

THE SPIRITUAL CULTURAL SPACE IN CONTEMPORARY VIETNAMESE CATHOLIC SHORT STORIES

KHÔNG GIAN VĂN HÓA TÂM LINH TRONG TRUYỆN NGẮN CÔNG GIÁO VIỆT NAM ĐƯƠNG ĐẠI

Nguyen Tan Tai*

The University of Danang - University of Science and Education, Vietnam

*Corresponding author: vintantai0504@gmail.com

(Received: February 20, 2025; Revised: August 19, 2025; Accepted: August 20, 2025)

DOI: 10.31130/ud-jst.2025.23(10A).081E

Abstract - Vietnamese Catholic literature, with a history of nearly 400 years of formation and development, remains relatively unfamiliar to most readers. This study focuses on identifying and analyzing the types of spiritual spaces in contemporary Vietnamese Catholic short stories, revealing how young Catholic writers construct artistic worlds imbued with sacredness and distinct religious identity. The key spaces include liturgical, service, family, and parish settings, which function not merely as contexts for religious life but also as symbolic environments reflecting Christian faith and morality within the relationship among human beings, God, others, and the self. Grounded in the foundations of the Bible, Theology, Philosophy, and Catholic Doctrine, the study affirms that Catholicism has contributed to enriching and diversifying modern Vietnamese literature.

Key words - Catholic short stories; Christian space; sacredness; liturgy; religious life; family; parish.

1. Introduction

Vietnam is a multi-religious and multi-faith nation, and thus its literature and art have been significantly influenced by religious thought. Besides the long-established religions in Vietnam, Catholicism, though introduced to our country relatively late, has developed rapidly and exerted a considerable influence on the nation's cultural life. Vietnamese Catholic literature began in 1632, when missionary Gieronimo Majorica established a printing house in Thang Long to print documents in Nom script. With nearly 400 years of formation and development, Catholicism has contributed much to the national literature. However, it seems that this body of literature has not truly been embraced. In his book *Vietnamese Catholic Literature – Milestones*, Le Dinh Bang raised the question: "Is it prejudice, misunderstanding, or caution? The research community still seems to have the impression that Vietnamese Catholic literature is a closed-off world, belonging to some private realm, isolated, quiet, and difficult to penetrate" [1, p. 50]. Wishing to affirm the contributions and acknowledge the presence of Catholic literature in Vietnam, Vo Long Te states: "The presence of Catholicism in Vietnamese literature is a historical event and, moreover, a dynamic catalyst that needs to be fully interpreted and acknowledged for its importance in national life" [2, p. 16]. With its cultural integration, respect for national identity, and its mission of

Tóm tắt – Văn học Công giáo Việt Nam, với lịch sử gần 400 năm hình thành và phát triển, vẫn còn khá xa lạ với số đông độc giả. Bài viết tập trung nhận diện và phân tích những kiểu không gian tâm linh trong truyện ngắn Công giáo Việt Nam đương đại, qua đó làm rõ cách các nhà văn trẻ Công giáo kiến tạo nên những không gian nghệ thuật thẩm đàm tinh thánh thiêng và bản sắc tôn giáo riêng biệt. Các kiểu không gian tiêu biểu gồm: không gian phụng vụ, không gian phục vụ, không gian gia đình và không gian xú đạo. Đây không chỉ là bối cảnh sinh hoạt tín ngưỡng, mà còn là môi trường biểu tượng phản ánh niềm tin, luân lý Kitô giáo trong mối quan hệ giữa con người – Thiên Chúa – tha nhân – chính mình. Để có cơ sở đổi mới và đánh giá, nghiên cứu dựa trên những nền tảng của Kinh Thánh, Thần học, Triết học và Giáo lý Công giáo, từ đó khẳng định đạo Công giáo đã góp phần làm phong phú và đa dạng thêm cho văn học Việt Nam.

Từ khóa – Truyện ngắn Công giáo; không gian Kitô giáo; thánh thiêng; phụng vụ; sống đạo; gia đình; xú đạo.

sanctification, Catholic literature deserves proper recognition in the history of Vietnamese literature. This is also the desire of those who appreciate Catholic literature, hoping that readers will become more familiar with this minority literature. To achieve that, further precise research and criticism of Catholic literary works are essential.

It can be said that religion is a category that models artistic space. Since artistic space is a creative product based on culture, studying religious spaces in literature allows us to understand some aspects of the spiritual and cultural life of that religion. In contemporary Vietnamese Catholic short stories, spiritual cultural spaces appear frequently, imbued with sacredness and aesthetic value. This shows that young Catholic writers place great importance on expressing the identity of their faith and building the communal life of Vietnamese Catholic communities.

2. Results and Discussion

In the book *The structure of the artistic text*, Iu. M. Lotman suggests that humans perceive the surrounding life through the characteristics of space such as social, religious, political, and moral aspects [3]. Reading a literary work allows us to live in the artistic world created by the writer, by recreating the real world from natural materials to the spirit. In this, artistic space is one of the

forms of existence and development of the artistic world. It is also a fundamental and important term in poetics. *Introduction to literary poetics* by Tran Dinh Su defines: “Artistic space in a work is the modeling of temporal, social, and moral relationships in the world picture that reflects the writer's worldview and choices” [4, p. 138]. Space in the artistic world is not merely a recreation of the real world, but through the perception of the creative subject, artistic space expresses the worldview of an individual or culture, has a signifying function, and holds aesthetic value. *The dictionary of literary terms* by Le Ba Han et al points out: “Artistic space not only reveals the internal structure of a literary work, symbolic language, but also reflects the worldview and depth of the author's or a literary era's perception” [5, p. 1611]. Thus, understanding artistic space helps the reader grasp the meaning of the text and discover the uniqueness of this artistic form.

2.1. Liturgical space

2.1.1. Space of the Mass

According to *The modern Catholic dictionary* by John A. Hardon: “Liturgy means the public duty or work. Today, liturgy refers to the common and official worship of the Church” [6, p. 474]. Additionally, in *Catholic terms: Understanding faith, Catechism, and Liturgy* by Nguyen Cong Vinh, it is further explained that: “Liturgy revolves around the Mass and the sacraments. The Mass is the center” [7, p. 148]. The Mass that Catholics perform daily and weekly reenacts the passion and resurrection of Jesus Christ, continuing God's work of redemption. It can be said that the Mass is the central element of the spiritual life of Catholics. According to the canon law of the Catholic Church, every Christian has the duty and obligation to “attend Mass and refrain from physical work on Sundays and holy days of obligation” (The Five Precepts of the Church). Since the liturgy is often associated with the Mass, the church becomes the gathering place for the faithful to attend Mass, worship, and a special place to encounter God.

The space of the Mass frequently appears in Catholic short stories, with different nuances. Writer Nguyen Thi Khanh Lien describes the Mass in the remote villages of the Central Highlands, revealing the strong faith of simple, poor people, who are rich in faith. “The Mass is so simple. Parishioners attend church in their best clothes, but not all are intact. Some are patched together. Bare feet covered in red soil. The wind blows through the patched metal sheets. But God is happy when He sees the Ba Na flock attending Mass. Is there any Mass more simple and full of love than this?” [8, p. 124]. Although Catholicism was introduced to Vietnam relatively late, the image of majestic Western-style churches, with tall bell towers, has become familiar and is now part of the cultural landscape of Vietnam. However, in contemporary Catholic short stories, the image of grand churches is absent. Instead, Catholic chapels and churches are described with spaces of simple and impoverished Masses, portrayed in a genuine and honest way. In the short story *The sower* (Nguyen Thi Khanh Lien), the Mass is held in a small, humble chapel, yet it exudes warmth and holiness. The space of the Mass

is described in a setting of extreme poverty, where “many Raglai people in this small chapel do not wear shoes” [8, p. 16]. In this sacred space, there is a sense of peace, showing ethnic harmony, despite all differences. Beyond the boundaries of ethnicity and language, the Kinh and Raglai parishioners gathered in the chapel shared a common language - faith in God. The space of the Mass serves as a unifying force for believers in their shared faith. Through the Mass, the seeds of faith are watered, blooming and bearing fruit even in difficult and challenging environments. Thus, people like Father Hung (*The land of love*) or the Raglai girl (*The Sower*) continue to be sowers of faith and love in this missionary land of the Central Highlands.

In favorable locations, Catholics hold daily Mass, and in some places, there are two to three Masses a day. In the short story *The sea of life*, author Chung Thanh Huy depicts the strong faith of Catholic communities in remote coastal islands, where the desire for daily Mass is intense, even though attending Sunday Mass is a significant challenge. Despite the distance and lack of spiritual care, the unwavering faith of these island parishioners profoundly moves and transforms the character of a young woman who had considered suicide. “Hearing about the people's yearning to attend Mass made her even more admiring of their faith. Despite being so far away and facing all kinds of difficulties, they remain steadfast in faith, hope, and love. Meanwhile, on the mainland, with daily Mass, it's only the elderly who attend” [9, p. 54]. Rather than portraying the solemn space of Mass in grand, sacred churches as we often see, contemporary young Catholic writers choose to depict the liturgical space of Mass in impoverished, deprived places, thereby praising the strong faith of humble, lowly individuals. This also evokes the turbulent history of the Catholic Church in Vietnam. The space of Mass not only recalls the hardships of Vietnamese Catholics in the past but also serves as a call to action for today's Catholics, reminding them of the ongoing challenges in missionary work.

With the author's artistic intention, the space of the Mass is also portrayed in the context of individuals returning to God after having abandoned their faith for many years. It is the journey of characters like Thanh (*The bells of spring* – Nguyen Thi Khanh Lien) and Mr. Tu (*A story in the rainy afternoon* – Chung Thanh Huy), who reconcile with God by going to church and attending Mass after years of leaving their faith behind. The Mass becomes a sacrificial offering of reconciliation between humanity and God, a source of strength that empowers individuals to abandon the path of sin and return to faith and to God. The journey back to faith carried by these characters conveys the message the author wishes to impart, thereby revealing their artistic ideas and intentions. The space of the Mass serves as a symbol of faith and a testimony to the reconciliation between man and God. It also opens a dimension of change in human life, illustrating the rebirth of the soul, transforming hearts once cold into ones that seek love. This suggests that God is always merciful and patiently waits for lost sheep to return. Furthermore, the

space of the Mass is placed within the context of internal struggles, a battle of thoughts in the deepest parts of the characters' souls, as seen in Phuong (*Walking through the pain* – Pham Hai Mien) and Hang (*The Echo* – Tam Ngoc). When facing the conflict between sacred faith in God and the worldly desires tormenting them, the Mass space appears as an invitation for people to come to God, to be comforted and strengthened in spirit. It offers them a path to the truth and the strength to confront life's temptations.

In the short story *Dust and ashes* (Nguyen Thi Khanh Lien), the author uses the space of the Mass as a place where the family of the protagonist and the family of the concubine come together in prayer for the deceased. "After my father passed away, each time we went to Mass to pray for him, my stepmother would take my younger sibling to church. My family - my grandmother, mother, my brother and me, and my stepmother with her two children would all stand together in the same church" [8, p. 55]. In the sacred space of the Mass, all animosities and grievances seem to be erased, giving way to prayer and remembrance of the father, who was also the one responsible for the tragedy and suffering that afflicted both families. The sacred space conveys the healing of wounded hearts, showing the Mass as a place of forgiveness between people. Just as Jesus prayed: "That they may all be one, as you, Father, are in me, and I am in you" [10], the Mass becomes a space where people are united in love. The character of the father in the story *The pastor's son* (Chung Thanh Huy) is a Protestant pastor who finds it hard to accept that his son has become a Catholic priest. This causes him great pain and creates a rift between the two. However, out of love and as a father, the pastor attends his son's ordination Mass as a Catholic priest. "Even now, he still couldn't understand why he was here, sitting in a place of honor in a Catholic church. He only knew that some invisible force had compelled him to come" [9, p. 43]. The space of the Mass reflects forgiveness and unity. Through love and understanding, people are united in the love of God. Love becomes the universal language in the space of the Mass, and it serves as the means to overcome all differences and resentment to build family happiness.

It can be affirmed that the space of the Mass is one of culture and art, and participating in the Mass has become a beautiful cultural tradition within the Catholic community. However, to non-believers, the Catholic Mass often seems foreign and is sometimes met with prejudice. This is evident in the words of the grandmother of the protagonist in the short story *Tales from Con village* (Chung Thanh Huy): "Every Sunday you go to Mass and never get tired of it. Does the priest over at the church give you rice or grain or something? I really don't get it..." [9, p. 110]. Or in the prohibitions of the father in *A new life* (Pham Hai Mien): "Why do you keep going to church? Your ancestors are on the altar at home, go worship them. Why believe in those saints jumping around? Don't hang out with those kids who have the faith, you hear me?" [11, p. 51]. Even after nearly five centuries of existence and development in Vietnam, Catholics still endure slander and misconceptions about Catholic culture. On the other hand, the Mass

provides an opportunity for some non-believers to explore the faith, embrace it, and convert. This is the case with Quan in *My beloved* (Nguyen Thi Khanh Lien), who starts with a curious question, "Going to church? Is God kind?" [8, p. 103], and later attends Mass, eager to learn about the faith. Similarly, the character Kiet in *A new life* (Pham Hai Mien) is initially intrigued by the statue of Christ hanging in the church. "Hey, why is Jesus hanging up there? And what does the sign over His head mean?" [11, p. 53]. From this initial curiosity, faith blossoms, leading him to kneel and pray with deep belief in the church. For Catholics, the Mass is the summit and source of their spiritual life. It is a treasure trove of Catholic culture and a doorway to understanding the faith. The space of the Mass invites people to find answers to their questions, as expressed in the Psalms: "Taste and see that the Lord is good" (cf. *Psalm 34:9*) [10]. Author Chung Thanh Huy reflects the miracle of faith through the character Duc in *Living Right*. Initially distant from the faith, Duc is drawn to it out of love for a Catholic girl, leading him to embrace faith. His newfound faith and fulfillment are shown through the Sunday Mass he attends each week with his wife, Ut Men. Characters like Quan (*My beloved*), Kiet (*A new life*), and Duc (*Living right*) highlight the religious tolerance of the Vietnamese people. They do not condemn or judge those with different beliefs but instead approach a foreign faith with open-mindedness and acceptance. As author Tran Ngoc Them writes in *The foundations of Vietnamese culture*: "The Vietnamese people are dynamic, flexible, and highly adaptable, coupled with a spirit of religious tolerance, making it easy to accept foreign religions that are introduced...The combination of comprehensive and flexible behavior creates a spirit of syncretism. This syncretism allows all imported religions in Vietnam to be accepted and developed" [12, pp. 316-317]. Thanks to the religious tolerance of the Vietnamese people, Catholicism has had the opportunity to grow, allowing many to come to know the Good News.

2.1.2. The space of festivals

Everything in the world exists in three-dimensional space (height, width, distance) and a fourth dimension - time. Unlike real-life space, artistic space is always connected with time. Through the writer's creative lens, the model of the world becomes a space of meaning, aesthetic expression, and a reflection of culture and society. In 1973, Bakhtin introduced the concept of "khronorov" to analyze the psychology and motives of characters' actions, including motifs such as encounters, visits, church services, dreams, etc. Tran Dinh Su elaborated on this concept in his *Introduction to literary poetics*: "In the khronorov, time is expressed within space, and space opens up with time... Any space ultimately becomes a time/space" [4, p. 137]. This means that time does not exist in abstraction but is manifested through concrete spaces. For example, liturgical time is often associated with the church space, while the road corresponds to the time of movement and events. Conversely, each space is never static; it always opens toward a temporal dimension. A given space encompasses flows, transformations, and the

continuum of past–present–future for both characters and communities. In particular, the concept of chronotope emphasizes the integrative nature of space in literature: space is never a purely physical setting but is always “temporalized” For instance, the space of encounter is not merely a place of meeting but also the moment that inaugurates a turning point in the characters’ relationships; the church space is not only a location but also reflects liturgical time (the liturgical seasons and feast days). Similarly, family space is tied to the time of memory, tradition, and generations. Thus, in literary analysis, space and time cannot be separated, for every situation in a narrative constitutes an artistic time–space, one that simultaneously structures the characters’ experiences and conveys the author’s ideological and artistic intent.

Liturgical space in Catholic short stories is often associated with the timing of religious holidays, determined by the “Liturgical Calendar” (also known as the Catholic Calendar). In other words, liturgical space is always intertwined with liturgical time. In Catholicism, the liturgical calendar is organized according to cycles of liturgical seasons, based on the mysteries of Jesus Christ and following the content of the Bible. According to the *Catholic dictionary* of the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Vietnam: “The Liturgical Year has 52 weeks, beginning with the First Sunday of Advent and ending with the Feast of Christ the King, divided into five seasons: Advent, Christmas, Lent, Easter, and Ordinary Time” [13, p. 240]. Each liturgical season has its own mood, theological dimensions, and distinct rituals, making it, for the faithful, a living Gospel. Author Nguyen Van Ngoan, in his article *Annual ceremonies of Catholics* published in *Ethnic Studies Journal*, studied and introduced the annual Catholic festivals, categorizing them into daily feasts, Sunday feasts, solemnities, feast days, memorials of saints, etc. [14]. The research illustrates the rich and diverse spiritual life of Catholics through the variety of religious holidays.

Around the world, and in Vietnam in particular, the celebration of Jesus Christ’s birth (commonly known as Christmas or Noel) has become a widely recognized and embraced festival. For Catholics, the Christmas season begins on December 25th, the day of Christ’s birth, and extends to the Feast of the Epiphany, celebrating the event of Jesus becoming human. This is a major festival for Catholics, regarded as a grand celebration, which is why Christmas space appears frequently in Catholic literary works. In the short story *Where the river flows* by Nguyen Thi Khanh Lien, the Christmas setting is where the initial encounter between the protagonist and the female character takes place. A soldier is captivated and falls in love with a girl whose angelic singing leaves a lasting impression. “On Christmas Eve, I sang a solo with her, ‘A Bright Star Season.’ She wore a pristine white ao dai, her voice as clear as crystal. Though she wasn’t wearing wings, I believed she was an angel. A marine attending Christmas Mass was moved by her singing” [8, p. 59]. Christmas is seen as a festival of love, marking humanity’s first encounter with God in human form. The poetic setting of the birth of God’s Son evokes the blossoming of love in passionate hearts.

This is also reflected in the story *Night stars* by Chung Thanh Huy, where Christmas is the backdrop for Khang’s first encounter with a girl who leaves him deeply moved. “The girl had such beautiful eyes and a delicate face, standing out in the dance group” [9, p. 79]. Her performance in the Christmas Eve sacred dance left a deep imprint on his mind, and later, when he was lost in a crisis of faith, “the Christmas night stars” from that performance became a guiding light, helping him find his life’s purpose.

On the other hand, authors often choose the Christmas setting to highlight the motivations behind their characters’ actions. For instance, in the short story *The Christmas eve gift* by Tam Ngoc, a doctor, demonstrating great generosity, patiently treats his last patient on Christmas Eve and gives away all the money for the medicine to the poor stranger, simply stating, “Today is a day of love” [15, p. 111]. Once a homeless man himself after a failed business venture, the doctor, who was once too ashamed to look anyone in the eye and longed for death, regained his faith and strength thanks to “the people in the Catholic neighborhood who supported him, helped him recover his faith, and guided him through difficult times” [15, p. 110]. Having received love and support from those around him, the doctor now has the opportunity to extend that love to others less fortunate. Just as God’s only Son came to Earth out of love for the world, Christmas symbolizes love. In the space of Christmas, people are encouraged to open their hearts and share love with those around them. Even small acts of kindness, such as those by little Ti in the story *Ti’s joy* by Tam Ngoc hold profound humanitarian value. Ti used the money he saved in his piggy bank to buy a wool hat for his friend during Christmas. In the joy of Christ’s birth, Ti shared that joy with those in need, and in giving love, he, too, received “a small joy that was kindled” [15, p. 81]. Similarly, sharing though small became a struggle of conscience for Doan, a student in the story *Christmas Gifts* by Pham Hai Mien. On a bus ride to attend Christmas Mass, he wrestled with whether to give the driver an extra six thousand dong, thinking, “Should I give the driver an extra six thousand? That amount is about the same as the bundle of pennywort mom ties up every day, or even dad’s morning cup of coffee it’s not a small sum at all” [11, pp. 153-154]. Witnessing the driver, a poor man himself, give money to a grandmother and her grandchild begging by the roadside deeply impacted Doan, who was battling with his own selfishness and doubt. In the end, Doan took out all the money he had “five ten-thousand dong bills” and gave it to the driver. The Baby Jesus is the Christmas gift to the world, and for Doan, another gift was the lesson in love and sharing he learned that night. The Bible tells the story of *The widow’s two coins* (Luke 21:1-4), in which a poor widow, though she gave only two small coins to the temple treasury, was praised by Jesus for giving more than anyone else. Jesus explained, “All these people gave their gifts out of their wealth; but she, out of her poverty, put in all she had to live on” (Luke 21:4). The characters of Ti (*Ti’s Joy* – Tam Ngoc) and Doan (*Christmas Gifts* – Pham Hai Mien) are reflections of the poor widow in the Bible. They shared and gave generously, with all the love and kindness they had, embodying the spiritual essence that Christmas is meant to inspire.

In the two short stories *Christmas gift* and *Christ at Christmas*, author Nguyen Ninh contrasts the poor, ragged lottery boys with the cheerful, radiant people in the grand and magnificent space of the Holy Night. Nguyen Ninh uses this contrasting imagery with artistic intent, expressing theological reflections. The author evokes the image of the Infant Jesus, who was once rejected by the world and had to be born in a poor, humble manger. Now, the poor lottery boys become a representation of that same God from long ago. "Amid the flickering candlelight, among a crowd of people laughing and chatting, dressed in their finest clothes, standing in the winter cold, He was there - wearing shabby clothes. Sad. Cold. Alone. Crying out tirelessly, asking them to buy lottery tickets" [16, p. 254]. Nguyen Ninh sounds a reminder of the duty of today's Christians, calling attention to the many hardships and impoverished conditions in the world. Catholics should not be "silent, selfish sheep in the midst of suffering lives" (as phrased by Pham Hai Mien [11, p. 154]). Christmas is not just an external celebration, but a call to share and spread love, especially to those less fortunate. In the short story *Christmas Gift* (Nguyen Ninh), a simple steamed bun and a small gesture of kindness from a woman towards the lottery boy ignite a glimmer of hope for a heart that has endured much pain in the cold winter night. With the sacred message that Christmas brings, Nguyen Ninh highlights how even a seemingly small action can profoundly touch one's spirit.

Besides Christmas, Easter (also known as the celebration of the Resurrection) is another significant feast in Catholicism. According to Nguyen Van Ngoan, the meaning of Easter is explained as follows: "The resurrection of Jesus is seen as His second birth, erasing sins and darkness, bringing forth the source of new life for humanity. The Risen Christ brings faith, hope, and the grace of salvation and life to mankind. This is the most essential meaning of celebrating Easter" [14, p. 131]. In the short story *New life*, Pham Hai Mien uses the setting of Easter to portray the rebirth of Kiet's family after the trials of life. "Saturday came, the Easter Vigil had arrived, and little Kiet was neatly dressed in his uniform as if going to school. His whole family, everyone was well-prepared. The other catechumens in the parish were the same. All were receiving the rites to become children of God that evening" [11, p. 60]. According to Catholic tradition, the Easter Vigil (the service held on Saturday night before Easter Sunday) is a special Mass for catechumens (those newly converted to Catholicism). During the Easter Vigil, these catechumens receive the sacraments of initiation into the Christian faith, marking their formal entry into the Church. From this moment, they become Christians and begin a new life in God. In the Easter setting, Pham Hai Mien expresses the joy of Kiet's family, symbolizing how the light of Easter has dispelled the darkness of sin and sorrow in their lives. Through this transformation, a new Catholic family is born, carrying the hope of renewal in all aspects of life.

Because Easter is such a significant celebration for Catholic believers, it also serves as an opportunity for

family reunions to celebrate the Resurrection of Christ. In the short story *Next year's Easter* by Nguyen Ninh, the author reflects on familial values through the empty promises of children living far from home: "Next year for Easter, I'll come home" [16, p. 233]. Nguyen Ninh evokes a sense of longing and reflection on family ties, portraying a lonely elderly mother during Easter: "While others' children laugh with their families on Easter, the mother is alone by the kitchen. With each bite of rice, who knows if a tear fell into the bowl" [16, p. 232]. Similarly, in other liturgical celebrations throughout the year, the Catholic Church emphasizes filial piety to its followers. In Pham Hai Mien's short story *Love*, the setting shifts to the second day of the Lunar New Year - a day Catholics traditionally dedicate to honoring their ancestors, parents, and grandparents. The author describes the neglected grave of a mother, forlorn among the tombs during the New Year's celebration: "On the second day of Tet, Father held Mass at the cemetery. Suddenly, he approached a grave, distinct from the others. There wasn't a single chrysanthemum beside it, the structure was unkempt, and wild grass sparsely grew around" [11, p. 186]. Catholic filial piety is not limited to tending to the graves of parents after they pass away; it also involves the duty to love and care for parents while they are still alive. This is the message that author Tam Ngoc conveys through the character Tan in *Rain of grace*. After attending a priest's first Mass, Tan reflects on his mistaken priorities: "I always thought that as long as I provided enough money for my family, I had fulfilled my duty. But I was wrong! If one day, mother and sister are no longer here, no amount of money will bring them back" [15, p. 64]. Catholic writers use the settings of these religious holidays to convey messages about family love, especially the duty of children to their parents both in life and death. Each celebration carries its unique nuances and meanings, yet all share a common spiritual dimension that guides people toward Integrity - Compassion - Excellence.

2.2. Space of Service

John A. Hardon's *Popular Catholic dictionary* defines the verb "serve" as "fulfilling the religious duty of a creature to God and carrying out one's moral responsibility toward the needs of others" [6, p. 474]. The Catholic commandment of service is based on two duties: "Love God and love your neighbor" This is seen as the "mandate of charity," obliging believers to act. Therefore, Catholic writers often create spaces of service that embody the social charity of the "religion of love" These spaces of service are often found in depictions of priests working in impoverished and challenging missionary areas. For instance, in Nguyen Thi Khanh Lien's *The Sower*, a priest tends to the hungry and destitute in poor villages. Similarly, Father Hung (*The land of love* - Nguyen Thi Khanh Lien) rides a bull to reach Ba Na parishioners in remote areas. In another example, Father Trinh (*A father's love* - Tam Ngoc) is fervently dedicated to serving his congregation in a distant mission field: "The small chapel is 30 kilometers away from the parish. The roads are muddy in the rainy season, dusty and bumpy with potholes

in the dry season. Riding in Father's car feels like riding a horse. Yet, Father goes there every day to offer Mass. His car has become a means for people to attend church, and he has inadvertently become a transporter" [15, pp. 70-71]. By choosing missionary regions lacking in resources and filled with hardships as their space of service, these writers emphasize the love of those who serve both God and the people. As Tam Ngoc writes, "Without God's grace, without charity, patience, and perseverance, Father would not have been able to do it" (*A father's love* - Tam Ngoc [15, p. 71]). Similarly, Nguyen Thi Khanh Lien praises the mission of shepherds in missionary lands, comparing it to "a land of love" a place where God's love and human compassion are vividly expressed. "March is the season when bees go out to gather honey. Father is also out gathering honey for this barren and impoverished land. To him, it is a land of love. Where there is poverty and need, there bloom the beautiful flowers of God's love and human love" (*The land of love* - Nguyen Thi Khanh Lien [8, p. 129]). The space of service in such missionary regions, with all its trials and difficulties, becomes a test of faith for priests, offering them the opportunity to refine and contemplate the mission entrusted to them by God and the Church. Through living and serving the impoverished flock, the shepherds recognized the image of God in those very people. Deacon Hai Minh (*Turning Point* - Tam Ngoc) contemplated these truths through his service to the people in the missionary region, which also served as preparation for the journey of embracing the priestly vocation that he pursued for a lifetime.

Another type of space that appears in Catholic short stories is the space of leprosy camps/villages, where people like Sister Maria (*The night stars* - Chung Thanh Huy) devote their youth and lives to serving leprosy patients. This is also the "calling" of characters like Viet and Nhien (*The call of love* - Nguyen Ninh), as they leave behind love in the bustling city, abandoning their youthful years and bright futures to dedicate themselves to the leprosy villages. The authors create images of people with noble ideals, who, because of the "call of love," selflessly and altruistically serve others. The space of the leprosy villages serves as a call for people to dedicate themselves to the community and society. The patients, who endure suffering and despair due to illness, find comfort in the great sacrifices made by individuals like sister Maria, nurse Nhien, and brother Kiet. Through this, they feel God's love through the goodness of these people. For example, the character Quyen (*Waves* - Nguyen Ninh), through treatment at the leprosy village, is healed both physically and spiritually by Brother Vinh, a monk serving in the leprosy village. It can be said that leprosy is not as frightening as the stigma and alienation from those around them, which adds to the pain and emotional collapse of the patients. This is also the concern of a monk serving in a charitable facility (*The dark corners of life* - Pham Hai Mien), who questions God: "How many places like this are there in the world? How many dark corners of life out there need to be illuminated, Lord?" [11, p. 131]. In addition to caring for the material needs of life, those serving with a Christian spirit also wish to spread God's love, like candles

of faith dispelling the darkness of the souls of the unfortunate.

Additionally, Catholic writers also use the hospital as a space to express the Christian spirit of charity. In the short story *The night stars*, author Pham Hai Mien portrays Dr. Ly as a compassionate Catholic doctor. At the hospital where she works, in addition to her dedicated care for the patients, Dr. Ly generously helps them with medical fees, even if they are strangers. Above all, through her firm faith and trust in God, she helps patients rediscover the light of hope in their lives through God's Mercy. Pham Hai Mien uses the hospital as the setting where a parish priest (*New life*) donates blood to save the life of Kiet's father, who once held grudges and prejudice against Catholicism. Through the loving and forgiving heart of the priest, Kiet's father is not only saved physically but also transformed spiritually. "Unexpected events in life can change a person in unbelievable ways. I believe that the precious drops of blood from my parish priest have mixed with Kiet's father's blood, enabling him to live, change, and live as a new person bearing the blood of Jesus Christ" [11, p. 60]. Author Tam Ngoc also uses the hospital as a setting to convey the shepherd's love for his flock through the character of Father Minh (*Flowers blooming at night*). Despite the approaching Christmas Vigil, upon hearing of a dying person, Father Minh eagerly goes to the hospital to anoint the patient, even though others in the parish discouraged and criticized him. The priest's presence at the hospital, especially during the final moments of an abandoned person's life, provides spiritual comfort to a heart that has endured much suffering. It can be said that through the loving and dedicated heart of the priest, Huong was able to peacefully return to God.

In reality, Catholicism is a religion with dynamic and diverse social charitable activities in all areas, including shelters for orphans, the elderly, people with disabilities, the mentally ill, and others. In Catholic short stories, writers create artistic spaces in impoverished missionary areas, leprosy villages, hospitals, and more, with the purpose of emphasizing that spaces of service are spaces of love. Through this, they praise individuals with noble ideals and highlight the spirit of love that Catholicism extends to those facing hardship, misfortune, and abandonment. With the aim of building a civilization of love, *The Catholic Church's social doctrine*, in section 581, explains: "Love must be present and penetrate into all social relationships. This is especially true for those responsible for promoting the common good. They must love strongly and strive to inspire charity in others" [17, p. 398].

2.3. Family space

Throughout different eras and cultures, the family has always been regarded as sacred in human consciousness. The importance and central role of the family in both human life and society is something the Catholic Church frequently emphasizes. *The Catholic Church's social doctrine*, in section 211, states: "The family has its own distinctive and unique social nature; it is the primary place where interpersonal relationships occur, and it is the first and living cell of society. The family is a divine institution

that forms the foundation of human life, and it is the original model of all social organizations" [17, p. 164]. Based on the fundamental roles and functions of a family, a Catholic family bears similarities to ordinary families in society. What distinguishes a Catholic family is that marriage possesses the "holy and enduring nature," joined together through a unique sacrament called the "Sacrament of Matrimony" Through this, the faithful are called to fulfill the duties of marriage and family life, while also living in accordance with the spirit of Christ and the Church. With this understanding, a significant proportion of contemporary Catholic short stories choose the family setting as the space to convey Christian values.

The family is where individuals are born and raised, serving as the cradle of life and love. In fulfilling the sacred duty of protecting life, the family acts as a stronghold, providing protection and support for unborn children. Nguyen Ninh, through the words of a mother in the story *Tending the garden again*, conveys the Catholic Church's moral teaching on the life of the unborn: "Even if something happens to me, I will never kill my child" [16, p. 183]. Facing the boundary between life and death, mothers are willing to sacrifice their own lives so that their children can be born. This is also seen in the image of the mother in *The Season of Winds* by Nguyen Ninh, who sacrifices her eyes so that her daughter can see the sunlight. She also intervenes to stop the character An from considering an abortion, advising her to let the baby in her womb be born. *The Catholic Church's Catechism*, section 2270, firmly affirms: "Human life must be respected and absolutely protected from the moment of conception. From the very first moment of existence, human beings must be recognized as having the rights of a person - among which is the inviolable right to life for every innocent being" [18, p. 640].

In addition to the sacred role of protecting human life, Catholic authors portray the family as a place to teach and transmit moral, spiritual, and religious values to their children. In the short story *My beloved*, Nguyen Thi Khanh Lien shows how a marriage without shared faith brings unhappiness and difficulties in educating children in the faith. The mother had to endure her husband's prohibitions and abuse every time she took her child to Mass on Sunday evenings. Out of love for her child and to uphold her Catholic marriage vows, she endured and remained patient so that her child could continue attending church and maintain their faith. Similarly, in the story *Jesus' love song* by Pham Hai Mien, when the family altar was removed by the father, the mother's tears as she held the altar became an enduring image of sorrow for the narrator. Even without a place to honor Jesus and the Virgin Mary, the narrator's mother and the narrator continued to persevere in their faith by silently praying the Rosary every night. The struggle to preserve faith in difficult family circumstances is also reflected in the short story *A story from Con Hamlet* by Chung Thanh Huy, where the mother cleverly preserves the family's faith through a small family altar hidden behind a pillar. "The family's prayer space was a tiny wooden platform hidden behind a round pillar near the bed. The altar only had a small statue of the Virgin Mary and a tiny cross" [9, p. 102]. As the only Catholic family in Con

Hamlet, they faced opposition from the grandmother, the head of the household who held deep prejudice against the Catholic faith, and endured misunderstanding and gossip from those around them. Despite these difficulties, thanks to the mother's patience and devotion, the seed of faith was nurtured and flourished within the family and the land where they lived. Similarly, Tam Ngoc portrays a difficult faith journey in the family of Thien Tam (*Love returns*), where the husband, lost in alcoholism, denied his faith in God and forbade his wife and children from attending church. "Tam, his wife, was deeply saddened but quietly endured. She taught her children to pray every night and taught them to converse with God and the Virgin Mary as if they were speaking to a friend" [15, p. 98]. Each family in Catholic short stories faces unique challenges. Authors place families in the midst of life's tragedies and trials, emphasizing the irreplaceable role of the family in educating children in the faith. Here, the mothers or wives often emerge as both victims and the guardians of the family's faith, keeping the fire of belief alive despite obstacles from their own households. Parental love is expressed through their choices and desires for the best for their children. For Catholic parents, in addition to caring for and raising their children, educating them in the faith is a sacred duty and an expression of parental love. As in *A story from Con Hamlet*, the mother resolutely fought to ensure her children could learn the faith: "It's true that some choices can wait, like careers or life partners. But there are things that children need to be taught from a young age because waiting until they are older is too late - things like education, morality, and virtue... Learning the Catechism means learning the good and the teachings of Christ, so the children know how to live well and help others" [9, p. 103]. It can be said that the family is the cradle of faith, with parents serving as "instruments of God" in nurturing the seeds of faith in their children. This is reaffirmed in *Amoris Laetitia*, the apostolic exhortation of the Synod of Bishops, which Mai Quoc Phong presents and emphasizes in the book *Moral Theology and Catholic Social Teaching*: "Despite the obstacles of modern life, the family must continue to be the place where children are taught to grasp the principles and beauty of the faith, to pray, and to serve others" [19, p. 733]. Thus, the Catholic family is the cradle of life, the first school of moral values and faith. It is where members are cared for, nurtured, and educated to become good Christians.

It is evident that in most Catholic short stories, the family space is often set against a backdrop of tragedy and conflict. Beyond causing challenges in raising children, differences in faith lead to familial division. In *The miracle of love*, Nguyen Ninh sets the story in a traditional Buddhist family, where the character Luan wishes to convert to Catholicism. The father views this as abandoning ancestral traditions and refuses to accept his youngest son's conversion. This marks the beginning of family conflict between father and son. Similarly, in *The pastor's son* by Chung Thanh Huy, the conflict arises when Nhan chooses to enter a Catholic seminary to become a priest instead of following in his father's footsteps to become a Protestant pastor. This decision is hard for Mr.

Tam - both as a father and as a Protestant pastor to accept. Despite both Catholicism and Protestantism sharing a belief in God, the differences and conflicts between the two religions create divisions among their followers. Pham Hai Mien depicts this tension in the family of the narrator in the short story *Jesus' love song*. The father, being a Protestant, forbids family members from attending Catholic church activities, stating: "Not only can a Protestant's daughter not bring her into the church, but now she's also playing the role of the Virgin Mary. If this spreads, how could I face the pastor at my church or the fellow believers?" [11, p. 137]. A family that seems to have all the elements of happiness is disrupted by the discord over spiritual unity, which profoundly affects every aspect of family life. Jesus addressed this issue in the Bible, saying: "Do not suppose that I have come to bring peace to the earth. I did not come to bring peace, but a sword. For I have come to turn a man against his father, a daughter against her mother, a daughter-in-law against her mother-in-law-a man's enemies will be the members of his own household" (Matthew 10:34-36). At first glance, these words seem paradoxical. From a biblical perspective, the division mentioned highlights the difficult and painful choice believers must make when following Jesus. However, those who persevere will attain salvation. In reality, families often experience division between those who believe in Christ and those who do not. Differences in faith inevitably lead to discord and separation within families. However, through the perseverance and steadfast faith of believers - like the mother in *A story from Con hamlet* (Chung Thanh Huy), Nhan (*The Pastor's Son* - Chung Thanh Huy), and Luan (*The miracle of love* - Nguyen Ninh) - their families ultimately embrace the Catholic faith and find unity in faith and love.

Recognizing the challenges that affect family happiness today, through the portrayal of the family space of Tan (*Graceful rain*), Tam Ngoc highlights the tremendous impact of modern life, where people are constantly chasing material values and striving to earn more money, only to forget the core values of family, which are love and sharing. This is also the conflict within the family in the story *The bell sound* (Nguyen Ninh), where the choice between fame, wealth, and family happiness becomes the central dilemma. Catholic families today are facing challenges from the fast-paced nature of life and society, with the loss of faith leading to changes in people's views and values. As a result, family members no longer find the bond, love, and happiness within their families, which eventually leads to breakdowns. As author Nguyen Ninh contemplates: "Sacrifice, earning wealth, but then the house falls apart, husband, wife, and children separated - what is it worth?" (*The bell sound* - Nguyen Ninh [16, p. 68]). Additionally, writers boldly recreate the space of Catholic families amidst the serious decline of moral values, where the traditional ethical codes are overturned. This is seen in cases of broken vows of fidelity by husbands/fathers in short stories such as *Dust* (Nguyen Thi Khanh Lien), *The old house* (Nguyen Ninh), and *Crossing over the pain* (Pham Hai Mien). The family no longer serves as a safe refuge for children, especially when

perpetrators of heinous crimes, like stepfathers, are the ones who commit these acts, as seen in the stories *The Lord's sheep*, *On the wild grass field* (Nguyen Thi Khanh Lien), and *The sea of human life* (Chung Thanh Huy). It is clear that suffering and collapse occur when families fail to uphold Christian moral values. By depicting the tragedies that take place within families, the authors ring an alarm about the crisis of faith and prompt reflections on the choices and responsibilities of each member in preserving family happiness.

On the other hand, recognizing the role and responsibility of the family in proclaiming the Gospel, Catholic families must fulfill their duty to live as examples, love, and preserve the good traditions of faith. Ensuring the characteristics of Catholic marriage (first, unity: one husband, one wife; second, indissolubility: no divorce, a lifelong faithful love) is the foundation for building a strong family, creating sacredness, transcendence, and a distinct beauty in Catholic family life. Author Nguyen Thi Khanh Lien illustrates the beauty of Catholic marriage through the story of a faithful family in *The Lord's sheep*. Despite the husband being disabled and impoverished, the wife does not abandon him but instead cares for him with devotion: "If his wife were a non-believer, she would have left him by now. But his wife is a Catholic. God's law does not permit divorce. And she still has some sense of obligation, accepting to care for him – a paralyzed man" [8, p. 41]. When choosing family life, a believer must always live out their promise made before God and the Church - to remain faithful in all circumstances, whether in hardship or prosperity, in sickness or health, to respect and love their spouse until death. This is also why the mother of the narrator in *Oh my beloved* (Nguyen Thi Khanh Lien) endures an unhappy marriage: "Because of the vow made in the sacrament of marriage. A Catholic cannot abandon their companion. Mother harbored the vague hope of changing father, even if only a little" [8, p. 99]. Hope and patient endurance in marriage are key to maintaining faithfulness. In the short story *Waiting*, author Nguyen Ninh depicts contrasting thoughts on loyalty between two generations - Mrs. Mien and her daughter Ngoc, representing two generations and two different perspectives. One side stands for traditional Christian values, the other for individualism. Through the image of Mrs. Mien, who keeps her chastity her entire life, standing by the riverbank every day singing a waiting song for her husband to return, Nguyen Ninh shows that the promise of fidelity in marriage is the guarantee of lasting and fulfilling happiness. It can be said that faithfulness is a unique beauty and enduring testimony of Catholic marriage, as evidenced by the exemplary lives of faithful families, becoming living witnesses of the Gospel. Through their witness, non-believers are led to respect and accept the Catholic faith. This is seen in the family of the character Duc's master (*Being upright* - Chung Thanh Huy), whose exemplary married life inspired many around them to believe in God. The authors use the family space as a medium to convey Christian moral values with artistic intent. As expressed in the spirit of Vatican II, Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity, No. 11: "Christian families are always the most

precious witnesses to Christ in the world, through their entire life bound to the Gospel and upholding the example of Christian marriage" [20, p. 552].

2.4. The parish space

The Catholic space is not only based on the values of faith and sacred symbols but also on tangible values associated with geographical spaces, such as places of worship and organizational structures. Catholicism is a tightly organized and unified religion, from individuals to communities, from central to local levels, from national to global scales. The organizational units of the Catholic community, listed from largest to smallest, are: the Roman Curia, dioceses, parishes, and congregations. In this context, we use the term "parish" to refer to the communal space where Catholic believers gather. It is a unique social and religious space where the social structure is vividly displayed - from the Church's organizational system to the practice of religion through rituals, festivals, and the personal lives of parishioners. Moreover, the parish reflects a rich spiritual life, where social relationships, Christian values, and religious symbols are intricately intertwined, creating a distinctive identity.

In each parish, the church is the place for worship, religious rituals, and the center of parishioner activities. Therefore, it is regarded as a symbol of faith. Wherever there is a church, it signifies the presence of Catholic faith. In *The song of the little cicada* by Nguyen Thi Khanh Lien, a longhouse in the middle of the forest becomes a gathering place for scattered lepers and the location where they worship God. The longhouse, which eventually becomes the official church of the lepers' village, symbolizes the growth of faith and the resurrection of a flock after enduring hardships and suffering. Nguyen Thi Khanh Lien also describes different atmospheres within the parish church. For instance, in the short story *Oh my beloved*, one side depicts a new church where the narrator's mother and she attend Mass every Sunday afternoon. The other side shows the space of an abandoned old church, described as a shelter for souls living on the margins – "half human, half something else, with their own share of misfortunes and flaws. [...] The old church of God graciously accepts all who are broken and lost. One need not be a sheep of Christ. Buddhist, atheist, human, rat, or bat... all are welcome in God's house" [8, p. 102]. It is also the place where the narrator's family must take refuge after his father sold their house to pay off gambling debts. This creates a contrast between the space for those who have faith and trust in God and the space for sinners and those who defy religion. However, despite belonging to different church spaces, all characters eventually find peace, protection, and fulfillment at the end of their journeys. The contrasting images of the two churches evoke a theological value about the mercy and kindness of God, as reflected in Scripture: "He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous" (Matthew 5:45). Thus, the parish church should be a space that represents love and forgiveness and welcomes everyone without discrimination, rejecting no one.

In the book *Catholicism in my eyes* by Do Quang Hung,

the author asserts that "There is a Catholic space" which is reflected through the lifestyle of believers [21]. Since the 16th century, the medieval Western way of practicing the faith has been spread to Vietnam, and to this day, that atmosphere has been preserved in the Christian life of Vietnamese Catholics. This period is referred to as the (Chrétienté), era, meaning that the religious aspect is visibly expressed in all areas of social life. Both religious and secular activities are organized and arranged in such a way that believers are enclosed within a "framework," not only as a physical setting but also as a standard framework for living the faith. For a long time, the majority of Vietnamese Catholics have lived together in close-knit communities, loving each other like family. As Confucian scholar Phan Boi Chau remarked about Christianity in his book *Vietnamese national history study*: "Christianity emphasizes mutual support and love, fosters a sense of community, and creates an unspoken, unified sentiment. One only needs to observe where the congregation gathers to listen to sermons, and the sense of mutual love is evident" Catholicism is widely recognized as the "religion of love" [22, p. 148]. The life in a parish is a vivid portrayal of a unified and loving community of God's people, and it is a place where the virtuous values of the Gospel are spread.

It is easy to recognize a significant amount of parish spaces appearing in contemporary Vietnamese Catholic short stories, where writers vividly portray the "life of faith" of believers. In these stories, the personal relationships between shepherds and their flock, as well as those among fellow believers, are clearly depicted. However, a rather notable aspect is that parishes are no longer peaceful havens for God's children; they have ceased to be communities of love and unity, instead becoming spaces where sins, conflicts, and the breakdown of once good relationships are recreated. For instance, the story of the choir activities of parishioners in Xeo La parish (*The Xeo La choir - Chung Thanh Huy*) tarnishes the image of God's people. This is due to the selfishness, arrogance, and scandalous behavior depicted in the story. Or the division and lack of unity in the religious village in *The church bell ringer* by Nguyen Thi Khanh Lien, stemming from discrimination between 'the upper village and the lower village'; between the well-off, educated individuals and the poor, illiterate laborers. "Children from the lower village fought those from the upper village because the upper village kids called the lower ones 'illiterate.' The church was always noisy after Mass, with a bunch of kids rushing to fight each other, adults stepping in to separate them, but the next day they would fight again" [8, p. 27]. It can be seen that even in sacred places, people cannot escape pettiness, selfishness, and triviality. In *Spring returns to the riverside hamlet* by Tam Ngoc, for instance, the disheveled appearance of a poor boy leads the gatekeeper of the Thien An parish to drive him away from God's house, a wound that deeply scars the innocent heart of the young boy. Similarly, the condescending looks from parishioners toward the "lost sheep" upon their return to the community are vividly portrayed in stories like *The wheat grain and Blossoms bloom at Night* by Tam Ngoc, *Waiting for a call* (Nguyen Ninh), *Spring bells* (Nguyen Thi Khanh Lien).

Not only do the writers depict the breakdown of relationships among the faithful, but they also highlight the changing dynamics between the shepherd (the priest) and the flock (the parishioners). In the past, every parishioner in a parish always respected and regarded the parish priest as the representative of God, their spiritual father. This created a harmonious, warm, and peaceful atmosphere in the practice of the faith. Unfortunately, this relationship has changed and gradually eroded, as seen through conflicts over charitable pastoral work between the parish priest and the parishioners in stories like *The wheat grain* (Tam Ngoc), *Love* (Pham Hai Mien),... There are also instances where priests are slandered and defamed by their own flock, such as Father Phu in *Measuring the heart* (Pham Hai Mien) and Father Phuong in *The Jesus Love Song* (Pham Hai Mien). In each parish, the priest observes and cares for the religious life of the parishioners, and they are witnesses to the image of devout believers engaging in religious practices, but without embodying the values of love, compassion, forgiveness, and respect for the humble. This sentiment is captured in the weary sigh of Father Han in *The wheat grain* (Tam Ngoc), as he reflects on the current state of faith practice among believers: "I don't understand why, every day people attend Mass, listen to the Word of God, organize charitable groups, and never miss a prayer meeting, yet they don't practice what they've learned or heard. Is solidarity between people just a luxury, mere words to delight the eye, or a superficial formality meant to be seen by others?" [15, p. 21]. From a realistic perspective, the authors highlight the problem that today's Catholics are living like the Pharisees and scribes of old. This hypocritical way of life, which Jesus condemned in the Bible, is vividly described: "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You are like whitewashed tombs, which look beautiful on the outside but on the inside are full of the bones of the dead and everything unclean. In the same way, on the outside you appear to people as righteous but on the inside you are full of hypocrisy and wickedness!" (Matthew 23:27-28) [10, p. 1657]. It is clear that the religious life of parishioners in the parish is depicted through a rigid "framework," in which they believe that diligently following religious practices and adhering to the rules is sufficient. This structured life leads believers to focus on maintaining external forms while forgetting the true values of the Gospel. Young Catholic writers have boldly confronted reality and portrayed the issues within Christian life in their works. Through this, they sound an alarm, calling for a reflection on the changing way of living out the faith in the new era - an era of the New Evangelization.

3. Conclusion

Tran Dinh Su asserts that: "Space is a cultural symbol from which one can infer the entire language of its forms, distinguishing it from the language of other cultures" [4, p. 130]. Religion not only preserves cultural values but also

ensures the preservation and development of the culture of different peoples. In contemporary Vietnamese Catholic short stories, young writers have portrayed artistic spaces rich in Christian identity. Through spiritual activities, festivals, family life, and the lives of faith communities, the authors have painted a vivid picture of religious life and reflected the values of Catholic faith. These sacred spaces help believers reflect on their religious life according to the spirit of the Gospel, prompting them to adjust their thoughts and behavior in relation to both God and fellow humans. From a cultural and spiritual perspective, readers are able to gain a deeper understanding of the material and spiritual lives of Vietnamese Catholics, thereby dispelling prejudices and bridging the gap between Christian culture and national culture. It can be affirmed that Catholic culture has contributed to the diversity of Vietnamese cultural identity, and Catholic literature has introduced new ideas and artistic values to national literature.

REFERENCES

- [1] L. D. Bang, *Vietnamese Catholic literature - Milestones*, Ha Noi: Encyclopedia Publishing House, 2010.
- [2] V. L. Te, *History of Vietnamese Catholic Literature*, Sai Gon: Tu Duy Publishing House, 1965.
- [3] I. M. Lotman, *The Structure of the artistic text*, Translated by T. N. Vuong, Ha Noi: Vietnam National University Press, Hanoi, 2004.
- [4] T. D. Su, *Introduction to literary poetics*, Ha Noi: University of Education, 2023.
- [5] L. B. Han, *The dictionary of literary terms*, Ha Noi: Vietnam Education Publishing House Limited Company, 2010.
- [6] J. A. Hardon, *The modern Catholic dictionary*, Translated by team Chanh Hung, Ha Noi: Religion, 2020.
- [7] N. C. Vinh, *Catholic Terms: Understanding Faith, Catechism, and Liturgy*, Ha Noi: Religion, 2022.
- [8] N. T. K. Lien, *Where does the river flow*, Ha Noi: Hong Duc, 2021.
- [9] C. T. Huy, *The Storm*, Ha Noi: Hong Duc, 2022.
- [10] Many authors, *The Holy Bible: Old Testament and New Testament - God's Word for Everyone*, translated by The Group of Translators of the Liturgy of the Hours, Ha Noi: Religion Publishing House, 2006.
- [11] P. H. Mien, *Starlight at night*, Ha Noi: Hong Duc, 2022.
- [12] T. N. Them, *The foundations of Vietnamese culture*, Ho Chi Minh: General University of Ho Chi Minh City, 1995.
- [13] Catholic Bishops' Conference of Vietnam, *Catholic dictionary*, Ha Noi: Religion, 2011.
- [14] N. V. Ngoan, "Annual ceremonies of Catholics", *Ethnic Studies Journal*, vol. 12, no. 04, pp. 127-133, 2023.
- [15] T. Ngoc, *Echo*, Ha Noi: Hong Duc, 2023.
- [16] N. Ninh, *Looking for Ikigai*, Ha Noi: Hong Duc, 2023.
- [17] Catholic Bishops' Conference of Vietnam, *The Catholic Church's social doctrine*, Ha Noi: Religion, 2007.
- [18] The Holy See, *The Catholic Church's Catechism*, Ha Noi: Religion, 2022.
- [19] M. Q. Phong, *Moral Theology and Catholic Social Teaching*, Ha Noi: Religion, 2022.
- [20] V. I. Council, *Vatican II Council*, Translated by C. B. C. o. Vietnam, Ha Noi: Religion, 2022.
- [21] D. Q. Hung, *Catholicism in my eyes*, Ha Noi: Religion, 2012.
- [22] P. B. Chau, *Vietnamese national history study*, Ha Noi: Vietnam Education Publishing House Limited Company, 1962.