

Spiritan Magazine

Volume 35
Number 2 *Spring*

Article 5

Spring 2011

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Recommended Citation

Palmer, P., Lombart, J., Gavino, A., Liwagon, A., Casanes, D., & Sormani, D. (2011). Vietnam, Taiwan, Philippines. *Spiritan Magazine*, 35 (2). Retrieved from <https://dsc.duq.edu/spiritan-tc/vol35/iss2/5>

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Vietnam, Taiwan, Philippines

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Vietnam Taiwan P

Think Spiritan missions and you think Africa ... perhaps South America if you know some more of the Spiritan story. Canadian readers might add Papua New Guinea. Then of course there's Pakistan — and Mauritius in the Indian Ocean. That's about it.

Wait a moment — how about the Far East? How about Taiwan, Vietnam and the Philippines? The Spiritans are there too? Yes they are.

India

Vietnam

Spiritans bring sense of wider church

Pat Palmer CSSp

Vietnam is the most recent Spiritan mission in our move towards new challenges.

Asia is home to the majority of the world's population. Here all the great world religions originated, but it is the continent with the smallest percentage of Christians. In the 1970s Spiritans began working in Pakistan and Papua New Guinea. We opened new missions in the Philippines (1987), Taiwan (1997) and Vietnam (2007).

Between 2002 and 2006 Spiritan Brian Fulton (England) single-handedly worked very hard to learn Vietnamese as he spent time with the children of lepers and orphans in Saigon. After his tragic death, when he collapsed from a heart attack while out jogging, the Taiwan Spiritans resolved to start a community in Saigon. Currently there are three of us in Vietnam Trinh Le (US West), Frederic Rossignol (Belgium) and, as the third member of the group, I represent the Irish Province.

Missionary beginnings

The first European missionaries came to Vietnam in the 16th century and, despite the suspicion and hostility of the authori-

ties, sowed the seeds of today's vibrant church. Vietnam itself is a developing country with a very young population. It has left behind it the years of struggle involving China, France and the USA. For most people, that war is not even a memory. The only signs of it are in museums and TV documentaries.

Vietnam has a population of over eighty million, the bulk of whom lives either in the Red River Delta in the north or the Mekong River Delta in the south. Much of the country is mountains and forests, where up to fifty aboriginal tribes live.

Ho Chi Minh City

Ho Chi Minh City, formerly known as Saigon, where the Spiritan community is based, is a bustling, crowded, noisy city of eight million people. The first thing that strikes a visitor are the rivers of motorbikes on the roads: it is the only way to get around. Taxis and cars are fine but they get caught in the traffic. So a visitor's first lesson is how to cross the road. Forget pedestrian crossings. You launch yourself into the traffic, weaving around it, making the sudden movement — and trusting that it will weave itself around you.

Philippines



Religion

Most people in Vietnam would describe themselves as either Buddhists or no religion. As in the West, religion is mainly a factor of birth, marriage and death. Catholics number about 7% of the population, but judging from the number of churches and the crowds they attract, a visitor would think it was higher. In recent years the Church has embarked on a campaign of church building to cater for the increasing numbers. There is freedom of worship, seminaries operate openly and are full. Long-established religious groups operate openly. However, new religious orders, like our own, find it very difficult to get official recognition.

We cannot have our own parish nor can we set up a formation house for new Spiritans. But in a society like this, much can be done indirectly. The unwritten rules can often be as important as the written ones.

Spiritans in Vietnam

The Spiritan community in Vietnam is small. Fr Frederic Rossignol is a young priest from Belgium ordained in 2006 and now on his first missionary appointment. Fr Anton Trinh Le, from Vietnam, left for the USA in 1994. He joined the Spiritans there, was ordained in 2007 and was then assigned to work back in his own country. I represent the Irish Province.

The three of us who arrived in 2007 have since been joined by another Vietnamese Spiritan. Both Vietnamese priests escaped from Vietnam as young people and went to the United States where they joined the Congregation. Now they have come back to work in their own country as Spiritans.

Another thing that strikes a visitor is the number of places to eat, from small kiosks by the side of the road to large restaurants. The Vietnamese take their food seriously: breakfast, lunch and dinner are not to be skipped without very good reason. They boast that their food is always fresh, that they have retained the best of the French and Chinese traditions and combined them with their own. Because of their rich farmlands and two thousand miles of coastline, this boast is not an exaggeration.

Photo by Jean-Pascal Lombart CSSP



The rivers of motorbikes on the roads of Ho Chi Minh City.

Being missionary where no missionary work is actually allowed gives us a certain freedom. We are not restricted by already existing institutions or the expectations of people. Instead we can move around, prudently, and become involved in works where there is a real need.

One of these works is in orphanages, which are a big factor in society here. Poverty and social taboos contribute to the large number of children in orphanages. They are run by the government, the Church, private individuals and groups and a few by the Buddhists. Some cater exclusively for seriously handicapped children and are mostly run by religious Sisters.

The unwritten rules can often be as important as the written ones.

Culture

Having worked in Africa and Ireland, coming to Vietnam was a major change for me. While it is true to say that people are the same everywhere, it is also true that people present themselves differently in different cultures. As missionaries we have to have patience and realize that to understand such an ancient culture as this will take a long time.

Learning about the culture involves learning the language. That is one of the first tasks facing two of us. We have also taken on part-time ministries in a parish and as chaplains. We do not have our own parish and it may be a long time before we can get one. We also try to help out in various charitable programmes where there really is a great need.

The religious orders in Vietnam are very involved in charitable works partly because they cannot open schools or hospitals.

Instead they have centres for the care of orphans, handicapped children and victims of AIDS. These centres are well run and receive great support from the local population. This comes in the form of money and goods, but also in people who visit the children and care for them. We do not have our own centres, but help out through visits and financial support.

Establishing a Spiritan foundation

Our main work is to establish a foundation of the Congregation here. Vietnam is rich in vocations to the priesthood and to religious life. Seminaries have more applicants than they can accept. Convents have no trouble attracting young women to their ranks.

In the West we are no longer accustomed to full Churches but here it is quite a sight to see Churches full on Sundays with the overflow standing on the street outside “getting Mass”.

Our community is also involved in ministry to the expatriate community of the city, to English and French-speaking groups. But it is not just a matter of using Vietnam as a source for vocations. The church in Vietnam is very strong, but it needs to become more aware of its missionary dimension and responsibilities. Because of its history it has had to look inwards, but now the wider Church needs its strengths. Missionary orders like the Spiritans can bring a greater sense of the worldwide church and that has to be part of our mission.

To that end we have started a vocation program with twelve young men joining this year. They are all in their 20s and 30s and all have third level qualifications. It is early days for the Spiritan community and for the Spiritan foundation in Vietnam, but we believe that just as the Irish Province started from small beginnings in 1859 to go on to become a source of great missionary endeavour, so too future Vietnamese Spiritan missionaries will grow in the spirit of the Congregation and be part of the missionary outreach of the Vietnamese Church. ■

Taiwan

Getting something started

Jean-Pascal Lombart CSSp

Look at Spiritan maps and you’ll find the Far East firmly in place. We are getting something started there in Taiwan. Since the late 1990s a Spiritan presence is slowly emerging on the ground.

Our Taiwan group is not very numerous — only nine in number. Three short of the number Jesus started with. When we began in 1997 there were four of us: Sean O’Leary (Ireland), James Sandy (Sierra Leone), Jean Paul Hoch and

myself (France). Sean got involved in prison ministry, James worked with migrants, I was asked to go into campus ministry and Jean Paul (the ever-reliable wise man) took on parish ministry. But we lost him when he was elected Superior General of the Spiritans in 2004. I’m currently the group leader for Taiwan.

When newcomers arrive I tell the bishop we have a plan in place for them: these are our priorities. We then ask the new-



Jean-Pascal Lombart CSSp and Taiwanese University students visit Spiritan works in Tanzania.

comers to buy into what's going on. This gives them a sense of being where they're wanted and meant to be. Thus they're more likely to put up with the inevitable challenges ahead of them. Other Spiritans too are attracted to such overall plans. "That's where we want to be," they have told me. "You know what you're doing. We believe you'll listen to us and hear us out."

We started as a small community living in the house of a local Catholic. But before long many people came and asked

New ventures become life-giving — new people, new projects, new hopes.

to join us. One of the things that attracted them was our spirituality of the Holy Spirit. From among those who applied we selected three.

Realizing that our understanding of what was going on was somewhat superficial, we asked a young local woman, who had just finished university, to help us. She suggested creative new ideas in our approach to the people.

My mission in the local Taiwanese church was to be supportive of the lay people. They were the real missionaries. I encouraged the other Spiritans to see themselves in a similar role, and to develop a network of relationships with other religious congregations and different dioceses.

From the beginning we believed it was important that the local church sponsor us and invite us to come among them. In Taiwan no missionary can become a resident — the most that can be expected is that we each get a one-year visa. Working

within the rules and regulations avoids putting the local people or authorities in a compromised position.

A good community life accompanies this planned approach. Despite being so multicultural (we now come from Ghana, Nigeria, Portugal, France, and two Vietnamese from the U.S.) our togetherness helps the younger Spiritans to become inserted into our ministry and milieu.

For the first two years newcomers cannot do much except learn Chinese. This gives them time to know the cultural set up, the life of the church and their own expectations. They become more realistic. They find out what they can contribute. New ventures become life-giving — new people, new projects, new hopes.

At the moment we are all in one city — two of us are parish priests. Another Spiritan is an associate to a Taiwanese pastor. Apart from parishes we also work in campus ministry, prison chaplaincy, accompanying immigrants, preparing couples for marriage, forming catechists and taking part in inter-religious dialogue. We believe in collaboration — among ourselves, with our parishioners and with those of other religions.

Christianity and church in Taiwan

The Dominicans arrived in Taiwan from the Philippines 150 years ago. They really built up Christianity in the south of the country. As a result we have several generations of very committed Catholics — whole villages and many families.

A second missionary wave came ashore in the 1950s when the Communists expelled Christian missionaries from China. Many of them were young, full of zeal and very resourceful.

Taiwan was very poor then — many were hungry and had very little clothing. The foreign missionaries were told to look after approximately 50,000 Catholics. Currently there are

7 dioceses in Taiwan with a total of 85 parishes. There is an emphasis on building big churches as more and more rural people migrate to the cities for employment. Schooling has become more and more important. But in general we are an aging church with less and less lay participation.

We comprise only 1% of the population and number only 60-200 at Sunday Masses. Despite being an already established church, we engage mainly in first-stage missionary work in a country whose lifestyle is very similar to that in Canada.

Popular religious practices

The Taiwanese have a great devotion to the Buddha in addition to their other divinities and popular religious practices. Respect for ancestors is the strongest element in their popular form of Taoism. These ancestors and their own children have a great influence in their lives: "I will need both my ancestors

"It is up to the living to make sure that all will be well with the dead."

and my children to provide for my needs in the next world so as to prevent me from becoming a wandering soul. It is in my interest to make sure that my soul goes to its resting place. My elaborate ceremonies now will shorten the time between my dying and my resting. It is up to the living to make sure that all will be well with the dead."

The spiritual and everyday life are very much connected. Many currently venerated divinities are people, now dead, who continue to provide for others. People look forward to seeing the former imperial administration reproduced in the next world, e.g. guardians for villages, agriculture and housing.

Dialogue with traditional Taiwanese people involves such questions as, "How do I become a Christian and still share the grief, the wellbeing and the solidarity of my family past and present? How do I express my belief in the resurrection?" Such dialogue enables us to understand each other's religion, to talk about it, to reinforce each other and to share common projects.

Taiwan students in Tanzania

The high point of my early years was certainly when I took thirteen Taiwanese University students to Tanzania to teach in Bagamoyo primary and secondary schools and to visit Spiritan works. I had spent a few years there on my Overseas Training Programme, so the idea of connecting people from Taiwan and Tanzania became an exciting venture. We traveled to Bagamoyo, Arusha and Maasailand, met the people there, and took part in some of their projects. The Tanzanian Spiritans and people welcomed us warmly.

The young Taiwanese came back with a different outlook, not only on Africa, but also on their own lifestyle and values.

The Canadian VICS mentality and outlook that we found there went hand in hand with our experience. We also saw this venture as an opportunity to build a foundation for a future Spiritan service to the church in Taiwan, and to connect that church to the larger worldwide church.

An eventual decision to go into China is perhaps 3-5 years down the road. We can get a three-month visitor's visa to enter China from Taiwan. Meanwhile a Hong Kong-Macow-Taiwan joint effort is possible. This involves learning Cantonese, the language common to all three places.

Campus ministry

I started campus ministry in 2000 by inviting a Sister to form a campus ministry team. This approach was somewhat new, but we pulled ideas together regarding activities, retreats and how to work as a pastoral team. It can be very frustrating — only a small number of Catholics get involved: if I get 20-25 interested, that is wonderful. Each week we meet and eat a meal together in one of the student residences. We call on other outside resources to organize a Christmas concert. We promote a night of prayer where they can connect with their own generation and other invited students.

Our formation involves taking the students beyond the catechism into adult faith issues. Many students want to further their understanding and handing on of their faith. We promote formation camps where they learn to become leaders. Teamwork is very important for young adults.

There is a good core of African Spiritans in Taiwan now. We share community life and finances. When people see that what we have is shared by all, they sense that justice is at work among us. We strongly believe that we need to keep up our connections with local churches and also with Taoists and Buddhists.

We live in a religious atmosphere where people believe in the existence and influential presence of gods in daily life. But how do we bring the different religious communities into dialogue with one another? Much remains to be done. ■

An outsider's viewpoint of the Spiritans

You will not easily change the direction you decide to go. You will keep doing the same job for a long time until you get results. When people move from one place to the other the mission will be carried on by others... You treat each other politely and respectfully. The people in your group work together, support and encourage each other.

... Although there are cultural gaps between the original countries you came from and Taiwan, you are flexible and adaptable. I feel you respect the local people and our culture from the heart. I don't feel you are arrogant in your thinking, though it is not totally absent!

— Moses Tang, local businessman

New house, new language, new way of life

Dennis Casanes CSSp, Aying Gavino CSSp, Alfre Liwagon CSSp

Metro Manila is a huge city and is much more diverse and complicated than the place we come from — Mindanao. Though our house (Spiritan House of Studies) is very quiet, cool and comfortable, Metro Manila is generally crowded, noisy and polluted. But, since this is where God has put us now, even if it is more challenging than being in Mindanao, we have to adapt and get used to this place.

There is so much that we did not know about Manila. When he took the train for the first time, Emboy was scared and sweating inside. The condensed population, the tall buildings, the six lane highways, some flyovers and underground highways — we were foreigners in our own country. It was good to have someone older than us in the place, showing us around and introducing us to some places and friends.

Language is also one of the challenges we had to face. We were all born and raised in Mindanao; we speak Cebuano eloquently. Not one of us speaks Tagalog at home. When we were in elementary and high school we sometimes used it in our Tagalog Course, but after that we only heard it on TV. Now Tagalog is a must, it is our language of friendship and it is more helpful especially if we want to be understood in our apostolate, when riding the jeepneys, buying in the market, and the like. Many times we have been embarrassed because of our hard Cebuano accent when we speak Tagalog. Local people sometimes tease us. We also notice that what Tagalog people consider funny usually for us Cebuanos does not make sense.

Spiritan House of Studies

This house is a perfect design if we are to aim for internationality. In terms of academic affairs, there are many international schools nearby. Most, if not all, are within easy access and conducive for learning. So far we have welcomed confreres from Vietnam and Taiwan who studied English and they all have a great time and find the ambience perfect for studies. In the future we hope to welcome many confreres here.

Every now and then we invite our classmates, friends and other religious for group study, to play table tennis, sometimes to watch TV and enjoy everyone's company in friendship and camaraderie. Having good relationships with other young religious, we believe, is healthy and can strengthen our life as religious.



Photo by Jean-Pascal Lombart CSSp

Dan Sormani CSSp with two seminarians.

Loyola School of Theology, where we study, is more international. Students in this school are from all over the world. In one way or another, experiences in living with different nationalities help us enrich ourselves through sharing with people from other countries and cultures.

Community life

Like all Spiritans in the world, we live out our calling in a community, an essential element in our way of life as young religious. In the Spiritan House of Studies, Manila, we not only live as a community but also as a true family. Even though we are so busy at school, we do not forget to value community life. Each one of us in the community has the responsibility of taking care of various things around the house. Like any poor family, we do not have house helpers.

We help each other in running and keeping the house clean. By ourselves, we do the dishes, sweep and mop the floor, pay bills and cultivate and beautify our garden and the like. We create a home that is clean and orderly, a home that is livable and comfortable. It is always a compliment when our classmates remark that they like to visit and hang out with us in our house

because it is very homey and welcoming. During breakfast we talk over our plans for the week and discuss if there are necessary things to do for the community.

We take turns going to the market. We learn how to budget, how to choose food that is fresh, nutritious, delicious yet affordable. We believe that a religious who takes the vow of poverty should know how much a kilo of rice costs; and should be able to notice that a dozen eggs in one store is 50 cents cheaper than in the other store. The person who goes to the market is also the cook for the week. It is his opportunity to render a concrete service to the community. It is also an indirect way of expressing to the community what his favorite foods are.

Every Thursday is our community night. We bond through playing games, doing community projects, helping with somebody's homework, taking a walk or going to McDonalds for 25peso ice cream sundaes.

In the Spiritan House of Studies we are formed how to be responsible adults. We do not just do what we are told to do ... we take initiative. We are trained to develop our giftedness and potentials so that all dimensions of life are well tapped and balanced.

In our community, being a priest or a brother is less important than being a true religious family where one is concerned for everyone's welfare. Thanks to our Director Fr. Dan, our older brother.

Adventures in Manila

Dan Sormani CSSp

I'll be the first to admit that all of us here in the Spiritan House of Studies, Manila, have that sort of bachelor approach to housekeeping — basically clean, but not fanatics about it. So you can imagine my surprise when I opened one of the kitchen cupboards and found what looked like sand all over the place!

"How did we get muddy sand in the cupboard?" I wondered aloud as I called for the guys to join me. Then, in the midst of all that muddy sand, I saw what looked like pieces of rice running back and forth... termites!! We had been invaded by termites! As we opened cupboard after cupboard, we found they had moved into a number of shelves and were obviously enjoying themselves immensely. So I grabbed the phone and call the termite-folks. Believe me, everyone here in Metro Manila has them on speed-dial! Termites are part of daily life and people just take them in stride. The next morning witnessed the massacre of the visiting termites, but we had no time to mourn, being too busy cleaning up their mess. I was exhausted since I hadn't slept well the night before, wondering if our newly acquired house was going to collapse around us, having been an all-you-can-eat buffet for the local pests. But thank God, after massive spraying, poking and inspecting, we were declared termite-free, complete with a year's warranty! But every day I find myself checking the cupboards, just in case... oh me of little faith!

As if that little adventure into nature wasn't enough, a few days later I got a text message from Dennis while at still at school. "Dre, we've just killed two big snakes in the house... I hope they're not all over the place." I didn't know if I should rush home or just make a reservation at the Hilton Hotel. In fact, they weren't IN the house, but right outside: two big, long non-poisonous garden snakes. I guess the violent rains had disturbed their homes. Or maybe they were coming to visit the termites? Who knows? Later when I was on the phone telling a friend about our snakes, I saw the hugest hornet ever fly into the room. Making plenty of room for this 747-like creature, I was horrified to see it fly into a clump of mud stuck on the bottom of the jalousie windows!! (Well, I told you our housekeeping isn't always what it could be!!). It was building it's home in our home... but there just isn't enough room for all of us, so summoning up our courage, we knocked the nest, sprayed it wildly with Raid, stomped on it like enraged flamenco dancers from Seville. What a zoo!! And I thought that moving to the big city we'd lose touch with nature!! It's been like living on the Discovery Channel this last month!! While the Filipinos all tsk-ed and commiserated with our dilemma of finding the snakes, all our Chinese friends immediately congratulated us and told us how very delicious snake soup is!! Still, I'd rather be the one eating the snake than vice-versa!!



Prayer life

For us, spiritual life is our core, the center and most essential part of our life as religious. It is the spring from which we draw strength to unreservedly respond to our Spiritan calling, to be completely available before God and before others. In a concrete way, we develop our spiritual life through daily Eucharist, morning and evening prayer, and rosary. During the Eucharist we take turns sharing reflections after the Gospel. Each of us has our own spiritual director and confessor. Once a month we have one day of silent recollection. Every time the Spiritans celebrate a special feast like that of the founders we also take time to make the celebration meaningful.

Academic life

We study at Loyola School of Theology, a Jesuit and Filipino institution and community of learning, dedicated to formative theological education and research within the Catholic tradition. At school we are enriched by excellent professors who teach every subject matter with mastery. Our Professors are both Filipinos and foreigners. Each class is a mixture of religious men and women, diocesan seminarians and priests from all over the globe. The ambiance inside the classroom is very interesting and enriching. We don't always agree with each other. We differ in our point of view depending on our cultural background.

The three of us had difficulty adjusting our mind to the academic world, at least in the beginning. After a few years of not being involved seriously in academic training, our first semester was like a rehabilitation process. Academics at Loyola School of Theology have a very high standard and we need to study really well. Some of us spend at least four to five hours a day, just reading and understanding the subject matter and trying to figure how to apply it pastorally.

Because we believe this is where God is calling us now, we have to strive hard, not only to do justice to the tuition fee, but also to grow in wisdom and understanding, and be learned Spiritan religious. Eventually learning becomes enjoyable

Pastoral life

One of our commitments as Spiritan religious is to those oppressed and most disadvantaged as a group or an individual; we are called to be defenders of the weak and the little ones. We live out this commitment through our apostolate in Guannela's Center, a home that takes care of our brothers who are challenged physically and mentally. We stay there overnight Saturday afternoon through Sunday. Every first weekend of the month is Dennis' turn to assist in the center. Emboy goes every second week and Aying every third week. Every last weekend of the month the three of us go together. We go to take care of the people there who range in age from 9 to 50 years old, to bathe them, feed them, pray with them and bring them to church for Mass. We find this apostolate very interesting and challenging, and so we continue doing it.

One of us said that in this apostolate also he realized what it means to experience the essence of being with the poor and the most abandoned: "For me personally, to be with these people is not so easy. I have to go down to their level so that I can sympathize with them. When I go there, I forget my image of who I am because I know they don't bother about it. All they need is our care and love. That's all." So far our experiences have been very challenging but definitely enriching.

We are juniors!

There are so many Congregations in Manila. In Loyola School of Theology itself there are almost a hundred. We always find it interesting and enriching to get to know "juniors" from other congregations. We are also active in a group called Juniors-Seminarians Forum (JSF). It is a gathering of all the temporary professed religious and seminarians, men and women, all over Metro Manila, and those from the provinces are also welcomed. As of this year, one of us Spiritans works as part of the core group.

It is always a compliment when our classmates remark that they like to visit and hang out with us in our house.

The last time we had our gathering, there were about seven hundred from more than a hundred congregations. It was very meaningful for many of us. One of us said, "I can't imagine how God calls each one of us. The moment I mingled with them, I said to myself, 'Wow, Lord, this is great. I can feel that we are not alone in the journey of religious life.' My faith was awakened as I saw the number of religious flocking together in joy. I deeply realized how mysterious the call of God is." Another one said, "Personally such activities help me clarify God's call. The more I get to know other congregations, their spirituality and charism, the more also I appreciate, love and embrace my own."

We gather. We share our charism and spirituality. We share our joys, struggles and doubts as young religious, we encourage one another and we get involved in social concerns, build community and work as a team. We also listen to our elders by inviting speakers whom we believe can guide us in our journey.

As we continue our journey day by day, we are very humbled to take our place in Spiritan history as the first Filipino Spiritans, doing our little part in the building of a new foundation and even a new program here in Manila. None of us can say "This is how it's always been done", so we listen to the Holy Spirit and our brothers and sisters in the Spiritan community ... and we hear the voice of God. ■