

Fr. Chien Xuan Dinh, SVD

Autobiography:

My name is Chien Xuan Dinh, SVD. I am originally from Vietnam. I have been living in the United States since 1990. Due to the political and social situations of Vietnam after 1975, I escaped my country by boat in 1988, therefore, I belong to the “*boat people*” category. I was born on January 20, 1970, five years before northern Vietnamese Communists invaded South Vietnam. I am seventh in a big family of nine siblings, six girls and three boys. One of my brothers died when he was seven years old. My father’s name is Thai Van Dinh (Vietnamese, we call *Dinh Van Thai*) and my mother’s name is Tuyen Thi Vu. Unfortunately, both of my parents passed away. My mother died in 1996 after suffering from her illness for many years and my father died in 2006. They were truly wonderful people and they both were Catholic.

My parents had just gotten married for a couple weeks when Vietnam was divided into two political entities. My parents, along with my paternal grandmother and almost one million Vietnamese, moved South following the partition of the country into North and South Vietnam in 1954. From this time, my paternal grandmother and my parents were separated from my paternal grandfather, my maternal grandparents, my uncles and aunts for these people were stuck in the North. They never had a chance to see one another again. After emigrating to the South, my father taught in a local elementary school, which was established for children of emigrant families. He was also the chairman of the parish council at a Catholic Church where he and his family were members for many years. My mother preferred to be a housewife and always busied herself with family life. She was very religious and traditional, and thus her children benefited from her examples of virtues. Before 1975, both of my parents were very interested in cultural and traditional activities. My father showed his eagerness in taking part in community activities in our village. My village is very unique in a sense that most villagers are Catholic and come from the North. The Catholic diocese to which my family belongs is the largest one in Vietnam (the Xuan Loc Diocese). I have six sisters who are now living in Vietnam. Although I am away from my siblings for my priestly ministry, I eagerly maintain good relationships with all of my family, especially with my old brother who also escaped by boat from Vietnam in 1981 and now lives in San Jose, California. He is a very good brother and has a happy family. He has two children, one girl and one boy. I have learned many good things from him, particularly on being patient and a virtuous manner.

Before escaping Vietnam, I had only eleven years of grade-school education because at that time, the Communist government did not allow us Catholics to have much education and training beyond grade-school. Based on my family history, we were branded as belonging to a sector of the population which has had a history of anti-Communism and thus being unfriendly to Communist authorities: Northern emigrants, ardent Catholics, participants in religious activities. As in the case for people belonging to this category, we were denied many social services that people of the free-world take for granted: education, medical care, social assistance. A lot people were sent to “re-education camps” or pseudo prisons, including my father and my brother. This is a sensitive subject for me to talk about but this gives you a glimpse of how far me & my family have come from.

Upon coming to the United States, I set out to fulfill my dream of pursuing higher

education. While going to school, I also worked in order to support myself and my family in Vietnam. Initially, I worked for Hewlett Packard, which produces computers and other electrical equipment. I worked as an administrative assistant for human resource. I made identification badges for employees and helped filing the records, answered phones, and sometimes prepared for workshops or seminars. In 1997, I successfully completed the Associate of Science degree program in Business Administration. I graduated with a Bachelor of Science in Business Administration, with a concentration in Information System Management in 2000. Before I graduated from college, I worked for San Jose State University in technical support. I worked in the department of Student Services such as helping employers about computer trouble shooting, connecting printers and networking. I enjoyed working there because it was a multicultural environment which allowed me to learn other cultures, particularly Mexican and Filipino cultures. Being an active person, I always enjoy taking part in community activities, particularly among Vietnamese Americans. I developed an interest in helping people and participating in communal activities during my stay in the refugee camps.

I always give thanks to God for the blessing of coming to a country like the United States where freedom is truly lived out and cherished. I appreciate the value of freedom because I personally paid a high price for it with my escape from Vietnam, which involved many close encounters with sufferings and death. I think freedom is one of the most important tenets of human dignity. Understanding the sacredness of human dignity has also provided me with much-needed inspiration for involving myself in the endeavor of helping others. I want to be life-giving to others, especially to those in need. This is a desire that has been present in my heart for a long time as a missionary.

Fourteen years ago, I had the privilege of joining the Associate's Program at the Divine Word Theologate in Chicago. After a year of preliminary discernment about my vocational calling, I realized that I was drawn by the emphasis on living in a multi-cultural environment of the Society of the Divine Word. I felt a deep call to religious live as an SVD missionary. Consequently, I made my decision of applying for the SVD Novitiate program. I was accepted into the novitiate and spent one year (August 2002-August 2003) living at Techny, Illinois. During the novitiate year, I had many opportunities to engage in ministry in an African American setting (St. Anselm's Catholic Church in Chicago). I tutored math & read to kids of elementary school ages. At times I did some counseling. I enjoyed working at St. Anselm's because I was able to get involved in various activities with the students. In the process, I was able to develop specific skills for dealing with difficult students whose culture was different from mine. To say the least, I really enjoyed learning about the African American culture and made use of every opportunity for doing so during my time at St. Anselm's.

I was a student at Catholic Theological Union (CTU) in Chicago from 2001-2008, in studying for my Master of Divinity degree. I had opportunities to do both course work and practicum in the area of pastoral care. I have believed that Pastoral Care stands at the heart of what the priesthood is all about. It was one of the required areas of training for ministry at CTU. While acquiring the skills and knowledge about pastoral care at CTU this school year, I was involved in ministry at St. Felicitas' Parish in Chicago for five hours each week. I worked with Sr. Kathleen Smith who was in charge of religious education for children. I did tutoring every week at the school. Occasionally, I did some counseling with the children. I enjoyed working

with children and I hoped to experience and learned more about their cultural perspectives. Also, during my academic years at Catholic Union Theological School, I chose the “*Night Ministry*” in Chicago for my ministry. My ministry involved distributing foods, clothes and supplies to the homeless, including gays and lesbians (“our Parishioners”). At times, I did some counseling with people who approached me and shared their struggles or frustration. I felt privileged to be able to work at the Night Ministry because of its unique experience of cross-culture (i.e., African-American and Native-American). Indeed, I increasingly developed a warm and loving heart to our “Parishioners” who were left behind by the society. I had come to realize the gifts of giving and receiving in my service to the community at the Night Ministry and I truly felt my ministry at the Night Ministry was the first step in preparing myself for future ministry. Yet, the ministerial experience that I experienced at the Night Ministry was instrumental in forming myself as a person and as a religious.

Graciously, I was ordained on May 24, 2008 in Techny, Illinois and sent to work at Saint Mary of the Purification Church in Houston (2009 – 2015) as parochial vicar. This was my first assignment. During the time I was at St Mary of the Purification, I was not only fulfilling my duty to do the sacramental rites and celebrating the liturgies, but I had a particular interest in visiting the sick, the disabled and especially those who were homebound, including taken part in hospital ministry as needed. I enjoyed making occasional visits to my sick parishioners, especially African-American people. My work as a parochial vicar to help Fr. Borgia Aubespain, SVD, my pastor, to celebrate Liturgies and other sacramental rites. I was also assigned to taking care of Baptism, Religious Education, School Mass, and be a chaplain for St. Vincent de Paul Organization in my parish. Besides a parochial vicar for my parish, I also was asked by the Chancellor of the Archdiocese of Galveston-Houston to say daily Mass for the elderly people at the Indo-Chinese Cultural Center which was located nearby my parish. Indeed, I have loved my parishioners at St. Mary’s Church and the people whom I encountered daily and I always feel blessed to be with them. Although I left St. Mary of the Purification Parish and my acquaintances who live in Houston area, I still carry them in my daily prayer.

I must say that while I was in the Houston City area, I have seen many sick and dying people who were left without proper care and assistance in my life. I recall for example, when I was in the Indo-Chinese Cultural Center, one of my friends told me about an old Asian woman in her neighborhood who was paralyzed. Upon learning of the old lady’s condition and situation, I did not hesitate to request a permission to see her. When I came to her apartment, I soon realized that she was a Vietnamese by birth and came to the United States in 1961 through her marriage to an American. Her husband had been deceased for many years at the time of my visit. She did not have any children or relatives in the United States. She seemed very lonely and also suffered from her illness. She received private home care from a lady who came three times per week. After visiting her for a few times, I discovered that she was a Catholic and had not received Holy Communion and the Sacrament of Reconciliation for many years due to a lack of contact with her faith community. She was very happy to see me as a Catholic priest and she sincerely asked me if I would bring Holy Communion and administer the sacraments to her. Whenever I met her, we prayed together and shared reflections on a scriptural passage of our choice. Every time I came to see her, she was very happy and touched at the thought that a young man would sacrifice his time and energy with an old lady like her. She told me many times that she admired

me for my dedication and efforts. Whenever I heard she was saying that, I felt very encouraged and happy. Sadly, I later learned that she was by herself at the time of her death. People found her lying dead on the floor of her apartment, perhaps for three days according to the postmortem of the hospital. This experience has triggered in me a profound sympathy for the lonely and elderly, especially those who now undergo the same situation as the old lady friend of mine did before her death.

Concerning myself, I am a happy and optimistic person. I like to spend time with friends. At times I prefer to be alone in order to recollect myself. I have many hobbies such as listening to country or religious music, drinking tea, and jogging. I also like to go visit my friends and their families on an occasional basis. I have a lot of friends and I enjoy good relationships with both males and females. I have a balanced life. Being an SVD Priest, I am confident of who I am and deeply grateful for God's love and presence in my life. I am fully aware of God constantly inviting me to live my life with joy, creativity, and fullness. My desire is to respond ever more faithful to this call so as to imitate Jesus more fully in living my vocation as a religious missionary. I believe that the more I reflect my life, the more I recognize God's love for me as well as God's presence in this world. For me, God manifests in love, kindness and gentleness. I thank God for the many blessings that I have received from God; among them is the chance for recognizing God's presence and gifts in my life and in others during my priestly ministry.

My expectation from the Immaculate Heart of Mary Community is to focus on learning people's names and sharing my life with my parish's staffs, parishioners and the people who are of a different culture and language from me. Because I am aware that living with people who have a different language, culture or tradition is not easy, I do believe that God is always with us and cares for us as we are all God's children. So far, I feel very comfortable and confident to approach people, especially parish's staffs and parishioners and I do not hesitate to work with them to build the Kingdom of God at IHM Church. I hope I will learn more experiences and integrity from the people at IHM and my SVD brothers whom I live with. Truly, I feel very happy to be with people at Immaculate Heart of Mary Church in the Lafayette Diocese and I will let God continue to lead me in His will and I realize that I can celebrate my life and will be blessed here at IHM Church. May God bless us here at IHM Church always!