

Faith and Freedom in Vietnam

Four decades after the Communist suppression of the Catholic Church, Xavier Symons travelled with 14 high school boys to Vietnam on a service project. The boys all attend Nairana Study Centre, a centre of Opus Dei in Sydney.

04/05/2014

In 1975 the new Communist regime saw Catholicism as a threatening parallel authority, and so imprisoned all Catholic bishops, closed

seminaries and dissuaded faithful from practicing. Today, the Church is stronger than ever. In South Vietnam the government recently lifted the cap on the number of priests who could be ordained. Seminaries are full, and as a consequence many seminarians need to travel overseas for training.

I was very surprised by the vibrancy of the Catholic faith in the country; it continues to grow and now numbers over 8 million people. While travelling by bus to Saigon on a Sunday afternoon, we passed special traffic controllers who dealt with the congestion generated by all the people going to and from numerous churches.

On every street we saw houses with a statue of the Blessed Virgin on the top balcony, adapting the Buddhist culture's tradition of placing a statue of Guan Yin, the goddess of mercy, at

the apex of a house. In other homes families build small shrines to the Holy Family. And at 4:30 am church bells ring out all across Saigon. The faith of the Vietnamese is truly palpable.

In the hot and humid village of My Son, we worked closely with Fr. Joseph, an energetic parish priest who among his countless duties looks after extensive housing repairs for poorer residents. The harsh conditions of the Mekong quickly weather away poorer quality wood used in the more humble houses. Indeed, one house we repaired had partially collapsed! Using money the boys had raised throughout the year, we purchased timber and corrugated aluminium to build new exteriors for five houses, which should last many decades longer than the original flimsy timber walls.

We became more ambitious in K'Long a cold, dry town in the highlands outside of Saigon. There we set about building a whole new house for one of the poorer residents, in addition to two amenities blocks for general use. Recruiting the help of local artisans, we built and rendered walls for the new house, constructed the roof, and built a bathroom.

For the last two days of the camp we headed back to Saigon. Preparations for the Tet Festival (the Vietnamese Lunar New Year celebration) were in full swing. We saw many amazing floats and floral displays being prepared in the main streets, though unfortunately we had to leave before the big day itself.

Catholics in Vietnam are hoping that this year brings more progress towards religious freedom in the country. Relations with the

authorities have indeed improved, but everyone I talked to still implored me to pray for their country. It is a great intention for all Catholics to bear in mind.

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