

Monday was the day Dennis and I spent time together in Dalat. I wanted time to chat with Dennis about what we had done so far. From what you have read, it seems that we had a good time eating, sightseeing, visiting from place to place, etc as tourists. Yes, we did all of that but we worked as well. We had specific work to do and we have accomplished some of it. Time and again, surprises and our concrete experiences on site pushed us to reflect more on the mission of our trip.

We began the day with wet weather. It rained softly with a heavy fog at first, then heavier and heavier but not heavy enough to allow farmers to rest. They still had to go to their gardens to water the vegetables. Besides, it is the season of the coffee harvest.

After breakfast, some of seminarians went to the farm. The others had class. Dennis and I were waiting for a taxi and we left around 9 a.m. We visited the Notre Dame des Missions community which my sister entered in 1986. The main house is the same. They just “received” their school back three years ago after the local government “borrowed” it in 1975. It is a kindergarten now for children in the area from 3 to 5. Parents can choose to have all three meals for their children, two meals, or only lunch depending on the financial support of each family. However, most of them, 160 children, have three meals a day. Parents bring them to school at 6:30 a.m. for breakfast, then there's study and play. Lunch is served at 11:30 a.m. and supper at 4:30. One third of these students ARE children of the local police or Communist government officials. As is the tradition everywhere in Vietnam, we were served tea in small cups and coffee as well.



Leaving the community after a short visit of the house and school, I wanted to show Dennis “my

family home.” I told the taxi driver to take us to the place my family always avoids visiting. He was surprised because he knew there was nothing to see. From conversations with Dennis, somehow he guessed that I had some link with this area. It was very sad to look at the house with a door closed and a piece of wood nailed across it. The front yard is overgrown. The roof seemed to be sagging from the wind and the weight of the red roof tiles. The windows are broken, the wall of the house is discolored from the weather. It is the same thing with our neighbors' houses.



We drove around a hill on which there was a “club”, a place as beautiful as some areas in Worcester. Now it is a Guest House of the Army. The architect was the same; but the color is changed, the gate is new, there is more grass than flowers even if Dalat is called “flower city.” From there, we drove to “the chapel” where we stayed for a long time. It looks absolutely like an “old farm house” for animals. I hear that the nave of the chapel was used as a “discotheque” for few years after 1975. All the gardens around the chapel have disappeared. The only thing we can see now is some small houses with “developed architecture.” They look like many heavy boxes on top each other without any order.

In the past there was another building which was built resembling an open arm. One side was a

tower which has remained the same. The other end was a playground which disappeared I am not sure when. However, the entire hill was called Grand Lycée. Many of us still use this name; but it seems “too strange” to call it thus after 1975. Not far from the Grand Lycée, we entered the only Train Station which was built around 1940s. How dirty, disordered, and awful the station looks now! My parents and their generation could tell you how beautiful it was! It is one of many “tourist sights” for those who come to Dalat and do not know what it was like before. For those who knew what it was once like, they may excuse themselves politely if a visit is suggested. It reminded me of an experience I had in some areas of Rio de Janeiro.

Once we had passed by this area, we arrived at the University of Dalat. Before 1975 was the only Catholic university in Vietnam. It offered highly esteemed programs in French Literature, Business Administration and Social Humanism. Dennis and I walked slowly from villa to villa. The statue of Cardinal Spellman in front of the hall named after him was removed and replaced by a bush. The beautiful chapel had become a hall or a class room (I don’t know). The bell tower has a new figure which is a star blotting out what had been the cross. I walk slower and slower and I knew that the heaviness of my thought and feeling about the history of this place was pulling me down with every step I took.

It was time for us to have lunch. Of course it was “pho” again. I think Dennis may have had enough of Pho; but it was safe for him. After lunch, we went to visit one of my friends who has a photo studio and wedding business. He was my classmate. We took some pictures and chatted for a while. Dennis had a chance to see how someone can make the portrait of anyone beautiful!

From my friend’s house, we went to the Dalat market where you can find anything: food, shoes, clothes, souvenirs, vegetables, meet, fish, bread, beans, jams, flowers, fruit, etc. We bought some gifts for Japan and other things. Again,people were surprised to see us as we passed by. The reason this time was not Dennis’ appearance but because they recognized me. None of them expected to see me; but we met and talked. From the top floor to the bottom, Dennis slowly recorded many images of a place so familiar to me.

