

History of the Catholic Churches in Thailand

The first Catholic Missioners came to the capital of Siam as chaplains on board the Portuguese trading ships. There are records of two Portuguese Dominicans in Ayuthaya in the year 1567. Among the many beautiful remains of Buddhist temples in Ayuthaya today, one will also find evidence of that first Christian Community.

The first missioners were Dominicans, Franciscans, Jesuits and then secular priests. They were sent mainly by Portugal. In 1662, Apostolic Vicars and Apostolic Missioners were sent to Siam by Pope Alexander VII and reached Ayuthaya where they were welcomed by King Narai the Great. Their successors, known as MEP fathers (Missions Etrangeres de Paris), have been working in the country for over three centuries and are the actual founders of the church of Thailand.

Towards the end of the 17th century, troubles arose both inside and outside the kingdom. They culminated with the Burmese overthrow and destruction of Ayuthaya which also brought total ruin to the Church.

- In 1811, there were about 3,000 Christians scattered around the kingdom. Some of them were the descendants of those who had escaped the slaughter or enslavement of 1767; others were new converts. King Taksin and especially the Kings of the Chakri Dynasty welcomed the new Missioners.
- Two outstanding names in the 19th century Church: Msgr. Pallegoix, Apostolic Vicar from 1841-1862, a language scholar who learned Pali from King Rama IV, and in turn taught the Prince Latin, and Msgr. Jean Louis Vey (1875-1909) who spread the missions into Burma and Laos. Msgr. Vey set up schools and hospitals in Bangkok, inviting the St. Paul de Chartre Sisters and welcoming the Gabrielite Brothers. He also gave new impetus to a local order of nuns--Lovers of the Cross--that had been established in 1669 by the first Apostolic Vicar.
- In the early and mid 1900's many other religious orders came to work in Thailand. Today this includes: the Salesians, the LaSalle Brothers & Sisters, the Ursulines, Sisters of the Sacred Heart, Sisters of the Holy Infant Jesus, the Good Shepherd Sisters, the Assumption Sisters, the Redemptorists, Jesuits, the OMI's, the PIME's, the MEP's, and the Maryknollers. Native vocations flourished as well. There are more than 450 Diocesan Priests, 215 Religious, 400 Brothers and Seminarians, and 1350 Sisters with a total of 228,672 Catholics.
- On December 18, 1965 the Catholic Church of Thailand became of age. The two archbishoprics of Bangkok and Thare-Nongseng were established. A native Thai hierarchy headed the 8 dioceses of the time. In 1967 and 1969 two more dioceses were created, comprising the present 10 dioceses. The Catholic Church in Thailand is now truly Thai.
- Archbishop Michael Michai Kitbunchu was named the first Cardinal of Thailand on February 2, 1983. The City of Bangkok now has 18 Catholic

Parishes and Masses offered in 8 different languages on a Sunday. The Thai Church proudly remembers Pope John Paul II's visit on May 10-11, 1984.

- The Church has responded to the call of the gospel by its many educational and social development programs. It has been outstanding in assisting the government care for the thousands of refugees who have found asylum in Thailand.
- In the face of great poverty and social problems, the Catholic Church has enjoyed working along side the many other religions in Thailand trying to make this country truly the "Land of Smiles."