

A DIARY EXTENSIONS TO HUONG PHUONG VILLAGE ORPHANAGE

EASTER

I returned to Vietnam to spend two weeks to visit the sisters, sight the construction project, and spend some savings and donations at the convent and orphanage. At the same time, my wife holidayed at Townsville.

THE PROJECT

The orphanage chapel (stage 1) is to be followed by extensions to the guest rooms and dormitories of the orphanage (stage 2). It was reaching “lock-up” (i.e. completion of the exterior shell) when I arrived.



Stage 1 close to lock-up stage.



Stage 1 close to lock-up stage.

I am fascinated by Vietnamese scaffolding. It is usually held together by a few recycled

nails and tie wire, yet seems to hold together. A totally floored working platform is usually considered to be an unnecessary expense and so there is the added interest of gaps between boards. The flooring boards are usually fairly bendy.



Vietnamese scaffolding held together with tie wire and nails but still seems to work.



Gaps in the working platform are "normal".



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Young man working on a platform near the ceiling. Making a mitre cut by hand.



A worker at the top of the pole ladder pulls up a bucket of mixed mortar by rope.

There is a long single pole ladder to the top of the cross, where a cement statue of the local saint is being made. The reward at the top is a long view of the orphanage and surrounds.

The statue is basically being hand made with a bit of reinforcing and mortar gradually being built up in layers. Very painstaking work.



The rough-out contains a bit of reinforcing for an arm and bricks for the prayer book.



St Vincent is at the highest spot above the orphanage.



Two weeks later, the statue was being finely detailed.



The statue sculptor compares his source document with his 3-D interpretation.



From close up, St Vincent is very life-like.

Sponsors in Sai gon had paid for a fancy wooden panelled ceiling. I had advised against this unnecessary expense – but nobody listens to architects! At the top of the scaffold at loft level, the workers hop from plank to plank, surrounded by a clutter of timber mouldings and tools.

The inclusion of ineffectual and glare-producing (and dare I say it, incongruously ugly) office lighting in the ceiling did not help.



Hole for fluorescent office light is in the ceiling, some 10m above the floor.



The ceiling includes some intricate detailing (rather pointless if the worship is genuinely supposed to be directed at the altar at ground level).



Ceiling workers on scaffold.



Ceiling workers on scaffold.

EASTER OBSERVANCES & RECOVERY

Easter is the most important Christian feast day of the year. It recalls the Great Teacher's political trial, torture, execution and resurrection in a special form. The week proceeding Easter day (the resurrection day) is Holy Week. This is marked by special observances.

For the sisters, much of Holy Week is spent on their knees (leading to the permanent knee bruising and scarring as I was to discover later when the sisters went to a beach trip).

Every day of Holy Week, the sisters take turns singing scripture which retells the Easter story. The song is in the form of a lament, which echoes inside the concrete chapel and floats through the grounds. It is very beautiful to hear.



Sister Huong takes her turn singing the lament.



The Rosary is prayed in the form of a chant each morning. I made MP3 recordings of the lament and some of the more common prayers and hymns. The recording is without electric organ backing and the voices are raw. My mother said about the music, "it's like the women in some village in Lithuania". I replied, "That's the whole idea. These are women in a village. There are elements of traditional folk singing in dialect".

The week is also marked by fasting and meat prohibitions, especially on Good Friday, the day recalling the sacrifice of Christ, by his acceptance of torture and execution.

Good Friday includes a three hour service with Stations of the Cross, by which people contemplate each of 14 points in the story of the arrest and crucifixion.



Procession moves under each station of the cross while prayers are chanted.



Women in au dai (traditional dress).



A man with mourning head band fans himself in the heat.

Stations of the Cross is then followed by veneration of the cross, by which people come forward individually and show a sign of respect.



Priest holds up the cross for veneration.



Sisters venerate the cross by kissing the feet of the figure of Christ.

Easter Saturday has a three hour mass at the start of the day. At night the Service of Light is held. This is a ritual which echoes from ancient pagan traditions of fire worship, but superimposes the importance of the Great Teacher, as the “light of the world”. From the outside fire, candles are lit and people process into the church. The hidden mystery of the story is represented by a curtain that hides the whole sanctuary from view.



The Easter fire is lit and candles are lit.



The people gather into the church with candles.



Choir.



Women in traditional dress, many with mourning bands, hold candles.

On Easter Sunday (resurrection day), the service begins with bells and singing. Ropes holding the curtain in front of the church are pulled. The curtain drops suddenly to the ground. It reveals the sanctuary with steps up to a decorated altar, bright lights and tabernacle.

By Easter Sunday, the privations of Holy Week are over and the Sisters are joyful and relieved. Easter Sunday gave me an opportunity to present a few gifts. The sisters got chocolate that had been carted in luggage from Australia. In hindsight, it would have been a lot easier to just buy a treat for them locally.

Just before leaving for Vietnam I had been invited to give a talk to an Aboriginal men's group in Goulburn (which included some of their wives and girlfriends) about

researching their family trees. The message stick and men's apron were presented to me at the meeting. I wanted these gifts to continue to do good work.

I presented an Aussie hat with my new Aboriginal history book to the senior priest. The message stick and men's apron were presented to the Mother Superior (boss) with an explanation.

I demonstrated the apron by fitting it on the priest. I suggested that the apron is highly suitable for any visiting seminarians and priests to help with the washing up. This is a very novel cultural concept in the village (but not the city) in Vietnam.

The priest, who trains seminarians (trainee priests) responded by inviting me to give a talk to the seminarians at Vinh City about cultural differences in treatment of the disadvantaged and status of women in Vietnam vs Australia.

At the end of the presentation I asked mother superior for a small blessing for the (cultural) traveller, to accompany the message stick, which she agreed to. How could she refuse?



Book being presented to my client, Fr Vien.



Aussie hat and men's apron. "Recommended for visiting seminarians and priests. Does the apron fit well?"



A little story about the 40,000 year old culture and the message stick for Mother Superior.



A symbolic blessing from Mother Superior.



A symbolic blessing from Mother Superior.

Mother Superior then announced that the sisters were granted freedom for the afternoon. The sisters responded with exclamations of joy and exited applause. What were they going to do with all this unlimited freedom? Rather than pole vault the fence, the sisters caught with a couple of hours sleep, sang in the music room and washed their hair. A few with families nearby walked to visit their loved ones.

The Monday following Easter was made a holiday. A beach day was organised. Doubling up on bicycles, I rode with 18 sisters to the beach near Ba don.

The presence of a foreigner attracted the usual unwanted attention. I got invitations from the parties of men having beer or rice vodka drinking sessions, to come and drink with them. Their women, of course, worked on and served the food and beer. One slightly crazed and persistent man kept on returning to chum up, dance a little jig and rifle through our bags on the beach. By this time I had figured out that the way to manage this is to put my arm around him and walk with him back to his drinking hole, away from the sisters. Rather than punch his lights out, which is what I felt like doing. Eventually his son arrived on a small fishing boat and coaxed him away.

The Sisters took quite some time to drift to the edge of the sea. Some tag games were organised and they had a great time. It was great to see these young women – most between ages of say 20 and 26 – forget everything for a few hours.

The Sisters' swimming outfits are white cotton shorts with their normal casual T-shirts on top. Most could not swim. Sister Ha can swim freestyle, but a few of the others spent as much time under water as above it. Sister Tuyen manages a splashy dog paddle, but I fear she might drown if dropped into a deep pool.



Sisters playing tag on the beach.



Sister Huong reaching for a new camera angle.



Posing for a group photo.



Only a small proportion are confident swimmers.



Sister Tuyen shows off the shell fish that were collected, later used to make soup at the convent.



Oh, no! A typical fishermen's drinking party.



Our friendly drunk, who was very difficult to shake off.

The beach trip presented a lot of staged photo opportunities for sister Huong, who came to supervise and photograph. I also had the camera taken from me when I was lying down to take photos. The sisters staged a photo with me at centre. Perhaps not one for Facebook. Or is it? The photo tells a story of why at times like this I felt privileged to be a guest of the Sisters.



Not a picture for the Facebook page! Or is it?

Returning from the beach we all stopped at a café at Badon where I had the opportunity to buy lunch for the sisters. At the end they chorused with a *Cam on Bo!* (“Thanks, Dad”), to which I responded with *Khong co gi muoi tam con gai* (“You’re welcome, 18 daughters”).



Lunch. *Cam on Bo!*

Following Easter Monday the routine returned to normal. At breakfast one of the new novices was asked by Mother Superior to make an announcement. The girl fronted up, speaking in a barely audible voice and explained that after one month’s trial she had decided that the monastic life was not for her and that she was returning to her family.

I was told by Tuyen that the girl (and every nun) is “free” to choose. There are degrees of freedom. It is difficult for an outsider to see how such decisions might reflect on the girls’ families.