

## National Minister's Occasional Message



## Summer Vacations

**Beloved National Family,**

**At the beginning of autumn, permit me to share with you one challenge and one joy of going to Vietnam, Cambodia and Brazil this past summer.**

**My family and I journeyed first to Vietnam, and the challenge in Vietnam was the difficulty of practicing our Catholic faith in a Communist country. At first I thought it was my nervousness or paranoia because I always felt that I and the worshippers were being watched when we attended Mass; for me, twice in Hanoi, once in Cai Be and once in Saigon (Ho Chi Minh City). I shared my fear of being watched and tried to laugh it off with my Vietnamese guide, who replied, "Don't laugh. You probably were being watched."**

**I promise you it's not a good feeling to be looking over your shoulder as you try to focus on the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass in a language (Vietnamese) vastly different from English. Some people, even in my immediate family, take our freedom to attend Mass in America so for granted that we don't even bother to attend every Sunday. Not the Vietnamese people. I met one man who told me his daughter had been refused entrance to University in Vietnam even though she had excellent entrance examination results solely because she and her family were Catholic.**

**Perhaps in response to this challenge or threat, I could feel the joy of celebrating their faith within the Vietnamese Catholic Community. At every Mass I attended, regardless of city, the people sang their responses throughout the whole Mass! It was a beautiful, faith-filled call and response from the priest to the people even though I understood only a little.**

**Even before the Mass, people came early to pray together. In Hanoi, in the dark, but stately Cathedral of St. Joseph, with the Altar to the Sacred Heart on my left and the Altar to the Blessed Mother on my right, with statues of St. Francis and St. John Vianney on pillars flanking the Main Altar, and gentle St. Joseph guarding the Tabernacle in front of me, the entire congregation sang the Rosary together. After one decade of sung Hail Marys, I could catch the rhythm and repetition, and felt so uplifted.**

**In Saigon, at the famous and often-photographed Notre Dame Cathedral, we sang the Liturgy of the Hours before Mass. These strong, suffering, but joyful Catholics strengthened my faith. They were probably not sure what to make of me, but I certainly wanted to be one of them! I can only pray that I would have**

**the courage and grace of these Vietnamese Catholics to practice my faith even when harshly opposed by my country's government if that day ever comes.**



**Joyful Vietnamese girls wearing their white Ao Dai's to Sunday Mass**

**In Cambodia, I discovered a different challenge. My family and I flew from Vietnam to Siem Riep, the jumping-off point to the great Temples of Angkor Thom and Angkor Wat. We were placed in a lovely hotel on a broad, tree-lined boulevard of spacious hotels. One street over on either side of this scenic boulevard were dirt hovels and, to me, desperate poverty. I have traveled to many countries, but I have never seen such pervasive poverty as I saw in Cambodia. When the monster Pol Pot and his Khmer Rouge slaughtered nearly one fourth of their own people, they killed all the professionals, the doctors, teachers and educated people. They drove all the people of Phnom Penh, the capital, out to work in the rice paddies. I don't think the country has**

yet recovered. Ninety of the urban areas of Cambodia run on the dollar. I never even saw the local currency during my entire visit there.

Perhaps in response to this challenge flows the utter graciousness of the Cambodian people. When they greet you, they grasp their hands together as if in prayer and bow their heads in honor of meeting you. They are good listeners. They are very polite. They are also very attractive people. The little that they have they will give to you!

Please note the lovely young girl, perhaps eight or nine years old or even younger, in the picture at the beginning of this article. Can you see how dirty her hair and shirt are? Do you see the half-eaten sugar cane clutched in her hand? Her job is to sell that sugar cane to tourists stopping briefly at a rest stop along the horribly pitted main highway out of Siem Riep. Sell it, not eat it! She was so hungry, however, that she could not resist eating her own merchandise. Can you see behind her an even younger and smaller girl, perhaps her sister, perhaps only a fellow sales girl? This second girl had just come up. She said something to the bigger girl, and the girl turned to her. Even though this girl was hungry herself and even though she really shouldn't be eating her own retail products, when the other little girl came up to her and looked beseechingly at her sugar cane, this hungry girl immediately gave it to her. Perhaps this is why outside the Church of St. John in Siem Riep, not on the luxurious boulevard, but on one of the poor side streets, where I worshipped and visited with two of Blessed Mother Theresa's Missionaries of Charity, you find this utterly gracious Child Jesus opening His hands to the people, with a most inviting Blessed Mother behind Him.



**About ten days after getting my family safely home from Vietnam and Cambodia, it was time to follow up on a personal invitation by Jim Flickinger**

SFO, head of Amazon Relief (<http://www.amazonrelief.org>) to come and visit Manaus, Brazil, where much of their ministry takes place among the good people afflicted there with leprosy, homelessness and poverty. The immediate and continuing challenge is where to begin since there are so many problems.

As you know, in the very first words of his great Testament, St. Francis wrote, "This is how God inspired me, Brother Francis, to embark upon a life of penance. When I was in sin, the sight of lepers nauseated me beyond measure; but then God himself led me into their company, and I had pity on them. When I had once become acquainted with them, what had previously nauseated me became a source of spiritual and physical consolation for me. After that I did not wait long before leaving the world."

Yet after you have hugged the one suffering with leprosy or smiled at the one caught in poverty, what do you do next and every day thereafter? That's the challenge. Well, Jim and good Sister Caritas from the Missionaries of Charity and others showed me that you do what you can do for as long as you can do it. You visit those suffering from leprosy in the hospital. You help them stay clean and well fed. You dignify them. You help them be as pain-free and independent as they can be. You pray with them. You set up schools and affordable housing for their children and dependents. All of this Jim and others are doing, and the doing brings its own special reward.

The great joy I felt here and throughout my summer vacations in Vietnam, Cambodia and Brazil was that perhaps precisely because of the challenges, Christ was there. Of course, God is everywhere, but when most needed, Christ seems most present. And where God is, even in the face of leprosy, poverty and oppression, there is also and always hope, mercy and love.

I close with my embrace of a gentle and very warm soul named Angelo das Graças, whose name I translate as Angel of Thanks. You can see him below. Please pray for him; he prays for you. Of course, you can see in his face that leprosy is no fun, but Angelo was not an unhappy or bitter person. He asked how I was! As his name indicates, he was thankful for the visit, thankful for the care, thankful that his dependents were receiving help with education and housing. I'm not trying to sugarcoat this, I'm just telling you how I found him. He was and is a man of faith.



**Can I "fix" Angelo's leprosy? No. Can I remove the poverty I saw in Cambodia? No. Can I defeat the Communism in Vietnam? No.**

Yet "with God all things are possible" (Matthew 19:26). Let us pray that we will do what we can do to alleviate the suffering around us in the world as well as in our own families and fraternities. As Jim Flickinger always says, "We cannot do everything, but we can do something."

It often doesn't take much. I saw one lady in the hospital who had blown out her left flip-flop and didn't have the fingers left because of her leprosy to fix it. I bent down, fixed her flip-flop and put it on her foot. "Deus abençoe!" (God bless!) she said over and over. These people bless us whenever we do what we can. Lord, show us the way.

Peace and love to all,

Tom