

Catholic Church History in Thailand

The first Catholic missionaries to serve in Siam were the Dominicans Friar J eronimo da Cruz and Sabastio da Canto. They arrived in Ayudhya in 1567, where they were warmly received but da Cruz and two other missionaries were killed by the Burmese in 1569. Franciscan missionaries first arrived in 1582, and the first Jesuit reach Siam in 1607. By 1662, there was a Christian community of roughly 2,000 people in Ayudhya, served by 1 Spanish and 10 Portuguese priests.

In August 1662, the Catholic Missions  trang eres de Paris (MEP) sent three missionaries to Ayudhya, including Pierre Lambert de la Motte, who was an apostolic vicar as well; and in 1664, a second apostolic vicar, Fran ois Pallu, also was sent to Ayudhya along with a group of companions. Also, in 1664, the French missionaries in Ayudhya held a synod in which it was agreed, among other things, to open a seminary. In 1669, a papal bull, *Speculatores*, was issued giving the apostolic vicars full authority over all Catholics in Ayudhya, which they had not had before. That same year the mission opened its first hospital, and in the ensuing years the work of the mission prospered so that by 1674 there were roughly 600 Thai Catholics. There were many more Catholics of other nationalities in the Kingdom of Ayudhya, including Vietnamese, Portuguese, and Japanese Christians. In 1688, however, the apparently pro-Catholic King Narai of Ayudhya was deposed and the new king, Phra Phetracha, engaged in a severe oppression of Christianity. From that point onwards, the church suffered under several periods of repression and Catholic missionaries were closely regulated in their work.

Matters improved with the establishment of the Chakri Dynasty in 1782, and in 1785 King Phra Phutthayotfa (Rama I) invited Catholic missionaries to return to Siam. Catholicism began to grow, slowly, with about 2,500 Catholics in Siam in 1802 and roughly 3,000 by 1811. In 1838 Msr. Jean-Baptiste Pallegoix was consecrated as bishop for Siam, and in 1841 the Vatican established the Mission of Oriental Siam, including Siam and Laos with Pallegoix as its apostolic vicar. By 1875, the Siam Mission had roughly 10,000 Christians, 20 European missionaries, and 8 Thai priests. From this point onwards, the mission's work continued to grow rapidly. In 1885, it established its first modern Western-style school in Bangkok, Assumption College. St. Louis Hospital was founded in 1898. After 1910, Catholic work began to spread quite rapidly into new areas of the country, particularly in northern Siam.

Catholicism in Thailand expanded in a number of other ways, including the establishment of many new dioceses, and the entry of numerous religious orders. In 1965, the Vatican established two archbishoprics in Thailand, Bangkok and Thare-Nongaseng, and in 1983 Archbishop Joseph Kiamsun Nittayo was consecrated by Pope John Paul II as Thailand's first cardinal. By 2000, there were roughly 300,000 Catholics in Thailand. (this entry is based largely on *A Dictionary of Asian Christianity*, s.v. "Thailand, Roman Catholic Church")