

Dariusz Klejnowski-Różycki*

University of Opole, Opole

Piotr Sękowski**

The Pontifical Institute for Arabic and Islamic Studies, Rome

Bartłomiej Cudziło***

University of Silesia, Katowice

CHRISTIANITY IN THE SOCIALIST KINGDOM ON THE MEKONG: THE CHURCH AND THEOLOGY OF LAOS¹

CHRZEŚCIJAŃSTWO W SOCJALISTYCZNYM KRÓLESTWIE NAD MEKONGIEM: KOŚCIÓŁ I TEOLOGIA LAOSU

Streszczenie

Chrześcijaństwo i teologia w Laosie mają swoją wyjątkową specyfikę: rozwijają się jako religia mniejszościowa w kontekście buddyzmu i animizmu, pod stałym nadzorem państwa i doświadczeniem prześladowań. Na tożsamość Kościoła wpływa zarówno dziedzictwo dawnej monarchicznej tradycji buddyjskiej, jak i współczesny socjalizm, który zamyka państwo na świat i pogłębia biedę społeczeństwa. Kościół katolicki i protestancki budują struktury oparte na świadectwie męczenników, inkulturacji, dialogu i duszpasterstwie ubogich. Główne nurty teologiczne to teologia męczeństwa, inkulturacji i zaangażowania społecznego. Kluczową rolę odgrywają duchowni lokalni. Tłumaczenia liturgii i Pisma Świętego oraz edukacja świeckich wspierają rozwój rodzimej teologii.

Słowa kluczowe: Kościół w Laosie, chrześcijaństwo w Laosie, teologia Laosu, teologowie laotańscy, inkulturacja

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INTRODUCTION

Christianity in Laos – a small country dominated by Buddhism – has developed over the centuries in the shadow of persecution and political upheaval. One might say that “the Church in Laos was born through the blood of martyrs,” much like in ancient Rome or Lyon.² The first missionaries arrived here as early as the 17th century, but it was only in the 19th and 20th centuries that evangelization bore lasting fruit. Today, the Christian community in Laos – although comprising only about 1–2% of the country’s population – is vibrant and dynamic, drawing strength from the heroic witness of previous generations.

This article presents a panorama of the history of the Church in Laos and the specific character of its theology. It discusses the successive stages of Christianity’s development in the region, the socio-political context in which the religion functions, as well as the most important contemporary theological trends among Laotian Christians. A separate section is devoted to the profiles of key theologians – both Catholic and Protestant – their biographies, and major works.

The bibliography is based on both contemporary online sources and printed publications, including older materials. The authors made a deliberate effort to gather bibliographical data from diverse sources, as information about Christianity in Laos is scarce, difficult to access, and locating it requires considerable effort – an added value of this publication.

THE STATE – HISTORY AND CONTEXT

Laos, officially the Lao People’s Democratic Republic, is a small landlocked country in Southeast Asia, bordering China, Vietnam, Cambodia, Thailand, and Myanmar. Historically, this territory was the center of the Kingdom of Lan Xang (founded in the 14th century), which disintegrated into three principalities in the 18th century. By the end of the 19th

² Alpanet.pl, *Błogosławieni męczennicy z Laosu* [Blessed Martyrs of Laos], 5.03.2025, <http://www.swietykrzyz.pl/kategorie/blogoslawieni-meczennicy-z-laosu>.

century, Laos came under French colonial rule as part of French Indochina (a protectorate established in 1893). In the 20th century, independence movements emerged – after World War II, Laos gained autonomy in 1949 and full independence in 1954 under the Geneva Accords.³ (World Council of Churches, n.d.) However, the 1950s and 1960s were marked by political instability and a civil war that formed part of the broader context of the Vietnam War.

In 1975, the communist Pathet Lao party seized power, overthrowing the monarchy and establishing a one-party socialist state dependent on Vietnam. This ushered in widespread repression of religion – all religious schools and institutions were nationalized, foreign missionaries were expelled, and religious practices were forced underground. (Bressan, 1999)⁴ It was only after 1990, with Laos's cautious opening to the world and the initiation of reforms (the so-called “new approach policy” – *kanpianpeng mai*), that the situation began to liberalize. In 1991, the constitution removed references to socialism, and the red star in the party emblem was replaced with a Buddhist stupa – a symbolic shift toward traditional values and an attempt to legitimize power through Buddhism.

Theravāda Buddhism, practiced by approximately 65% of the population, continues to play a key role in Laotian national identity.⁵ The government officially recognizes four religions: Buddhism (as the majority religion), Christianity, Islam, and the Bahá'í Faith.⁶ Within Christianity, only three communities are permitted to operate: the Roman Catholic Church, the Lao Evangelical Church (Protestant), and the Seventh-day Adventist Church.⁷ Christian minorities are subject to strict supervision – all religious

³ World Council of Churches, *Laos*. *World Council of Churches*, Oikoumene WCC, 5.03.2025, <https://www.oikoumene.org/countries/laos>.

⁴ L. Bressan, *Z dziejów ewangelizacji Laosu. Krótka historia misji w Laosie od XVII wieku aż do dziś* [From the History of Evangelization in Laos: A Brief Account of Missions in Laos from the 17th Century to the Present Day], "L'Osservatore Romano" (Polish Edition) 1999, no. 4 (July 15, 1999), p. 20–21.

⁵ G. Condominas, *Phībān Cults in Rural Laos*, in *Change and Persistence in Thai Society: Essays in Honor of Lauriston Sharp*, ed. G.W. Skinner, A.T. Kirsch, Ithaca, NY 1975, p. 252–277; *Religion in Laos*, Wikipedia, 5.03.2025, https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Religion_in_Laos&oldid=1276778445.

⁶ United States Department of State, *Laos*, 5.03.2025, <https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-report-on-international-religious-freedom/laos/>.

⁷ OMI World, *Laos: Kościół dedykowany pierwszemu laotańskiemu świętemu z grupy etnicznej Hmong* [Laos: A Church Dedicated to the First Laotian Saint from the Hmong Ethnic Group], *Oblaci.pl*, 5.03.2025, <https://oblaci.pl/2022/02/09/laos-kosciol-dedykowany-pierwszemu-laotanskiemu-swietemu-z-grupy-etnicznej-hmong/>.

activities must be registered and approved by the Lao Front for National Construction (formerly the Lao Front for National Reconstruction), the body overseeing religious life.⁸

According to the official 2015 census, Christians make up about 1,7% of the population (around 120,000 people), although the actual number may reach 2–3% due to individuals practicing in secret. The state continues to enforce restrictions – for example, mass conversions of entire villages are suppressed, and local officials often harass converts under accusations of embracing a “foreign religion.”⁹ Nevertheless, recent decades have brought some improvements: the authorities have allowed the construction of certain places of worship and have gradually initiated dialogue with Christian leaders.

The country thus exhibits a tense balance – Buddhism enjoys state support as a component of national culture, while Christianity is tolerated only to a limited extent and is still viewed with suspicion as a potentially “foreign element” or a remnant of colonialism.

THE CHURCH – HISTORY OF CHRISTIANITY IN LAOS

BEGINNINGS OF MISSIONS (17TH–19TH CENTURY)

The initial contact between the inhabitants of Laos and Christianity occurred in the 17th century. In 1642, two Jesuit missionaries from Tonkin (Vietnam), including Fr. Giovanni Maria Leria, arrived in the Kingdom of Lan Xang. However, their efforts did not yield lasting results – Fr. Leria left Laos after six years without establishing a permanent community. For the next two centuries, the country remained virtually closed to foreigners, and it was not until the 19th century that renewed attempts at evangelization were made.¹⁰

A pivotal role was played by clergy from the Paris Foreign Missions Society (MEP) based in neighboring Siam. As early as 1830, Fr. Jean-Pierre Bonald Deschavannes reached northern Laos, but the mission faced enormous challenges. Systematic missionary work began in the 1880s. In 1881,

⁸ World Council of Churches, *Laos. World Council of Churches...*

⁹ Bressan, *Z dziejów...* [From the History of Evangelization in Laos...]; E. Gumulak, *Laos: „Wyznajecie Boga Ameryki, która zniszczyła nasz kraj!”* [Laos: ‘You confess the God of America, who destroyed our country!’], Vatican News, September 21, 2020, 5.03.2025, <https://www.vaticannews.va/pl/kosciol/news/2020-09/laos-przesladowania-chrzescijan.html>.

¹⁰ G. Evans, *A Short History of Laos: The Land in Between*, Crows Nest, NSW 2002.

a permanent Catholic presence was established, and in 1899, the Holy See erected the Apostolic Vicariate of Laos with its seat in Nong Seng (later moved to Tharé, in present-day Thailand). At the time of the vicariate's establishment, there were approximately 10,000 baptized individuals and 2,000 catechumens in Laos – a small fraction compared to the predominantly Buddhist society. The missionaries spared no effort or sacrifice: many died young from tropical diseases; there were also isolated incidents of violence – such as the murder of Fr. Joseph-Auguste Séguret by bandits in 1884. Despite these losses, by the late 19th century, Catholics had founded the first mission stations and a seminary in Don Don near Thakhek (1891) to train local catechists and candidates for the priesthood. The fruit of these efforts was the ordination of the first indigenous clergy: around 1932, the first Laotian, Fr. Théophane (Tin) Théng, received the sacrament of Holy Orders.

Concurrently, Protestant work began in southern Laos. The first were Swiss missionaries from the Plymouth Brethren, who established a station in 1902 and translated portions of the Bible into the Lao language.¹¹ Protestant activities continued in subsequent decades, including efforts by the Swedish Baptist Mission (from 1890) and the Christian and Missionary Alliance (C&MA) from the 1920s.¹² (Mouanoutoua, 2014) Despite initial setbacks, the foundations for the future Church were laid.¹³

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH (20TH CENTURY)

The period of French colonial rule favored the strengthening of the Catholic Church's structures in Laos. By 1911, the Apostolic Vicariate of Laos already counted 23,000 faithful, and in the following years administrative changes were introduced to adapt the Church's organization to local conditions. In 1938, the Apostolic Prefecture of Northern Laos was established, based in Luang Prabang, and entrusted to the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate (OMI).

¹¹ World Council of Churches, *Laos. World Council of Churches...*

¹² K. Mouanoutoua, *LEC History*, Lao Evangelical Church, July 15, 2014, 5.03.2025, <https://lao-evangelicalchurch.com/lec-history/>.

¹³ Ch. Archambault, *Structures Religieuses Lao (Rites et Mythes)*, Vientiane 1973; C. Charpentier, S. Clément, P. Clément, *L'habitation Lao. Dans Les Régions de Vientiane et de Luang Prabang*, Paris 1990.

Until the outbreak of World War II, the Church carried out active pastoral and educational work in Laos – schools, minor seminaries, orphanages, and leprosaria were founded.¹⁴

However, the war brought new persecutions: in March 1945, during the Japanese occupation, the Apostolic Vicar of Laos, Bishop Jean-Arthur-Gervais Gouin, was arrested and executed in Nakay, along with several other French missionaries.

After the war, with Laos gaining independence, the Church had to find its place within the new reality of a young state. In 1950, the Apostolic Prefecture of Savannakhet was created (later entrusted to Fr. Jean Arnould), and in 1967, the Apostolic Vicariate of Paksé was established in the south of the country.¹⁵ At the same time, educational and charitable initiatives were dynamically expanding: religious congregations – such as the Sisters of Charity and the Daughters of Mary – ran schools in Vientiane for hundreds of children, hospitals, and workshops, also reaching remote villages.

By the early 1970s, the Catholic Church in Laos had developed a network of parishes, schools, and health facilities, serving the population regardless of religious affiliation. In 1973, Catholics operated three leprosaria and several clinics, and the number of baptized Catholics reached 45,000.

Unfortunately, these years of relative freedom ended with the communist takeover in 1975. The new regime regarded the Church – like Buddhism – as an ideological threat.¹⁶ Persecutions began: all foreign missionaries were immediately expelled, many local priests were arrested and sent to “reeducation” camps.

All Catholic schools and institutions were nationalized, and religious worship went underground. From 1975 to 1988, the Laotian Church was practically cut off from contact with the Holy See and the universal Church.

It was a time of “silence,” but also of fidelity – small groups of believers continued to practice their faith in secret, despite the lack of priests and sacraments for over a decade.¹⁷

A symbolic witness of this period is the fate of the first native priest of Laos, Blessed Fr. Joseph Thao Tién (Tieng), ordained in 1949 – he remained with his parish community despite danger and was murdered in 1954 by

¹⁴ Bressan, *Z dziejów...* [From the History of Evangelization in Laos...].

¹⁵ R. Dziura, *Laos*, in: *Encyklopedia katolicka*, ed. W. Granat et al., Lublin 1973, p. 482–486.

¹⁶ L. Morev, *Religion in Laos Today*, “Religion, State and Society” 30, no. 4 (December 2002), p. 395–407, <https://doi.org/10.1080/09637490220127602>.

¹⁷ Bressan, *Z dziejów...* [From the History of Evangelization in Laos...].

communist partisans out of hatred for the faith.¹⁸ He and several other priests and laypeople who were killed between 1954 and 1970 were eventually beatified as martyrs for the faith. The beatification ceremony of the 17 Laotian Martyrs took place on December 11, 2016, in Vientiane.¹⁹ Their blood became the seed of the Church – the survival of the Catholic community during that difficult time is often attributed to their intercession and witness.²⁰

PROTESTANT CHURCHES

Protestant churches also underwent dramatic transformations in the 20th century. Protestants – active mainly among ethnic minorities such as the Hmong and Khamu – experienced significant growth in the 1950s.²¹ (Guy, 1968)

In 1950, American missionary Ted Andrianoff (C&MA) baptized the first Hmong believers in Xieng Khouang Province, including the later well-known shaman Boua Ya Thao, whose conversion drew thousands of his compatriots to Christianity.²² To coordinate missionary efforts, the nationwide Lao Evangelical Church (LEC) was established in March 1957 – a federation uniting the work of Swiss, Swedish, and American missionaries. The first president of the LEC was Pastor Saly Kounthapanya, a former Buddhist novice who converted along with his cousin and became one of the pillars of Protestantism in Laos.²³

By the 1970s, the Evangelical Church had developed a network of over 200 congregations and missions in rural areas. After 1975, Protestants also faced persecution – many pastors fled into exile (mainly to the United States and Thailand), while those who remained operated underground. Eventually, in 1979, the authorities permitted the LEC to resume limited activities, although under strict supervision by the National Front.²⁴ (<https://a-piu.it>, 2023)

Today, the LEC remains the largest Protestant community in the country, comprising (according to various estimates) between 150,000 and 200,000 members. A small Seventh-day Adventist Church also operates in Laos, with around 2,500 adherents. Like Catholics, Laotian Protestants are not

¹⁸ Alpanet.pl, *Błogosławieni...* [Blessed Martyrs of Laos].

¹⁹ OMI World, *Laos: Kościół...* [Laos: A Church Dedicated to...].

²⁰ Alpanet.pl, *Błogosławieni...* [Blessed Martyrs of Laos].

²¹ M. Guy, *Le Chamanisme Des Hmong*, Bulletin de l'Ecole Française d'Extrême-Orient 54 (1968), p. 53–294.

²² Archambault, *Structures Religieuses Lao (Rites et Mythes)...*

²³ Mouanoutoua, *LEC History...*

²⁴ J. Wong, *(Re)Building the Church in Laos*, OFM – Order of Friars Minor (ofm.org), February 17, 2023, 5.03.2025, <https://ofm.org/en/re-building-the-church-in-laos.html>.

permitted to run schools or official charitable organizations; they therefore focus on activity within their own communities and quiet evangelization through the witness of their lives.

THE CATHOLIC CHURCH TODAY

Despite decades of isolation, the Catholic Church in Laos experienced a rebirth after 1990 as a small yet vibrant community.²⁵ It is estimated that there are currently around 50,000 to 60,000 Catholics in the country (0,7–1% of the population),²⁶ although some sources suggest the number may be as high as 100,000. Catholics are dispersed across four ecclesiastical jurisdictions – there are no dioceses, but four Apostolic Vicariates function: Vientiane (the capital), Louang Prabang (north), Thakhek–Savannakhet (central), and Paksé (south). Each is headed by an apostolic vicar with the rank of titular bishop.²⁷

Significantly, since the 1990s, all the vicariates have been led by native priests (Laotians) – a change from the colonial period, when bishops were French. The Laotian Church remains under the care of the Pontifical Mission Societies and neighboring episcopal conferences. Laos and Cambodia share a single bishops' conference – not because of their territorial size, but most likely due to the very small number of Catholics in both countries: approximately 60,000–70,000 in Laos (about 1.5% of the population) and only around 20,000 in Cambodia (about 0,15%).²⁸

There are only about 20 to 30 priests working in Laotian parishes (some of them are foreigners from neighboring countries working temporarily), as well as approximately 100 religious sisters. A continuing weakness is the shortage of clergy – with each priest serving several thousand faithful – which is why great emphasis is placed on the formation of lay catechists. These lay catechists, often married couples, serve as the “extended hands” of priests by leading prayer and catechesis in remote villages. (Catholic News Service, 2017)²⁹

²⁵ Aktualna struktura hierarchiczna Kościoła w Laosie jest dostępna w: D.M. Cheney, *Catholic Church in Lao People's Democratic Republic*, Catholic-Hierarchy, 25.03.2025, <https://www.catholic-hierarchy.org/country/la.html>.

²⁶ OMI World, *Laos: Kościół...* [Laos: A Church Dedicated to...].

²⁷ *Christianity in Laos*, Wikipedia, December 10, 2024, 5.03.2025, https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Christianity_in_Laos&oldid=1262210964.

²⁸ Bressan, *Z dziejów...* [From the History of Evangelization in Laos...].

²⁹ Catholic News Service, *New Cardinal from Laos Known for Kindness and Open-Minded Dialogue*, America Magazine, May 25, 2017, 5.03.2025, <https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2017/05/25/new-cardinal-laos-known-kindness-and-open-minded-dialogue>.

In 1998, a decision was made to produce the first complete translation of the Bible into Lao – previously, Catholics mostly used the Scriptures in French or Thai, while Protestants had their own translations. Today, the Catholic liturgy is celebrated in Lao and also in minority dialects (such as Khamu), the fruit of long-term inculturation efforts that began in the 1970s with the translation of liturgical texts into local languages.³⁰

Despite restrictions, the Church is gradually reclaiming its space – in recent years, the government has permitted the construction of several new churches (e.g., in 2017, the first church dedicated to a Laotian martyr, catechist Paul Thoj Xyooj, was consecrated in northern Laos).

A historic moment came with the creation of the first Laotian cardinal – in 2017, Pope Francis elevated the then Apostolic Vicar of Paksé, Bishop Louis-Marie Ling Mangkhankhoun, to the cardinalate, which was widely interpreted as a sign of recognition for the entire Church in Laos.

For this small community, vocations are also a sign of hope – in recent years, several new priests have been ordained annually, which in the Laotian context is seen as a meaningful “small miracle.”³¹

Overall, although numerically small, the Catholic Church in Laos displays remarkable vitality.³² (KAI, 2024) It has survived half a century of persecution and, in the new social conditions, strives to serve the whole society through spiritual and charitable activity (as far as the existing restrictions allow). As one missionary summarized: “The Laotian Christian community has survived a difficult half-century and is once again alive and dynamic, ready to grow further.”³³

THEOLOGY – THE SPECIFICITY OF LAOTIAN THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION

Christianity in Laos has always developed as a minority religion, remaining in dialogue – at times a dramatic one – with the dominant Bud-

³⁰ Bressan, *Z dziejów...* [From the History of Evangelization in Laos...].

³¹ OMI World, *Laos: Kościół...* [Laos: A Church Dedicated to...].

³² Katolicka Agencja Informacyjna, *Kościół w Laosie: mały cud* [Church in Laos: A Small Miracle], Onet, November 2, 2024, 5.03.2025, <https://www.onet.pl/informacje/kai/kosciol-w-laosie-maly-cud/9qrel2q,30bc1058>.

³³ Bressan, *Z dziejów...* [From the History of Evangelization in Laos...].

dhist culture and traditional animist beliefs.³⁴ For this reason, Laotian theology has taken on specific characteristics shaped by its context: it is a theology rooted in the experience of a small, impoverished community, living amidst a foreign faith and exposed to persecution. And if serious theological scholarship allows us to speak of Chinese,³⁵ Japanese,³⁶ Arab,³⁷ (Sękowski, 2024, 2016) or Thai theologies,³⁸ then we should likewise be able to identify the specific nature of Laotian theology.

THEOLOGY OF MARTYRDOM AND WITNESS

One of the central themes, therefore, is the theology of martyrdom and witness. The martyrs of the 20th century – both clergy and laity – have become models of fidelity unto the cross for Laotian Christians. Their lives and deaths are interpreted as the sowing of the Gospel on Laotian soil. As the Church affirmed in the beatification documentation, the blood of the witnesses of faith became the leaven of a new community. (Alpanet.pl, 2020) This awareness shapes the community's spirituality: devotion to the martyrs is strong (for example, local liturgical commemorations on December 12), as is the historical narrative that emphasizes the continuity of the Church despite persecution. The theology of suffering for the faith is also closely linked to paschal motifs – the comparison to a grain of wheat that must die to bear fruit (cf. John 12:24) is frequently invoked.³⁹

³⁴ M. Zago, *Rites et Cérémonies En Milieu Bouddhiste Lao*, "Revue de l'histoire Des Religions" 185, no. 2 (1974), p. 234–235; M.S. Viravong, *Phongsavadan Lao* [History of Laos], New York 1964; M. Stuart-Fox, *A History of Laos*, Cambridge 1997; Ch. Archambault, *Le Sacrifice Du Buffle à S'ien Khwang (Laos)*, Paris 1991.

³⁵ Ch. Starr, G. He, X. Yang, eds., *A Reader in Chinese Theology*, Waco, Texas 2022; D. Klejnowski-Różycki, 柯達理, 中国的神学。 *Teologia chińska. Uwarunkowania kulturowe pojęć trynitarnych* [Chinese theology. Cultural determinants of the Trinity concepts], Opole 2012; D. Klejnowski-Różycki, 柯達理, *Teologia chińska. Szansa czy zagrożenie?* [Chinese Theology. Opportunity or Threat?], "Studia Salvatoriana Polonica" 16 (2022), 129–143; D. Klejnowski-Różycki, 柯達理, ed., 中国的基督论。 *Chrystologia chińska. Teologia i Kościół w kontekście chińskim* [Chinese Christology. Theology and the Church in the Chinese Context], Opole 2008.

³⁶ Y. Furuya, ed., *A History of Japanese Theology*, Grand Rapids, Mich 1997.

³⁷ P. Sękowski, *Chrześcijańska teologia islamu Louisa Massignona* [Christian Theology of Islam by Louis Massignon], Gliwice–Rome 2024; P. Sękowski, *Chrystologia arabska: pierwsze syn-tezy wyznań pochalcedońskich* [Arab Christology: The First Syntheses of Post-Chalcedonian Confessions], Gliwice 2016.

³⁸ S. Boonyakiat, *A Christian Theology of Suffering in the Context of Theravada Buddhism in Thailand*, Carlisle 2020.

³⁹ Alpanet.pl, *Błogosławieni...* [Blessed Martyrs of Laos].

THEOLOGY OF INCULTURATION AND INTERRELIGIOUS DIALOGUE

A second important characteristic is the theology of inculturation and interreligious dialogue. For years, Laotian theologians – both Catholic and Protestant – have been reflecting on how to proclaim the Gospel in a way that is understandable to Buddhists and adherents of traditional religions. (Cabaton, n.d.; Condominas, n.d.) The Church strives to highlight those aspects of Christianity that can resonate with Theravāda Buddhism – for example, the ideas of mercy, compassion, peace, and monastic life.⁴⁰

As early as the 1960s and 1970s, the first official steps in Catholic-Buddhist dialogue were taken. In 1973, a historic visit took place in which a delegation of Laotian Buddhist monks and Catholics traveled to Rome, where they were received by Pope Paul VI. One of the initiators of these efforts was missionary and theologian Marcello Zago, OMI, who served in Laos for 15 years. Archbishop Zago recalled the “remarkable openness of Buddhists to dialogue” in Laos – initially tentative, but over time increasingly systematic.⁴¹

One fruit of this openness is the fact that the translation of fundamental Christian prayers into Lao uses many culturally neutral or Buddhist-derived terms in order to avoid unnecessary confrontation. For example, in the “Our Father,” the phrase ໂຜດຜົດ (phot phit – forgive faults) is used to express the forgiveness of sins – a term less doctrinally charged than the theological vocabulary found in Western languages.⁴²

Such linguistic choices reflect a broader process of seeking a local theology in which the truths of the faith are expressed through indigenous concepts and metaphors. Systematic theology in Laos is still in its infancy (there are no theological universities in the country, and very little theological literature exists in the Lao language), yet certain elements of original thinking can be seen in preaching and catechesis.

Emphasis is placed on God as the good Father and on Jesus as the Divine Teacher of morality – an image that resonates with the Buddhist understanding of religion as an ethical path. Christology and ecclesiology are presented in a communal context: the Church is likened to a family united in the Spirit, rather than an institution or organization, helping Laotians

⁴⁰ G. Condominas, *Laos*, in: *Encyclopédie Des Religions*, vol. VIII, Paris 2010, p. 451–454.

⁴¹ Bressan, *Z dziejów...* [From the History of Evangelization in Laos...].

⁴² M. Philibert, *Naissance d'une Chrétienté Au Laos*, Missions Etrangères de Paris 141 (1965), p. 43–51.

distinguish the faith community from state structures (which often evoke mistrust).

It is worth noting that a large portion of Laotian Catholics belong to ethnic minorities (such as the Khmu or Hmong), who have their own animist traditions.⁴³ Dialogue with traditional religion is reflected, among other things, in the incorporation of native symbolism into theology – for example, the image of water as a sign of life (important in folk cosmology) is used in catechesis on baptism and grace; likewise, the Buddhist theme of light (Theravāda Buddhism emphasizes “enlightenment”) is reinterpreted as the light of Christ.

Naturally, the Laotian Church undertakes this carefully, avoiding syncretism, yet it values the truths found in the local culture. Pope John Paul II, in his apostolic exhortation *Ecclesia in Asia*, encouraged the nations of Asia to live with a “double fidelity” – to the Gospel and to their own culture – which has found an echo in Laos as well.⁴⁴

THEOLOGY OF LIBERATION AND DEVELOPMENT

Another theme in Laotian theology is the theology of liberation and development, though in a form distinct from that found in Latin America. Christians in Laos, living in one of the poorest countries in Asia, raise questions about how to combine the proclamation of the Good News with the promotion of human development and social justice. The Catholic Church – although not permitted to run official social institutions – has nonetheless been involved in education on agriculture and health in rural areas since before 1975. In the teachings of Laotian bishops, the theme of the option for the poor is present: it is emphasized that Christ was born poor, and that His Church is called to serve the most vulnerable, regardless of their religious affiliation.⁴⁵

A particularly relevant contemporary issue is the theology of creation and ecology. Laos – a country rich in natural beauty – is facing serious ecological challenges, including deforestation and the construction of dams along the Mekong River. Cardinal Louis-Marie Ling has warned that environmental destruction caused by unregulated industry and corruption

⁴³ A. Doré, *Aux Sources de La Civilisation Lao. Contribution Ethno-Historique à La Connaissance de La Culture Luang-Prabanaise*, Paris 1987.

⁴⁴ M.L. Manich Jumsai, *History of Laos*, Bangkok 1967.

⁴⁵ Bressan, *Z dziejów...* [From the History of Evangelization in Laos...].

stands in opposition to God's design: "We are beginning to destroy ourselves... this is not only the effect of climate change, but above all the result of human actions," he cautioned, calling for a renewed respect for creation.⁴⁶ His voice aligns with Pope Francis's ecological message in *Laudato Si'*, demonstrating that even within such a small Church, an awareness of global theological challenges is taking root.

In conclusion, Christian theology in Laos focuses on several interwoven dimensions: the witness of faith under persecution, the inculturation of the Gospel message in a Buddhist-animist context, and the practical application of the Gospel in the service of humanity. It is a theology shaped more by practice than by academic discourse – expressed in homilies, pastoral letters, and testimonies of faith rather than scholarly treatises. Nevertheless, through the lived experience of the local Church, it offers a valuable contribution to the treasury of universal theological reflection, reminding us of both the universality and diversity of the Body of Christ.

KEY LAOTIAN THEOLOGIANS

In the context of Laos, the term "theologians" often refers simply to leading Christian clergy and thinkers who, through their ministry, writings, or formative work, have shaped the face of local theology. Below are the profiles of several of the most important such figures – from both the Catholic Church and Protestant communities.

LOUIS-MARIE LING MANGKHANEKHOUN

Cardinal Louis-Marie Ling Mangkhanekhoun (b. 1944) is the first and, so far, the only cardinal from Laos. He was born on April 5, 1944, in Xieng Khouang Province, into a family belonging to the Khamu ethnic minority.⁴⁷ He was baptized as a teenager along with his mother (a convert from Buddhism) and soon discovered his vocation to the priesthood. He entered the seminary run by the *Voluntas Dei* Institute—a society of apostolic life closely associated with the Oblates of Mary Immaculate (OMI). He was

⁴⁶ Catholic News Service, *New Cardinal from Laos...*

⁴⁷ *Cardinal Louis-Marie Ling Mangkhanekhoun, IVD | OMI World*, 5.03.2025, <https://www.omiworld.org/interview/cardinal-louis-marie-ling-mangkhanekhounivd/>; *Louis-Marie Ling Mangkhanekhoun*, Wikipedia, 5.03.2025, https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Louis-Marie_Ling_Mangkhanekhoun&oldid=1280580376.

ordained a priest in 1972, just before the communist revolution. Despite the regime change, he remained in Laos and served in secret.⁴⁸

From 1975 to 1987, he was one of the few active priests in the country, traveling incognito from village to village to strengthen scattered communities. In 2000, Pope John Paul II appointed him Apostolic Vicar of Paksé (there was no diocese, but he acted as a missionary bishop). He received episcopal consecration in 2001. Since Laos had no established hierarchy at the time, Bishop Ling became the de facto leader of the local Church. Beginning in 2007, he also administered the Vicariate of Vientiane, and in 2017, Pope Francis elevated him to the College of Cardinals.

Cardinal Ling is not the author of theological books, but his pastoral work and public statements provide a guiding vision for the Church in Laos. He is known for a pastoral approach grounded in dialogue. “Bishop Ling masterfully employs dialogue instead of confrontation in dealing with the authorities and convinced the government that the Church is focused on social development,” one of his collaborators said.⁴⁹ He emphasized evangelization through presence and service, paying special attention to rural communities. He developed a unique model of priestly formation: after several years of study, seminarians must complete a year (or more) of missionary work as catechists in remote villages, “living as the villagers do, bringing them basic help and prayer.”⁵⁰ The goal of this model, he explains, is to root future priests in the realities of the faithful and teach them the humility of service.

Cardinal Ling is also a strong advocate of inculturation – the integration of Christianity into Lao culture. “He sought to bring Christian values into Laotian culture so that the Church could live in harmony with the Buddhist nation,” reported a missionary from neighboring Vietnam.⁵¹ In practice, this meant accepting certain culturally neutral customs (such as national holidays or respectful gestures toward monks), translating theological terms into language familiar to locals, and maintaining warm relationships with Buddhist leaders.

Ling emphasizes that the Church must be “poor and simple” – he himself is known for the simplicity of his life and closeness to the people. In

⁴⁸ A. Gotovskiy, *Laos’ First Cardinal Focused on Evangelization, Dialogue*, Catholic News Agency CNA, June 27, 2017, 5.03.2025, <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/36337/laos-first-cardinal-focused-on-evangelization-dialogue>.

⁴⁹ Catholic News Service, *New Cardinal from Laos...*

⁵⁰ Catholic News Service, *New Cardinal from Laos...*

⁵¹ Catholic News Service, *New Cardinal from Laos...*

interviews, he has said: “It doesn’t matter whether you are a cardinal or not – we are all the same, we must be simple and truly with the people.”⁵² His ministry is also marked by social engagement: he was one of the first Laotian religious leaders to speak out publicly about deforestation and the harm done to local communities displaced by logging operations.⁵³ He called for ethical stewardship of natural resources, making him a voice of “ecothology” in the spirit of Pope Francis.

Cardinal Ling thus embodies both the legacy of the first missionaries (whose spiritual heir he is) and the innovative approach of a pastor serving the Church on the margins. His life and work represent a living “theology in action” – a testimony to how the Gospel takes root in a foreign culture through dialogue, poverty, and sacrificial love.

JEAN KHAMSE VITHAVONG

Bishop Jean Khamsé Vithavong, OMI (1942–2024), was for many years the Apostolic Vicar of Vientiane, often referred to as the “architect of the Church’s reconstruction” in Laos after the period of persecution. He was born on October 18, 1942, in Laos. In his youth, he entered the Congregation of the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate (OMI) and received both his religious and theological formation, most likely abroad (the Oblates ran seminaries in countries such as Canada and France for candidates from Asia). He was ordained to the priesthood on January 25, 1975.

After the communist takeover in 1975, when most foreign missionaries were forced to leave the country, the young Fr. Khamsé chose to remain and continued pastoral ministry in secrecy. As part of a delicate compromise between the Holy See and the Laotian authorities, on November 19, 1982, Jean Khamsé Vithavong was appointed by Pope John Paul II as Co-adjutor Bishop of the Apostolic Vicariate of Vientiane and Titular Bishop of Moglaena; he received episcopal consecration on January 16, 1983, and formally assumed office on April 7, 1984, following the death of Bishop Thomas Nanthy.⁵⁴ He served as the pastoral head of the Laotian Church for over 30 years, until his retirement in 2017, striving to ensure both its survival and development.

⁵² Gotovski, *Laos’ First Cardinal Focused on Evangelization, Dialogue...*

⁵³ Catholic News Service, *New Cardinal from Laos...*

⁵⁴ *Jean Khamsé Vithavong*, Wikipedia, January 20, 2025, 5.03.2025, https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Jean_Khams%C3%A9_Vithavong&oldid=1270685636.

Bishop Vithavong did not publish written theological works – his contribution was primarily pastoral and organizational. Nonetheless, his theological legacy is expressed through his practical initiatives. He played a key role in reactivating ecclesial structures after 1988: he initiated renewed gatherings of the bishops of Laos and Cambodia, contributed to the drafting of the episcopal conference's statutes, and developed a local program for priestly formation.⁵⁵ In 1995, he founded the Catechist Formation Center in Thakhek, dedicated to training lay religious leaders – aware that without them, the Church could not survive across Laos's vast missionary territories. He also personally participated in translating liturgical texts, being fluent in both Lao and French, which greatly facilitated the creation of the first Missal and ritual books in the Laotian language.

His episcopal motto was that of the Oblates: *Evangelizare pauperibus misit me* ("He has sent me to bring the Good News to the poor"). Indeed, in his ministry he strongly emphasized the option for the poor and for ethnic minorities: he visited remote mountain villages and celebrated the sacraments for small groups of faithful who had gone years without a priest. During the years when attending Mass could be dangerous, he organized underground networks and secret retreats for Catholic youth.

After 1990, he also became the face of the Laotian Church on the international stage – representing Laos at Synods of Bishops in Rome and advocating for missionary support. His humility and quiet demeanor earned him respect even from state authorities – although he lived under surveillance until the end of his life, he managed to win their trust, for example by consistently emphasizing that the Church prays for the good of the nation.

He died on December 8, 2024, in Vientiane, having lived to see the fruits of his lifelong labor – leaving behind a Church with a local clergy and a new generation of leaders. In his homilies, he often spoke of the unity of the Church, stressing that although Laos is geographically isolated, it is an integral part of the universal community of God's People.

One could say that his "theology" was manifested in his actions: he rebuilt the Church institutionally and spiritually, guided by fidelity to Rome and a profound sensitivity to local culture. He himself was a Laotian deeply rooted in native tradition and, at the same time, a fervent Catholic – embodying the ideal of inculturation.⁵⁶

⁵⁵ Bressan, *Z dziejów...* [From the History of Evangelization in Laos...].

⁵⁶ L.M. Ling, *Laos' Small Catholic Community Shows Resilience despite Isolation*, "La Croix International – Catholic Outlook", November 20, 2024, 5.03.2025, <https://catholicoutlook.org/laos-small-catholic-community-shows-resilience-despite-isolation/>.

SĀLY KOUNTHAPANYA

Pastor Sāly Kounthapanya (1915–2004?) was a pioneer of Laotian Protestantism and the first president of the Lao Evangelical Church. He was likely born around 1915 into a Buddhist family; the year of his death remains uncertain due to the lack of confirmed public records, especially after 1975, when he may have gone into exile. As a young man, he became a novice in a Buddhist monastery, but in the 1940s he encountered Christian missionaries. According to church tradition, he was one of two cousins (the other being the future pastor Titus Sithideth) who, after deep study of the Bible, received baptism – an event regarded as the beginning of the indigenous Protestant Church in Laos.⁵⁷ Sāly took the surname Kounthapanya (meant to symbolize a new life – literally meaning “servant of the Lord”) and committed himself to evangelization.

In the 1950s, he worked with Swiss and American missionaries on the translation of the Bible into Lao. In 1957, when a nationwide Evangelical Church was established, he was elected as its first president – a role he held, with some interruptions, until 1973, having been re-elected several times.⁵⁸ Pastor Kounthapanya was the author of the first Protestant catechisms in the Lao language and co-translator of the New Testament. His preaching focused on the essential truths of Scripture in a simple and accessible form. He emphasized a personal relationship with Jesus as Savior – a point that distinguishes Christianity from the impersonal character of Buddhism.

In his sermons, he often drew on personal experience – for example, describing the inner peace he found in Christ and contrasting it with the years he spent in the monastery, where he had never encountered a similar assurance of salvation. His theological style was deeply biblical and evangelical: he quoted Scripture extensively, interpreting and applying it to the daily lives of his listeners.

He was also sensitive to cultural elements: he respected former Buddhist monks (having once been one himself), and through this built bridges with the local community. Many pastors of the newer Laotian generation regard him as their spiritual father.

After 1975, the fate of Sāly Kounthapanya is not well documented; there are indications that he may have gone into exile in France or the United States, where he continued to support the Laotian faithful from afar. Nonetheless, he left behind a lasting legacy: the translated Lao Bible (the com-

⁵⁷ Mouanoutoua, *LEC History...*

⁵⁸ Mouanoutoua, *LEC History...*

plete Scriptures were finalized in the 1970s thanks to the efforts initiated by him and the missionaries) and a solidified structure for the Evangelical Church in Laos.

His biography reflects a transformation from Buddhist spirituality to fervent Christianity – hence he is sometimes called the “Laotian Paul,” having undergone a dramatic conversion and become an apostle in his homeland.⁵⁹ (Cha, 2015; Chunakara, n.d.)

MARCELLO ZAGO

Archbishop Marcello Zago, OMI (1932–2001), was an Italian missionary and theologian who played a significant role in the Catholic Church in Laos and in promoting interreligious dialogue worldwide.⁶⁰ He was born on August 9, 1932, in Villorba, in the Diocese of Treviso in northern Italy. After two years of theological studies at the diocesan seminary, he joined the novitiate of the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate (OMI) in Ripalimosani in 1955. He was ordained a priest on September 13, 1959, in Villorba, and made his perpetual vows two weeks later. Afterwards, he went to Southeast Asia to study the region’s languages. Between 1966 and 1974, he worked as a missionary in Laos, engaging in evangelization and promoting interreligious dialogue, especially with Buddhism. In 1986, he was elected Superior General of the OMI congregation, and in 1998, Pope John Paul II appointed him Secretary of the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples and titular Archbishop of Rusellae. He passed away on March 1, 2001, in Rome.⁶¹

Archbishop Zago was a passionate advocate for interreligious dialogue, particularly with the religions of Asia, such as Buddhism. His missionary experiences in Laos led him to become deeply committed to fostering mutual

⁵⁹ L.Y. Cha, *Wind in the Bamboo: The Life and Witness of Khamphone Kounthapanya*, Wheaton 2015; M.G. Chunakara, *Homage to the Charismatic Church and Ecumenical Leader in Lao PDR – The Rev. Dr Khamphone Kounthapanya* | CCA, 5.03.2025, <https://www.cca.org.hk/news/homage-charismatic-church-and-ecumenical-leader-lao-pdr-rev-dr-khamphone-kounthapanya>.

⁶⁰ D.M. Cheney, *Archbishop Marcello Zago*, Catholic-Hierarchy, 5.03.2025, https://catholic-hierarchy.org/bishop/bzago.html?utm_source=chatgpt.com.

⁶¹ Oblate Communications, *P. Marcello Zago, OMI Tenencia: 1986.09.13–1998.03.28*, OMI The Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate, August 17, 2017, 5.03.2025, <https://www.omiworld.org/es/nuestra-familia/liderazgo/superiores-pasados/marcello-zago-o-m-mas-tarde-arzobispo/biografia/>; *Marcello Zago*, Wikipedia, wolna encyklopedia, July 24, 2024, 5.03.2025, https://pl.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Marcello_Zago&oldid=74382500.

understanding among followers of different religious traditions.⁶² As Secretary of the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, he played a key role in shaping the Church's policy on missions and interreligious dialogue. His writings and activities significantly influenced the development of missiology and the Church's approach to evangelization in a multireligious context.⁶³

ANDREW SOUKSAVATH NOUANE ASA

Bishop Andrew Souksavath Nouane Asa (b. 1972) is a contemporary Laotian Catholic clergyman who has served as Apostolic Vicar of Paksé since 2022.⁶⁴ He was born on August 5, 1972, in Paksé, Laos. From 1988 to 1991, he attended the minor seminary in Paksé and then continued his studies at the Pedagogical University in Vientiane, earning a bachelor's degree in English language teaching. He was ordained a priest on December 30, 2006. He held various pastoral roles, including youth ministry, philosophy lecturer at the seminary in Savannakhet, and administrator of the Apostolic Vicariate of Paksé. In 2019, he was elected Secretary General of the Episcopal Conference of Laos and Cambodia.⁶⁵ (Agenzia Fides, 2022) On May 31, 2022, Pope Francis appointed him Apostolic Vicar of Paksé, and he received episcopal consecration on August 15, 2022.⁶⁶

Bishop Asa focuses on the spiritual and intellectual formation of the faithful in Laos. As a philosophy lecturer, he emphasized the development of critical thinking within the context of faith. His pastoral ministry includes commitment to youth education and the promotion of Christian values in Laotian society. As Apostolic Vicar of Paksé, he continues to work to strengthen the Catholic Church in Laos, drawing attention to the need for dialogue and cooperation among the country's diverse religious communities.⁶⁷

⁶² Provincia d'Italia dei Missionari OMI, *Marcello Zago, uomo del dialogo*, Missionari Oblati di Maria Immacolata, March 1, 2016, 5.03.2025, <https://www.omimed.eu/2016/03/01/marcello-zago/>.

⁶³ *Zago, Marcello*, Encyclopedia.Com, New Catholic Encyclopedia, 5.03.2025, https://www.encyclopedia.com/religion/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/zago-marcello?utm_source=chatgpt.com.

⁶⁴ D.M. Cheney, *Bishop Andrew Souksavath Nouane Asa* [Catholic-Hierarchy], 5.03.2025, https://catholic-hierarchy.org/bishop/bsoukna.html?utm_source=chatgpt.com.

⁶⁵ Agenzia Fides, *ASIA/LAOS – Appointment of Vicar Apostolic of Paksé*, May 31, 2022, 5.03.2025, https://www.fides.org/en/news/72267?utm_source=chatgpt.com.

⁶⁶ *Andrew Souksavath Nouane Asa*, Wikipedia, 5.03.2025, https://pl.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Andrew_Souksavath_Nouane_Asa&oldid=76322101.

⁶⁷ *Resignations and Appointments*, 5.03.2025, https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2022/05/31/220531a.html?utm_source=chatgpt.com.

THE LEGACY OF THE PIONEERS (19TH–20TH CENTURIES)

Earlier missionaries and martyrs of the 19th and 20th centuries also had a lasting impact on theology in Laos. In the 19th century, missionaries from the Paris Foreign Missions Society (MEP), such as Fr. Jean Prudhomme, founded the first Christian communities – purchasing local slaves and forming them into self-sufficient Catholic villages.⁶⁸ In the 20th century, the Oblate missionaries (including Bishop Lionello Berti – the first Apostolic Vicar of Luang Prabang, builder of the local cathedral, seminary, and schools⁶⁹, – and Blessed Mario Borzaga, OMI, murdered in 1960, whose posthumously published *Diary of a Happy Man* revealed the spiritual struggles of a missionary in the Laotian jungle⁷⁰) exemplified a theology of action through their witness, even unto martyrdom. Between 1957 and 1975, a total of 17 priests, religious, and lay catechists were killed; they were beatified by the Church in 2016 in Vientiane. Their lives have become an inspiration for the theology of martyrdom and perseverance in faith. Likewise, the first Protestant evangelizers from Swedish and Swiss churches, as well as from the Christian and Missionary Alliance (C&MA), laid the foundation for indigenous theological thought: they translated the Bible into Lao and minority languages, emphasized the inculturation of the Gospel into folk culture, and trained local leaders. In 1957, Pastor Saly Kounthapanya became the first president of the United Evangelical Church of Laos, and the American missionary Theodore “Ted” Andrianoff (C&MA) initiated mass conversions among the Hmong people – baptizing the first converts from among animist shamans in 1950, which sparked a wave of conversions of thousands of Hmong. The legacy of these pioneers – their translations, writings, testimonies of faith, and models of pastoral ministry (ranging from the use of indigenous culture to ecumenical relations) – continues to inspire contemporary Laotian theologians and pastors.⁷¹

In addition to the theologians mentioned above, it is worth noting that some Laotian Christians pursue theological education abroad – in Thailand,

⁶⁸ Laos, *The Catholic Church In*, in: *Encyclopedia.Com*, 5.03.2025, <https://www.encyclopedia.com/religion/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/laos-catholic-church>.

⁶⁹ Agenzia Fides, *ASIA/LAOS – The Church remembers Lionello Berti, first Bishop and missionary* – Agenzia Fides, accessed March 29, 2025, https://www.fides.org/en/news/63805-ASIA_LAOS_The_Church_remembers_Lionello_Berti_first_Bishop_and_missionary.

⁷⁰ Alpanet.pl, *Blogosławiony Mario Borzaga OMI* [Blessed Mario Borzaga OMI], Święty Krzyż – Klasztor Misjonarzy Oblatów Maryi Niepokalanej, 2020, 5.03.2025, <http://www.swietykrzyz.pl/kategorie/blogoslawiony-mario-borzaga-omi>.

⁷¹ Mouanoutoua, *LEC History...*

the Philippines, or the United States – and return to their homeland or work within the diaspora. Their theses and publications (once produced) may one day enrich theological literature concerning Laos. For now, however, access to their work remains limited due to safety concerns and language barriers.

CONCLUSION – PERSPECTIVES

The history of the Church in Laos resembles a dramatic story of a seed sown in hostile soil, which, by God's grace, nonetheless sprouted and bore fruit. Despite persecution, isolation, and limited resources, Laotian Christians managed to preserve a living faith and build mature ecclesial structures. Today, this community continues to face many challenges: the political regime is not conducive to religious freedom, and the dominance of Buddhism means that the Church must constantly explain itself and the Gospel in terms comprehensible to its surroundings. Nevertheless, there are reasons for cautious optimism. The Holy See maintains dialogue with the government of Laos, as evidenced by the appointments of successive native bishops and the creation of a cardinal – Laos is no longer a “forgotten Church.” The young generation of Catholics and Protestants, though small, is full of zeal and proud of its religious identity. In 2020, the first permanent deacons were ordained in the Catholic Church; the Lao Evangelical Church (LEC) is developing youth leadership training programs. An increasing number of Christian works are being translated into Lao, gradually laying the foundations for a native theological literature. Social conditions – poverty, illiteracy in rural areas – remain a challenge, but here too the Church strives to act within its means (e.g., informal educational activities run by religious sisters).

The prospects for the future depend largely on the political environment. If Laos continues down the path of liberalization and opens itself to international cooperation, the Church may gain greater freedom. A possible normalization of relations with the Vatican (e.g., the establishment of full diplomatic relations – the Holy See currently has only an apostolic delegate residing outside Laos) could help clarify the legal status of the Catholic Church. Similarly, ecumenical and interreligious dialogue could bear fruit – joint initiatives between Christians and Buddhists (even in charitable work) could improve the public image of Christians and dispel the stereotype of a “foreign religion.” In the theological sphere, further deepening of inculturation can be expected – perhaps the first theological works written by Laotians in their native language will emerge, integrating Christian thought

with Eastern wisdom. We may also see a translation of the Catechism of the Church or the Compendium of the Doctrine into a format accessible to Lao readers, which would aid catechesis. A key issue for the future will be maintaining balance: the Church in Laos must preserve its missionary zeal while also showing respect and loyalty toward the state, to avoid accusations of subversive activity. So far, this delicate task has been successfully managed thanks to the wise leadership of the shepherds. As one of them – the current cardinal – vividly put it: “We are a little flock, but Jesus is with us. A mustard seed of faith is enough to move mountains.” This reference to the Gospel parable of the mustard seed aptly expresses the hopes of Laotian believers: they trust that from this smallest of all communities, a tree may one day grow that bears fruit for the good of the entire society.

Despite many attempts to crush it, the Church in Laos has survived and continues its mission today – quiet, humble, and at the same time steadfast. Its history and theology teach us that even in the most difficult conditions, the seed of the Gospel can grow if it is watered with faith, hope, and love. The future will reveal what further chapters Providence will add to this extraordinary story of faith on the banks of the Mekong.

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* Dariusz Klejnowski-Różycki (Chinese: 柯達理) – priest of the Gliwice diocese, sinologist, pianist, iconographer, professor at the University of Opole, habilitated doctor of theological sciences in the field of dogmatics and ecumenism, Rector of the Silesian School of Iconography, Director of the Institute of Research on Theology and Spirituality of the Far East, head of doctoral studies in theological sciences at the Faculty of Theology of the University of Opole, lecturer at the Poland-China Cooperation Center "Confucius Institute" at Opole University of Technology, co-founder of the Sinicum Association of Michał Boym SJ, curator of the international think-tank Catechetical Definitions, church censor of the Gliwice diocese. He studied in Lublin, Krakow, Paris, London, Beijing and Taipei. His research interests and publications mainly concern dogmatic theology (Christology), icon theology, theology of art, Chinese and Asian theology; e-mail: dspjkr@gmail.com; ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8388-702X>.

** Piotr Sękowski (Arabic: بيوتر سيكوفسكي) – a presbyter of the Diocese of Gliwice, Doctor of Theological Sciences specializing in dogmatic theology, religious studies, and interreligious dialogue; Arabist, Islamologist, and Massignonologist. He is a postdoctoral researcher at the Pontificio Istituto di Studi Arabi e d'Islamistica in Rome, Chair of the Audit Commission of the Institute for Research on Theology and Spirituality of the Far East (Arabic Section), Dean of the Faculty of Mosaic of the Life-Giving Tree of the Holy Cross at the Silesian School of Iconography, Prosecutor of SEKO Publishing House, Curator of the International Think Tank Catechetical Definitions, Director of the Polish Section of Badaliya, Lecturer at the Faculty of Theology, University of Opole, former National Leader of Gioventù Studentesca within the Comunione e Liberazione Movement in Poland. He is also a member of the Sinicum Association Michał Boym SJ, the Society of Dogmatic Theologians, and the "Friends of Deir Mar Musa" Association (خليل دير مار موسى الحبشي, Ḥalīl Dayr Mār Mūsā al-Ḥabašī). He has studied in Milan, Rabat, Cairo, Paris, and Lyon. His academic research and publications focus on Christian-Muslim dialogue, Arab Christianity, and Islamic theology; e-mail: pgfseko@gmail.com; ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8119-717X>.

*** Bartłomiej Cudziło (Thai: บารโธโลไมว ชูดซีโล) – a presbyter of the Archdiocese of Katowice, affiliated with the University of Silesia, holding a Master of Theology degree in biblical studies and ecumenism. A multiple-time recipient of the Rector's Scholarship for Best Student at the University of Silesia, he completed an internship in Zambia in 2014. He is the Chancellor of the Institute for Research on Theology and Spirituality of the Far East and a member of the Sinicum Association named after Michał Boym, SJ, which assists the Church in China. His research focuses on independent Christian churches, the Pentecostal movement, and Asian theology and culture, particularly in relation to the Churches of Thailand. He is an experienced traveler and guide, specializing in Southeast Asian countries with particular expertise in Thailand; e-mail: bartlomiej.cudzilo@gmail.com; ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0000-6518-8903>.