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## A BRIEF HISTORY OF THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE CONGREGATION OF THE PASSION OF JESUS CHRIST IN VIETNAM

By Trung Thu DHM and Paul Vuong CP

Three Passionist religious were the founders of the mission in Vietnam: Fr. Jefferies Foale CP, Fr. Thomas Anamattathil CP and Fr. Francisco J. Murray CP. Fr. Jeff and Fr. Thomas, arrived on 12 October 2005, and Fr. Francisco, arrived on 1st March 2006, with a short visit in November 2005.

Fr. Francisco served in Vietnam for 6 years, from 2006-2012 and Fr. Jeff and Fr. Thomas have been in Vietnam until now, October 2018.

Fr. Ottaviano D'Egidio CP, the General of the Congregation, and his Council sent them to the new mission in a beautiful ceremony in the church of St. Paul of the Cross, Glen Osmond, South Australia, on 21 September 2005.

During these 13 years, the first Passionist community has been built up in Vietnam with many vocations. Let us recall their journey with gratitude to God and to the Congregation.

### Father Jeff's story

Father Jeff Foale, a farm boy from Australia, joined the Passionists when he was 12 years old and trained to be a preacher, but became a missionary in Papua New Guinea from 1961. People were running away from the Indonesian army, in West Papua, and they came to his mission station as refugees. He fed them, cared for them and protected them. But, when he was out of town, the government came and kicked these people out and sent them back. He could not do anything about it. It happened in 1968, and it left its mark in his heart that he should protect refugees. In 1975, many refugees arrived in Australia from Vietnam, and he worked to help them for a very long time. A leading figure in helping Vietnamese refugees in Australia was Sister Tran Thi Nien a refugee from Vietnam, from the Congregation of the Lovers of the Holy Cross, who joined the Sisters of Mercy in Australia. In the beginning, Fr. Jeff celebrated Mass in English and Sister Nien translated the relevant parts into Vietnamese. In 1979, a Vietnamese Jesuit, Fr. Augustine Nguyen Duc Thu, joined them. In 1999, while Fr. Jeff was having lunch in the Vietnamese community in Adelaide, the capital city in the State of South Australia, Fr. Augustine and Sister Nien asked him: "Why don't you go to Vietnam?"

During 1994-2006, Fr. Jeff was in Rome as a Consultor for the Passionist Superior General. He was looking for ways to support missionary work; so he went to China with the Korean Passionists. He hoped that the Passionist Congregation would have

a mission in China started by the Korean Passionists, but after it began he was frustrated because in China, the Church has very little freedom. After that he thought about Myanmar and Vietnam. Finally, he chose Vietnam. According to his congregation, the Passion of Christ is the most precious gift to be proclaimed. But how to bring it to Asia was his question. Fortunately, he found that Vietnam would be a place for their mission and for the benefit of millions there.

## **A significant decision**

In October 2002, Fr. Jeff suggested to his Superior General that the time had come for them to make a new foundation in Vietnam. Fr. Ottaviano, the Superior General, encouraged Fr. Jeff to go to Vietnam and report on the situation.

In the month of June, 2003, Fr. Jeff came to Vietnam. He met a number of archbishops and bishops, priests and sisters. He met Cardinal John Baptist who told him that he welcomed him and would bless his community if they would come here. After three weeks, he returned to Rome and reported to his Superior General and the Consultors in July. They instructed him to go ahead and make a plan for their new mission in Vietnam.

## **Companions on the road**

On his trip to Vietnam, Fr. Jeff was not alone. He was accompanied by a Vietnamese woman who had been living in the United States of America. Her name was Theresa Anh Sang Luu. This is how Fr. Jeff met her. In his duty as Consultor, he was making a visitation of the Passionist community in Orlando, Florida, United States. They have a rest house and Theresa was doing voluntary work helping the sick Fathers there. When the Superior introduced her he said to Fr. Jeff, "Fr. Jeff, meet Theresa, she is from Vietnam." Fr. Jeff said to her: "I'm very glad to meet you and I hope to bring our Passionists to your country". She replied: "I will help you". And she really did that. Due to her great generosity, the Passionists in Vietnam have considered her their first benefactor.

In 2005, Fr. Jeff was in India on duty. He was invited to do a presentation for the Indian Passionist Assembly. So, he conducted a slide show on Vietnam, its culture and the possible ministries to be engaged in. At the end of his presentation, he told them: "The next photo is of a person who will go to Vietnam with me". The next slide contained the photo of all of them! Next day he returned to Rome. One week later, he got an e-mail from Brother Thomas Anamattathil.

Bro. Thomas volunteered for the mission in Vietnam. It was very quickly decided. Of course, he came after some months, but it took only 3 days for their Superior General, Consultors, Regional Superior and Provincial to decide that he could come to Vietnam. He just could not believe that his life would be very different. At that time, he had been Director of Seminarians and Superior of a small community for 1 year in Kerala, India. The photo in the last slide presented by Fr. Jeff remained in the mind of Thomas. He discussed the matter with a brother before he wrote to Fr. Jeff.

Thomas was professed as a Brother in 1989 and in 2002 he decided to seek to become a Priest, and it happened in 2009 in India.

To have a good team for a new mission in Vietnam, their Superior General transferred to Vietnam a priest who was serving in Indonesia. His name was Francisco José Murray, an Argentinian. When they arrived in Vietnam Fr. Jeff was 72 years old, Fr. Francisco was 51 and Br. Thomas was 37.

## **Settling down**

On October 12, 2005, Fr. Jeff and Br. Thomas came to Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, from Australia. Fr. Francisco came for a short visit in November 2005, and he officially got involved in the mission in Vietnam on March 1, 2006.

When Fr. Jeff and Br. Thomas arrived in Vietnam, Theresa and her niece, Thu, welcomed them at the airport. Thu had a mini hotel, so Fr. Jeff and Br. Thomas stayed there. After 2 weeks, Theresa went back to the United States. As she was leaving, the two Passionists felt a little bit lost because she had been translating for them, had been arranging the house and had been showing them the streets when she was there. Suddenly they would have to do all these things for themselves. Not only that, after two weeks, Fr. Jeff also left, for Rome. Thomas remained alone in the mini hotel for more than weeks. To be well adapted to the new environment, Thomas began learning Vietnamese in the University of Social Sciences and Humanities on October 29, 2005.

## **New acquaintances**

A week before Thomas left India for Vietnam; he met an Indian gentleman who was working in Vietnam. This man had returned to India for a week's vacation. His name was Paulose. Paulose had relatives who were neighbours of Thomas's community in India. As they knew that Thomas was going to Vietnam, they introduced Paulose to him. Paulose gave Thomas his telephone number in Vietnam and asked him to call when he got to Vietnam. He said he knew an Indian priest who had also been working in Vietnam.

It happened that two days after Thomas arrived in Vietnam, he called Paulose. Immediately, Paulose came to the mini hotel with an Indian priest, Fr. Jerry Kumar, a Claretian. They talked about many things. Finally, Fr. Jerry invited all of them to join his community in celebrating the feast of his congregation on October 24, 2005. As they promised, Fr. Jeff, Thomas and Theresa went to Fr. Jerry's community in Le Van Sy Street, Phu Nhuan District, Ho Chi Minh City. On that occasion, they met many Priests, Sisters and Brothers from different Congregations, especially the foreign missionaries who had formed themselves into a group.

This group was formed to help newcomers and other foreign missionaries to be connected with the people. Useful information was shared in common. They held a meeting once a month at different places. On that day, they invited Fr. Jeff and Br. Thomas to join them. When Fr. Arvin who had organized the meetings, left Vietnam,

the group chose Br. Thomas to be coordinator and he continued in that role for three years until he was ordained a priest.

Let us return to the day when Paulose and Fr. Jerry came to meet Thomas at the mini hotel. They discussed where Thomas would stay after Fr. Jeff and Theresa left.

Paulose suggested that Thomas and he could rent an apartment in Nguyen Huu Canh Street, Binh Thanh District, Ho Chi Minh City, near Thi Nghe Bridge. All of them agreed with this suggestion. So Thomas and Paulose lived together for three and a half months until Fr. Jeff came back.

## **A rented house and house building**

When Fr. Jeff came back in December 2005, he stayed briefly with Paulose and Thomas in the same apartment. After a short time, Fr. Jeff left again and when he returned, they made a plan to rent a house.

On March 13, 2006, Fr. Francisco arrived in Vietnam and stayed with Br Thomas and Fr. Jeff in three different rooms of the mini hotel where Fr. Jeff and Thomas were staying. They studied Vietnamese and strengthened their community life, while they contacted young people and visited different parts of Vietnam in order to know the culture, the people and the landscapes of this beautiful land. Every day they celebrated mass in Fr. Jeff's room.

They had difficulties in finding a house, and everyone was feeling quite frustrated from all the going around and looking. Then, fortunately a good opportunity came their way. It was a blessing that Theresa had come back at that moment. One day, Fr. Jeff and Theresa went looking for an old lady near Fatima church because they had heard she knew about a suitable house for rent. They went into a shop to ask where this lady lived. When Theresa told the shop lady, Ms Lan, what they were looking for, she got very excited, "That's my house!," she said. They were exceedingly happy with her answer and went to see the house and Fr. Jeff fell in love with it. After that, they decided to rent that house. It was located in Street 15, Hiep Binh Chanh Ward, Thu Duc District, Ho Chi Minh City. The three religious, Jeff, Thomas and Francisco, moved in in March 2006. It was a lovely two bedroom house (Jeff's and Francisco's rooms) on a block of about 350 square metres, with a kitchen, and living room and a separate small building at the back with one bedroom (Thomas's bedroom) and a big room for meetings and/or playing ping pong. In front of the house was a beautiful little garden with many kinds of flowers, a small fish pond and a tall palm tree. It was called St. Paul's (Fatima). The rent was not too high, and other congregations really envied the Passionists such a good home.

Opposite the house was the community of Visitation Sisters and, 300 meters away, was Fatima Church. They were able to live there for 9 years until the house was sold on April 30, 2015.

In order to foster young vocations, in August 2006 they rented a house for students near Cau Do, Nguyen Xi Street, Binh Thanh District. It was called the 1st house. In the beginning, they had 4 students and two among them became priests, Fr. Truc

and Fr. Thanh. These students used to come to St. Paul's (Fatima) to learn English and would gather for vocation accompaniment on Sundays, twice a month. The students also went to Ba Chuong Church for some classes. Later on, the Passionists rented the 2nd house in Phu Nhuan District. Due to some changes, the 1st house moved to Binh Loi and the 2nd house moved to Tan Binh District. In those days the three foreigners always lived away from the students as required by the police. In 2007, they bought a piece of land in Thu Duc District and started to build their own house in 2009. This house was called Saint Gabriel's. All the students in Binh Loi moved to this new house in 2009. At the same time, the students in Tan Binh moved to Binh Loi where they lived until October 2017.

## **Contributors**

There were many other Passionists involved in the mission in Vietnam.

Fr. Augustine Jun-Su Kim, a Korean, was sent to replace Fr. Francisco in 2012. He stayed for 3 years and 2 months. He was the formator for the professed students.

Fr. Orven from the Philippines arrived in 2012 and stayed until July 2017. He was the formator of the Aspirants and the Pre-philosophy students.

Fr. Paulus Jasmin, from Indonesia, arrived in December 2015. He is the formator for the professed students.

Fr. Jeff as Mission Superior has had the heaviest responsibility, that of fund raising for the mission in Vietnam. He was 72 years old when he came to Vietnam. He translated the life of Bishop Lambert De La Motte, the first Bishop of Vietnam, from French to English, in order to understand the Church in Vietnam, its culture, and the perception of the people. Fr. Francisco was the formator of aspirants, postulants and newly professed during his stay in Vietnam. Fr. Thomas has been the director of vocations from the beginning, as well as coordinator and manager, including responsibility for the finances and building construction. He has also been formator for different groups.

## **The fruits**

Due to all the sacrifices and efforts of Fr. Jeff and his collaborators, including all the Passionists that have lived or are living in this mission, during these 13 years, the Congregation of the Passion of Jesus Christ has borne much fruit in Vietnam. The community in Vietnam now has 6 Vietnamese priests, 1 deacon, 9 professed, 5 novices, 11 philosophers and 10 aspirants. Our students, deacons and priests have already been serving the people of God in many poor, remote parishes and in shelters for suffering people. Bishop Thiên of Cần Thơ has just invited them to take care of a small chapel at Phú Khởi and begin a Passionist spiritual ministry of prayer and retreats, leading in time to establishing a retreat house. The Passionists look forward to great missionary work among the people of Vietnam.

The foundations of a new house were laid at the end of 2015 and much work done since then with many challenges. It is located near the Saigon River with a nice view

of the city looking out from the balconies and the terrace, and with fresh and cool air from the river. The feast of St. Paul of the Cross 2018 is a significant occasion to remember the first day the Passionists have lived in this new house which is named after St. Paul of the Cross. This also marks the 13th anniversary of the arrival of The Passionists in Vietnam.

The Feast of St. Paul of the Cross,  
Founder of the Congregation of the Passion of Jesus Christ,  
Oct 19<sup>th</sup>.