George E. Dutton

A Vietnamese Moses: Philipphê Bỉnh and the Geographies of Early Modern Catholicism. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2017. Pp xiii + 332. Pb, \$39.95.

A Vietnamese Moses recounts the saga of Felipe de Rosario Bỉnh (1759–1833), one of the early Vietnamese who lived in Portugal during the turbulent years of the Napoleonic era. Through the narratives, skillfully retold by George Dutton, professor of Vietnamese history at UCLA, the audience is mesmerized by the many twists and turns of a Tonkinese priest in his unrelenting quest for a *Padroado* sponsorship of the former Jesuit mission field. Philipphê (Felipe) Bỉnh saw himself as an envoy from a far-away mission land seeking for ecclesial justice.

By the time Bỉnh was born in 1759, the Jesuits had been evangelizing in Tonkin (North Vietnam) for 132 years. With the support of the *Padroado* system, the Jesuits enjoyed a virtual monopoly of the missionary activities since the beginning of their Tonkinese mission in 1627. Most of the coastal areas were evangelized by Jesuits and their Vietnamese collaborators. From a tiny group of few converts, the number of Christian exploded to an estimation of 300,000 in 1663.

Then the tide turned. The French priests of the Missions Étrangères de Paris (MEP) began to arrive in 1666, to be followed by Spanish Dominicans in 1676. In 1678, the mission of Tonkin was divided into two apostolic vicariates under the auspice of the Propaganda Fide, which wanted to take over the Asian mission from Portuguese patronage. Conflict over jurisdiction was inevitable. During the next decade, the Jesuits were recalled to Macau while their local congregations were taken over by other missionaries and local Vietnamese priests under the authority of MEP and Dominican bishops. Eventually, a compromise was reached. The Jesuits were allowed to return to Tonkin to rebuild their communities in 1696, and these *Padroado*-based communities were left alone to flourish alongside with parishes ran by the other missionary groups.

At the young age, Bỉnh was an apprentice of Father “Luis” Castiglioni who arrived at Tonkin shortly before the Society of Jesus was dissolved worldwide in 1773. Soon, he was caught in a complex ecclesial politics when a newly appointed Dominican apostolic vicar of East Tonkin wanted to incorporate former Jesuit-based communities into the vicariate structure. Even though Bỉnh was ordained a diocesan priest and was never a part of the Jesuit order, the loyalty to his mentors made him a fierce defendant of the Jesuit legacy. Seeing the future of their Jesuit-based communities at risk, the people elected Bỉnh

and several other young men to be their envoys to Europe, hoping to petition the court of Portugal to send more Jesuit priests to minister to them.

Thus began the voyage of Bính and his confrères to Macau, Goa, and eventually all the way to Lisbon in 1795–96. Their journey to Europe was filled with many setbacks and hardships. Bính and his companions had to dodge the ecclesial authority of Macau and Goa who were not at all sympathetic to their cause. After all, the Jesuit order no longer existed, and their properties should be transferred to diocesan and other religious authorities. Who were these Tonkinese that dared change the status quo? Eventually, the men decided to divide into two groups—one will stay behind in Macau to be the liaison to the *Padroado*-based communities back home, and the other group risked their lives to reach the court of Portugal.

At first, when Bính arrived at Lisbon in 1796, his group was well-received by the royal family. The Portuguese ruler, Crown Prince (and later King) João VI (1767–1826) became the group's patron during their stay in Portugal. Seeing himself as a Moses on the quest for liberation of his people, Bính wasted no time in imploring the crown prince to appoint a Portuguese bishop for Tonkin who would then take charge of the Jesuit-based communities. Bính's petition evoked fierce opposition from church leaders who did not want a *Padroado* bishop. Eventually, the Franciscan Manoel Galdino (1769–1831) was chosen to be a *Padroado* bishop of Tonkin. But this experiment was short-lived. Galdino was later assigned to be the bishop of Macau in 1803. Not giving up on his cause, Bính continued to pressure Dom João but the latter was reluctant to carry out his promise.

Meantime, the Napoleon army was marching toward Lisbon and the royal family fled to Brazil in 1807, ended all Bính's hope of a viable ecclesial solution for his communities back home. Another bad news was that Galdino decided to force Bính's group in Macau to return home and instructed the Jesuit loyalists to submit to the local church authority. From this time on until his death in 1833, Bính lived as an exile in Europe. As his two companions died one by one, Bính spent his time composing Catholic literature and tales of his journey to be sent home to his community. A prolific writer, Bính produced twenty-five notebooks in Portuguese and Romanized Vietnamese scripts, which were preserved in Vatican library.

In the story of Bính, George Dutton has skillfully analyzed many complex issues, ranging from a global sense of Catholic identity to European ecclesial and civil politics. Dutton has been studying the life of Father Bính for the past twenty-five years and is uniquely qualified to offer the audience a coherent narrative of Bính's quest for justice, reconstructed from the details given in the priest's own traveling notes. Furthermore, Dutton devotes a chapter

analyzing Binh's writings, giving the reader a glimpse into the mind and heart of an eighteenth-century Vietnamese priest who lived among Europeans.

This fascinating book is a significant contribution to the field of Asian Christianity, mission studies, and Jesuit studies. It will be an important reference of the complex history of early Vietnamese Catholicism. A masterpiece of tales, this book, however, suffers from some minor mistakes and spellings, which could be avoided by an editor knowledgeable in Vietnamese language and history.

Anh Q. Tran, S.J.

Jesuit School of Theology of Santa Clara University

aqtran@scu.edu

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