

Vietnam visit

Part 1

Arrival

I have written a 'report' or diary of other 'first trips' I've done to countries like PNG, the Philippines, Japan, South Africa, Egypt, Israel and some European countries. Although this visit is only to a confined part of the southern city of Saigon (referred to by government officials as Ho Chi Minh) it will be a 'taste' of the country. My reason for visiting is to help my understanding of the needs of Passionist Formation here and how we might best support our candidates.

I left Melbourne on Vietnam Airlines at 11.30am November 10th, 2015, having been warned to arrive three hours early because many of the passengers will seem to be returning or visiting Vietnam with half of their household goods! I understood what was meant when I saw how many bags and boxes were being taken as part of people's luggage. The check in took 50 minutes, but immigration and screening was straight forward.

The flight took 8 hours and 45 minutes and was quite pleasant because it was only about 60% full (two spare seats beside me) and the flying time (middle of the day) was good. Vietnam is 4 hours behind Melbourne time so I arrived around 4.15pm (8.15pm Melbourne time). As we approached landing I changed to a window seat and saw that we flew through some very dense white cloud. Down below as we approached land, the alluvial nature of the landscape was obvious with so many bends in two main rivers that join the Saigon river which begins in Cambodia and runs for 230 kilometres, ending in Saigon port. As the plane flew lower the scene looked like one of those 'upside down rivers' (muddy coloured) such as the Yarra in Melbourne has sometimes been described.

My baggage was ready and off the carousel when I arrived to collect it and I went straight through immigration. I had previously procured a visa so there was no card to fill out and no questions to answer. I was met by Jeff Foale and (Joseph) Dien one of our theology students who undertook his novitiate in the Philippines. It was very quiet outside the airport and a warm 33 degrees.



Dien arranged for a taxi (they are not all genuine Jeff told me) and we set off for a short ride of maybe 10 kilometres.

Bikes...yikes! I have been told often how many motor bikes there are, but you have to see it to comprehend it! I hardly spotted a

bus that first afternoon; just one ten seater. I'm told while there are buses, they are not common. There is only one rail line which goes north to Hanoi and if you want to take the entire trip it will take 44 hours! The road rules are, well, by the look of it, a hope for survival! Bikes cut across traffic and even at times come directly in the same line as those going in the opposite direction.

It is a great example of how as often happens in nature, chaos creates its own sense of order in a way that no other system could. When one man with three quite young children on his bike cut right across the front of us, Jeff calmly said "he knows the car will stop or slow down for him".

The sheer volume of motor bikes and some push bikes that meet at roundabouts and somehow manage to get across suggest it's much easier work on a bike than in a car! We got on to a new freeway after three kilometres and as I'd noticed from the plane, there are very few cars but thousands and thousands of bikes. Curiously, the four lanes provided for cars could have been one lane, and the two side lanes for bikes (separated from the cars by a concrete wall) could have been six! We could not hear much noise from the traffic because the vehicle was air-conditioned, but there was some light tooting.



We turned off the main road into our street (No 36) which was lined by market stalls and pedestrians, all the way to our community residence (St Gabriel's) which is only a hundred and fifty metres from the Saigon river. We continued to the 'Valentine' hotel one street away.



Thomas an Indian Passionist who has been resident here for ten years kindly met me there. We just dropped my bags and walked back to the St Gabriel's residence around 5.20pm. The tall metal gate is permanently locked with a padlock, but once inside an attractive shrub lined path was revealed, that leads to the front door of a large two story house. Several

sets of footwear indicated that their owners were inside.

At present there are 17 men living here and Thanh and Truc will return in December to add two more for a while. There are three priests here (Jeff Foale, Thomas Anamattathil from India who has been here ten years and an Indonesian Passionist Jasmin who has only been here for four months. He is learning English and Vietnamese at the same time! Given that achievement it is not surprising to learn that he has a PhD! These men have small rooms upstairs on the second floor, along with eight professed students and two second year philosophers who will be the next to undertake English language studies and novitiate in Australia. Together, all of them share four rooms.

Six philosophy students share one room downstairs with three double bunks and six desks crowded with books and crammed next to each other. Another (Filipino) Passionist lives about seven kilometres away.

There is a large room that is set up twice a day for lunch (11.45am) and for dinner (7.00pm) and partially set up for 'get your own' breakfast at 6.00am. Between this room and the front door there is an artificial divide created by two cupboards, one of which holds liturgical items and the other bed linen and towels. Between this divide and the front door is a small sitting area with a number of chairs and a TV.



Tonight the timetable had been changed and we had Evening prayer and Mass at 6pm. The singing in Vietnamese was lovely. This was followed by a nourishing dinner cooked by three of the students. After dinner, Tom invited the community to 'coffee' at a nearby hotel, which from the fifth floor, had a great view and a very welcome breeze. From this vantage point we could see our own hotel, and a little way past, the land where preliminary work has begun for building our new 36 bed residence. More about that later. Obviously prices here even at hotels are minimal compared with Australia. Our dollar is worth 15,000 dong.

A cup of coffee is about A\$1. Tom and I returned to our rooms which are on the fourth floor of the hotel. The room is very comfortable and importantly, has air-con. I learned the next day that the name 'Valentine' is no accident, indicated by nearby advertising that includes a price for a two hourly rate! By the time I unpacked and checked emails it was about 10.00pm (2.00am Melbourne time) when I turned off the lights and I slept quite well until 5.30am.

Second day

I got up on Wednesday at 5.30am and spent until 8.00am on the computer. I then had a shower and headed over to the house and had breakfast. I could not find any cereal so I had two pieces of toast and an egg. The only tea is green tea, so I had that. After a while Tom arrived having just interviewed one of the students. We chatted for a while and Thomas A joined us and a little later so did Jeff who had returned from a walk; a pretty impressive effort for an 82 year old in the heat.

At 10.00am we headed across the road for a K & C Coffee, and after tasting that I decided it would be my last one while I am in Vietnam. Enough said! We sat in a quite attractive outdoor setting with a lot of shade, but it seems to be a place where some drug dealing and prostitution occurs. I don't expect to be heading back there.

Some things that I do expect to find in Asian cities are humidity, traffic noise, pollution and barking dogs, but at our residence and in the hotel none of these are a problem (there are ceiling fans) and I've only seen and heard a few dogs so far, mostly tied up or enclosed behind a fence.



The housing here is obviously extremely dense and not 'traditional' as I expected, but then having been colonized by the French and suffered the ravages of the American war, Saigon could look like any number of cities. Obviously every bit of land is precious and although not crammed in the same

way Japan is, most buildings have more than one story. I was struck by how narrow many buildings are and Jeff explained that at one time the King extracted a tax based on the width of buildings!

Jeff, Thomas A, Jasmin, Tom and I were picked up by a taxi at 2.30pm to head our other (new) house to be named St Vincent's, where Orven is in residence and where he will be joined next month by the six pre-philosophers. It is about seven kilometres (twenty minutes) from St Gabriel's. We met the owner, a lovely youngish woman who has been accepted for employment in Australia and is waiting to complete an English exam. She is a Catholic and very happy to rent the house to us. It is very modern and will be able to be adapted for our purposes. Perhaps (Fr) Jasmin will also live here. Tomorrow evening we will meet the pre-philosophers and see where they are currently living.

Like our other men at St Gabriel's, Orven has been given permission by the government only this month to live in the same house as the students. It has been a major disappointment for Passionist life and formation in Vietnam until now that 'foreigners' have not been allowed to live with our students.

Tom and I had a three hour meeting with the senior men about formation issues in Vietnam and we covered a lot of territory. It was really good to meet face to face. We agreed we need to meet again tomorrow. We thought it a good idea to have a meal together so we went to an outdoor restaurant that specialises in and serves goat and only goat. So that was first for me, which initially I was not keen about. Thomas A spoke to the owner and he said he could get some BBQ chicken from across the road. I said "Don't worry about it, I'll have the goat".



Five minutes later the delighted owner placed on the table five fried chicken feet. Luckily we were an international table and the chicken feet were eaten, but I had become a goat fan by then! The meal was very tasty but we were surprised that there was no rice served. We had a beer with a large block of ice placed inserted, and later replaced, in the glass. It was only a seven minute walk home afterwards and it wasn't long before I hit the sack around 10.00pm.

Third day

I woke early on Thursday and eventually got up at 5.20am and answered some emails. At 6.00am I walked down the stairs (four floors) and had to wake the young guy on the sofa clutching his teddy bear, to open the front door! I went for a two hour walk and although it was hot it was not oppressive.



How many bikes must there be? I read that for a population here in Saigon of 7 million people there are 4 million bikes and 1,300 are added every day. So by the time I leave next Tuesday, nine thousand more bikes will be on the road! It's not possible to imagine what it's like. This clip gives an idea. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k3tP0BkhCew>

Most riders wear thongs or sandals, and perhaps 60% have face masks. The driver might have a helmet, but often small children do not. Virtually none of the drivers or vendors I saw were wearing sunglasses. That surprised me because sunglasses make sense even to protect ones eyes from objects flying off the road. An entrepreneur could advertise on TV about the danger of small objects hitting your eye, and the damage the sun can do to your eyes. If you sold 5 million sunglasses for A1 profit each pair!



The bikes create a quiet din. I was surprised at one stage when a bike came across the road and up on to the footpath beside me. That bike was quickly followed by a couple of dozen more, heading the opposite way to the adjacent bike traffic. Throughout the morning walk that happened repeatedly.



11% of employed Vietnamese are informal street vendors. Many have stalls that jut out on to the footpath, so it can be a little hazardous. Sidewalk cafes line the road and bikes stop for breakfast (and other meals no doubt). Most of those I saw who stopped were men.

I had thought I might get to walk across 'the red bridge' which I had seen the previous day. I got underneath the access point but I could not go any further because there was no pedestrian crossing at the very busy roundabout. I waked left and searched for a few hundred metres and then turned back. I came across Jeff out for his walk. When I got back to the hotel I wrote up some of these events and headed over to the house where I had toast and green tea for breakfast and had a chat for a while with Thomas A and Jeff.



After lunch I returned to the hotel for a much needed 70 minute rest or 'horizontal meditation' as Kevin Hennessy calls it. Then at 2.45pm we headed off as we did yesterday for another three hour meeting with Tom and the four senior men here. This was again very profitable and covered a lot of issues where policy needs to be discussed and decided upon.

After the meeting we walked down to the Blessed Andre community where seven pre-philosophers and aspirants are living. I didn't see upstairs bit I imagine from the size of the house that they share two rooms. Perhaps, as in one of the professed rooms that two guys share at St Gabriel's, one uses a hammock instead of the double bunk.

These young guys had cooked a beautiful meal and they were very enthusiastic. They are engaged in various university or tech courses and learn English from Orven. It will be several years before they undertake novitiate. They will spend up to four years as aspirants and can then proceed to philosophy (three years) before novitiate. So it is a long formation programme, largely caused by the need to learn English to a satisfactory level.

By the end of next year (2016) there should be two Vietnamese priests (Thanh and Truc) and three other finally professed (Dien, Tue and Tuan) who may also by then be deacons. That will be a cause of great encouragement for the others and the beginning of a new era.

We made our way home by taxi to the hotel (and Jeff to the community) and I needed to close my eyes as soon as possible, and rest!

And morning came and evening came...and it was very good!

Part 2

In this second part I thought it might be helpful to share something of Passionist life here which began about twelve years ago and in that time and still now there has been adjustment and change, and amazing efforts made to house and feed an ever growing number of candidates. At the present time, all of the candidates share a room either with one, three or five others. At the Gabriel's' there is a large community of seventeen men of whom fourteen are students.

In late December they will be joined by the two newly ordained deacons. By July next year some of the present six novices will return to St Gabriel's to continue with theological studies.

For that reason a new residence will be built that can house a community of thirty-six. Preliminary work has begun and hopefully a successful weight test on Monday will lead to the installation of the piles that will serve as support for the six story building. The cost of land is surprisingly high and so it is unfortunate that we have not been able to afford to purchase extra external green space, and in the new building as is the case now, there will be a shortage of rooms for recreation and personal interviews.

Hopefully they will be able to afford to purchase some chairs for the dining room. Currently they use 5 or 6 blue stackable plastic chairs and a number of stools, that are put away after every meal, together with metal folding tables. They use the same kind of chairs at university – 2-3 hours sitting on something so uncomfortable can't assist study! The chapel chairs are a nice style but very uncomfortable.



The simplicity of the present house is admirable with basic and limited amenities for men mostly between 25-35. It will continue to be used for the aspirant and pre-philosophy students, and it will only be a five minute walk for them to the new house. As mentioned, the new house will have thirty-six bedrooms on six levels, including one underground level, where no doubt twenty or more bikes will be parked. The chapel will be on the top floor. This will make for remarkably improved facilities, suitable for modern demands.



The generous assistance of so many people, and most especially the annual preaching appeals in the USA has made funding possible to undertake this expensive task as well as the continue to provide for the daily living costs of so many candidates. We hope people will continue to support this endeavour in whatever ways they can.

The students at St Gabriel's rise each morning around 4.15am. They put the lights out in their rooms at 10.00pm, but some continue studying by lamp- light until 11.00pm. They have an hour's sleep or slightly more after lunch, but that still is not a lot of sleep. Classes are 8.00am-11.00am and if they have afternoon classes they are 2.00pm-5.00pm.



The community dresses simply and everyone eats simple meals, but all of the students I have met look healthy. There is a very happy and positive spirit among them which is extremely commendable among such a large group.

They make regular daily visits to the markets including evening visits when food prices are lower. The coming and going of bikes is a feature of morning life as the students head to four different colleges for their studies.

St Francis Shelter

On Saturday morning Tom, Jeff Foale and I visited 'The Francis Shelter' which is about an hour's drive from St Gabriel's. The Shelter is in Dong Noi Province. Thanh was born in this Province about an hour's journey further away), Bay (By) one of the philosophy students also came with us. He visits every weekend (staying over on Saturday nights) as his apostolate, and he has also spent two months there on pastoral placement. How can one describe the Shelter and then the experience? To start with, a look at this brief video will give you some idea of the Shelter, but I will try to combine what I saw with what I felt. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EJVmNAC6z3Y>



The Shelter was founded seventeen years ago by a former St John of God Brother, Bui Van Chau, to provide care for abandoned disabled children and adults. There are no employed staff. A few volunteers are full time and live in at the facility and those that we met are inspiring. Chau has spoken with Jeff to express his desire that the Passionists might take over the running of the Shelter. Of course there would need to be close examination of the legal and financial implications of running such an institute in a communist country with volunteer staff who may not have the required qualifications. Chau has upgraded and extended the facilities and Jeff says he is an amazing man.

Mr Chu Van Nham, (see the photo opposite) whom we met and who seems always to have a ready smile, acts as manager when Chau is away with his family in the US.



There appears to be a need for an upgrade to comply with some modern standards of WH&S and that together with other issues would make it an expensive operation, but what a wonderful service it provides.

In the video above the volunteers seem to be so happy displaying big smiles and that is exactly what we experienced today. They are modern day saints, working for the lowest of people with total dedication, care and joy. Pope Francis would be proud of them! A longer clip comprised mostly of pictures with no spoken words can be found at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1HFXLxMAimM>

Perhaps a good place to start is to recount something of Bay's experience. He said when first came he was scared, and especially he could not stand the stench when it came to washing some of the patients which is done in a bathroom with a hose like spray. Many of the patients need to wear nappies which have to be changed regularly, and he had to get used to doing that too. A good number of patients including very young children, are permanently restrained, tied hands and feet to their bed, except for when they are showered. This is to prevent them from causing harm to themselves. I did not take any photos and I don't think it is fair to their dignity to post photos of them here, even though that might help others to 'picture' what it is like. The video does show this.

Gradually Bay got used to the less pleasant side of things and now thinks little of it. He started to find he missed the patients when he went home and looked forward to seeing them the following week. It says a great deal about him that he has taken on this volunteering work as his regular pastoral experience and spent a prolonged period living on site and working there. Most, if not all of the Passionist students have visited and engaged with the patients, helping to feed them and spend time with them. They also hosted them last Christmas as St Gabriel's and that obviously involved a lot of extra volunteers to get them there.

Bui Truong Tho is seventy-two. He was found abandoned on the road after a motor accident. The Good Samaritan who 'found' him saved his life. He knew of the Shelter and brought him there and he has regained motor skills, but like many patients there, his memory or brain has been affected. In some cases, like his, the family would not know where he is. In most cases the family do not care and either wives, husbands, parents or children have abandoned them.

I noticed a man walking awkwardly up the stairs holding a cup of tea in one hand. He had suffered a stroke.

One of the permanent volunteers Nem, also noticed and she moved towards him, took the cup, held his arm and guided him safely up the stairs. With a beautiful smile she returned his cup to him.

Perhaps the saddest boy I saw was aged around seven. He is severely restrained and Bay told me that there is only one male volunteer who has formed such a bond with him that he will always receive food from him; it is not so easy for the other volunteers. For the others trying to feed him and when he is showered he kicks and bucks viciously and without the physical restraint he wears he would continually bash his head against his bed or the wall.

There is a girl aged five who was found abandoned after two days, She seems very happy, but she is an orphan. There are many teenage and young adults who cannot speak and some who cannot hear either. Many have suffered this kind of physical damage from motor bike accidents. One man is blind. Some have other physical disabilities. They are divided into separate rooms, much like you could imagine as a hospital ward. Young female children; young male children; older teenagers and young adult males, and in a separate room, females of a similar age.

In another room there are adult males who have serious disabilities and they are locked in with a padlock cell door, when there is no one visiting or assisting them. They could be a danger to themselves and possibly to others if they leave their room. There is another group of men (perhaps some women too but I did not see them) who suffer from a disability such as the man with a stroke, who are able to interact with other patients and assist to some extent as co-volunteers.

There is a room with adult females, one of whom has hydrocephalus, a condition where fluid builds up in the skull and causes the brain to swell. I could not help but recall how my father as a St Vincent de Paul member visited a hospital a few short weeks before my bother Paul was born.

He experienced for the first time a ward of young children suffering from hydrocephalus and learned of their normal fate. Little was he to know that Paul would be born with this condition from which he mysteriously or miraculously as we believed, was cured.

A group of volunteers arrived in time to begin feeding the children first, and later (after we left) the adults. There were nine volunteers in one room feeding children and others outside cooking and preparing food. One of these is a young man who has just finished university but is working fulltime as a volunteer. I could only feel overwhelming gratitude that there are people willing to undertake such caring ministry to 'les miserables'.

Bay told us that there are eighty-seven patients. We saw some photos of a woman who had been a patient and who died recently. One photo shows her baby girl sitting on her bed and another on her grave – smiling. One stunning photo is of Chau, the founder carrying a naked man across his body in an accidental pieta pose. The man had extreme lower back bed sores and one leg had been amputated. Chau was carrying him from the shower. A modern post Calvary Passion scene.

At one stage, Tom, sitting nearby muttered three or four times, "Oh my goodness". That captured for me the profound reality of the Francis Shelter. It is a mixture of pain, horror, sorrow, shamefulness, compassion, generosity and joy. It can seem overwhelming but it isn't, as Bay discovered. I felt keenly that I did not want to treat these people as if they were in a sideshow and I was there just to observe. These are true human beings, robbed of their dignity and worth without access to mental health treatment and medicine, who are having that dignity restored by the tender care they receive.

Seeing a small child tied to a bed, knowing his or her life will always be like that is confronting. There is no answer and not really even a question. What there is or was in me was a profound appreciation for the women and men who devote themselves to adults and children who have been abandoned by others to a degree that I have never done. Hopefully, in some way I can support this generous ministry and hopefully our Passionist students will continue to support those who live and work at the Francis shelter. As Bay said, "*you have to do this as well as spend time in the chapel*".



This photo is typical of the joy we witnessed

Commitment

When he suggested to the Passionist General at the time that perhaps it was time to make a foundation in Vietnam, **Jeff Foale** did not expect that he would be that founder. That story is better written elsewhere and more accurately recorded that I could assure. Jeff has served here with some men who have returned to other ministries and at age 82, his energy for and commitment to Passionist life in Vietnam is unflagging. I was suggesting that back when he was 28 and appointed to an infant mission in Papua New Guinea, he was a lot fitter and healthier than now when he is undertaking a similar task.

He disagreed, and said his health then was poor and his energy levels low, caused by a number of factors including diet, climate and lack of medical care. So reversing the numbers 28 to 82, he once again involved in preparing for the future by ensuring suitable facilities can be provided, while continuing his ministry to the disadvantage in a variety of ways.

Thomas Anamattathil came to Vietnam as a Passionist brother ten years ago. He discerned his vocation and decided to become a priest and he was ordained in 2009. He has learned Vietnamese and spent many long hours teaching our students English and teaching many of them to cook. In recent months he has been devoted his energies to the building programme engaging in negotiations that often have been delicate because he is a foreigner and representing our Congregation. This work will continue in the year ahead.

These kind of projects always take longer than we are first told, so the nine months may well extend to a year or more.

Orven Gonzaga came to Vietnam from the Philippines almost four years ago as the only trained formator for our students. He too has learned Vietnamese and has devoted his time to those who apply as aspirants and need to undergo preliminary studies at university or college. He prepares students to undertake philosophy. A major task apart from spiritual guidance has been to teach these students English.

Jasmin came to Vietnam five months ago and he is learning both English and Vietnamese, and managing communication in both already. He is hoping to have the opportunity to do a brief intensive time improving his English which will allow him to be a valuable presence in Vietnam personally, pastorally and in supporting the formation of our students.

These four men are making a great commitment, having left their own homelands and Provinces to help the Passionist Congregation take a firm hold in Vietnam. Added to this commitment is that made by Holy Spirit Province and in particular by **Tom McDonough** as Provincial. This is his third visit to the community here in 2015. Of course there is too the amazing commitment of those who have joined us. Already **(Thomas) Thanh** and **(Peter) Truc** have spent ten years with us and they have had to wait that long to be finally professed and ordained deacons. They are in Melbourne for another five weeks.

Tue (**John Baptist**), Tuan (**Joseph**) and Dien (**Joseph**) are the next group to reach those milestones which they will do in 2016..

There are thirty Vietnamese men already in various stages of Passionist life. There are our **two** finally professed men in Melbourne and **six** men in the novitiate in Adelaide. There are **five** professed studying theology and **eight** philosophy students at St Gabriel's in Quận Thủ Đức district of Saigon where the new house will be built. Two of these, Quyen and Thong are preparing for English language studies in Australia next year prior to novitiate.

There are **six** pre-philosophers at St Vincent's, **and two** aspirants at Blessed Andre with another four possibly soon to begin as aspirants. They live in the Bình Thạnh district of Saigon.

When the new house is completed, the pre-philosophers and aspirants will move in to the vacant St Gabriel's house and everyone will be in the Thủ Đức district and about half an hour's drive east of the airport

It has been good to be here to meet some of our men for the first time, to see how they are living and to recognise the genuine hope they provide. Our Province and Configuration needs to assist and support the commitment these young men are already displaying and hopefully we can help them learn from our experiences and mistakes. One of the students shared with me that during his aspirancy, apart from his studies, he worked five hours a day and earned a little less than A\$2 for that effort. He is now professed. That is the spirit and the kind of commitment we need from these first brothers in Vietnam.

Signing off,

Brian

Brian Traynor CP



Huynh, Bay, Nem, unknown (to me) Thanh