

FROM BOAT PERSON TO BISHOP

AN INTERVIEW WITH BISHOP LONG VAN NGUYEN OFM CONV

‘I was one of the boat people who escaped from South Vietnam.’ During migration awareness month [August], the new Australian Catholic Bishops Conference delegate for migrants and refugees, Bishop Vincent Long Van Nguyen ofm conv, shared his journey from survival as a refugee to nurturing a longing to become a priest, before being appointed Auxilliary Bishop of Melbourne.



‘The escape happened after South Vietnam had fallen to the Vietnamese communist forces in 1975.’

‘My parents who had escaped by boat themselves from North Vietnam in 1954 encouraged me and my siblings to escape. They had experienced the cruelty and tyranny of communism.’

From an early age, ‘you could say that risk-taking and freedom-seeking were in our blood’.

‘Our boat journey was risky. There were more people onboard than the boat could carry safely. By the third day, we had run out of food, water and fuel. From then on, we were at the mercy of the elements. On the seventh day, we drifted near an oil rig, half alive and half dead.’

Fortunately, Bishop Long and some family members were rescued and brought to a refugee camp off the coast of Malaysia. He stayed there for a year and four months.

Bishop Long travelled with his sister in law and her two young children, an 18-month-old boy and a four-month-old girl. ‘My two older siblings, including the father of the two children, had escaped before and settled in the Netherlands. It was my duty to accompany them and take them to their father. I only made it half way, even though it was the most difficult half. We parted company at the refugee camp: they went to the Netherlands in November 1980.

‘In December 1981, I was accepted and brought to a country I knew nothing about: Australia.’

Speaking about life in Vietnam before fleeing, Bishop Long explained that ‘following the Fall of Saigon, the victorious communist government was extremely harsh in its rule, particularly over South Vietnam and those it considered imperialist collaborators such as officials and soldiers of the former regime’.

Within a few years, Vietnam was reduced to total chaos: international embargo, war against China and Cambodia, forced collectivisation, not to mention the proliferation of the so-called “reeducation camps”- a euphemism for the communist gulags. ‘We grew up in poverty, isolation and in a state of constant fear.’

Vocation

‘I was in St Paul’s Minor Seminary for my native diocese of Xuan Loc, 60km north of Saigon, when the Liberation Army arrived and turned it into their barracks. We were expelled and my desire for the priesthood would remain concealed until I found myself in the free land of Australia.’

The decision to become a priest or a religious is often quite complex and multifaceted. 'In my case, it began when I was 13 years of age, living in one of the most turbulent periods of my country's history. The war and its terrible effects had a profound impact on me, even as an adolescent and a young man.

'The decision to become a priest was initially motivated by a desire to help people who suffered. Then, as I became more mature, I was able to test and deepen that desire in the context of my faith and lived experience.'

Bishop Long says that it was his encounter with the Franciscan Friars in the Melbourne suburb of Springvale, following his arrival in Australia in 1981, which was critical to his vocation discernment. 'I was at the stage where I really wanted to continue my pursuit for the priesthood, which was interrupted by the communist victory, 30 April 1975, and the watershed events that followed, escaping by boat, refugee camp in Malaysia and arrival in Australia.'

It was the friars' 'simplicity and especially their service to the marginalised' that appealed to Bishop Long immediately. 'I wanted to share in their vision of life.'

The native of Dong Nai, Vietnam was ordained a priest of the Order of Friars Minor Conventual (O.F.M. Conv) on 30 December 1989 and appointed Auxiliary Bishop of Melbourne on 20 May 2011 at the age of 49.

Culture shock

Bishop Long described arriving in Australia on a Malaysian airlines flight as 'a culture shock landing in a strange and foreign country for the first time in my life'.

'For us, one of the biggest changes was the move from the extended family structure that was so much welded into the Vietnamese society to the free, egalitarian and independent spirit that characterises Australia.'

The absence of family makes matters worse for refugees, Bishop Long notes. 'I myself was on my own when I set foot here. This resulted in a profound sense of dislocation and isolation. I suspect many unaccompanied youths and young adults like myself resorted to alternative forms of family structure to give them security and familiarity. I was fortunate to have found and lived with an elderly Vietnamese couple before making my way to religious life.'

Many, especially in the early years of Vietnamese settlement in Australia experienced discontinuity and brokenness and this inhibited their ability to adapt successfully, the Auxiliary Bishop of Melbourne says.

He describes the Melbourne suburb of Springvale as 'a true melting pot' where there was generally 'more tolerance in a predominantly migrant suburb than other places. 'I experienced a few instances where I was made to feel unwelcome. Once I had eggs thrown on my back by a group of youngsters. But they were isolated instances. On the whole, I felt accepted and this sense of acceptance increased gradually as I assimilated into Australian society.'

Vietnamese refugees arrived en masse in Australia during the seventies and eighties, 'the White Australia Policy might have been abolished formally. However, legacy of that policy may take years if not generations to do away with. In the meantime, like other minority groups, Vietnamese refugees have to earn their place in Australian society against all the odds', he adds.

The experience of the Vietnamese refugees is clear evidence that even the most traumatised and the most impoverished group can be integrated in our multicultural society and can make a positive contribution,

Bishop Long states. 'The fear that our social cohesion might be undermined or that our very future might be compromised on account of an "Asian invasion" has been proven unfounded.

'Today, Asian Australians have joined the mainstream in every aspect of our society. Even the sceptics of multiculturalism would concede that Australia has evolved to become a much more dynamic, diverse and interesting place.'

Immigration policy

In terms of Australian policy regarding refugees, Bishop Long appeals to our Government for a more humane policy towards asylum seekers, 'one that is in accordance with our international obligations, our status as a prosperous and civilised society and most of all our tradition as a generous and welcoming migrant country'.

'I realise that in the real world, we cannot have an open border policy. I even concede that we should stop human trafficking and prevent unnecessary deaths at sea. However, these concerns must not lead us to treat asylum seekers and refugees with cruelty, harshness and injustice.'

Bishop Long cautions that 'Australia risks dishonouring its own legacy of "a fair go" for the way it dehumanises asylum seekers'.

He remembers with pride the Australia that 'rose to the challenge in the past with its generous embrace of migrants and refugees. It proved itself especially courageous during the Indochinese exodus and accepted an unprecedented number of Asian refugees'.

'Australia changed for the better as it always has with each successive waves of new arrivals. Australia is what it is today because of their determination and drive for a better future. We honour the legacy of this great nation not by excessive protectionism, isolation and defence of our privilege at all costs. Rather, we make it greater by our concern and care for asylum seekers in the spirit of compassion and solidarity that has marked the history of our country from its beginning,' he explains.

Bishop Long acknowledges the advocacy and practical work carried out by the Australian Catholic Migrants and Refugees Office and the Australian Catholic Social Justice Council, in particular during this migration awareness month, August 2015. The bishop delegate for migrants concluded that the Church's position on refugees is based on the inherent dignity of every person, on their human rights and on the teachings of Jesus Christ.

'Human life is sacred because each person is created in the image of God. The human dignity and human rights of asylum seekers and refugees must be respected, regardless of their citizenship, visa status or mode of arrival.

He concludes that we should all learn from the example of Jesus, who was a refugee himself in Egypt and who identified with the marginalised and persecuted, 'he inspires all Christians to work for a better world, for a better society and especially for the protection and care of asylum seekers and refugees'.

*Aoife Connors
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