

# V i e t n a m

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A long journey, lasting many hours on a plane, to a distant country that is very different in many ways including its culture. I was going to a country I did not know where many strange and wonderful things happen. I felt nervous and anxious. I managed to calm myself down by reminding myself that I had come for a specific task: my first physical contact with our carmelite presence in Vietnam.

I was accompanied by two guardian angels who offered me special protection. The first was St. Therese of the Child Jesus. In her desire to be a missionary she wanted to fly to Saigon, to Hanoi; she spoke also of Tonkin. Her spiritual brother, the priest, Adolf Roulland, while on a journey to his destination in China, stopped over in Saigon and wrote to the Lisieux carmel about his impressions following his visit to the carmel in this country. Therese was very excited to read his letter.

I recommended myself, at the same time, to the intercession of the saintly vietnamese cardinal, Francis-Xavier Van Thuan Nguyen (+ 2002). I considered his friendship as a grace, and the trust he confided in me. The thoughts he published in his books on his 13 years in communist prisons, these thoughts I heard from his own mouth, the details of which I shall retain for the rest of my life. In 2001 and 2002 he encouraged me to visit Vietnam. Now these memories stimulated me.

*With a whole host of memories –*

When we go on important journeys we arm ourselves also by recalling semi-dormant memories of the past. Before the invention of computers the human person had their own memory, that could not be moved and which constituted something of our very selves and our history. Memories become active in the here and now and, sometimes, affect us. This occurred before Sigmund Freud spoke to us about the subconscious.

What are the memories that associate me with Vietnam? Besides the reference to guardian angels, I was struck in my childhood by the martyrs of Tonkin, with our St. Valentine de Berrio-Ochoa. I admired the story of Fr. Luis of the Trinity (+1964), the provincial of Paris and tireless promoter of St. John of the Cross. During the second world war his friend, General De Gaulle withdrew him, temporarily from his priory in order to lead, as an admiral, the operations of the french army in the South Pacific. In this uniform of the grand marechal, Fr. Louis d'Argenlieu docked in different ports in Indochina where he took time to visit the carmelite nuns in Ponh Penh and Saigon.

I came to know Fr. Xuen during my years in Monte Carlo. The only survivor of a wave of vietnamese carmelites who poured into post-conciliar France in May 1968. It was in Monte Carlo that Miss Mitsou and her mother began to interest us in their country that was now at war.

More recently I recall meeting Fr. John Peter Vota Kan, a vietnamese priest who in the year 2000 made profession as a carmelite in las Palmas desert house in Castile. Again, I cannot forget my good friend Jose Antonio Osaba, a true disciple of St. John of the Cross. It was thanks to him that I first made personal contact with carmel in Vietnam that had persevered until this time; Jose Antonio was working with the basque government and I was in charge of the review, 'La Obra Maxima'.

While still delving into the memory-chest, I would like to mention that extraordinary account of the journey by our carmelite nuns from Hue in 1925 to found a missionary carmel in Cholet, France. Accompanying them on the journey by ship was the writer Paul Claudel, who also implored them to make a foundation in Japan, where he was an ambassador. This chronicle is a true pearl of Carmel's missionary history in the 20th Century, with a copy in the archives of the Generalate in Rome.

In the most profane but historically interesting chapters, it recalls the famous battle of Dien Bien Phu (1954), which was to become the mortal blow to France's colonial presence in this

asiatic country. Similar feelings were aroused in the last months of the siege of Saigon in April 1975, by the american capitulation and the union of all the territory of Vietnam into one sole republic. Still sealed into our memory are our impressions of those heartbreaking photos of the 'boat-people' in a rush to get away. After the fall of Saigon in 1975, for fear of reprisals by the communists, more than a million people escaped from the country in small boats, arriving at refugee camps in Thailand and the Philippines, from where they were offered exile by the United States and Canada. The mythical Ho Chi Minh trail reminds us of the never ending war that became more and more cruel over the course of many years, with a campaign unknown in Europe.

These recollections were to be a promising foretaste of what I was about to see, hear and admire in this country. All these memories restored my strength and prepared me for the experience. Thus I landed in historical Saigon, that since the reunification of the country is now called Ho Chi Minh City, in memory of the great leader who ended the foreign occupation of his country (1975).

#### *Facts about the country:*

The portuguese were the first europeans to appear in this area in 1545. They entered from the south, and named the region Cochinchina. After them came the Dutch. Then there were the english, who were always apparently disillusioned not to find something that would prosper their commercial interests. With the withdrawal of the european powers the missionaries became the centre of interest. The french jesuit, Alexander de Rodes (1591-1660) created an alphabet of the language with latinized characters. For this reason the vietnamese language, with its many accents and, for us, strange pronunciation, is written without oriental characters. They told me that being a tonal language, each word can have up to six different meanings depending on the tone of voice.

French Indochina of the colonial epoch bordered Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam. During the colonial period, the king of Anam handed over to the french in 1863 a third of his large territory, the southern part, that was called the colony of Cochinchina, where the provinces of Tonkin in the north and Anam in the Routh were founded as protectorates.

Vietnam is a country of sunshine, of tropical colours, of frequent smiles from people who are very kind. Vietnam is a socialist republic in the extreme orient. It borders from north to south, China, Laos, Thailand and Cambodia. On the south pacific (here it is not called the China Sea) it has a coastal line of 3,444 kms, with almost 2,000 islands, that according to tradition, was created by the blows from the tail of an enormous angry dragon. It is bigger than Italy in square kilometers, but has a population 85 million inhabitants, in third place among the most inhabited countries in the world. Looking at a map, we see that it is shaped like an elongated S.

Vietnam today continues to move forward under the same communist regime. Without collective farming, with a free market, it is moving rapidly and unhesitatingly towards the most liberal form of capitalism. You can even find 'San Miguel' beer and other kinds of international brands. It is a country with an emerging economy. If communism persists it is not due to ideological conviction but rather for the interest of the party, whose supporters obtain the best posts.

The custom controls are easy. You can walk around freely especially in the big cities. However, here too one needs to be discreet and vigilant. I am accustomed to this kind of cautious vigilance, watching what goes on around me, when in the years 1982-1985 I assisted in the novitiate without a novice-director in Jauernick in the ex republic of East Germany.

Here they do not allow anyone to raise their voice in opposition, not so much as a threat. The government controls the courts and the media. With the reforms of the *dai moi*, that since 1987 have brought many economic benefits, in a different way to what occurred with *perestroika* in the ex Soviet Union, here *glasnost* has not arrived. There is a control of telephones and the Internet. You are not allowed to stay the night in a private home nor even in a priory. At least they are concerned to have good education. Here it is considered more prestigious to be a teacher than a doctor.

With 10 to 12% of the population catholic, there are areas where christians are in the majority. The churches are full to overflowing, especially on a Sunday, like it used to be with us in the 1950's and 60's, with many young people. The people's christian faith is strengthened by much religious persecution, with the blood of many martyrs from the past.

The christians are very generous. With their contributions from their poverty they have contibuted to the construction of many new churches. From a religious point of view, Vietnam is going through a period of abundant vocations to the priestly as well as to religious life. In one cistercian monastery I encountered a community with 148 young monks. The few elderly ones are survivors from prisons and torture for their christian faith. Now and again the government is restoring some confiscated properties to the Church.

As we were about to land we were told that the temperature was 35 degrees in Ho Chi Minh City. In my years in Kinshasa it was about the same temperature. In Figuil (Cameroun) I believe it reached 45 degrees. In such cases, I abide by the wisdom of the popular song:

*¡Ay que cosas pasan en Cuba,  
Ay que cosas pasan en mi tierra,  
Que cuando hace calor se suda ...!*<sup>1</sup>

In the airport almost everyone covered their mouths with anti-contamination masks. Driving away from the airport we had our first surprise. I had never seen such a traffic-jam? Here there were hundreds, thousands of cars, like a continuous stream. The traffic was chaotic. I entered into the maelstrom in the the back of a car driven by a member of our secular Order, J.N. I was amazed at his skill as he managed to weave his way through the traffic.

The taxi drivers, nonetheless drive unpeturbed at 50 km an hour. They show no anxiety or impatience when breaking the law of the road. I was amused by the people with their conical shaped hats that covered their entire heads.

With its 8 million inhabitants, with its rivers and canals, with its 19 districts in the city and five more in the open countryside, with a surface area of 2,000 square kms., Ho Chi Minh City is a large metropolis. In the past it was given many compliments, such as the pearl of the Orient, the Paris of the East. The streets and avenues are overrun by this flood of vehicles. The private houses have a handful of land around them, which they make good use of for creating domestic fish ponds. Also here, as in other areas, the cristians place statues of the Virgin Mary in front of their houses.

Outside the urban sprawl, an unexpected journey to the high plateau of the country helped me to see a more overall vision of Vietnam. Here the very christian population from the north has taken root, where it sought refuge after the fall of that area to the communists (1954). It also became a place of refuge for ethnic minorities, with darker skin colouring. Everyone maintains a strong christian identity. They have built a number of new churches and shrines. Many monks are perishing in prisons.

The capital is Dalat with its 240,000 inhabitants, at an altitude of 1,500 meters, and about 300 kms from Ho Chi Minh City. With a translator from french I was able to speak to the seminary students. The diocesan bishop is president of the episcopal conference, he has a sister who is one of our carmelite nuns. Between signs and the spoken word I came to learn about the life of this country. You should not ask too many questions, but understand quickly. The language is almost coded, but it reflects the situation: in Ho Chi Minh city there are more than 50 religious congregations. To the number of priestly seminaries allowed by the government you can add 'annexes' and 'extensions,' that serve to practise as new seminaries. Revolution does not always have to be the only solution to difficulties. An intelligent and positive pragmatism will produce benefits.

From here I continued my journey to Nha Trang. It meant descending towards the coast. Who gave the bus driver permission to go over the single and sometimes double line in the middle of the road? Who taught him to drive at such a dizzy speed, while going downhill and manoeuvring around bends? All the time he was blasting the horn.

*Our carmelite presence:*

This was my principal point of interest. Here I encountered surprise and optimism. After the communist invasion of Hanoi, the carmel in that city moved to Dolbeau, Canada in 1957. The nuns from Bui Chu did the same, moving to Danville, Canada. The other carmels faced up to

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<sup>1</sup> Tr. *There are things that happen in Cuba,  
There are things that happen in my country,  
That when it becomes hot we sweat...!*

the trials, remaining in the country or going back to it after painful emigrations. Let us look at each of them:

### 1. *Saigon*

It is the historical carmel for different reasons. It was founded from Lisieux carmel in 1861, during a time of open religious persecution. In that same year, and just months before the sisters arrived Blessed Theophane Venard had been martyred, to whom St. Therese showed a great devotion. Saigon was the first foundation of a carmel in a missionary country, almost 60 years before the encyclical 'Rerum Ecclesiae' (1926), in which the Pope of the missions, Pius XI, called upon the contemplative Orders to insert themselves in the missionary world.

Here I visited the tomb of the foundress, Mother Philomena of the Immaculate Virgin Mary. She was professed in Lisieux, and was the first of the apostolic vicariate in Indochina. Mgr. Dominic Lefebvre, the vicar apostolice, while in prison had had a vision of Saint Teresa of Jesus. She begged him to found a carmel in Anam, because "God would be greatly served and glorified there."

The first indigenous carmelite nun was Ana Nam, who took the name Teresa of Jesus. We know how much St. Therese connected with this foundation. Therese lived seven years with Sr. Anne of the Sacred Heart, professed in Saigon, to where Anne returned after Lisieux in 1895. Therese wrote her a delightful letter five months before her own death, on May 2, 1897. She recalled 'with joy' the years they had spent together in the normandy carmel.

In 1895 Saigon founded a carmel in Hanoi. This required more personnel and, so Saigon asked Lisieux, the original carmel. Then they discussed the possibility of sending the future carmelite Saint to Vietnam. Therese was ready to go, until heaven showed her that her intention was impossible due to the deterioration of her health.

With these recollections let us now turn to the present. Saigon carmel is solidly built and a focal point for devotion to the patroness of the missions. The most wonderful factor is their actual youthfulness: 26 nuns in solemn vows, 4 in simple vows, 5 novices and 3 postulants. A total of 38 members, and all very young.

### 2) *Binh Trieu – Saigon II*

In times of political turbulence Hue carmel sought refuge in a place in the northerly suburbs of Saigon. They built a refuge, with just the basic necessities, so that they were 'to enter as best you can.' Also here the experience of St. Teresa was verified, 'although small it was perfect for a monastery' (*Life* 33.12). The carmel is a beehive of industry, with every space used to the full in order to give space (to the community that had increased) for offices.

Thanks to the fruit of much prayer and many privations, some of the nuns were able to return to Hue to renew the carmelite life there. However, the community in Binh Trieu was able to continue where it was, becoming the fourth carmel in Vietnam, with 37 members: 13 solemnly professed, 4 in perpetual vows (Extern sisters), 13 simply professed, 3 postulants and 4 aspirants.

This carmel's principle source of income is in making altar-breads, using a machine that really shows we are in a country where the cost of articles made by hand is low.

### 3) *Nha Trang*

This carmel came from Than Hoa in 1929. The nuns experienced the vicissitudes of exile in France. The government confiscated many hectares of their land. However, they managed to maintain a spacious convent next to the sea.

Here too there are many young sisters: 18 nuns in solemn vows, 9 in temporary vows, 8 novices, 2 postulants, 10 aspirants...Four sisters have gone to help carmels in other countries.

### 4) *Hué*

The presence of our nuns in this imperial city dates back to 1909. For this reason they are celebrating the centenary of foundation with a programme of events that will continue throughout the year. They have experienced periods of extremely difficulty, leading to exile in

France. However, they managed to return and courageously faced up to the life. They began a carmel in the Philippines with a foundation in Jaro-Iloilo. The carmels of Cholet and Binh Trieu have sought their help.

These are the four carmels recognized by the government authorities. Since 1999 they have formed the Association of Our Lady of Carmel. How many convents of the Order are there in fact in Vietnam? Let us leave the Holy Spirit to work. The Spirit knows how to work in silence and with efficiency. One day we shall be able to see the greatness of the Lord. In any case, it must remain clear that some 'women' can live together –among other reasons- to cultivate land they bought. We suppose that the praise and glory of God are not subject to the authorization of any human law. There is no question that in Vietnam heaven has protected and protects Teresa's vine, that produces much fruit in Vietnam. Carmel here seems to enjoy St. Teresa's special blessing.

Coming as I did from Europe where there is a dearth of vocations, here my hope was restored by so much youth, who were so full of kindness. In all the carmels I was given a welcome of incomparable oriental courtesy: warm, sincere, transparent and ingenious. I could never have guessed that at their evening recreation they would have performed the dance of our popular habanera 'La paloma', by Mauel Iradier, as a message of peace. In all my life I have never met more attentive nuns. They only have to notice the first hint of sweat on the guest for the prioress to produce later a change of shirt.

#### *The masculine carmel?*

Right now there are two carmelite friars in the Oklahoma province, who are of the 'boat-people' generation. A member of the third Order, from Belgium, is studying in our Venice province. In the Philippine's commissariate three brothers in simple vows are studying; three novices will be professed and a postulant is preparing for his clothing.

In their own country there are two arrangements for the actual seven aspirants to carmelite life. They are completing their studies in college and university. In order to improve their knowledge of english they are getting supplementary classes. Carmel will flourish in Vietnam.

#### *Conclusion*

First of all, I would like to draw attention to the vitality of carmel in Vietnam. My admiration grew when I saw the conditions in which they live. With so much youth, with so much strength the Order's presence gives us great hope, joy, and stimulus. The entire Order owes them a great debt of gratitude and we are strenghtened by their testimony.

They want us to promote carmelite formation by all possible means, to encourage a greater sense of identity in new vocations. One concrete way we could help would be to finance their studies and to diffuse the works of Teresa and John of the Cross, as well as carmelite literature in general, always translated into good vietnamese. Carmel should always work with all its members and with its spiritual patrimony, and it should do this as much in the Orient as in West.