

By Don Turbitt

COUNTRY COORDINATOR
for VIETNAM

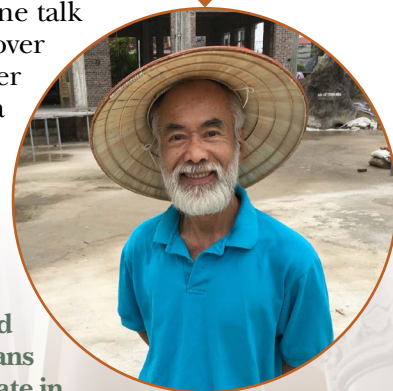
Don has been a Catholic lay leader, father, and businessman for over twenty years. His ministry in the Church has been diverse. For forty-five years, he has coordinated the People of God's Love Prayer Group. He has led parish missions and conferences throughout the world. Don is the director of international ministries for Men of St. Joseph International. In 2013, Don and his wife, Pat, received the Lumen Gentium Award from Bishop Thomas Tobin of Providence, Rhode Island, for their work in the New Evangelization.

Spreading the GOSPEL in Vietnam

Due to government restrictions in the past, there has been a shortage of priests in Vietnam, but they now have so many seminarians, I believe that problem will soon disappear. However, it does take thirteen years of study to become a priest in Vietnam.

Fr. Hoan, the brother of a seminarian I know from my home in Providence, Rhode Island, was very hospitable and gracious to Deacon Chau and me. Deacon Chau is a native of Vietnam who now lives in Detroit. We spent four days in Fr. Hoan's parish and ate wonderful meals in the homes of his parishioners and his rectory. My experience with the Vietnamese people has been one of great blessings. They are such honorable people and, like Italian Americans, you can't come into a house without them graciously offering food to you.

- Deacon Chau gave the homily at Mass each day. He also gave a teaching each day to a group of singles on marriage. I gave one talk to the parish and one talk to the singles. We also prayed over the people after my talk. People lined up for healing prayer every time they saw us, both before and after Mass. At a meal after Mass, one man said his sinuses were healed when I prayed with him.



When we were eating in the Vietnamese homes, the men sat at one table, and the women and children sat at another table, separate from one another. Even at Mass, the men sit on the right, and women and children sit on the left. We Americans may not think that's a good idea, but the divorce rate in Vietnam is eight percent, and for Catholics it's five percent, while in the United States, we are over fifty percent.



On Sunday, we drove to the diocese of Thanh Hoa, to meet with Archbishop Joseph Nguyen Linh. Bishop Linh recently was promoted to archbishop and now presides over two dioceses, Thanh Hoa and Hue. In time, the government will approve a new bishop for Thanh Hoa. Along with his new responsibilities, Archbishop Linh is also the head of the Bishops' Committee for Vietnam.



Archbishop Joseph Linh is not a tall man, but he is a giant of a man in the Church. The people love him, and I deeply admire him. He had to wait three years after graduating from the seminary before the government would allow him to be ordained. After that, he was imprisoned four times, once for nine months, once for four months, once for three months, and once for nine days. What a privilege it was to spend time with him!



We also took time to visit my sixteen “adopted granddaughters.” Five years ago, I attended the first vows of these religious sisters, and it all happened on my birthday. I was sitting with Archbishop Linh when he announced my birthday, and he also said I should adopt these sisters as my “granddaughters.” So, for the last five years, we have been building a very warm and happy relationship. They have been praying for me and my family, as I also pray for them. My “granddaughters” are very mature, hard-working young women, but around me, they act like little girls, laughing and playing around their “grandfather.” I have been blessed by this relationship.

After they took their final vows at Mass, we all went together with their families to the convent hall for dinner. I had the opportunity to sit with Archbishop Linh and the three heads of the order for a wonderful feast. At the end of the day, I spent some private time with the sisters, prayed with each of them, and said my farewell to all of them.



The following day, I was given an opportunity to speak to 550 catechists receiving their yearly instruction in the Thanh Hoa Diocese. Eight percent of the population in Vietnam is Catholic, which equals six million people, and ninety percent of the Catholics attend Sunday Mass. I was told by one pastor that sixty percent of his parishioners attend daily Mass. The first Mass is at 4:45 a.m.! Since Renewal Ministries has come to the diocese of Thanh Hoa, the number of Catholics has increased from 120,000 to 150,000. I believe Archbishop Joseph Linh is the main reason for such a dramatic increase.



The next day, we went with Archbishop Linh to visit three parishes. The first parish had hundreds of people standing on both sides of the driveway to receive the archbishop. A drum and bugle corps was part of the reception, and there was an overflow crowd in the church. The next parish had an escort with one-hundred motorbikes, with the archbishop's flags on each bike, which led us from the highway to the church. There was another overflow crowd in the church and a huge meal for everyone after Mass. The third parish was way out in the bush. They had completed a summer camp to learn English and were happily celebrating the end of camp.



The next day, we flew to Hue (pronounced “Way”), which is the new diocese under Archbishop Joseph Linh. We spent our time in Hue meeting the leading priests of the diocese and planning next year's mission. One priest we met was Fr. Anthony Ha, who told us he spent twenty-one years in the seminary, because there was a twenty-year period in which the government would not allow any priests to be ordained.



We returned to the Phat Diem diocese by overnight train, a twelve-hour ride. The following day, we spent time with Bishop Joseph Nguyen Nang, who celebrated Mass for youth.

We continued to pray for the sick each day, before and after Mass. The people have great faith and are a blessing to be with. The temperatures were always in the high nineties and slightly over one-hundred degrees each day, but the joy of the work made all things pleasurable. The people in Vietnam are a delight to be with, and my heart swells with joy when I am in Vietnam.