

A DIARY EXTENSIONS TO HUONG PHUONG VILLAGE ORPHANAGE

INTERLUDE:

While in Saigon, Fr Phong had translated an email from me, reminding the engineer to prepare a report on structural adequacy of the orphanage extension and to send an invoice.

I returned to Australia in mid-February. A week later I phoned and through an interpreter asked about the same info. The engineer sent a reassuring email which I had translated. It basically said: "Do not worry".

After getting back to Canberra, I returned to my "old" job. In the car, driving to rural councils in the region, there was plenty of time to reflect. The open, relatively unpopulated landscape of rural NSW seemed to contrast the village and its convent, where everyone was related and people looked out for each other. A sense of profound loss washed over me, bringing me to the point of tears a couple of times. I was missing the village. I was missing the convent.

I don't have secrets. My wife saw that a piece of me was still in Vietnam. She said I would "get better". I didn't. I felt embarrassed to talk to people about it, but instead phoned Archbishop Coleridge's office, to discuss an idea to sponsor three of the sisters to visit Australia. He was encouraging, but cautious about the Archdiocese becoming responsible for three overseas visitors. He suggested they better travel on a tourist visa. At the same time, I started making enquiries about returning to Vietnam to see the project in its final stages of construction.

With a Vietnamese friend to interpret, I telephoned the foreman on site, the engineer, some of the sisters and anyone who would talk. They all asked the same question, "When are you coming back?" There was a new centre of the world for me and at its core was the village of Huong Phuong, Quang Binh province, central Vietnam.

Six weeks later I had developed a pattern. Most Saturday afternoons were spent on the phone to Vietnam, with Trung, a Vietnamese local friend in Canberra, as interpreter.

Following a string of phone calls and emails, Ngoc drew and emailed roof structure details provided by the engineer. The engineer also confirmed that he had checked the structure. Halleluia! A load of worry was lifted from my shoulders. Next, I asked Sr Huong to take a few photos of the construction in progress. She took off by motorbike and emailed back some photos. These showed that the roof concrete frame was well under way.



26th Feb 2011. Concrete roof frame forming.



26th Feb 2011.



26th Feb 2011.

**HUONG PHUONG ORPHANAGE EXTENSIONS – CHAPEL.
FINANCIAL RECORD BY SR HUONG – 01.03.2011**

Item	Quantity	Price/each	Cost (VND)
Progress payment to Ngoc, draftsman and head contractor.			8,000,000
Progress payment to Hoc, the joiner, on 140M vnd agreed total price for doors and windows.			90,000,000
Progress payment to Sau, the foreman and his work team, on agreed total price of 250M vnd for site labour.			80,000,000
Steel reinforcing rods	Various		159,133,000
Nails 5mm,7mm	105kg	19,400/kg	2,040,000
Cement	55 tons	98,000/ton	53,900,000
Bricks	43,000	95,000/thousand	40,850,000
Rock			17,000,000
Sand			13,850,000
Boards			20,400,000
Nails			1,584,000
Total			508,655,000

Simplified version of the statement:

Sister Huong sent across her expenditure record. For a while, I found it hard to understand. Then Tien (who is studying in Auckland) suggested that the mysterious long column of numbers on the left hand side might be a list of steel reinforcing rod sizes. I added some explanations in English and distributed the expenditure statement.

It indicated that the building could reach lock-up stage with the donated money. It also was a reminder that the construction team, who were on a fixed labour cost agreement, accounted for only \$12,500 worth of the building cost. The rest of the \$52,000 to \$80,000 cost (depending on whether you applied the donated budget or the aspirational one expressed by the draftsman) was for materials. Also, as always, I was amazed at Sister Huong's capabilities. She was self-educated. Yet she was able to knock out a spread sheet on the computer.

A fortnight later, Sister Lan emailed some shots. This showed that the exterior was already being rendered.



12 March 2011. Render being flung up in stages.



12 March 2011. Detail of roof beams and scaffold.



12 March 2011. Progress in rendering.

In Canberra, I stayed in touch with my long-term Vietnamese friend Long. I had tutored him in the volunteer English language program for migrants, when Long was still in high school, living at the Buddhist temple in Canberra and working long hours in the kitchen to earn his keep. Long now advised me not to neglect my income-earning work at home. Then he organised my plane flights, so I could visit the convent and see the project.

I phoned my client, the vicar-general of Vinh Diocese. He had pulled back direct involvement and sounded happy for the project to be managed at the local level. Basically all the news was good. The sisters and Vietnamese workers had come through with a good product.

There was less luck in the idea of getting visitors out to Australia. A few emails on the subject of a visit by three sisters to Australia had drawn a tentative response from the

convent. Through my interpreter, I phoned mother superior Hoa to discuss. It was truth time. I asked, "Would mother superior help the three sisters get their passports in order?" Sister Hoa explained, "Thank you for the offer. This is a big opportunity. But will not be sending young sisters. Too risky, because the convent is responsible to the families. After their vows we can look at this again."

I got the message. After their vows, sisters would be forever locked into the system. The convent would have effectively completed its contractual obligation to the girls' families.

On 15 March Ngoc sent engineering details for the remainder of the frontage and roof structure. By 23 March the roof framing and tiling was being done, as the following photos form Sister Huong show:



23 March roof framing.



23 March roof framing and tiling.



23rd March roof tiling.



Completion roof tiling.

By phone, I stayed in contact with Fr Phong in Saigon. I had left him getting prices for church furniture. Everyone wanted the work it seems, but did not seem enthusiastic about quoting a fixed price. Eventually, one reluctant quote came through. It seemed a bit high and Fr Phong suggested we get another. That was OK with me.

I sent one more pathetic email, pleading that additional funds above the budget should be diverted from building ornamentation and instead be used in projects to help the poor. I was not ever going to win that argument. On the contrary, the sisters asked for money to decorate the church ceiling at Sai Gon Lenten masses, such as at Chi Hoa Church of the Christian and succeeded in gathering together extra donations of 140 m VND. Perhaps they were right. Without a specific church building target, the donations may not have been made (we will never know).

Separately, I emailed enquires about costs for specific small projects: computers for the convent and orphanage; improvements to the convent kitchen; outdoor play and

equipment for the orphanage; indoor rehabilitation equipment for the orphanage.

Start of April. Sister Huong reported that the project to raise more chickens for the orphanage had hit disaster.

The first batch of chickens, purchased for raising to “eating size”, had to be hurriedly slaughtered. Before the bird ‘flu disease front reached the village, the whole first generation of 300 chickens was slaughtered and eaten or sold as meat (20kg to the orphanage, 5kg for the sisters and 4M VND income).

The second generation of 200 chickens had just been purchased. Everyone was hoping that these would grow to full size. Which in Vietnam is not very big. Apparently, even chicken raising is a risky business. Sister Huong finished her email with the customary “God bless you”. The sisters might need good judgement and luck for the chicken farm to do well. A bit of divine intervention might help the chickens as well. I responded with “God bless the chickens!”.

Sister Huong then sent her weekly photos of window framing and concrete vent detailing in progress. Flower shapes of concrete were precast on site and installed in above-window vents.



2 April window framing in progress.



2 April. Site cast concrete vents drying off and being fitted above windows.



2 April. Ridge tiling being completed.

In Canberra I approached a local Vietnamese shop owner to ask if they could give me a lesson or two on some Vietnamese words and pronunciation. I offered to pay for the lesson and told them of the orphanage trip. Their Australian-Vietnamese friend Linh gave me a lesson then refused payment, instead forcing an envelope of \$50 notes into my hand with the instruction “give this to the poor when you go to Vietnam.”

This was to be one of a series of similar events. I met with my friend Dennis, a former employer who had retired to Kangaloon. We had coffee and he pulled out his wallet and handed across cash for the orphanage. My family members offered contributions. It was other people’s money and I felt a great responsibility to the donors to spend wisely and account for the expenditure.

Then David, who I had met through my work at Goulburn, wanted to contribute. I suggested that he could travel to the orphanage and personally hand over a donation, as well as volunteer to run a couple of English conversation practice classes. A few weeks later he had booked a flight for later in the year.

By the second week of April, I was feeling fairly happy with the project. The building was progressing well - not a surprise given the hard working people on the site. Half a dozen people had pledged some kind of donation for me to spend on their behalf – provided a good use and fixed cost could be identified. I had managed to keep some sort of email/phone contact with my client Fr Vien in Vinh city, with Fr Phong in Saigon and the sisters at Huong Phuong. I started packing chocolates and money. I was ready to go back.