MONASTIC LIFE COMPARED WITH LIFE OUTSIDE

Monastic life is not such a bad lifestyle – when you compare it to life of local farmers.

The sisters at the Huong Phuong convent come from local farming families. Life and death on the farm is a familiar experience. So it was a routine event when in the morning a pig was dragged out, squealing loudly in protest, to be tied to a timber frame and have its throat cut. The other farm slaughter method (probably more humane but locally regarded as "cruel") is to knock the pig unconscious with a club before cutting its throat. At the moment of death, the pig ceases to be *con lon* (live, or walking, pig) and becomes *tit lon* (eating pig). A bit like the idea of transubstantiation.

First the pig was weighed. It was then tightly tied to a wooden frame, so it would not move about, and washed. This, as far as I could see, was the only time that the pig was upset. The slaughterer felt for the artery and then inserted a knife, plying it to keep the artery open and direct the blood into a plastic wash bowl.

Sister Sen was waiting at the door. Both she and the slaughterer gathered a small rice bowl each of the first, hot blood. They then eagerly drank it. Amongst some people in the village there is a belief that this fresh blood will help the sick or anaemic. No point in trying to point out to people who believe in sympathetic magic that uncooked blood is unsafe to drink.

The pig showed no sign of being upset when its artery was being punctured, or when it was bled. It lapsed into unconsciousness and died within a minute or so. The carcass was carried to a wooden slab and washed with boiling water for the bristles to be scraped by knife.

Before slaughter, the pig is strapped to a wooden frame and weighed.

The artery is felt by hand and a long blade lined up for puncture.

The puncture is made and blood guided into a plastic wash bowl. The first blood is gathered into a rice bowl.

Sister Sen and the slaughterer quickly season and drink a rice bowl of the first blood.

Blood drainage is maintained by levering the knife to keep the arterial puncture open.

The artery is opened by hand to drain the last of the blood from the dead pig.

The pig is carried across to a wooden frame.

Boiling water loosens the bristles for scraping.

A little while later before breakfast I called into the kitchen where sisters had finished butchering the pig. Its body was carved up and stacked in a pyramid on a wooden slab on the kitchen floor. Its severed head greeted me from the kitchen sink. Organs and intestines were tied with plastic string and boiled in a cauldron. Slabs of fatty meat were roasted over the fire, then washed and cut up for frying or other cooking. On another occasion, a plastic wash bowl with the blood and organs was delivered to the orphanage.

That evening, as I sat down to eat pieces of the pig cooked in a special sauce normally used for dog meat (*ngon* – “delicious”), I had more respect for both the pig - that had its life given up for that meal - as well as the sisters.

The livestock handler bagging meat.

Sisters cutting up the pig.

Sr Ha (rear)) roasting meat over the fire. It is then washed, sliced and cooked in a rich sauce. Another young sister is tying organs and intestines with plastic string for boiling.

The intestines is tied into lengths and boiled in a pot.

A series of lunches were then hosted by the sisters over the next few days. First there was a worker's lunch for the orphanage site. Second, there was a lunch for some 20 poor and sick folk from the village. Third, there was a big meal to welcome the sisters and chaplain converging from their outstations to the convent for a day, to meet and greet and return.

So, when sister Hien (the kitchen boss) came back from Ba don market with some big chickens, I was hardly surprised. Most were alive, but at least one had its neck rung, presumably for being too active to carry on the motor bike. A short time later, I was eating village free range chicken (called "walking chicken" here). Very delicious – ngon lam.

The basic level of education in a developing country brings unexpected side-effects. During our visit to Ha Loi a big bowl of raw goat's blood (tiet canh – blood soup) was generously delivered to the table by the café owners next door (I considered it inadequate compensation for the ugly sound of karaoke that we had been cruelly subjected to the whole previous night). This seems to be some set of folk beliefs relating to goats, their meat and body parts meat products. At the café I saw jars of what appeared to be goat or bear body parts pickled for customers. My query regarding the use of the pickles was brushed off, as if folk belief in magic might be a slight embarrassment or "not for foreigners".

At Ha Loi we were treated with both goat meat and "forest animal" (presumably monkey). Both were regarded as "special" foods. It was explained that forest meat comes from the National Park, but that people are hungry and have to hunt in the forest to survive. I found the goat meat unremarkable, except for a slightly "gamey" taste.

Left to right, Sisters Hoa, Vinh and ? sitting down to a very healthy meal, except for the very dubious inclusion of tiet canh (raw goat blood), at centre.

While sister Vinh happily tucked into ladle fulls of raw blood, I advised young sister Hoa (who is my daughter's age) that she did not need to eat it: uncooked blood might contain a range of intestinal parasites. Despite the advice, Sr Hoa exercised her freedom. She had a good feed from the blood bowl, with a violent vomit over the toilet bowl a short time later. A basic general awareness of biology may have dissuaded the sisters from ingesting uncooked bodily fluids.

Belief in sympathetic magic and folk remedies is widespread. Rare or powerful creatures soaked in rice vodka are believed to have therapeutic effect. At Thien An monastery we saw beautifully prepared snake spirit containing 3 different kinds of snake. A cobra biting a green tree snake with one or two snakes curled up in the bottom of the bottle. There was a spirit bottle with a special combination of snake and scorpion. Seahorse and gecko are another powerful combination.

Treatment with placebos and other forms of sympathetic magic seems to me to be a side effect of low education. But one could respect it as local religion and village culture.

Locally, sympathetic magic spreads seamlessly into Christian veneration. Alongside the snake bottles are the crucifixes, saint statues and other religious objects for sale at Thien An monastery. At La Vang, a row of concrete angels dispense water from the healing spring to pilgrims.

Villagers bring items such as religious posters and calendars to the priest for blessing. When we brought back a carved wooden statue of Mary of La Vang for the sisters I was asked by a seminarian if it had been blessed by the priest. I think the basic idea was that it would not "work" properly as an object of veneration until it had been blessed. At the time, I said "OK, I'll bless it for you, if you like". I recanted later and decided to respect local belief. It was a privilege to attend a mass at the local La Vang shrine, at which the statue was blessed.

Snake spirit medicine at Thien An monastery.

Crucifixes, saint's statues and spirit bottle with cobra and scorpion all play a therapeutic role.

An angel spurts water at La Vang.

The row of concrete angels dispensing "miraculous water" at La Vang.

Sympathetic magic and healing with placebos also runs seamlessly into "western" medicine. Because of low general education, villagers find it hard to discern placebos from medicines and come to places such as the convent or local herbalist for help.

When a flu-like virus swept through the monastic community I visited a couple of the sisters who had been moved to the convent's treatment room.

Three girls were lying on beds heaped with blankets. The "doctor" (actually a sister who had previous partial training as a nurse's aide) was happily jabbing wrists and forearms. Sisters were intravenously being connected to a vitamin compound or being re-hydrated. The whole scene reminded me of a local hospital incident in which a psychiatric patient, posing as a doctor, went into the hospital emergency ward and started cannulating (jabbing people for intravenous fluids) everyone.

Three girls with a viral infection put on drips.

I made suggestions such as, “Why don’t people who want to take vitamins B and C (contents of the vitamin infusion) simply swallow a tablet? Why don’t people who are a bit dehydrated first be given sips of filtered water mixed with electrolyte? How about just NOT poking them in the veins, unless you have a medical reason?

The idea, as far as I could discern, was that intravenous delivery (which was being used for everything, vitamins, antibiotics, water etc) is perceived (presumably by the “doctor” as well as by her clients) as more “powerful” medicine. Maybe she is right. The placebo effect of being painfully jabbed in the veins to be fed “medicines” might be just the ticket. (Unless you are really sick). In any case, about half of the medicines in the medicine cabinet appear to be for injection.

Half the medicines in the cabinet are for intravenous injection.

I also offered to buy a small TV or radio for the sick bay, so that sisters could have a distraction from their misery and help cheer themselves. I was told, “Entertainment might distract sisters from their work. Healthy sisters might visit the infirmary to be

entertained".

Sister Hoa was looking worse than before and her health does not seen to be strong. I gave her my spare course of broad spectrum antibiotic (Amoxicillin). A couple of days later she felt better and was advised by the "doctor"to stop the course of antibiotics (not a good idea). I got the feeling that the medication was being stopped because I had supplied it. I got some medical advice from Canberra by email and pleaded with her to finish the course.

Visiting the convent for a few days was a sister who had commenced university medical training. But the convent "doctor" was well installed and happy in her practice. I feared she may not take kindly to threats to her absolute authority in the sick room.

Next morning I asked for a quarter of an hour of the sisters' time to "talk about medicine". I said that there are three kinds of medicine: placebos, ones that deal ease symptoms and the third that deal with underlying cause. I went through instructions for use of paracetamol and amoxicillin (both available at the local market). During the talk the convent "doctor" went off and disappeared. I sent sisters after her but she could not be found. She reappeared at the end of talk, happily feeding a placebo to a baby, to prove her qualifications.

The flu and chest/throat infection was spreading through the convent. I heard by email that both David (the student group leader) and my wife Amanda were now sick with it in Australia. I went to Ba don market and cleaned out the pharmacy of its stocks of amoxicillin and paracetamol, buying a thousand capsules of each.

The next day I decided to negotiate with the shaman and invited a young doctor (home for Tet holiday from Saigon) to visit. He complemented them on the treatment room and gently sat them down. He explained that the two worst village problems were appendicitis and respiratory infection, and how to recognise these conditions. He then went on to mention that intravenous medicines are a last resort. He then went on to diagnose and recommend treatment for a visiting girl with a respiratory infection. This time, the message seemed to partially sink in. Although young sister seemed more concerned about correct dosage of her stocks of (mainly placebo) baby cough medicine.

A photo of what I first thought must be Florence Nightingale hangs on the wall. An email from my friend Dennis McManus said "It doesn't look like her, clothes are wrong, hair is wrong (she always had her hair parted in the centre) and she is smiling - not possible before the use of greater shutter speeds. But as Poirot would say, If it's not Florence who is it?" It turned out to be Therese of Lisieux, who died of consumption at the age of 24. She was made a Catholic saint for her example of acceptance of suffering and slow death. I did not find that encouraging. I hope not to be treated by "nurse ratchet". I wish she would read the instructions on the packets.

I was not totally swayed by the presence of Therese de Lisieux on the wall.

Another girl gets a pint of intravenous water, instead of having a drink.

The shaman effect spreads across local priests, nurses and anyone who might be privileged with some knowledge (which might be called general knowledge in the west). When giving some cream to the local café owner for an ugly swelling on her face, I tried, unsuccessfully, to explain, “I am not a medical doctor. The swelling could be allergic, or bacterial or fungal. The cream can only deal with one of the three possible causes.” The cream worked. I could now set up as the local shaman.

For the new generation (born post 1985) of sisters, monastic life offers a level of protection, security and educational opportunity that is in stark contrast to life on the family farm.

I was invited by sister Loi to visit her parents. Her parents are in poor health and live in a basic thatched house. It contains a small sitting area, kitchen area, and two curtained beds for husband and wife. Stitched rice bags line the earthen floor.

Sr Loi with parents at their hut entrance. Her mother has an untreated eye infection which has caused partial blindness.

Sr Loi's parents' hut showing the extent of their garden plot. They are too frail to work farm fields.

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Sr Loi's mother sits at the kitchen area of the earthen floor, lined with bags.

Sr Loi helps her father prepare hospitality tea.

Sr Loi's father at his curtained sleeping area beside the table/family altar.

Typical family altar, at Sr Loi's parents' hut.

Distant past or cumulative long-term problems do not figure in local thinking. Past history, wars and sufferings are vague. Future effects are also not considered. These include household dumping in rivers, accumulation of discarded asbestos and carcinogenic fumes from burning plastic household rubbish (plastics). The type of education (Confucian rather than western liberal) keeps general knowledge of the outside world at a low level. Westerners might say it keeps the standard of education at a low level. But for a developing country, Vietnam probably has a reasonable level of general literacy and education.

For many girls from large farming families of Quang Binh, a convent is the only option of escape from poverty. Honour flows to the family. They get the best seat at every party. It is easy to forget the difference that this additional status can bring. Status is very important in this society.

Sister Loi's parents never went to school. She is the only one of the 7 children to receive a university education. At the convent, sister Loi is protected, further trained, kept in guaranteed employment, fed three meals a day, gets housing and basic medical advice.

Her sister, of similar age, already supports four children and will struggle to keep them all educated, housed and fed. Sister Loi has had to give up a lot, but will have the security of monastic life in exchange.

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Sr Loi's siblings have many undernourished children. The boy at right is 11 years old.

Sister Lua's mother died when she was young. Her father fell off his bicycle a year or so ago and has a broken collar bone that was not properly set. He now cannot work the fields and relies on his son, who lives in a sleep out, for additional support.

During the 2010 flood her father climbed the ladder and lived in a small loft, cluttered with farm junk, until the waters subsided three days later.

Like the other sisters of the convent of her generation (born after 1985), she is the only one of her siblings to ever go to university. Her graduation photo has a proud place on the wall.

Sr Lua with her father.

Amanda Gaunt visits the hospitality room at Lua's father's house.

Sr Lua's graduation photo.

Ladder to loft area where Sr Lua's father lived during the floods. "Khong co gi", I was told: "No problem!"

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I said to a young visiting priest that the sisters are beautiful. He seemed to be pretty uncomfortable with the idea that the nuns, particularly the ones that aren't young anymore, might be beautiful, and asked me "What do you feel when you see them?" I said, "I feel happy". His response was, "They are beautiful because they have the spirit of God in them". This seemed to be a denial of the real quality of these wonderful people. The sisters are real people with real difficulties such as exhaustion, doubts, stress headaches and bouts of depression. But their faith is lived. I have had the great privilege of witnessing these amazing women lifting each other up by generous service, hard work, conversation and humour.

I have watched how Sr Hien and Sr Ha care for the 100 year old woman at the orphanage. They laugh with her, humour her and put snacks into her pockets, so she would not go hungry. When she wanders off the convent they bring her back and warm her with noodle soup (*mi tom*) by the fire. Sr Hien regularly takes her to the clean bathroom attached to main dining room to gently give her a sponge bath and massage.

Sr Hien gently massages and sponge bathes the 100 year old woman at the convent. An act of love.

Similarly, I visited Hien's 103 year old grandmother who spends the day propped up in bed. Hien asks her "Do you remember me?", and jokes with her. These are beautiful expressions of love.

Sr Hien visits her 103 year old grandmother: "Do you remember me? I am Hien, your granddaughter."

When sisters Huong and Lan brought a little unwanted boy from a broken family back to the convent, they made him completely at home. They put all their other activities to one side and sang songs with the boy, playing with him, joking with him and giving him small treats.

As the kitchen boss, Sister Hien shows her love by feeding those around her at table, always with a bit of clowning around. She is not intimidated by priests. One evening she phoned the parish priest and said, "How long is the sermon going to be tomorrow? Peter here has been asking and says he'll go if the sermon is short." (I didn't go that time, because he wouldn't shorten the sermon).

Sr Hien visits parents at her brother's house for Tet holiday. A bit embarrassed by my request for a relaxed, informal pose for the photo.

Sr Hien's parents are frail. Her father lives beside the river and works as a fisherman. Her grandmother is 103 years old and looks every bit her age. I visited her propped up in the bed and inspected her coffin, which has been prepared and is kept in her room, suspended from the ceiling.

103 year old grandmother visited by family. Her coffin has been made ready. It is suspended from the

ceiling in the bedroom corner, above flood level.

Typically of the pre-1985 generation, Sr Hien attended the village school but had to work at the family farm rather than continue with tertiary education. Even the younger sisters with the local university education struggle a bit with computers and seem to have a localised world view.

Sr Hien's sister and a few brothers live in one of the typical Thai temple style houses of the province. Adults and children are happy. Furniture is sparse, i.e. there is no furniture except for beds in the bed rooms. Indicative of the local area are her brother's personal possessions, which are an electric keyboard for church music and a notebook computer.

Sr Hien at the convent with Amanda Gaunt.

Left to right in the hospitality room: Hien's sister, Hien, her brother with children.

Hien's brother with his children.

Unlike most family farms the monastic community has a wide range of small cottage industries. These which help diversify the monastic economy and provide variety of work for the sisters. Communion host is made in a little room just behind the church sanctuary. This is the bread that is used in the Christian ceremony (the mass) that is a ritualised re-enactment of Jesus' last supper prior to crucifixion. Depending on one's doctrinal bent, the bread symbolises the sacrificed body of Christ (for Protestants) or is the "actual" body of Christ (for Catholics).

Communion host production room.

Pouring the unleavened wheat bread flour batter.

Pressing the “waffle” iron down.

The fragile, thin wafer is gently prised from the hotplate.

Young sister seems proud of her clean and intact set of communion wafers, ready for blessing and ritual use.

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