

**A DIARY
EXTENSIONS TO HUONG PHUONG VILLAGE ORPHANAGE
WEEK 6**

This progress report marks construction to the end of the sixth week of the Huong Phuong village orphanage extensions. There is also a travel diary, as I have been travelling this week, with periodic returns to visit the construction site.



Our clients. Huong, the beautiful orphanage girl at centre attends the government school. She has a skin aging condition.



Our clients – left to right sisters Hoa, Huong and Hien cooking in the convent kitchen.



The orphanage kitchen. Con meo and cook, a volunteer named Ha.



Left to right: Sr Hien, Amanda Gaunt, Sr Hanh, Sr Phu.



Children at the government school showing their gift of 20,000 VND for each student, presented by the visiting Australian student volunteers, to help celebrate Tet holiday (Vietnamese New Year).

CONSTRUCTION PROGRESS

This week of the construction was taken up with:

- Verandah slab and bond beam - formwork and concrete pour.
- Upper floor columns - steel, formwork and concrete pour.

All building materials are moved up in stages. So when the mortar is mixed at ground level it is flung up by shovel to the first scaffold platform. Then flung again from the first to the second platform. Then thrown up by shovel into the column formwork. Same with bricks. All very labour intensive but surprisingly fast.

Otherwise, mortar is winched up in a bucket for loading onto a wheelbarrow.

Photographs below show the progress of works.















CURRENT CONTRACT & BUDGET

During the week I discussed the projected building budget of the orphanage chapel with the vicar-general Fr Vien. He indicated that he has plans for future expansion of the site into a complex that includes educational buildings for students and/or seminarians. Hence the prominent building size and larger budget (exceeding the original \$52,000 donation from a private donor affiliated with St Aloysius College).

Rationale for larger building size and building budget is that it is part of local “culture” that a chapel should be at least as tall as its neighbouring 2-storey orphanage building. I was unconvinced. I have now visited a number of attractive, single-storey churches and chapels in Vietnam.

This chapel, which apart from its front elevation is basically a copy of local concrete churches within 10km radius of Huong Phuong village, could have had any of wide range of designs. Past experience suggests that every client considers themselves to be somewhat of a building design expert. This client is also like my other previous church clients: wanting as much as possible and not too concerned about budget (that is, until “the shit hits the fan”, which might be fairly soon).

Through my interpreter, Tien, I had a bit of a discussion with the builder about NOT adding extra cost items into the job at this stage. I am not sure that he quite accepted or agreed with the suggestion.

ORPHANAGE CHAPEL INTERIOR

During the previous week I had met with Hoc, who runs a local woodcarving workshop. He brings young men, who have trained in woodcarving at Hanoi, to the local province.

Hoc invited us for dinner with Tien and Sr Huong (who is handling the orphanage project for the sisters) to further discuss the interior. I had already indicated to Sr Huong that an interior of individually dedicated locally carved furniture would be attractive for donors. Furniture that showcases traditional Vietnamese designs and crafts would be of greater interest than other options. Small stone plaques (of the type made for local tombs) could note names of individual donors.

Church furniture was discussed with the sisters and I toured some churches, in particular the monastery at Hue, to view examples of church furnishings. We also selected images of European examples to show the sisters.



Entrance to Thien An monastery and the monk who showed us around.

The visit to Thien An (Heavenly Peace) monastery at Hue was guided by an elderly monk who took us through the monk’s chapel (upper level) and the church (lower level). He explained things to us in a mix of French, English and Vietnamese.

As an aside, over the last few days I have found people trying a lot of French and

Russian on me. My Russian only consists of half a dozen phrases but the school-level French has had a good workout. There is about the same amount of Russian and French spoken as English in Ba don and nearby villages.

The buildings, landscaping and furnishings at the monastery were of great interest to me. They appear to be native Vietnamese in style and are inspirational examples for the orphanage chapel.



Thien An monastery at Hue.

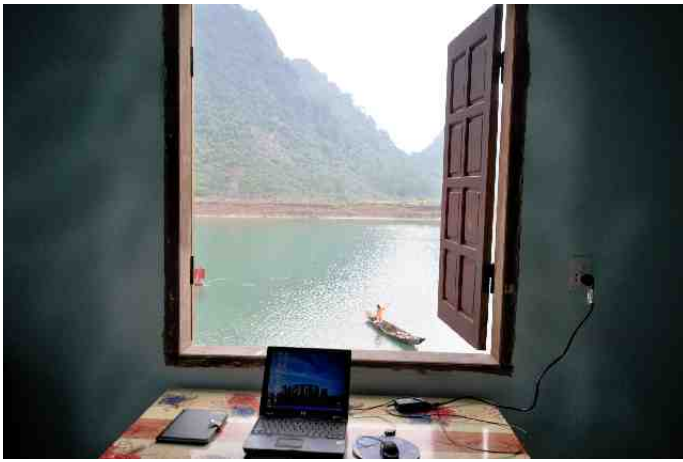
By contrast, church styles and furnishings at Saigon and Quang Binh appear to have more Western cultural imports, put together in an eclectic mishmash. There seems to have been no grounding, no absorption, of the cultural meanings and design concepts embodied in the long history of European buildings. Ideals such as modernist restraint and Renaissance balance and symmetry are less important than height, colour and ornamentation.

VISIT TO HA LOI

The monastic community's main local fund-raising operation for the orphanage is the extraction, treatment, bottling and supply of bottles of "Halowa" (acronym of "Ha Loi" and "water") of spring water.

This is all done at the sisters' hostel at Ha Loi, a small village on the river. The village services tourism to the spectacular Phuong Ngia river caves. Villagers supplement their income in the winter season with fishing and farming. This provides a diversified economy, much more prosperous than at Huong Phuong, where the only job is farming.

Ha Loi and Phuong Ngia are on a river that emerges from the steep limestone mountains as a natural spring as pure blue water. These are locations renowned their spectacular beauty. A fitting source for the monastic community's purified water.



The view from my "office" window at Ha Loi.



Pure blue water near the spring fed source of the river.



Hole-in-the-mountain entrance into the river caves of Phuong Ngia.



Mooring spot for barges, deep underground in the river caves.



Illuminated limestone formations in the caves.



A large illuminated chamber in one of the caves.

The founder of the water purifying plant, Fr Binh and operator of the water works, Sr Thanh, gave us a tour of the operation.

The sisters run a hostel and a bore at the property provides the source. By local measures, it is a deep well (30m). Hardly an artesian bore, but would draw sand filtered water from below the river.

Water is pumped into a roof tank from the bore then gravity fed into a fully fabricated and semi-automated stainless steel filtering plant.



Water purifying plant at Ha Loi.

First the water is made soft by having dissolved mineral salts filtered out. The mineral-rich residue water is pumped into cylinders for disposal. Then the water goes through filter cylinders that are cleaned weekly.



Cylinders with water softener.



Brine residue goes into tanks for disposal.

The purified water is stored in two 2000 litre stainless steel tanks, so that supply is not interrupted if there is a power cut.



Sisters Hai, Dao, Duong at storage tanks.

The large hard plastic re-usable bottles that the water is sold in are then filled at a filling machine, which passes the water through a UV light as a final clean. The same UV light technology is used to prepare septic tank water for garden spraying in Australia. Once a month, a water sample is sent to Dong Hoi for testing (presumably an ecoli count and test for heavy metal content).



Sr Dao at filling machine.

The reusable water bottles are scrubbed clean, and hand washed with filtered water. Seals made of paper stickers and shrink wrap plastic (to mark that the water bottle has not been tampered with) are scrubbed off.

Bottles are then washed in the bottle washer.



Bottle washer.

After filling, the bottles are slid along a stainless steel conveyor belt into a truck for distant deliveries, or onto a cart pulled by the sisters to the village.



Conveyor belt to truck.



Delivery in the village by hand cart.

The fabrication company plaque for the equipment is Water Maxx. It is claimed to be made with “American technology”, proven by stick-on US flags and an engraved manufacturer’s name plate claiming US origin. A lot of Vietnamese products have these sorts of stickers, to give the product a foreign import appearance. In fact the company is Vietnamese with a shop in Saigon. Stainless steel work in Vietnam is brilliant. The basic plant, which had cost around \$8,000A to purchase, would probably cost 10 times that amount if manufactured in a western country such as the US.



Water Maxx plaque and "American technology" stickers.

QUAN BINH'S HEARTLAND OF LOCAL RELIGION

The deeply religious and poor farming community at Huong Phuong was an early area of French missionary activity, with a local three-century old monastic tradition. It is a pilgrimage centre, as the convent chapel contains the relics of the local saint, St Vincente (Nguyen Thi Diem). It has been exporting seminarians, priests, novices and nuns out to other areas of Quang Binh province and elsewhere in Vietnam.

The local martyr provides an important focus of belief. The martyr's remains are held in the altar of the convent chapel, clearly defining the space as a sacred site. A story board outside the chapel explains the story of the martyr to villagers and pilgrims.



Thanh (Saint) Vincente Nguyen Thoi Diem. Canonised 27.05.1900.



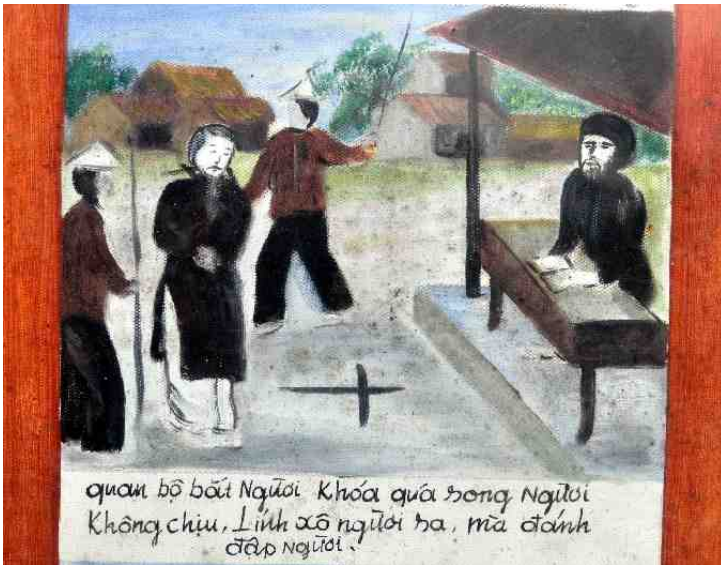
As a young man, Diem studied very hard to educate himself.



He was arrested on a sand hill at Dan Sa village (about 10km from Huong Phuong), 27.07.1838.



He was taken to Dong Hoi town. The soldiers had to carry him because he was too old and sick to walk the distance.



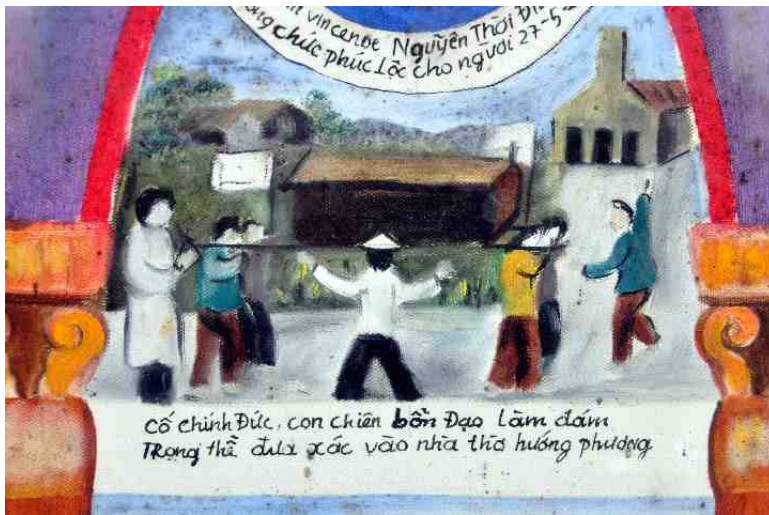
He was handcuffed. He maintained his innocence. He refused to give up the names of priests. He was beaten by officials.



He prayed on route to his place of execution.



He was executed by strangulation at Dong Hoi in 24.11.1838.



A local priest named Duc brought his body back for burial at Huong Phuong.

The Christian church in Vietnam is a “young” church. After a long period of banning by the government (since the French occupation in the 1940s and 1950s) some restrictions have been lifted.

As a result, the Christian minority in Vietnam (possibly 7%) has recently spread out from strongly religious communities such as Huong Phuong village and surrounding villages. Priests and sisters in Vietnam are young. Apart from a very small number of old priests and nuns, some have trained or entered the novitiate after 1988 and most have begun training in the last 6 years.

This sudden efflorescence (as far as I can gauge) is driven by the usual engines of religious devotion: endemic poverty, small community solidarity, tradition and government repression.

Having mentioned government repression, it is also notable that there has been some relaxation of government restrictions for training of nuns and priests. There is slow but increasingly government recognition of the church’s works for the poor. There is an attempt to gain support for works to the poor by promotion. At times, I have noticed with discomfort the exploitative use of photographs of the suffering to promote charitable institutions. Orphanages seem to function at several levels. At one level, they help a selected number of poor people. At another level, they are a promotional flagship for the church.

Village networks are important. Typically, the local priest in Ha Loi has brought out sisters from his home village (near Huong Phuong) to operate the water purification works and run the hostel. This kind of “chain migration” through networks of village community and family seems to be typical. Most sisters and seminarians seem to have an uncle or aunt in religious life. Family and relatives form widespread networks here.

Many priests, seminarians, nuns and novices rely on having other family members in the church. Support for decisions and favours, education and other advantages flow from having an aunt who is a nun in the same convent, or an uncle who is a priest. The church seems to be a sort of “family business”.

Tien, my main interpreter, is a seminarian. His uncle is my client and the vicar-general of the diocese. His uncle’s brother has completed medicine. Another uncle is an older seminarian at the local parish. Presumably, other relatives will get a helping hand when most needed. This might be kind advice, a good reference, or support for an administrative decision.

Sister Tuyen, (my second interpreter) is in the same convent as her aunt. Her father is a devout member of the parish council. Everyone knows this and presumably will give Tuyen a bit of latitude. Both Tien and Tuyen are devout and serious about their vocations. Because of family support, they can probably afford to take an enlightened view of the local church.

By contrast, Sister Huong (manager of the novices at the convent) is totally isolated, without any relatives in the church to lend support. She is highly intelligent and capable, and has to rely on further developing these gifts. She has to be cautious in decisions and needs to refer anything that has a wiff of controversy up the chain of command, just to cover her back. She is totally isolated. She relies on the mateship of a few same age nuns. Perhaps they sympathise with her situation and will step in to defend her when the time is right.

Relations between religious minorities and the government seem to vary greatly from one area to another. Around Huong Phuong, most of the population are Christians. Local government officials who may identify as non-Christian still grew up in the same community, attending the same schools, as local religious people. They know each other and hopefully have a measure of mutual respect.

Elsewhere, if religious minorities are smaller (as at Ha Loi where Christians comprise only half the village population) the officials may be less cooperative.

With a long history of French missionary colonisation and carpet bombing of some areas such as Phuong Ngia by the Americans during the Vietnam War, it is hardly surprising that religious minorities might be regarded with suspicion.

Priests' competition with officials for status is a significant danger to the future of this young church. Many people in Vietnam are poor. People in Vietnam are very conscious of status. While the nuns proclaim a vow of poverty and travel on foot or scooter, priests drive about in black cars. Black is a "high status" colour for a car. Priests tend to live in larger houses than the sisters. There are often showpiece hospitality rooms (usually connecting to a small, cluttered private space, with a curtained off bed and personal belongings). Often a housekeeper, a nun and a couple of house-boys live in with the priest to "help the parish". At times they behave as if they were the priest's personal servants.

Such an artificially maintained caste system is potentially more dangerous to the church than any other aspect of church organisation. The lowered rank of common people, women and the disabled denies just about every recent social reform in the west. It might also be against Christ's teaching that "the first shall be last and the last shall be first".

Denial of an equal status for women could particularly hurt the local church in the future. We have already lived this future in the west, where denial of the right of women to make their own choices has damaged the church. The invention of effective contraception in the 1960s; attempts by the Vatican to ban the use of this technology and the exclusion of women from priesthood has severely depleted the church in western countries.

There is a good news story here. Everywhere in the villages there are new houses being built. Vietnam is a developing country, with areas of expanding prosperity around the cities and tourism centres. The Vietnamese people are the strength of the country. They do not hold a grudge and have the ability to endure if required and move on.

After seeing how these wonderful people work and have a good time, I am hopeful for the future of Vietnam and would like to remain a friend of these people.

ROOF RAISING PARTY

A small party was hosted by the sisters to celebrate commencement of the roof.

Work accelerated in the lead up to the Tet holiday (Vietnamese Lunar New Year). Once the holiday begins most people in Vietnam knock off work for a week and travel to their home villages to spend time with family. The building industry shut down period is short – only from 29th January to 8th February – but will cut into my attendance time on the site.

To mark the slab pour commencing construction of the roof, the sisters at the orphanage prepared a celebratory lunch for the workers. As at Christmas, it was a great privilege to be invited and to attend. Afterwards, the workers warmed themselves around a small fire in the camp kitchen and chatted.



Roof raising party



Sau, the foreman, shows how to drink rice vodka.



Workers warming by the fire after lunch.