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EDUCATION - For Vietnamese Catholics, this spring is going to be quite different from other recent ones. Two decisive steps are going to be taken for the establishment of the first university-level Catholic theological institute in this South-East Asian country.

Bishop Giuseppe Dinh Duc Dao who heads the institution's episcopal commission is smiling and optimistic as he tells Vatican Insider about the state of the art project that will mark a key turning point in the country's history. "The Catholic university will soon become a reality. We are waiting for the Congregation for Catholic Education to ratify the project next May, after it has examined the well-structured plans prepared by Vietnam's bishops."

Meanwhile, Hanoi is expected to give the definitive green light. As Vatican Insider wrote in July 2014, [the government has already given its full support](#) to the project. There are no big obstacles to the creation of a Catholic university with the distinguished theological institute as a nucleus. The prospects for the presence and mission of the Catholic Church in Vietnam have both a taste of the new and the old seeing as though in the past – before the Communist regime – Catholics had already founded a number of universities that gave local faithful, priests and religious access to theological and academic studies in their own country.

A long period of cultural and spiritual darkness followed: 60 years of suffering, with the closure of universities, the nationalisation of schools and institutions and Catholic properties, the

revocation of the freedom to teach. People are still painfully deprived of this freedom despite the fact that the country finds itself in a completely different historical phase and after the significant steps taken toward rapprochement and a clearer definition of relations between Church and State: Catholic religious congregations are able to run kindergartens but nothing else. That was until the longed-for green light for a new Catholic University.

With the tireless calm of someone who trusts in Divine Providence, Bishop Dao - who has taught at the Pontifical Urbaniana University for many years and is director of the International Centre for Missionary Animation (*CIAM*) in the Vatican - is taking all the necessary steps to get a project up and running and to plan all angles of the new university's life: the professors, the curriculum, the structures, the library.

In this initial phase, the partnership with the Catholic Institute of Paris, known as the "Catho", and founded in 1875, could prove to be very valuable. The agreement with the prestigious French university continues thanks to the good links Bishop Giuseppe Nguyen Chi Linh has with the institution having had the opportunity to study there.

Most importantly, it will prove useful because if all goes to plan, the Church intends to celebrate the solemn inauguration of the first academic year of the new season in autumn 2015.

Just a few metres from the finish line, Dinh Duc Dao explains that the institution's objective will be to "raise the standards of the academic education of the Vietnamese clergy and the people of God."

"Education," the bishop said, "is important because for Catholic faithful, a faith that is lived only thanks to tradition is not enough. Global challenges, new ideas and modernity have presented the need for priests, religious and lay people who are also able to live the faith with understanding and deeper reflection."

The Vietnamese Church's commitment to the university – which it is hoped will lead to licences being unblocked so that schools of all types and levels can re-open – is also a sign of the attention given to young people "who are irretrievably swept away by the wind of secularisation," Dao notes. The mission of education for new generations is crucial and Vietnam's bishops have come up with a comprehensive plan of actions and initiatives that will make the best out of a

bad situation given that it is impossible to run educational institutes autonomously.

Another crucial aspect is to do with the external element: the Church in Vietnam with its seven million Catholics, is home to the second largest number of Catholics in Asia after the Philippines. As such, “it wants to engage in dialogue with other Asian Christian and non-Christian universities to broaden its horizons” and play a significant role also in the field of intercultural and interreligious relations. This is a country where seminaries are brimming with candidates and which is preparing to send its priests and missionaries all over the continent.

Source: Vatican Insider. February 21, 2015