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CHÙA GIÊSU CHỜ ĐỢI TA NƠI BÍ TÍCH THÁNH THỂ

# Bishop John Travel Diary Vietnam



## Day Eight - Sunday 4th June

The flight for Ho Chi Minh required an early start and Fr David Chan, the Procurator of the Diocese, was insistent on driving me to the airport, departing from the Cathedral House at 5am, in his enormous Mitsubishi minibus-type car. Not only that, he parked the car and accompanied me to the check-in desk so ensure that all was well, and then to airport security. He could not have been kinder, but that is the trademark of everything that has happened this week. Everywhere, people have welcomed me and taken time to explain and to help and the hospitality has been overwhelming. I am now sitting at a desk in this enormous airport, at 6.30am, waiting for the flight.

The journey to the airport was another glimpse, in the relative quiet of an early Sunday morning, of the unique mega-city which is Hong Kong. The town planners must have both imagination and daring. Once away from the narrow and winding roads in the oldest part of Hong Kong Island, there are tunnels, flyovers and bridges which connect the island with so many other smaller islands. There are two new tunnels that connect with Kowloon and three enormous bridges that connect the city with this enormous new airport on Lan Tau island - an airport which is already expanding with a new terminal. There is the longest bridge in the world, I understand, that links Hong Kong with Macau. The bus, tram and train service is greatly praised and the over-sixties pay just 20 pence for their journey of whatever length!

The week really has been excellent. I think I have been able to touch on the worries and fears of both the people who are leaving Hong Kong and those who are making the decision to stay. I think I can understand better the different aspirations of the Hong Kong Chinese who came to the United Kingdom in the sixties and seventies and those who are arriving now. I hope that we can help in some ways to make sure that the new arrivals are welcomed and their qualifications (especially in terms of their Church participation) valued and used. Bishop Stephen Chow has been so kind with his time and his concern to help and I have certainly appreciated our conversations, and his humour. There is a real sense of partnership and collaboration.

Bishop Joseph Ha has also given me so much of his time and it has been fascinating to hear about his own personal history and his becoming a Catholic in his youth - eventually baptising his own parents. Fr Peter Chow, V.G. told me about his own youth in poverty, as his parents were refugees from mainland China, and the living conditions that he endured as a boy.

I am departing from Hong Kong on a particularly important day when the massacre of Tiananmen Square is usually remembered, not least with prayers for those who died. It has been made clear that there is to be no remembrance this year as it would be construed as an anti-Beijing statement.

And so to Vietnam.....

The first flight to Ho Chi Minh was ordinary enough. Just two and a half hours. The next flight to Vinh was just two hours but very unusual. There seemed to be more children than adults. From babes in arms to primary school age. I can only assume that summer holidays are beginning. It made for a very amusing, if very loud, flight with children everywhere and playing all sorts of games which the stewards did not seem to mind!

I was met by the Vicar General, Fr Peter Vien, at the airport. Vinh could not be different from Hong Kong. Virtually no high rise buildings, except in the centre of the city. Almost all single storey wooden and corrugated iron houses in the suburbs, with shops spilling out onto the pavement all along the way. Traffic chaos with, as far as I can see, no highway code beyond "don't hit anything or anyone and don't get hit yourself". It is just as hot as Hong Kong and there is a very dark sky to the East, which may well mean a storm. I am back in Bishop's House, in the same very clean and spacious bedroom, bathroom and office. Bishop Alphonse is away today but returns tomorrow evening. We begin the selection of seminarians on Tuesday so we need a plan about how this can be done for both Vinh and Salford.

Fr Peter has invited me to the funeral Mass for a priest friend of his tomorrow. I shall be pleased to attend. Fr Peter collected me for supper. I remember well the dining room but this time there are a few visitors (a group making a retreat), a table of eight very young-looking nuns and a table for Fr Peter and I and the other staff who did not turn up. All the pre-seminarians who are usually here are now on pastoral placement before their summer holiday. There were also the two dogs that I remember well from last year that wander about the dining room. No-one gives them food but seem happy that they are there.

On my way back to my room I took an opportunity to have a quick look at the new Pastoral Centre. It was in construction last year but is now complete and open. It is immense. Six floors of meeting rooms and offices which stands between the Bishop's House and the Cathedral. I saw the dining room with beautiful carved teak tables and chairs, to seat 200 people. Upstairs there was loud singing of, I think, Vespers. Apparently, it is already difficult to get a booking there as it is so popular.

At supper, Fr Peter was giving me some description of the Church in Vietnam. Some statistics are overwhelming and I hope that I heard him correctly. His English is pretty good but not always that clear. I know about the Adorers of the Holy Cross Convent behind Bishop's House with its 506 sisters but I was told tonight that just a quarter of a mile away are the Sisters of St Joseph, with a convent of three hundred sisters! Fr Peter was insistent that Ho Chi Minh Diocese has 301 different religious orders in various forms of ministry! I will keep asking for numbers from different people.

This will be an important week for strengthening the relationship with Salford. I can only ask that we pray that it goes well.

### Day Nine - Monday 5th June

I was given a lie-in this morning. There was no usual 4.30am Mass because there is the funeral of a priest this afternoon and I have been invited to attend. Breakfast at 6am was a bowl of noodles, a banana, some cheese. Lots of lemon tea. Fr Peter (who embarrassingly I now know is Bishop Peter, the auxiliary bishop of the Diocese!) suggested that I take the morning off but then began to organise activities. I was invited to take a tour of the new pastoral centre, accompanied by one of the seminarians, and I am more than slightly overwhelmed by the place. There is a meeting in progress in the building for about one hundred members of a Catholic organisation called "Consilio". I do not think we have it in England but it seems similar to SVP or Legion of Mary. We could hear their wonderful singing of Morning Prayer as we approached the building. The space is ideal. The building can cater for 2,000 at any one time, with 250 en-suite bedrooms. There is a conference hall with over 500 banked seats, a beautiful and large chapel, several meeting bedrooms, including a very formal room for official receptions, and a museum full of artifacts for the history of the Church since the first missionaries arrived in 1533. I cannot think of any English Diocese with anything like such a facility.

I was back to my room soon after 7am and immediately received a visit from a local priest who had been asked to bring me vestments for the funeral later today.

The reception room next to my office is apparently mine as well. It is heaped with different varieties of tea and coffee and lots of biscuits and bags of nuts. I rather doubt that I need any of it but, like Hong Kong, this is the example of their hospitality.

This is not a criticism or complaint but a comment that might be worth consideration. The Bishop's House is eleven Kilometers from the centre of Vinh. The house is surrounded by the Cathedral, Pastoral Centre, Junior Seminary, Senior Seminary, the Convent of 500 nuns. The only current building work in this area is the new Catechetical Centre, which will be similar to the Pastoral Centre in size. There are no other buildings in the vicinity that are more than two storeys. They are simple dwellings, homes and workshops. Looking out from the top of Bishop's House there are, in the near distance, four structures which stand out - all the steeples of four local parishes. What a tribute to the people that the Church is of such central importance and these building projects have been, and continue to be, the priority. What is impressive is that every building is for the people and used by them - even here in Bishop's House there are all sorts of visitors and meetings.

And now things have gone quiet and I was told that the worst of the heat will be this morning and I should stay indoors. There does seem to be a genuine concern here that things are hotter and the summer season is getting longer. I think I noted earlier (while in Hong Kong) that the government here had ordered that the street lighting be turned off in order to provide more electricity for air-conditioning and electric fans in homes. There was a brief power failure this morning. When I was called to lunch, everyone was making their way to the dining hall under the cover of umbrellas.

On the news today is a report that several activists have been arrested in Hong Kong for a demonstration on the 4th June, remembering the 34th Anniversary of the Tiananmen Square massacre. Some were arrested for nothing more than being near Victoria Park bearing flowers. I knew that there was some nervousness about the possibilities of disruption. The Beijing Government claim that Hong Kong, under their care, is moving "from chaos to prosperity". That was not my experience.

This afternoon has been a surprise. We left the house at 1.30pm and travelled for about an hour on reasonably good roads (with appalling drivers!) for about 40 miles, into the neighbouring Diocese of Hai Tin. Hai Tin was carved out of the Diocese of Vinh a few years ago so just about all the priests of that Diocese were originally in the Diocese of Vinh. The villages we passed through were very quiet as most things close in the hottest part of the day.

We arrived at the village and the crowds were enormous. We drove to the church and I saw what I thought was a very old, French-styled, church being repaired, and covered in scaffolding like Salford Cathedral, and another church in front of it. More on that later. The funeral of the priest was so impressive. This was his home village and more than 5,000 people attended the funeral, with at least 83 priests (which I counted myself!), a large number of nuns and then the youth organizations in uniform. Most wore a white head band or a stole for the funeral. The Mass was fairly familiar to me, with a eulogy from a priest. We came to the committal which was quite dramatic. All the priests sprinkled the large wooden coffin with holy water and then it was borne by about twenty young men on bamboo poles. There was a loud wailing from women relatives as we made the short journey to the graveside. Many of the white stoles were then knotted together to lower the coffin into the grave. People crowded around and the singing (which had been exceptionally beautiful by the choir in the Mass) continued. The committal took about half an hour.

I asked, after the funeral, if I could look at this old church covered in scaffolding. No, that is the new church being built and then the church where we have just had Mass will be demolished. I was shocked. We went to look at this church. I hope you may see a couple of photographs. It is being built in a French Gothic style and this relatively poor parish is paying for the whole lot. I was interested to see that the maze of scaffolding was all bamboo. What a project! The place is like a cathedral.

Tomorrow is examination day for 230 candidates. I have an early start with Mass at 4.30am.

The construction of the new church





## Day Ten - Tuesday 6th June

An early start. Hot but cloudy, so it may be a very humid day. The seven sisters and the seminarians who are helping in the house during their summer break were at 4.30am Mass this morning and their chanting was very polished, loud and prayerful. Bishop Alphonse returned last evening from a visit in a distant part of the Diocese and I met him before Mass began. Both Bishop Alphonse and Bishop Peter have now gone to the seminary to prepare for the arrival of all those taking the examination for selection today. I am told that 230 candidates will sit the exam! They have all been in touch with their local priests and the seminary for at least five years and have had a syllabus in preparing for this exam. Only about 30 will be selected. A candidate can have three tries at selection. We have to work out how best we choose candidates for Salford. It could be tricky.

I went to breakfast and was served a large bowl of noodles, with seafood. That was more than enough, except that I was tempted to eat, and enjoyed, a large avocado! The priest next to me added a large bowl of cereals and bread. My total number of dogs sighted about the place just went to thirteen as I spotted the six very new puppies with their mother.

I must admit that language is a problem. I do not have a single word of Viet so I can hardly complain. Most of the priests have some knowledge of written English but spoken English is a difficulty. This will have to be a priority for any candidate coming to study and minister as a priest in England. My two wonderful Vietnamese priests in Enfield, all those years ago, progressed very quickly when they arrived in the parish. After the funeral yesterday I met the priest nominated to come as a chaplain to the Vietnamese in the North of England. He will have to pass an English exam before he can get a working visa. Although he says that his reading and writing of English is improving, his spoken English will need a lot of practice improvement. He is studying English full-time at the moment so I hope he will make good progress.

I had a good conversation with Bishop Alphonse. We are almost exactly the same age. He is one of fourteen siblings, the seventh. He has two brothers who are priests. Although born in the north of Vietnam, the family moved south to avoid the worst of the war. He was made an auxiliary bishop ten years ago and only arrived in Vinh as bishop four years ago. His English is about the best of the priests. He is talking about other priests from Salford coming to encourage vocations and insistent that I return. I wonder if that will happen.

Tuesday afternoon. I can only say that I am in shock! Bishops Alphonse and Peter invited me to lunch at the seminary where the selection is taking place. There were 114 candidates here and, on the same day, 115 candidates are at the seminary of the neighbouring Diocese of Ha Tin. The Vinh candidates gathered for lunch. Could there be a similar gathering anywhere else in the world? Perhaps Nigeria, or Kerala in India?



All of them are aged between 22 and 28 years and all have a university degree. Being Vietnamese, they look as though they are still schoolboys. I was asked to address them, with the help of a translator, and I explained that the bishop had invited me to come and request four seminarians for future training and service in the Diocese of Salford, developing our relationship. This was the first time they had heard about the offer and this will be much more broadcast next time.

We went back to the seminary this afternoon and we interviewed 16 hopeful young men who say that they want to come to England. They are all graduates, with degrees ranging from I.T. Technology, Psychology, Economics, Administration and Law. The interviews were not easy or conclusive as most had to speak through a translator and, it should be said, that Vietnamese seem to have shyness as part of their DNA. In one sense the interview was not that important. I will be relying much more of the mark that they scored in the written paper and how they managed the full interview with a seminary professor. There is also a written report from their own parish priest. To be honest, they were - without exception - delightful characters. They all want so much to be priests and the fact is that most of them will not be accepted.

There were also some shocking facts. For example, two of the young men came from the same parish where there are over four hundred priests and religious vocations from that one parish! Another parish currently has 28 deacons in formation. There is a Eucharistic Movement for young people which, nationwide, has over 800,000 members ranging from 5 to 16 years, with 150,000 trained leaders for the different age groups. Dedicated Faith is everywhere, in a way that I have not experienced except, perhaps, in the Philippines. So many people not only attend daily Mass but also gather again for morning and evening prayers. The individual interviews with the seminary professors continue tomorrow so I must return to the seminary and see who else might come forward for an interview for Salford.

As far as I understand it, I have Mass tomorrow morning with the Sisters of Charity, at 4.45am. Their convent is less than a mile away. I will then meet with the superior. There is some question that they may wish to establish a community in Salford. It was mentioned earlier that this is a diocesan congregation and the community in Vinh has over 300 sisters. I hope to verify numbers tomorrow.

Now it is time for supper and, hopefully, a quiet evening. I have to write my homily for the morning, for the translator. It will be short!

### Day Eleven - Wednesday 7th June

I had another wonderful shock this morning. Starting at 4.30am, we travelled in the car less than half a mile and turned down a narrow lane between two shops to find ourselves in front of a large new church, just one year old. It is the chapel of the Sisters of Charity. The order was founded by a diocesan priest, still alive at 92 years, in 1980. There are now already 400 finally professed sisters with another 400 at various levels of formation. The real shock came as I entered the chapel and I hope you have a picture. (It is not a good picture but I was trying not to be conspicuous with the camera). Over 250 very young looking sisters ready for Mass.



This is the mother house and some sisters are here for a retreat, others live and work here. They have an orphanage close by and one of their major works is the longterm care of those with physical and mental disabilities. I am not sure that my homily was helpful to them but they were certainly very attentive! I met with the superior of the house after the Mass and we discussed the possibility of sisters coming to Salford. They have sisters studying in the United States and Canada, so many speak English.

Back at the Bishop's House there was breakfast and then, starting at 7.30am this morning, we interviewed another eleven possible candidates, a total of twenty five. They were, without exception, charming and shy and very polite. One or two stood out because their English was better and they could give longer answers with more confidence but none of them were clearly unsuitable for selection. It is impossible to judge between them when the language is a major hurdle.

If and when chosen, I hope that four of them will have intensive English before they start studies in England. But I must now leave it to the selection committee to put all the information together and choose the best candidates for their own quota of thirty for Vinh Diocese, and four for Salford. This will be decided in the coming days.

The idea was discussed of getting some retired people to come from England for some time, perhaps a month or two, to speak English and help with diction and speaking confidence. The visitors could stay in the seminary, which is simple but comfortable, and I think we could help with travel costs. I must follow up this possibility.

Because of the heat, lunch is normally at 11am and there is quite a long break during the hottest part of the day. In fact things are a little cooler today, but it is still 31 degrees and there are still rumbles of thunder in the distance. I keep being introduced to new fruits and food. Eels appeared at lunch today, in a stew, along with a very slippery yellow fruit which had a creamy taste. They told me that the smell of the fruit was not good, but the taste exceptional. I must admit that I could not smell anything unpleasant at all. The taste was very quite delicate but good. There was also another white fruit in a hard purple shell which is very juicy and tasty.

While the many gifts that I was given in Hong Kong were mainly books, pamphlets and objects like crosses and badges, here in Vietnam I am being gifted with dried fruits and expensive teas. Some brands of tea here are matured like wine and are apparently quite expensive. I am hoping I can get things into my suitcase. This afternoon, Bishop Alphonse gave me a large box of dried fruit and I had to explain that there was no chance I could fit everything in, but will gratefully take what I can.

I have to prepare a homily for a meeting of young people tomorrow who are learning English. There is also a big gathering of people on Saturday and I am asked to preach there as well. It means writing the homily so that the translator is sure of what I am saying but, as you will probably know, written homilies are not my usual habit. I like to "learn" what I want to say and not have paper to hand. I suspect that, getting older, I will need to revert to more written notes, as reminders!

This afternoon, I had a surprise visit from the superior of the Convent of the Holy Cross next door. I had met her last year. This is the convent with over 500 sisters. We spoke about the possibility of a community in Salford (that would be the second meeting about possible foundations, with two different congregations, in one day!) She asked if I had

time to visit the novices and the sisters on retreat before their profession of final vows. I went to the convent. They were all gathering in the chapel and it was getting crowded. I will send a picture. There are 90 novices in a two-year novitiate, and 53 sisters preparing for final vows.



The next two visits were not easy. I was taken first to an orphanage for mentally and physically disabled people, run by the Sisters of the Holy Cross. (The Sisters of Charity also have an orphanage nearby) What can I say? The facilities were minimal, with each individual (from a child of about one year old, to a man of 31 years) each in a metal bed frame. They were not actually confined to that space but the two dormitories that I saw were just a bundle of about twelve metal beds. The children were of all sorts of disability and were all abandoned by their families. The sisters were certainly gentle and caring but the place was so hot and lacking facilities.

The next stop was the small hospital run by the nuns. It is the only “Catholic” hospital in Vietnam and has no funding from any public body. There are twenty nuns there, as doctors and nurses, with some lay staff. Again, facilities were minimal but at least good work is done and the treatment is free. They rely on donations. There was no air conditioning in the building at all. The sisters on the staff live in the hospital. The kitchen was in a shed outside, next to a pharmacy that had so little stock. We saw some patients having acupuncture, who seemed very grateful for their care.

The “Consilio” group of men continues its retreat in the Pastoral Centre and their and their loud and beautiful singing of prayers punctuates the day. Tomorrow, Bishop Peter goes to Hanoi for an overnight meeting and I am invited, I think, to travel into the mountains to one of the major Buddhist shrines. Relations with the Buddhists is good and they have social projects together.

## Day Twelve - Thursday 8th June

Research has revealed that the white fruit in the hard purple shell is Mangosteen. It is to be recommended if it ever comes on the market at home. I made the mistake of saying how much I enjoyed this fruit and my little reception room now has a pile of them ready for eating!

I am back in my room by 7pm which seems early but I have another early start to be with the youth tomorrow morning and then, hopefully, I have a driver and some companions for the visit to the Buddhist shrine. Bishop Alphonse is clearly a lover of the dogs. Of the many dogs in the diocesan compound, there is one small one that follows him everywhere and three or four of the larger ones will gather around our table at meals, very quietly, looking for a possible morsel, which they usually get from his plate.

Thursday morning. Bishop Peter came to read my written homily at 4.30am so that he was ready to translate it at the Mass. We travelled to the meeting place for Mass at 5am. The summer school is taking place in the local Kindergarten. There are 200 children aged 10 to 16 years, under the care of 25 sisters of the Holy Cross and the purpose of the two months course is to learn English.

The children were a delight and sang loudly at the Mass. I am not sure if the summer course is compulsory but, as it is residential, the sisters were saying that some of the children get homesick. At least most of them see their families at weekends, if they are local. However, some of the children live at quite a distance.

As happens frequently, I am invited to have tea back at the Cathedral. It is now 6.30am. This time it is with Bishop Alphonse. He was going to open the General Chapter of the Sisters of the Holy Cross but it turns out that the start of the Chapter is tomorrow and I will go with him to that Mass. The tea is poured into tiny cups, not much more than the size of an egg cup, but this is re-filled four or five times as the tea gets stronger.

At 7am I was met by one of the young men who has taken the seminary exam, who was to be my driver this morning. His name is Quang, but pronounced "Gwa". With us were also two sisters of the Holy Cross, Sister Quin and Sister Shan. Both spoke some English - Sister Shan studied in Australia. Sister Quin is the novice mistress. It is about an hour's drive into the mountains to a Buddhist Shrine. The shrine was full of splendid carvings and decorations, with several different buildings on the top of one of the heavily wooded mountains. The view back to Vinh and the ocean was spectacular. Sadly, despite the size of the place there is only one resident monk, and he was away for the day. I was hoping to hear some chanting.

There were a lot of volunteers and staff making sure that the place is spotlessly tidy and decorated with piles of fruit and the offerings of pilgrims - and paper lanterns. Perhaps given the time of day (8am) there were very few visitors. I need to correct something I

said about there being good relations between Christians and Buddhists. I gather that it is more accurate to say that, while there is no animosity, interfaith relations are really minimal.

The drive to the temple took us through some villages and the poverty was very evident. The sisters spoke of the difficulties for people finding work which, even if available, often does not provide a living wage. We drove through the flat lands which are near the coast before getting in to the mountains and the sisters were saying that agriculture is being disrupted by the increasing heat and the unreliable rainy season. The rain, when it comes, can be in shorter but heavier showers.

In our conversation in the car, the sisters were saying that, while there are 23 first year novices and 35 second year novices for the Congregation of the Holy Cross, the figures are reducing and they are concerned that the younger Vietnamese are being distracted by social media and consumerism and the option of a religious vocation is being overlooked by many. While the numbers seem spectacular to us, it would seem that things can be going in the same direction as the Global North.

There are some much better houses along the road, usually quite flamboyant and decorated. I am told that most of these have been built by Vietnamese who have worked abroad for some years and come back with relative wealth, to retire. I am also told that those working for the communist government have substantially higher wages and benefits and there are over one million State employees, representing about 1% of the total population.

At 5pm a driver came to collect me to travel to the parish of "Mary, Full of Grace, where Fr Anthony is parish priest. I do not understand this too well but Fr Anthony is only two years ordained and also has the job of Bishop's Secretary and Communications Officer, together with being parish priest. With so many priests I would have thought he would have one job and would be nowhere near getting a parish. The parish is celebrating 80 years.

It was only about twenty minutes in the car but it was a very different world. It is farming country and quite poor. The church is, nonetheless, impressive with a large parish centre and buildings used as classrooms for catechetics. There was also a pool of not such clean water in which a lot of children were delighting - many just jumping in fully clothed.

There are three Jesuit scholastics and a seminarian sending a pastoral appointment in the parish. Very pleasant and welcoming but not a lot of English. With parish council leaders, about 16 of us sat down for another large spread. I am a bit concerned that, at whatever meal, we never get near to consuming all the food. Where does it go? It is often said that many people here do not have the money for enough food.

The church bell rang at 7.15pm and Rosary was to start at 7.30pm, led by the community of sisters in the parish. We walked around the outside of the church and no-one was about but when we had vested and processed into the church ten minutes later there was literally not a space left in the pews. I would estimate 600 people. There were children in their church uniforms and ladies in elegant traditional dress.

I had written my homily and was told a phrase (phonetically) to say as I began. Apparently it was words of welcome and I got a round of applause. Fr Anthony had a written translation and we managed the homily.

At Communion, having distributed the host to as many as received communion, all the pre-communion children came forward to have a blessing. It took an age. But they were a delight.

I am back at the Cathedral after a rather perilous drive through pitch black streets and lanes (the street lighting is banned by the Government to save electricity). There were people on bicycles with no lights and a lot of pedestrians. So many close shaves, but the driver seemed unperturbed and calm. It is nearly 10pm and it is another early start with Bishop Alphonse - the opening of the General Chapter of the nuns next door.

### Day Thirteen - Friday 9th June

There were some lengthy speeches of welcome to me, in the parish Mass, and there was a loud round of applause. As I was leaving I was presented with another enormous bag of vintage tea, a book written by Fr Anthony, some beautiful small stones (local minerals) and a worker hat which is the circular, pointed hat worn by so many Vietnamese as protection from the sun. It will never fit into my suitcase but I have a selfie of me wearing it.

The dogs in the compound were upset about something last night and they barked loudly and frequently for over an hour. Possible intruders? It was the first time that I had heard any of them bark. They seem to recognise me and this morning, when I opened the main door to the Bishop's House, suddenly and silently two of the biggest dogs brushed past me in the dark.

I was waiting for Bishop Alphonse about 4.20am and there was singing coming from the Cathedral a steady stream of pedestrians, cyclists and motorcyclists making their way along the path to the Cathedral. If the timetable makes it possible, I will try to get to the Cathedral tomorrow morning and see what is happening. It seems to be more than just Mass.

The Bishop and I walked to the convent chapel - a hundred yards - and the sisters were singing morning prayer. The Mass began at 5am and lasted until 6.10am. Perhaps I am getting obsessed with numbers but the sisters sit in strict single file in the benches.

In the chapel there were twenty lines of pews, and 18 places in each row, divided into four blocks. That equals 360. In the side aisles were musicians, servers and others - over 30 sisters. The doors at the back of the chapel were open for some air and there were sisters passing throughout the Mass. I was told that they were the staff of the infirmary, staff of the orphanage, kindergarten, kitchen etc. After the Mass we were walking through a sheltered area connected to the chapel, (I would say probably 30yards x15yards) and the sister explained that they have a recollection day every month when all the sisters of the mother house gather and this space is needed for them as the chapel is full. The total in the convent remains over 500. It seems more like a village. There is also building work going on and it was explained that, at present, the sisters sleep in open dormitories of fifty beds (which I saw last year) and this building will mean that just four sisters will share a room. How different to anything I have seen in the UK.

The seventy sisters attending the General Chapter of the Holy Cross came to a separate refectory for breakfast: noodles, sticky rice with nuts, dim sum. I was back in my room by 7am with the promise that two sisters would call at 8am to take me into the city of Vinh after the main rush hours of traffic. It is a little cooler today, but still 28 degrees first thing, expected to rise to 32 degrees. The sister at breakfast said that the previous week had touched 42 degrees on two days so they feel more comfortable now.

A driver and two sisters of the Holy Cross came punctually at 8am. More surprises were in store. One of the sisters is the driver of the Mother House Convent. She drives cars, minibus and full-sized coach. Given the traffic here, I can see why that can be a vocation in itself! The other sister is studying in Iowa, U.S.A. and staying in a Presentation Convent there. She was last in Vietnam in 2019, and returned here four days ago. This afternoon she will see her family for the first time since she arrived. I was a bit shocked that my needs were more important than her family reunion.

We drove into Vinh. It is a city of about one million people and rather more developed than I had remembered. The approach is very typically Vietnamese, mainly one and two storey buildings with shops spilling on to the pavement all along the roadside. Suddenly there was a change and we entered a new development zone, with some high-rise hotels, banks, businesses and hospitals. This area is much tidier, with carefully manicured hedges and flowerbeds. Vinh is getting more of a reputation as a resort with its beaches but I think it relies on foreign tourists with few Vietnamese able to afford the time and the money for such holidays.

Our first stop was the Buddhist shrine. Although surrounded by the modern development, it was a beautiful, clean space with many temple shrines and lots of statues. There was intricate carving of wood and stone and beautiful paintings. We asked to see a monk and were told that one monk (of just four resident in this sizeable compound) would meet us after we had visited the various shrines. There was also another large building in construction for the temple facilities.



We met with a young monk who sat us down in one of the formal reception areas that I see in every place that we visit. Offers of tea were made and the monk set about making the tea on the table in front of us, refilling our tiny cups as the tea strengthened in flavour. He has been a monk for just twelve years and is appointed to pray and advise visitors, while studying and observing his hours of prayer.

The next stop was a new parish. I hope to send a photograph. It appeared out of nowhere as we drove along the road, It seats 1,000 people, with a basement hall that can double the numbers attending Mass.

New parish in Vinh





100  
Mừng  
Năm  
Thánh  
Bách  
Chu  
Niên  
Thành  
Lập

CHiesa GIESU CHOH DOI TA NOI BI YICH THAMNH THE

New parish in Vinh

We met the parish sisters who come from two congregations; the Sisters of the Holy Cross and Sisters of Charity (a French Order, founded by St Jeanne Antide Thouret, who have made their first foundation in Vietnam from a house in Laos). Both groups of sisters wanted me to visit their communities in the parish. We managed a brief visit to both but you need to understand that every visit means sitting in a formal reception area and being fed and watered, with a degree of insistence. So we had tea, fruit juice, coconut drink, ice cream, bananas, mangoleen, melon, biscuits and yoghurt, all in fast succession, in both places.

These Sisters of Charity have just one community of thirty seven sisters in Vietnam and will see six sisters make First Profession and four make Final Profession on Monday. Can I be there? Unfortunately not. The Holy Cross sister said that they had a small community in the parish, running a kindergarten for 250 children adding that, by small, she meant just 30 sisters!

There was a race back to the diocesan centre for lunch! There was no-one else on the usual priests' table so a couple of seminarians came to keep me company. Their English was not good so it made things a bit laboured but they should be commended for their sense of hospitality. Apparently, the seminarians and the sisters who eat with us are concerned, and often commenting, that I do not eat enough!

I am keeping up with BBC Radio World News and things sound very grim for those enduring the smog in Canada and the United States, caused by the 150 wildfires. I really would not be wishing this on anybody but, perhaps, it will mean some serious acknowledgement of the reality and impact of Climate Change. I have not seen a television here so have not seen pictures of New York and elsewhere.

#### Day Fourteen - Saturday 10th June

Bishop Alphonse is just a couple of months older than me. He is one of fourteen siblings and the third priest among them. One priest is in Canada, the other in his home Diocese in the north of Vietnam. We have spoken together quite a lot and although his English is not by any means fluent, he is keen to understand and be understood and he is happy to laugh a lot.

Coming back from the parish the other night, I was surprised to see how many of the shops were simply part of people's houses and, even though closed from trading, were still the place where the family would be eating together or the children playing. I commented before on the fact that the government has ordered the suspension of street lighting so as to conserve electricity for home fans and air-conditioning. That made the streets so dangerous with pedestrians, and cyclists without lights, appearing from nowhere. And you might be surprised by the luggage that some cyclists and motor-cyclists will have loaded on their vehicles. How about a 15 foot step ladder being carried sideways? A cage with a couple of large cows? Multiple crates or bundles of vegetation?

But I must say that all the drivers I have had have been calm and careful. The car we were in yesterday had a little statue of St Joseph, lying down and asleep, which was placed above the dashboard by the windscreen. It had a calming effect in the chaos of the city traffic!

I went this evening to the Holy Cross Convent, which is next door to the Diocesan compound. The grounds are extensive, with a big market garden where there were lots of sisters at work. There was also a very large construction site for the new dormitories and administration block. There were sisters unloading food from a lorry and I can only imagine what a task it must be to cater for 500 sisters every day. I got smiles and waves wherever I went but little more in English than "How are you" and "Nice to see you". I think that language is going to be the major challenge and hurdle for any priests or nuns that may come to Salford. They will need to work hard with English if their ministry is to be effective. Although, their kindness and smiles will make an important impact for the good.

At supper last evening, Bishop Alphonse told me that the Superior General of the Holy Cross Sisters was re-elected for a second term of office on the first day of the General Chapter. I must say that I feel confident that I can work with her if she decides to send a community to Salford. Also at supper, Bishop Alphonse admitted to being a smoker and had a cigarette! I told him off and he said he was used to that. His Vicar General produced an ancient pipe and filled part of it with water before he produced mouthfuls of smoke! He said that was a healthier way of smoking. We briefly discussed the indictment of Donald Trump and I did not get any indication that they favoured Trump's form of politics.

We had a later start this morning. But I wanted to see what the Cathedral is like for the first Mass of the day. The Cathedral bells began at 4am and the chanting about 4.15am. When the Mass began at 4.30am I would estimate that there were between 200 and 300 people in the congregation. Outside the church was a great muddle of bicycles and motor cycles.

The big church that we visited yesterday is the focus for Eucharistic Adoration this week, for the whole Diocese. Apparently this is a regular practice and brings large crowds together. I did not mention the hundreds of Vatican flags that surrounded the parish compound, indicating that the Eucharistic Adoration is taking place here. There was to be the main gathering today for the day of recollection, with Mass and a homily from me.

I was not expecting this event, and I think I have run out of adjectives. We arrived at the church at 7.30am to find the crowds assembling for the procession. Many of them were forming groups according to their organisation - and uniform. The procession from the square outside into the church took fifteen minutes. The children processed first, wearing their uniforms with coloured scarves. Then came the ladies in their beautiful traditional full-length gowns but the colour of their outer garment signifying their organization. So there were yellow, red, blue, green and brown and black. Then the men in their uniforms, then the many nuns from different congregations (There are 31 different orders at work in this single parish!) then thirty priests. The sun was already blazing down so many carried umbrellas. The music was loud. A brass band played outside the church entrance but the more impressive interludes were by the drummers.

When the bishop and I entered the church it was entirely full of those who had processed and we left all the crowds outside. The bishop suggested that there were between five and six thousand present. I must say that the choir were wonderful and I cannot think of any celebration, other than a papal liturgy, that I have seen which has been so solemn and dramatic. The homily seemed to go down well enough but that might have been because the translator made improvements on my text! (On the strength of that, I have been invited to celebrate Mass and preach tomorrow morning in a parish, on the way to the airport).

When it came to communion, I was given the task of blessing the children by placing my hand on their heads. There were hundreds of them. There were those who had processed and then every other pre-communion child down to new born babies.

I was processing off the sanctuary at the end of Mass when persuaded to stop for a photo with the choir. Unfortunately, that led to a photo with several other groups and individuals which seemed never-ending.

At 9.30am we sat down for lunch! I was introduced to a Franciscan sister who was born in Assisi, studied in America and joined a very new Franciscan order there: Franciscan Sisters of the Eucharist.

Lunch done by 10am, we set off along the main highway which links Ho Chi Minh City in the South to Vinh and then Hanoi in the North and then China. As the most important road in the country it is very poor condition and barely what we might call a dual carriageway. Its efficiency is hampered by the fact that, along much of the road that we saw, the shops are right up to the roadside, with vehicles stopping and starting so all the traffic is slowed down.

We travelled about 30 kilometers north to visit a church which is something of a shrine to martyrs. It was explained to me that Catholics were much persecuted and about 150 years ago 19 men were killed here, including a priest. The bodies were put into a common grave. The bones have now been exhumed and we saw them in four glass tanks, which were un-sealed for us to see. I am not sure how easy I felt about that. But it was good to see the place of pilgrimage. What startling results those first Christians had in making the foundations of the Church that I see here today!

Back at the Diocesan Centre, I have a homily to prepare for Corpus Christi. Suddenly, thunder and a heavy shower of rain, and the prospect for the rest of the day is thunderstorms.

There were just Bishop Alphonse at our table for supper last evening and it was good to speak with him. He really wants to be helpful with the selection of seminarians for Salford. Two of the selectors came to the table, during the meal, to ask if I wanted to discuss their selection but I declined. They are being very thorough and using the results of the exam, the interview and the parish priest's report. I do not think my contribution would be helpful. We agreed that there must be an immediate stress on the learning of English.

Packing was a bit more complicated with all the gifts but everything seemed to fit eventually.

Bishop Alphonse and I met at 5am to make our farewells and then I was in the car with Bishop Peter to get to the parish for Mass. It was about 20 kilometers and, being Sunday morning, there was little traffic (but reckless nonetheless). The parish is by the ocean. Again, the church was full with seating outside and all the children were in their uniforms. The choir were very good and the congregation enthusiastic in joining in. I mentioned before that the Eucharistic Convention has 800,000 children, aged 3 to 16. After the Mass each Sunday, the children have two hours of catechism and today some of the older children were actually having an examination. I do not think that would be easily accepted in our parishes!

After breakfast with fish soup and squid, there was time to see something of the coast. I was given a large fresh squid as we left but I had to be sure to leave that, with my thanks, to our driver. There would be no chance of getting that on to the plane. Even as I was

presented with it in its wrapping the smell was strong. The ocean side resort is growing fast with both housing and hotels. It is not actually part of Vinh but about 11kilometers away. I was told that both Vietnamese and foreign tourists come here but it is less popular with foreigners as Vinh Airport has very few international flights. (A correction from an earlier entry: The Communist government directly and indirectly employs not one million but eleven million. I also heard that there is a lot of people-watching and my visit will almost certainly have been documented - true?)

Vinh airport was a delight. No queue to check in, no queue for security and a pleasant two hour flight to Ho Chi Minh City. Again, there were an unusual number of children but that might be accounted for as it is the summer holidays and there is no real competition by a very antiquated railway system.

Ho Chi Minh airport is chaotic, as is the city's traffic but I am staying in a hotel very near the airport and ready for an early morning start tomorrow.

I hope to get something of a summary comment done on the way back, or in the next couple of days. What an excellent and, I hope, productive trip.