News
News
Migration



St. Paul de Chartres sisters are pictured praying in their convent in June 1954, in what is today Vietnam's Thanh Hoa Diocese, before they migrated to the south. (Courtesy of Sisters of St. Paul de Chartes)

by GSR Staff

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Editor's Note: *This is Part One of a two-part series. Read Part Two here.*

"It was a turning point in my religious life. I believe everything is arranged by divine providence."

That was the response of Lovers of the Holy Cross of Vinh Sr. Mary Trinh Thi Lan when asked about her failed migration to southern Vietnam 70 years ago.

Lan, 91, vividly recalled herself and five other sisters from Yen Thanh convent in Nghe An province being arrested by soldiers while they were on a boat heading south to evade communists on Sept. 11, 1954.

"We were accused of being against revolutionaries, and they detained us for three months for reeducation," she said.

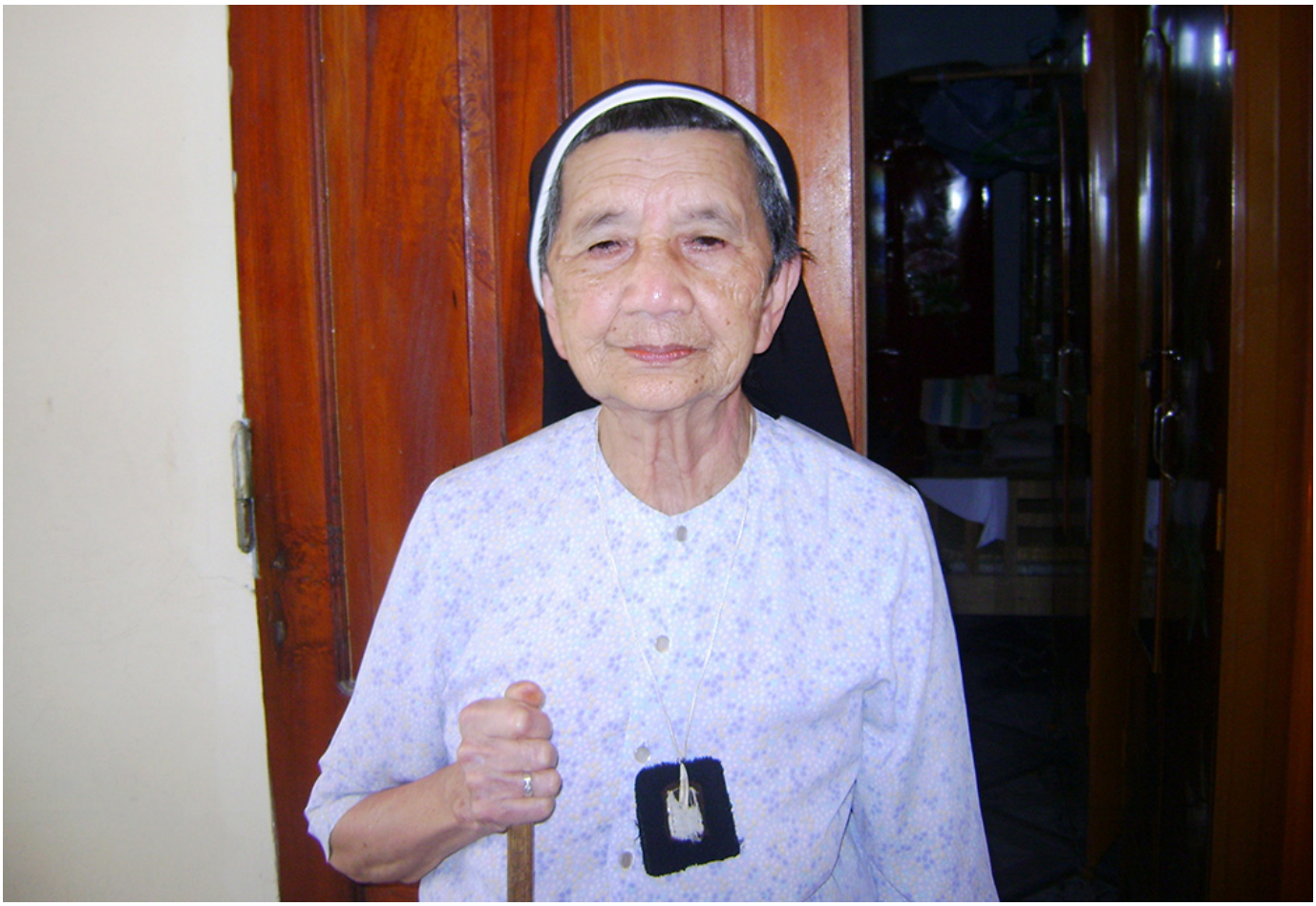
Lan noted that previously, 58 nuns and novices from the community had moved by boat to Quang Binh province, where they were evacuated by a French ship to Da Nang. Most local Catholics, including their priest from Yen Thanh Parish, also fled to the south in search of freedom to practice their faith.

She noted that Christians from northern dioceses sought refuge in southern provinces for fear of religious oppression by communists who embraced atheism under the Geneva Agreement on the Cessation of Hostilities in Vietnam.

The agreement, dated July 20, 1954, and signed on July 21 by representatives of France and the Viet Minh or North Vietnamese, temporarily divided Vietnam into communist North Vietnam and pro-Western South Vietnam. Its main provisions included establishing a provisional military demarcation line along the 17th parallel in the central province of Quang Tri and granting 300 days for both sides to withdraw their troops to their respective territories, allowing ordinary people to move freely.

During this unprecedented mass exodus in Vietnamese history from September 1954 to July 1955, the government estimated that over 1 million people, including French Union forces, civilian personnel, businessmen and Catholics, relocated to the south. Conversely, approximately 150,000 communist officials, soldiers, guerrillas and their supporters migrated to the north.

The Catholic Church in Vietnam reported that most clergy and religious, alongside over 650,000 laypeople, relocated to the south. In the wake of this migration, ten northern dioceses were left with only seven bishops, 374 religious and a handful of priests to serve a community of 750,000 believers.



Lovers of the Holy Cross Sr. Mary Trinh Thi Lan is pictured at Cam Xuyen convent in Ha Tinh province on June 28, 2024. Lan spoke to GSR about her failed migration to southern Vietnam 70 years ago. (GSR photo)

Some older nuns said that most women congregations in the north — Carmelites, Canonesses of St. Augustine of Notre Dame, Daughters of Our Lady of the Holy Rosary, Dominican Sisters, Franciscan Missionaries of Mary, Lovers of the Holy Cross , Sisters of Our Lady of the Missions, and Sisters of St. Paul de Chartres — relocated to the south. A few left behind members at home to care for their facilities.

They noted that government authorities tried to prevent the locals from leaving their homelands as so many were moving to the south.

St. Paul de Chartres Sr. Benedictine Pham Dieu Canh, a member of the Hanoi community, recounted how cadres advised the nuns to remain and join them in the fight against their adversaries.

Canh, 89, said, "We chose to move to the south to expand our pastoral activities, fearing persecution and being compelled to do things against our Christian beliefs if we stayed north."

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>
> —St. Paul de Chartres Sr. Benedictine Pham Dieu Canh

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She was among 40 nuns and novices, accompanied by orphans, traveling from Hanoi to Hai Phong, where they boarded a French ship.

During their five-day journey, she recounted how they were repeatedly intercepted by soldiers and suffered from hunger, thirst and seasickness. Tragically, three novices fainted, and one perished before landing in Da Nang on Sept. 18, 1954.

She noted that some 200 St. Paul de Chartres sisters from the dioceses of Bui Chu, Hai Phong, Hanoi, Phat Diem, Thai Binh and Thanh Hoa migrated to Da Nang.

Lan recounted that after their release, she and other sisters were compelled to return home and farm to make a living. At that time, Lan was 21 years old.

In 1958, she reentered the congregation and took her first vows the following year. She was assigned to the Giap Ha community in Ha Tinh province in 1961.

By then, this community had dwindled to just three sisters who chose to stay behind voluntarily to care for local elderly Catholics, as most people had migrated south. It had 32 members who fled to the south.

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Lan also recalled that many convents and church facilities were forcibly closed, and church properties were confiscated. Many sisters were forced to return to their families and coerced into labor such as road construction and transporting weapons to battlefields. Some sisters were jailed for several years for refusing to leave their convents.

She said Sr. Elizabeth Trinh Thi Phuong was imprisoned until death for refusing to accuse her father of being a landlord during the land reform campaign of 1953-56. Numerous priests and laypeople were kept in jail for false accusations of inciting people against the government.

The older nun said that during the 1960s, residents lived in constant fear due to U.S. aerial bombardments. "Every day, we heard the alarm sirens, sometimes sounding three times a day. We witnessed people's houses burning and collapsing, with many casualties from bomb strikes. The scenes were utterly horrifying."

"Many church facilities were used as rice storage and mechanical workshops until 1968 when they were destroyed by American bombing raids. These attacks also resulted in injuries to 14 sisters and the deaths of two others," she said.

In 1969, Lan and three other sisters, Anna Trinh Thi Hoai, Martha Dau Thi Linh, and Agatha Hoang Thi Hue, decided to return to rebuild the Giap Ha community.



The remains of Yen Thanh convent's old chapel, destroyed by U.S. bombings in June 1965. The bell tower is pictured on June 28, 2024, in Nghe An province, Vietnam. (GSR photo)

They were in dire need of everything, surviving on cassava and sweet potatoes, and wearing clothes patched together from various scraps. They faced threats from the authorities and were forced to dig underground bunkers on Sundays.

"Despite unfair treatment, we remained steadfast in our vocations and strove to safeguard the convent's property against confiscation," Lan affirmed.

She recalled they tended gardens, raised poultry and crafted traditional herbal remedies to sell to the locals for their livelihood. Quietly, they imparted religious instruction, performed baptisms for catechumens and children, and administered the Eucharist to the sick.

"We embraced the Gospel's spirit of poverty and shared hardships with our fellow brothers and sisters," she said.

Due to restrictions on religious activities, they did not receive any new vocations until 1971, when three young women joined. The novitiate remained closed until 1993.

Lan, residing at a home for elderly sisters, said that among those who stayed home, only two remain alive: Srs. Anna Hoang Thi Vinh and Mary Martha Tran Thi Nghe, ages 90 and 92 respectively. Both are bedridden at a retirement home in Nghe An province.

St. Paul de Chartres Sr. Ursuline Pham Thanh Khue said that 19 nuns volunteered to remain behind to care for their facilities and serve people in Hanoi. Some of those nuns later told her about the great hardships they endured for decades.

Khue, 79, said they described how they used bicycles to transport and distribute food to hospital patients. Often, sirens would sound while distributing the food, causing people to hurriedly seek shelter and spill the food onto the ground, leaving many patients without sustenance.



St. Paul de Chartres Sr. Ursuline Pham Thanh Khue, left, receives and offers food to Co Tu ethnic villagers on July 1, at her convent in Quang Nam province, in Vietnam. (GSR photo)

The sisters were closely monitored by authorities, who accused them of recruiting followers. Once, two nuns visited a critically ill Catholic in a hospital; one sister offered the patient a cross to kiss. Consequently, both sisters were imprisoned for over six months.

Their hospitals, schools, convents, orphanages and shelters were confiscated. At one point, the community in Hanoi dwindled to just six members.

Khue said that of the sisters who migrated to Da Nang 70 years ago, only four are still alive. The eldest is Sr. Therese Nguyen Thi Guong, aged 98.

Lan, who prays the rosary three times daily for the departed sisters, believed that "God uses us to serve the local church in challenging times, bearing witness to his presence and love. This inspires us to remain steadfast in our consecrated lives."

"God always protects, journeys with and assists us under the circumstances," she said.

Known for her gentle, joyful and humorous demeanor, Lan said that she holds no ill will towards those who caused the sisters suffering for a long time, as they have yet to grasp Christian values and the church's mission.

"I continuously pray for them and their descendants to transform their lives positively and live in peace," she said.

Lovers of the Holy Cross of Vinh Sr. Anna Truong Hoai Anh commented that senior sisters, including Lan, were courageous champions of faith who willingly faced the numerous hardships and persecutions they foresaw.

"They sacrificed everything to follow God and spread the good news to all," she stated, underscoring their embodiment of poverty, service and unwavering trust in God.

"We deeply appreciate their sacrifices in preserving our traditions and imparting them to younger generations," said the nun in charge of the postulants.