

# Communities of the Word

STORIES OF THE CHICAGO PROVINCE



THE VIETNAMESE STORY, 1975 – 2012

*Brother Dennis Newton*



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## **1975: A WATERSHED YEAR IN SAIGON AND EPWORTH**

Could a single phone call in early 1975 trigger a series of events that would change the course of history for the Society of the Divine Word in North America and around the world? It seems so, for a single phone call set off a remarkable chain of events that eventually led to the admission of the first Vietnamese candidates into the Society of the Divine Word.

## “Nha Trang,” “Da Nang,” “Hue,” “Dalat,” “Saigon”

Every Divine Word Missionary living in the United States in the late-1960s and early-1970s will certainly recognize the names of these Vietnamese places. Countless reports from the military bases and battlefields of Vietnam were broadcast into U.S. homes every single night during those years.

Today many young Divine Word Missionaries and candidates also know these place names but not through newspaper and television reports. These cities and towns are their former hometowns or the villages from which their families came.

## The Fall of Saigon

The year 1975 was a tragic milestone in Vietnam’s history, and it began a period of massive flight from that country. That year also marked a watershed in the history of the Society of the Divine Word.

When Saigon fell to the Communists in 1975, there were very few Vietnamese in the United States. In fact, the *Immigration and Naturalization Service* reported that a grand total of seven Vietnamese had been granted lawful permanent resident status as refugees during the decade between 1961 and 1970. By 1990, however, the 10-year census showed there were 614,547 Vietnamese in the United States. By 2012 (latest statistics available) that number had risen to 1,259,000 or 3 percent of the United States foreign-born population.

It also is significant that although approximately 10 percent of the population in Vietnam is Catholic, the percentage of Catholics among the Vietnamese refugees to the United States has been estimated by some to be as high as 40 percent.

No one could have predicted that the fall of Saigon in 1975 would impact the Society of the Divine Word as dramatically as it did. Amid a general decline in vocations throughout the United States, our Society was blessed with many vocations from the Vietnamese Catholic community. By 1998, 75 percent of the Divine Word Brothers and seminarians in temporary vows in the three North American provinces were of Vietnamese heritage.

## Fort Chaffee, Arkansas

In late spring of 1975, a large group of Vietnamese refugees was flown to Fort Chaffee, Arkansas, to begin their resettlement in the United States. Among them was a group of Catholic seminarians.



Divine Word Theologate students and staff at 2014 Lunar New Year celebration.

One of the military chaplains at Fort Chaffee, himself a onetime seminarian with the Society of the Divine Word, brought the plight of these seminarians to the attention of the office of the Secretary General of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops in Washington, D.C., where Father Thomas Krosnicki was serving on the NCCB's liturgy committee.

After hearing about the young men at Fort Chaffee, Father Krosnicki phoned Father Joseph Francis, then Provincial Superior of the Southern Province at Bay St. Louis, Mississippi, with the suggestion that the Divine Word Missionaries might perhaps be able to help the Vietnamese seminarians at Fort Chaffee to continue their training toward the priesthood. Such aid to the seminarians "in exile" could be, Father Krosnicki suggested, an appropriate contribution by the Divine Word Missionaries in the United States to the plight of the "boat people," which at the time had so dramatically caught the nation's attention.

At the direction of Father Francis, Father William Kelley, vocation director for the Southern Province, traveled to Fort Chaffee to meet with the seminarians. Assisted by a Vietnamese physician who served as translator, Father Kelley and a bishop, who also happened to be visiting, met a large group of Vietnamese seminarians in the base chapel.

Father Kelley told the seminarians that the Society of the Divine Word was prepared to do whatever it could to help them to reconnect

with their religious communities or, if they wished, to continue their studies toward the diocesan priesthood or for other religious congregations in the United States.

Later, Father Edward Herberger from the vocation office at Divine Word College in Epworth, Iowa, also visited the seminarians at Fort Chaffee and returned to Epworth to report to Father Louis Luzbetak, then president of the college.

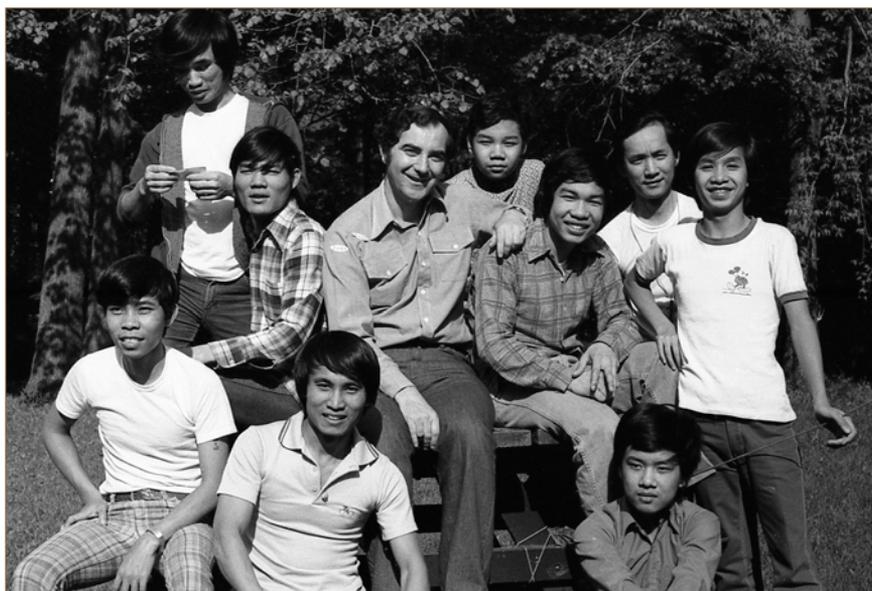
### **DIVINE WORD COLLEGE WELCOMES VIETNAMESE CANDIDATES**

With the encouragement and support of the provincial and council of the Northern Province, Father Luzbetak and other Divine Word Missionaries on the college staff at Epworth decided to roll up their sleeves and pitch in. At first, they scrambled to plan a bridging program to help Vietnamese seminarians enter seminary formation in the United States. They thought they would only be responding to a temporary need. Instead, their efforts, and the efforts of the Divine Word vocation directors and formators who followed them, were rewarded by the Lord with unforeseen blessings as promised in the Gospel, gifts *“packed together, shaken down, and overflowing,”* (Lk 6:38) that were poured into the Society’s lap.

It was fortunate that just a few months prior to this Father Luzbetak had invited Brother Patrick Hogan, a professional linguist, who at that time was a missionary in Taiwan, to join the faculty at Epworth. In a memorandum dated August 14, 1975, to the College Board of Administration, Father Luzbetak outlined three essential components that would be required for this new venture to succeed: 1) a director with experience of the Orient; 2) a professional ESL (English-as-Second-Language) program; and 3) a sound formation program. Brother Patrick Hogan, with his training and experience, met each of the criteria Father Luzbetak had described.

*“Here they come...”*

When the first group of 16 Vietnamese seminarians was greeted at the Dubuque airport on their way to Epworth in the fall of 1975, Brother Pat became their language instructor, formator, friend and substitute parent. Although half of that first group had not yet finished high school, all entered the new “English-as-Second-Language” (ESL) Program.



Brother Patrick Hogan (center) with some of the first Vietnamese seminarians.

Divine Word College agreed to sponsor these high school-age seminarians and was required to follow guidelines set by the U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare. Of the first 16 Vietnamese candidates, only two had relatives in the United States. Equipped with only a few English phrases, the transition would prove to be quite difficult.

To make this rescue operation even more difficult, none of the staff at Divine Word College spoke a word of Vietnamese. Fortunately, an elderly Vietnamese diocesan priest, Father Kim Ngoc Nguyen, who was living at St. Anthony parish in nearby Dubuque, was able to make occasional visits to the college and made himself available for spiritual guidance and emotional support.

In August 1978 the college hired Father Peter Hung Trinh, a diocesan priest, to teach philosophy. Later, Father Joseph Duc Minh Nguyen, also a diocesan priest, replaced Father Hung on the staff.

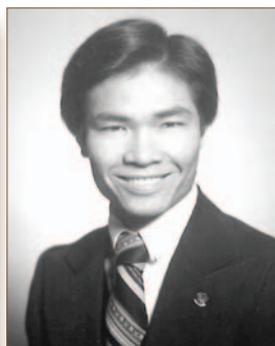
The 1980 graduation class of Divine Word College counted four students of Vietnamese heritage among the 17 graduates. Two of them, Paul Vung Van Le and Joseph Tri Van Vu, went on to be ordained to the priesthood in 1985. In 1981, there were 14 graduates, two of



Paul Vung Van Le  
College Graduation 1980  
Ordination 1985



Joseph Tri Van Vu  
College Graduation 1980  
Ordination 1985



Peter Sam Cao Nguyen  
College Graduation 1981  
Ordination 1986

whom were Vietnamese, including Peter Sam Cao Nguyen who was ordained in 1986.

The assignment of the first Vietnamese Divine Word Missionary to Divine Word College came in 1990 when Father Joseph Tri Van Vu, who had been among the original group of 16 seminarians, was named Dean of Students.

Before his departure from Vietnam, Joseph Tri Van Vu had been a seminarian for five years. Having escaped to Thailand, he was airlifted from an American air base to Fort Chaffee, Arkansas. One of Father Vu's first impressions of the college at Epworth came at the Halloween party. He was shocked at this non-traditional seminary that converted its dining room into a dance floor! More adjustments and shocks surely followed as the seminarians came to learn more about American culture and the American Church.

#### **FOUR DECADES OF GROWTH**

Meanwhile, the Society of the Divine Word was rapidly gaining both visibility and earning a solid reputation among the ever-expanding Vietnamese Catholic community throughout the United States. More and more young men learned about the Society and applied for admission. With the exception of 1976, each year brought new candidates to the Society. In 1995 and 1996 alone, 50 Vietnamese seminarians entered the formation program at Divine Word College.

Between 1975 and 1998, a total of 315 Vietnamese entered the Society of the Divine Word formation program in the United States.

Much has changed since 1975. In the fall of 1998, 80 percent of the candidates at Divine Word College were Vietnamese, and five Vietnamese Divine Word Missionaries in perpetual vows were involved fulltime in either formation, administration or vocation work at Divine Word College. Today, candidates of Vietnamese origin represent about 50 percent of the seminarians and brother candidates studying for the Society of the Divine Word at the college, and there are 12 Vietnamese Divine Word fathers and Brothers on the staff.

Divine Word College and the Society of the Divine Word throughout the world have been so enriched over the years by the presence of the Vietnamese that it was decided several years ago to share this experience with other Vietnamese, especially with other religious. During the 2014-2015 academic year, 28 Vietnamese Sisters from several religious congregations were studying at Epworth – either in the English-as-Second-Language Program or for a college degree. In addition to a healthy touch of femininity, these young Sisters and their participation in every aspect of student life have brought a burst of renewed enthusiasm and life to the college. To add to the mix, during the last few years a handful of Vietnamese Cistercian monks also have come to Epworth to study at Divine Word College.



Divine Word College students and staff at 2015 Lunar New Year celebration.

And now, the first Vietnamese who were born, raised and educated in the United States, are coming of age and are entering the Divine Word Novitiate at Techny. Although the initial great wave of emigration from Vietnam has passed, 50 percent of the Divine Word candidates at the college are of Vietnamese descent – fruit of the Vietnamese Catholic community in the United States with its strong family tradition and its support for religious and priestly vocations.

As more and more Vietnamese candidates are being born in the United States or have come at a very young age and have for all practical purposes been raised and educated here, in the span of little more than a generation, we have gone from “Vietnamese in America” to “Vietnamese-Americans” to “Americans of Vietnamese descent.”



2014-2015 novices of Vietnamese heritage: Peter Trong Do born in Santa Clara, California; Anthony Thanh Nguyen born in Baton Rouge, Louisiana; and Binh Dominic Tran born in Vietnam.

This phenomenon has given rise to a new and curious problem. Younger Vietnamese candidates are beginning to lose their ability to speak and write Vietnamese fluently – a natural consequence of growing up surrounded by American language and culture. Divine Word College now has a course in the Vietnamese language so that those who grew up here won't lose their heritage and will be able to celebrate a First Mass in Vietnamese in their home parishes and later become involved in ministry to Vietnamese Catholic communities around the country and the world.



Vietnamese confreres gathered at Riverside, California, in 2012.

### **WELCOMING THE BROTHERS OF ST. JOSEPH**

In another, closely related and very evident sign of Divine Providence, by the mid-1990s the members of a small religious congregation of Brothers and priests in Vietnam were ready to vote as a group to petition for admission “*en bloc*” into the international Society of the Divine Word.

Over the course of several decades, contacts and negotiations with the Society of the Divine Word General Council in Rome had been carried on sporadically and quietly, often amid difficulties and no little danger posed by such illegal contacts with foreigners.

On one occasion toward the end of the 1980s, the superior of the Brothers of St. Joseph wrote to the Divine Word Generalate in Rome to excuse a lengthy interval without contact by saying that unfortunately he had been “confined to hospital” and had been unable to write. Reading between the lines, the superiors in Rome understood that he really meant “prison” and promised that “Uncle Henry” (Divine Word Superior General Father Henry Barlage) would be coming soon to visit them, traveling disguised as a “German businessman.”

In 1998, after receiving their petition for the merger, agreed to and signed by each member in vows of the Brothers of St. Joseph in Vietnam, the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and for Societies of Apostolic Life in Rome declared that all was ready; the necessary documents were signed and sealed; and the Brothers of St. Joseph were able to renew their religious vows as members of the Society of the Divine Word in the presence of Father Antonio M. Pernia, the Society of the Divine Word Superior General, who had traveled to the Brothers' headquarters at Nha Trang, Vietnam, for the historic occasion.

### **WORLDWIDE ACCEPTANCE AND ACCOMPLISHMENTS**

Looking back at the last 40 years of Divine Word history, could anyone not be in tremendous awe at the bounteous grace the Society of the Divine Word has received from God in the Vietnamese? The Society has embarked on the new millennium with optimism and energy, buoyed by the presence of so many young and talented Vietnamese confreres engaged in the work of the Divine Word Missionaries worldwide.

To date, 74 Divine Word Missionaries of Vietnamese heritage have been ordained and two have professed perpetual vows as Brothers following their formation in the United States. Their names appear at the end of this chapter.

Numerous others who had done some portion of their seminary training with the Society have gone on to become diocesan priests or members of other religious congregations. Young Vietnamese also have entered the Society in other countries such as Germany, Japan, the Philippines and Australia to which they or their families had emigrated.

According to the 2015 *SVD Catalogus*, in the Chicago Province alone there are 61 confreres of Vietnamese origin – priests, Brothers, seminarians and novices (not including the 25 Vietnamese in the pre-novitiate program at Divine Word College). An additional 30 Vietnamese who had their formation in the Chicago Province are now assigned to Divine Word provinces in other parts of the world.

Today, Vietnamese confreres have been either elected or appointed to leadership positions such as Rector and Dean of Students of Divine Word College at Epworth, Prefect of Scholastics at Divine Word Theologate in Chicago and Rector of the Chicago Province's largest community at the Society's U.S. "motherhouse" in Techny – the Divine Word Residence.



A 2014 Vietnamese Christmas gathering at Divine Word Theologate.

Today, the vibrant Society of the Divine Word province in Vietnam, dedicated to St. Joseph in memory of their origins, has more than doubled in size since the day the Brothers first asked to join the Society of the Divine Word. They now have 69 priests, nine Brothers in perpetual vows, five Brothers in temporary vows, 52 scholastics and 13 novices, for a total of 148 members.

Young confreres from Vietnam, at the time of their perpetual vows, are now being given their first assignment to missions in countries outside of Vietnam. Others are being sent from Vietnam to Rome and universities elsewhere for graduate studies so that they can return to Vietnam to teach and to direct the flourishing formation program there and to develop the Divine Word missionary outreach in tribal and other needy areas of the country of Vietnam.

Father Stanley Uroda, an American who had worked with Vietnamese seminarians for years as both formator and rector of Divine Word Theologate in Chicago, is currently studying Vietnamese and working in Vietnam to assist the confreres there in building up their formation program

There are now more than 300 members of the Society of the Divine Word scattered around the world who either came from Vietnam or who were born into Vietnamese families in other countries.

Vietnamese Divine Word Missionaries are currently studying or are actively engaged in 33 countries around the world: Italy, Germany, Poland, the Czech Republic, Russia, United States, Canada, Jamaica, St. Kitts & Nevis, Mexico, Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Paraguay, Ecuador, Colombia, Panama, Taiwan, Macau, Japan, Philippines, Korea, Vietnam, Australia, Thailand, Papua New Guinea, Ghana, Togo, Angola, Botswana, Kenya, Mozambique and Chad.

And to think that all of this began with one simple phone call.  
Just amazing!



The first two Vietnamese confreres were ordained deacons on September 25, 1984, with their four classmates: (left-to-right) Ponciano Ramos, Paul Vung Van Le, Joseph Tri Van Vu, Auxiliary Bishop John Vlazny, Robert Kisala, James Liebner and Rosales Vega.

## VIETNAMESE ORDINATIONS IN NORTH AMERICA

| YEAR | NAME                    |
|------|-------------------------|
| 1985 | Paul Vung Van Le        |
| 1985 | Joseph Tri Van Vu       |
| 1986 | Peter Sam Cao Nguyen    |
| 1987 | Peter De Ta Vo          |
| 1988 | Joseph Dao Vu           |
| 1991 | Joseph Trong Nguyen     |
| 1991 | Joseph Thang Tran       |
| 1992 | Quang Duc Dinh          |
| 1992 | Khien Mai Luu           |
| 1993 | Joseph Huynh Tran       |
| 1995 | Chau Minh Pham          |
| 1996 | John Hue Dinh Tran      |
| 1996 | Anthony Luc Tran        |
| 1996 | Joseph Nguyen Vu        |
| 1997 | vanThanh Nguyen         |
| 1998 | Dominic Dung Anh Nguyen |
| 1998 | Peter Tam Thanh Tran    |
| 1999 | Brandon Hiep Nguyen     |
| 1999 | Hien Xuan Pham          |
| 2000 | Cuong Paul Nguyen       |
| 2000 | Nick Hien Nguyen        |
| 2000 | Bang Cong Tran          |
| 2000 | Nhan Van Tran           |
| 2000 | Thomas Quoc Tran        |
| 2002 | Binh Thanh Nguyen       |
| 2002 | Michael Quang Nguyen    |
| 2002 | Thi Xuan Pham           |
| 2003 | Xuan Ho                 |
| 2003 | Thang Tat Le            |
| 2003 | Peter Son Van Nguyen    |
| 2003 | Tan Viet Nguyen         |
| 2003 | Andrew Thu Pham         |
| 2003 | Sai ThienTran           |
| 2004 | John Hung Le            |
| 2004 | Thang Cao Hoang         |
| 2005 | Trung Thanh Mai         |
| 2005 | Duong Viet Nguyen       |

| <b>YEAR</b> | <b>NAME</b>              |
|-------------|--------------------------|
| 2005        | Danh Van Pham            |
| 2005        | Dai Ba Thai              |
| 2006        | Anthony Duc Le           |
| 2006        | Hieu Trong Nguyen        |
| 2006        | Kha Stephen Manh Nguyen  |
| 2006        | Phong Cao Nguyen         |
| 2006        | Long Michael Duc Vu      |
| 2006        | Toan Quoc Vu             |
| 2007        | Simon Thoi Hoang         |
| 2007        | Long Phi Nguyen          |
| 2007        | Vinh Daniel Nguyen       |
| 2007        | Vinh The Trinh           |
| 2007        | Andy Dinh Vu             |
| 2008        | Chien Xuan Dinh          |
| 2008        | Ky Ngoc Dinh             |
| 2008        | Michael Thanh Do         |
| 2008        | Anthony Cong Nguyen      |
| 2008        | Joseph Chau Nguyen       |
| 2008        | Khoa Quang Nguyen        |
| 2008        | Long Van Nguyen          |
| 2008        | Chinh Trong Phan         |
| 2009        | Quy Ngoc Dang            |
| 2009        | Tam Nguyen               |
| 2009        | Tuan Anh Mai             |
| 2009        | Linh Duy Pham            |
| 2010        | Tinh Van Nguyen          |
| 2011        | Joseph Minh Nguyen       |
| 2011        | Dominic Savio Huynh Pham |
| 2011        | Bao Trung Tran           |
| 2011        | Duy John Tran            |
| 2012        | Lan Tu Luong             |
| 2012        | Nam Quoc Vu              |
| 2013        | Bao The Nguyen           |
| 2013        | Peter Son Le             |
| 2013        | Nhien Minh Truong        |
| 2014        | Peter Phong Xuan Nguyen  |
| 2015        | Giang Tien Nguyen        |

**VIETNAMESE BROTHERS WHO PROFESSED PERPETUAL VOWS  
IN NORTH AMERICA**

| <b>YEAR</b> | <b>NAME</b>     |
|-------------|-----------------|
| 2006        | Vinh Ngoc Trinh |
| 2012        | Duy Linh Tran   |