

Vietnam and Cambodia: Luna Capalla travelled to Vietnam and Cambodia in December.

Luna Capalla: Sr. Joyce Meyer, on behalf of the Global Sisters Report, and I travelled together throughout the central highlands, coastal and southern regions of Vietnam, and the border towns in Cambodia. We visited 22 project sites during our 17-day trip in these two countries, spending the majority of the time in Vietnam. Sr. Joyce, who had been to this part of southeast Asia 3 previous times, stated that this was her best visit because of the rich context provided by our Vietnamese-American guides and our meetings with the highlander tribes in the mountainous regions. As the former executive director of the Fund for Sisters, she pointed out that building strong relationships with those with whom the Fund collaborates was one of the main goals of the project site visits.

Both of our guides, Leanne and Damin Hoang, were born in Saigon and immigrated to the U.S. in 1975, after the North Vietnamese Army captured their city. They met in the refugee camps in their early teens and later got married in Southern California. Both studied engineering and worked at Boeing for more than 20 years, securing high-level positions. In 2006, they retired early and moved back to Vietnam to become full-time missionaries. For the past 10 years, Leanne has been the liaison between the Fund for Sisters and various congregations in Vietnam, acting as a translator and helping the sisters with their grant applications. She continues to work together with the sisters in various provinces of Vietnam.

Having well-educated Vietnamese-Americans as our guides was valuable, especially when they shared their perspectives on the socio-political environment in Vietnam. I learned that anti-communist sentiments are still very strong within the older generation in South Vietnam and that Saigon is the preferred name of the former capital city over that of the communist revolutionary leader, Ho Chi Minh. The Vietnamese generally keep silent about their views for fear of being arrested and sent to re-education camps. The highlanders living in the mountainous regions are, in fact, marginalized because they helped the Americans during the Vietnam War. Bribery is also a way of life in Vietnam and is a routine part of doing business. As long as the people pay the “informal charges,” the communist authorities leave them alone. Another interesting fact I learned was that Vietnam is a relatively small country no bigger than the state of California.

Sr. Joyce and I met with several congregations and their general or provincial superiors at separate locations. Unfortunately, we could not meet with them all at one place as we would

have liked because large gatherings are considered a threat by the communist government. Leanne explained that if the sisters would like to organize a leadership conference, they must first submit their agenda with a list of all attendees to government officials one year in advance and have it approved before the date of the meeting. The sisters are not allowed to deviate from their written agenda or have any new participants who are not on the list. At such meetings, the sisters are afraid to speak freely because they know they are being closely monitored. Sr. Joyce and I agreed that meeting the sisters privately was the best option.

One of the congregations we met with was the Lovers of the Holy Cross. Founded in 1670, this was the very first indigenous female religious congregation in East Asia. It is actually a confederation of a number of congregations that are under the authority of more than 20 individual local bishops rather than that of the pope. As of 2015, we were told there was a total of 27 autonomous Lovers of the Holy Cross congregations. However, they have never been able to get together as a whole group. In October of last year, one of the congregations took the initiative of renting a bus and driving to all of the different Lovers of the Holy Cross congregations to meet with the superiors and share their experiences and challenges. This was a bold move and Sr. Joyce wanted them to keep the momentum by encouraging the sisters to go to a UISG (International Union of Superior Generals) meeting in Rome where they would be able to talk freely amongst themselves. The meeting takes place this May 2016.

Each of the congregations we met with had interesting stories to share. I admire how these religious women continue to work in a country where the goal of the atheistic communist government is to destroy faith in God and the Church. One of the sisters stated indignantly, "The government wants to destroy the conscience of the people." I felt that the work of the sisters in Vietnam was of great importance as they quietly instilled good, moral values in the children and families they served. We met with a total of 8 different congregations who successfully managed the various projects that we visited. The following is a list of the congregations: Lovers of the Holy Cross of Qui Nhon, The Good Shepherd Sisters, The Franciscan Missionaries of Mary, Servantes Du Tres Saint Sacrement, The Dominican Sisters of Tam Hiep, and St. Paul de Chartres Congregation, Dominican Sisters of Phu Cuong, and the Society of Missionaries of Mary Mother of the Redeemer.

In Vietnam, we visited a total of 17 project sites located throughout Saigon/Ho Chi Minh City and the provinces of Dong Nai, Daklak, Gia Lai, Kontum, Ninh Thuan and Binh Dinh. The projects consisted of 4 regular schools, 4 schools for children with disabilities, 2 orphanages, 2 boarding homes, 2 clinics, 1 home for elderly women, 1 cow project and 1 cashew farm.

In Cambodia, we visited 5 projects located in Phnom Penh and the remote village of Loc Quang. These consisted of 2 schools, 1 orphanage and 2 water projects. The sisters we met were all Vietnamese. It is interesting to note that Cambodia used to be a much bigger country containing what is now Thailand and the southern part of Vietnam.