



Part Two:
Vietnam

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

My knowledge of Vietnam is shaped by distant memories of the Vietnam War which dominated the news headlines for so long while I was a university student, in the 1970s.

My first contact with Vietnamese people was only in the 1990s when I was blessed to have two Vietnamese priests assisting in the parish. That brought me into some, limited, contact with the Vietnamese community - at first in Westminster Diocese and more recently here in the Greater Manchester area.

Why am I travelling to Vietnam? The reason dates back to the “ad limina” visit to the Vatican of the Bishops of England and Wales in 2018. When we met with Pope Francis during that visit, he had delighted in telling us that the Bishops of Vietnam had recently had their “ad limina” and told him that they had over 4,000 seminarians! Given the limited Catholic population of Vietnam, this number seemed certainly more than their needs. I think that a number of the English and Welsh bishops had it in mind that they might benefit from arrangements with a Vietnamese Diocese. I had made a few enquiries, but nothing more concrete, when the pandemic broke out and the whole matter was delayed.

At the beginning of 2022, it was apparent that the growing Vietnamese community in the Diocese of Salford were in need of a chaplain, their current chaplain was required elsewhere. I had decided to approach a Vietnamese bishop, for a replacement, when I went to Walsingham and happened to meet a group of Vietnamese pilgrims, with a Vietnamese priest, from London. The priest was very enthusiastic about giving me contact details for his Bishop, and the Diocese of Vinh.

My initial contact with Bishop Alphonse has been very warm and generous. He is willing to supply a priest chaplain for the Vietnamese community but also has priests who would be willing to serve in the Diocese of Salford.

The invitation was made to visit his Diocese and consider possible arrangements.

As mentioned above, my own experience of Vietnamese priests has been primarily in the two priests who came to Enfield, while I was parish priest. They were truly excellent. Always kind and helpful, they were hard-working and prayerful.

I know very little about the contents of the visit - I have simply been invited to stay with the Bishop from Sunday 4th September to Saturday 10th September. I hope I shall see something of Bishop Alphonse's Diocese.

Day eight...

I have certainly woken up in a very different world to Singapore. The arrival at Vinh Airport was very quick and easy and Frs Viet and Paul were there to meet me and, with Francis as driver, we travelled the 19 kilometres to the Bishop's House.

Fr Viet showed me the house timetable. It begins with a wake-up call at 4am! Mass at 4.45am and breakfast at 6am. I was invited to sleep longer because of my travels but tomorrow I am invited to preside at the 5am Mass for the minor seminarians!

I have been learning about this place which seems quite unreal. I met with Bishop Alphonse and his Auxiliary Bishop Peter this morning for an hour. They are delightful characters. +Alphonse was born in the south of the country and has 13 siblings. +Peter was born in the communist north, with just 7 siblings. They spoke of living through the war. +Aphonse is my age, , within just a few months, so would have been a teenager and in his early twenties for the worst of the fighting. Curiously, both kept referring to "Saigon" rather than "Ho Chi Minh".

The statistics about the diocese are from a different world. Here, on this diocesan campus, there is the bishop's House, a large church, a house of retirement for priests, the building of a new Pastoral Centre which is a four-storey building, the pre-seminary (with thirty young men) and a convent which has (and I checked this number) no less than 500 nuns, and an orphanage. These are sisters of the Holy Cross, founded in Vietnam. They have over 1,000 sisters in this diocese and 10,000 in the whole country. This must make this order one of the largest, if not the largest, in the world.

Seminarians. There is an examination offered once every two years which is usually taken by about 200 young men. Following an interview and the gathering of other information, just thirty are chosen to enter the seminary. It is already suggested that, if we come to an agreement, two or more pre-seminarians would be selected for Salford at this stage and put on intensive English study in order to be sent to England for seminary after two years.

A Scottish diocese has already made this arrangement. Older and more experienced priests would also be available. Nineteen seminarians have just gone to New Zealand and two to Scotland. Priests from this diocese are also being sent to other Vietnamese dioceses where there may be a shortage of clergy. I wonder why this diocese is so well-provided with vocations? I might be being cynical in thinking that this might be a "career" choice and a way out of poverty but there is no evidence of that yet. Perhaps the answer will emerge. Language for those travelling abroad will be a major challenge but that is well understood.

The bishops are eager that I should see something of the diocese during my stay and we will plan possibilities day by day. I am rather taken with the idea of getting into the mountains and it was suddenly decided that I will travel tomorrow to see a World Heritage site, the biggest caves in the world - of which I know nothing. But it gets me to the mountains and a rural parish.

The benefit of the early rise is the provision of a quiet time after lunch. Even as we walked from one building to another, an umbrella was provided as the heat is very strong. There is no trace of the downpour of last evening.

Then it was off to the seminary, which is just beginning a new academic year. I am left rather speechless by what I have seen.

The seminary. A broad campus of buildings housing the 160 seminarians. We need to remember the full process of formation for the priesthood here. 1. A time of enquiry. 2. The examination for entry. 3. Two years as a pre-seminarian. 4. Two years philosophy. 5. One year pastoral placement. 6. Four years theology. 6. One more year Pastoral placement. 7. Diaconate for at least six months. 8. Priesthood. Ten years in total and most candidates have completed a four-year university degree before applying.

The seminaries were closed between 1945 and 1988 by the communists. All applicants must be below the age of 28 years. Today all the seminarians were coming back for the start of the new academic year. There were no classes as they begin after the Feast of the Birthday of Our Lady on 8th September. But today they were all out working in the grounds, clearing dead leaves, cutting the lawns, gathering fallen palm tree branches. They were all looking so cheerful.

Then another shock. The Convent. This is more of a village than a convent. The Lovers of the Cross Congregation was founded by a Frenchman Lambert de la Notte in 1670. It flourished but suffered badly in the 20th Century wars. It has bounced back. The sisters, a great number of whom seem so young and always smiling, wear black trousers, a blue tunic and a simple veil. They put on a black full-length coat for prayer. The place was buzzing, with so many different works, including: kindergarten, residential care for children with special needs, vestment making, altar bread manufacture, medicine production, home for abused women, orphanage, home for elderly sisters. Their simplicity was marked, and I was taken



to see the dormitories - rooms with up to forty beds. These beds are moreorless touching and there is no bedding, just a pillow for each.

(Everywhere I have been in Singapore and Vietnam, we are seated in a very formal reception room and offered coffee, water, biscuits and fruit etc. Such hospitality)

After the convent, +Peter, Fr Paul and Fr Dan took me into the city of Vinh. I am surprised by the lack of traffic but what I saw was chaotic. There are very few cars or motor vehicles, almost everyone is on a motorbike, bicycle or on foot but the chaos is in the total disregard for a highway code. The emphasis seems to be to just make sure you steer around anything in the way, whether or not they are on the right side of the road, or in the middle. I saw the coast with the magnificent beach which makes Vinh a popular holiday destination for the Vietnamese. There are over one hundred hotels of varying size and level of service. The centre of the city has just a few highrise buildings, mainly hotels. The whole area is otherwise a ribbon development of mostly single-story housing - quite a degree of poverty for most I guess. Again, it is rather late and I have the prospect of the 5am Mass.

Day nine..

I must have slept quite well the first night in Vinh as I was unaware of the 4am wake up call. But this morning the church bell was chiming loudly and the house-dogs (of which there are several) all started to whine and howl.

One thing I forgot to record yesterday was about the convent. I mentioned the dormitories where the sisters sleep. Outside the dormitories were the corridor “wardrobes”. On the floor along the corridor on each side were suitcases laid end to end. Above each suitcase was a coatrack. Each sister has a suitcase and the space above it for all her belongings. She has nothing else. What simplicity and what a sense of freedom from things! I also forgot to mention the number of novices. There are 50 novices in the first year and 42 novices in the second year of the novitiate. 57 sisters took final vows this year. (And to repeat, from a second conversation with the sisters this morning, the Holy Cross sisters number 506 in this mother house, 1,218 in this diocese, and more than 10,000 in Vietnam!)

The Mass was very interesting this morning. I arrived in the chapel at 4.50am to find the 32 pre-seminarians in military precision in lines in their benches, all dressed in cassocks. They sang so well, and in English. They have Mass in English normally every Friday. Their chanting of Morning Prayer (in Vietnamese) was very devotional and reminded me of the Buddhists. The competition was the 4.30am Cathedral Mass, the 4.45am Seminarians Mass and the 5am Convent Mass -all within a couple of hundred yards.

After breakfast with the bishops, we set out for Phong Nha, a World Heritage site only discovered in 1991 by an English explorer. It boasts fourteen sites of the biggest caves in the world. The journey was about four hours. Most of the way we saw just the ribbon development of small shops and businesses along the side of the road. Wherever we came to even a large village, the skyline was dominated by the largest building - a

Catholic Church. Even in the countryside, it was possible to see two or more churches at any one time. We moved from the Diocese of Vinh to the new Diocese of Hatinh. This was part of Vinh Diocese until three years ago when the new diocese was created. In its former state, Vinh must have been an impossible size. +Alphonse said that he could not get around the whole Diocese with such distances. Even in its reduced state, it is ten times the size of Salford Diocese. Vinh seems to be the Catholic heart of the nation.

The housing in these rural districts is simple and poor. The occasional two storey house is to be seen as evidence of some family getting wealthier. There were a lot of graveyards on the journey. I am told that there are many tombs of unnamed victims of the war. The Buddhist graves have little model temples in bright golden colours, as tombstones.

There is much to remind me of Myanmar. Many of the labourers on the street and building sites are women. There are cattle often to be seen wandering the streets or even lying down in the middle of traffic - causing considerable delays. There are lots of wild dogs who are scavengers and very different from the peaceful, sleepy dogs at the Bishop's House. As I mentioned, apart from the lorries, there are few motor vehicles but plenty of motorbikes and bicycles, often loaded with ridiculous amounts of merchandise or even a whole family clinging to the driver. I think five people (2 adults and three children) was the record this morning on the back of a scooter. I have noticed a lot of beautiful wood carving, whether the tables and chairs in cafes or even an altar made of a single piece of highly polished wood.

We arrived at Phong Nha at 11am. I would say that it is a place beginning a radical change because of the discovery of the caves. Any sizeable building, house or hotel, is very new and built post-discovery. They dominate what would seem to have been a one street village on the banks of a river. It is surrounded by cone-shaped mountains, all of which are uncultivated and covered with trees. They look as though they have never been explored.



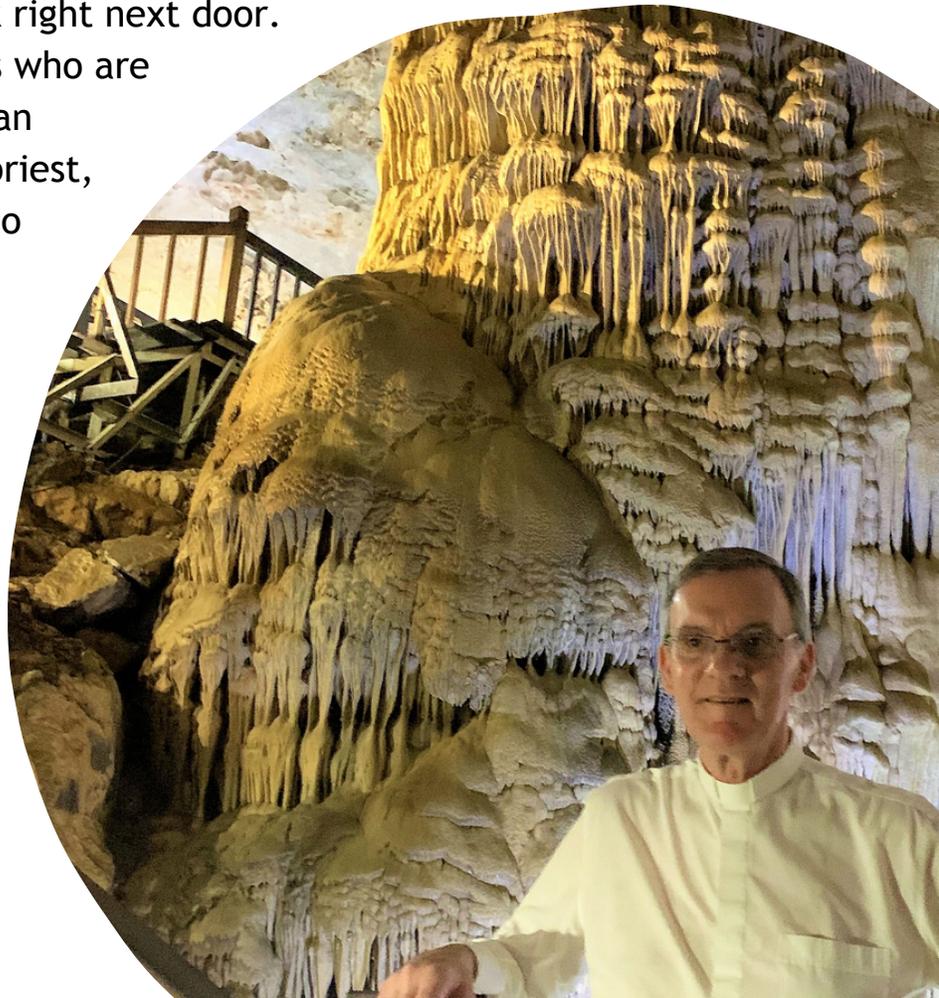
We set out for Paradise Cave at 1.45pm. I thought that it was a five-minute journey but it turned out to be an hour. Paradise is the largest of the fourteen caves that were discovered in 1991, Our longer than expected journey took us through the most wonderful scenery, along the valley floor with very steep mountains on either side, covered in very thick greenery and trees. Descending into this enormous cavern, we had a wooden walkway for about a kilometre with fantastic stalactites and stalagmites, and all sorts of galleries and passageways. While this is becoming a popular tourist attraction, we were here on the second day of the new school year and there was literally no-one around. We three entered the cave on our own and, in the hour that we were there, there were just seven other people. The silence and emptiness made the visit all the more profound.

We were to have visited another site but it was closed, so we decided to visit a couple of the churches on our way to our next engagement. These churches are so prominent, with their steeples, and their sheer size. The first church was dedicated to St Michael. While the church was in perfect order, there was building work right next door. It is being built by parishioners who are volunteers. At least the foreman is a professional

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It is being built by parishioners who are volunteers. At least the foreman is a professional builder. The priest, a very excitable gentleman who is from Da Nang but who volunteered to come and help this church, explained that the church and presbytery is flooded almost every year, up to about six feet. So, the new building is built above that level and will be a refuge for the families in the parish who are flooded out of their homes. The floods are getting worse. Climate change?



The next church was even bigger and was very busy with small children playing after school, a dancing lesson for young girls, volleyball for some young men (all apparently likely candidates for priesthood), and a large group of lady volunteers cleaning and sweeping. The parish priest here has been ordained just five months. Apparently, this is common and a sign that this Diocese is hard up for priests! He is also building but this is a large shrine to Our Lady in the grounds.

Finally, we went to our arranged supper date. Food again! This time oysters and eel stew were among the dishes on offer. I am practising my eat slowly, eat less habit and it seemed to work quite well. But this church was the largest of the three, with magnificent wooden ceiling and the presbytery is just overwhelmed with timber furniture and fittings.

Tomorrow, we hope to visit another cave, this time in a boat, then we intend to call on the Administrator-Bishop of this new Diocese. At some stage I have to prepare a talk for the seminarians.

Tomorrow looks like another 4.30am Mass.

Day ten...

I had a reprieve this morning and Mass was only at 5.30am. The Parish Priest was away at one of his four chapels of ease. He says Mass twice a day, in rotation around his parish, at 4.30am and 9pm. A long day - but the Vietnamese are keen on siesta which must help. I asked how many attended the weekday Masses and he said "because it is only at one of the chapels of ease, there are usually only about 200 people present"!

We set off at 7.30 (after another sizeable breakfast of noodles, rice and fish) to the second cave that we are to visit, called Phong Nha Cave. We travelled up the river about a mile and entered the narrow entrance to the cave. It was extraordinary. We travelled a kilometre into the cave, passing

galleries and great spaces full of natural structures, created over thousands of years.

On the way back along the river we discussed the flood that happens every year. The presbytery, in which we stayed, is at least ten feet above the present water level but every year it, and all the surrounding houses and shops of this single street village, are flooded - up to the first floor. There were water marks on the walls to show last year's flood level. That is a truly immense amount of water. The river was quite busy with fishermen and other boatmen who were drawing some sort of weeds from the riverbed. But their efforts could hardly be making a mark on the size of the river or its flooding. The parish priest was very matter of fact about simply moving everything upstairs as the river rose.

It was now 10am and we set off to visit a couple of parishes on the way to meet the Administrator Bishop of Htin Diocese. Although this part of Vietnam is mainly rural and with uncultivated steep mountain sides, there were the steeples of churches visible wherever we went - always two or more at any one time - as they are about the only buildings more than one or two storeys in height. They are mainly modelled on French 19th Century architecture, but they are very large. Certainly, one of the ones visited today was the size of Salford Cathedral. They are all busy places.

Two more churches to be visited and a long drive back to the city of Htin, to meet Bishop Louis. The Diocese of Vinh was divided recently because it was impossibly big - especially given the very Catholic nature of the population. +Louis is a delightful smiling character with pretty good English. He is actually an auxiliary bishop from Saigon, on loan for the founding of this new Diocese. He has followed the Vinh system for seminary training and has 30 pre-seminarians living in an adjacent building to the Cathedral and about 100 seminarians in the nearby seminary. Although "short of priests"(!) at the moment, he says that the rate of ordination means all will be well in a couple of years.



I asked what the main challenges were for the bishop. He said that it was the exit of the young adults to find work, particularly in Taiwan, Japan and South Korea. It is happening because industries like fishing are greatly reduced because of pollution in the ocean, and labour-saving automation of various industries. It breaks up the family and has damaged that sense of family faith in the church. I said that we had seen a lot of building work in the parishes. He smiled and said that the only cost was materials as the parishioners would do all the building themselves! This apparently includes the building of the four-storey flood building that we saw at the parish, the new pre-seminary and the pastoral work building at the parish.

We arrived back in Vinh at 6pm, to find that the Cathedral has hosted a full day's retreat for 3,500 members of the Legion of Mary. The statistics about the Church in this place simply astound me.

Notes: As we travelled today I became very aware of the number of very large cemeteries. They seemed to be all along the side of the road in the countryside and even in the middle of some built-up areas. They generally

seemed to be rather neglected but there were lots of crosses and also Buddhist symbols over the mainly older graves.

COVID apparently hit the big cities of Vietnam very badly and there is suspicion about the lack of official data on deaths and hospitalizations. But the place seems clear. Masks are optional except on public transport, but many people seem to be comfortable in wearing them.

The mountains are wonderful to see. They are so steep and conical shaped and covered with forest. There would seem to be no cultivation on them, and no-one builds houses there. Just occasionally electric pylons make their path through them. Central Vietnam, where I am staying, has a plain along the coast and then the mountains rise like a wall a few miles inland as the country borders on Laos. This makes the whole area at risk of flooding as water streams down from the mountains of Laos.

Today has emphasised the diversity of the standards of living here. In some of the rural areas we have seen there is real simplicity and probably poverty. There are lots of single room huts with corrugated roofs. Then there has been lots of simple houses, almost all single storey but properly built with signs of being comfortable (such as the ones we visited today). Then there are the modern houses, two or three storeys (one in which we ate the other evening) which show a degree of real wealth and comfort. I am told that this is often a building financed through working abroad. All these can be seen in towns and rural areas in a mixture. In these very Catholic areas, many of the houses have large statues of Christ or Mary displayed on their front walls or roofs.

Now I must close and prepare for tomorrow, The bishop has me doing some work with a talk to the seminarians as they celebrate the Feast of the Birthday of Our Lady and the official opening of the new academic year. So, there is a lie-in and breakfast at 6am!

Day eleven...

It was raining hard when I went to bed last night. I heard the rain during the night, and it was still raining heavily this morning. I can understand the risk of flooding even as the country begins the rainy season. It really was a continuous, heavy downpour. The rain eased about 11am

At 6am breakfast we discussed the migration of the young people. Apparently 22 of the 39 victims, in that lorry found in the U.K. recently, were from this province. So many people that I have met have spoken about having family members working abroad. We also heard this morning about 22 fatalities at a Karaoke session in Saigon (never referred to as Ho Chi Minh). The building in which they were gathered collapsed. Apparently, these disasters are frequent because of poor building standards and bad electrics. Over 100 others are in hospital. I wonder what dangers there may be for buildings being built by the willing parishioners in these parishes?

We began this Feast of the Birthday of Our Lady with the official opening of the academic year in the seminary. I was taken to the seminary, less than a mile away, and ushered into an auditorium - with 160 seminarians. +Alphonse and +Peter led the way to loud applause, and we were joined by about half the academic staff - some twenty priests. It was a very wordy event with long speeches from both bishops, the Rector and vice-Rector and the Spiritual Director. Of course, I could not understand a single word but +Peter was giving me some idea of content: aspirations, college discipline, on-going discernment of vocation etc. The seminarians sat in rows, all in white shirts and not a grey hair on the very black-haired heads. They look so young but the youngest was at least 24 years of age.

There was a photographer so I hope I can send something on, and you will understand my shock to see the room so full of students. There was some music, and solo singing from one student. I gave a speech (translated by +Peter) about Pope Francis and his appeal to think globally, to care for our

common home and see the need to put faith into action and not just keep it quietly to ourselves. I also spoke about the mission of the priest. All speakers were loudly applauded, even me. A few of the seminarians seemed to understand my English and I hope +Peter's translation was clear. The whole event was about one hour and three quarters. That was followed by Mass, and the numbers of students was swelled to over 200 by the members of the religious orders, including a number of young monks dressed in their Cistercian habits. The singing was deafening and beautiful. I was asked to preach, and I spoke about Lourdes and Mary being intent on listening and the place of prayer in our ministry. Whether or not they were being polite, several of the staff thanked me afterwards for what I had said!

I am writing this during the afternoon siesta period. I am not being let off lightly. This evening, we three bishops are traveling across the city to establish a new parish and I must preach again. I am told that, before I leave on Saturday, I am to celebrate Mass for the nuns next door and there is something planned for tomorrow, though I am not sure what just yet. The rain has disappeared, and the sun is out again. The rainwater just seems to disappear in an instant. Now I have a meeting with +Alphonse and +Peter. They seem to be very concerned to have a plan for training some priests to come to Salford and for a more senior priest to come to be a chaplain to the growing Vietnamese community, which is based in Manchester. It will be a while before things can be agreed and there will need to be discussions with people back in the diocese.

The meeting with the bishops went well. There are lots of options to consider. Vinh has sent priests to Canada and America in the past and to New Zealand and Scotland and Australia more recently. +Alphonse has a brother priest in Canada and +Peter a nephew a priest in New Zealand. I walked around the diocesan campus. The cathedral is enormous but in need of a lick of paint. There is the new pastoral building which is on a grand scale. The seminary and the Bishop's House are certainly generous in size.

I wandered across the cathedral school where there were a large number of children playing after classes. There was a big dance group. A seminarian, now in his final placement before ordination came up to me. He had obviously heard about the Mass this morning and why I am here in Vinh. Then I was suddenly swamped by fifty or more small children all wanting to practice their English... “What is your name?” “How old are you”. But most could not count in English to my age! All smiling and waving with nervous giggles. Since just about everyone here has heard about Manchester, for the obvious football reason, I seem to be a bit of a celebrity.

Sadly, the forecast is for constant rain until my departure. I hope that does not prove to be the case, but it started while we were at Mass this evening. This was another shock. +Peter and I went to a local parish, just a couple of miles away.

The church was literally overflowing - more than a thousand people. I asked if this is a special feast for the parish. “No. Most evenings are like this...” was the parish priest’s reply. The congregation were divided man and women, and the central aisle was for the children and young people.



I preached again. A full choir led the singing but the whole congregation were enthusiastic. The main stance for people at Mass is to have arms folded. It looks rather good. After communion the youngest children came to have a hand on the head in blessing from the two bishops. Immediately after Mass all the young people wanted a photograph - some in groups (such as the Eucharistic Friends, and the altar servers), some as friends and some as individuals. That lasted a good quarter of an hour. Then suddenly everyone had gone, and the heavens opened. It was 8.30pm and the day seems to start for most people about 4am.

Not sure what is happening tomorrow. There have been various suggestions, but I shall simply wait to be told when to be ready and where to go. I have another lie in, with breakfast at 6am.

Day twelve...

Early morning: Given the difference in the hour, I only awoke this morning to messages about the death of Queen Elizabeth yesterday. May she rest in peace. I am pleased that she only had a brief final illness and seems to have died very peacefully. But what a shock, nonetheless. I feel a long way from it all.

As I opened the emails this morning there was a flood of newspaper comments, tributes from a wide range of people and from organisations and faith groups. The Press must be in overdrive, what with the new Prime Minister beginning to make radical decisions as well. I wonder whether the news will be widely known here and what the reaction might be? I have to preach this morning and I think I need to start with the news of the Queen's death. So strange to be talking of a new King! Given his age, the demands on him are going to be great.

In contrast, I cannot stop thinking about the crowded church last evening.

Can it really be that people “normally” attend daily Mass in their parish in such numbers? Many of the ladies, all gathered together on one side of the church, were wearing the full-length traditional dresses, the children were smartly dressed and very attentive - even the little ones were singing the hymns and responses. But the Bishop and the parish priest made little of it - “it’s quite normal”. (I can say that I have not seen a television screen since I arrived here. I gather that much of the broadcasting is government dictated with a lot of propaganda so not very popular. Television is not a major distraction. The young people have their phones and social media but getting to church seems to be such an acceptable priority)

Just back from breakfast and all the priests at table knew of the Queen’s death. I got the impression that there was a healthy respect for her, without much more knowledge.

The Mass this morning, at 8am, is the celebration of a new parish. It was officially formed a year ago, but Covid has meant that there has been no formal opening. That is to happen this morning, together with Confirmations. I have a feeling that it will be quite lengthy. It is curious that it will be in the morning of a normal working weekday. Will people come? I suspect, given the turnout elsewhere, that people will see this as a priority and will be there in good numbers.....

Early afternoon: Another shock! Many more shocks like this and I may have a heart-attack. We set out at 7.15am. The parish was about twenty minutes away. The rain had begun. We passed a couple of villages, with their own enormous churches, and the shops were already open and trading was busy with people everywhere. We came to another village and the place was completely shutdown - no-one in sight. Guess where they all were? We turned off the road into the church compound to find the crowds. First an escort of uniformly and elegantly dressed ladies, then a bouquet of flowers which I had trouble carrying as it was really heavy. The space made into a



sacristy could have been a florists, with bouquets and floral displays around the walls.

How to describe the Mass? This is not the biggest church I have seen and would probably hold 500-600. The 92 Confirmation candidates were seated in the central pews, to the front. Behind them were members of church associations such as the Legion of Mary. There was a 20-30 piece brass band, with the choir loft full of singers. I counted 40+ concelebrant priests, five Cistercian monks, religious sisters who, judging by their habits, were from two or three different Congregations. The side aisles' seating was full and so were the large marquees along the side of the church and at the back. Still more people seemed happy to stand in the car park in the pouring rain, under umbrellas. The Mass last two hours and included a formal establishing of the parish and the confirmations. The singing was

loud, the offertory procession very devotional - the speeches rather long. Communion was hectic and +Alphonse and I made our way to the back of the church to touch the heads of all the children. I was asked to speak and spoke of my sadness at the death of Queen Elizabeth but that I was so encouraged to see the faith and energy of this new parish and the confirmation of so many young people. Every liturgical event has just been rather overwhelming.

The rain was becoming a fierce downpour and the journey back took much longer. Even the windscreen wipers on double time did not give the driver good visibility, especially as the sky was so dark, and the motorbikes were more difficult to negotiate because of the deep puddles and sprays of water. The rain has meant that the trip to another parish this afternoon has been cancelled. I have supper, more food, with +Alphonse this evening and must prepare for my departure tomorrow to Cambodia. I am still hoping to see a little more of the convent of the Sisters of the Holy Cross.

When the rain stopped about 4pm, I went out for a short walk. My room is next to the Bishop's Reception room and a large group of about 40 adults had arrived. They are indigenous people from the far Northwest of Vietnam. They were dressed in their traditional costume and looked very Tibetan. I was called in to listen to their singing. They had brought a load of presents including a wild pig, chicken, clothing and food. +Alphonse knows this people from years ago, in his ministry. All shy smiling faces. Plenty more photographs.

I had hoped to visit the convent for Mass this morning, but a sister died and their timetable changed. So, I asked if I could visit this afternoon. There were sisters everywhere but the focal point was a small chapel where the coffin of the deceased sister was being kept until the funeral tomorrow. It was an open casket and surrounded by a mountain of flower arrangements, with lots of sisters in prayer. There was a group of young ladies dressed in white, without a veil. They are postulants - just 32 of them this year! The sisters preparing for profession, 51 of them, are on pastoral placement for six months and the sisters preparing for final vows are here on retreat - 57

of them. These numbers are beyond comprehension. There is a possibility that I will get to an evening Mass or Mass tomorrow morning. I would just love to see them all together. The Assistant Superior General spoke again about the possibility of a community in Salford. Who knows?

To round off the day - an ambition fulfilled. I went to concelebrate a Mass at the convent. It was a Mass for the deceased sister, conveniently called Sr Mary. Her funeral is tomorrow. It was truly astonishing to see 350 nuns in the chapel - all habited, whether postulants, or temporarily or finally professed. The novices (all one hundred of them) are away at the moment. The place was full with 350. I am not sure how they could get all 500 members of the community in there all at once.

5am Mass tomorrow so I must close.



Day thirteen...

Lots more heavy rain, with thunder and lightning, during the night. It is not difficult to imagine the flooding of the plain in this part of Vietnam. In fact, the news this morning is that part of this Province of Vietnam is now in flood.

Today is a day for travelling. I hope to add a few notes while sitting in the airports. Last minute goodbyes and gifts. I suddenly have two small statues of Our Lady of Vietnam and a 600 page book by +Peter "The Church as the Sacrament of Harmony".

Also, this morning has been the funeral Mass for Sr Mary, at 7am. There was a very slow procession to the chapel with a solemn drumbeat and gong, all very solemn but beautiful. As we left for the airport, a long procession - with drum and gong - was slowing making its way to the cemetery.

What an extraordinary experience these days in Vietnam have been. Such kind and smiling people, and so hospitable.

I have seen very few cars outside the city, and none of them have been smart limousines. Public transport seems non-existent outside the cities, though we have crossed an occasional railway track, laid in French colonial days, but I never saw a train. There does not seem to be any regular public bus service but private buses run regularly between the cities. I certainly would not want to drive here. Everything is too unpredictable, with motorbikes and bicycles on either side of the road and emerging from alleyways and crossing traffic. The children are fearless, even the little ones, on their bikes. But I did hear this morning that there are no less than 40 fatalities a day on the roads.

Given the whole demeanour of the priests here, and my past experience of

them in London, I think we would do well to cultivate a relationship with the Diocese of Vinh. Language will be a priority as so much of priesthood and ministry lies in good communication. The Sisters of the Holy Cross have also asked if they can consider a foundation in the diocese. I think we have to gratefully accept that we are a “mission” church and must rely, at least to some extent, on priests and religious from elsewhere as we have relied so much on the Irish priests in the past.

+Peter took me to the airport. Vinh airport was easily negotiable. Ho Chi Minh not so easy as it meant claiming baggage and changing terminal (just a short walk away). The international terminal was very quiet indeed. Perhaps there is a public holiday about which I have heard nothing. The flight to Phnom Penh was just thirty minutes and while there was lots of bureaucracy for the visa, the health certificate and the customs declaration, I was through very quickly.

The driver to the hotel was very informative about the corruption at the present time and the growing influence of the Chinese, with their investment in building and roads and their apparent growing influence in government policy. The roads were just as chaotic as Vinh but much more so in that it is a much bigger city with a lot more cars. As we arrived at the hotel, he took me past a Chinese home where there was a fleet of ostentatious cars, a Rolls Royce, Bentley, Lamborgini, lotus racing car - about seven cars in all - just one married Chinese couple, he says. There was a security man to watch over them.

The hotel is small and in the centre of the city. It is certainly pretty noisy but I am here just one night before leaving for the city of Battambang tomorrow morning.

CAFOD have kindly put together a schedule for the days that I am in Cambodia and - as always with CAFOD - no time is being wasted.