**Meeting of the Prefect**

**of the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples**

**with the Bishops of the Episcopal Conference of Vietnam**

**20/01/2015 - Hà Nội**

Your Eminence, Cardinal John Baptist Pham Minh Mân,

Your Excellency, the Papal Representative,

Your Excellency, the President of the Episcopal Conference of Vietnam,

Brothers in the Episcopate:

Allow me to greet with particularly warm wishes His Excellency, Monsignor Peter Nguyễn Văn Nhơn, Archbishop of Hà Nội, who was created a Cardinal by Pope Francis only a few days ago, and who will be joined to the College of Cardinals this coming February 14th.

This is a most beautiful gesture toward this zealous Confrere, and a great honor for the Church of Hà Nội and all of Vietnam. I am very happy to be here with you and sincerely thank the Episcopal Conference for the invitation allowing me to visit your Country. I have before me an entire week in which to meet, from North to South, the many members of the People of God in Vietnam – Bishops, priests, religious men and women, seminarians, and laity – and to pray together in the celebration of various liturgies. My two predecessors, Cardinal Crescenzio Sepe and Cardinal Ivan Dias, both visited Vietnam, returning with a wonderful impression of a living Church. I, too, on this occasion, can see with my own eyes the vitality of your Community, the steadfast Faith of the Vietnamese faithful, about which you have told me in our meetings and from the reports of the Papal Representative. I know that religious practice is high (80-93%) and fervent - not just for Sunday Mass, but also throughout the week. I know also that in all of the Dioceses and parishes the faithful love to gather together in organizations for the lay apostolate, and this is very interesting. Everywhere they show a particular interest in the Word of God and in study of the Catechism. Moreover, they desire to contribute, using their own labor and talents, to the building up and development of the Church, as well as the Country.

Dear Brother Bishops, the Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* [*EG*] is an invaluable document, because it is the programmatic text of the Church today and represents the vision that Pope Francis has given for the years to come. He says that the joy of the Gospel is the basis for evangelization. It is born and reborn in the personal encounter with Jesus, from which is derived the change in life and the missionary spirit. In fact, joy, by its nature, always seeks to communicate itself: “*For if we have received the love which restores meaning to our lives, how can we fail to share that love with others?*” (n. 8). Evangelization is the natural consequence of this joy, that consists in having met the Lord and having been renewed by Him: “*It is not by proselytizing that the Church grows, but ‘by attraction’”* (n. 15). It follows that one who evangelizes must be in continual, personal conversion in order to become an authentic witness to the Gospel. The virtuous life of all the members of the People of God manifests the noble and fascinating beauty of the Gospel. At the same time, it is a decisive requisite for the work of evangelization in the world of today.

This year marks the Fiftieth Anniversary of the Conciliar Decree *Ad Gentes* [*AG*], concerning the missionary activity of the Church. There is says that missionary activity flows directly out of the nature itself of the Church. Through this missionary impulse, the first seeds of the Faith were brought here to Vietnam through the work of the Jesuits, the Fathers of the Foreign Mission Society of Paris, the Dominicans, the Augustinians, the Franciscans, and so many others. The tiny seeds have taken root in the culture and customs, such that today the Faith has become a part of the lives of many Vietnamese Christians. In 2010, the Church in Vietnam celebrated the Jubilee Year, commemorating the 350th Anniversary of the first two Apostolic Vicariates, and the 50th Anniversary of the Establishment of the Hierarchy. Today, we must remember that it has been 400 years since evangelization here first began. The initial creation of the Hierarchy marked the passage from “mission” status to the first configurations of a local Church, with the Bishops beginning to assume direct responsibility. Hence, every Bishop must continue to personally assume responsibility for evangelization, because “*The mandate of Christ to preach the Gospel to every creature (Mark 16:15) primarily and immediately concerns them (the Bishops), with Peter and under Peter”* (*AG*, n. 38).

The Conciliar Document *Ad Gentes* still remains valid for us today. The Holy Father, Pope Francis, in *Evangelii Gaudium*, citing *Redemptoris Missio*, reaffirmed that *“…today missionary activity still represents ‘the gr**eatest challenge for the Church’ and ‘the missionary task must remain foremost’”* (n. 15) the responsibility of the Bishop. The Bishop, as head and center of the Diocesan apostolate, must promote, direct, and coordinate missionary activity, and, furthermore, must encourage all the members of the People of God to participate in missionary works. Priests, religious brothers and sisters, as close collaborators with the Bishops in evangelization, are called to live their own proper vocations and charisms to become “the salt of the earth and light of the world”. In the one Body of Christ that is the Church, each baptized person has received from God a personal call to be a witness to the Gospel in every circumstance in which one finds oneself. One must avoid any self-centered mentality that seeks to preserve the Faith only for one’s personal salvation; rather, one must contribute to the building up and growth of the community, committing himself to the apostolate. It must be remembered that “*Every Christian is a missionary to the extent that he or she has encountered the love of God in Christ Jesus: we no longer say that we are “disciples” and “missionaries”, but rather that we are always “missionary disciples”* (*EG*, n.120). One must never forget that this missionary task can only be realized with the collaboration and prayer of the entire Church.

It is noteworthy that this missionary task “*is one and the same everywhere and in every condition, even though it may be carried out differently according to circumstances”* (*AG*, n. 6). That is to say that the path of evangelization is not an easy one to tread, and in fact, “…*circumstances are sometimes such that, for the time being, there is no possibility of expounding the Gospel directly and forthwith”* (*AG*, n. 6). We certainly must not forget that St. Paul urged the proclamation of the Word of God whether “*convenient and inconvenient”* (*2 Timothy* 4:2), but, *“in this case”*, the Conciliar Document *Ad Gentes* writes “…*missionaries can and must at least bear witness to Christ by charity and by works of mercy, with all patience, prudence and great confidence. Thus they will prepare the way for the Lord and make Him somehow present”* (n. 6). The Servant of God Cardinal Francis Xavier Nguyễn Văn Thuận, a witness to hope and minister of the mercy of God, is an extraordinary example of announcing the Gospel in every moment, convenient or inconvenient; yet, he shows us as well how to exercise patience and prudence, especially in dialogue. Our Holy Father Francis often affirms the need to promote dialogue and the culture of encounter.

The role of your Episcopal Conference consists primarily in orienting and coordinating the works of evangelization, avoiding wasteful use of resources in terms of persons and projects, and in such a way that at every level – local, civil, and social – the whole reality can be integrated, putting into communion the works of the persons and groups that make up the Church. As such, this realizes unity in plurality - that unity which is not uniformity.

Before concluding my brief remarks, I would like to offer to all of you, dear Brother Bishops, a word of appreciation for the work of evangelization that you have undertaken through your pastoral generosity and through your laudable communion with the Holy Father.

I entrust each one of you, your Dioceses, and your pastoral ministry to the maternal protection of Our Lady of La Vang. May the Holy Spirit, through the intercession of Mary, renew in you the desire to serve the Reign of God with your whole heart and strength, in solidarity with the Holy Father and with each other.