

Interim Report on Thailand

Number of universities....5

Total student population.... estimated at 3000

Number of Catholic students....estimated not more than 150

The Catholic Students' Association contacted is the only university Catholic student organisation in the country. Its membership is drawn from all the universities. Its active strength is in the region of 20 to 50. For accurate detail information the following could be contacted,

Rev.Fr. Eugene Denis S.J., Chaplain, Catholic Students Centre
131 Rajadamri Lane, Bangkok.

Mr.Pitak Lanhasomboon, President.

Mr.Joseph Chia, External Relations.



Religious Formation

Fr.Denis has just taken over the work as chaplain. ^{The work} ~~is~~ is in good hands. He is both a fulltime chaplain and a fulltime ~~chaplain~~ student in Thai Literature at the Chulalongkon University. His personal influence both on Catholic and non-Catholic students is growing each day. Much depends on his growing ^{mastery} ~~ability~~ of the Thai language. His formation in the student apostolate was in J.E.C. at its best in France. He was also a student in Peita (University of Peking). He is currently working on a thesis on Thai Literature to be presented at Sorbonne, possibly at the end of '58/'59. The fact that he is a fulltime student might indicate that he has very limited time for students. ~~On the other hand~~ ^{On the other hand} it is ~~only~~ his status as a student that brings him into direct contact with students without arousing undue suspicion in an officially Buddhist environment. (Incidentally, most if not all the students though Buddhist/^{by birth and 'by Nationality'} know extremely little about Buddhist doctrine. I saw a mature student kneel before a tree with hands clasped in prayer and offering a chunk of meat and a bottle of alcohol. I was told that this/^{is} not an infrequent occurrence ~~in~~ on the campus, especially when there is any festive occasion like the welcome of FRESHMEN.)

The idea of being an apostle as a student in the university is not too wellknown amongst the Catholic students. There is therefore little awareness of the need for an understanding of the Buddhist environment in order to transform it. There is more awareness of the fact that the Catholics form a very small minority in the country. There does not seem to be any proportionate awareness of the fact that this minority has the Complete Truth whilst the majority has only mere fragments of it. A few of the students and certainly the chaplain are taking steps to solve the problem

the problem of resignation. (e.g. "we do not make the sign of the cross in a public restaurant here", remarked one student;)

The annual enclosed retreats, the days of recollection, the occasional dialogue mass, these have yet to be introduced into the Association's programme. ~~See~~
~~xxxxxxx~~The chaplain is looking into the possibilities. The Jesuits are too new in the country and up till the present there is not anyone amongst them who would be able to give a retreat in Thai.

For the present two definite steps have been taken, the weekly meeting at the Student Centre attended by 15 to 50 students and the monthly magazine. Both of these though not giving the same kind of religious formation that is derived from an enclosed retreat are religious activities, giving doctrinal formation.

Intellectual formation

In addition to the weekly meeting and the monthly magazine there is the (fortnightly) Philosophy discussion directed by Joseph Chia (British subject from Singapore) and assisted by Dr. Lert, President of Catholic Action in Thailand. Up till the present this is still in its experimental stage and somewhat confused. (I think) The students are somewhat handicapped by their lack of familiarity with a foreign language. (Any discussion on Philosophy in Thai, I was given to understand, cannot be of any great depth)

Via the Thai language alone, there is little opportunity for the Thai student to participate in the intellectual traditions of the Church. Coupled to the fact that the average Thai student's familiarity with foreign literature is more within the realm of pure science, natural science, ~~xxxxxxx~~ the less difficult novels and classics, medical text-books etc., (With ~~xxxx~~ exceptions of course), there is not an atmosphere of ~~xxxxxxx~~ Humanism inspired at one and the same time with both a courageous thirst for truth and ~~the~~ the docility of a child of God. In its place there are indications of an atmosphere of resignation, resignation to ^{a co-existence} ~~xxxxxxx~~ in the ~~xxxxxxx~~ darkness of what is loosely described as Buddhism in Thailand. The need is the need for transformation

Cultural and 'National' formation

Is it possible for a Catholic to remain completely Catholic whilst at the same time living fully a Thai way of life with its many 'Buddhist' customs which do not concern religious doctrine? (It is a similar question to that concerned with Confucian rites in China)

Only the Thai himself can give any adequate answer. At the moment not many Catholics in Thailand can give an answer. It is however notable that professions in the Thai Army, Navy, Police and Air Force are practically closed to Catholics due to the fact that members belonging to these groups are obliged to practice daily certain 'religious Buddhist' activities.

The significance of 'ordination' for every single ^{male} Buddhist 'at least once' in his lifetime, usually near the Buddhist Lent is rarely grasped by the Thai Catholic student. (Perhaps it is true too in the case of the one 'ordained.' There is strictly no ordination as a Catholic understands the term.)



The trend and type of university education ~~that~~ is marked by a strong emphasis on utility, eg. there is roughly 'one university' for a particular profession, a 'university' for law and civil service, a 'university' for medicine, a 'university' for agriculture, a 'university' for fine arts etc. The idea of a university as a 'technical' college is generally accepted by both the staff and the students, implicitly, if not explicitly. Hence there ~~is~~ is no incongruity ~~taxi~~ in the 'common practice' amongst Thai students in the worship of 'spirits' in trees on the campus. The university is merely a preparation of living no NEW LIFE but essentially an old and oftentimes primitive life with new techniques.

Cultural activities on the campus included a faithfully copied Red Indian rig-up for the welcome of Freshmen, a 'national' English football match between the two biggest 'universities' in Bangkok preceded by an annual parade copied to the last detail from the American campus.

When there is music in the Catholic Student Centre it is the music of England or the latest from Hollywood. When the students were asked to comment on this ^{peculiarity} ~~peculiarity~~ they remarked, "The popular tunes in Thai ~~music~~ have very doubtful lyrics. Moreover many of these are simply Western tunes with Thai lyrics."

In spite of its many years of independence it is not insignificant that ~~the~~ a professor (an Italian from Florence) in the Fine Arts University should remark that the Thai is in a difficult period of transition, ~~that he has~~ ^{He has} to choose the new without discarding the old and he is confused. The university does not make his choice any easier.

Psychological formation.

The average Catholic student has to contend with conflicting factors, both on the national and the personal level. He is a member of a tiny minority. His best friends may come from the most traditional Buddhist families. Neither he nor his best friend understands much of the other faith or oftentimes his own. Each tends to take the easiest way out, resignation, neither hot nor cold, neither persecution nor propagation. There is no blood shed. All the same there is an overwhelming darkness.

There seems to be also a strong Chinese element within the Catholic Students' Association, ~~meaning~~ Quite a few of the members are of 'complete' Chinese descent but who have 'completely' identified themselves as Thai subjects. (I was told that they feel hurt if referred to as Chinese. The point that Catholicism is not dependent on one's nationality nor on a person's racial origin does not seem to have been grasped.)





International Formation

There is on the average one international meeting per month in Bangkok, (where ECAFE, SEATO, American Mission etc. have their HQs). The significance of this is not ~~expressed~~ easily apparent. The Catholic student is still very much isolated. The participation of two members of the Association at the Training Course/might have helped to break this isolation. It is a moot point as to whether these two members became leaders in their Association during the last year. The indications are not too favourable though certainly not unduly discouraging. Something has been achieved, ~~of~~ eg. like the formation of 'public speaking in English' meetings resulting from the persistence of August Gohwong; the talks on the Training Course; the contact with PMKRI through Helen Wanida; etc.,.

There is one member, ~~xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx~~ Helen Wanida, ~~xxx~~ on the W.U.S. Committee. She was at Singapore. There is however hardly any awareness of the existence of W.U.S. amongst the Catholic students. On the other hand there is as yet no inspiring W.U.S. programme in the country.

Pax Romana, COSEC and I.U.S. are similarly unknown.

Communistic 'presence' I was told is not absent though ~~xxx~~ not alarming in proportion. Essentially the ~~Buddhist~~ Path of the Thai is no real resistance to a positive ideology like Communism or Catholicism, one based on the supremacy of matter, the other the supremacy of God and His Love. For the moment it is possible that the Thai ~~is xxxxxxxx~~ ^{being} enthralled by American plenty ~~and~~ coupled to the fact that the party in power has easy access to this plenty are factors ~~xxxxxxxx~~ that prevent the onset of Communism. ~~Furthermore~~ Furthermore the Thai loves his King and his Queen. Whatever the causes may be for Thailand's present position vis-a-vis Communism, three considerations ~~xxxxxxxx~~ need be noted.

1. There is hardly any real understanding of the dignity of the human person.
2. American plenty is a potentially 'corrupting' influence on the party in power.
3. The universities are not power houses in thought but merely in techniques.

Affiliation to Pax Romana

Discussions with the Executive Committee of the Catholic Student Association centred on three points, viz., What is Pax Romana?

What is the Association?

What is affiliation and why?

For the present purpose the last point remains to be clarified. I expressed the idea of affiliation in the form of an analogy, affiliation could be compared to the opening of one more window to a semi-lighted room, it must mean more light if it means anything at all. The idea was strongly supported by the chaplain, Fr. Denis. The members however were understandably hesitant. They wanted to know in particular what extra responsibilities were involved and what extra finance was needed.



As it appeared to be more proper that the Committee should come to a final decision in the absence of an official from Pax Romana Secretariat the suggestion was made that the External Relations officer, Mr. Joseph Chia should get in touch with the General Secretariat as soon as the Committee is able to come to a more definite decision. (Incidentally Miss Isabel Diaz has represented herself to this Association, via correspondence, as "of Pax Romana, I.M.C.S." and has further requested that the Association forward their application for affiliation to "this office", meaning her home address, Quezon City. The printed letter head in question has been forwarded to the General Secretary earlier on from the Philippines. I think a decision on the matter of the use of the words "of Pax Romana, IMCS" should be taken by the Directing Committee as soon as possible before the confusion becomes more confounded.)

Planning and Plans, Pax Romana Secretariat vis-a-vis the Catholic Student Association of Thailand.

1. Inclusion of Thailand in a possible project, The Southeast Asian Seminar, The Formation of a Catholic Leader, to be submitted to Asia Foundation in September '57.
2. Inclusion in Correspondence circulars etc., list.
3. The despatch of five copies of the Journal, gratis, on the understanding that the Association attempt to find five subscribers eventually during the year.
4. The translation of at least two student articles from Thai into French or English, from the Association's monthly magazine for reprint in the Pax Romana Journal or/and for the information of the Federations.
5. The translation of at least two articles from the Journal and/or the Lumen de Oriente into Thai for reprint in the Association's monthly magazine.
6. Proposal to be forwarded to the CSSUM, (Catholic Students' Society of the University of Malaya) or the Newman Association of Singapore for an invitation to be issued to one Thai student for one month's stay in Malaya to learn English and to participate in the CSSUM's programme of action. (Travel Bangkok-Singapore-Bangkok must be paid for by either the student himself or the Association in Thailand or some benefactor, but all other expenses will be met with by Singapore/Malaya.)
7. The theme for the next Interfederal Assembly and/or the theme for the SEAsian Seminar to be studied by the maximum number possible of members from the Association. One young graduate (in civil engineering, from the University of Sidney) in Singapore working in close collaboration with the Assistant Secretary in Singapore, the External Relations Officer in Bangkok from the Association, and possibly also with the Thai student in Singapore (if the abovementioned proposal comes through), will maintain close contact with the Association to render any aid necessary, if required.

Some general points concerning Catholic Action in Thailand.

1. There is as yet no organised intellectual apostolate on the graduate level. A few Catholic doctors run a clinic. Dr. Lert who will be in Rome for the Lay Congress is the President of Catholic Action. He was also in Manila. He emphasised two points, "we are very few in numbers, there are only ten Catholic doctors in the country,"

and "we must move gradually, gradually". Dr. Lert is at the same time a sort of Lay Moderator to the students.

2. There are possibly from ten to thirty Catholics on the staffs of the five universities. They have little contact with the Catholic students (with exceptions). They have very little contact between themselves. One has become Buddhist for many years now and in fact is unknown as a Catholic but very well known as a Buddhist. The Jesuits newly arrived on the campus are doing fine work contacting both these staff members as well as the non-Catholics. (I met Fr. Bonninque S.J. who has been in correspondence with Ramon and who represented Pax Romana at one of the ECAFE meetings. He is a great fighter having fought ~~in the~~ Communist indoctrination classes to which he was forced to attend as Rector of the Catholic University in Tientsin before he was put in jail for three years. He is a little unhappy in Thailand. He could have been a powerful ~~xxxxxx~~ ~~xxxx~~ tower of immediate strength in Singapore's Nanyang University, alas!)

3. I met the Bishop of Bangkok. He is French. The theme is familiar, "We must move gradually, gradually". There is no Archbishop in Thailand. So the conference of Bishops I was told, is called by Dr. Lert, President of Catholic Action!

Asia Foundation

Fr. Bonninque is in touch with the Representative concerning the possibility of a students hostel similar to the one in Singapore (which was financed by the Foundation and is run by the Irish Jesuits.)

I met the newly arrived Assistant. It was a courtesy call. I had the impression that he too had the preconceived idea like many of us (I suspect), that Buddhism in Thailand is the surest guarantee against Communism. This is a false concept as far as Buddhism in Thailand is concerned. It is not strictly a force, a doctrine, a purposiveness but merely a conventional superstition. (The phrase sounds somewhat harsh but I think it describes truly the thing, ~~for~~ what it is.)



Principal Secretary
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