

## My Trip Home to Vietnam – Fr Thanh

It has been only eight months since my arrival in Melbourne in January 2013, but I had the opportunity to return home for the very first time to attend the episcopal ordination of Father Peter Vien Van Nguyen, who has been appointed Auxiliary Bishop of Vinh by His Holiness Pope Francis.

Bishop Peter Nguyen was born on January 8, 1965 in Quang Binh province. In 1999, he was ordained to the priesthood for the diocese of Vinh. Following his ordination, he was sent to the School of Philosophy and Theology, Sydney for further studies. In 2009 Fr Peter graduated with a doctoral degree in Systematic Theology and returned to Vinh to work as Professor of Systematic Theology and Vice Rector of Vinh Thanh Seminary. In 2010 he was made Vicar General whilst retaining his teaching duties in the seminary.



The ordination ceremony took place on September 4, 2013 in Vinh with an estimated crowd of 22,000 participants. It brought joy to Vietnamese Catholics and particularly to those of the Vinh diocese. It also brought a two-fold joy to the local church's leaders: the Vietnamese bishops welcomed a new member to the college of bishops whilst Bishop Paul Nguyen Thai Hop has another collaborator to share his pastoral ministry in the diocese of Vinh where the needs for pastoral care increased over the past decade

The ceremony was a truly blessed and joyful occasion for thousands of Vinh's faithful as well as other participants from all parts of Vietnam and the world. Here, in and through the service, the participants experienced a deep sense of the Universal Church both in the literal and theological sense. Here, they also witnessed a spectacular, festive and yet prayerful, solemn outdoor service peculiar to this local church. Those present, as well as those united with Bishop Peter Nguyen, in spirit would joyfully thank God for the grace-filled service, especially the unusually fine weather on an early autumn day, which manifested a sign of God's abundant blessings.

For the faithful of Vinh, the ordination also brought about a fresh hope for a better life for the local church expressed vividly in the motto chosen by Bishop Nguyen, *"Peace I leave with you"* (Jn 14: 27). The motto reflects deeply the person and the insight of the newly ordained bishop, who has been praised as a man of harmony. This message of peace is significant in the midst of a nationwide crisis of identity and leadership as well as in the peculiar context of the diocese of Vinh where the relationship between the local authority and the



church has worsened in recent years due to a lack of mutual understanding and sincere dialogue. In his thank-you speech following the ordination ceremony, Bishop Peter Nguyen expressed his wish to work in collaboration with the local authorities toward a more just and humane society.

Unfortunately, whilst the joy and celebration were still going on following the ordination service, and the message of peace had just been proclaimed, a brutal and inhumane attack was launched by Nghe An authority aimed at the parishioners of My Yen parish, Vinh diocese, which shattered the joy and peace of the faithful of this parish and the diocese of Vinh as a whole. The cause for the attack was identified with the fact that the local authority failed to carry out their commitment to release two Catholic detainees of My Yen parish who had been illegally arrested on May 22, 2013 for a charge entitled "disturbance of public peace." When people gathered around Nghi Phuong's communal house to protest against the authority, they were brutally bashed by thousands of armed police and soldiers.

Consequently, more than 30 people, including women and adolescents, were brutally beaten. Three were in critical condition with head injuries; others suffered from broken legs, arms and ribs. Undoubtedly, the incident has caused serious damage to the trust of Vietnamese people in those who lead the country and the good name of Vietnam. It also raises concern about religious freedom, freedom of speech, human rights, democracy and social justice in Vietnam. Sadly these things seem to remain *mere words* in a country where the communist party is the sole and inviolable political regime.

Returning to Australia where people enjoy a high level of human rights and social justice, I am saddened when thinking about the suffering of the Vietnamese people and the serious deprivation of human rights in my home country. This has led me to think that the way to religious freedom, human rights and social justice in Vietnam is both challenging and far from existing, even though these realities are intrinsic to human existence. A sound government is the one that safeguards and nurtures these basic and fundamental human rights.

In a nutshell, my trip to Vietnam turned from joy into sadness because of the suffering of Vietnamese people under the communist regime. However, my hope, as well as my prayer, is that the Catholic Church in Vietnam continues to grow strongly against this hostile environment; and that Bishop Peter Vien Nguyen, who identified as a messenger of peace, together with Bishop Paul Nguyen, will work hard together to bring about peace, justice and harmony for the people of Vinh. My strong belief is that this hope will never fail because "*If God is for us, who can be against us?*" (Romans 8: 31).

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