

THE BLESSED MISSIONARY

Fr. Joseph Tran Si Tin, C.Ss.R.

Missionary of Jrai Mission

My name is Joseph Tran Si Tin, C.Ss.R. We are here to testify about the blessings we have received since we were called missionaries in the Church of God. The only thing God has given me to recognize is that I am a missionary who is blessed and evangelized (*evangelisari a pauperibus*) so much. We realize that the Mission of Evangelization works in two ways: the missionary and the receiver. We want to thank you for asking me to come here to testify about what we have done. For me, at the age of 80, everything I do might be the last thing in the world. And this is also the final judgment for me, and the judge are you, dear fathers. I hope that you will indulge with me.

I. The spirit of missionary

1. By the grace of God, we experienced the spirit of Jesus when he was in Nazareth

We (Fr. Tai, Bro. Quan, and two deacons, Mau & Tin) were brought to Plei Kly by Bishop Paul Seitz, bishop of the Diocese of Kontum, October 10, 1969. Father Diep placed us into the village of Plei Kly (almost 60km from Pleiku), where we have never been to, and we didn't know anyone there. We also had no shelter prepared at that time.

When we arrived at Plei Kly, the bishop took the Gospel and read to us the passage Luke 10: 12, when God sent his 72 disciples. He said: "I give you all these Jrai people. Now you are only 4. But if the Redemptorists send 72 people like in the Gospel, we will also welcome you all." He prayed and blessed us, then he got in the car and back to Pleiku.

Until 2001, we learned that Bishop Paul Seitz sent a formal letter to the Redemptorist Vice-province of Vietnam in 1953. He asked the Redemptorist to establish the community in the Diocese of Kontum and be in charge of the formation of the lay by preaching the Good News to the ethnic communities. This request was repeated in 1956. So, our journey seemed to be indefinite, but the fact was predetermined since we were in the early years of our postulancy formation in the Redemptorist.

We started the mission in 1969, but the Jrai people have been converted to Catholicism since 1988. Do you know how? Looking back the history, we can see how the war become a crucial factor. In 1968, there was an attack of Communists on the eve of Lunar New Year. Plei Kly, where we were assigned, became an area of indefinite control. The national military handled it in the daytime, but it belonged to communists at night. They fought each other for a long time. In March 1971, the army of Communists attacked Phu Nhon district near our place. In that situation, we (Fr. Mau, Bro. Mark Dan, deacon Tin, and a laywoman) were forced to go into the forest, near Cambodia, for penitentiary. We were there for four months as parishioners. Sadly, Bro. Mark Dan passed away because of malaria. All of us had the disease and got weakened. I lost 20kg during

that time. After that, they brought us back. They told everyone that they, communists, respected religious rights already.

During our imprisonment, we knew that they were going to conquer the Highlands of Vietnam. Therefore, when I returned, I asked Bishop Paul Seitz to ordain me as a priest. Because I acknowledged that there would be no ordination if we were under the Communist Party. Then I was ordained on December 8, 1972, in Cheoreo with a few Jrai people and Fr. Jacques Dournes.

Since our house in Plei Kly was bombed, we transferred to Cheoreo Phu Bon, a hundred kilometers away from Plei Kly, at the end of August 1971. During that time, we translated the New Testament into Jrai language with the help of some Jrai people. It paved the way for our mission and my ordination as well. We also translated the *Presbyterorum Ordinis* document.

We returned to Plei Kly in 1973. In March of 1975, the highlands and the whole southern part of Vietnam occupied by communists. We thought that no one wants to be converted to Catholicism in those times. Hence, I became a farmer and lived with the Jrai people. For almost 20 years since 1969, I dwelt with the people. I lived with them, worked with them, and learned from them. In that way, I improved a lot in Jrai language. I came to know more about their own culture. I also realized that my 20 years with the people would not be in vain. I believed that God allowed me to experience this, just like His time in Nazareth. Indeed, Jesus lived in Nazareth for 30 years before starting His mission of proclaiming the Good News. Jesus' first steps in the mission were to understand the culture and people. As a missionary, I need to seek God in the people instead of bringing God to them. So the evangelical journey that I had allowed me to understand this notion.

2. By the grace of God, I realized the role of the laity in evangelization and the value of *Kerygma*.

June 1988, the Church canonized 117 Vietnamese martyrs. After this event, many people in Vietnam converted to Catholicism, especially the Jrai people. Indeed, the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Christians (Tertullian). At that time, we lack religious freedom. We were not allowed to go out of our church compound. If we talked or preached outside the church, we would be accused of preaching religion, which is illegal at that time.

However, I took the risk, left the farm, and started the mission in 1987. I only carried the books of the New Testament and went to the village of the Jrai people. In 1985, I baptized seven Jrais, particularly the family of Vina. Vina's family had come to the church for ten years and asked me to baptize them. I recommended that they should wait for Vina's father, who was in prison during that time. Later on, I came to know that he already became a Catholic inside the prison. When he was released, he regularly went to the church, even though there were many threats from the police. And, I baptized the rest of his family. I also baptized Vincent Kpui Tum, who perseveringly join the Church for ten years. It took him a long time to become a Catholic because his wife was not ready to be baptized. It became a tradition in the Diocese of Kontum that they were baptized as a whole family (not individually). There were only three new Catholics in 1986. The number

increased to 72 in 1987. Since then, many convert to Catholicism every year, even though there were persecutions or threats from the authority.

In the beginning, I only preached with the candidates for catechumen. We didn't have any materials except the New Testament, translated in 1971-1972. At three (3 a.m.) of dawn, we left our house and went to the village by bicycle. Then, we talked to the people who initially introduced us. We read the Gospel and prayed together. At 5 a.m, we finished and returned home. We did the *Lectio Divina*. The Jrai mission was done only by praying the Word of God, without any lectures at all.

Our prayer process was: listen to the Word of God, praying, sharing, and end with a thanksgiving prayer. Bible sharing was essential as it could inspire others and strengthened their faith. After that, we encouraged them to share their faith with others. And Jrai people experienced the grace and blessings that God had done into their life.

We organized Bible sharing and prayers for Jrai people by small groups in the villages or parishes. One of the rituals that we had in the course was to ask Jesus Christ to come into our lives to be our God and asked Him to grant His Holy Spirit as we read in Acts 2: 32-36: "*This Jesus God raised up, and of that all of us are witnesses. Being, therefore, exalted at the right hand of God, and having received from the Father the promise of the Holy Spirit, he has poured out this that you both see and hear... Therefore let the entire house of Israel know with certainty that God has made him both Lord and Messiah, this Jesus whom you crucified.*" Indeed, the Church professed Jesus Christ as our Lord is the climax of our faith. That the salvation of God as read in Philippians 2:6-11: "*Though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.*"

And that is the *Kerygma*. For us, Jrai people, we didn't only preach it, we also professed and received it into our life. In our Jrai Mission, *Lectio Divina* and *Kerygma* were taking place at the same time. The catechism that we had was praying with the Word of God. We learned through praying, and we prayed as we were learning. Our school is Jesus Christ. Our teacher is the Holy Spirit, and our book is the Bible.

I accompanied them in *Lectio Divina* prayers from 1985-1995. When the Word of God reached more than 20 villages, I couldn't come with them all. So, I asked for help from Jrai lay ministers who knew how to read and write. They had been with me for many years, and at that time, I sent them to go. They took care of the candidates from the beginning until they become baptized Catholics. They also accompanied them throughout the journey of the Sacraments of Initiation. They are still doing it even at our present time. Now the young Redemptorist missionaries continue to follow that way and train more lay faithful for the Jrai mission.

II. The challenges of missionaries

1. I realized that the role of the laity in the Church is significant. Their role in the Church changed from collaboration to co-responsibility. However, we find it difficult now to practice it with them. Pope Francis said: “The lay is not the servant of the priest.” As we heard that the laity is the priest’s hands, we can often see that they become the priest’s servants. Pope Francis said to the bishops of Chile, “We should acknowledge that we are all servants, not masters; we belong to the people of God. There is the temptation that leads us to become masters or bosses, which is dangerous for our vocation. The role of the laity is vital in the Church and the world.”
2. Our laypeople are still taught to keep the faith, not trained to become missionaries. Even they were taught to become missionaries, but they don’t know at all about *Kerygma* (They don’t let Jesus become their Lord and ask the Holy Spirit to come upon them in their life and their ministry). The church we have now focused too much on management; that’s not missionary as we need.
3. I observe now that we misunderstand and cannot distinguish between “evangelization” and “mission.” While other languages have distinction obviously, Vietnamese understand that they have the same meaning. Of course, not! As long as we don’t see its differences, we cannot become a missionary because it manifests our mindset in doing mission. We need to change our way of thinking and become good missionaries.

We ask God to be with us always. We ask for Holy Spirit to continually come to each one of us so that He can transform us and make us become good missionaries for God’s people.

(Translated into English by bro. Peter Tran Ba Thao C.Ss.R)