

**The following pages are a brief history of the Montagnard people and the Catholic Missionaries in Vietnam as told by Sister Marie Dominique who lived in Vietnam before, during, and after the War.**

“GOD IS GOOD ALL THE TIME !  
ALL THE TIME GOD IS GOOD!”

# VIỆT - NAM

A LITTLE BIT ABOUT THE MONTAGNARDS in  
VIỆT-NAM at KONTUM, THE HIGHLANDS OF VIỆT-NAM.

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KONTUM, or Hauts-Plateaux ( Highlands , South of ViệtNam ) is the Mother land of the Montagnards, it's their homeland, the homeland of their Ancestors. There they celebrate their Birth, their Life and their Death. There are many different tribes of Montagnards (Ethnic minorities) Bahnar, Jơlong, Jrai, Rơngao, Sơdang etc . Each tribe speaks a different dialect, but the most common dialect, the one which has Bible, Religious books and teachings translated is the *Bahnar language* . I've learned this one.

The Montagnards are the poorest among the Poor in ViệtNam. They were kings and masters of their lands and traditions. The first Missionaries who came in 1848 had many difficulties to evangelize them. They used to adore and worship all kinds of gods by superstition: the Banian Tree god, the Lightning-Thunder god, the Sun god, the Moon god, the Ox, the Snake, the Lion, the Tiger etc.. all things that can hurt them, or threaten their life, become their gods ! They offered them sacrifices of oxen, water-buffalos that they pierced, killed , burned in wood-fire , cut them into pieces, roasted them then consumed them with jars of wine that they made with cereal while the young danced , played drums, gongs and other bambou instruments. All was pagan. But after they've been evangelized by the M.E.P. missionaries , it was so touching to see the entire household turning away from those pagan gods , throwing them to the ground, destroying their altars, installing the Crucifix at their place, and kneeling down , bowing their heads to adore Jesus, to receive the Exorcism and the blessings given by the Missionaries.

Now they believe in God and are Catholics, happy to be His children.

The Montagnards are very poor materially but their hearts are very kind, gentle, sincere and faithful. They are also very hospitable, loving, caring, protecting each other, their strength comes from their unity. They help each other in many occasions: like: doing the sowing seeds, rice planting, or collecting the harvest etc. When there is a wedding or a Funeral in the village: all the villagers old, young, children, all, stop their own work and give a hand, and participate in the common event. They practice what St. Paul taught:

*“ Rejoice with those who are happy, and mourn with those who are sad.”*

But, now that the Communists govern the Country, they chase the Montagnards far away, in the remotest forests, usurp their villages and install themselves there and other Vietnamese. The Montagnards have always suffered oppression, and injustice, .., They work very hard for their livelihood: planting rice, corn, manioc, roots, vegetables in the forests, in ricefields, they work in the fields: those are their main resources, their income! They carry their products to exchange with the Vietnamese for more rice, or fish-sauce, fish, salt etc.

Now, let's talk about two of the many activities in this Missionary land.

## I-SCHOOL NOTRE-DAME

TRƯỜNG ĐỨC-BÀ

HNAM TRUNG XANTA MARIA

1957-1972

I've been blessed to serve those Montagnards during 15 years from 1957-1972.

They didn't have schools at that time, the children are in the fields with their parents, playing, catching insects, shooting birds, fishing in the rivers etc... , the olders help their parents in the fields, the little kids play outdoor with birds, insects, fishing, enjoying the fresh air of the nature. They live in small villages, in "huts" made with straw or thatch, called: "Sarpilotis". Under their huts they put fire-woods, they raise pigs, chickens, a couple of cows or waterbuffalos (those who can afford), upstairs is a big room, with any separations: everybody in the family lives in the same room, which is used for cooking, eating, sleeping, working, receiving guests etc. ! So when you come to visit them, you sit on the floor, you smell their food, and other unpleasant odors, you see their torn out clothes

hanging together in the walls, their blankets on the floor, if you are not bitten by mosquitos or bugs and other insects, you are lucky ! In each hut they put an altar in the middle of the room with a Crucifix, a statue or picture of our Blessed Mother, some rosary beads hanging there. Yes they are poor but very prayerful ! During your visit, they can offer you to taste some of their food, or wine, some fruit from their field: banana, watermelons etc. Sometimes they give you a couple chicken eggs, or even a chick ! You'll show them your love, your respect, your concern, by tasting their food or accepting their gift ! Your attitude shows them your love or your disgust !

And it makes a lot of difference for the fruit of your apostolate !

This is the case to apply Saint Paul's experience:

*"I have made myself all things to all people in order to save at least some of them ."* In fact I do all that I do for the sake of the Gospel in the hope of having a share in its blessings." (1 Cor. 9:22-23 )

In the middle of the village, there is a big house named " Hnam-Rông" Common House. This is the place for prayers meetings, gatherings, celebrations etc.

When I arrived in 1957, the first thing I did, was to go into the nearest village, with a Bahnar sister to invite a few children , brought them to the Sisters ' house, talking to them, teaching them a little bit, and learning from them their language : Bahnar. I did it every morning for 6 months. Slowly, at the 2<sup>nd</sup> year, we began to build up some rooms, thanks to the generosity of the National Army, and the hard work of my Aunt who was also a Daughter of Charity Sister Léonide Đõ who went to Pleiku ( 50 Kilometers from Kontum) to beg for materials to build up a few rooms, to be used as classrooms! In 1958 we began to open our school: more children came, we began to teach them for a few hours then released them to their freedom in the fields, rivers etc..

Little by little, months after months , years after years, we got 100 children, 200 children, then, by the end of the 8th year 1,000 children from Pre-school ( Day Care) through primary classes. After the primary Certificat (equivalent to the 8th grade here ) we transferred them to a Vietnamese school , one mile from ours, to continue High School and up.. Montagnards don't like to study at all ! We have to force them to go to school, it was hard for them and for us. When a child missed his class, the pastor went to the fields looking for him and brought him back to school, at anytime of the day: 12 noon, or 2, or 3 pm. We have to be ready

to accept him . Oftentimes, when the children were absent, I have to convoke the parents and those children for a conference on Sundays. At the question: "Why did you miss class such such day ?" The answer was unanimous "Lazy!" They tell you the truth !

They have nothing: *their only presence at school was a "big favor for us!"* Because they'd rather run freely in the fields and rivers , wandering through mountains and valleys, outdoors there, than to be kept in a classroom! So, we had to provide everything : pencils, notebooks, papers, colors, *EVERYTHING*, and we tried to encourage them to frequent school by rewarding them once a month with school supplies for their regular attendance.

I noticed that the Montagnards love music, and have the talent for music. One day, in the Church during the Holy Mass, when the priest began to sing the "Gloria" in Jolong tune: the whole church , even the mothers with their children on their back got up and danced along with the music. With this experience, we used songs, and music to teach Catechism and classes. They sing very well, they have a very high pitch, nice voice and they play musical instruments easily.

Question? Where did I get all those school supplies ? I became a " beggar!" , Yes, a beggar for the Poor and on behalf of them. !

And God always blessed us, and provided all our needs, at the time. Slowly, to educate them and encourage their parents to participate in the education of their children, we asked them an effort as a kind of " Tuition": The Firewoods!

Each Friday, in union with Jesus carrying His Cross to Mount Calvary, each child, according to his, her physical strength, carried one, or two or more logs of firewoods for the Sisters. It was so meaningful , so touching to see , especially the small children carrying their logs on their shoulders in procession , class by class each Friday: Day of Penance !

Another question ? Who were the teachers ? Where did they come from ?

Answer: None besides me ! for the first year ! I was learning their language, preparing the class, translating school books from French , Vietnamese into Bahnar, hiring 2 Vietnamese Teachers to help me, and a few young girls Bahnar teaching them and instructing them how to teach the kids.... Little by little , the big girls learned to teach the small kids, and became " Teachers !" Can you believe it ? It's hard to imagine what was happening there! Even now, when I recall that time, I can't stop thanking

God: He really was with us, protected us and sustained us; real Miracles happened ! Well, a few of these Learning-teachers desired to become "Nuns " The Convent of the Sisters of the "Miraculous Medal" existed since 1948, All are Montagnard Sisters, but three Vietnamese. They were all together 30 nuns with a french Daughter of Charity as their Superior. I invited some of those Bahnar sisters and formed them to become "Teachers" Now, in 1972, when I left Kontum, they were 80 Sisters. Among the children who frequented our " Notre-Dame School", 12 got the Bacchalaureats, 2 French Brevets within my 15 years in this mission, The 12 Baccalaureats became "Nuns" , 6 of them worked as " Teachers " at our School.

We worked very hard, believe me ! Each Saturday we have Catechists' meeting to learn and prepare the lessons for the following week, then in the afternoon, those same sisters came back to prepare the lessons for their regular classes : Because they are learning and teaching , so why it took so much work and time to do it ! On Sundays , early in the morning I attended Mass with the Community, then Mass with the villagers, then Adult Catechism, Meetings with the parents and children who were absent during the week, solving up their problems etc . Meeting with the catechists of five villages, listening to them and encouraging them in their apostolate with people in the villages, sometimes helping them to prepare the great Feasts of the liturgical year. It took me the whole day , then at night I had to check the Sisters' preparations for catechism and classes ( 24 copy-books together ). We instructed not only the children, but also the young, and their parents! Everything was new for them !

I was exhausted, so were the sisters who worked with me ! This hectic and overwhelming work lasts for 15 years. Yes, in this mission ,in the service of the Montagnards !

Our Summers were spent in more Trainings on Pedagogy, Psychology and many other workshops , our only vacations were to work without the presence of the children, that's it ! God blessed our crazy and hectic years ! We were enthusiastic, eager, happy to see the number of the students increasing, and the flourishing religious vocations, and our zeal to spread the Word, and the Good News of Jesus-Christ sustained us in our apostolate.

*"Bōnē kō Bā-Yang pā gōh khan dang yō !"*

**II. SAINT VINCENT ORPHANAGE**  
**TỔ ẤM MÂM NON !**  
**WARM NEST of LOVE !**

1975-1999

The Orphans: Who are they ? Where do they come from ?

In 1968-69 the Communists attacked and took Kontum. The D.C. fled back to Saigon. Only Sr. Marguerite ( French ), Sr. Louise (VN) and myself with Father Jean Faugère M.E.P, we offered our life , and got ready , to be killed and to die among the Montagnards and with them. We were hiding in our Community room with a group of Montagnard refugees., meanwhile the National soldiers fought with the Communists face-to face, with bombs, rockets, shootings, killing, helicopters over our heads. It was like our last hour on this earth.... Anyway, the good Lord protected us , and we got out of it alive !

After this terrible event , I was exhausted. In 1972 the Superiors called me to Saigon, the change of work and atmosphere helped to strengthen me with the time. At Saigon, I continued my master degrees at the University, Attended the music class to learn how to direct a church choir, supervising the catechism for our High-School classes and other chores: I put all my strength to my present assignment but my heart is still in Kontum , praying and waiting God's time to return with the Montagnards as the Superiors promised them so, because since I moved, they never stopped asking the Superiors to send me back to them .

After the Falldown of our Country into the Communist government in April 1975, I've asked 4 times to go back to Kontum, to die among the Montagnards, but the permission was refused ! ..

Since I am in the United States, I lost contact with Kontum, until last year, I got to know that after the Daughters of Charity left Kontum, the Montagnard sisters continue their life, with persistent and strong faith, , against spiritual , mental oppression, against the worst poverty..., they survive through their total trust in God's Providence! And the Montagnards become poorer, miserable, because, the Communists take their lands, push them far away in the forests, they get sick, but have no

medicines, the children die, their parents die, they put their children, newborn babies, at the sisters' house, or in the streets. Charitably, the sisters kindly took those children in; most of them lost their mother, at birth, or lost both mother and father, some elderly people were abandoned by their family, their own children, the reason was their incapability to care for them or feed them, in a word their poverty, the sisters also take in some infirms abandoned by their family ! This is the case of "the Poor helping the poor !"

Now, what do the sisters do to feed and raise those 380 orphans ? They work on the fields for their livelihood , but their love for the poor makes them becoming "loving mothers" and instead of leaving those unfortunate children on the street ! They receive them, care for them , as " loving "Mothers" do for their own children. God provides! A few visitors , recently came to adopt a few ( 9 ) of these orphans , in Oregon, and Washington; some rare benefactors or visitors help them a little bit.. , and mostly God's Providence. I have the pictures and videos which show the faith, the trust in God's Providence and the love that the Montagnard sisters provide to those orphans ! Their love made them crawling up from the valley of their miserable " hut" to a better lodge, to avoid the "Big Flood" which comes and devastates and kills many people every 10 years. Now they are in a house more comfortable for their health , thanks be to God ! The sisters continue to work hard! They send the children to Government School according to their ages, they have to pay their tuition, provide, school supplies etc.

The children, after school, have to work in the garden, or kitchen, or fields , or around the house, according to their age, and strength, they never stay idle!

By the way, those Sisters were my little students from 1957, now they become Mother general, General Councillors, they are independent and just this year, they reopened their Noviciat with 12 Novices, because, since the Communists' invasion ( 1975 ) they had to close up the Noviciat. Many other girls desire to enter into the Convent but, they have to study, to have at least their Proficiency, , and do it secretly . They meet with the Sisters, on a basic time , but discretely! (Because of the Communists!)

Every evening all the orphans and sisters gather together at the foot of St. Vincent Statue, their Patron and Protector to pray for their safety and for all their Benefactors ! So, Please know that you are in their daily prayer, that's their only way to say " Thank you" to God and to You ,their



benefactors. I'm sure that the Lord answers their pleas, because their prayer pierces Heavens! As *"The Lord always hears the cry of the Poor! Blessed be His Holy Name!"*

Personally, I'm very proud of those Montagnard Sisters, proud of their Faith, their courage, their boldness, their persistence, their trust in God's Providence, their perseverance, their love for God and for the Poor! Yes they stand firm no matter what! Still struggling with the Communists' oppression and with mother-poverty!

I have to imitate their virtues and support them with my daily prayers and sometimes with my humble and discreet voice for their voiceless, their poverty, their wants!

Thank you, Dear Friends for your love, prayer, concern and generosity. Please continue to pray for the Sisters of the Miraculous Medal and the Orphans, and remember that:

*"The hands of the poor are the Bank of Jesus-Christ!"*

St. Chrysostome

Yes. ***"GOD IS GOOD ALL THE TIME !  
ALL THE TIME GOD IS GOOD !"***

With love and prayer as always.

Your friend, and friend of the Poor.

Sister Marie-Dominique, D.C.

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Sister Marie-Dominique, D.C.

427 S. Evergreen Ave.

Los Angeles, CA 90033.

Tel ( 323) 268-7731

Email: Yanik7@aol.com