

A brief Presentation on the Writing of the book

## "THE HISTORY OF 50 YEARS THE DAUGHTERS OF MARY HELP OF CHRISTIANS PRESENT IN VIETNAM"

### 1 . Background of the history book

The History Book of "Mary Help of Christians" Province was written during the preparation for the celebration of the 50 years the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians present in Vietnam (1961-2011). In 2005, the Superior of the VTN Pre-Province, Sr. Rosa Vũ thị Kim Liên suggested to me to write the history of the Institute in Vietnam, in preparation for this Golden Jubilee Celebration. Knowing that this is a meaningful contribution to the Province, and moreover, I myself like history, I accepted her suggestion.

After asking for advice, I was fortunate to have Sr. Grazia Loparco who gave me the standard guides to write history. Father John Nguyen Van Ty, SDB helped me with documenting the material, and Fr. Joseph Nguyen Van Tam, SDB showed me how to cite the sources.

For me, this was a difficult work, because I am not an expert. Besides, most of the documents in Vietnam were destroyed when the communist regime started in 1975. From that time until 1997, no other document was written. Only in 2003, the Province picked up the writing of house Chronicles. Because of all these, collecting materials to write required much work.

#### 1. Collecting data

##### Historical Source 1

**At the General House archives**, the historical data was found in the Chronicles of the houses in Vietnam and Hongkong, the minutes, the reports from 1961-1975, and a handwritten notebook that the last two missionaries wrote until the time they were expelled from Vietnam.

I found that the missionary sisters were history minded because they wrote the Chronicles with a sense of history: very lively, allowing us to picture out their life, their spirit and their apostolic activities at that time. The handwritten notebook was dated from 30<sup>th</sup> April 1975 until 09<sup>th</sup> July 1976, before boarding the plane to leave Vietnam. This has provided invaluable information.

The problem was where can we could get the data after 1976.

**From interviews:** the important source that helped to create history came from the missionaries and the first Vietnamese sisters who are still alive today. They were ready to recall and contribute to this history book. The interviews include:

- **The missionaries:** Sr. Anna Persico (Torino 2005), Sr. Elena Miravalle (Hongkong 2009), Sr. Olivia Sadaya (Philippines 2009)
- **The members of Salesian Family:** 11 Vietnamese sisters of the early time, other sisters from different periods after, some older SDB, some lay people who had some connection with the sisters, the local people, and some past pupils.

Useful information was collected, but the recalling of the events did not match regarding the time, and sometimes they overlapped. While I did not know how to figure out the exactness of the historical information, the Divine Providence intervened.

##### Archives in Hongkong:

I went to Hongkong in 2009 to interview Sr. Elena Miravalle and found out that Hongkong archives keep all the Vietnam historical documents before 1975. The documents were carefully kept: each report, letter, greeting card and even small pieces of paper, the regular correspondence after 1975 between the Vietnamese Superiors, the sisters, and the sisters who left the Institute with the Provincial, with Sr. Elena Miravalle, or with Sr. Rosa Zoller. This was a great blessing to me because it helped to identify the accurate dates and events.

##### Historical source 2

Other references include:

- The book "*Storia delle FMA oltre Cina*" of China and Hongkong Province, where Vietnam once belonged to.
- Some spontaneous writings of the sisters, or short history of the communities
- The sisters' writings on their vocation and why they chose this Institute

- The socio-historical sources
- The book “*The Catholic Church in Vietnam from 1975-2000 and Appendix*”
- Yearbooks of different Congregations

After arranging the events chronologically and analyzing the data, I matched for the last time the historical sources with the inputs of the Superiors responsible in Vietnam through different periods. Finally I began to write.

## **2. The Structure of the book**

The history book was printed with size 17 x 24 cm, 540 pages thick, recounting the history not according to cyclical time but are divided according to the meaning of the stages. It has 9 chapters and 2 Appendixes retelling events from the time the Salesian Sisters came to Vietnam to explore (1960) until the event of the relict of St. John Bosco coming to Vietnam (21/01/2011). The story of Vietnam is read through the image of a seed, consisting these segments:

**1960-1963: Land clearing and cultivating.** Retelling the years and the first experiences of the missionaries in their integration and orientation for the mission in Vietnam. They lived in rented house, and even they did not know Vietnamese, they were utterly dedicated to the teaching of Catechism, elementary school and organizing oratory activities.

**1963-1975: Sowing seeds on the new land.** The first community purchased their house from the seminary. From here the work developed: aspirantate, Oratory, Kindergarten, Elementary and High School. In 1967 the Vietnamese sisters returned to Vietnam after their formation in Hongkong and Rome, and they collaborated closely with the missionaries.

**1975 – 1997: Deeply rooted in silence.** Under the Communist regime, the missionaries were expelled. Only 12 native sisters remained. Life was tough, the sisters were being suspected, they were not allowed to teach, their activities were limited. However the sisters were happy, they served quietly and persistently in forming religious vocation, teaching catechism and training catechists.

**1997 – 2003: Life growing.** Vietnam belonged to Pre-Province SEA. The number of personnel and the communities increased, initiatives were introduced before the societal changes, new forms of serving the poor resulting from the migration phenomenon were adopted.

**2003 – 2009: Firm Steps –** Vietnam was a Pre-Province in 2003 and became a Province in 2009. The Province continues to grow strongly in the fidelity and creativity in the mission to respond to the growing demands of multifaceted in today’s societal context and promote missionary resilience.

## **3. Sharing my experience from history writing**

It took me 6 years to write the history book, but what I personally gained is much longer, larger and deeper. First of all, this history tells of God’s providential love on our Institute. Writing history is not only about retelling the events, rather it’s the capacity to recognize God’s presence hidden within, it’s the making memories of the historical persons alive, and the vitality of the Institute can be seen in time.

I am convinced and value the importance of writing house Chronicles, of history mentality which must be promoted and nurtured. For if our predecessors had not written down their history nor had they kept the historical data, there was no way we could recreate the history.

My limitation in historical expertise is a reminder that I must always be open to the light of the Spirit, with God’s mediation. I must be sensitive to the events, must devote myself to search, be quick to the signs, even for me they are vague, and I must be ready to change.

When the history book was completed, I was very happy because I felt that I personally touched the depth of the life of our Province. My love and my sense of belonging to the Institute had grown. I feel more responsible in living and in giving my contribution, and in particular I understand, love and appreciate my sisters more.

What remains in me is my gratitude, first of all to God who always guides and intervenes in the history. I thank the Province for the support and provide good conditions for me to write this history book. I thank each sister who joyfully gave her contribution so that I could have the historical data. I thank all those who readily shared their experiences and help so that I could do my best in particular Sr. Lina Chiandotto who sent me precious materials from Cambodia Archives, Sr. Elena Miravalle from Hong Kong Archives. And I thank you for your listening to my sharing.