



Part Three:  
*Cambodia*

Bishop John's Diary from 2022 visit  
to South East Asia

## Day fourteen...

The traffic noise continued through the night. I was hoping, unrealistically, that there might be some sort of curfew for the blowing of horns. No such luck. I have noticed several times that there seems to be a new gadget, used mainly by motorcyclists, that is a constant repeater of short sounds of the horn as they travel along..... rather annoying!

The hotel (Hotel Anise) is small and surrounded by a crowd of buildings; some new apartments and lots of two-storey shops and houses. There was a bar nearby last evening with some singing until quite late. The city has quite a lot of very new buildings, high-rise, and mainly Chinese built. They are situated among a great clutter of older buildings. One thing that seems to have been carefully promoted is a grid system for the roads, many of which are wide highways but all of which seem very busy with lots of traffic jams, even from early this morning.

One very noticeable change is the absence of the churches seen in Vietnam and the prominence of Buddhist Temples - highly decorated and often covered in gold. I am hoping to find out more about the relationship between Christians and Buddhists here.

Sunday evening.....

What a privileged day. A seven-hour journey into the middle of Cambodia, with so much to see. Rojanet, a CAFOD employee and lead for Cambodia, came to the hotel at 7am, with our driver, Zarum. The drive out of the city was slow, even Sunday has its rush hour, while a non-working day for many. We travelled along one of the rivers out of the city and passed a very large suburban area of new high-rise buildings, with more being constructed. Chinese finance, it seems. I thought I had heard that the journey was about three hours and was a bit surprised at 10.30am to make our first stop with

just about half the journey done. This stop was to collect Chamroeun, the Project manager of the project we next stop to see. This is a Demonstration Farm run by a CAFOD partner called Karuna Battambang Organisation "KBO". They run this farm to educate local people in more efficient and environmentally friendly farming techniques. They also run a cafe where they train locals in catering. I was impressed by the cleanliness of the place and the wide variety of crops being cultivated. They also provided a very tasty fish soup and rice, in manageable proportions.

Then were on the road again for another two and a half hours. But I enjoy it, just seeing the country and witnessing something of the way of life. There is clearly a lot of poverty, but I am told that things are gradually improving for the people most in need.

We finally arrived at Battambang. I was a little concerned when Rojanet said that plans had changed and we would not be staying in the hotel after all, but at the church. What might that mean? I need not have worried. The Catholic Church here is in a compound consisting of several buildings, including the church, Bishop's house, a priests' house, a convent, a guest house, pastoral Centre, Youth Centre, Catechetics building, garden cafe and several ancillary buildings for meetings. It is swamped in greenery and relatively quiet. The welcome was warm. The bishop has apologised for his absence today as all the bishops have been meeting in Phnom Penh (that is all three of them) and there was a diaconate ordination of three men yesterday. He should be back tonight. The campus manager is more easily called "Tom", his family name - the Cambodian name being unpronounceable. Tom was born in a refugee camp in Thailand which seems to have been a very difficult experience. He remembers much from his first seven years there. Chamroeun was also in a refugee camp and remembers rather more as he was a young man when he was taken there and live there much longer.

I made heading notes during the journey so will follow up with a series of

comments. Hopefully it will make sense.

The Roads. This was quite a mixture of experience. There is clearly a national plan for some good roads. Some are in place. I have never been on such straight roads, except maybe in the States. At one stage we travelled at 50-60 miles an hour for over an hour (yes, I timed it!) without any bend at all in the road. The terrain is very flat in the part of Cambodia I have seen today. But difficulty comes in the cities with the sheer weight of traffic, and the traffic jams. In the countryside, there is a lot of road construction, repair and maintenance and the roadworkers do not usually provide adequate alternative road surface for the traffic. That can lead to some long delays and traffic actually leaving the road to find a way ahead. It will be quite something when the roads are all fully built and repaired but for the time being it makes journey time unpredictable.

The roadside. This seems to be where the population congregates and most of the shopping is done. Stalls full of every type of food, utensils, furniture are at the road edge. There are motorbikes dragging trolleys with a shop-full of stock which just pull up and start business. In the rural areas, there are simple stalls, under sunshades, perhaps selling just one item - the local fruit, a single type of drink. While everything is there and displayed, there was not much custom. During the heat of the day, many of the sellers simply put up a hammock and have a sleep. I was a bit concerned to see so much fresh meat displayed in the hot sun.

Buddhism. This is clearly the country's religion and includes the majority of the population. There are a few mosques in clearly Muslim areas, but very few churches. I am told there are a good number of Catholic churches in Phnom Penh but I have seen just two since we left the city. In comparison, Buddhist Temples and monasteries are everywhere along the road and some are enormous. Most are highly decorated with lots of gold. Curiously, I have seen almost no-one in the temple compounds and just compare that with the crowds of people that surrounded every Catholic Church I visited in Vietnam and Singapore. I am told that Christian-Buddhist relationships are very good and I hope to discuss that more.

Very noticeable have been the shops selling Buddhist shrines. They seem to come mainly in two forms, one about four feet in height and the other about six feet. I will enquire as to their meaning. Rather more surprising have been the carvers of statues of the Buddha. At one stage on our journey, probably in a place where the right sort of stone was more readily available, I saw at least a dozen workshops, all displaying a variety of statues by the side of the road - some much more than life-size.

Housing. Most of the housing has appeared to be rather poor. However, there is evidence of a lot of newer housing. Much of it is raised on stilts.



This provides a covered groundfloor space which is often used for sleeping during the hottest time of the year, and for storage. It can easily be evacuated if and when the area floods. There were also some smart new houses, often identified by their pristine white painted walls and blue reflective glass in the windows which I assume assists with the air-conditioning. I am told that there are few homeless people - most being in Phnom Penh. However, I think that those I have seen living under tarpaulin, within a bamboo frame, without drainage or electricity would be called "homeless" in the U.K.

Rubbish. Sadly, the countryside has a lot of garbage - particularly plastic waste. All along the roadside. The buffalo who roam freely are often grazing nearby. I have seen no cows, horses, sheep or goats. In the towns there was plenty of rubbish but it seemed, for the most part, to be gathered in specific places for collection but it looked pretty unsightly.

Some of the smartest buildings in any village or small town that we saw were the local headquarters of the Cambodian People's Party - the ruling communist party. There are signs everywhere, with pictures of local representatives. No other party has any publicity, at least not that I have seen.

The biggest buildings in the countryside seem mainly to be schools but I saw a few federal buildings, including an institute concerned with the remaining mines from the war. Last time I was here I was told that even then there were about 1000 casualties a year. Most casualties are now amputees. Undiscovered mines are still thought to be everywhere. Incidentally, the man who opened the gates to the Cathedral compound had no arms from the elbows - no doubt one of the casualties.

Battambang has had a very difficult recent history, particularly because of Khmer Rouge.

Final note for today. Rojanet and I were guests of KBO at a restaurant called "The Lonely Tree". The owner, who works for KBO is a Spaniard called Juan who came to Cambodia as a volunteer five years ago. He stayed and has married a Cambodian lady who manages the restaurant. Juan is from Valladolid and knows our college well. Tom was also with us, and I learned a good deal about the energy and growth of Church here. It is bouncing back from the persecution under Khmer Rouge. Tomorrow, we see the offices of KBO and the extent of its work. That is enough for today!

## Day fifteen...

I marvel at how different Vietnam and Cambodia, nations divided only by Laos, can be so different. Vietnam has a very small Buddhist following, while the majority of Cambodians follow Buddhism. Vietnam has such a vibrant and energetic Catholic Church. Cambodia's Catholics, while growing and certainly enthusiastic, are such a tiny minority. The Cathedral Church and other churches here in Cambodia have nothing of the architecture of the French-style churches in Vietnam. For a start, there are no pews, only prayer mats and almost no decoration.

The artwork elsewhere is so different. I shall be very interested to see the celebration of Mass - sadly it will only be on a weekday, before my departure. Food seems different, too. The language sounds very different. But the shy smiles and friendly greetings are the same.

The day began with breakfast at 7.30am. Bishop Kike (he is actually not a bishop but the Apostolic Prefect for this region. Everyone calls him Bishop) had arrived back during the night from Phnom Penh and he joined us. His manner was so easy going and he has been a delight to be with all today. His English is very good, fortunately. We had an hour together just to talk. He has been here for over thirty years, and it is clearly home to him. He explained something of the Church structure in Cambodia. It had been very Catholic before Khmer Rouge and is still in recovery. There are three Prefectures in the country. Battambang is the largest and bigger in area than Portugal. There are two bishops and Kike. Battambang Prefecture has about 5 million inhabitants, and about 7,000 Catholics who live in 30 communities. About two thirds of the Catholics are Cambodian and one third Vietnamese. He has 22 priests, three of whom are Cambodian. The others are a mix: Indonesian, Filipino, Vietnamese, Thai, Indian, Italian, French and Togan. He is delighted that so many are young. (I have met several today and many have been five to seven years ordained).

Kike told me about the Church in Laos, where two of the four bishops have been in prison, one still is in prison. One is a Cardinal. The bishops of Laos and Cambodia are together in a single Conference.

He showed me his office and it is swamped in photographs and memorabilia of one type or another - lots of statues. He says that he remembers things better when he has photographs. He will certainly remember me as we had a photo together in every place we visited today - along with staff and priests. He wanted to show me around this complex of buildings which make up the compound. We visited the Department of the Mental health of Children and the Department for Children's Physical Disability. There has been so much distress here because of the casualties from landmines (so often children) and the fact that there had been a Polio epidemic when the government had refused the use of vaccinations. I met with the team for Physical Disability who were having their weekly meeting. Normally they are going out to the villages. At the end of the meeting eight of the thirteen of the team were shown to be amputees!

We went to a warehouse which Kike calls the "Holy of Holies". It is where they make the Mekong wheelchair - especially designed for Cambodia and for amputees and Polio victims. They make over a thousand of these wheelchairs every year.

We also went to the Catechetical Centre, the Education Centre and the Kindergarten. The Prefecture has outreach to schools in the villages - often schools which are not recognised and funded by the State. They currently provide 119 teachers who are normally paid in food supplies, rather than in money. There is also a hostel for students studying at one of the five universities in Battambang.

This afternoon was also packed with visits. We went first to the Mutata Textile Company (Kike would not allow it to be called a factory because of the negative connotations of hard labour). The decision had been made that it was not enough simply to provide for the poor and the disabled. Nor was it enough to train them for work. The Prefecture must also provide

jobs. A partnership was initiated with a very generous local manufacturer of clothes to produce clothing and a building built for the work. Of the 120 employees, over 40 have disabilities, usually amputation. The work was successful with some garments provided for our own M&S. The businessman moved away, leaving additional machinery but Mutata must now find its own customers. It is managing but needs to grow. Again, there were people in wheelchairs everywhere.

Next, we visited the Ombattam Hotel. This is a small hotel (16 rooms) in central Battambang which has been built both to provide employment for disabled people and to earn money for the work of KBO. I was most impressed by the level of accommodation. This was all planned, designed, built and now managed by a young accountant lady member of KBO staff. The rooms were spacious and well equipped. This was to have been the hotel where we should have stayed. I would not have been disappointed! Of the seven staff, three have disabilities, two of whom are amputees. As in every place we visit, there is tea and something to eat.

Mass in the Cathedral this evening was most enjoyable. It was officially a Youth Mass and the choir of young people were enthusiastic. Kike suggested that the Mass be offered for Queen Elizabeth and I was invited to preach, with Fr Bong Bong translating. There was a large picture of the Queen in front of the altar with incense burning in tribute.

What can I say about today? It has been an extraordinary experience. Kike is a mountain of energy and ideas. He sees the pastoral outreach as a challenge and his first priority. The "Cathedral" is not actually a church at all but was a large chapel and part of a convent before the Khmer Rouge destroyed the previous cathedral and most of the buildings in the compound. The re-building of many buildings has been slow but constant with the emphasis being on the pastoral mission and providing facilities. The church will be built eventually. The grounds are deep in vegetation - trees, bushes, plants, with over 200 trees planted last year alone.

There are a couple of local devotions, with statues, and I will hope to explain them. But first, a very curious image is popular here, particularly

in catechetics. The giraffe! The giraffe represents an attitude to life. The giraffe has the largest heart of any mammal. This obviously represents a capacity to love. Its long neck means that it has eyes that can see a long way ahead and is not obstructed by objects getting in the way of its view. It also has feet firmly on the ground. The lesson being that we must be loving. We must not get caught up in short-term thinking but have a vision for the longer term. We must also be firmly rooted in the realities of the world in which we live. Not a bad lesson to be learning. I have been given a model of a giraffe to take home!

*Day seventeen...*

A few notes from yesterday which got overlooked.

I met a very young and shy lady doctor at the clinic building on the campus. She was a catechist in her local rural parish when she met a couple from Norwich who encouraged her in her ambition to be a doctor and offered to pay for all her medical studies. The connection with the Diocese of East Anglia has been strong since +Michael Evans was bishop and visited Cambodia.

My Buddhist neighbour, just outside the campus, chants early in the morning and he has started before 4.30am. He was joined this morning by the Muslim prayers coming from a nearby mosque. It is a very gentle start to the day. Yesterday, on our drive to the Mutata Textile Centre we passed one of the biggest buildings that I have seen in Battambang. It is a Buddhist listening and meditation shrine, which was built only three years ago. It is highly decorated in the traditional style. It is not a temple or monastery but the place of a preacher. In this case, the preacher is nationally known for his ministry.

On my first visit to Cambodia, I came across the religious artwork that

commemorates the amputees. I have now seen it many times in England. Among them, there is a simple matchstick representation of the crucified Christ, with one leg amputated at the knee. I have a copy of a sculpture frequently seen here of a man seated before Christ who is kneeling to wash his foot. The inscription is "Lord, I have no foot for you to wash". The scars of the Khmer Rouge era are still very much alive - particularly when the landmines are still a danger.

This morning I attended a Mass in the church at 6am. The congregation was almost entirely school children - apparently, they come of their own volition before going to school. There were a few adults. At the end, the students came forward for a blessing and generous sprinkling with holy water.

There are two French priests here, Francois and Vincent. They came to Cambodia together five years ago, immediately after ordination. They belong to the French Missionary Society. I admit that I had not heard of the Society, but it has been very influential over two centuries in the establishing of the Catholic Church in China and Southeast Asia. After about fifteen years of virtually no vocations, they are thriving again in vocations in France.

Bishop Kike has meetings here today so cannot travel with us.. (By the way "Kike" is pronounced "Key-Kay"). I include a note about him which I found on the internet.

You may remember that, often on these trips, I find that the elastic band has stretched as far as it will go and I feel a sense of starting to return home. This happened today. I will explain the journey. We set out at 8am to visit an education project and a community development project in Banteay Meanchey province. The journey began with about two hours on a good road, in the direction of the Thailand border. Once out of Battambang and the rush hour traffic, the road opened up and was dual carriageway much of the way. There were some lorries but nothing to delay our

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progress. After two hours we turned off the road onto a soil track. It was pot-holed and very uneven but the driver Zarum is very good. However, after half an hour on this road we came to the first Farming cooperative and met with some of the farmers and discussed their relationship with KBO and CAFOD. The next stage of the journey had to be on the back of a tractor as the road had become a muddy track and the flood waters were flowing over it in places which made it impossible for the car. We reached an isolated but very beautiful Buddhist shrine (more later) and then continued for the last thirty minutes or so on the back of a motorbike as we were now on a muddy footpath. Our final destination, just a few miles from the border with Thailand, is another farming cooperative of 36 families. As we looked out over the rice fields, across this empty stretch of land as far as I could see, with only occasional, isolated farms, I thought this was the moment when the elastic band could stretch no further. We made the same journey home in reverse.

I feel a little confused by what we have seen today in the Farming Cooperatives. The people certainly feel that there is progress and that they are very grateful and now making a living. There is rice growing as far as the eye can see but these families have now learned about the cultivation of other vegetables for their own use. They also farm animals - buffalo, pigs, goats and chicken. I was a bit concerned about how the pigs were contained in tiny pens where they had little room to move, while the buffalo, goats and the chicken are free to wander around the farm and onto the roads. What concerned me most was the squalor of the buildings and the surrounds. Nothing seemed to be tidied away and there was plastic waste everywhere. So many of the houses were simple rooms with wooden plank walls and corrugated iron roofs. To be fair, some were more substantial and the two or three where I saw inside were clean and decorated. But all five farms that we saw were a mess with their various huts for animals and storage and the ground so uneven and muddy because of the flooding which seems to be a regular hazard.

We had lunch at a school. The school was in fact two buildings, each with three rooms and there were two toilet blocks. It is certainly very basic. The communist government had been slow in providing any school and then their eventual contribution was inadequate so this school has been provided by KBO and a group called The Samaritans. The lunch was provided by the wives of some of the farmers and consisted of meat and fish in several kinds, rice and some very strong tasting sauces with the vegetables. It was the typical hospitality offered to guests which the families could never afford for themselves on a regular basis, but insist must be offered to guests.

The Farming Cooperatives are succeeding in providing knowledge of new farming techniques while creating credit unions which help the communities through more difficult times. The first Cooperative had 22 farmer members, seventeen of whom are women. The second has 36 farmers, twelve of whom are women.

On the return journey I was able to visit this magnificent Buddhist shrine. There was a building with a reclining Buddha figure, about 25ft long, and wonderful wall paintings. The temple was covered on walls and ceiling with depictions of the Buddha's life in wonderful colours. There was also a third highly decorated building and I met three boy monks there.

Dinner this evening was with Bishop Kike, back at the Lonely Tree restaurant. He likes the place a lot because it offers a selection of Spanish dishes! He is fascinating company. He gave me a whole bag of gifts, including a statue of Our Lady seen so often here (which I must describe), a giraffe, a book of photographs, a history. Will I get this lot home? I gave him a small glass Celtic Cross!

The statue that I mentioned is called "Our Mother of the Inclusive Love". It is everywhere in the Catholic churches and buildings in Battambang Province. Mary is holding Jesus who has His hands spread in welcome to all

who wish to draw near. Both are smiling. Below Jesus are two children. One holds a book symbolising wisdom, the other playing a flute - symbol of praising God. Below them are three more children. The middle child is giving a hug (of solidarity) to the other two children, who are disabled. We are all within the love of God. One of these children is in a wheelchair holding a dove representing peace. The other child, with a crutch, is holding a bunch of flowers, a sign of love, God's greatest commandment. The cloak of Our Lady surrounds all these figures - a sign of the Church including all. All these many statues, in wood or stone, small or large, are carved by disabled artists.

I may have under-estimated Battambang. On our way to the restaurant this evening, Bishop Kike spoke of the new measures to protect the architectural history of this city - with over 500 buildings being listed. They are mainly Cambodian architecture, with French influence. The city is rated for its ecological measures and has become something of a tourist favourite, with Siem Reap and the archeological site of Angkor Wat being so close. We visited the peace monument which is made of thousands of rifles, revolvers and hand-grenades and shaped into a sickle of harvesting peace. Tomorrow is the final day in Battambang and I am pleased that Bishop Kike has made time to be with me. A lie in to start the day, with breakfast at 8am. The Bishop will be going for his run before breakfast! There is a plan to visit a school close to the city, to meet an important Buddhist monk and to visit Bishop Kike's parish. Yes, he decided that, with the shortage of priests some years ago, he should also have a parish and says that it keeps him grounded with the concerns of the local people. Much to be said for that.

Another busy day comes to a close and I feel that I have set the direction for home.

## Day eighteen...

I do not think that I have mentioned the temperature during this trip. It has been pretty consistent in the low to mid-thirties. It has been very humid which makes the air-conditioning, that seems to be readily available in most places, very welcome. The temperature falls to upper twenties at night but I have had access to a fan in most places, which makes things reasonably comfortable.

Breakfasts here are rather different - meeting the needs of a Spanish Bishop. All-Bran and Yoghurt are on offer, with small slices of toasted bread to be covered with tomato and avocado. There is a wonderful marmalade, produced by one of the ladies on the team - Mango and passion fruit. She should patent it and make a fortune.

This morning we were joined by the doctor, a young Spanish volunteer, Fr Francois and two other team members for breakfast before our 9am departure to Obruch School, on the edge of the city.

I think that maybe the elastic band needs to stretch a little further this time, as today has been quite different again. Two 4x4 vehicles set out at 9am. We were eight. That is me, the drivers, and five Caritas workers. I had been under the impression that we were to visit a school "not far from" the city. We went in the direction of the hills and Thailand. The road was good, improved because the hills contain a Buddhist sanctuary which is both a place of pilgrimage and a tourist attraction. Once past the entrance to the sanctuary, we turned off the road onto a track, complete with potholes, but the driver was managing well. We must have been on the road for about an hour when we turned off onto a dirt track. Imagine a raised embankment, about the width of two cars. To either side is a six foot drop to ditches full of water. The track is muddy and with potholes. At places there was water on the surface and we ploughed through thick mud. Twice we ground to a halt and had to get out and push - the mud was thick

and sticky. There were other occasions where the vehicle, though moving slowly, started to slip towards the edge of the track.

We reached the school to which we were travelling. A very poor area, very remote, with hardly a building in sight. The school is just four classrooms, with 55 pupils ranging from five years to sixteen. Everywhere was sodden ground and mud. The Caritas workers had brought sacks of rice.

The number of students has fallen gradually as more of the families move away for work, either to Cambodian cities or abroad. It was a sad sight, but the children were, as always, shy and grinning broadly. I must admit that I had my eye on the darkening sky that threatened rain. We would have to journey back through the mud. In fact the rain held off but the other vehicle managed to plunge into a pothole so that the two front wheels were in the mud and the two rear wheels were lifted off the ground. It took some clever work to get it moving again.

We reached the entrance to the Buddhist shrine and stopped for lunch. There is a lake at the foot of the hill and along one side, facing the hill, were about forty little bamboo-thatched chalets. Each chalet was empty but for a mat on the floor and several hammocks. The eight of us sat around on the floor and the mat became the table cloth on which was placed another wide range of dishes - meat, fish, vegetables, rice, powerful sauces. The others all sat cross-legged but that is no longer possible for me so kneeling for lunch was not the most comfortable way of eating. A little rain fell, but not too much. Then we continued the rest of the journey back to the campus but, as we arrived, the heavens opened and it was torrential rain with thunder and lightening for about thirty minutes. I wonder what that track by the school must be like now? We would have been in real trouble.

The day was far from over. I was back just in time to leave with Bishop Kike to visit a Buddhist monk. I had asked for some contact with the Buddhists and he came up with nothing short of an hour with the President

of the Buddhist University here in Battambang. They are good friends and it is clear that they discuss lots of matters about collaboration and social action together. It was a very good meeting. His name is VYSOVICHEA, however it may be pronounced. Curiously, the University is called “The White Elephant”. It means “Wisdom” for the Buddhists but I explained what it means for us!

Bishop Kike had suggested a visit to his parish, about seven miles from the campus, in a village. I readily agreed and we went there for Mass. He obviously loves the place. He had neglected to tell me that the campus of the parish comprises a home for children - with 120 residents aged 4 years to eighteen. They are a mix of orphaned, abused, trafficked and abandoned children. They were a delight but just about all of them wanted to be greeted with the praying hands gesture and a bow. There were some with physical and mental disability. One little boy who looked about five, in a wheelchair, is in fact probably ten years old and had been abandoned on the streets possibly for years. A member of staff has formally adopted him and he is learning to speak.

We had Mass with about 60 of the children present, among whom were a group of traditional Cambodian dances who danced twice in the Mass. Afterwards we were treated to four traditional dances by different groups. It was extremely graceful with extraordinary movement, particularly of fingers and hands.

Now back at the Cathedral campus, I have packing to do for an early start back to Phonm Penh. One of the priests I met here on Monday has invited me to call at his parish on the way. I will need a little more time to consider my thoughts on Bishop Kike - a rather unique person.

*Day nineteen...*

This is the longest trip of this kind that I have made. The CAFOD trips have usually been ten to fourteen days maximum. But I think it has been

worthwhile to put three rather different trips together when they are all in this corner of the world. I have probably written too much for any readership, but the diary is as much a record for myself than for others. Certain elements of the trip already stand out for me.

Singapore: There is no doubt that this tiny nation state is very successful in diverse ways. It is not just in economic terms. Clearly it is an international hub for banking, business, tourism, and transportation. It has established itself in little over half a century. There does seem to be a concern for the wellbeing of people as a whole. Life is certainly expensive but there is negligible homelessness and poverty in its strict sense. I was very impressed by the work of Caritas and Charis and their approach to understanding the complexity of people's lives and the different aspects of poverty. My interest, of course, is in the environmental work being done. That is impressive, with renewable energy, water supply, greening, waste disposal and land reclamation. Perhaps the most important factor in achieving all this is the government initiative. The Church is clearly doing a lot but it is the government policy and investment which is causing real progress. .

Vietnam: The sheer energy of the Church is my abiding memory. Not only are the vocations in staggering numbers but the Church is at work in alleviating the poverty of people. The church community seems to impact on every aspect of life as a priority - everyone having the parish as a real centre of life. The kindness of +Alphonse and +Peter was so encouraging and I hope that we have the beginnings of a good and lasting relationship.

Cambodia: The enthusiasm of +Kike has to dominate any thoughts on my visit here. His dedication for forty years to the refugees and the disabled has gone to the roots of people's suffering and been the reason for the creation of the wonderful Karuna (KBO). Given the tiny minority of Catholics in Battambang Diocese, the impact of the Church is truly impressive. It is also good to see the relationship with the Buddhists and the common purpose that they have together. The shadow and the damage of the war is still alive but things are improving. In our final conversation,

Kike said that whatever subject was being discussed, be it poverty, roads, prisons, education, there is still a lot to be done but things are getting better.

These last few hours in Phomn Penh have rather confirmed what people have said about the real poverty of the country focussing itself here. There are clearly people scraping a living selling their pile of sandwiches from their bicycle, On a corner near the hotel are three young people, two of whom appear to be blind, singing and asking donations from the traffic halted by the lights. I am told that the truly homeless people - those without any shelter - are to be found in this city.

In all three places, I heard caution about the growing influence of China and its ambitions. What will happen in Hong Kong and Taiwan? Who will be next to feel China's growing grip? The Chinese investment in building and roads is evident everywhere I have been but, curiously, it does not seem to be an investment that benefits the people as a whole but brings great wealth to a few.

A real concern for me must be the threat of the damage of Climate Change in these three countries. In each place, people spoke about the disruption of the seasons. The essential rains are becoming more unpredictable. All spoke of much heavier storms and their impact, particularly on roads and communications in the rural areas. What if sea-levels rise, even by a few feet? So much rice cultivation would be lost to sea-water. Much of the road system would be underwater.

A different concern for both +Alphonse and Kike was the migration of younger people for work, particularly to Seoul, Japan, Taiwan and Hong Kong. It is disrupting the strength of family life and values which are such a strong constituent in the life of the Church.

The final journey home starts now. I have kept up with some of the news at home - rightly dominated by the death and funeral of Queen Elizabeth. I am pleased that I shall be able to celebrate Mass for the Queen on Sunday, in Salford Cathedral. May she rest in peace.