

The Tea Ritual in Vietnam: A Challenge for Inculturation

Christopher Sta. Ana, CSSR

Abstract

This paper PRESENTS THE Vietnamese as a people naturally inclined to welcoming strangers. Despite wars and negative impressions of communism, Vietnam continuously maintains a harmonious rapport not only among themselves but also with foreigners. Fortunately, Vietnam's religions have a moral and religious assent to doing good and building rapport with one another amidst chaos. They view these as spiritual tasks. This natural inclination to strengthening relationships is embedded in their tea culture. Unfortunately, over the course of time, the Vietnamese tea culture has been appreciated just as a commonplace activity, sweeping away its profound metaphysical meaning. Hence, this paper is devoted to unravelling the meaning, which seems to have been relegated to oblivion.

Introduction

My heart was pounding. Memories of warnings echoed in my mind. I should not say that I am a Redemptorist. I should not identify myself as a religious. Then it was my turn. The officer set his gaze upon me. I was composing myself, trying to be calm. But I could feel the surge of tension and shook. I handed him my passport. He looked at me intently. He asked for my plane ticket. I immediately gave it to him. He stamped something on my passport, and said, "Welcome to Vietnam, Sir!" I cleared my throat and uttered the words "Thank you."

I was assigned in Vietnam for one year, and I brought with me prejudices, unnecessary anxieties, and mistrust. The experience above manifested unwarranted fear, that is, the fear of the unknown. With Vietnam being branded as a communist country where religious men and women are being persecuted, I couldn't help but feel afraid. However, the simple response of the immigration officer proved otherwise. I was expecting an interrogation, but instead, he gave me a welcoming attitude. I was a stranger, yet I was welcomed.

Words of welcome alone, be these half- or whole- heartedly uttered, reassure a stranger as being worthy of trust and acknowledges him/her as being one with them. The postmodern context of migration, rampant criminalities, and terrorism affects the very mindset of every person. Watching the news, reading tabloids and even browsing Facebook, one will always find that crimes abound. Our human tendency is to secure ourselves from these alarming truths and

by so doing, we gradually sever our connectedness with the Others. One saying even goes “Don’t trust a stranger.” But, have we looked at the face of this stranger?

I am a stranger. A missionary is always and will always be a stranger. This is the inescapable truth that a missionary experiences before one proclaims the gospel and enters into a dialogue of culture. Although missionaries might be able to develop an insider perspective through time and immersion, they will not be able to think and function totally as a local. But, here lies the problem. Being sent to mission, one acknowledges that the missionary is a stranger because he/she does not know the language, culture, and the people. However, the missionary is in fact not a stranger at all. To be a missionary is to be part of, to belong to the Catholic Church, an institution that is recognized throughout the world. In this sense, the missionary assumes that the locals must have an idea of him/her because of his/her linkage to the Universal Catholic Church. Hence, the missionary is not stranger at all, but the locals are the stranger to the missionary.

In this paper, I would like to see myself as a missionary but at the same time, a real stranger. This paper would reflect my experience in Vietnam as a stranger whom the locals consider as a missionary. Hence, I am the other in the mission area. This paper is an present that the mission of God is taking place even in the simple gesture of welcoming a stranger. Furthermore, this paper will deal with the simplest form of Vietnamese hospitality and welcoming act, that is, the tea culture. This will be read in the philosophical perspective using the lens of Emmanuel Levinas’ face-to-face encounter hand-in-hand with the missiological viewpoint of Antonio Pernia. Lastly, this paper is an attempt to see mission not only as Proclamation and Evangelization but also as ethical responsibility that genuine relationship precedes indoctrination.