

Week Eleven: Sunday — April 07, 2019

Da Lat, Vietnam

From the Testament of Francis . . .

“And I used to work with my hands, and I still desire to work; and I firmly wish that all my brothers give themselves to honest work. Let those who do not know how to work learn, not from desire of receiving wages for their work but as an example and in order to avoid idleness. And when we are not paid for our work, let us have recourse to the table of the Lord, seeking alms from door to door. The Lord revealed to me a greeting, as we used to say: May the Lord give you peace.”



It is very obvious to me that the Vietnamese Friars are living out these words as they walk with the poor and needy of the country. Recently their spirit of generosity was expressed as they welcomed five young adult Cambodians into the novitiate compound in order to learn how to properly cultivate and grow flowers on an industrial

scale so that they might start a similar industry in their homeland. By comparison, Cambodia is struggling its way out of a third world economy and they are in need of all the assistance they can acquire.



Perhaps a bit of refresher history course of these countries will help to clarify the significance of this act of kindness on the part of the Friars. After the American-Vietnam War ceased, Vietnam invaded the neighboring country of Cambodia in an effort to obtain more land for its growing population. The Viets occupied Cambodia for ten years but they finally retreated in 1989. Needless to say, the Cambodians do not have a positive attitude toward the Vietnamese.



The five Cambodians were invited to Vietnam by the Friars who are ministering to the remaining Vietnamese immigrants in the small villages that border Phnom Penh. During the

conflicts between the two countries approximately 750,000 emigrated to Cambodia in hopes of a better life. Unfortunately that has not happened and the immigrants now find themselves caught in the middle of a complicated political web. The Vietnamese government maintains that they freely chose to leave Vietnam and should therefore stay put and the Cambodian government would like to rid itself of the constant reminder of their past conflicts with the Vietnamese. Consequently the immigrants are regularly denied social services and education and they are relegated to doing the most menial of jobs.



The most heartening piece to this story is that four of the five young people are Buddhists and so their presence in our Catholic compound is even more inspiring. The Friars have treated them with the utmost respect and reverence, just as St Francis would expect from any of his brothers.

The Friars worked with their guests side by side and shared all of their technical skills with them. The flower greenhouse covers almost two and a half acres. The majority of the seedlings are yellow chrysanthemums which are highly regarded in Asia as symbols of good fortune. The plants are grown from seeds that are harvested by the workers and great care is given to maintain the high quality of the plants. Once the seedlings reach about two inches in height they are sold off to other flower growers who specialize in cultivating them to maturity. The greenhouse operation employs twenty-five ethnic minority workers.



Since most of the young Friars come from the rural areas of Vietnam they are very much at home with working in the gardens. A lot of their parents work on coffee or pepper plantations and so they are accustomed to the backbreaking work. The novitiate schedule is quite stringent and it is heavily focused on prayer (*as it should be*) and even though the work times are limited to about two and a half hours each day the greenhouse is able to produce its flowering plants to the highest

standards. Watching the young men work in the fields is like watching a synchronized dance routine. They seem to have the ability to maximize their every movement.



This coming week promises to be filled with many worthy activities. The deacon and priesthood candidates for this year will be with us for a five-day retreat. I taught conversational English to all of the ordinands and so it will be especially heartwarming to have the opportunity to spend time with them. And next weekend we will be attending the Palm Sunday Youth Mass at the Da Lat Cathedral. Both events are beacons of hope for Vietnam.

Peace and All Good!

Bruce

