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Thailand

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the Human Development Centre, which provides a variety of services to several hundred local residents — from children's education to the hospice for men and women with AIDS. He is well-known in Thailand as a man unafraid to speak publicly about its social problems, but also willing to give the nation its due by pointing out how it tries to solve them.

"Thailand is very generous and very kind," the Redemptorist cleric said of the Southeast Asian nation, bordered by Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar (Burma).

The Thai government provides health care and health education to its citizens, he said, though recent funding cutbacks for hospitals have made the futures of some low-income patients uncertain. Then again, his ability to talk openly about such realities is a tribute to Thai society, given the fact that many other governments punish missionaries who speak out, he noted.

"In many other countries I would have been shot because I'm not 'holy' enough, not 'pious' enough," he said.

A welcome church

Thailand, indeed, is different. While the Catholic Church and its social-work efforts are viewed suspiciously or even contemptuously by some Asian countries with long, bitter memories of Christian Europe's interference, the Thai church is blessed by the fact that Thailand ("Siam" until the middle of this century) has never been colonized by a European power. Hence, many church observers noted, Thai Catholics are not burdened with anti-colonial biases.

"The Catholic Church is a very well-respected institution in the country," said Dennis Cody, a free-lance journalist from the United States who lives in Bangkok. Cody has written for several U.S. publications including the *National Catholic Reporter*, as well as Catholic News Service.

Despite the fact that Catholics number only 250,000 in a 95-percent Buddhist nation of more than 60 million people, the church's schools and social work touch the lives of many Thais, Cody said.

"The leading families throughout Thailand have had their children educated in Catholic schools for generations," Cody said, referring to the church's 300 educational institutions. "This gives (Catholics)

a firm base in society."

That fact was borne out by visits to a number of Catholic schools in Thailand where again and again, the student bodies were overwhelmingly Buddhist. Church officials noted that several government officials, including members of the Thai parliament and its royal family, have been educated in Catholic schools.

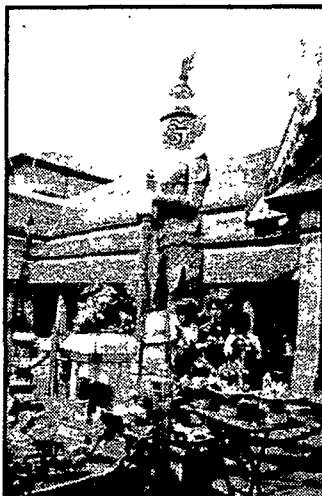
Thai Catholics also share with their fellow citizens a high respect for authority, Cody said. That observation is exemplified by the Thais' deference to their highly popular constitutional monarch, King Phumiphon Adunyadet, who has been on the throne since 1946. The king holds no executive power, but apparently wields great moral suasion. He is well-known for his dedication to the rural poor, for whom he has established dozens of agricultural improvement projects. His portrait graces the outside and inside of buildings throughout the country, including Catholic schools, centers and churches.

On a related note, Thai Catholics are also respectful of Thai Buddhist beliefs, and Buddhist temples, several Thais said. In contrast, one priest noted that a group of missionaries from another denomination once came to Thailand and were photographed sitting on a statue of the Buddha. They were promptly sent packing by the Thai government. In Thailand, there are two things you never attack if you want to get anywhere — the king and the Buddha, several Thais said.

Thai respect for hierarchy is embodied by an overall cultural emphasis on polite relations, summed up somewhat simplistically in the Thai tourist slogan "Welcome to the Land of the Smile." In fact, Westerners sometimes are frustrated by the Thais' general lack of forthrightness, Cody noted. But such behavior is motivated more by politeness than by a motive to evade another's questions, he added.

"I'm not going to say something that embarrasses you and me, and (the Thais) are not going to embarrass someone in authority," he said.

Related to that observation is the fact



Rob Cullivan/Catholic Courier
Buddhist statue, interior, Grand Palace, Bangkok, Thailand.

that lay Thai Catholics apparently engage in a traditional type of Catholic worship, leaving most liturgical duties to their priests, and discourage the Western trend toward casual dress among religious orders. Sister Kanlaya Trisopa, SHB, secretary of the Conference of Major Superiors of Women Religious of Thailand, said Thai Catholic religious women wearing habits are simply echoing a larger cultural tradition.

"Thais like to wear uniforms," she said. "People expect us to wear the uniform. When we work in the school, and we wear the habit, we will be respected by the people. When they do not respect us, we cannot teach them."

Frowns as well

Thailand may be a generally polite society, but it has had its share of difficult times. It has endured an ongoing struggle between military and civilian leaders who have alternately controlled the country throughout most of this century. That struggle only recently resolved itself again in October 1997 after Thailand adopted a new democratic constitution.

Another recent challenge has been the Asian economic crisis. From the late 1980s to the late 1990s, Thailand was the world's fastest growing economy. This is evidenced in Bangkok, which looks like some strange bustling combination of Hong Kong commerce, Las Vegas glitz, Miami glass skyscrapers and Los Angeles traffic jams. But the merchants and markets that crowd the streets disguise the fact that Thailand, along with several of its Asian neighbors, experienced a major economic downturn

in late 1997.

Rural Thais were hit particularly hard, suffering a 25-50 percent income decline, according to Nicola Bullard who serves as deputy director of Focus on the Global South, a Thailand-based research organization that examines the impact of the global economy on southern Asia.

"It will be a long time to get back to the way things were," she said.

Looking outward

Despite Thailand's many challenges, much promise is on the horizon — promise that is beginning to manifest itself in such institutions as the Catholic Church. Long known for its charitable, educational and ministerial work, Thailand's Catholic Church now is poised to lend a different kind of service to the Thai people, according to Father Vichai Phokthavi, SJ, president of the Catholic Justice and Peace Commission of Thailand.

Father Phokthavi said that his commission is working to make Thai Catholics — and Thais in general — more vocal about such concerns as human rights, concerns that were muted during Thailand's years of political instability.

"I would prefer that the church would be more socially oriented, and now that we have a new constitution, we can be more comfortable with this," he said.

He added that the Catholic Church is now promoting a human rights curriculum in its schools. Also, various church individuals and groups are working on such issues as women's and children's rights and the rights of cheaply paid foreign laborers.

Then again, in doing the work of the church, Thai Catholics are only imitating one of their fellow Asians, according to Bishop George Pimpisan, CSSR, president of the Catholic Bishops Conference of Thailand.

"Christ was born in Asia," the bishop said. "Do we still recognize his face as being Asian?"

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Human Development Centre, 3757/15 Sukhumvit Road, Soi 40, Phrakonong, Bangkok, Thailand, 10110, or e-mail Father Joseph H. Maier, CSSR, at frjoehdc@hotmail.com.

Father Raymond A. Brennan, CSSR, Director, The Pattaya Orphanage, 384 Moo 6, Sukhumvit Road, Km.144 P.O. Box 15, Pattaya City, Choburi, 20150

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Fountain of Life Center, Good Shepherd Sisters, 463/49 Soi Srinakorn, North Pattaya, Chonburi, 20260.

Father Vichai Phokthavi, SJ, President, Justice and Peace Commission of Thailand, 2492 Soi Saen Suk, Pracha-songkroh Road, Huay Khwang, Bangkok, 10400, Thailand.

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St. Mary's

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She declined to say if Ascension Health planned to discontinue its ties with Unity.

Riemer added that the announcement did not involve "decisions made about any other collaborations." Earlier this year, Unity Health announced that it had begun exploring a collaboration with Via-Health, a merger of Rochester's Genesee Hospital and General Hospital.

Pam Wong, spokesperson for Ascension Health, declined comment Nov. 30.

At the time of the Unity alliance's formation, the Daughters of Charity invest-

ed \$40 million toward restructuring Unity's services and facilities.

However, the *Rochester Business Journal* article stated that Unity's debt load had reached more than \$115 million.

Several rounds of staff layoffs have taken place in the system since it was formed. In addition, St. Mary's Hospital closed its maternity unit in December 1998 and converted its emergency department into a walk-in clinic in September 1999. Maternity and emergency services were largely moved to Park Ridge. Most of the second and third floors at St. Mary's are now occupied by residents of the former Park Hope Nursing Home.

St. Mary's Hospital, founded by the Daughters of Charity in 1857, has been the only Catholic hospital in Monroe County. Other Catholic hospitals in the Rochester Diocese are St. James Mercy, Hornell; and St. Joseph's, Elmira.

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