

By Anne Sophie Hourdeaux

His name is Gregory Notebaert; the Vietnamese call him Hoàng Phúc, “The happy northerner.” A native of the diocese of Cambrai, in northern France, Gregory is spending two years as a volunteer in Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon), where he is involved mostly in teaching French.

It was always a dream of his to do volunteer work and finally he is living his dream fully. Before leaving for Vietnam, Gregory was very involved in his diocese, as a musician and a composer of religious songs, and, from 2004-2009, as director the diocesan liturgical music commission.

The idea of going abroad as a volunteer wasn’t something new for him. “As a student, I saw a lot of my friends tempted by adventure. I admired them for what they were able to experience and was impressed at how they were transformed by these experiences. But at the time I never followed them because I just wasn’t ready.”

A Passion for Vietnam

In the wake of two back operations and the fact that he lost his job in IT, a good friend reminded him of his longstanding dream, “Maybe this is the time to go.” That was the tipping point for him. Why Asia? That was obvious for him, “Since forever, I have been taken up with this part of the world. My father served in the military in Indochina and as a child I would hear stories about Vietnam as other children might listen to their fathers talk about soccer. Besides, a bunch of my

friends back in France are Vietnamese and I was always sensitive to this culture and fascinated by it." Today he is living in Saigon in a room above a grocery shop in a small commercial district of the city. Because of the heat he is up every day at 5 AM and spends his day teaching, visiting the Assumptionist community, studying Vietnamese, editing his blog (le Ch'ti Bonheur http://kompozitor.fr), and, not to be forgotten, a daily power nap.

A Church both alive and persecuted

Gregory has been able to continue living his faith in a country where the Catholic population counts some 8%, not to mention the fact that he is a teacher for the Assumptionists. "In Vietnam, the Assumption Family maintains several student residences, some pre-school programs, and an orphanage in Ho Chi Minh City. The young people in the residence and young Assumptionists need to learn French in order to communicate with religious from France or elsewhere and to be able to study in France, if the opportunity arises. I'm also able to eat with the Assumptionists and pray with them." Once a week he even does a commentary on a Scripture passage at Morning Prayer.

He writes that the Church in Vietnam "is alive since it has to resist the current government, one with other Catholics as a result of being oppressed even if 'religious freedom' is officially written into the law. I had an opportunity to meet the cardinal of Saigon. He told me that the challenge for the Church in Vietnam in the next ten years is that it must get out of the churches and go to encounter other brothers."

Volunteering is a school for life: "You need a lot of patience and must learn to forget yourself in order to enter into another's culture. The more you try to move ahead in human relations, the more you realize that deep down you really don't know the other. That doesn't mean that you stop trying. Just that you're more realistic and that you don't try to forget yourself to the point of forgetting who you really are."

In his leisure moments he thinks of his homeland, to be sure, but also spends time composing songs he hopes to publish one day.