

# nd Solace in SE Asia

Có bao giờ em hỏi, quê hương mình ở đâu? Có bao giờ em đợi, tháng mấy trời mưa ngâu?

*Have you ever wondered where your country is? Have you ever waited for the month of sudden and brief showers?*

By Quan Tran, S.J.

I used to sing this song when I lived in Vietnam. Nevertheless, its meaning didn't penetrate my soul. Only after I came to live in the United States did those simple words gnaw at my heart. The opportunity to leave Vietnam for freedom is a plus. Yet the fact that I have to be in exile is not a pleasant feeling. Where is my country? Where is the month of sudden and brief rain? What has happened to those who left and those who stayed? All of these questions intermingle with each other in a great harmony forming a sharp knife cutting my being into pieces. I have to go back to touch the soil and breathe the air of my fatherland. Twelve years is a wink for many, yet it is a century for the exile. Thus, I couldn't wait to see the changes that occurred in Vietnam over those years and experience one more time the difficulties that my people have gone through. No doubt, I must see this. The only question was, when?

I thought the day of my return would never come, especially after my decision to join the Jesuits. The mission of the Society, to me, was much more important than my simple wish. Yet I was stunned last summer when Fathers Whitney and Dillard not only gave me the green light, but also encouraged me to go right then! Vietnam, my beloved country, was finally on the horizon.

Although there is only so much land and therefore the city has to grow skyward to contain the influx of people, Saigon - the Pearl of the East - is still able to keep her charm.

Saigon has changed vigorously. Yet she has struggled to be a beloved land for all. My heart was twisted for the first few days because there was so much injustice all around. Prostitutes stood on the street to sell their bodies. Boys and girls as young as eight years old had to work hard to bring food to the table. Sometimes, they earned only 20,000 đồng (a little more than \$1.00 US) a day to feed their families. Many had to live in cardboard boxes. Meanwhile, others lived in

fancy palaces and didn't hesitate to throw away millions of đồng each night for fun. The gap between rich and poor is greater than ever. I wonder if this really is the whole picture?

Friends and family members came to visit. They suggested many places to go and tours to take. Instead, I asked for a list of orphanages and hospices for AIDS and leprosy patients. They burst into laughter and said, "Rich people come here for fun, not for those things." I was hurt because they didn't want to see me as a regular person as I once was. However, they dropped the mask at the end and revealed to me who the people of Saigon were.



Quan Tran, S.J. plays with a group of children from the Thien Phuoc Orphanage in Vietnam.

Then I took my bike and began to explore the many corners of the city where what I saw brought tears of both desolation and consolation. I witnessed a 13-year-old boy die while searching for small crabs on the Saigon River to feed his family. I saw young men and women kneeling in front of an AIDS patient to take care of his wound in spite of the unpleasant smell. I talked to prostitutes who work to earn enough money to pay for his/her children's tuition. I read the waiting list of many young men who wanted to join the seminary to become God's servants. I held the hand of another young boy whose fingers were removed due to a job-related accident. His main concern was not about losing the fingers but about losing a chance to help his parents support his six brothers and sisters. I attended daily Mass at 4:30 a.m. in a church packed with young people. People in Saigon continue to have a good spiritual life. They love each other and do all they can to carry out that love.

Saigon summers are filled with rain and sunshine. There is rain to sprinkle the hearts of those who are abandoned. There is sunshine to dispel the darkness. Having seen what I saw in Saigon last summer, I cannot help but ask myself: if I knew then what I know now, would I have stayed or would I have still left my fatherland?