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THE BROTHERS AND THE ASIAN REFUGEES IN FRANCE

As an introduction to this article I wish to call attention to two realities. The first concerns figures. Between May, 1975 and October, 1984, 107,000 refugees from South-East Asia came to France, 700,000 went to the United States and approximately 900,000 went to various other parts of the world including Israel.

Besides the total of these figures we must not forget that a great number rest on the ocean floor because only about 50% of those who tried to flee in boats ever reached land.

The second reality is the suffering endured by those who were picked up from the boats and accepted by other countries. After having paid their passage by a lifetime's savings they were taken on board frail and often overcrowded craft. They then ran the risk of being intercepted by coastguard patrols, of storms, of hunger and thirst, of the break-down of engines and of being attacked by pirates from Thailand. These latter, attracted by the hope of finding gold and by the women and girls on board, were guilty of the most heinous crimes: murder, rape, robbery and kidnappings.

So, when at Easter, 1978 I was asked by Vietnamese friends, priests and lay people, to do something for the children of my compatriots, I could not refuse. I agreed, but what could I do? How could I find the money? Where could I begin? I was only a refugee, myself.

However, together with the Vietnamese Brothers already in Paris, I decided to do what was most urgent. In conjunction with other organizations, both official and private, we helped with administrative forms, translated identity documents, wrote letters, tried to find lodging and work, got the children into schools and taught children and adults to read.

Without money, without support... for two years I was practically alone except for a young Vietnamese woman refugee who helped me with the work. Occasionally two Brothers helped me during their free time.

Little by little our work became known. The Ministry of the Interior recognized our literacy classes and from 1980 on we were accepted as a legitimate organization with a variety of activities. We run literacy classes at four different levels for ten hours a week each. We run supplementary courses for secondary school students in all subjects. We organize social, cultural and religious activities throughout the year with special functions at Christmas, Easter and the lunar New Year. We have monthly student meetings, guided tours in spring and summer and annual family vacations for the cost of the food. We have a lending library, an information office, a choir and a music club. On Wednesday and Saturday afternoons as well as on Sundays more than 100 students come to ALDER (Lasallian Association for Aid to Refugees) for help with their studies. Many families put their homes at our disposal for meetings. We five Brothers, three of whom have reached retiring age are, carry on this work from our house which has become a reception centre, open all day.

We have no fixed income and must rely on donations from well-wishers and annual membership fees. As Vietnamese refugees we are looked upon with distrust by an administration which, in spite of appearances, is prejudiced, while others have the benefit of government subsidies during their period of studies in France.

Though we have managed to maintain our activities for the past five years, it is only since October, 1983, and thanks to the opening of the house at Ivry, that we have known anything like comfort. This house, bought by the Region of France and put at our disposal, is the most appreciated, but not the only

help we have received from the Brothers. We have also formed many personal friendships with individual Brothers and have found them most useful, but it is the house at Ivry that has been of most benefit to us.

Unfortunately, the initial objective of the Association has still not been attained: that of helping to educate the young people whose families were suddenly transplanted from a partly closed society to one which is wide open and often permissive. We are the first to regret this, as are many of our friends because, in their eyes, we are the best fitted for the task by reason of our vocation and the success of our work in Vietnam during the hundred or so years from 6th January, 1866 to 30th April 1975.

We share their point of view but for different reasons. Vietnam is a country in a permanent state of war since the Japanese occupation in 1941. When the Japanese left in 1945 we had the war of independence from 1946 to 1954, followed by the war against North Vietnam, 1954-75. At present we are at war with Cambodia and there is always the nationalist guerrilla. People under 40 years of age have never known peace. The ruins which continue to pile up after nearly 50 years of war will not be easy to rebuild. Those who, at the moment, in Vietnam, have to struggle for their daily bowl of rice, for the shirt on their back, or for the elementary freedom to think, to work, to move from place to place, to meet or even to sleep peacefully in their beds, are not the people to carry out this task.

This challenge awaits the generation which will have benefited, abroad, by the opportunity of gaining a better human and professional formation. But will they be able for the task of reconstruction if they are beginning to dissipate the only heritage that they brought intact from their native land: their culture, their language, their history and their traditions, and if they follow the same path of decadence which we deplore in other populations of immigrants from the Third World?

Sociologists interested in the case of immigrants, particularly Chinese and Japanese into the United States in recent decades, say that you cannot count on the first generation because they are taken up with the struggle to adapt and to earn a living, and that you can rely on only part of the second generation who are often disappointed with their milieu and reject it. Only the third generation is well adapted to the host country and at the same time faithful to its ethnic origins. Consequently those who care for the future of their people must work on the second generation in order to form the third.

The lesson is clear for us. To me it seems that this is a providential mission for us Brothers who are messengers of the Gospel and people in whom the sense of country and of ethnic culture finds a certain resonance...

An inquiry conducted by those in charge of Polish and Catholic Armenian pastoral centres shows similar preoccupation with loss of identity. The Poles, who came to France in large numbers after the second world war, and the Armenians who came after the first, have educational centres in schools or other establishments under the direction of religious of their own nationalities. The pupils of these schools are mainly Poles or Armenians though they live in a predominantly French milieu. Though only a small proportion of the children of both nationalities attend these schools, those in charge feel that they are serving their respective countries while leaving pastoral care of the people to their own clergy.

This dream which we have cherished from the beginning and which we have not yet been able to realize could have given rise to a community effort capable of creating a spirit of real unity and fraternal sharing, as well as a rallying point for our fellow countrymen scattered around the world. It could also have provided a formation centre for those in search of God while awaiting the moment to reestablish the District of Saïgon in a country united and at peace.

It is with this in view that we propose to create a system of mutual aid to meet effectively the needs of the refugees. Everything else is but a temporary expedient.

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We wish to thank also the Community of the Rue de Sèvres where our students were able to prepare for their examinations at weekends, and the Brothers of the Pensionnat de l'Immaculée Conception in Béziers where "our families" spent the best holidays of their lives.