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This spring was harsh for several of our mission communities that found themselves in the path of tropical cyclones in Africa and India. Our missionaries and their teams were unharmed, but many buildings in our communities were severely damaged, some destroyed.

These cyclones aren't what we think of in America, where the term is another word for tornado. Rather, these massive storms are in the same family as hurricanes and typhoons and can cause brutal damage when they make landfall.

The first of these spring cyclones, Cyclone Idai, struck Mozambique on March 14. Idai had the strength of a Category 4 hurricane when it made landfall, dealing the most damage to the city of Beira. Unprecedented flooding, described by CBS News as "an inland ocean," left the city of 500,000 isolated from the rest of the country.

Divine Word Missionaries administer the St. Francis Xavier Parish in Beira. The three missionaries who live at the parish were safe, but their house was destroyed when a mango tree fell on it. The community chapel and compound wall also were damaged. Despite destruction of their own homes, members of the parish community formed a volunteer team to distribute food and other necessities to the neediest people of Beira.

Not more than two months later, Cyclone Fani made landfall near Puri in Odisha state on India's eastern coast. Fani was also a Category 4 storm when it hit on May 3, and according to reports more than 70 percent of all trees in Puri and nearby Bhubaneswar were uprooted.

Puri and Bhubaneswar are home to a Divine Word parish, an ashram and two schools. Our missionaries in the area were unhurt, but properties were damaged. The entire campus of St. Arnold's School in Bhubaneswar was flattened.

Please join me in praying for all those around the world—most recently here in America—who have lost loved ones, their homes and possessions in natural disasters. As relief efforts continue in Mozambique and India, pray that our missionaries are able to offer aid and comfort to those in need as they rebuild from these tragedies.

Yours in the Divine Word,

*Bro. Daniel J. Holman SVD*  
Bro. Daniel Holman SVD  
Mission Director

Contact me any time, my email address is:  
[director@svdmissions.org](mailto:director@svdmissions.org)

**Thank you  
for your  
prayers & support!**



*Mother of Perpetual Help Center  
Thailand*  
**Finding purpose**  
*in sorrow*

Truong Thong Le SVD

Missionaries on home leave would visit with us, and in those days many of them came from New Guinea, as the country was still called. These men inspired me. When it came time to pick a mission area, it seemed natural to volunteer for Papua New Guinea.

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**STAY  
IN  
TOUCH**



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## Mother of Perpetual Help Center Thailand



## Finding purpose in sorrow

By Father Truong Thong Le SVD

“Why is it that we do the things that we do?” I once used this fanciful phrase in one of my homilies. That was a while ago, and I can’t remember the point of the homily. Probably something about meaning. But the question has come back to me. It has preoccupied my mind because I have a more personal take on it.

I’ve been back at the mission in Nong Bua Lamphu, Thailand, for about six months now. The experience is different than when I had spent two years here during the Cross-Cultural Training Program. What sparked the existential question—“Why is it that I do the things that I do?”—was the death of a 21-year-old at the Mother of Perpetual Help Center. Phu’s death affected me personally because he was one of the children under the center’s care while I was here for the CTP. I had gotten to know Phu during my time at Mother Mary Home, a shelter for young people living with HIV and for elderly patients who have recovered but have no home to return to.

Mother Mary Home aims to empower young people living with HIV, to give them a positive outlook on life and, most importantly, to adhere to their treatment





plan. I've been trying to piece together the reasons that led Phu to the point of not taking the antiviral medications and hopelessly letting go of life. He had left Mother Mary Home at the age of 19 to explore life on his own, and within only two years, he returned to our hospice in dire condition.

Unfortunately, Phu's situation is not an isolated case but part of a trend on the rise. The Catholic Coalition on HIV/AIDS in Thailand reports an increase in young people returning to hospice centers having lost all hope and finding no reason to live. I was not in Thailand when Phu left the home. I deeply regret not being there to walk with him through his difficult times and to help him transition into adulthood.

When I was in Nong Bua Lamphu three years ago, I saw Phu as innocent, unjaded by the sophistication of the world. He maintained this outlook even though life had dealt him many hard blows. He had lost both parents to AIDS, perhaps even witnessing their deaths, and no relatives wanted to care for him. And so he was given to the Mother of Perpetual Help Center and lived at Mother Mary Home. Like Phu, the

other young people at the center have their own stories of tragedies, having been born with an incurable disease and bearing the burden of rejection and discrimination. They are, indeed, the forgotten and abandoned of the world.

Phu spent his last month at our hospice. I knew the prognosis was unfavorable, but I wanted him to have a second chance, a fighting chance. At times, all I could do was hold onto his swollen legs as he cried out in pain. There was nothing more that I could do. I prayed, of course, but God seemed to be silent at that very moment.

In the silence of my prayers, I asked: Why this child? He already had suffered so much since birth, been deprived of so many things and rejected by people who were supposed to love him. Why did he have to suffer even more in these final moments? Phu died because his case of AIDS was too far advanced, and it was tuberculosis that eventually took his life.

My prayers were unanswered, but that does not mean unheard. At Phu's funeral, I told the staff to bring all the kids in the home. I wanted to instill fear into them, using scare tactics to



*Everything in life will pass away our titles, successes, failures, pains and worries but the love of God will endure in us.*



help them understand what is at stake if they choose to forgo their antivirals.

Instead, we had a different conversation about life and the hopeful future. After a lengthy discussion, they reassured me that they know the importance of taking their medication on a timely basis. They spoke boldly: “Father, you don’t need to worry. We know better!” My fear of attending another similar funeral was dispelled.

Rather than mulling over how things could have changed, I came out of the experience with a more significant commitment to my first assignment as a religious missionary to Thailand. The Holy Spirit works in various ways, and through Phu’s death I see that this mission here is where I belong. I do the things that I do because of these faces—the young people and the patients at our center. They are not just people who need help and support, but truly in them I find the presence of Christ, the suffering Christ. I also have my own wounds and brokenness; I, too, am in need of healing. Perhaps we are united because we all share the fragility of the human person.

The mystery of suffering is incomprehensible; yet through Christ we find meaning and value in suffering. Hardships, difficulties, worries and pains, even death cannot take us from the truth that we are loved and are the beloved of the heavenly Father. Nothing can strip us of that divine dignity. Everything in life will pass away—our titles, successes, failures, pains and worries—but the love of God will endure in us. It may take us a lifetime, or longer, to understand the depth of this truth.

In the meantime, through the HIV/AIDS ministries at Nong Bua Lamphu, I strive to live up to the conviction that we are sons and daughters of God. There are headaches and heartaches each and every day, especially caring for teenagers. For the past six months I’ve been on an emotional roller coaster working with these kids, but I know that it’s part of caring. I want to be a positive presence in their lives—one that will never give up





on them, one that will never reject them and one that teaches and disciplines them even when they do not want to hear it.

Some of my happiest moments come when I finally get one of our kids to recognize the importance of education. This 17-year-old girl had been living in a government orphanage since she was 4. Because she's turning 18, the orphanage no longer can care for her. Because she is at such a critical age, Mother Mary Home was asked to continue her care and help her stay on the antiviral treatment.

After the girl had spent a few months with us, the staff and I noticed she could not read and write. She had reached high school but could not complete the course work. This showed that not only her own parents rejected her, but her teachers also did not care whether she could read or write.

Recognizing we could not reintegrate her into society without a proper education, we began to teach her the basics in reading and writing Thai. Pulling in other resources for help, I reached out to the local high school where I had volunteered teaching English. Now this young woman has private tutoring lessons in a school environment during the weekdays. She is happy living at Mother Mary Home and going to school again. She plans to finish the junior high school level, which takes about three years, and study nursing assistance.

Mother Mary Home, as a part of the Mother of Perpetual Help Center, could not be sustained without the help of so many benefactors and friends. Particularly through the annual fundraiser in Chicago, our friends and partners in the Thailand mission have made the HIV/AIDS ministry sustainable. Your donations directly impact the lives of our young people and patients. Your donations give them a second chance, a fighting chance at life.

As much as you all are committed to helping Mary Mother Home, I am committed to supporting and assisting the young people and the patients at our center. Your generosity, truly, embodies the love of God for those who are marginalized and rejected by society. ♦

## ***Mother Mary Home, and the Mother of Perpetual Help Center,***

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event  
raised over  
\$64,000!**



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All Who  
Attended!**

## **Mother of Perpetual Help Center Thailand**



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# Mission Accomplished!

## My 53 years in Papua New Guinea

*By Father Joseph Bisson SVD*

**As I reflect on my 53 years as a missionary in Papua New Guinea, it seems I was destined to serve in that country from my earliest days with Divine Word Missionaries.**

It was 1949 when I entered Miramar, our minor seminary set in a beautiful seaside town just outside of Boston. Missionaries taught classes and regaled us with stories of projects and programs in faraway places. Missionaries on home leave would visit with us, and in those days many of them came from New Guinea, as the country was still called. These men inspired me. When it came time to pick a mission area, it seemed natural to volunteer for Papua New Guinea.

Out of our graduating class of 22, four of us were assigned to Papua New Guinea. Before going overseas, we were sent to Washington, D.C., to get our master's degrees. I was in Washington when President Kennedy was assassinated on Nov. 22, 1963. The sadness of that day still lingers after all these years.

In 1964, having completed my master's degree in education, I left for Papua New Guinea. Little did I know how valuable this degree would be over the next five decades. When I arrived, I was warmly welcomed by my two heroes: Father William Ross SVD, a giant of a missionary, and Bishop George Bernarding SVD, who was in charge of the Mount Hagen diocese. My missionary dream had come true.

### **Learning the Language**

I was beginning my new career as a baby, so to speak. My first job was to learn to speak Pidgin, the lingua franca of the country. Because it is a simple language I was able to



# PAPUA NEW GUINEA

## A brief history of Divine Word Missionaries in PNG

Papua New Guinea is located in the South Pacific just north of Australia and east of Indonesia. It was first sighted by Westerners—seamen from Portugal—in the mid-1500s. It looked similar, they said, to Guinea in Africa. Hence it was named New Guinea, a name it had for 450 years. It officially got its new name in 1975 when it became independent of Australia and is now known as Papua New Guinea.

Six Catholic missionaries first arrived in New Guinea in 1845 after a sea voyage lasting one year and four months. This initial attempt at evangelization failed six years later as two of the original priests were killed by the locals and two others died of malaria. Divine Word Missionaries arrived on mainland New Guinea in 1896. It was then a German colony known as Kaiser Wilhelmsland, or German New Guinea. Australia took over the country shortly after the outbreak of World War I.

Divine Word Missionaries were part of the country's tragic history in World War II. In January 1942, one month after Pearl Harbor, Japan sent 250,000 soldiers to New Guinea and quickly took over the outlying islands and some of the coastal areas. They intended to use New Guinea as a base to take Australia. Beginning with the Battle of the Coral Sea in July 1942, New Guinea became a major battleground with the U.S. Marines and the Army fighting many fierce battles against the Japanese.

During the war, 160 of our priests, Brothers and Sisters were killed by Japanese soldiers, who considered them American spies. This was an enormous setback for our mission in New Guinea. Beginning anew in 1946, a large number of new Divine Word Missionaries, many of them American, began arriving every year.

Prior to the war Marist missionaries worked on the islands with other orders working in Papua, the southern part of the mainland. Divine Word Missionaries was the only religious order on the New Guinea mainland, and it poured in literally hundreds of priests and Brothers until other orders began to arrive after World War II.

In the early 1970s, 286 Divine Word Missionaries served in the country. From its first days there, Divine Word Missionaries made major contributions to the country's development, especially in education and health care. We built up a marvelous Catholic Church now located now in every part of the country. The Church comprises 30 percent of the population while educating 30 percent of the nation's children. Divine Word Missionaries now work in seven of the nation's 21 Catholic dioceses.

*Fr. Joseph Bisson SVD, Bishop George Bernarding SVD and Fr. William Ross SVD*



I was warmly welcomed by my two heroes: Father William Ross SVD, a giant of a missionary, and Bishop George Bernarding SVD, who was in charge of the Mount Hagen...

learn it in a month. The people of the coastal and island areas spoke Pidgin, but I was to be assigned to Mount Hagen, which is located in the highlands. Few there spoke Pidgin. Hence, after mastering Pidgin I immediately started learning the local Mount Hagen language. It took almost two years, but I finally had enough command of this complex native language to preach my Sunday homilies in it. Papua New Guinea as a whole has 700 different languages.



Mount Hagen's people were unknown to the world for ten thousand years. In 1933, gold prospectors ventured into the highlands and found a million primitive people living in isolation from our civilization. Fr. Ross, who was based on the coast, got permission from Rome to establish a new mission in the highlands. After leading a 39-day

expedition through uncharted areas, he arrived in Mount Hagen on Good Friday 1934. Fr. Ross died in Mount Hagen in 1973 after serving 47 years in Papua New Guinea.

When I arrived in Mount Hagen the residents had been exposed to the outside world for only 30 years. They had never refined iron, invented the wheel, made a clay pot, feathered an arrow or had a government or king. Not one road had ever been built. Not one of the local languages had ever been written down.



No animals had ever been domesticated except for the pig and dog, both of which the people ate. Because the people had never discovered brass or iron, they had to use stone axes to build houses and cut firewood. They were a Stone Age people when Fr. Ross arrived in 1934 and only a bit further along when I arrived in 1964.

At the time about 200 Divine Word Missionaries were serving in various dioceses around Papua New Guinea, with 40 Divine Word priests and 10 Brothers in our diocese of Mount Hagen. About 30 parishes had been established in the Mount Hagen diocese, each with one or more schools. Sixty lay missionaries taught in our schools at the time. The village children were bright and took to our schools like fish to water. Village children were incredibly well-behaved and a joy for us to work with.

In my first parish was a lay missionary named Colin Barnet from Australia. He had already been there for several years and altogether spent 20 years at that school. When he told me they needed desks, I gladly used my practical skills as a carpenter and made simple, but sturdy desks for the children. My master's degree in education also was invaluable when I became vicar for education and director of all 180 Catholic schools in our archdiocese. Shortly after I arrived, Bishop Bernarding established a Catholic teacher's college to educate native teachers for our schools. They gradually took teaching duties from overseas lay missionaries.

#### **Getting Around**

Our parishes covered huge areas, and travel was extremely difficult. There were no paved roads. The few existing roads were hand-built and seldom maintained. Bridges were built from logs by the village men. My first vehicle was an ex-Army World War II Jeep that had been given to Fr. Ross by a U.S. Army chaplain in 1945. The Jeep already had been in service in Mount Hagen for 19 years when I arrived and provided me with reliable transport for another 15 years.





Papua New Guinea, being near the Equator, has just two seasons: rainy and dry. During the rainy season it was normal to get stuck several times on each trip around the parish. The village people, even the school children, were always eager to pull my stuck vehicle out of the mud. I made sure to always carry a long rope!

Villagers have no vehicles, so we missionaries had to go where they lived. My last parish, Kiripia, had 13 congregations, each with its own church, catechists, communion ministers and Mass program. It took an hour's hard driving to get to some of these churches. At the parish's central church we had weekly Sunday Mass as well as daily Mass. The other congregations had two visits a month with Mass normally celebrated just once a month on a Sunday. Communion services were held on the other three Sundays.

With so few roads in those early days, we did a lot of walking and carried on our backs a Mass kit and supplies for an overnight stay in the village. Gradually, dirt roads appeared. By the time I retired in 2017, I had to walk to only one congregation. The other 12 I could reach in my four-wheel-drive vehicle. An hour's drive each way was a normal pastoral trip, and it was a two hours' drive every Tuesday to Mount Hagen for shopping and mail.

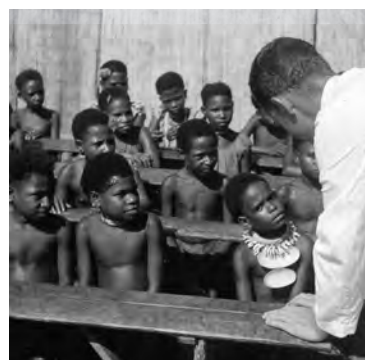
#### **The Role of Lay Missionaries**

Lay missionaries played an enormous role in the success of our early schools. Over the years, beginning with Colin Barnett, I had 17 altogether—14 women and three men. All were from Australia except one, John Jack, who hailed from Glasgow, Scotland. He was a handyman and a builder and gave 30 years of his life to our missionary work. I was with him when he died in 1988 at age 82.

Of the other two male lay missionaries, one was a retired medical doctor with 40 years of experience. He stayed two years working in our parish's small health facility. The other man was an experienced carpenter and builder who stayed with me for three years building numerous churches, teachers' houses and classrooms. His major contribution was the construction of our parish center, which we used for all parish activities. It could



**The village people, even the school children, were always eager to pull my stuck vehicle out of the mud.**



No story about  
Papua New  
Guinea would be  
complete  
without mention  
of the  
“singsing.”  
This is a Pidgin  
word meaning a  
village  
celebration  
where adults  
and children  
alike dress in  
their traditional  
native feathers  
and regalia and  
engage in  
singing and  
dancing.



accommodate 72 people overnight. All 14 of the women lay ministers were teachers. Almost all stayed on for three years. One, Pauline Randall, dedicated more than 40 years of her life to her lay missionary vocation, retiring with me in 2017.

Besides working in education, we also made a lot of strides in health care. In each parish where we worked, we built a health center that, for all practical purposes, was a small hospital. They were staffed by Catholic nurses trained to deal with all the normal day-to-day sicknesses in the village, such as malaria and dysentery.

Many babies were born at our Kiripia Health Center, which was a well-equipped two-story building. Our ambulance would collect people too sick to walk and bring them to our health center for treatment and then home again. We had three wards for those too sick to return home. For the seriously ill, the ambulance would take them to Mount Hagen General Hospital, a two-hour drive away.

#### **‘Singsings’ and Other Things**

No story about Papua New Guinea would be complete without mention of the “singsing.” This is a Pidgin word meaning a village celebration where adults and children alike dress in their traditional native feathers and regalia and engage in singing and dancing. Every tribe has its way of decorating and painting faces and of using bird-of-paradise feathers for self-decoration. Singsings take place at big

festivals such as marriages, pig exchanges between different tribes, peace ceremonies and church celebrations. The 50th anniversary of my ordination, Feb. 2, 2013, was graced by dozens of men and women dressed up in their traditional finery.

In my 53 years of missionary service, I got to know villagers in the remotest areas of Papua New Guinea. Most were subsistence farmers, the poorest of God’s poor. They could earn money only by growing vegetables and potatoes. Because of the cold weather at the altitude of 7,500 feet above sea level, none of the national cash crops (such as coffee, peanuts, tea and palm oil) that thrived at lower altitudes could grow in the highlands of Mount Hagen.

No one had money. Mass collections were tiny. However, people gave generously of the things they grew in their gardens. Sometimes an offertory collection would fill the back of my pickup truck.

Over the years I have been blessed with wonderful friends and family back in the United States, Germany, Australia and New Zealand who provided great financial support for our projects in Papua New Guinea. With this help we build a large church at my former parish of Mun in 1972, along with another 18 smaller churches and dozens of school buildings. Even now, based here in the United States, their love and support continue to contribute to our missionary work in Papua New Guinea. For this I am forever grateful.



Fr. Joseph Bisson SVD with Medal of Honor



### Letting Go

In 2016 I could hear the Lord telling me that it was time to “let go.” For many months, sciatica in my left leg made it difficult to get around. I kept getting the Lord’s message: “What more could you accomplish that you haven’t already done in 53 years?” So, I made the decision to retire.

In February 2017, the parish gave me a tremendous farewell celebration. People from all walks of life, from all over the parish and province came to celebrate the contributions I had made to the Kingdom of God and the progress of Papua New Guinea. At that same time, I received a message that I had been put on the queen’s New Year’s Honors List.

A medal was to be given to me by the governor-general. He was to represent Queen Elizabeth II, Papua New Guinea’s head of state. I returned to Papua New Guinea nine months later to receive this medal. It was an honor and the grand finale to a remarkably long and fruitful missionary career in that country I had grown to love.

I thank the Lord for the beautiful village people I had the privilege to serve, especially the children, the wonderful lay missionaries that contributed to the education of thousands of children. I thank the Lord for my many confreres, the Divine Word priests and Brothers who remain in that beautiful mission and carry on the teaching and building that will change lives forever. Now, after my 53 years abroad, as I begin the final phase of my life I have a strong sense of “Thank you, Lord!” and “Mission Accomplished!” ♦

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# VAKHANI, VAKHANI

**Father Giang Nguyen SVD in Mozambique**

*By Jeffrey Westhoff*





**As a missionary in Mozambique, Father Giang Nguyen SVD has found wisdom in a phrase in Makua, the local language. The phrase is “Vakhani, vakhani.”**

**“Little by little,” Fr. Giang translates. “Little pennies add up.”**

Fr. Giang was missioned to Mozambique shortly after his ordination in 2015. Prior to that, he spent two years in the country for the Cross-Cultural Training Program. In all that time he learned that the little things matter, both in his pastoral work and the tasks that crop up on the “mission side” of his job. “How to fix a car and change a tire. How to fix a solar panel and install a router,” he says. “Little things like that.”

Fr. Giang has taught himself to do many technical things, such as set up a computer network, install a router and fix a solar panel—tasks that weren’t addressed in the seminary. “The needs and circumstances in Mozambique have allowed me to learn a lot of things I wouldn’t have in other contexts,” he says. “Limited circumstances have forced missionaries and locals alike to be creative.”

Together with three other Divine Word Missionaries—two priests and one Brother—Fr. Giang is based at St. Francis Xavier Parish in Liupo, which is located in the rural, northeastern region of Mozambique. They work alongside 11 Holy Spirit Missionary Sisters (SSpS) also in the area.

Liupo is surrounded by farmland, and at least 90 percent of the people Fr. Giang ministers to are farmers. Fr. Giang and his fellow missionaries have also turned to agriculture, raising cashews and oranges and mangoes along with such livestock as chickens, pigs, sheep and goats. “This is some of what we do to stay sustainable.”

The missionaries are able to share some of their cost-saving agricultural practices, such as storing organic seeds in containers to prevent them from spoiling, with the local farmers.







## VAKHANI,

Aside from agriculture, Fr. Giang also tries to share technology with the locals. "My passion is energy. ... I have tried to apply appropriate technologies where possible." In particular, he tries to bring solar energy to family homes. This cheaper, more efficient energy can lessen the effects of poverty. "For \$40 I can install a simple system for a family," he says. That system can light the home and power the stove for cooking. Families no longer have to collect firewood to power the stove. "You're wasting energy just to collect firewood to cook."

The missionaries also try to help the people with economic opportunities. They provide phone cards and bars of soap that the locals can sell for a small profit and then use the money to pay for everyday things such as school fees. "Indirectly, I'm teaching them small business skills," Fr. Giang says. "Small lessons that go a long way."

Divine Word Missionaries in Liupo also have a focus on education. They built the only high school in the district, which is now run by the local government. Seven years ago they built the Arnold Janssen Library, the district's only community library. The missionaries operate the library with the Holy Spirit Missionary Sisters. Fr. Giang is proud of the library and hopes to add a digital collection using a combination of low-powered computers and tablets run on solar energy.



## VaKHaNi

He also wants to meet the needs of the community. "Since we are surrounded by mostly farmers, we hope to develop the library to serve their needs as well. Not many can read well, so we are exploring the visual/audio platform to reach out to them."

While offering economic, technological and educational assistance is important, these all flow from Fr. Giang's spiritual mission. "What you do is you inspire them with the Bible, with the word of God. The people are very keen of the word of God. They are still very interested in it." Forty-three faith communities make up St. Francis Xavier Parish. These communities are spread about the vast countryside surrounding Liupo. Each community has a patron saint and a chapel, some made with mud and grass. The Divine Word priests of St. Francis Xavier travel across the parish on weekends, celebrating Mass at several of the chapels each Sunday. "We're always on the go," Fr. Giang says. "By car, by motorbike, by bike. All means of transportation."

Because the priests cannot reach every chapel on every Sunday, they have trained lay leaders and catechists to look after the communities in the priests' absence. "A lot of our energy goes into training these lay leaders on a local level ... instilling in them the same missionary spirit that we have."







"We form leaders so that they can go back to the community and continue what we try to do at the parish level," he adds. "The way we work with them and the way we see them is as missionary partners."

One of the challenges that faced Fr. Giang was learning to communicate with the local people in their own language. Prior to beginning his work in Liupo, he learned Portuguese, the official language of Mozambique. But the most common language in his part of the country is Makua, the language most often spoken by women and children. He took a three-month course in the language, but admits he is still learning it. "It has no connection at all to any of the languages I've learned."

Still, he says the missionaries have adapted their ministry to the language. "We celebrate the majority of Masses in Makua."

Fr. Giang's pastoral focus is working with children and young adults. He finds this rewarding because he sees their hope. "A lot of them have the aspiration to change their lives. ... I don't see them as being poor. I see so much potential in their lives."

While he teaches the people of Mozambique about opportunities and faith, they in turn have taught

VakHani VakHani





him to adopt a calmer attitude. "The people are very, very simple. They find joy in the most simple things of life. That's what I've learned from them. They have taught me to be joyful and to enjoy the simple things of life."

They have also taught him to worship with the African custom of dance. "They have taught me how to pray with my whole body. My Asian bones have learned to move a little bit more like the Africans."

Fr. Giang was born in Vietnam in 1983. He immigrated to America with his family in 1991 when he was 8 years old. Growing up in California's Bay Area, he began to think about the priesthood when he was in seventh grade and was intrigued when a Divine Word vocation director left a stack of Sacred Heart calendars at his parish. Using a brand-new search engine called Yahoo, he found Divine Word Missionaries on the World Wide Web. "I was one of the first to make contact with the SVDs through the internet."

He expresses gratitude that his early email led to a vocation spreading the word of God to the people of Mozambique. "I am sent to be among them to witness their power and grace. I'm very grateful. I'm grateful to be an SVD, to be a missionary priest. Grateful to be where I'm at. Grateful to be with this community, there along with the Sisters."

Fr. Giang continues to follow "vakhani, vakhani," to accomplish great things little by little. "What I have learned to do from Mother Teresa is to do little things with great love." ♦



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# “For I was hungry, and

## When I was a Stranger, You Welcomed Me

*By Daisuke Narui SVD*





# you gave me food.”

*Father Martín Islas SVD*



Cargo trains regularly pass through the small Mexican town of Salto de Agua, which is located about 62 miles from the border Mexico shares with Guatemala. Migrants jump from the trains as they pass through town, then make their way to Casa Betania Santa Marta, a welcome house run by Divine Word Missionaries' Mexico Province.

The Casa is in Mexico's southernmost state, Chiapas, along the route that migrants follow on their way north. Since its establishment in March 2018, the Casa already has hosted more than 8,000 migrants.

When I visited Casa Santa Marta in November 2018, approximately 15 to 20 migrants were arriving every day. I was told that this was not a significant number. The most migrants the Casa hosted in a day was 250.

In my talks with a few of the migrants, I realized each of them had an overriding reason to leave their homeland. Some migrants are forced from their homes because of conflicts, persecution, disasters or land grabbing. Some migrants are seeking a better life with greater opportunities for employment, education and medical treatment. Some move because of



family ties. Many of these migrants did not leave for a single reason, but a combination of complex reasons.

I saw that the migrants arriving at the Casa are often tired and some are injured. They worry about their journey and their family. I heard that during the trip some of their fellow travelers died by accident or were murdered or raped. Some fell victim to human trafficking. Children were abducted as well.

Unfortunately, there are people who cheat the migrants and treat them maliciously. Others use these migrants to gain their own political advantage. And then there are the great many people who claim indifference but complain about migrants in their country.

Father Martín Islas SVD works at Casa Santa Marta along with four Franciscan Missionaries of Mary Sisters and a few lay staff. Volunteers from the nearby Divine Word parish, San Fernando de Guadalupe, also pitch in. They help to prepare beds and meals and provide clothes, medicine and places to shower. Volunteers also offer a counseling service.

Social commitment is often fulfilling work for religious missionaries because we can see the development and growth of individuals and communities. However, in the Casa the migrants come and go. There is no way the staff will ever know what will happen to these migrants or what future awaits them. This must be very tough work.

I saw Fr. Martín sitting beside a migrant and listening to the man's story. Behind them, on the kitchen wall, I saw the Gospel message "For I was hungry, and you gave me food." I became convinced that the work of the staff of Casa is a real witness of the Gospel. It is the work Jesus wanted to do for the poor people. It is also the work Jesus wants us to do as Divine Word Missionaries.

May God continue to bless the staff of the Casa and their work. May he also bless the migrants and accompany them on their journey. ♦



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