

Foreign minister optimistic about papal trip to Vietnam

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A papal visit to Vietnam would send a very good message to the Asian region, said Archbishop Paul R. Gallagher, the Vatican's foreign minister.

"There's a few further steps to be taken before (a papal trip) would be appropriate," he said, expressing optimism that such a trip could happen eventually.

"But I think the Holy Father is keen to go. Certainly the Catholic community in Vietnam is very happy to want the Holy Father to go, and I think it would send a very good message to the region," the archbishop told reporters on the sidelines of a news conference at the Vatican Jan. 18.

Archbishop Gallagher, Cardinal Pietro Parolin, Vatican secretary of state, and Pope Francis had sat down in separate meetings earlier the same day with a delegation from Vietnam's ruling communist party. The delegation was led by Lê Hoài Trung, a member of the party's central committee and chairman of its commission for external relations.

Asked about his meeting with the delegation, Archbishop Gallagher said it went "very well" and talks focused on last year's agreement allowing for a resident papal representative "and building on that in the near future."

The agreement, which came after years of negotiations, allows for a papal representative to reside in Vietnam and open an office there to support Vietnam's estimated 6.5 million Catholics. The agreement was signed the same day Vietnamese President Vo Van Thuong traveled to the Vatican and met with Pope Francis and other Vatican officials July 27.

The countries still do not have full diplomatic relations, but the Vatican has had a nonresident papal representative in Vietnam since 2011. Polish Archbishop Marek Zalewski, apostolic nuncio to Singapore, was named the resident papal representative to Vietnam Dec. 23.

President Van Thuong sent a letter to the Vatican in mid-December officially inviting Pope Francis to visit the southeast Asian country.

The pope told reporters on the papal flight from Mongolia to Rome in September that "I am very positive about relations with Vietnam; good work has been going on for years."

Asked if he was planning to visit Vietnam, Pope Francis said if he does not go, his successor "certainly will!"

Speaking with reporters Jan. 18, Archbishop Gallagher said the members of the Vietnamese delegation "are very anxious to have a visit from the Holy Father, as many people are."

Vietnam is "an important country in the region. It's a little bit of an economic miracle in many ways," he said.

He said he was headed to Vietnam in April and Cardinal Parolin would be traveling there later in the year. "We'll do things gradually. We're confident things will move forward."

About 6.6 percent of Vietnam's population is Catholic, according to a 2019 government census, making Catholicism the most-widely practiced organized religion in the country.