

Narrator: Brother Francis Tri Nguyen

Interviewer: Melissa Schellinger

Date/Time: April 2, 2007/3:30 pm

Location: 361 Olney Hall, La Salle University, Philadelphia, PA

Abstract

Francis of Assisi Nguyen von Tri, was born in Shanghai, China on November 6, 1938. When the Communists took over China, his family left the country for Hanoi, North Vietnam. In 1954, when the French were defeated, they fled the Communists again, and settled in South Vietnam. He was raised a Catholic, and enrolled in the Christian Brothers order at a young age. While completing his formation for the Christian Brotherhood, Brother Francis began teaching students at various age levels. He entered into higher education, completed a Bachelors degree, and went on to pursue a Masters degree in Sociology after receiving a scholarship to attend the Asian Social Institute in Manila, Philippines. He taught at schools in Vietnam and Cambodia in the 1960s and 70s, during the height of the Vietnam War. In 1975, he was a member of the large group of refugees who fled South Vietnam when Saigon fell to the North Vietnamese. Brother Francis arrived in the United States in the summer of 1975. Once he arrived in the U.S., he sustained his role as a Christian Brother by joining the American community, and pursued degrees at several major universities. Brother Francis has conducted research on La Sallian identity around the world, the plight and successes of Vietnamese refugees, and the aging process. He has been a faculty member at La Salle University since 1985, and currently serves as head of the University's Sociology Department. His office is located in 361 Olney Hall.

Table of Contents

Session 1 - April 2, 2007, 3:30 pm – 1 hour, 6 minutes

Permission to record; identifying information: full name, date of birth (Nov. 6, 1938), place of birth (Shanghai, China)

00:33 –family's emigration to Vietnam when Communists took over in China; left on French battleship, and initially settled in Saigon (1949-50) then moved to Hanoi; father's job as Assistant Deputy Director of Police and Security in North Vietnam (Hanoi)

1:48 – role of religion in childhood; discusses parent's conversion to Catholicism, role of the French in his father's conversion as well as his reading of the Gospel; he and brothers all born/baptized Catholic; at 6-7 years of age, French Catholic nun came to village teaching catechism; during last year in Shanghai transferred from French public school to a Catholic school run by Marist Brothers; once in Vietnam, attended Christian Brothers school in Hanoi

04:59 – "calling" to the brotherhood; at 11 years old the Brother school held a retreat during Tet holiday, and 5th graders went to retreat; belonged to either "Valiant Hearts" (like Boy Scouts) or

“Young People for Mary;” boys played “trick” on the priests and found himself beginning preparation for Christian Brotherhood; sent to Juniorate¹; Providence takes over, and God decides where he will go (God’s hand has shaped him from leaving Shanghai, to escaping Communists in Hanoi when French lost in 1954, to leaving Vietnam as a refugee in 1975).

08:33 –father’s support of his vocation and compares it to the challenges of others who entered the brotherhood

09:08 – early experience with Christian Brothers (5th grade); experience with Marist Brothers in 4th grade; nothing in particular drove him to become a Christian Brother; last remaining Christian Brother from his class

10:45 – understanding of Christian Brothers’ mission; learned when he began doing research; everyone gives “official formula” because they are in a routine; brothers have different interpretations of meaning of La Sallian mission; reason for his research on La Sallian identity around the globe

11:58 – Christian Brothers’ training in mission; wanted to see how brothers internalize the mission on their own; challenges to fulfilling the Christian Brothers mission in the US (most of the people are middle class, many lay people at the university); new understanding after research project

14:25 – formal schooling; began at 4 years old (kindergarten), began picking up English; then went to French school College Francais in Shanghai; skipped a grade (French grades moved backwards), went from grade 11 to grade 9; school’s administration and curriculum was French, but students were very “cosmopolitan;” during breaks everyone spoke English, so he picked up English (in addition to one English class); discusses Shanghai which was very international with French, English, American, German sections; he lived in French sector where there was still a large English influence

17:01 – higher education; always knew he would go to college because it was something that was valued in his family and because many Christian brothers went on to universities; father was self-taught in many languages, so he and his brothers became very intellectual and desired to go on to high education; went to university in Vietnam, then took a scholarship in Manila, Philippines for Sociology and came to like it (initially planned to study Psychology); in hindsight feels that Sociology helped him with various social situations in his life (ie. from China to Vietnam and Vietnam to the US); wrote Masters thesis on General Chapter in 1966 (analyzed changes post-Vatican II) – values that changed and values that did not change post-Vatican II; discusses how brothers reacted to the changes that occurred after Vatican II

21:10 – Vatican II’s effect on brothers (the removal of external structure and the need to adapt to self-reliance); brothers in S.E. Asia were so used to routine and structure, many had difficulty thinking for themselves because they had built little internal structure; many felt lost and began questioning their role as Christian brothers

23:23 – path to teaching; mentions novitiate and scholasticate stages of his Christian Brothers formation; began teaching by substituting for brothers who were studying for exams; students liked and respected him, and he found teaching to be very rewarding; began teaching in 1960; initially taught 4th graders, then 6th graders (math, French and religion), and 11th grade (English); after two years taught at Ecole Miche (French school in Cambodia) - here he taught math, science and religion; found teaching religion to be most rewarding

26:12 – French influence on Vietnamese education; French Ministry in France centralized curriculum (dictated textbooks, curriculum, etc.); contrasts that with America where everything is so decentralized; comments that adaptation to the US was difficult because there is so much free choice on the part of students, which is something he is still getting used to

27:32 – teaching younger students vs. older students; expresses that the change was based on need; enjoyed teaching all age groups and found it to be beneficial to teach every level; eventually chose to teach at the university level; taught at La Salle High School when he first came to the US; tells story of encountering Flubacher (Economics professor), on campus with the mother of a former student at La Salle High School; talks about American kids' involvement in extra-curricular social activities; because he was not into this he wanted to teach at the college level

30:39 – changes in classroom role once he arrived in the US; was never tested by students in Vietnam, but was challenged once he arrived in the classroom in the US; discusses reasons he likes American students; recounts a story told to him by Crew moderator where students commented that he was the smartest teacher they ever met; he finds he was successful at impacting students; discusses differences between students in Vietnam and US; US students respect you for competency, not because they are told they must respect you, like in Vietnam; feels teaching in the US allows him to live the Gospel better; discusses differing relationships with students in Vietnam and US; tells story of writing a recommendation for an American female student who was applying for the Navy (he found this to be a unique and ironic situation)

38:27 – impact of US presence in Vietnam on his teaching; at the time he felt it had little impact, but in hindsight he realizes the huge impact that it had (on Vietnamese families and even on the Christian brothers); changed brothers' perspectives from being community-oriented to more individualistic; discusses brothers' isolation from the war; discusses America's detrimental effects on Vietnamese people and society; commented that he did not plan to leave Vietnam

41:50 – moral deterioration of Vietnamese society due to American presence during the war; long term effects of the war on students that the brothers teach and, in turn, the brothers' need to adapt to those changes; does not have much knowledge of Vietnamese students today because he has little contact with people there; comments on the effects of globalization on Vietnamese people

46:09 – negative impact of the French (pre-1954) and Americans on Vietnam; expresses opinion on American foreign policy, and propensity toward corruption and the promotion of corrupt leaders in foreign policy

48:31 – political isolation of brothers during the war; bazooka into room at night; in hindsight thinks brothers should have been more connected to the ordinary people during the war instead of separating themselves from the community; one mistake was talking about high-ranking alumni (ie. President Ngo dinh Diem); should have listened more to the desperations of the community; tells story of former Communist student who discreetly tried to recruit him; talks about similarities between Americans and Vietnamese (both fought for independence to get rid of foreign powers)

52:50 – reasons for leaving Vietnam in 1975 (“push” instead of a “pull”); always had an attraction to the US, but never intended to come as a refugee; left Vietnam because of Communists; brother died on April 8, 1975 and left behind a wife and kids; saw that brother’s family had no future under communists since his brother was a former general in South Vietnamese army

54:46 – feelings upon leaving Vietnam; “numbness,” lack of money and the need to feed 6 nephews and nieces and their mother; recounts boat trip from Saigon to Guam (5 days); discusses sorting of refugees in Guam; remembers encounter with female Air Force captain who allowed he and his family to leave in May instead of July; arrived at Ft. Indiantown Gap near Harrisburg

57:41 – always planned to remain a Christian brother; Glencoe, MO – place for Vietnamese brothers (was put in charge of other Vietnamese brothers there); discusses the desire that many brothers had to leave because they felt they could not impact children in the US; knowing English and foreign customs was an asset for him one he arrived in the US

59:58 – differences between American and Vietnamese brothers; individualism vs. community; superiority of Americans’ professional and academic preparation; American brothers’ active choice to become a brother vs. many Vietnamese brothers who joined the order to avoid the draft; reaction to American individuality

01:03 – ease of fulfilling role as a Christian brother in Vietnam vs. US; Vietnam – Catholics not accepted, US – Christian culture, Catholics respected and accepted; US – materialism makes it difficult to remain a brother, Vietnam – little choice; positives and negatives to living out the role of a Christian brother in both societies