

Lord, Make Me Your Fisher of Men!



The first half of Father Hien @40

Stay tuned for the second half!

Meanwhile, turn the page for an exciting adventure...

Father Hien Paul Nguyen

The boy crept silently through the jungle,
His senses alert to dangers ahead.
He knew if they made a sound,
All of them could end up dead.
He led a group of Vietnamese adults.
All were his family or close friends.
They were seeking religious freedom,
Their lives in the hands of young Hien.
Dark clouds hung over the ocean.
Cold rain pelted his small face.
They slid quietly into the muddy water
Fearing soldiers would hear
and give chase.
They climbed aboard a small fishing boat
Made of wood that was rotted and worn.
The men, their wives, and small children
Hoisted a sail that was tattered and torn.
They saw a ship of Communist soldiers.
It was armed and headed their way.
They sailed close to the bank to hide
'Neath a tree that grew near the bay.
Once more God answered their prayers,
As they placed their faith in Him.
They knew without God to protect them,
Their chances of survival were slim.
A storm raged and battered their boat,
With gusting winds, lightening and rain.
It tossed them about in the ocean.
They were seasick, starving, and in pain.
Days they were blistered by sun,
Nights they were chilled to the bone.
Their throats parched from lack of water;
Hearts broken as they thought of home.

Young Hien thought of those departed,
The loved ones he left behind.
He vowed one day to return to them
As memories of each came to mind.
The days and nights all ran together.
United they fell to their knees.
Using the rosary, they asked Mother Mary
To save them, to please intercede.
In the distance they saw a small island,
The first land they had seen in six days.
Prayers of thanksgiving they shouted,
To a loving God they sang their praise.
They were saved by Malaysian fishermen.
All were taken aboard their huge ship.
They watched as their tiny fishing boat
Split apart and into the water it slipped.
From one refugee camp to another,
This family's heart was being torn apart.
They fled the security of their homeland,
Praying to God for a fresh start.
Word came they were being deported
To a country far, far away.
A country that held a lot of promise.
They were headed to the U.S.A.
They began their new life in Kansas,
A home so different from their own.
They embraced their new life in America.
They worked hard to make it their home.
Hien's journey was not always easy.
He battled prejudice, poverty, and more.
He struggled to learn the English language.
His loyalties between countries were torn.
Years later, Hien received a message.
God touched him and called his name.

He entered Conception Seminary,
For the priesthood he began to train.
God saw the love Hien had in his heart,
Though others failed to see.
He guided him with kindness and love.
A priest God wanted him to be.
Hien became an American citizen.
America was officially his home.
He also pledged his loyalties to God,
Beneath the Cathedral's golden dome.
As Hien prayed during his ordination,
Tears coursed down his cheeks.
Today he would be called "Father".
It made him feel humble and meek.
Father asked the Lord to stand beside him,
As he celebrated each Holy Mass.
He prayed to love each parishioner,
To save souls from hell's fiery blast.
He prayed, "Lord I am only human,
A simple heart is all I possess.
With each beat of my heart I promise
To serve you more and myself less".
The Vietnamese martyrs in Heaven
Burst forth with a mighty cheer.
Father felt the warmth in his heart.
He knew all his ancestors were near.
Today Father Hien celebrates his birthday.
God has blessed him with forty years.
For twelve years he has been a priest.
He celebrates with love, happiness,
and tears.

Written for Father Hien Paul Nguyen
In honor of his priestly ministry & 40th birthday.
~ by Harriet Miller Bina

The First Half of Father Hien @ 40

Written by Father Hien Paul Nguyen

Edited by Rose Davidson

First distributed on Sunday, June 10, 2012,

In Holy Family Parish, Marion, Kansas,

On the occasion of his 7 years of ministry in Marion County,
celebrating 12 years as a priest
and 40 years of life.

INTRODUCTION: My dear beloved family and friends, thank you so much for taking the time to read about my life. Please help me thank God for my life, my priesthood and everyone God has blessed me with for the first 40 years of my life. Many of you I have had the privilege to meet and know well, while many others who have loved me much and prayed for me I have never had the chance to meet in person. I thank God for you all and I love you all. I know that God knows your good heart and He will bless you for your great love, kindness and generosity to me. As you read this story about my personal life written from memory, the life God has blessed me with, please thank God for His eternal love for me. I need God's love in me in order for me to live well each day, and in return I love and serve others, as He would like me to do as a priest. Every day of my life has been a gift from God and I pray that I will have many more blessed days ahead of me here on earth and for eternity in heaven with all my family and friends.

From the day my memories begin, I have never regretted a day of my life, and I wish that everyone would feel this way about their life. Every day of our life is a gift from God, to be with Him and to be with others in unity and love. I love each day and I am sharing this story from memory without any consultation from my family or any notes or documents. This is truly what I see, witness and understand as God gave me. God knows me inside and out, He watches over me, and He leads me to be who I am today—a priest, a son, a brother, and a friend to all I meet, although I'm still working to be a better person to all. My beloved family consists of my mom and dad, my older

brother and sister who died many years ago, my four surviving younger sisters and a younger brother who was born in this blessed country.

MY CHILDHOOD: I was born sometime in 1972. According to my mother, Lan Dinh, I was born during the hot summer months while the American war in Vietnam was going on. However, my father's younger sister told me that I was born two weeks before her son, and he was born in September. When I was growing up, there were no photographs, records or paperwork of any kind, such as birth certificates, marriage certificates, etc., which is why I don't know the exact date of my birthday. Therefore, since I have been in the United States, I enjoy telling people that "everyday is my birthday," because I love each day of my life. God bless my loving mother because all she remembered was that it was a blazing hot summer day and she could hear bombing from the war. My dad, just like my uncles, was gone assisting the South Vietnamese government who, with the Americans, were fighting the Communists. My dad came home from the war once in awhile to see my mother and give her all the money he had earned in order for her to take care of the family while he was away. My dad served many years in the war and was injured. Thankfully he was not killed in battle like his two older brothers and many friends and neighbors. He told me that when he was young, he loved to play volleyball and compete with other soldiers and friends. He was known to be a good hitter in volleyball and he always enjoyed his time with his friends.

My parents told me that they got married in 1968 although they never told me what day and month it was. I don't think they remember the date of their wedding because they were quite young when they got married. He was about 20 and she was about 17. They hardly knew each other before they were married mainly because the war was going on, and young men must marry quickly before they went to battle. My parents never dated each other before they got married in church. Their marriage was pretty much pre-arranged by their parents just like most couples in those days. I believe my father did see my mom once or twice before he married her. She was from a village nearby. After their wedding day, they lived with my dad's parents because that was part of our culture, also because he had to leave for the war, and also because they were poor. I thank God for my parents because they are happily married and surrounded by their children and grandchildren. They have always been the best parents to me in words and deeds, and above all, in loving and caring.

By the time I was born, my older sister, Van, who was my parent's second child, had already died. I was told that she was born as a beautiful and healthy girl like an angel, but suddenly she got sick and cried and cried until she died. She lived for one

month. No one knew what caused her death but my mom remembered that she watched her daughter cry until she died. I can't imagine the sorrow and pain my parents went through, day after day, before and after the death of my sister. By this time, my oldest brother, Hung, was already three years old, but I have no memory of him. He was the first child of my parents.

One day when I was about two years old, and my brother Hung was about five, my mom was harvesting rice in the fields, and my grandfather was babysitting my brother and me. My grandfather was well known for making baskets with bamboo sticks. He made them for his children as gifts so that they could use them for washing rice before cooking, for carrying rice from the field, or for washing vegetables. On this day he was making his baskets like usual and at the same time watching my brother and me in front of his house. Suddenly, my brother disappeared about 500 feet away from my grandfather and drowned in one of the ponds, stuck in the mud. No one knew about it until my grandfather realized I was by myself and he didn't see my brother. So he began to call my brother by name but got no response. He called louder and louder and our neighbors heard and began to look for him. They could not find him, so they went by the river and ponds to look for him. Finally, they found a fishing pole lying on the bank near my brother lying in the muddy water. They dived into the pond and snatched him out of the water. Immediately, my grandfather grabbed him by his feet, holding him upside down and he began to run, hoping to get the water out of his lungs, but it was too late. Everybody came and saw what happened. My mother got the news in the rice field.

Everybody from the village was so shocked, especially my aunt Phung, the older sister of my father. When she was a young child, she was the closest sister to my dad. She loved my brother more than anybody. Everyday she took care of him, feeding both of us. She said he was the most intelligent child around. When they taught my brother a song, he would remember it the next day. I believe he was gifted with a photographic memory. He could recite prayers or sing a song like he knew it forever. Not only that but he was very generous. When someone gave him a banana, or candy, he always gave it to me instead of eating it himself. That was why it was so hard for everybody to see what happened to him, for he was so cute, smart and generous. He was the joy of their hearts and was a good example for the other children in the village. His death caused so much sorrow and pain, especially to my parents. They lost both of their first two children in the beginning years of their marriage. Thankfully, they had strong faith in God and numerous family members and friends to support them in their grief.

For many days and years after, my grandfather greatly regretted the death of my

brother. However, my parents, especially my mother, never blamed my grandfather for the accident, for in her heart, she knew that what God has given, God can take away. Because of her great faith, God blessed her with a total of eight children that she would never have thought of having, for they were very poor materially, but rich with the gift of their children. Their children have been their blessing from God, and not worldly goods. I didn't know anything about my brother and sister or about my uncles who died in the war until I came to America. I believe it was because my parents didn't want us to suffer the pain that they suffered. My dad's oldest brother and his third oldest brother were killed in the war and left behind their wives and many children. I guess we were not allowed to talk about it because we were living in a Communist country and so we had no freedom to talk about many things. We learned to be quiet to avoid getting in trouble with the authorities.

In Vietnamese villages, there is a river where American cities would have a street. Where American homes have grass in between their houses, we have a pond or two for each household. These ponds are owned by a family and are used for water, to raise fish for food, and for waste disposal. The rivers don't belong to anybody; they are used for transportation by canoes and boats with small engines. The rivers were developed by the refugees such as my family who came from North Vietnam.

Recently as I was driving with my dad in my truck, he shared with me his childhood experiences. It was in 1954 that many Vietnamese from the northern part of the country, where the Communists were, had to flee to the south for freedom and better lives. My dad told me that when he was a young boy, 6 or 7 years old, his family would have to dig a hole in the ground of their house to bury their food. The Communists would come to their house any time during the day and take what they had, including all their food. They had no freedom or future. One day in the middle of the night, my dad's family fled in a small boat in the ocean where they were rescued by the American soldiers in their ships who brought them to South Vietnam. The Vietnamese president in the south, Ngo Dinh Diem, joined forces with the Americans against the Communists from the north. He accepted my dad's family, along with millions of others, and gave them a piece of land to build a house and farm. For this reason, all the people in my village in the south spoke the same dialect and they were all Catholic. They fled together and lived together to support each other. Most of my dad's family (likewise my mother's family) were able to escape from the north in 1954. Both of my parents had nine siblings in their families, three sisters and five brothers. All of their parents are dead, except my mother's father who is still living in Vietnam. My grandfather told me that he was very proud to work for the Americans when they

were in South Vietnam. Because of his commitment and service to America, he was given the opportunity to leave Vietnam and live in the United States, but he chose not to so he could stay with his family. A few years ago, he came to the United States to tour this free county and visit his seven children and many grandchildren in Alabama, Kansas, Texas, and New Jersey. He enjoyed his visit to America.

THE GREAT FLOOD: The first thing I remember from my childhood was the flood of 1978. After this day, I remember many things about my childhood. This flood was the greatest flood in our village. It wiped out most houses because the water was higher than the floor of every home and street. It killed all our livestock and pets, the fish escaped from our ponds, and we lost all our crops in the field. I was six years old, and I remember that it was raining day after day and night after night, like 40 days and 40 nights in the Bible, and eventually every home was flooded, including ours. Every day, my cousin and I would take a canoe to the rice field with a shovel, and swim to the bottom of the rice field and dig the dirt, haul it up to the boat, and bring it to our home to pile the dirt so that we had a dry spot to cook and sleep. During the flood, I spent most of the day either swimming or having fun with my cousins or catching fish with my hands. Also, I helped my father kill our pigs, because we couldn't keep them alive since we had no food for them. I personally never liked raising pigs. They ate a lot, which meant that we had to look for vegetables and cook them with rice flour to feed them. The pigs were stinky and very noisy when they were hungry.

I would rather catch fish instead. I caught many fish with a net or fishing pole or spear that I made. One day I was so happy to find some old fishing nets made from fishing lines. I told myself that I could recycle the line and use it as fishing line. All I needed was to take a knife and cut the fishing line off the net. At the age of six and hardly ever having used a big knife before, I took the biggest knife and swung at the fishing line. O my God, I didn't cut the fishing line but I chopped half of my finger off. I was bleeding so bad that my blood was everywhere in the water. That was my first mistake done unto myself. It was painful.

By the time of the flood, my parents had already moved into a little house across the street from my grandfather, and my dad was sharing this lot with his older brother, who survived the war, and his family. His brother owned the majority of the lot, and the front of the lot of our house. Even during the flood we still had to go to church. We used a small canoe to go to church or to our relatives' house. I loved my grandparents' house the most and I spent many hours at their home everyday. I caught many fish at the front steps of their house. They fed me. I always found joy, happiness, peace and security being in my grandparents' house. They loved me a lot

because of what happened to my older brother Hung. I felt that my grandparents loved me more than my parents.

By this time, I had two younger sisters, Bich [Jennifer - born in 1975], and Dung [Ashley – born right before the flood.] Jennifer was about three years old during the flood, and we gave her the nickname “Nine Sausage Girl” because one time she ate nine pieces of dog sausage. I'm sure she was very hungry since we were so poor. We also made fun of Jennifer because unlike the other girls who had black hair, she had hair the color of corn silk. We called her “corn ear hair girl.” Ashley was born during the flood and I remember changing and washing her diapers. The diapers were nothing but a piece of cloth. I had to take them to the pond or river and wash them with my hands but no soap and hang them for drying. After the flood, trees, plants, and vegetables began to come back to life. The pond that we used every day for bathing and for all uses for the family and our livestock was surrounded by vegetables that were both for us and for our pigs (every family had a small pond because there was no electricity or city water or well water). There were a lot of snakes in this pond. It was also the year that I remember my first haircut. My mom shaved my whole head because of some kind of rash and red spots on my head.

In front of our home were a few papaya trees. In front of my uncle's house was a big tall milk fruit tree—its fruit looks like a red or green apple but once it ripens, it becomes soft, sweet, juicy and full of milk. From this house, we moved across the street where my brother had died earlier. My dad's brother Ba who died in the war owned this house. His wife decided to move back to live with her parents in another village. Two of her sons stayed with my family for a few years because she was too poor to feed all four. The house was so bad and so torn apart that we had to build a new one with bamboo sticks, straw mixed with mud, and leaves. Our house was about the size of a double garage. I remember helping my dad and cousins get mud from our pond and the river, carry it with our hands in baskets, and mix it with rice straw with our hands and feet, stepping on it until it bonded together, then using this mixture to patch the walls, so that our home could be enclosed. Then we brought coconut leaves and put them on the roof and tied them down with a thin slice of fresh bamboo. We had no ropes or wires or pliers. We had to re-build the whole house like this every two years, because the coconut leaves didn't last very long with the hot weather and moisture from the rain. When we built this house, there was one area that we made about four feet higher than the rest, in case of a flood again, so we didn't have to worry about a dry place to stay.

In this house I remember there were many cracks and holes in the floor, and

there were many rats and wild green snakes living with us, besides ants and all kinds of bugs and spiders. As time went by we had a dog, a pig, and a few chickens. Our dog was very obedient because he knew that if he failed us, we would cook him for dinner. Our pig was high maintenance. I had to find food for it every day and cook it, and once in awhile, carry buckets of water from the pond to clean its poop out of its pen; otherwise, it would be too stinky. I hated when that pig had babies. My dad told me that as soon as a baby was born, I had to jump into the pen and pick up the baby pig before the mother ate her baby and, of course, ate me, too. That pig gave birth to seven babies but only two survived and they got fat like crazy. I must have fed them well even though I didn't like any of them.

I liked our chickens the most, they gave us eggs when they could which we used as our daily food. There were days that my whole family shared one chicken egg for our meal. We cooked it with lots of salt so that you couldn't eat too much at a time. We had two little ponds. The one closest to the house was used to draw water for drinking, to bathe in and to wash vegetables in. The other one was where we raised some fish to eat, and also where we urinated and defecated because the fish fed on our human waste. Once the fish were big enough to eat, we had no choice but eat them too, like anything that was edible.

In our house there were two beds made out of bamboo sticks, the first one located by the entrance door with a flat bed with one small blanket for my dad and me. The other bed was for my mother and my four sisters. We slept with mosquito nets draped over us so that the mosquitoes wouldn't suck our blood, since they carried diseases such as malaria. For this reason, everyone went to bed as soon as it got dark to avoid mosquito bites. I had to learn to sleep without moving and without putting my arms and legs outside of the net. Sometimes there were so many mosquitoes that I could catch a bunch of them with my hands. Before bedtime, I had to kill as many mosquitoes as possible that were in my bed so that they wouldn't bite us during the night.

The mosquitoes were bad but water coming from the roof was even worse. Every time it rained, water leaked through the roof onto the floor. The worst was that once you got wet in the middle of the night, it was cold and we had no coats or blankets. Of course, there was no furnace or air conditioning, since there was no electricity in our village. We used one oil lamp for the whole house only when we had to light it, because the light attracted bugs and mosquitos. I also made another lamp as a flashlight to help me see at night so that I could catch small frogs for my fishing bait or check my fishing traps or trout line. I had to find bait and catch fish every night to

provide food for my family. My dad came back from the war with malaria, so he was sick a lot. He would get freezing cold. Therefore, he was not able to help plant or harvest rice in the fields, or go fishing for food for the family. My dad's father always laughed at my dad because he knew his son could not catch a fish. One time my dad pretended to have gone fishing and came home with a nice fish, and his dad immediately knew he must have gotten it from somebody...which he did, he bought it and hooked it to his line! He couldn't fool his dad but he was always very close to his parents, and perhaps he was one of their favorites.

We had a piece of land behind our house for growing rice and vegetables for our own use. It had a lot of weeds and uneven ground, so one area was too low and next to it was too high. We didn't have any machines to work the ground. I remember spending many hours everyday breaking the ground with a shovel. It was tough to break the ground because it was hardened by the extreme heat. We got almost nothing from our harvest. One year, my dad decided he was going to use the land to grow sugar cane instead of rice. That was the biggest mistake of my dad's farming experience. Planting cane required the right amount of water when it needed it so we had to dig a canal by hand to supply the water for the field. We had either too much water at one time due to the heavy rain or none due to the drought. We did not have manpower to bail water by hand from the ponds with buckets. Because my dad was sick most of the time and even when he was feeling better, he was not the one working the hardest in the field. It was my mother who did all the hard labor. Once my dad learned that it was a mistake to plant sugar cane, we returned to planting rice, at which time we realized it was difficult to get rid of the roots.

However, from this field I was able to catch a lot of crab, tiny fish, eel, and shrimp for our daily food. Every night, I set three traps where the water was running, and the next day I would have a few baby shrimp, eel or crab for our food. Most of the time I used the little shrimp for bait to catch bigger fish during the day. We smashed the crab and got the juice out to make soup with vegetables. Most of the fish we ate were too small to gut so we cooked them without cleaning out the guts.

By this time, I had a third sister, Tuyet [Julian – born in 1981]. I remember my mother had to stay with her mother in the next village when she had Julian and my sister Jennifer and I had to take care of everything at home, in the rice field as well as provide food for our family, and raise our few chickens and pig. One day my dad was lying sick in one bed, and my mother had just had my sister Julian and she was not feeling well either in another bed, so they told me to boil them some water. Instead of going and boiling the water for my parents, I made my sister Jennifer do it. I learned

my mistake that night and I regret doing that to her. She was only about six years old, small and innocent. After she boiled the water, she carried it from our shed where our pig was, along with our fire and cooking area, to the house, walking in complete darkness since we didn't have flashlights or outside lights. She slipped and fell to the ground (it had been thundering, storming and raining all day and night) and all the hot water splashed over her body. She was being burnt with hot water and I didn't know what to do. We didn't have a medical doctor or medication to help her with her pain. I was very angry with myself for putting my sister in such a bad situation. I admired her for she was obedient and willing to do difficult tasks for her parents.

Yes, that night, I had an earful from my parents because my sister was too young and she was a little girl to do such a hard job. Well, I am sure that I was not very big either in size. I learned that girls couldn't always do what boys could. I could run faster than she could. I could jump down from a tall tree and she would be afraid to climb a tall tree, because every tree was full of nasty ants. Ants had their nests in trees and got their food by eating the fruits of the tree, especially when they're ripe. I love fruit that are ripened, and freshly picked from the tree.

LORD, MAKE ME YOUR FISHER OF MEN! Since that day, I took greater care of Jennifer and she became my closest sister. She was three years younger than me. My mother had quite a story in giving birth to Jennifer. When it was time for my mother to give birth to her, my dad put my mom in a small canoe, taking her to the clinic a few miles away. About halfway there my mother gave birth to my sister in the canoe while it was raining. My dad didn't know what to do. He stopped the canoe and carried my mother to shore and brought her into a neighbor's house. The family was shocked and didn't know what to do when they saw my mother with her baby in her pants. My dad was furious and said to the family, "You better help me take care of my wife and baby." They did and both my mom and sister were fine. God took care of them through the hands of their neighbors. I can't imagine how happy my parents must have been to have another child after losing my older sister and brother. We were all precious to them.

Jennifer grew up and became strong and healthy like a boy. I never saw her get sick in her childhood. We went to church together every morning at 4:45 a.m. We walked in the dark and in the rain. Before Jennifer's accident, I wasn't always nice to her because she was a girl, and I was her big brother who she looked up to for getting tasks done. I took advantage of her and made her act like a boy by running and walking while having the confidence of a man. What I meant was that I often acted like a ghost to scare her, or made our neighbor's dog angry so he would chase after us,

and she would have to run with me, frightened and crying. Jennifer was pretty innocent, and I had to teach her about everything, how to start a fire for cooking and even how to cook different dishes. She always loved to do things with me and did them well.

In those days, we had hardly anything, not even a lighter to start a fire for cooking. We cooked our food over an open fire. We used rocks for the pot to set on. We had no electricity, gas burner or firewood or much straw to burn either. Most of the time we had to cook our food, or food for the pig, with rice shells, which is very smoky and hard to light, especially when it's wet or humid outside. We had to blow on the fire to get it started which got ashes on our face. It was even harder to start the fire when rainwater leaked into our cooking area. My sister Jennifer learned fast the tricks I taught her, such as killing a fish before you clean it. Hit the snakes and eels on the head and not on the body. Grasp the eels with your middle finger along with some ashes in your hands, because they are very clammy and slippery, and the ashes give you a grip.

I don't think I ever slapped her or hit her physically but whenever another kid made her cry or made her upset, I beat that kid up. She was three years younger than me but as she grew older, she did everything as well or twice better than I. She knew how to do things around the house, such as cooking and babysitting; she was also very smart and always did very well in school. As a matter of fact, she can read and write Vietnamese better than I can. She knew more prayers and songs than me, and, of course, today she is a million times better cook than me. We did many things for our family. She was more of a homebody than me; she didn't hang around much with friends like I did. She gave her time to her family, taking care of them and cooking for them.

None of my siblings and I ever complained to one another about the things we had to do for our family or about how our parents treated us. Because of this, I loved my childhood because I never complained or even felt jealous of other kids for what they had and I didn't. I loved my family and I loved to do what was asked of me, and I did it well. I liked to play games [rubber bands, marbles, and spinning tops] with other kids. I was known to make the tops spin for a long time. I cut them from a fresh cut guava tree with my knife and smoothed it with a broken piece of glass. The smoother the top, the longer it would spin. I also made many traps out of bamboo to catch all kinds of fish, eels, snakes, turtles, and birds, especially field rats, for dinner. All of the children my age did not have to do what we did because their families were better off than my family. What I did at the age of 7 or 8 was done mostly by adults; however,

even they were not much better than I was at fishing, or catching fish in the mud with my hands.

Every time a neighbor was done bailing out all the water in their ponds to harvest all the fish they could, they would allow people like me to hunt for any fish that might be left behind. Now, every pond was full of mud in the bottom, sometimes two or three feet deep. Many of the fish hid in the mud but no one could see them with the naked eye. To catch them, you had to put both hands into the deep mud and try to find the fish but sometimes you caught a snake or eel instead. The trick was that once you found a fish, you never acted up or yelled out because others would move close to you and take it away from you. The rule was that the fish was not yours until it was in your basket. So every time I found a fish, I always looked for the head and grasped it with both of my hands; therefore it wouldn't escape. The fish were very slippery due to their nature and also because they were in the mud. If the fish had moved and swam away in the mud or popped up above the mud, then everyone would jump in and try to catch it. I didn't tell you that every fish sways its tail--flopping around like crazy when you hold it with your hands. Yes, every time I caught a fish, my face was full of mud. However, I had to do what was asked of me to feed my family.

Since the age of six years old, I was very observant and I learned handy work fast. My family had an old and heavy bicycle. I learned how to bike on my own. My legs were too short so I rode the bike sideways. I did not take swimming lessons. I learned how to swim by jumping into the water and swimming and I have done it ever since. I spent many hours with my cousin, and every Sunday (we didn't work because it was the Lord's Day) my friends and I swam and played games in the river, sometimes for four or five hours. One Sunday, after I swam for many hours and forgot to eat, I walked to church and attended Mass at four in the afternoon. After Mass, I fainted after everyone was gone, and lay in the pew. A sacristan found me and others came and walked me home to my parents, who fed me uncooked rice. I could have been dead from starvation. They believed that uncooked rice helped me. I think it's a myth.

LIKE FATHER LIKE SON – ORNERY! Since I was young, I was very obedient to my parents and took care of my family, such as looking for food to feed my family, from catching fish by hand in the water, to swimming underwater or digging deep in the mud, to setting traps for crab, fish and snakes. We ate what I caught or found including vegetables that we fed to our pigs. On the other hand, I was a very playful and ornery person probably because I got this from my dad. One time his brothers and sisters challenged him to be a beggar to see how many people he could

fool. Although everyone in my village was poor, they were blessed to have a place to live, some type of food to eat and above all their families and friends to be with. However, there were homeless people and beggars from everywhere. They had nothing - no food to eat, no place to live or family to be with. We had no money but as a Christian family, we had to share food with those who asked us. We were taught that when a beggar came to your door and asked for food, it was Jesus standing at your door asking for your kindness and generosity. One day, my dad decided he would be one of the beggars. He put a big, old torn hat over his head that covered most of his face, made his face look dirty, wore a torn piece of clothing and carried a guitar in his hand along with a dirty bag on his back. He went from one house to the next, singing the songs that people knew and playing his guitar. He went from house to house and people gave him rice and enjoyed his performance. They didn't realize that it was my dad until later one of them recognized him, and everybody got a kick out of it. My dad was very good at making people laugh and feel good about themselves.

He was well known for butchering animals and cooked for people when they had a party. He never cooked at home. Every time someone butchered an animal, they always invited him because he would prepare special dishes for them. We were not allowed to charge for our service, everyone must volunteer at church and help out their neighbors. Sometimes, my dad brought home a small piece of meat, like a pound or two of pork or pork fat, and we would be very happy. We didn't get to eat meat often, whether chicken or pork or dog, for sure never beef. We cooked the pork fat in a skillet and got the fat out of it for oil and saved it for future cooking. Dad was also very good at playing Chinese Chess, cards and dominos. I would have to say not many people could beat him, because he normally planned a step or two ahead of them. His hobbies didn't make my mom happy, because she would be by herself taking care of the family while he was having fun. I have to admit that my dad was very well admired by many people of different ages because he was friendly and made people feel happy and important.

As a kid, I loved to wrestle and not many of my friends could beat me. I threw rocks at neighbor's mango trees, so the mangoes would fall to the ground and I could eat them. I made neighbors' dogs upset so they would chase after me and I could outrun them. Didn't I tell you that I was very ornery?

I also loved to watch cockfights, as well as play chicken fights, and that was how I broke my left arm. One day, after school, two of my friends and I were walking and talking, and we decided, let's have a chicken fight, in which your right hand holds your right ankle, then you hop on your left leg and jump to attack your opponent with

the bent right leg that you are still holding. Whoever lets go of their ankle first, loses. This required stability and strong legs to jump, attack and push at the same time. I was always able to attack two kids at one time, and I would still win, until this one day, as we were playing like usual, one of the kids cheated by pushing my back with his left hand. As I was falling off the sidewalk, I saw that my head was going to hit a big rock, so I put out my left hand against the rock to keep my head from hitting the rock. But because I was being pushed and my body was too heavy for my left arm, I dislocated my arm, and it was pushed back to half the length. After what happened, my friends were so frightened, they took off and ran home, and left me there by myself.

The owner of the house saw what happened and he came out and took me to my parents. I was in a lot of pain, but I didn't cry because I was wondering what my dad would do to me when he found out. Thank God, when I got home he wasn't upset but went to our neighbors and borrowed their boat and took me to an herbal healer, far from my home. When we got there, the healer told me to turn away from the hurt arm. As soon as I did, he grabbed my arm and pulled it straight very hard. He then put a lot of herbs on it, and wrapped it with two sticks to keep my arm straight. My arm took a long time to heal by itself because I had no operation.

The two friends that caused me to dislocate my left arm were frightened and afraid of me. They always tried to avoid me because they knew I would beat them up. One day I caught both of them after school and threw them into the river. Since that day, my left hand has been very weak and painful in winter months. Recently I went to a surgeon in Wichita and he told me that I needed an elbow replacement. I have not had the surgery yet because I believe I am too young for an elbow replacement plus I would be limited in playing sports. Since the accident, I can't touch my left shoulder with my left hand.

This was the biggest trouble I caused to my family and to my life, but my dad did not spank me. All the other times he did, and he always told me that I did not have to hurt people even when they were wrong. So every time I hurt one of my friends whether for the right reason or the wrong reason, my dad didn't care, I deserved to be spanked on my butt. I got used to a spanking, and most of the time I didn't even cry. My dad was very strict, opposite of my mom. She was very caring and never punished me. She never blamed my dad for punishing me or tried to stop him. I am sure I deserved all the spankings my dad gave me. He taught me many valuable lessons such as don't let your anger get the best of you, forgive so that God will forgive you, and above all, there is a consequence for every wrong doing.

HOLY SACRAMENTS: Again, everyone in my village was born and raised

Catholic. I learned the Baltimore Catechism from my mother. Both my sister Jennifer and I had to learn some of the Baltimore Catechism together by heart before we could receive First Holy Communion from our priest. Once we received Holy Communion, then we had to learn the *entire* Baltimore Catechism by heart in order to be confirmed by the bishop. It took at least a year of study everyday and memorizing with my mother, and many tests with my dad. Every time I failed to recite the answers to the questions by heart, he spanked me. My sister got some spankings too but not as many as I did.

Before confirmation with the bishop, we had our exams in our church with about 1,000 parishioners watching us take our tests verbally. I was about 10 or 11. All the students sat in the front pews and when your name was called, you walked toward the altar and picked ten questions, one at a time, from the basket. These were exact questions from the Baltimore Catechism. One of the teachers read the question out loud through the microphone [the only place in the village that had electricity was the church, through a diesel-powered generator] so that everyone in church could hear the question. You then recited the answer to the question by heart in front of everybody, nice and loud, word-by-word as it was written in the book. Whatever question we picked was what we had to answer. And if we missed two questions out of ten, we failed, and would not be confirmed. Each question answered correctly received two points, and if anyone received 17 points or higher, they would pass. Most students passed the verbal test because all parents made sure that their children learned and memorized their faith.

When my name was called to pick my questions, my dad, who was sitting in the pew behind me, whispered in my ear to choose the questions on darker brown paper. The reason was that he had noticed these questions came from the first part of the book; therefore, they were a little easier because we had gone through those questions so many times. I picked my questions and answered 8 out of 10 perfectly, which was not enough to pass the test; however the Holy Spirit must have helped me recite my answers nice and loud. This impressed our priest and teachers and so they gave me one extra point; therefore, I got 17 points, just enough to pass. On the other hand, my sister Jennifer answered her ten questions perfectly. It was humbling that my little sister got a higher score than me. After my sister and I chose our questions on the darker brown paper, the priest and teachers noticed, so the priest called a time out and wouldn't let this happen anymore. The problem was that since both my sister and I were young, and didn't know to be sneaky, when we went up to pick the question we were obviously fishing around for the darker brown paper in the basket. Later on the priest told my dad

that he was very observant to see that the color of paper made a difference in the questions.

My sister and I were so happy that we passed the difficult oral exam and we were so excited to be confirmed by our bishop along with many of our friends because we all had been working hard at it every day for over a year. At this age, I had never seen a bishop before. I had no idea who our bishop was or what he would look like or dress like. I was told that the bishop might get to come to our village once every three to five years because everything was at the mercy of the Communists. However, a few days before Confirmation, the Communists did not allow our bishop to come and perform the sacrament. We were disappointed but had to accept what we couldn't control. I'm glad my parents taught me my faith because there is no better teacher than your own loving parents. That was the first time I had to work so hard to know my faith but I didn't get confirmed because it was not meant to be ... God had a different plan for me.

When I was growing up, unlike all my friends, I didn't have the chance to be an altar server or lector at church or be involved with church activities such as youth group, but I always attended daily Mass, even when my parents couldn't come. As a matter of fact, I had never stepped into the altar area of my church. I had only one pair of black pants and a white shirt that I only wore to church. I had one or two pairs of shorts but they were quite torn and patched everywhere. Usually all day long I had no shirt on because I didn't have many to wear and also it was too hot and humid. I didn't even have flip-flops to walk in whether at home or at school. Some days it was very hot outside and no one could walk barefoot on the sidewalk because of the burning heat so I walked on the grass or I ran so that my feet didn't have to stay on the concrete for very long. Of course we had no umbrella or hats to wear. I usually tore off a piece of banana leaf with my hands to cover my head when it was hot or raining outside. I was barefoot most of the day even when working in the field. We had no toothbrush or toothpaste, so we brushed our teeth with our fingers and a big piece of salt. The salt was quite big so we had to chew and grind it in our mouth to break it apart without swallowing it. The first time I went to the dentist was when I first came to America, when I was almost 14 years old.

Again, there was no electricity, TV, phone, computer, shoes or cars in our village. It would be hard for my readers to comprehend what life was like when I was growing up. However, I never complained or felt sad about my life condition; probably because I didn't know any better and of course I was very innocent as well. I am sure many people who lived in the city would have electricity and toothbrushes like us

today, but if you were really poor, you didn't have a house to live in, food to eat or a pair of shoes to wear. I learned that billions of people in the world today live on less than 1.50 US dollar a day. That is not much at all to live on; however, 30 years ago my family and I did not have \$1.50 at all. We had no income; therefore, we had no money to buy anything. We ate what we found and didn't buy what we could not afford. One good thing is that we had each other, great neighbors and everyone believed in God, and therefore, until this day, there has been no divorce in our village.

The most common transportation in our village was by bicycle or canoe if you had one. We used canoes to travel long distances or to move heavy stuff. At harvest time we cut our crops by hand with sickles, then gathered them together in piles with our hands, bundled them with a thin piece of bamboo and carried them to our home either on our shoulders with a stick or on our head. Very few families had an ox to plow their field or haul their crops with a trailer; the wheels would be made out of wood and there were no rubber tires. We planted our rice as often as possible so that we always had rice to eat. It wasn't often that I had to scavenge leftover rice from other people's fields after it had been harvested, but some people did to survive.

Everybody walked barefoot everywhere including working in the field or visiting their neighbor. Although we were poor and had no furniture in our home including a pillow, God did bless us with rice, not a lot, but enough to eat each day. We ate our meals by sitting on the mud floor with no carpet or chair and, of course, no silverware. We used chopsticks made from our bamboo trees. Rice was our main food and we liked to eat our rice with some type of soup along with a salty dish. If we had nothing to cook for soup then we ate our rice with water or any fruit that might be available such as bananas. Yes, you can make banana soup. We always ate as a family and prayed as a family before bedtime. No one ever dared to skip Sunday Mass or work on Sunday in the rice field. Everyone must dress their best for church such as black pants with white shirts. We had no clock or watch to know the time so we never knew the exact time of day. We didn't change our time either as seasons changed. We called it dry season and rainy season. The way to know the time was by looking at the sun. The way to know when to go to church was to listen for the church's bell. The first bell was to get ready for church, about 45 minutes before Mass. The second bell was 15 minutes before Mass. The third bell was five minutes before Mass. The cockcrows in the morning always helped us to know the timing of the morning day.

The most difficult thing for us was that we couldn't predict the weather, because we had no TV, radio, thermometer or newscast like here in the United States. There was no warning or communication for weather conditions. Sometimes we spread rice

out on the sidewalk so that the sun could dry it, but as soon as we did so, we had to bring it back inside so that it wouldn't get wet. The weather in a tropical climate changes rapidly. One way to know the weather conditions was to observe the dragonflies – if they were flying high in the sky that was a sign that it was going to be sunny. If they were flying above your head, then it meant that it would be cloudy and may rain. If they flew close to the ground, then definitely it will be rainy. Yes, we all can learn from nature. God gave all of creation to us for our sake, but not to love it more than God or our neighbors.

WORK TO LIVE NOT LIVE TO WORK! By the time I was 11 years old, my family had a small diesel engine (my dad bought it with the intention of building a small boat so that we could escape) to pump water from the ponds to the rice field for our farm. For this reason, there were many nights I slept by myself in the rice field to guard our motor. I also had to keep adding water to the engine to keep it cool so it did not overheat. By now I was old enough to harvest rice with a sickle and carry bundles or bags of rice on my head from the rice field to our home. To separate the rice from its straw, we beat it on the ground by hand.

Now since we had the motor, we manually fed it through a machine to separate the rice from the straw. I had to sit on top of the machine to feed the rice into the machine as it separated the rice from the straw. The scary thing was that if I missed feeding the rice into the blade by putting my hand in a little too deep, the blade would cut my hand to pieces. The worst part about this diesel engine was that it had to be started manually by cranking it, and for this reason, my back was injured and until this day there are times I have much back pain. Starting this engine was quite dangerous, especially for those who are not strong enough, like me as a child, because the engine might kick back and the metal handle could hit my head when it swung backwards. I had to know the machine well and know exactly when to let go of the switch with my left hand and at the same time release the crank off the nose of the engine with my right hand. The engine must spin fast enough and go around enough times in order for it to start. If it did not start by the third attempt, then I would not have enough strength to try a fourth time. The danger was that when the engine started, it would spin very fast and if the crank was still attached to the engine, then the crank could easily hit your head, nose or face. However, if it didn't start then it would kick backward. Thankfully, this never happened to me.

One day, as I was running the machine, I heard screaming and crying from our home, so my dad told me to run home and see what happened. I found that our dog had rabies and became crazy so it chased after my sisters to bite them. While she was

running away from the dog, my third sister Dung [Ashley] fell on the steps in front of our aunt's house, which was next to our house, and broke her right arm but she managed to get up and keep running. The dog didn't give up either and kept chasing my sisters, they were running and crying so I had to take a stick and chase the dog away to save my sisters. Immediately we caught the dog and butchered it for dinner. My dad took my sister to an herbal healer to help with her pain but since that day her hand has never been the same, very weak. This same sister, when she was young, was quite spoiled. Dad didn't spank her much at all. One time she was in trouble and dad spanked her, so she cried and ran to my grandfather's house. Then dad said to me, go and bring her home, and I did as he commanded. He spanked her twice the more. After that incident she was more obedient, learned not to run from dad and therefore didn't get spanked as much. All children should learn to respect and obey their parents because they always know what is best in life for their children.

SPIRITUAL HEROS IN MY FAMILY! One of the events that happened when I was about ten years old was that my Aunt Vui, the youngest sister of my dad, was pregnant with her third child. Suddenly, she realized that she was going to have her baby prematurely, so my dad quickly put her in a boat to take her to a clinic to deliver her baby. This just happened a day after she talked to me with her two sons. I was playing at the bridge, and she came to me and told me to take care of her sons in the future. At that moment I had no idea why God had her talk to me like this. That was the only time that I remember talking to her. When my dad got her to the clinic, they realized that she was losing so much blood that both her and her child were in danger, so my dad had to donate blood to try to save her life but that was not enough. He had to go to the market place to ask people to sell their blood so that he could save his sister. However, the doctor was not able to save her or her baby. She died after giving birth to her baby, then her baby also died immediately. I remember the day my dad took her to the clinic and also the day he brought her home in a boat, as I helped him dock the boat by the coconut tree. Everyone in our family was so sad and we cried and cried for many days; however, we believe that we have a little saint in heaven next to her life-giving mother, who gave until her last breath as she imitated the sacrifice of her Savior. Because of her faith and sacrifice for her baby, my aunt's life was short on earth but hopefully she will live for eternity in heaven. God knows every good deed that we do for each other.

I would have to say that all my uncles and aunts and relatives were very close to each other. Every time there was work to be done in one family, all the other families came over and volunteered to help. Every time our family cooked a big fish or a good

meal, we always shared it with our grandparents. It was very important that we shared everything we had with each other, including food. Therefore, when I was young, I was very close to my grandparents, even though my grandmother was blind in one eye since I was very young. My grandfather was making bamboo baskets for his children and grandchildren, but one time because of his old age, and he didn't have glasses, he had to look very closely at the basket with his screwdriver, but accidentally poked the screwdriver in one of his eyes and blinded it. At the beginning of 1984, my grandfather lost his eye, had a stroke and half his body was paralyzed.

Not too long after, his wife lost her second eye, and since that day, she became the most spiritual person in my life. I never saw her upset, angry or complaining to God about her eye condition, or the pain in her eyes, although she had tears constantly dripping from her eyes. She always had her rosary around her neck and prayed when no one was around. She could tell who we were. No one could fool her. I felt that she was never lonely, even when there was nobody around, because God was her companion. Her eyes were blind but her heart, mind and soul were not blind. She loved to share her food and fruits with me. My grandmother was the first person to give me a piece of orange and some Ramen noodles. Her children brought them for her out of love due to her old age, and I got to share some of her goodies. It was so wonderful to be loved by my grandmother.

JOURNEY WITH MOM: Not too long after that, my fourth sister Huyen [Alice] was born in early May 1984. It was on a cold rainy night about three in the morning and I was in a deep sleep. Suddenly my mother woke me up and said, "Wake up and take me to the clinic!" I didn't know what she meant or where the clinic was but she said that she was about to give birth to my sister. My dad had been sick that night. After she got a straw hat, she told me to run over to my aunt's house, and tell her to come and help my mother. Once I got back, my mother grabbed my hand, and she and I were walking so fast we were running in the dark toward the clinic. She was walking twice faster than I was, first because I was half asleep and second because she was in a hurry to get there before giving birth. She already had one child in her pants, and she didn't want that to happen again. Once we got close to the clinic she told me to stop by and wake the assistant nurse, as she continued walking towards the clinic. I was a bit frightened to enter his house because he had some mean dogs. I went in and banged on his door and told him what happened then I ran fast to catch up with my mother. Not too long after she got to the clinic, my sister was born, and immediately the church bell rang. My aunt who came right after us told me to run home and get some lime to sanitize the baby's belly button. I went home to my grandfather's house

and picked some limes from his tree and brought them to my aunt.

Once I returned to the clinic, it was very early in the morning. I was very tired because of all the walking and running in the mud due to the rain all night. I found my aunt washing my mother's pants in the river, and the water was muddy because of the rain. It was the main river in the area and so it's pretty large and the current was very strong. Suddenly she asked me to jump into the river and save the pants for my mom that she accidentally let go of, that were floating to the middle of the river. I had never swum in this river before because I was afraid to due to its strong currents. It was a cold morning as well, so I did not want to jump in. I had to think for a little bit about where I could swim back to the bank once I got in. I jumped in and got the pants and got back safely but it was very cold once I got out of the water. On my return home fully soaked, I realized that the road we took was very muddy, slippery and dangerous but during the night nothing happened to my mother or me. God kept my mom safe so that my sister could be born and have life, so that I could enjoy having her as one of my sisters.

This sister of mine was born healthy and my mother was also perfectly healthy. However, before my mother conceived Alice, I believe she had a serious miscarriage that almost cost her life. After she had the miscarriage at home there was leftover afterbirth that caused my mother serious sickness for weeks and months. My dad tried and tried to find help to heal my mother but he could not, until finally they found an herbal healer who lived far away and she helped with the right herbs to restore my mother's health. There was no modern medicine or surgery to help my mom. I remember traveling to her house to get herbs for my mother. I told myself that I did not want my mother to die. I also helped my sister cook the herbs to make medicine for my mother. I never enjoyed going away from home to a strange village or place but because I was the only son and the oldest in the family, I had no choice. I never liked to walk for hours to my mom's parent's house in another village, but I had to do what my parents asked of me.

DEATH CAME TO OUR FAMILY: July 13, 1984, my mother's mother in the next village died so I went to the funeral with my family. It was my first time seeing a dead person in a coffin. It was from that day on that I no longer got goodies from my grandmother. She always gave me some chicken eggs for the family or sugar cane to eat as I walked home. She was very small in stature but very hard working like my mother. Both of them always gave their entire selves to their families. It was truly like mother like daughter. Since the day of her death, I have missed her very much and thankfully I still have her by having my mother with me.

Not too long after that, my dad's father also died and I was there at his bedside. It was my first time witnessing someone die in his bed. I remember my grandmother was crying so loud. He died around eight in the evening, when most of his children were around him. After he died, every hour there were people coming to his house to visit his body and pray for him day and night. For two days and nights, there were many guests. Finally we took him to church for an early morning 4:45 a.m. burial Mass on a rainy day. It was very muddy at the cemetery, and everybody was dirty, including me. I remember seeing a big deep hole as they lowered my grandfather's coffin into the hole with bamboo ropes. We manually shoveled dirt over his coffin. It was then that I realized eventually we all have to die and be buried. After his funeral, my uncle butchered a young water buffalo in celebration of his life and to thank everyone who had come to give their condolences and help out.

After my grandfather died, my dad planned to move our family to a different town so as to escape. He couldn't do so before because his dad told him that as long as he lived he would not allow my dad to take our family to escape. My grandfather knew how dangerous it was to escape. He himself had escaped from North Vietnam to the south, so he knew the dangers. He had seen too many either in jail, or killed while escaping, or captured by pirates. Not only that but if the Communists knew that a member of a family was escaping, they would give the family members that stayed behind a hard time, for Communists have no mercy or fear of any person or God.

There were many nights in my childhood when the Communists came to my aunt's house, looking for my cousins, to force them to into the military or to go to a labor camp in Cambodia. Many nights when I was with my aunt and cousins, and even during the night while people were sleeping, if we heard an adult walking or a dog barking, then my cousins would have to flee out the window and hide in the rice field, bushes, or in the river. Two of my cousins who were a few years older than me were captured and we didn't hear anything from them for four years. The Communists had taken them to Cambodia to a labor camp. Even to this day, our world is full of violence and killing of innocent people. As a matter of fact, it is happening legally in America, that over one million Americans are being killed by abortion each year. Why are we killing our own flesh and blood? Please pray for an end to abortion as it is the most evil action in the world. Over 49 million babies are killed by abortion worldwide every year. Thankfully none of us were victims of abortion.

MOVED TO ESCAPE: Once my grandfather passed away, my father gave our house and land to his younger sister who had a big family of seven children; her oldest was about my age. She married a poorer man than her from another village. After

marriage, she moved and lived with her husband and his parents, as was the tradition. I went to her place a few times and played with her kids. I had been to their rice field and the soil at her place was worse than ours. They did very poorly in their farming; however, her first son was very intelligent and he did twice better than I at school. I was seen as a slow learner at school and I was fully aware of my lack of interest in school. Another reason my dad gave the house and land to his sister's family was so that it always stayed in our family tree, so that in case we might ever come back, we would have a place to restart our life. My mother never wanted to sell her house and land. I'm glad that my dad did not sell it because the land is still being used by my aunt's family to this day.

When it was time for us to move, we brought nothing with us because there was nothing worth bringing except a few bags of rice to cook and eat. We moved to Ngoc Ha, a city about 150 miles away from our village. It took us a few days to get there by bus. It was the first time for everybody in my family to ride in a vehicle, except for my dad. The bus in those days was operated by coal and not diesel or gasoline. First we stopped in Saigon and visited my mom's older brother and his family for the first time ever. It was in his house that I first saw a small black and white TV. In the street I saw many motorcycles and the crowd. However, I didn't care for their houses or the city because there was nothing natural like my village, no rice field, fruit trees, river or ponds, or fresh vegetables like I used to have around. I didn't like the trip to Ngoc Ha or our new house, because I felt like we were strangers and a lower class people. I didn't like the ground because it was red dirt plus it was always windy.

People in this town came from different backgrounds and spoke different dialects which I had never heard before. The house we moved into was a duplex house, located in front of a flea market, where thousands of people sold all kinds of livestock, vegetables and everything else you can imagine, and where at night, lepers came and slept along with neighbors' dogs, cats and loose chickens. It was not a pretty place because it smelled and was full of thieves and sick people with diseases, especially lepers. Most of the people who lived there were not Catholic but mainly Buddhists and ancestor worshipers, so cursing and swearing was their everyday language. When I was in my home village, my grandmother who was blind taught me never to curse or swear. She said to me, if you ever make a mistake and say a swear word, slap yourself with your hand on the mouth as hard as you can. I tried it and it worked. I guarantee that it would work for those who have this bad habit and it would set a good example for their children and others. For sure our world would be better if we watched our language and overcame our bad habits. It is possible if you are willing.

EXPERIENCE THE WORLD: As soon as we moved in, my dad had me selling cigarettes on the street from dawn to dusk as a way to fool the Communists, that we were not there to escape but to survive by making a living. Every morning I had to carry on my head a wooden display case full of cigarettes and sit on the main street where buses and travelers stopped to drop customers or to rest. Because of what I did, I had to learn to approach people and smoke cigarettes so I could light the cigarettes for my customers, especially when they were buying from within the bus. Customers could buy a single cigarette or as many as they wanted, but they didn't have free matches with them so I had to light the cigarette for them. I never enjoyed smoking or selling cigarettes because I didn't get to go to daily Mass, or school, or play games with friends like I used to in my village. I was completely isolated from all kids, and was by myself the whole day whether it was hot or cold, sunny or rainy. I didn't like it at all but was never angry with God or my parents for what I had to do. I accepted the position my parents gave me, and I am sure God had something to do with it as well to prepare me for my future as a priest. As a priest, I must be willing to go where I don't want to go and to serve people that I have never met, but above all, to lead them to God for their salvation.

Some days it was windy and rainy but I had to stay in the cold and rain. One time the wind was so strong that it blew my cigarette case into the river where it was probably about 30 feet deep. Another day I saw a group of people coming toward me and they wore yellow robes and had no hair on their heads. I didn't know who they were. I was so afraid and so I climbed a tree to let them pass without interacting with them. I was like a monkey in a tree watching but knowing nothing about what was happening. Later on I learned that they were Buddhist monks and there was a Buddhist temple not too far away.

Another time I saw two big, tall white men walking towards me. They were giants. I was so nervous and frightened that I left my cigarette case and climbed a tree again. I had never seen anyone so huge and white in my life. Later on I learned that they were Russians but I had no idea who they were nor that there were other nationalities in the world. I was never told or taught at school that there are billions of people throughout the world speaking different languages, with different cultures and practices, and of course different color of hair and skin than myself. No one knew how frightened I was being alone all day encountering strangers and strange people and how much I missed playing games with my friends in the village. I was good at doing something with my hands and here I was stuck with smoking cigarettes and talking to strangers and climbing up a tree for safety and protection.

One evening as I was carrying my cigarette case home (I was too small to carry it with my hands, I had to put it on my head and hold it with my hands), I stopped and watched some neighbor boys playing tops. As I watched them, I realized they didn't know a fraction of what I knew, when suddenly, one of the boys hit the top right and it bounced from the ground to my face, close by my eyes. Oh my, my face was full of blood, dripping to the ground, but I did not cry and continued going home. I tried to sneak into the house so that my dad would not see me and yell at me. Fortunately my uncle from the village just came to visit us and brought us some homegrown rice for us to cook and eat. As soon as he saw me, he came and helped me put my cigarette case down and asked me what happened. Everyone was so surprised to see me bleeding from my eyes down. I told them what happened and that I didn't blame the kid. We went to the family of the kid and told them what happened, and the father of the kid was a nurse, so he cleaned me up and bandaged me. At the end everything turned out okay for me because my family and I chose not to make a big deal out of a small matter. My family and I made new friends that day. Good things can come out of bad situations. We can all make a choice about how we react to the things that happen to us in our daily lives, whether it is at home or at work.

GOD SAVED ME: Living with us was my uncle Thuan, my mom's younger brother. He lived with us illegally because he fled from the Communists who were searching for all young men to capture them. Every night he would take me to the canals that connect to the ocean, to fish with a long net for our daily meal. We normally didn't get home until three or four in the morning. I had to go with my uncle because it takes two people to operate the net which was approximately 7x14 feet long. One person held each end of the net and walked in the deep water, up to their neck, to scoop fish from the canal. After walking for about 50 feet, they lifted the net up to collect the fish and discard the trash. At first, my dad went with him, but a fish stung him and he got really sick. Besides, he also had malaria, so he couldn't handle cold water. During this time, I slept mainly when my uncle was oaring the canoe with his feet to the place where he believed there were some fish to catch.

One time I was in the water and walking in the mud, when I stepped on a rotten stick that went through the middle of my pinkie toe, almost to the other end. It hurt and I bled a lot. Once I got home, I used a needle to clean the splinter out of my toe, which was very painful. This was a big mistake because I didn't clean the dirt located in the middle of my toe, therefore it kept swelling and got pus in it for weeks. So I had to go back a second time and clean it out, and it was not easy and twice the pain. I learned an important lesson in life, that is, try the best you can to do it right the first time.

One of my fears when I was with my uncle was canoeing by the opening of the canal. The current was very strong because of the waves in the ocean, and there were rumors that giant whales would come and eat us. The nights were always cold at sea. There was one time as my uncle and I headed home from fishing, we saw a big ship so we were curious, and got close to it. We didn't know that people were trying to escape. Therefore, when the Communists saw us, they thought we were one of those trying to escape, and they chased after us and fired their guns above my head. Immediately, my uncle told me to jump into the water. Thank God neither my uncle nor I got hurt. I guess my time to die was not here yet.

Another time my uncle and I were trying to sneak into one of the boats where people were trying to escape in the middle of the night, and as we came close to the ship, people from the ship were trying to hit us with long sticks so we wouldn't crawl over the side of the ship and get in with them. I didn't know why my uncle wanted us to get into the ship. I didn't know what escape meant or why we had to escape. I didn't know that there was another country. All I wanted then was to be in one piece and to be with my family. Later on I learned that people who wanted to escape would have to pay gold to the captains or to those who owned the ship. They didn't want us to go for free so they would rather kill us than take us. Thank God that we didn't make it onto the ship, otherwise they would kill us or we would end up in prison. The Communists captured this boat the next morning and everybody was imprisoned. At this moment, I was thankful that I did not get into the boat with them or get hurt by them. God saved my life by preventing my uncle and me from making it into the boat. However, I was experiencing scary real life situations and dealing with extreme difficulties in life.

My family and I lived in this town for almost a year. Although we didn't get to go to daily Mass like we used to, we did attend Sunday Mass. Both my sister and I were old enough and certified to be confirmed because we knew our faith by heart. However, as the confirmation date approached, we had to escape. This was the second time I would have been confirmed but it was not meant to be ... God had a different plan for me.

PRAYED FOR SIGNS AND MIRACLES: Why did my father bring our family to this strange town and why did I have to sell cigarettes in the streets? It was because he and two of his best friends who also came from our village had made their decision for their families to escape through the Pacific Ocean. Therefore, my dad and his friends put all their money together and bought an old wrecked ship and salvaged the wood and made it into a small boat about 7 feet wide and 21 feet long. After months of

building a small boat themselves, they decided to escape with this tiny thing. Who in the world would escape in this tiny boat in the Pacific Ocean? Most people escaped with ships at least five times bigger; my dad and his friends were either out of their minds or they believed in miracles. As a matter of fact, yes, there were miracles, for they had faith.

The miracle happened on the weekend before we escaped. My uncle, Thuan, my mom's younger brother, who had been living with us illegally, had a mission to go to Saigon and buy a compass and some other mechanical supplies to get ready to escape. While he was in Saigon, he entered a Catholic church and went to a statue of St. Martin de Porres and he prayed from his heart to the holy saint. He said that we needed God's protection to save us during this escape. He was asking for a sign from God on his return home on the bus; that journey would be symbolic of our escape journey. He said to God that if the Communists happened to stop his bus and capture him, it would be a sign that when we escaped the Communists would capture us. [The Communists stopped almost all buses.] He also asked for rain on the day we escaped, scheduled for Thursday, April 23, 1985. On his journey back home, the Communists did stop his bus, but they did not go in the bus and ask for identification paperwork from each passenger. If they had, he would have ended up in jail. My uncle was nervous but he got home safely. When he got home, he was half-scared and half-joyful. He told my parents that the Communists would chase us, but we would not be captured by them, and also because the Communists stopped his bus, this meant that we would encounter great danger in the Pacific Ocean.

When he came back, he brought his younger brother and his youngest sister with him so that they could also escape with us. I was happy to see my uncle Tu and aunt Mai, and I remember they asked me constantly, "When are we escaping?" I knew the answer, but because my parents had told me not to tell anybody, although my uncle Tu and aunt Mai were older than me, I did not. Escaping wasn't a big deal for me because I didn't know what it meant to escape or where we were heading. All I knew was I couldn't tell anybody because otherwise my family would be captured and put in jail. I felt fortunate and special that they revealed the secret plan to me.

THE EXODUS: On this Thursday morning of April 23, 1985, I was commissioned by my parents to lead a group of others, seven or eight young adults, all older than me, to a special location by the canal where my uncle and I used to fish, and wait until they came and picked us up. We dressed up like we were going to gather wood to sell, like the farmers going to the woods; therefore we had big knives to chop wood in our hands, and walked. My uncle Thuan wanted me to lead the group at four

in the morning, in the dark like people heading to work or to church. Once we got to the location, we needed to hide from everyone including the fishermen. So we were waiting since early morning, and the boat didn't come by to pick us up until about 1:00 p.m. Suddenly just before noon, it started raining hard like my uncle prayed for to make our escape less noticeable. The reason my uncle prayed for rain was that when it was raining, people had to be inside their house. Even fishermen by the dock or in the boat would go inside. In this way no one would think that we were trying to escape, otherwise the Communists would capture us. Many of the people living around home and the boat ramp were Communists, even a few houses from our home was a Communist commander's house.

When it was about 11:00 a.m. the kids were given sleeping pills so that there would be no crying or noise from them. During the rain, they brought all the women and children into the boat. It took them longer than they expected, because it took so long to start the diesel engine and to get the boat moving towards my location. When the boat came to my location, they turned off the engine, and we got into the boat, but we didn't start the engine because we saw Communists in another ship in front of us in the main river. Once the Communists were gone, we started the boat, and it was hard for that engine to start again, and some children began to make noise. After we started the engine, we headed to another location in the river to pick up another group of adults. It took awhile to find the group because there was a misunderstanding about the location. But once we picked up that group and went back to the main river, we saw a Communist ship again. We realized they were looking for us. When we saw them, we had no time to go into the small canal, but must remain in the big river, near the shore. Thank God there was a big tree, tilted or leaning over the water, and our boat was small enough that it could fit under the tree. We turned off the engine and waited for the Communists to pass by. During that time, my uncle was telling everybody, especially the children, to be quiet and not make any noise. By now it was evening.

After the Communist ship was gone, we continued our journey toward the ocean. It took us until the next morning to get to the Pacific Ocean, and I remember I woke up and saw for the first time the land and the ocean of Vietnam. It was so beautiful from the ocean view. We kept going and going further out in the ocean, hoping that the Communists would not chase us, because there was no longer any place to hide. We never stopped to eat or drink. Eating was not on our mind at that time but somehow we survived. There were 33 people in our boat. Nine of them were from my family, including my aunt and two uncles, my mom, myself and my four sisters. My dad was not with us. The other two families each brought the same number, but most

of them were children. The captain went along for free. However, there were three additional guests that weren't expected to be part of the escape. One of them was a young teenager, 14 years old, and I didn't know that she was a girl till we got to the refugee camp. She was taller than I. The reason she shaved her head and dressed like a boy was in case we ran into pirates, they might not capture her to rape her. (*This had happened so many times in the past to those who escaped, they were captured by pirates, raped or killed by them. Sometimes they ran over your boat with their ships and killed you. Other times they captured everyone and took them to an island and made them slaves until death. Of course, they had weapons with them as well.*)

When we were in the ocean, the captain and everybody else was terribly seasick, and throwing up. Because of the seasickness, people didn't have energy or strength but were mainly tired and sleeping. At that time, we realized that during our escape we forgot to bring the most important thing, which was food. All we had were two containers of water and some dry flour. Because the captain was so sick and useless, my uncle Thuan had to take over steering the boat and I was a little boy running around everywhere in the boat. All the women and children were cramped tightly in the bottom of the boat, with no room to stretch out, and no comforts such as a pillow to sit on, and there was no one to care for them in their seasickness. The young men were on the top beam where they bailed water out of the boat constantly. The boat leaked terribly due to many holes in the bottom of the boat. It normally took two men at a time to bail water out of the boat, one standing next to the engine, scooping the water and passing it up to the guy above so he could dump it into the ocean. We saw nothing in the ocean, only endless blue water, the sun during the day, the moon and stars at night.

My mother was the only one who sat next to the engine area, where there were containers of diesel for the engine. Day and night, she held my baby sister Alice, who at this time was less than a year old, never putting her down. My mother was breast-feeding my sister the whole time. How mom survived without any food and at the same time fed my sister for six days and nights, only God can explain. The first few nights, I was sleeping on the rail of the boat, which was about four inches wide, because there was no place else to sleep, and I had to hold onto the pole on the edge of the boat, so that I wouldn't fall off into the ocean. When I put my right hand down, I touched the ocean water. When I put my left hand down, it touched the girl's shaved head. I didn't have a shirt on when I escaped, all I had on were shorts, and at night it was very cold, so one time my mother told me to come down and stay next to her, and put my feet by the diesel container to keep me warm. I am glad I listened to my

mother. God blessed us with our mothers because they know best how to take care of their children, in any circumstances.

As I mentioned earlier, our boat was built from the salvage wood from old ships that we found lying around. Therefore, it had leaks everywhere since day one. At least one time, we stopped and one young man swam underneath the boat and tried to patch some of the leaks. I remember when he was doing so, I took advantage of the water, and I jumped right into the ocean and swam and also went to the bathroom. I didn't realize there were deadly fish in the ocean, such as sharks. As a matter of fact, I had never heard of them or dolphins, so they didn't scare me. A few of the other guys did the same as I, and they got sun burnt really bad because the salt water on their skin intensified the sun's rays. My uncle Thuan and I were the only ones who didn't get seasick.

GOD HEARS THE CRY OF THE POOR: One sunny morning, and I believe it was the day after we encountered a deadly thunderstorm, my mom said to me, as she and I were looking at the ocean, "I can't believe I brought my children here to drown them in the ocean." I didn't understand what she meant until later on when I thought about it and realized that what my grandfather said to my dad was so right: escaping was very risky and dangerous. What my mother meant was that she couldn't believe she put her own children in a very dangerous situation, to the point of death.

The reason my mother said what she said to me was because of the enormous and deadly thunderstorm we encountered in the middle of the night in complete darkness. We were hopeless for a chance at survival. It began with hard rain and strong wind, which caused our boat to be tossed around by waves that were so high that we could never imagine that we would survive; I would say 40 feet high or more. During this time, I was hiding myself in the nose of the boat, in a little area, and I heard the water from the sea splash over me as my uncle was steering the boat. He tried to steer along with the waves, so that the boat would not flip over or be broken apart by the waves because he was aware that the boat was very fragile. When it first began to rain, some of the men began to collect water for our containers for drinking, but as it rained harder and harder, we realized collecting water was no longer important, but saving ourselves was.

So there we were – hopeless – and didn't know where we were in the middle of the night with the thunder, lightning, darkness and being wet. People began to cry and cry. Suddenly I heard a voice from the oldest man in the boat. He said, "Everybody calm down, be quiet and let us begin to pray to Mary." So he began saying the rosary and everybody prayed with him in tears for hours and hours. We were praying for a

miracle. My uncle Thuan told me not to move but to stay on the tip of the boat because he had promised my dad that he would take care of my family and me, and if something happened to me, he wouldn't know how to answer to my dad. And I know him well that he would rather die than have any of my family or me die.

As people were praying through their tears, and we didn't know what to do, suddenly we saw some light ahead of us, and we knew that it was some kind of fishing ship. So we headed in that direction, and finally after a few hours we got there, and we decided that the people in the other ship had to save us. They will either save us or kill us themselves. Their ship was big, probably 120 feet long or more. When we got to that ship we turned off our engine and parked right in front of their ship so that they would run over us - we were trying to force them to slow down, stop and save us. They did slow down, but they did not stop, and when they got close to us, they turned and continued on. Our captain knew some English, and he told us that it was a Russian ship. It was still nighttime. After the ship left, we became much more sad as there was no more hope for life. We cried again.

As my uncle tried to start the engine again, he couldn't find the crank to put into the nose of the motor to start the engine. Somehow when the men were bailing water off the boat, they scooped the crank into the bucket and threw it into the ocean. Then there was a big argument, because they couldn't find the crank, and no one would take responsibility for its loss. Now we were even more hopeless because we could not start the engine without a crank. As they were upset, and angry and hopeless, suddenly I thought of the knife that I had with me when I was leading the group to chop wood. So I told my uncle why don't we use my knife and bend it into a crank; the handle of my knife was made out of soft metal and didn't wrap all the way around, it had an opening in the handle and we could bend the knife so that it would go into the nose of the motor and act as a crank. He did this, but they realized it was not strong enough to turn the engine fast enough to start it. One guy in the boat suggested that we use a rope to help turn the rotor of the engine. Thankfully after many attempts using the rope along with the knife, the engine started, and by that time everybody was tired to death because of the anguish, the crying, the seasickness, and the many days without food and water in our bodies.

By the time the engine restarted, the storm had calmed down a great deal, but my uncle didn't know which way to go. He had been focused on starting the engine, and the boat had floated around because the anchor rope was not long enough to hold the boat, and he lost his sense of direction. He asked for his compass only to find out it was lost during the night in the ocean also. There was no electricity in our boat or any

source of light such as flashlights. We were in complete darkness. By this time, the rain had stopped and the ocean had calmed down significantly, so my uncle looked at the stars in the sky to guide him. My uncle can read the tide and stars and figure out directions because he and I had been fishing so many nights. Towards the early morning, but it was still dark, as the men were bailing water off the boat like usual, my uncle yelled loudly, "Someone fell off the boat!" As soon as we heard that, we realized that the guy who was bailing water had fallen off the boat, probably because he was so tired from the long, stressful trip and sleepless nights, and he was already a good twenty feet behind the boat. Immediately we slowed down and turned around and saved him. It was dark, but we were able to see the water he was splashing. We saved him.

RESCUED: The next morning, we saw many fishing ships on our right side, and one in front of us. At first we were so excited, and then we realized they could be pirates. I remember I was holding a shirt in my hand and trying to wave as a sign for them to come save us. We headed towards one of the ships, which had its nets in the ocean catching fish, and when we got close to them, they brought in their net and the head of our boat hit the side of their ship. We knew these fishermen were not Vietnamese because they wrapped their bodies with a sarong and they couldn't speak our language or English, so the man who spoke English said to them, "Malaysia," so they understood that we wanted to go to Malaysia and not to Thailand. They pointed to the sunrise and so we followed the sun. They were generous by throwing us some diesel for the motor and some cigarettes for the men. They couldn't take our boat to Malaysia because they could not go beyond their fishing boundaries.

After we left them, we began to see an island far, very far away, and tiny. As we got a little closer to the island we saw dolphins jumping side by side with our boat. My uncle Tu was yelling, "Let's race!" It was the first time in our lives seeing such big fish. But my uncle Thuan said to him, "Stop saying this, because they could run over our boat and crash it." It took us towards late evening to get to the island, probably nine in the evening. When we got close to the island, the engine died because the propeller got stuck running over a fishing net. Therefore, some of our guys had to jump into the water and cut off the fishing net. Then we tried to get to the shore, but we couldn't because we were still many feet away from shore; however as we were doing so and it was late, some fisherman came with their fishing ship and pulled our boat to a safer side of the island on a large sand bar. It was midnight on April 29, 1985.

After everyone got off our boat, these fishermen gave us some leftover rice in a big rice pot and told us to stay on shore till morning and threatened us that if one

person was missing by going deeper into the island, they would take us back to Vietnam. The next morning the Malaysian fishermen came back and took us with our boat to another small island where they lived temporarily in the huts when they were seeking shelter from the storms. We stayed on a sandy beach and they gave us some canned food to eat. Many of our young men ate more than they should and got sick because their digestive system had not been fed for six or seven days. Many of them were in contact with salt water, so their skin was dry, sun burnt and peeling off. There were some coconut trees and we picked some fruit from them to drink and eat the meat out of. We were on this island for 4-5 days, eating, resting, and getting our energy back, before the fishermen could transport us to the refugee camp, since we didn't know where it was.

During this time, we asked the fishermen why they weren't in the ocean a few days ago when we encountered the big thunderstorm that almost killed us. They told us that they knew the weather was bad, so they weren't out fishing. They told us there would be another weaker storm coming the next day or two, and we believed them. Shortly the storm came up and we watched it tear our boat to pieces in front of us, and the waves drifted the pieces of the boat into the ocean. Thank God for saving everyone in my boat from the deadly thunderstorm, otherwise we would have been like those pieces of wood floating in the ocean.

REFUGEE CAMPS: At this time, I felt fortunate that our boat didn't break into pieces while we were in the middle of the Pacific Ocean. Once everyone in my boat was in better health, the fishermen took us on their fishing boat for many hours to another island where the ocean patrols were stationed. It was a nice bigger island with many fruit trees such as coconuts, mangos and papaya. They told us to sleep in one of their buildings. During the night, we met a group of Vietnamese refugees like us who got there many days before us. As we were talking, we shared with each other about who we were, what part of Vietnam we came from and how long we were in the ocean. We thought that our encounter with the big thunderstorm was the most dangerous event that anyone had ever encountered; however, what we learned was that what we encountered was nothing in comparison with these four or five survivors. There were over a hundred others who escaped with them; however, because they were lost in the Pacific Ocean for 49 days, and ran out of food since the first day, one person after another died. At first, they threw their deceased family and friends into the ocean, but toward the end of the 49 days, these survivors had to eat the flesh of their dead loved ones in order to survive. If they had not done so, they too would have been dead like everyone else in their boat. After we heard their story, we felt blessed that none of the

people in our group died, including the one who fell off the boat in the middle of the night. Since that moment, we learned that every day of our life is a gift from God and we must work hard to survive. No matter how much we had to suffer, there were always others in worse condition than us.

A few days later, after we did all the required paperwork such as our name, date of birth, and where we came from, they transferred us to a refugee camp full of refugees on an isolated island of Malaysia. They gave the people of our boat the identification number MB373 [the numbering system started with A100 through A999, then B100 through 999, later on AB100, etc. So you can see how many boats had been to this island alone.] They estimated that millions of Vietnamese fled through the Pacific Ocean for freedom after the Communists took over the country in 1975. As many as half of those who escaped were either killed by pirates or natural disasters in the ocean such as thunderstorms, earthquakes, typhoons, etc.

The island was so overcrowded with refugees that the authorities didn't have room for my family to stay together as one family. Since we used to live among the Communists and we didn't trust them, we were afraid that if our family were separated, we might never see each other again. It was already very late that first evening and we were so hungry and tired, but we kept walking from shed to shed looking for a place to stay together. We were hoping that someone might share his or her living place with us. Finally, the young Vietnamese man named Dung who helped us fill out our paperwork when we first got there had pity on our family and invited us to stay in his hut. He had been there for many years. We followed him to his place and lived with him. The space he shared with us was not more than 9 feet by 9 feet, therefore it was not big enough for nine of us to sleep together. The men slept on the top floor with him. The women slept on the main floor with hundreds of rats in the crawl space below them. We all stayed together, we shared our food and sleeping space. Later on when we got to Wichita, Kansas, we met his younger brother, Father Scott Nguyen, who was in the seminary with me. We went to the same church in Wichita. Dung finally made it to Wichita and we reunited and had a big dinner at our home on the east side of Wichita. We were grateful to God and to His goodness to our family.

In this refugee camp, the authorities gave us food twice a week, which was never enough. Later on I learned that some of the money given for the refugees was taken by corrupt officials. My uncle and mother had to go to the priest at church and the Buddhist monks asking for their mercy. They always gave us some rice. I remember that there were days that we went to the shore of the ocean and caught fish for our meals because what was given to us was not enough to survive. One time, the

man who offered us his living space knew some private areas where the authorities lived. He took me with him, and kept an eye on the authorities as they were eating their late supper, as I climbed over the wire fence and climbed on the papaya trees and stole their fruit from the trees.

My family and I stayed on this island for a few months, and then we were transferred to our second refugee camp on the mainland of Malaysia where there was a large soccer field. It was the first time in my life seeing a soccer field and people playing soccer and I enjoyed watching them play. I also got to kick the ball around with some other kids. Since then I wished to be able to play soccer because I never had a chance to play any sports in my younger years. There was also a volleyball court that people set up and played among themselves. I also watched them play and have fun. In this camp, we were fenced and no one could get out or go into the city. Some people who attempted during the night were caught and the police punished them close to death. They were stripped of their clothes and tortured in public.

The living space they gave us was small, about 10 feet by 10 feet. They gave us food once a day but never was the food fully cooked so we had to re-cook our food in our living space. The food we ate was low quality food because they treated us like animals. We had no freedom of speech so we couldn't say anything or complain. There was also a tin shed for us to go to church. This is where I saw Catholic kids sing songs and play games with each other. I did not join the group. It was in this refugee camp that my family had our first ever picture taken together. Someone took a picture of us before we were deported to another refugee camp. I was tiny and my siblings were even smaller. When we escaped, my youngest sister was only 8 months old and I was 12 years old.

We were so happy to get out of the camp where people were treated like criminals. We were transferred from this refugee camp in Malaysia to our third refugee camp in another country, the Philippines. At this time in life, we didn't know where our futures lie or what would happen to us. All the places we had been through were not better than what we had in Vietnam. We would be happier to return to our village and to be with our families and friends that we had grown up with. Our journey had been dangerous and miserable and we had not found our freedom yet. We were placed in a refugee camp close to the city of Manila; again, we were not allowed to go into the city. This refugee camp had some local people and many Asian refugees such as Chinese, Laos, Cambodians, Vietnamese, etc. My family was placed in a small apartment with many Chinese refugees. We had never heard the Chinese language but we began to learn and be friends with everyone because we were in the same situation

as them.

In this camp, they gave us food twice a week and my uncles had to work by distributing food to the refugees to earn extra food for the family. Our back yard had many mango trees but we were not allowed to pick any of the fruit. In this refugee camp, we learned that the Philippines who lived in the area were in worse condition than we were. They were homeless so we had to share our food with them. Near us, there was a flea market where Filipinos sold all kinds of wild animals, such as monkeys and reptiles, like snakes and lizards. People there eat them for food. I didn't know their language so I couldn't understand them or their culture. Many of the Filipinos carried baskets full of cooked chicken eggs that were almost hatched to sell to refugees to eat.

One afternoon after lunch, I was taking a nap upstairs and it was the first time ever in my life I felt an earthquake. Every place was shaken but thankfully no one got hurt and our place was not damaged. Only once a day in the late afternoon for a limited time would the authorities release water out of a big water tank, so I would take our plastic containers and get in a long line so that I could carry home water for drinking, cooking and bathing. It was at this refugee camp, after many months, that we first heard from our relatives in Wichita who sent some money for us. It was the first time we had money in our hands. We were happy for the money but above all we learned that the authorities had connected us with our relatives in the United States, my mom's younger sister and brother, who escaped from Vietnam in 1978, to sponsor us. I had no idea where the United States was or who my relatives were because I had never met them in my life.

I enjoyed being who I was as a teenager, adventurous, even in the refugee camps. One time my aunt was preparing and cooking our lunch, cutting the pork meat full of fat. She was saying to me how fatty the pork meat was, and I said, it's okay, so as to suggest to her not to complain. She looked at me and dared me to eat a piece of raw pork fat. It was about two inches long and one inch wide. She said if I would eat this raw piece of fat, she would give me her 10 pesos (worth less than 10 cents). I took the fat and I ate it in front of her. It did not taste good at all; however, I did what I did because nothing in life could scare or frighten me. I always appreciate what is given.

There was another occasion where a group of teenagers and I went into the jungle, away from the refugee camp. We were exploring and looking for a place to swim. We found a cliff with a spring of clear water. One of the men I knew had a camera. He dared me to swim to the other side of the cliff and climb up to the highest rock and jump into the water. If I got up there, he would take a picture of me as I

jumped into the water. Guess what, don't dare me. I jumped into the water, swam to the other side of the river, climbed to the highest rock, 70 feet high? and from there jumped into the water again. I still have the picture but looking at it now, I shouldn't have done what I did because there were rocks on the bottom of the river that could have killed me instantly. It was not like the river in my village, where the bottom was full of mud. I had another picture with me in blue jeans and my first pair of shoes in my life with my sisters taken in the backyard of our apartment at the refugee camp. I had very long hair then. This picture was taken before we left the camp for the United States. It was here that I saw a Chinese-Vietnamese family of 21 people, 19 children and their parents. They lived perfectly in peace and harmony with each other. And why can't many of us live in peace and harmony, in our family or community?

In front of our apartment was a small church. It was the first time in my life I was involved with other Catholic youth at church. Like many good Catholics, our family always went to daily Mass in the camp and joined in the church activities. We also took classes to learn about our Catholic faith. Our family prayed together every day, not only before meals but also in the evening. We didn't know how long we would be staying in the refugee camp, or what country we were going to next, such as Canada, France, Austria or America, or any country that would take us. However, my family had been hoping to come to America because our uncles and aunts were already living in Kansas. After we learned that we were accepted to come to America, we knew that I would miss my confirmation date again, which was to be held in the refugee camp two weeks after we were to depart. This was the third time I would have been confirmed but it was not meant to be ... God had a different plan for me.

DAD'S ESCAPE: Once my dad learned that we made it to the United States, he attempted three times to escape, hoping to reunite with us someday if he could make it alive. The first time he attempted to escape, somehow he learned that the Communists already knew the owner of the boat was planning to escape so my dad did not get into the boat with them. The second time he tried at night and he was already in the boat in the Pacific Ocean but not too far out. He and his friend saw the Communist ship heading toward his boat so both of them jumped into the ocean and hid in the water. Finally they swam to shore and found their way home. Everyone else was captured and put in jail. The third time my dad attempted, he made it with many others to Thailand. During the escape my dad had to be the captain of the boat and also fix the diesel engine when it broke down. There was an accident while he was fixing the engine on the boat, and he cut his leg. Everyone in his boat made it safely to Thailand.

The reason why my dad was not with us when we escaped was because he made

the sacrifice to stay behind in case something were to happen to us, such as being captured by the Communists and imprisoned, he might be able to do something to get us out. What happened on the day we escaped was that after our escape boat left, he headed back to our home, but before he got close to the house, he realized that the Communists were already in our house, searching for any family members left behind. They also took all our belongings, except for a statue of St. Paul, because every male in my family tree is named after St. Paul, as our baptismal name. My dad had hid all his money in the statue of St. Paul and that was the only thing they didn't take. Although he was frightened, he was so happy that he still had money to take a bus and flee to different places, hiding from the Communists. He couldn't stay in one location for more than a day or two, whether it was at a relatives or a friend's home. However, he had to stay around the area from which we escaped so that he could do something if he found out we were captured by the Communists. After many days, he didn't hear that we were captured, so he returned to our home village and waited to hear some news about us. At this time he had no idea whether we lived or died, or what happened to us. Finally, many months after we escaped, while we were in the refugee camp, we were able to connect with our relatives in the United States, and they informed my dad who was living in our village that we made it safely. Then he began to look for a way to escape to reunite with us.

Once Dad got to the refugee camp he turned in our names and address in the United States and we were able to reunite with each other as a family. We sent him letters, money, and photos of us, so that he would have some idea of how much we had grown over three years. We never thought that it would be possible because we were separated for so many years, and went through so many refugee camps in different countries, but God brought us back together.

PROMISED LAND FULL OF CHALLENGES: Finally, my family and I, except for my dad, flew to America, at the end of April 1986. The U.S. government paid for our flight and we had to pay them back later. It took my family many years to pay off our debt to the government because there were nine of us total. I was surprised to learn that we had to pay for the flights since we were refugees. It is true that there is nothing free in life, even in a free country, even when you are poor. The airplane stopped in Japan for fuel, stopped in San Francisco then on to Wichita, Kansas. We stayed at my aunt's house with her spouse and three children and three other relatives when we first arrived, for a total of 17 people. After a month or so, we got help from the government with food stamps and housing. We moved to a small duplex house on Market Street and 21st Street, where mostly Mexicans were living. The house is still there today, it's

the first house south of 21st Street on Market. It was a two-bedroom home with ten people living in it, the tenth person being my uncle from Dodge City, who was laid off. He also came to live with us because he wanted to live with his relatives as a family instead of by himself.

It was in this house that we learned a lot about America. Not everyone who lives here was rich, like I thought before I got here. Across from our home was a thrift store that was not very well kept and eventually went out of business. We bought most of our clothing and cooking supplies from this thrift store. 25 cents was too high for us, most of the items we bought were 5 cents or 10 cents. We were happy eating chicken legs everyday because we never had that much to eat before. Chicken legs were so cheap, as low as 29 cents per pound, and we received food stamps from the government that were more than we could use because we were so thrifty. We saved as much as we could so that we could have more money and send more money to our relatives in Vietnam who didn't often have chicken legs to eat. We grew our own vegetables and we saved every penny we found on the street or in the mud. We had a TV my uncle bought to watch Chinese movies translated into Vietnamese. My uncle had a two-door Toyota Celica car but it was not big enough for ten people so we either walked to church and school or made many trips transporting everyone.

It was here that we signed up for school and learned reading and writing English. My uncles and aunt were able to attend special language classes in the evening but I didn't because we couldn't afford it. I started out in America attending 8th grade at Horace Mann School for a short time due to my age, almost 14. I don't remember learning anything except avoiding contact with other students so they would not hurt me during or after school. This school was a mixture of black, white, Mexican, Asian and everything else. All I remember was I had a big fat Mexican-American teacher with a full dark beard and the whole day he was trying to keep the student's quiet and behaving. One time during lunch I was outside with some of the students and I learned that four leaf clovers symbolize the Irish. Another time during PE I remember my first swing with a bat at a baseball.

HIGH SCHOOL WAS FULL OF RACIAL TENSION: Then I was sent to North High School for four years where I began by learning the ABC's in my ESL Class [English as a Second Language]. I was taking four hours of intensive English when I first entered high school. Although I was a newcomer and didn't know English at all, I learned it much faster than most students, especially the Hispanic. Because I was motivated to pick up the language, my English teachers really liked me. However, attending school and learning were not easy for me because I did not attend school

much when I was younger, especially when I was selling cigarettes on the street. I had very little schooling before coming to the States. I quit school after the 3rd grade when I was in the village because attending school at that time was not important to me. I was focused on helping my family survive. I always thought school was for those who were wealthy or wanted to act intelligent, and not for me. Another reason was that schooling did not feed my family but was a great cost to my family. Every month in Vietnam, I had to carry a bag of rice to pay my teacher tuition for teaching my sister and me. For these reasons, I was not interested in schooling as a child.

It was in my ESL classes that I learned my Basic English. I learned best when I could associate the words with pictures or objects such as “fan” and there was a fan hanging from the ceiling. I wished I did have a personal teacher that would sit next to me and teach me how to pronounce each word in English correctly. I never had a helper or tutor to help me with the subjects that I had difficulty understanding, until I went to College, but never a tutor to learn English. For these reasons, I learned to pronounce many words incorrectly and I can’t change it now, especially any words that have the “R” sound. I also picked up some Spanish cuss words taught by my Hispanic classmates, and one of the best tricks. Can your whole body go through a piece of paper? Yes, you can, by using your scissors and cutting the paper a certain way so that there will be a big enough hole for your whole body to fit through. Try to figure it out, and show me when you do!

I also took PE every year, lots of math, typing, and study hall. I liked PE when we played team sports but I didn’t like public restrooms and showers. I took typing class because it didn’t require any knowledge of the English language. Amazingly, I got very good at typing. I could type around 60wpm! I had to take math and it was very difficult for me at first because I had only completed 3rd grade in my village, which was only about two hours of school a day, and then I skipped school all those years because I was working in the fields. All I knew was how to add and subtract and basic multiplication and division. I remember my uncle Thuan, who was captain of our escape boat, was up almost every night until three or four in the morning doing his high school homework, even though he was about 22 years old. He and I shared a little room and I was never happy seeing him stay up so late trying to learn the language and the subjects because then I couldn’t sleep. It was something very important to him, but sleeping was more important to me. He had many skills and talents but especially was strong-willed. Due to his age, he couldn’t attend high school very long, only a year, but he persevered and went to college and worked hard at it and became an electrical engineer. He’s now working for NASA. He was truly an inspiration to me because he

wanted to be educated and successful in life. He took advantage of opportunities in America to become financially independent. I have seen many people in America fail to work hard or become educated so that they can be successful in life. Instead they rely on welfare and others to feed them. America is the only place in the world that has all the opportunity for anyone who wants to prosper.

Besides learning the ABC’s and Basic English, the only subject I was able to work on at home was math. When I didn’t know the subject I never asked anyone for help, including my teachers. I never felt that my teachers cared for me. I was completely lost in all subjects because I could not read or write English. However, I always paid attention in class and tried to grasp as much as I could, especially math, and figure it out step-by-step by myself. Amazingly, every example they gave in the math book, I could figure out how they got the answer. I kept doing this and did the best I could with my assignments, and after four years I finished Algebra II and pre-Calculus and other subjects to graduate.

One of the many classes I took was mechanics, learning how to fix cars. The reason I took this class was because it didn’t take a lot of the English language. There were about eight students in the class. I was the only Vietnamese student; there was one white, two black and the rest were Hispanic. The teacher was an American man with a long moustache who loved to drink coffee constantly. Imagine how he looked with the coffee and cream on his moustache. Because I didn’t know the language, I couldn’t follow instructions very well, but I could learn to fix the car by example, by watching the guys doing the work. Often, the guys told me to get the tools for them, such as screwdriver, hammer, etc., so I learned the language while doing this. Sometimes it was difficult to understand what they were asking for because of their accent. I didn’t mind getting the tools for the guys, however it got old when they treated me like a dummy. They did so by petting me on the head, laughing at me and also bullying me. They failed to know what they were doing to me, insulting me by tapping me on my head.

For a while, I let it go but one day I couldn’t handle it anymore. As they were petting my head and laughing among themselves, in the tool room, I told them to stop, instead they laughed and did it some more. I said again, please stop. Of course, they didn’t and after I said it a third time, I swung a humongous hammer about three feet long at them with all my strength. I missed them by an inch, if not someone would have been badly hurt. From that moment on they learned that I was strong and what upset me and they never did it again. At lunchtime some Vietnamese students asked me to point out to them which students did this to me so they could beat them up after

school, but I wouldn't do it. At this school there was a fight almost every day, either during lunchtime or after school, due to the mix of minorities and racism. I was never involved with the fights or any problems. I didn't spend much time with those who liked to cause trouble, instead, I hung around with newcomers who just came from Vietnam and didn't know the language well, and helped them out. Before school, I attended daily Mass at St. Patrick's Church in the early morning. I was the only lonely young person in the back pews of the church. I didn't know any prayers in English yet, not even the Our Father or Hail Mary. I followed Mass as much as possible but I said most of the prayers in Vietnamese, such as The Father, while others were praying in English. No one knew what I was praying except God. I chose to be faithful to Him by going to church like when I was younger. I'm sure we can all make time to attend Holy Mass if the Holy Eucharist is really important to us.

CONFIRMATION: It was during my high school years that for some reason, Bishop Gerber had Confirmation at St. Francis of Assisi Church and so my aunt, who was a year older than me, and I got to receive Confirmation with many other students. However, I felt strange because I didn't know the students, the church, the language or the culture. For some reason, receiving Confirmation in America was not what I thought it would be. It was more like getting it done instead of something that was spiritual and transforming. Maybe because so many things had happened in my past such as moving from my village birth place to a strange town, escaping from the Communists dangerously in the ocean, living in many refugee camps, then traveling to a foreign country encountering so many cultural shocks, such as a new language and food and lifestyle differences. It was a lot of things going on in a quick few years, and plus this was the fourth time I had prepared for or anticipated receiving the sacrament. It was a strange feeling to attend Mass and not be able to participate because of the language barrier.

Learning another language, culture, and lifestyle was a difficult process for me. The only way to better understand and appreciate the new culture was to be open-minded to absorb everything day after day and year after year. The sad thing was that this process was painful because you had to put aside your culture and language in order to adapt yours to a new one in a foreign society and you had to make it your home. I felt that it was my responsibility to learn and to be open-minded in this country. I no longer felt free to be who I was or enjoy my favorite games like when I was a young child. Everything in this country was different and I had to learn to adapt myself to it because I was living in a new land and reality.

I started to become active in my parish at St. Patrick's where we had

Vietnamese Mass on Sunday. The first few years, I was a member of the church youth group, then as I grew older, I became a team leader, and toward the end of high school I became a group leader. This was where God prepared me to be a "fisher of men." It was at this time that I discovered in myself that I could teach kids. I never dreamt of telling an adult what to do. It was not in my comfort zone to work with people, however, I had to do it because others were too afraid to stand in front of the crowd and tell kids what to do. Eventually I was assigned and in charge of the whole group of kids to lead and teach for two hours every Sunday, for thirteen years until I became a priest. Whenever I was home from the seminary I would resume teaching the kids. I had to teach them songs, games and discipline. After every class, I had no voice left in me because my throat was very sore. There were times that I had about 60 kids from the age of 6 to 9 years old all to myself; however, I loved them and their voices were like the voices of the angels.

FIRST RETREAT: It was during my junior and senior years of high school that my parents began telling people that I would be going to the seminary to become a priest. What they said meant nothing to me then; however, I always respected their desire because I believed that they knew what was best for me and they were not afraid to guide me toward God. It was God's will that somehow I attended a retreat given by a Canadian priest who once served as a priest chaplain in Vietnam. He spoke both English and Vietnamese but had an accent. I was one of the youngest among the group of about 40 people. Most of them were in their 30's and fully prepared for the weekend. I was not into the retreat mode but I went along with them and did what people did. We attended Holy Mass and prayed together.

The evening before the retreat was over, we had an adoration and confession hour. I had never been to something like this before. I went to the chapel and prayed like everyone else; however, after I went to confession, I knelt in front of the icon of Jesus where devotional candles were lit. I looked at Jesus as long as I could and then I closed my eyes and prayed from the bottom of my heart to Jesus for the first time in my life. I told Him that I would do whatever He wanted me to do. If He called me to be a priest, He would be the one doing the miracles in me especially with all the years studying in the seminary. I knew in my heart that I did not have the educational background to attend college or the desire to attend classes. After I prayed, I told Jesus that I was going to burn a candle to let Him know that my prayer was sincere. That would be my promise to Jesus that I would go to the seminary and He would have to do the rest for me. I slowly opened my eyes and got ready to light a candle to let Jesus know that I was committed and willing to serve Him. I looked and looked for a candle

to light, but I found none that was not burnt. I was shocked and disappointed and said to myself, what's going on. "Does God want me to be a priest or not? Was this a sign from God?" God did not respond to my questions!

Then I looked to the other side where the icon of Mary was. I said to myself, "well, I can go over there and light a candle, it would be as good." So, I moved and knelt at the feet of Mary's icon and prayed. Before I closed my eyes to pray to Mary, I saw some candles were lit but many were not. I was happy and so I closed my eyes and prayed to Mary asking for her help so that I could do God's will. Once I got done praying, I opened my eyes to light a candle to express my sincerity to God. I looked and looked but again, no candle was available for me to light. I became downcast and depressed with tears in my heart so I closed my eyes and told God, "God, what are you trying to tell me here?" Then I said to God again, "God, I am committed to love you and serve you. Whatever you ask of me, I will do it." Immediately, I felt like I just ate the best fruit in my life—nice, juicy and sweet. It was like I was so hungry and thirsty at the same time and here I ate a nice, soft and juicy pear that quenched my hunger and thirst. I became happy and my whole body was full of joy and happiness because God gave me a sign.

That same evening during our reflection talk, I shared my story with everyone and I remember that some of the adults looked at me intently during my talk and they had tears of joy in their eyes. They were happy for me. That was my first retreat and it was the first time I felt God tested me and blessed me at the same time. I thank God for being patient with me and making me strong in my faith. God answered my prayer in a mysterious way. Once I recognized His work in me, I loved Him more and I was glad to be a Catholic.

SEMINARY: Not too long after the retreat my vocation director told me that I would be attending Conception Seminary, Missouri, for my formation. I had no idea what formation meant or where the seminary was. I had not been outside of Wichita since I had been in the States. I knew that once I got to the seminary I needed to be very close to God through lots of prayer. I did not know that doing well academically was the most important thing in the seminary. I attended all Masses and prayer services, never missed one. I also told myself that I must spend one half to one hour an evening to be with and make friends with American people and at the end of the day if I had any time left, then I would study for my classes. The first three months, I was so involved with everything. I met so many people, made many friends and played in almost all sports that were available, such as ping-pong, volleyball, wallyball, swimming, fishing, soccer, basketball, you name it, if they had it, I was there. I began

to immerse myself into the American culture and seminary life. I loved every moment of it except sitting in classrooms or in some of the dorm rooms of my fellow seminarians, because they smelled and were messy with dirty clothes on the floor. My dad taught me that it was okay to be poor, but even a poor person can still be clean.

For my first semester, my advisor gave me 16 hours of college credits that included psychology, English 101, Latin, etc. I took as many classes as my classmates and although I didn't understand most of what my teachers were talking about in class or when I read my text, I didn't complain. I thought that my duty was to be in class and learn as much as I could, however, at midterm I learned that I was dead wrong. My grades were D's and F's, only one C. That didn't really surprise me. I didn't know doing well in school was very important until one Tuesday evening I received my first and surprising phone call from my vocation director. He told me that he got my grades and they didn't look too good. He asked me to study harder and I promised him that I would. We hung up but the next day he called me again and talked to me about the same thing. He said the seminary did not think that I could improve my grades; therefore, they wanted me to leave the seminary. They looked into my ACT test scores and my best subject was math, and everything else was no good—bad, bad, and very bad. I said to him, please Father, let me try for the rest of the semester and if I don't do well by then, I will be happy to return to Wichita. At that moment he was okay with that and we hung up.

The next day, he called again and all he said to me was that the seminary had talked to him again and they decided that I would be leaving the seminary. I said to him, Father, have you talked to our bishop yet? He said no. I said to him, I will not leave here until my bishop tells me because in my heart, I was to obey my bishop and no one else. By now, my vocation director was not happy with me and so he said to me, ok, let me talk to the bishop. We hung up and not too long after that he called me back and said, "Hien, bishop wants you to go home." At that moment my heart was broken, I was so hurt and so sad. I loved being in the seminary. I got along so well with the other seminarians and priests. My only problem was academic and I was told that when an American student had problems with their grades, they had one year to improve before they had to leave the seminary. Here no one gave me a second chance. I felt life was unfair and people were not fair either, including religious people.

I went to my room and shut my door for an entire week. I didn't want to talk to anyone. However, my spiritual director who lived across from my room wanted me to meet with him everyday. Day after day, he tried and tried to help me but nothing worked. Since I knew that I had to leave the seminary, I had to write a letter to tell my

parents who were living with my siblings in Cleveland, Ohio. I was so embarrassed that I didn't have the courage to call and tell them. It was my first letter to my parents and it was the most difficult one ever.

As the days went by, I became so depressed and sad until one morning, my spiritual director, instead of meeting me in his private residence across from my room, wanted me to see him in his office, located in another building. As soon as I entered the room, I saw a big chalkboard and he had written my name on it "Hien !=failure." I looked at it and I cried. Not out of sadness, but because someone finally believed in me that I truly desired to serve God, and that I had the potential to become a priest. (I don't like to cry. I hardly ever cried, even when my dad spanked me.) He came to me and said, "Hien, you are not a failure. I believe that you have the vocation to the priesthood; however, this place is not the right place for you." He knew that I was being treated unfairly and there was nothing he could do for me, or the seminary could do to help me, at that time. They had no special program such as English as a second language or tutors to help any students with difficulties in their subjects. Later on I was told that because of me the seminary made these programs available for all students, including international students.

What Father said to me made me feel much better. I left his office and went directly to my rector's office and said to him, "Father, I am ready to leave this place." He stood up, placed his hands on my head, he prayed over me and blessed me. I was shocked at what he did for me. He was truly a holy priest. Currently, he is the abbot of this religious order.

I packed up and flew to my parent's house and stayed with them for a while because I had no idea what my future held, whether I would be living in Cleveland for good, or going back to Wichita or going to a seminary. After what happened at this seminary, I never thought I would be called to return to the seminary for the priesthood. So I found a full time job for a short time and worked as a painter, painting old houses for elderly people with low income. Those who worked with me were mostly black and Hispanic teenagers, and they were amazed that I was not afraid of heights. I was like a monkey holding onto something with one hand and scraping or painting with the other. They couldn't do what I did because they didn't have confidence in themselves, and many of them were overweight and lazy, although they kept very busy drinking soda all day long.

During this time, my vocation director in Wichita was looking for a volunteer American family for me to live with and learn English. Out of obedience, I moved back to Wichita, lived with the Dirks family and took one class at Wichita State. I also

took English classes with the St. Joseph Sisters who taught English for international students. By the middle of summer, we got a new vocation director and he told me that bishop wanted me to attend the seminary in Winona, Minnesota. I was surprised that the diocese wanted me back and twice surprised that I was heading to Minnesota. I said to him, are you telling me that state close to Canada? He said, yes. I said to myself, I will be freezing to death. I had grown up in a tropical country and Kansas was cold enough and now Minnesota? I did not question my bishop's decision and so to Minnesota I went.

Of course, I didn't have a car, so one of the new seminarians, Shawn McKnight, who had a 1980 Toyota Celica five-speed hatchback, gave me many rides to and from Minnesota. Shawn loved to talk, but hated to drive, so I had to drive his car. I travelled with him many times during my four years at this seminary, especially for winter break. Regardless of the weather, such as icy roads with no one else crazy enough to be on them, he told me to keep going the speed limit, and I was frightened to death because every time we crossed a bridge, our car fishtailed. God bless his soul for he was truly a good man and a good friend. He helped me a lot. Unfortunately he suffered depression and passed away not too long ago.

Once I got there I was happy to learn that there was a Vietnamese seminarian, Ha Tran. He had the same difficulties as I did and so both of us took many classes to improve our English at the same time we took courses at the college. Ha and I became good friends and we always loved to challenge each other to see who would do better with our grades. Funny to say, we took the same classes every semester and each class we shared, we always ended up with the same grade. If he got an A, for sure I would too, although he sat on the front row and I sat on the last row; however, we did study together. We studied very hard, I spent about four hours every night studying. I told myself that I would not allow more than one C a semester. Because I had to leave the first seminary, due to bad grades, I didn't want that to happen to me again, so I was up late every night, just like my uncle Thuan. Some days I was up until four in the morning because only after midnight would the computers in the computer lab be available for me to type my assignments. There were about four computers for 60 seminarians. It normally took me about five hours to write one page. After four years, I graduated with a major in philosophy and a minor in theology. I had more credits than I needed to graduate because I took at least 16 credits per semester. The first two years were so hard and thankfully I had good friends who helped me and tutored me.

Ha and I were well known in the seminary and among college students because we loved to play volleyball and we were good together. He was a good hitter and I was

a good passer and setter. We won the co-ed championship and we also played together in our college volleyball club. This college has about 1,500 students from all over, operated by the Christian Brothers. The seminary is on campus with the college and every year the seminarians have their annual snow fight with the college students. I joined them and we had lots of fun. Every year we could go skiing or go to the Mall of America for fun. I chose the mall because it was so big and nice and warm. I bought my first stereo at the Macy's in this Mall.

There were about 60 seminarians in the seminary and each student had a house job, and my assignment was dishwasher - washing dishes, pots and pans after dinner. However, after I finished my job, I always had to help those who cut and peeled vegetables for the next day because they talked more than worked and most of them cut their fingers and not the vegetables. After the first semester, our cook, Sister Barbara, fired four students and she had me with one other seminarian cut vegetables for her. I became her favorite because every time I headed to class or returned from class, I always stopped by the kitchen and said hi to her. She loved me so much that she always had me taste her cooking. She knew that I loved her fresh baked rolls.

BECAME AMERICAN: Sister knew that I loved her cooking so on the day that I went to Twin Cities to receive my American citizenship, she cooked a surprise special meal for me, and everyone in the seminary got to share it. It was like a banquet to celebrate not only my citizenship but also me as a person. First, they decorated my bedroom with American flags and banners with these words: "Hien is a philosopher, a theologian, a friend, an American and THE MAN OF GOD." Second, they decorated the dining room and every table was full of American flags and stars and balloons. For the special dinner, Sister cooked authentic American hamburgers, fries and root beer floats, which I had for the first time in my life, and I loved it. Everyone in the seminary, including priests and rector and sister, sang for me and I was shocked.

However, for them to get me in the dining room for the surprise party was not that easy. What happened was that while I was away for my citizenship ceremony in the Twin Cities, every seminarian and priest was told that they would have a special dinner and celebration for my citizenship. It was to be a surprise party for me and Brian's job was to lead me somewhere so that everyone could be downstairs before me so that once I came down everyone would sing and surprise me. Right after evening prayer, every day we were to wait for about three minutes before we could head downstairs to eat in the dining room. My friend, Brian, was a very nice person, very willing to help me in my difficulties with my classes. Before he entered the seminary he was a B1 pilot, and he told me that he had flown over Wichita. He was the one who

drove me two hours to Twin Cities for my citizenship ceremony. He came to me and asked, "Hien, can I borrow your camera." I said to him, for what? He said for his class tomorrow. I became suspicious and feeling something fishy about this so I ran. Brian and three other guys ran after me into the parking lot and towards the college. I ran faster than all of them but finally I gave up so they grasped me and carried me from the parking lot to the dining room.

It was one of the best days of my life because while I was away from my family, God gave me many good-hearted people as my family. It was at this seminary that I learned to love American food, culture and people. However, there were many things that I was told but never believed, such as rice is bad for you. We ate rice three times a day in our village and we were happy campers. Chicken eggs, cabbage and salt are also very bad for you, oh please, give me a break so that I can eat everything you consider bad. Yes, now I'm a little fatter...it must be because I ate all the bad food in the seminary!

I loved my time in Minnesota except for the cold winter. There were long winters from early November until the middle of April, always ice and snow. My coat was given to me by my uncle and it was a used one when he had it. That coat was too big for me. I always wrapped myself well, especially around my head, but still by the time I walked from the seminary to my classroom, my ears and hands were frozen. Yes, Minnesota was as cold as when I first learned about the states in high school. The seminary was located in a valley; therefore, it was colder yet. However, summer and fall are beautiful because Minnesota has 10,000 lakes.

HATE BEING SICK: In my childhood, I've never had chicken pox, but there was one time I had some kind of disease in my scalp, and my mother shaved my head. Since I didn't have chicken pox when I was young, I got shingles when I was a college senior in Winona, Minnesota, during my final exams at the seminary in the middle of winter. I was the ninth student in the history of this college to have shingles and I remember that it was very painful. It began on Saturday around 4 in the morning. I woke up, cleaned myself, and found some pimples on my chest. I didn't know I had a disease, so I thought it was pimples. I cooked myself a cup of Ramen noodles and ate. Then I left the seminary to go to the college to meet with my volleyball coach and my teammates to travel to Madison, Wisconsin, to play in a volleyball tournament for our college. This was our first team trip. As we were going, we stopped to get some gas for our van, which was full of men volleyball players. When we stopped at a gas station, one of the students, nice and tall, looked smart, but when he pumped some gas, somehow he spilled some gas on his jacket, so I guess he wasn't as smart as I thought.

Once he got in the car and we were driving, because of the cold weather, we had the heater on high which made the gas smell very strong in the van. I told the coach that I had a headache and needed to stop, but he said I should be fine. I was feeling nauseated, and finally I rolled down the window and threw up. All the noodles I ate came out, all over the side of the van. Then we stopped, and I bought some carsick medicine. Once we got to Wisconsin, everybody was laughing because of all the food frozen to the side of the van.

My body didn't feel strong the entire time. We played some games, but we didn't win. Once I returned to the college, I realized I couldn't see a school nurse until Monday late afternoon, and when I did, she told me that I had shingles. By this time, it had spread more on my chest. I didn't know what shingles were, so the nurse explained to me that it is a form of chicken pox disease for those who didn't have chicken pox, or had a light case as a child. She couldn't give me a prescription without a doctor, and there was no doctor on campus, and the snow was very deep. She told me she needed to make an appointment for me to see a doctor, but not until tomorrow, or Tuesday night, if he had any spare time. I asked her, will this disease kill me? She said no, but you will suffer greatly. I said to myself, I have suffered so much physical pain in the past, there's nothing I can't overcome. Oh my gosh, I didn't know what I was saying because that night, I suffered so much pain that I couldn't sleep. I had tears in my eyes, and there was nothing I could do about it. I cried out to God to help me but it didn't work, the pain continued.

God allowed me to suffer this much so that I might learn to love and have compassion for the millions of people in the world suffering with all forms of disease and sickness every day. I had to tell the rector of the seminary and he put a note on the board, so that all the seminarians knew they had to stay away from me. That was embarrassing. By Thursday afternoon, I was still looking for transportation to see the doctor in the city, but no one was willing to take me, or allow me to borrow their car. I felt very hurt that they didn't care. The reason was that it was so cold and there was so much snow outside and everybody was studying for their final exams.

Thanks to Father Jerome Spexarth, a seminarian like me from the Diocese of Wichita, who took me to the doctor. After I met with the doctor, he gave me the prescription for my medicine. I asked the doctor at least once, what would it cost me, and he said, the most would be \$1 a pill, and I have to take it for one week. We went to Shopko for my prescription. When I went to the counter to pick up my drugs, the bill was \$175, which was about \$5 a pill, and I did not have money to pay – not enough cash and no credit card. So I didn't buy the pills. The next day, I contacted the doctor

and told him I couldn't afford the pills. He told me to come on Thursday night and he would give me some samples, which was very nice of him. Then after Friday, I went back to Wichita for my Christmas break. So I went for six days without any kind of medicine or pain reliever.

Going six days without any kind of medication, from my shingles I learned that my will is not as strong as my physical pain. I was in so much pain that I couldn't sleep, day or night, and I realized that my will is not that strong. I thought that no physical pain could ever make me cry, even cutting myself. I have never cried for myself or experienced so much physical pain or frustration until this time. From this experience, I learned to appreciate medicine and also the good health that God gave to me. The best way for me to explain the pain and suffering of shingles is like taking hundreds of lit cigarettes and holding them on your skin. It was during these painful days that I prayed the most in my life, and Our Lord's Prayer was the most favorite of my soul.

Since this day, I have come to love all elderly people because many of them suffer from shingles in their old age, and one of them is Father Fabian, my best teacher and priest in my life. He kept all his pain and suffering to himself. I didn't know how much he had gone through until he shared with me after I had shingles, to help me be strong. Father Fabian is a very spiritual and physically strong person. I don't know much about his life, but I heard that before he became a religious Dominican, he was a professional boxer, and he was very good at it. However, it must have been God's will with a mission for Father Fabian to become a religious person, just like God called Saul on the road to Damascus and converted him to become an apostle for Christ. It happened one time during his boxing match that his eyes were severely hurt by the other boxer. Until this day, he can hardly see out of one his eyes. I believe this was a spiritual wake-up for him, and after this he became a priest, and has been one for over 40 years. When I knew him, he was over 70 years old, and he was still teaching in the seminary and every student loved him, not just seminarians, but college students as well. What Father Fabian taught us about life is that you must have faith in God and study hard, to gain greater wisdom and knowledge and always be logical. The wall of his office is full of postcards sent by his students over the years and he can tell a story about each one of them.

I trust and respect Father Fabian more than all the priests that I knew in the seminary. He is truly a humble and spiritual man. And when I most needed guidance, in which even my formation director was unable to help me, Father Fabian directed me. During our senior meal with the priests the week before graduation, I was sitting face-

to-face with Father Fabian, and at this time I had not decided what I was going to do after college graduation. Somehow, I looked at Father Fabian and I asked him for guidance, “Father Fabian, do you think I should continue going to theology school or should I take a break, find a job, and decide later on?” His question to me was, “Hien, do you want to become a priest?” I responded, “Father, I would love to become a priest, if that is what God wants me to do.” He said to me, “You should continue.”

For my college seminary graduation, some of my family came to celebrate with me, such as my parents and Jennifer. I was so happy to have them come because this was the first time they visited me in the seminary. Every year, seminarians had their parents visit twice a year for parents’ weekend, but I had no one come because it was too far for them to drive since they were not familiar with our country’s roads. For four years, I committed to study and discern. Not once did I go out to a movie or for a drink.

With Father Fabian’s recommendation, after my graduation, I went back to Wichita for the summer, and waited for Bishop Gerber to inform me where to go to theology school, whether at Mount St. Mary’s Seminary in Maryland, or elsewhere. During the fall semester, right before I had shingles, I wrote a personal letter to Bishop Gerber, requesting him to send me to Mount St. Mary’s in Emmetsburg for theology school, and not Josephinum, because I had heard that Josephinum in Columbus, Ohio, is academically one of the toughest schools in the nation and has the fewest minorities. I was afraid that I would not be able to perform well academically in this place, and I didn’t want to fail once again like I had at Conception Seminary, Missouri. I gave Bishop Gerber all my reasons and fears, hoping that he would grant my wish. I even told him that, for my personal and cultural survival, I would like to attend Mount St. Mary’s so I would be closer to my aunt and her family, who live in New Jersey.

It was a snowy winter day during my mid-term exams in the fall, and the seminary has a tradition of snowball fights with the college students. After my snowball fight, full of fun, I went to pick up my mail, and as I was walking back to the seminary, I opened Bishop Gerber’s letter responding to my request. All he said was, “I will take your request into consideration when I make my decision.” This was not what I was hoping for, and so I knew that I had to obey and had to attend whatever school the Bishop wanted me to. During the summer months home from the seminary, I worked at various jobs at St. Joseph and St. Francis hospitals in Wichita. One summer, I was a groundskeeper for the hospitals, another summer I was working in the kitchen doing dishes and serving food.

On July 12th, I had to work on my birthday and I was not happy at all because I

had requested to be off on that day only, but the manager didn’t care. So I had to work as an unhappy camper, however, God sent me an angel, an old, short and sweet Sister of the Sorrowful Mother, pushing a cart with a humongous cake. She had everyone in the kitchen area, over 20 people, come and sing happy birthday to me. She made that day special because God sent her to me. It was on that day that I learned that others are more important than myself. Even on my birthday, hundreds of hospitalized people had to be fed, and we all have to make sacrifices for the good of others. This sister loved me much more after I was ordained, and I served as a priest chaplain and celebrated Holy Mass with her and God’s people in the hospital. She worked with my mother at the hospital, and she liked her so much that every year on my mother’s birthday, she sent her a card from her retirement convent in Oklahoma. Although my mother cannot read English, she always makes sure that I tell Sister thank you and asks me to say a Mass for Sister.

Another summer I worked as a painter at the diocesan chancery. At first, my vocation director thought he would need three seminarians to paint the whole inside of the building, but he couldn’t get anybody else so I had to do it all by myself. I told myself I would have to scrape, patch, sand and paint two offices per week. And I did it. My vocation director was quite amazed, just like the staff at the chancery. I made the chancery look much nicer because I’m a good painter. Because I did a good job at the chancery, the next summer I painted the Cathedral rectory and many other rooms on the Cathedral complex. Every day I worked at the Cathedral for these two summers, I got to eat my lunch at the Cathedral with the priests, such as Father Blackledge, and Father Gilmore (who later became the bishop of the Dodge City Diocese. I went to his bishop ordination and he looked at me and said, Hien, are you joining me in Dodge City? I said, you would have to talk to my boss, Bishop Gerber. He smiled.) Bishop Gerber also had lunch with us as often as he was available. Connie the cook there was fabulous and we had a great time together. She knew that I could eat and eat a lot. It was during this summer that Fr. Mike Maybrier generously gave me his spare car, which was my first vehicle. It was a hot Chrysler LeBaron convertible, especially when it was hot outside.

In the middle of July, as I was in the basement of my parent’s house, the vocations director, Father Matt McGinnis, called me, and told me that Bishop Gerber wanted me to attend the Josephinum seminary. I said yes, but I was not happy because my heart was full of fear. In the middle of August, I left for the Josephinum in Columbus, Ohio, and when I got there, I was amazed at the campus complex. I found that what I had thought before was true. For many years in the past, until my arrival,

there had been very few Asian seminarians. But thank God when I got there, it was the first year that there were five Vietnamese, including me. I was the youngest and the only one who was in theology Masters studies, and the other ones were in philosophy studies, which means that these Vietnamese were in 1st or 2nd year of college, fulfilling their philosophy core studies, before they can attend graduate school, or masters of theology. I was on the 2nd floor, room 210, by myself, and my class was the biggest. In my class two were from Burma, one from Uganda, one from Mexico, and the rest were American.

Surprisingly, I adapted to the seminary life very well, and loved my life there like usual. I was like a leader among the Asian students; they loved to come to my room, normally on Friday or Saturday evenings. We would cook Vietnamese food in my room and we would speak our language together. The international students treated me like their brother, and they always felt free to come into my room day or night to use my cooking supplies or even eat my own food. The door of my dorm room was never locked, day or night, and it was amazing that what little I had helped our international students a lot, because they could use what I had to cook something similar to their cultural food and enjoy it. Sometimes I had nothing but rice and soy sauce, and the Ugandan guys enjoyed eating it.

Depending on the season, the seminarians played different sports. Normally in the fall, we would play soccer in the afternoon. When it was cold outside, we would play basketball or volleyball in the gym. In the spring, we would return to playing soccer. We kept our exercise schedule on a regular basis.

Every year, there is a basketball tournament for the seminarians in the Midwest states. This means that every seminary forms a team and travels to the other seminaries, such as the Josephinum, for a weekend-long tournament. The purpose was to build camaraderie and also support each other in our vocation. Fortunately, while I was there, the tournament was held in my seminary so I was able to join the team. However, I was not good at it because I had never been taught the rules of basketball, or how to shoot the basketball properly. I play volleyball much better than basketball. Before the tournament started, many seminarians in our seminary played basketball together and we even held a tournament among ourselves. Although I was not good at basketball, I was not afraid to learn and I enjoyed playing sports with my friends. About six teams were formed and I was on one of the teams. Fortunately, I had Father John Jirak, who at that time was a seminarian in my seminary, on my team because he was the best basketball player in the seminary because he is very quick and strong. He used to play years of basketball and was a running back in high school football.

Unfortunately, he had the worst basketball player in the college on his team, that was me. For all the games before the championship, because Father John was so good, we won every game and I didn't get to play much at all. They won because I didn't play. On the championship game, we were losing, because Father John was covered by two or three other players, and the game was about over. He could not move close to the basket or make many shots. At that moment I was in the game for a few minutes and I got so tired because I was not used to running back and forth so much. So I said, "timeout, I need a drink." So everyone stopped and we went to get a drink. At that moment, Father John came and whispered in my ear, "Hien, we are losing." I said to him, "John, don't worry, you keep doing what you've been doing, and when you go inside to the basket, you pass it out to me." We continued playing and he did exactly what I said, and he passed the ball to me three or four times in a row, and I made every shot at three points, and we won the game. From that moment on, everybody was shocked and called me "uni-bomber." The funny thing was, I was not shooting the ball, I was treating the basketball like a volleyball and setting it. I believe in luck, and I got plenty of it that day. Luck is greater than skill - have you ever seen anyone win the lottery with skill?

I also got in contact with the local Vietnamese in Columbus, and I would bring them to the seminary, and give them fresh pears picked from the trees in the seminary. For many years, no one had taken advantage of the fruit trees, until I got there, and I picked them for the students in the seminary to eat, and also gave them away, because I couldn't see the fruit going to waste.

Academically, it was a hard school. We had quarters instead of semesters, and each quarter we would have to read 6,000 to 7,000 pages in ten weeks. No one had ever had to read 600 to 700 pages a week, and in every class we had a paper to write, a mid-term test, and a final exam. Fortunately, I had no problem keeping up with my academic schedule, even though it was not in my native language, and I was able to take more classes than my school required. I took about 18 credits per quarter, so that I could finish in 3½ years, and spent part of my last quarter taking a 30-day silent Ignatius retreat in Lafayette, Louisiana, in a religious Jesuit retreat center. About 14 of my classmates went with me, and we had a good time. However, my first ten days of silence were so difficult, I felt so weird and different; I couldn't talk to anybody, but did a lot of walking and sleeping every day. Walking, exercise, and sleep every day. We could only speak when we were saying the responses during Mass. It was in Louisiana that I first had problems with allergies from the pollen and so I suffered from sinus drainage.

When I came back from this retreat, my classmates and I had a confession and Mass practicum, which meant that I had to pretend to be a confessor, hearing my classmates confess their made-up sins, and how would I counsel them, so that my teachers and classmates could critique me. I had my homiletic practicum the year before, in which I had to write my homilies, and pretend-preach them, and my classmates critiqued me. By this time I was an ordained deacon, and I was able to preach in a parish, and also we had to preach in the seminary to our faculty and classmates. Most of my classmates were frightened when it was their turn to preach in the seminary. They were not comfortable preaching to their teacher and friends. I had no problem preaching because I always preached from my heart, and I tried to preach as simple as I could and as short as I could. I told myself that whatever I do, make sure that I don't put people to sleep during my homily. I think I have done pretty well for the most part, except some parishioners, I am talking about some farmers, as soon as they sit down, they always listen with their eyes closed. They would be meditating during the homily whether the bishop gave it or I gave it. I tell myself that Jesus can change water into wine, but he can't keep people from sleeping in church or chewing gum like a cow in church. I am sure God loves them too, because they have good intentions.

HIEN DO: I was given the nickname "Hien Do" in the seminary because I volunteered to give haircuts to our seminarians and priests. At first everyone was very skeptical about me cutting their hair. First, no one had ever taught me how to cut hair and second, who knows what I might do to their head. I was very grateful that my friends and priests not only loved me but also trusted me. Not just one person came for a haircut but so many that I had to have a sign-up sheet. They must sign up and show up on time. It took me only about 15 minutes per person. I gave so many haircuts that my first electric clippers burnt out. When that happened one of the seminarians gave me \$100 and said to me, go buy a new one. I said, I can't, I don't have a car. Now for nine years of my seminary life I did not have a car nor would I know where to buy good clippers—professional ones. We looked it up in the phone book and he took me to downtown Columbus store and I bought an \$89 Oster professional clipper and a nice haircutting cape, both of which I still have and use at my parent's house. My sister Jennifer uses them every few weeks on her husband, my dad and my brother. About eight years ago, I went to the local store and bought the same clippers as a gift for a friend who gave me free hair cuts, it cost around \$140. In my four years of giving free haircuts, I calculated that I must have gave about 1,000 haircuts. I saved my friends and priests lots of money. I never took any money from any of them because I was

happy to do good for someone.

There was one time, an older Vietnamese friend, Kim, who was working as a secretary for the Columbus diocese, told me that her older sister was a nun in Vietnam. She worked in the orphanage, feeding the children and providing medical needs for them. Kim asked me whether I could do something to help the poor children. She gave me some pictures of the children from the orphanage and I posted it in our pub, where seminarians gathered in the evening for a drink, to eat popcorn or watch TV. After one weekend, my tin can was full of money. About \$1,500 was given by our seminarians to a good cause. This tells me that they appreciated what I did for them and also that they trusted me, not only with their heads but also with their money.

I must confess that I could not give a good haircut to a person with curly hair. The students from Uganda had hair that was curly and short like a carpet. However, they were my most favorite friends. They were very intelligent, hard working, good at soccer and, of course, they loved rice like I do. Many of them were my neighbors so they came to my room all the time and ate my rice with me. We didn't have much, just rice and soy sauce, but we had good friendship. I learned that they ate bananas (plantains) like Americans eat potatoes and Asians eat rice, however, Americans love Jell-o, and Ugandan men are not allowed to eat Jell-o in their country. It's because they believe that you become what you eat. Jell-o is soft in nature and looks weak and flexible, and Ugandan men must be manly, strong and courageous, to protect their family and country.

GOD'S REVELATION: Since the day I attended my first retreat at the Spiritual Life Center in Wichita, the summer of 1991, I have not stopped praying for God's revelation to me and my life, "God, if you want me to be a priest, please let me know. I desire to do your will." I prayed and prayed everyday, some days I prayed much more than others. The best prayer that I loved to pray was "the Lord's prayer." I learned that the more I pray this prayer, the more I know the heart of Jesus. No one, including my formation director, spiritual director and my most admired priest, Father Fabian, had been able to tell me that God wants me to be a priest, until one Sunday late afternoon, fall of 1998.

It was Thanksgiving weekend in Louisville, Kentucky. I had just finished singing and playing a game with the Vietnamese youth at the parish hall. My friend and I left town in his small Ford Fiesta heading back to the seminary. Both of us were in a good mood and talking to each other as he drove his car. I remember looking at the road as Paul was driving, then I turned to the right and I saw the beautiful autumn season full of golden leaves along the river. It was the first time that I really saw God

in His creation through the beauty of nature. Suddenly I turned to Paul and said to him, “Paul, did you hear that?” He said, what? I responded, “God just told me that he wants me to be a priest.” He looked at me and said, wow, and he was full of smiles. My whole body was full of joy and happiness that was unexplainable because internally God had answered my many years of prayer and discernment in my mind... I just knew. Suddenly. Without a doubt. Once I got back to the seminary, I told my spiritual director and my formation director about God’s calling for me and they were very happy for me. I felt so blessed.

Later that school year, I was ordained a deacon, the final step before priesthood. Since that miracle day, I have not stopped sharing with people about God’s love and revelation to me about the priesthood. I continued to pray and thank God for His revelation to me until one day, about a year later, I said to God, “God, you have told me that you wanted me to be a priest. In my mind, I have known it and I have no doubt. However, please let me know one more time that you want me to be a priest, but this time, let me feel it with my whole body.” Surely, a few months before my priesthood ordination, I was sitting on my chair at my study table, and I felt God’s blessing on me. I was so happy because God answered my prayer. I was so grateful to God and I knew that Jesus’ promise to us is always fulfilled. “Ask and you shall receive, knock and the door will be opened to you.” May none of us give up faith and hope in God, but be persistent and persevere in prayer.

I am convinced in the power of prayer and that God always answers our prayers. I have heard from so many people that God does not answer their prayers. I believe that they have failed to recognize God’s answer to their prayers. When we pray to God, all we have to do is trust in Him that He has heard it, and let it be done according to His way and His time and not our way or our time. Jesus said, when we ask for a fish, God would never give you a snake. This means that whatever we pray for, God will give it to us twice better than what we asked for.

From an article I read on the suffering of Jesus, I learned that He suffered so much agony and pain that His sweat became blood. I was in my room, and I prayed to Jesus, asking Him to allow me to see how much He really suffered. Jesus knew that I didn’t know what I was asking, so as soon as I said it, all I remember was shaking my head because Jesus somehow conveyed to me how painful it was, that if I were to experience it, I would lose my mind. Thankfully my prayer was not answered. Therefore, when I saw the movie “The Passion of Christ” not long after this, I understood that the suffering in the movie was nothing compared to what Jesus had to suffer. I don’t often go to movies, but I went to this one only to see how much people

understood that Jesus had to suffer before He died, but the movie did not portray a fraction of what He suffered. The suffering that Jesus had to suffer as a man was not only the physical, it was also the spiritual, due to the sinfulness of all humanity for all ages, that He took upon Himself. In other words, He suffered greatly because of *our* sins, and lack of faith and love for God.

ORDINATION TO THE PRIESTHOOD: By the grace of God and the many prayers of my family, relatives, friends and good-hearted people throughout the world—praying for the increase of men and women to the priesthood and religious life—I was able to finish my studies and be ordained a priest. It took me 8½ years in the seminary and one semester at Wichita State to become a priest. It was the long-time dream come true. I knew in my heart that if one day I became a priest, it must be God’s will for I knew that I was unworthy and had no characteristics to be a priest; besides, I was very uneducated in my younger years. I skipped any schooling from 4th grade until learning the ABC’s in high school. Honestly, studying and learning from textbooks has never been my interest, I would rather go fishing than read a good book. I would rather be alone and working outside than stand in front of the public or be with them. I would be happy to have a pair of sandals and wear them with my shorts than to dress up with dress shoes and a suit—way too uncomfortable. However, God made me a priest on Saturday, May 27, 2000, to share with me the ministry of His beloved Son Jesus Christ.

At the ordination, there were many relatives and friends with all of my family. Many of them came from other cities and states, such as California, Denver, New Orleans, Missouri, Houston and even Canada, that I had never met in my life. Of course, friends from the seminaries were there as well. It was Bishop Eugene Gerber who ordained me before he retired along with Fathers Eric Weldon, Joseph Eckberg, and Joseph Tatro at the Immaculate Conception Cathedral in Wichita, Kansas. We were blessed to be the last group of men that this great Bishop ordained. After I made my promise to my bishop, I was prostrated on the floor, giving my whole self to Jesus in His ministry. I was commissioned to go forward and to preach the good news by preaching what I believed, and practicing what I preached. At the end of the ordination Mass, it was so shocking to me that the one who just ordained me, Bishop Gerber, came to me, knelt in front of me and asked for my priest’s blessing, likewise Bishop Olmsted. I was frozen up but I believed in my heart that God would go beyond me and my weakness to bless His people. After Mass, many people came and received my first blessings. More blessings were given at the reception in the gym. Everyone was so happy for the four newly ordained priests. Since that day, at the age of 27, I have never

been the same: God works through me in my humanity.

The next day, I had my first Holy Mass, Thanksgiving Mass, at St. Anthony's in Wichita. It was in my native language and many many of my priest friends came to celebrate with me. The church was packed and I was so nervous because it was my first time. Celebrating it in Vietnamese was even harder because my Vietnamese was not that great and also I was not trained to celebrate Mass in Vietnamese. At the end of Mass, I thanked everyone for coming and praying for me all these years. I asked them to continue praying for me and also to join my family in the gym for our reception. At least 600 adults and over 100 children attended my first Mass and reception. The gym and classrooms were packed. It was not only my happy day, it was also for my parents and siblings because they got to prepare and cook the good food for everyone. Children performed skits for the crowd.

My second Thanksgiving Mass and reception was at St. Mary's in Newton, Kansas, where I served as deacon for a summer. Thank you to the people of St. Mary's who loved me and showed me a good time, especially the children. There was one summer week during my ministry at the parish in which the children and I were competing with each other after lunch to see who could do the most jumping jacks in a row. 4th, 5th, and 6th graders loved to challenge the young deacon; I told myself that I would beat any record that they can set. The first day, everyone tried and there was one girl who jumped more than 40, while I was the last one who jumped and I beat her by a few. I surprised them. The next day, some jumped more than 70, and when it was my turn, I beat them. They were really surprised that I had been able to beat them all so far including a girl who jumped over 130 jumps. On the last day, they had the best of the best show up and jump over 230 jumps; of course I beat her by jumping 245. They gave up and canonized me as their jump rope champion. They didn't know that when I was young in Vietnam, I used to jump rope, not that we had ropes but we used a banana trunk, sliced thin and made a rope out of to jump over. Second, I used to walk, swim or run in the water for hours every day. I love my childhood and I love children too. They are precious and sacred and FUN.

My third thanksgiving Mass was at the seminary in Columbus, Ohio, where I had my seminary formation. Many faculty and friends came and celebrated with me. They told me that I was the first priest to come back to thank God in the seminary that they knew of all these years. I knew in my heart that it was my responsibility to return to the seminary to thank God and the people who formed me and helped me. After some days in Ohio I went to Louisville, Kentucky, for a priest friend's ordination, then I returned home to Wichita on Sunday evening.

My plan was to attend Holy Mass at Newman Center at Wichita State at 7 p.m. It was about 5 minutes before Mass time as I was coming toward the church, when one of our seminarians, now Father Brian Nelson, saw me and ran to me saying out loud "here is a priest." I had no idea what was going on, as he said, "you are a priest, say Mass." At that instant I was very shocked, because I was coming to church as one of the people going to church without thinking that "I am a priest." I stopped and said to myself, yeah, I am a priest. By now Brian was rushing me into the church and the sacristy. He said, the pastor is out of town, another priest was to be here to celebrate Mass but he is not here.

Once we got into the sacristy, he looked at me like something bad just happened. Then he said, here, this will work, and he gave me the shortest alb he could find and it was still too long for me. On a good day, with my shoes on, I was 5'4" while most priests are more like 6'4". Once I put on the long alb and vestment, I had no idea what was going to happen next. I looked at the altar servers and they were all twice bigger and taller than I. They were college students. I looked at the church and I was more confused because there are three sections, each section was full of people - who are all these people? (it was the last Mass in town, so people come from all over, besides the students and people of Newman parish.) I began to panic. At the same time, Brian was trying to tell me what to do. I took a leap of faith and said to myself, let the Holy Spirit take over me. Finally I walked out and started saying Mass, half panicked and half happy—to have the honor to celebrate Mass, the honor that no one in this church has. Said all my prayers, read the gospel and preached my homily beautifully like I had done it a million times, but the truth was I had no preparation at all before Mass. It was one of my most holy and precious Masses that I will not forget because I allowed the Holy Spirit to take over me so that I could be Christ to the people at church.

Many people thanked me after Mass and also asked if I could hear their confession, which I did, spending a long time after Mass. Once everyone was gone, the seminarian Brian was so happy and I was so happy as well. I felt good because he and I worked together to serve God. Brian then handed me an envelope with money in it, he said, this is for you for saying Mass. I looked at Brian and the envelope, and I said to myself, wow, it's not that bad being a priest at all, I get paid. Thank you Jesus for saying "the laborer deserves his payment." Once I got home, I had to start packing to depart for Vietnam the next day.

My last thanksgiving Mass was held in the village in which I was born and raised. Now, it was my family and I who left my motherland for freedom and opportunities. We risked our lives during our escape due to the Communists and also

the wicked weather in the sea, but returning to where we came from was life-risking as well, although it was 15 years later. My family and I decided that although we were blessed with everything in this country, such as a better life, good education, nice home and vehicles, we needed to return home to visit and be with our loved ones once again and celebrate our faith with them. There were eight in my family plus my sister Jennifer's fiancé came with us. The cost for air tickets and money spent to fly overseas was quite a lot, besides the money we must give to our relatives to support them. There was a fear in me that my family and I might not get to return to the United States. We hoped and trusted in God to take us to Vietnam and then bring us back safely to the U.S. Finally, we departed and flew to Los Angeles, to Tokyo and to Saigon, Vietnam. As we were about to land, I got to view the farms, houses and buildings in bad shape, and my heart was moved with pity and sadness for the people of Vietnam. I was hoping that my airplane would land in one piece because the airport was so small, very old and full of cracks in the runway.

Once we landed we went through customs with some bribe in order to have our luggage pass through customs. We finally got to see some of our relatives who came to pick us up. They recognized my dad and mother and from that moment on, we began to reconnect again. Everyone, especially my younger siblings, began to learn about their country. Most of them had no memory of Vietnam because they were very young when we escaped. My youngest sister was only eight months old and my brother was born in Wichita, Kansas. We stayed in Saigon a for few days with our relatives, then they rented a van and took us close to the village where I was raised, then we hired a boat to take us into the village. When my dad and his siblings saw each other, they ran and hugged each other like the father hugged and kissed his prodigal son in the Bible - "my son was dead, now he is alive." They said that since the day we escaped, they have never stopped thinking of us, and thinking that for sure they would never see us again. When I saw my dad and his sister hugging each other and jumping and smiling and crying out of happiness, I was so happy to be with them. God made it so.

The only person that they recognized in my family was my dad and my mother. My sisters and I were very young when we left the village; therefore, they didn't know who the priest was. There was my younger brother who was born in Wichita, Kansas, and my sister's fiancée who came with us, he was taller than I and looked whiter than I, so my uncles and aunts thought that he was the newly ordained priest. My family and I got a big kick out of it and we laughed hard. After we gave them money to buy food, they fed us well, more than we could eat. One U.S. dollar was worth about 16,000 Vietnamese dollars; therefore, a U.S. dollar goes a long way in Vietnam. I ate so much

every day, especially many fruits that we don't have here in the United States. I visited all my relatives in many villages and towns. Of course we gave each family some gifts that we brought from the U.S.A. and money to help them out.

One of the most meaningful experiences for me was celebrating holy Mass at my uncle's house for my cousin, Nghia, who we believed to be dead. He was born in 1978 and not too long after we escaped and made it to the United States, his parents sent him with their neighbors to escape. At this time he was about eight years old. They were hoping that if he made it to the United States, it would be better for him. First, he would not be deployed into the communist camps and possibly killed in battle. Secondly, he for sure would have a better future and maybe he might financially help his family that was left behind once he had a job. However, they were surprised that their plans did not work out for their first-born child.

He and all the people in his boat were captured by the pirates and were taken into their ships and until this day we don't know whether he is alive or dead. We believe that he was like everyone else, over 100 of them were killed one by one after the pirates were done using them. This story was told by the only survivor in this boat, she was my neighbor. (I used to play around her home.) During the escape with her husband, she was pregnant with her first child. Before the pirates attacked, she gave birth to her boy and so she was bloody and half dead; therefore, the pirates thought that she was dead and didn't capture her. After they took everyone into their ship, they left her and her baby in the boat. A few days later, the US Coast Guard found them and saved both of them and brought them to the refugee camp. Finally they came to the United States and told the story of everyone in her boat, including my cousin. On my ordination to the priesthood, she came to Wichita for my special day. Every time I was in Los Angeles, I stopped by to see her.

My young cousin who tried to escape has been long gone, over twenty-five years. For this reason I knew that it was very difficult for my uncle and his wife. When she saw my family make it back to the village, she cried because she was thinking of her son, hoping that she might get to see him again one day. My heart was full of love and compassion and pain at the same time because there was joy that I survived but sadness that my cousin did not make it. He and I knew each other well because we used to play together. He was truly a strong and hard working boy and was very helpful to his family like I was to my family. Both he and I did what we could to feed and help our families. For this reason, every time I return to Vietnam to visit my relatives, I always spend many days with this cousin's family, he has four younger sisters and a younger brother. I always try to be a big brother to them since they lost

their brother. His oldest sister will profess her final vows as a nun this summer.

That first Sunday, I had my final thanksgiving Mass at the church in my village, where I was baptized and received Holy Communion, with more than 30 guest priests attending and over a thousand people. We killed one big water buffalo and two big pigs to feed everyone. No one in my village could believe that I became a priest because I was too ornery when I was young, I was uneducated and my family was much poorer than most of theirs. In my heart, I always believed that all things are possible with the help of God. I celebrated my 27th birthday along with my cousin's birthday, in the village with many relatives before we departed for the states. This cousin of mine had a great time because it was the first time he had a big birthday celebration [we just don't celebrate birthdays in Vietnam, plus they can't afford it]. We sang many karaoke songs, laughed a lot and of course ate a lot.

Thank God for the beautiful and meaningful trip home. My family and I had a great time with our loved ones, with many good memories. We still talk about it to this day and hope that one day we can all do it again, but now I have many nieces and nephews so it will be expensive for all of us to go. God was good to us. Since then I have been back every few years to visit my loved ones, to be with them and stay connected with them. Only I can come to them, they can't come to me because they don't have the freedom and the means to do so. Sometimes we forget how blessed we are to live in this beautiful and free country, and we fail to love, appreciate and enjoy each other.

ASSOCIATE PASTOR: While I was in Vietnam with my family until the middle of July, my bishop had already decided where I would be serving as an associate pastor. I didn't know that he had decided this until I got home and heard from one of my friends that I was assigned to the Church of the Magdalene parish in Wichita on East Kellogg and Woodlawn. Within a few hours of landing, I called the parish office and talked to the pastor, Father Ken Van Haverbeke, who I couldn't recall if I had met before. I asked him, am I supposed to come to your parish? He said, yes. Then I asked, when? He responded, ASAP. It was a Thursday afternoon. I said, when are you thinking? He said, how about tomorrow. I said ookkay...when do you want me to move in? He said, by this weekend, I will introduce you to the whole parish at all five weekend Masses. I was shocked at the moment because I was tired, had jetlag and didn't even know where the church was located. Once I met with him and realized that he was the only priest for more than 1,300 families with a school, and with five Sunday Masses, I had compassion and love, and was more willing to help him out. God knew what was best for me, because once I moved in to the parish, I met so many

people, both parishioners and staff, and I loved my ministry as a priest at this parish.

One of my roles as an associate was to visit the school children in their classrooms. I always looked forward to being with them, class by class, for about 45 minutes at a time. I talked to all of them about a religious vocation and also about responsibilities that they have at school and also at home. I wanted every child to be helpful and of service to God and neighbor. I talked about it so much that one day I was surprised to see in one of the classrooms a big banner, that said "responsibility—talk to Father Hien." I loved the children as much as they loved me. We had lunch together, and I played with them at lunch break and also after school, especially teaching them and playing volleyball with them. I didn't mention I played in the snow with them, right? Yes, we did, snow, lots of snow fights. Above all, I loved to celebrate holy Mass with them, imagine about 400 children attending holy Mass, reverently and fully participating during Mass. You can really hear them and especially their beautiful voices. They are like angels singing to God. After Mass, they all had to give me a high five in the back of church. I kept Jesus' teaching in my heart, "let the children come to me, and whoever welcomes them welcomes me." They are precious to Jesus, so they are precious to me.

Another part of my ministry as a priest was to visit the elderly at their homes or nursing homes. This is where I learned a lot about being patient and at the same time being grateful to God for being able to walk and go where I like or to drive. When one gets very old, one loses everything that one used to be able to do. I was grateful to God for those I served because I came to love them as Jesus loved them. I was told that one of the people I visited at the end of her life gave a few million dollars to the parish. People are very generous to us when we are generous with them with our time and our love. Every parish exists and continues because of generous parishioners who give of their time, talent and treasure to God.

I also formed a team of adult volleyball players and we played every Sunday night at the gym. We always had at least four teams playing at a time; some players were not even Catholic. After about a year of my ministry at the parish, the city of Wichita bought our church and school grounds for the expansion of Kellogg Avenue. I watched the old church being taken down piece by piece. We then purchased 30 acres of land at the current location of the Church and built a new church and school with a new rectory. Before everything was built, I was there with Bishop Gerber for the blessing of the ground and watched that church being built from the ground up. I served a total of three years as an associate at the Church of the Magdalene and I loved every minute of it, except when my pastor made me bless the animals on the feast of St.

Francis for the parishioners, and I couldn't eat them after I blessed them. That was a shame, they don't know how delicious those pets can be...ha..ha..ha...☺

I also was very involved with the Knights and went with them to Texhoma Lake to go fishing. That was my first time fishing on a boat trip, and I caught so many big fish. We called the old Magdalene church the "hamburger" church. When we moved to the new church, I called the new church "the big Mac church." Everyone at Magdalene was so nice and kind to me. I was very well loved and I loved them so much. All I want as a priest is to be with people and celebrate the sacraments with them. I have never wanted to be a pastor because I don't like meetings and I don't like to make decisions, for I am fully aware that no decision can satisfy every parishioner. I would do anything to avoid being a pastor. So my next ministry.....

PRIEST CHAPLAIN: My second assignment was at St. Joseph's Hospital in Wichita. I had always wanted to be a priest chaplain because I really want to spend my time with those who are sick and near death. When I got to the hospital and to my rectory, I learned that the house had mold in it. Immediately I moved to All Saint's Parish and lived there with Father Birket while working at that hospital while my rectory was being treated for mold. I had a good time with Father Birket. We ate together and we talked a lot when we could. After a month, I was able to move back to the hospital rectory. Not too long after, I found out that the priest at St. Francis Hospital was moving out of state, so I was appointed to both hospitals at the same time. Due to a greater demand for a priest at St. Francis Hospital, I had to move onsite. There was no rectory for a priest so I had to live on the 4th floor where the daycare center was.

Not long after that I asked the sisters to fix up the empty house near the hospital so that I could move into it. The sisters used to live in this house but it had been empty for about four years by then. After it was cleaned up, I moved into it and all the priest chaplains since then have been living in it. While I was there, Father Charlie Seiwert also moved in and lived with me as a friend. We talked to each other everyday and he always challenged me to exercise on the treadmill or elliptical. I said, "I don't waste my time running like a mad man on a machine." He said, "Hien, you better exercise, otherwise you will be a fat pastor one day." I laughed at him and said, "I would love to be a fat pastor." In my heart, being fat is not a bad thing because it means that you are well fed. I always wanted to be well fed and sleep well because I didn't have that when I was young. And here, I've seen many people unhappy with the gift of life that God has given them. Whether we are skinny or fat, short or tall, we are precious to God.

It was a beautiful Friday afternoon, the day of the funeral of Pope John Paul II.

After I had finished my visits in the hospital, had a nice lunch, took a nice nap and a shower, at 3 p.m. I left my rectory and headed to my uncle's house to help my cousin fill out papers for her jobs, because she recently came to America. I had driven for about three blocks and was following two other cars going through a green light. Suddenly, I heard a big bang on my pickup, I immediately knew that someone just ran into me. I told myself not to panic, although both of my arms were numb. I started looking around, and saw that all the speakers in my car had flown off due to the high impact, and a to-go box of food was thrown everywhere. The engine died and the windshield broke. Once I had feeling in my arms again, I tried to open the door but I couldn't because the other car hit right at my driver's door. I crawled over to the other side and got out of my pickup. I immediately went over to see the other car and driver, to make sure that she was ok and if she needed the last rites, I could give it to her. She was bleeding on her head because she hit the windshield. She said she was ok and the ambulance came and took her to the hospital, which was right in front of us. Other drivers came to me and said that they saw her run the red light and t-bone my car. Three of my four tires went flat and my truck landed about 40 feet away from where the accident happened. I was lucky that she had a small car and the front of her car hit right at the beams of my truck and underneath my seat, otherwise I would have been killed. God saved me again.

That was my first truck that I bought and it was totaled by the insurance company. That truck saved my life, so I wanted to buy another truck just like it. I was looking and looking for about a month but could not find one because they are so expensive. By this time, I needed a break so I flew to Columbus, Ohio, to see some friends and went to a car action hoping to buy another used Tacoma pickup. I finally did find one, it was a five speed. I had it tuned up and bought new tires for it, and drove it home, about 850 miles away. I wanted to be home in time for the priesthood ordination, which would be the last weekend in May.

As I got close to Wichita, one of my priest friends, Father Jerome Spexarth, called me and said, Hien, guess what, I just bought a brand new Camry and my parents are with me test driving it. I said, good job Jerome, you finally you got smart and bought a Toyota. I always teased him because he is a big fan of American cars such as Buick and Cadillac. Since he bought the Camry, he has not been disappointed and has never wanted to get rid of it. Father Jerome likes to talk about cars and test drive new ones.

FIRST PASTOR ASSIGNMENT: Once I got back to the hospital to do my priestly rounds, Sister came to me and said, Father Hien, bishop has been looking for

you. I said for what? She didn't know but said he is at St. Joseph's Hospital celebrating a special Mass for us. So, I went to St. Joseph's and waited to see him after Mass. As soon as he saw me, he said, Father Hien, follow me. I was shocked and wondered in my mind what is going on? By this time in my life as a priest, I had not wanted to be a pastor, until this day, I still don't want to be a pastor—too much work, meetings and conflicts. I told myself that I would be happy to be an associate or chaplain all my priestly life. I would rather someone else be my boss than for me to be the boss. Once we got to the sacristy and the bishop closed the door, he said to me, Hien, I want you to be a pastor of Holy Family Parish. I was very surprised that he wanted me to be a pastor. I didn't know where Holy Family Parish was but that was not my concern. He asked me, do you know where Marion is? I said, I don't know for sure. I have been to the reservoir twelve years ago, fishing. He said, yes, it's about 60 miles from Wichita. I told him that I never thought to leave Wichita, I guess because I was Vietnamese and have been helping with the Vietnamese people and was the chairman for the Vietnamese Council. Bishop said you can still do both, just more driving. At that moment I said to myself, "once the bishop makes his decision, I can't change his mind."

When I was done talking to the bishop, I went back to my rectory and talked to Father Charlie, who told me many things about Holy Family Parish in Marion: "Hien, it's the whole county and you will have four churches, each church has people of different roots, all one parish." As I was listening to him, everything he was saying didn't make sense to me yet because I had no idea what a county is or how big and widespread it is. All I knew in my heart was that Holy Family was the best name for a parish. I said to him, I know a few people from Holy Family Parish, Father Nick Voelker and Father John Jirak and his parents. He said to me, "Hien, Father John and Father Nick are not neighbors, they live about 40 miles away from each other." I was shocked to learn that they were not neighbors and yet grew up in the same neighborhood.

A few days afterwards, I called the pastor at Holy Family Parish, Father Stephen Gronert, and asked him to take me around to the churches because I would not know how to get from one church to another. I was not even sure how to get to the reservoir. So, I took out my map and took my dad along to help me so my trip did not seem so long. First, I found the reservoir and I said to myself, if I keep going on highway 56, I should drive into Marion. Once I found the church and got into the office, my dad and I met Rose, the secretary. When Rose met my dad and me, she immediately thought that my dad was the priest and I was a come along helper. She was very surprised to

learn that I was the priest who would be telling her what to do. Her boss. The one in charge. She learned that I didn't like to be called "boss." When the townspeople saw me with her, they thought I was her international exchange high school student, and she always had to say, no, he is my boss.

Father Steve gave me a tour of all the churches. First, Marion church was not a church like I had in mind because it was not that pretty (this was before the renovation in 2008). Second visit was to the Florence church. Now, I was so shocked to see how fast Father Steve was driving, 35 miles on a 60 mph road [can you hear my sarcasm? ☺]. At this time Highway 77 was under construction, so he took the back dirt roads full of dust and rocks with many curves. My dad almost had a heart attack when he saw all the dust and dangerous back roads. He felt so sorry for me and in his mind, the Bishop was punishing me by sending me away from Wichita, away from my family and civilization. Father Steve also took me to Pilsen, and finally I had the courage to tell him to drive faster. He offered to take me to the Tampa church but I said, I could do that on my own because I was tired of sitting in the car with him. On my way back to Wichita, my dad was not very happy and he was afraid to tell my mom and siblings about the churches and especially the back roads to the Florence church.

On my first moving day, as soon as I drove into the parking lot, with my truck full of stuff and my brother along to help me, Rose ran out and said to me, Father, a parishioner is dying, we need you to go to the hospital and give the last rites. I told my brother to stay and wait for me while I went to the hospital. When I came back we began moving stuff into the rectory. The rectory was not in good shape; since I have been living in it, we have had to replace about everything in that house from toilets to washer and dryer, besides fixing up our old churches, rectories and buildings, nine to be exact plus I built one big shed.

The biggest project I worked on, of course, with the help of many parishioners, was the Marion church renovation, expansion of the south parking lot and adding the canopy for a handicapped drive through. Parishioners were very happy with the renovation and expansion. It needed to be done to better serve our elderly parishioners, and because the building was falling apart and a beautiful church was important to us. Parishioners and non-parishioners gave very generously. Thankfully after the project was completed, we were not in debt. I did put my heart and soul into the renovation with my parishioners. I did have many obstacles in the process because many parishioners told me that I would lead them into a big debt and that I didn't know what I was doing. I tried to assure them that that was not my plan and I promised them that it would not happen. Another obstacle was people making the project bigger than what

I wanted to accomplish. I don't believe in doing all projects at the same time because then they may not be finished due to lack of financial means. I did make some people unhappy because I didn't take their ideas into account. We also built a big new shed for storage.

We purchased a brand new statue of the Holy Family, 5 feet tall, made out of marble, and underneath the statue, we listed about 460 names of deceased parishioners, families and friends, including our beloved deceased priests who once served Marion County. In this way, we will never forget them and we will keep praying for their salvation. The most personal piece of work for me in this statue project, that I put my whole heart into, was the prayer I wrote that is under the statue, so that every parishioner and visitor can pray as they look at the names of the deceased. I wanted the prayer to be simple so that even a small child could read it and understand:

Dear God, Please grant eternal life to all our beloved deceased
priests, family and friends, and all the names listed below.
We love You – we trust in You – and we hope to be with You
for all eternity with all Your holy angels and saints in heaven.

Jesus, Mary and Joseph –

Pray for us until we are all in heaven with you. Amen.

I came up with this prayer because I believe in the power of prayer, and that prayer also leads us closer to God and our beloved deceased. They always need us to pray for them.

Since I have been in this parish, I love to celebrate Holy Mass with my parishioners. We have grown so much in love, unity and above all spirituality. I would love to be with them any day at Holy Mass and enjoy a cup of coffee after Mass with them. Parishioners came to church early with homemade baked goods, made coffee at the hall and we all enjoyed homemade sweets with hot coffee and the best of all, our precious time together. We all are growing older but we are never too old for each other.

Another piece of my ministry at Holy Family Parish was that I created an enjoyable evening for all those who have been teaching religion and all those who have gone an extra mile to help me keeping up with the 10 buildings that we have, such as mowing, cleaning every week, those who brought Holy Communion to the lonely and sick, etc....All these people were special to me because they helped me in my ministry. We called it the "Appreciation Dinner." First we started out with Holy Mass, and then we spent some time visiting before we sat down and enjoyed our famous dinner, prime rib cooked by our parish council and served by our youth. About 100 parishioners

joined me every year for this special time of prayer and good food together.

Our parish children are wonderful, they did what I asked of them, such as singing Christmas carols before Christmas Mass for everyone. Our youth performed many plays for the parish and the public, either Christmas plays or the Passion of Our Lord or the Story of Father Kapaun. They and their families also worked hard to give generously to our parish Charity Auction where we collected up to \$10,000 a year for the poor and needy.

Our church in Pilsen recently updated with a new restroom to accommodate all the visitors to Pilsen due to the holiness of Father Kapaun. Our churches in Tampa and Florence got some work done to their roofs. Basically, I was always busy fixing up one building or another at one of our church sites, but there are still many projects that need attention.

Finally, the most important piece of my ministry at Holy Family Parish was to promote vocations. Holy Family has two seminarians, plus we are blessed to have one parishioner ordained to the priesthood. Father Aaron Vinduska was ordained in December 2011 in Rome for the Legionnaires of Christ. I had the privilege to be with his parents and family in Rome for a week at the time of his ordination. I got to see the Pope in Rome and bought my parishioners some religious gifts and had them blessed by our Holy Father. Every family got a key chain with the Holy Family on one side and a guardian angel on the other. I want all families to be like the Holy Family and always be watched over by their angels. Our two seminarians studying for the priesthood are Andrew Bina and Grant Schneider. Let us keep praying for them so that they too will follow the example of Father Kapaun.

Every parishioner of our parish knows well about Father Kapaun because I have parts of the story of Father Kapaun read in church before every Sunday Mass. We also pray for his canonization after Mass. Of course we also pray for more vocations to the priesthood and religious life, and also pray to the Holy Family so that they too will pray for all of us until we are all in heaven. I designed our weekly stewardship envelope to include a drawing of the Holy Family along with the following quote from Father Kapaun: "*God gave us our gifts, not for our own glory or pride, but that we might use them for God's greater honor and glory. Use your gifts to help your fellow man as much as you can.*" It has been a blessing for me to imitate the love and sacrifice of Father Kapaun in my priestly ministry. May he pray for us all so that we always give glory and praise to God in this life and forever in heaven.

SECOND PASTOR ASSIGNMENT: It was on Good Friday, late morning, as I was mentally and spiritually preparing for Good Friday service at 3 p.m. that I received

a surprising phone call from my bishop. He told me that he would like me to be the pastor of St. Joseph in McPherson, and St. Bridget of Sweden in Lindsborg, Kansas. I was very surprised and apprehensive because I did not expect a change of assignment at the moment, especially going to two parishes with schools and a big debt, over 2 million dollars. I told the bishop that it would be big shoes for me to fill because their current pastor, Father Birket, has been my mentor and good friend and I know him to be a most capable priest. Bishop assured me that I would do well in that parish just like I have done a good job in Marion County. I was very happy to hear from him when he said, “you turned one of our ugliest churches into a beautiful church.” I thanked him for recognizing what I did and I also told him that it was not easy. I said to him, does he realize that I am Asian and it will be difficult for the people McPherson and Lindsborg to accept me. He responded that he knew that some of the people in my parish didn’t accept me when I first came to the parish. What he said gave me much consolation because he knows what I have gone through in Marion County but I did not give up loving and serving the people God entrusted to my care and love. I have never stopped loving my parishioners and as a matter of fact, I have told them in church more than I have told my family that I love them. In my heart, I would love to be with them for the rest of my life.

As for the conversation with my bishop, I did not really want to say yes to McPherson County. The bishop had asked me to move on two different occasions; once was to study to become a canon lawyer; the second was to pastor another parish that needed strong leadership. I told him that I would rather not because, the first time I was planning to renovate the Marion church and the second time was right before the Pilsen restroom renovation. So I asked him, do I have any other options besides McPherson. I was hoping that if I had to move, I would hopefully move closer to my family in Wichita. God bless my bishop because he always cares for and loves his priests. He did give me two other options. First option was to be a chaplain in the hospital, which I was doing before he sent me to be the pastor of Marion County. Personally I would do it again any day and I always love to be with and serve those who are sick and near death, they love God more, they trust in God more and so they really want the sacraments from the bottom of their hearts and soul. Plus, I don’t have to make difficult decisions every day or attend meetings. I learned so much about suffering and faith when I was serving in the hospital. People see me and treat me as a Catholic priest and not as a leader and decision maker in a parish. The second option the bishop gave me was to be in a similar parish that has a few churches and it also has good fishing holes and good hunting, which sounded so tempting because I have

enjoyed these two hobbies a lot for the last seven years in Marion County. At that moment with bishop, my heart would rather take one of the last two options because I had been there, done that, and therefore, I can probably easily cruise through those assignments.

Thankfully I did not tell my bishop which assignment I would prefer but instead, I asked him to give me some time to think and pray about it. I asked him when do I have to give him an answer, and he said, sooner is better, but no later than a day or two. I thanked him for the phone call and we hung up. I took a deep breath and said “Oh God.” Within an hour, I called the bishop back and told him that I must do God’s will and where ever bishop believes is best for me, that’s where I need to go. Seven years ago, God sent me to Marion County to be their pastor, although I had no desire at the time, and I have been blessed to be here. Today, I must do the same, let God send me where he needs me instead of me going where I want to go. Bishop was very happy to hear my decision. I told him that I have nothing to offer the people of my next assignment but I promise to love them and bring our Lord to them. Bishop responded, “I know you will and that is why I am sending you.”

As the day went on, I was very happy with my decision to do God’s will, and so I began to love my current parishioners twice more than before because I knew that I would be leaving them. It will be very difficult for many of them and for me, too. At that time, none of them knew that I would be leaving the parish, except my secretary Rose. Every year, she asked me, “Are you leaving the parish?” I said to her once before that when I find out, she would be the first one to know. I wanted to keep my word to her, so I did. Another person that I told was my mother. One Monday morning as she offered me a cup of coffee, she asked me the same question. At that moment, I felt that I needed to tell her because my mother just asked a question and I needed to respond with honesty. So I did, but I didn’t tell her where I was going. I also knew that she would not tell anybody. Since that day, my secretary has said to me, “Father, you have a short term attitude.” I always smiled at her. I have been blessed to work with Rose for the last seven years. We served our Lord well together as a team. I inherited her from my previous pastor. I hope she will continue serving God at Holy Family Parish.

40TH ON JULY 12, 2012: On this day, I will turn the big four-oh, which does not mean a whole lot to me. I will be another day and another year older. However, I still remember my first year in the seminary at Conception Seminary. As I mentioned before, I love my time and my friends and priests at the seminary. I got to taste American culture, food and practices and to have American friends. My first priest

chaplain, Father Peter, was more than a priest, he was a friend to me. I felt free to come to his room and share with him about my life and he did the same thing with me. We shared many things in common such as he likes fish as pets and I do too. One day, we celebrated his 40th birthday and someone gave him a black t-shirt with the word “40th birthday” on the back. I was happy that he turned 40; it meant that he was older and wiser, but he told me that turning 40 is not a good thing in America, it means that you are getting old and you are going downhill.

He was completely right, I am only 39.99 and I already feel old and going downhill. My eyes are more sensitive to light than before. I get sinus headaches and allergies more than before. I have more sleepless nights than before and above all I am much fatter than ever before. What will I look like when I turn 50? Only God knows! However, I am happy today and can’t wait to be with my family, friends and parishioners to celebrate my big 40. I always love to be with them and that’s what my life is about, to be in love and to be loving. I believe that God gave us life out of love, we were born from our parents out of love, we were with our siblings in a family out of love, and therefore, we must live to love one another as the Lord has commissioned us. For this reason, when I renovated the Marion church, I wanted everyone who enters this church, the house of God, a place of prayer, to put on above all things—**Love**. “Faith, Hope and Love,” the words I had inscribed in the Marion church entryway, are the virtues we must clothe ourselves with when we enter the church to encounter our Lord and also go home full of God’s love towards our family, friends and neighbor. Love heals all wounds; love brings peace to all souls; and above all, love will lead us to eternal life. Love one another as Jesus loved us.

MOM & DAD LOVE ME: I am very blessed to be a child of my wonderful parents who have loved and sacrificed so much for me my entire life. Since the moment I was born, they always loved me and wanted the best for me. If it were not for them and their guidance, I would not be a priest today. They told me to go to the seminary to discern my vocation and serve God. I am glad that I took their advice to heart to be a priest. I love to spend time with my parents, especially my mom. She always serves me coffee in the morning and makes sure that I am well fed. I have gone fishing a lot with my dad, and we do maintenance projects around house. He loves to fish and eat, especially fried chicken. When I see that my parents are happy around their children and grandchildren, I am happy for them and thankful to God for every one of my siblings and nieces and nephews. I can see that my parents are no longer living this life for themselves but always for the good of their children and grandchildren. I hope and pray that all parents will always live for their family and

lead them to God.

JENNIFER & LONG: I am happy that my sister Jennifer and her family are in good health and happily married. They are blessed to have three children, two girls and a boy. Their first child, Lia Vui Pham, passed away when she was only nine months old. No one knew, including the doctors, that Lia had a heart complication until she was born. My sister Jennifer had a C-section and after some tests, the doctors found out that Lia had only two chambers in her heart. It surprised all of us and so immediately after she was born, I baptized her and I had the privilege to give her middle name, Vui. This tells you that my sister and her husband trusted me a great deal and we were close to each other.

The story of Lia is as follows. My sister knew that she could be due at any time. On the evening before Lia was born, Jennifer was doing well. In the middle of that night she was brought to the hospital to deliver her baby. At this moment I didn’t know and was sleeping soundly, suddenly I woke up right before I felt a tremendous pain in my stomach. I was lying in bed, wondering what was wrong with me. Suddenly my cell phone rang and I found out that my sister just had an early delivery. I immediately went to the hospital to see her and her newborn baby but I could not because the doctors were doing tests on the baby to make sure that she was doing well the way she was supposed to. I said to my sister’s husband, how long has the doctor been testing the baby, he said about 15 minutes. At this moment everyone thinks the baby is doing fine. Fifteen minutes went by, then another 15 minutes and I began to suspect that something was wrong. Surely there was something very wrong, the doctor came out and told us that she had only two chambers instead of four in her heart. They needed to fly her to Children Mercy Hospital in Kansas City to save her life. At this moment we were very worried and didn’t know what to do. I had to leave the hospital and go back to the Church of the Magdalene parish to celebrate 6:30 a.m. Mass and it happened during Mass that I came up with the middle name for my niece - Vui. This was the name of my aunt that I personally knew, who died in 1985 while trying to give birth to her third baby. She died in her mid-twenties because she lost so much blood and also because there were no doctors or extra blood for her needs. During Mass, I knew that my niece would need a miracle to survive.

After Mass, I baptized her with tears in my eyes and they flew her to Kansas City. Her dad went with her in the helicopter. It was not easy to tell my sister what happened to her baby because she was still groggy from having her C-section. We were told that they had to operate on the baby as soon as possible. However, my sister was still in the hospital recovering. She told me that she wanted to be with her child

for the surgery. We told her that she was not fully recovered and this might not be the best thing, but she insisted and finally the doctor allowed her to leave.

I picked her up at the hospital to take her to Kansas City. I was the driver and my sister was my passenger, when suddenly an elderly man made a left turn and failed to see my vehicle approaching due to the bright sun, so we had an accident. My sister hit her head on the windshield and broke it. I was ok, so I called 911 and they came and took her back to the hospital. I felt so bad for my sister; everything was going wrong at the same time. Later that evening, the doctor finally allowed my sister to leave to be with her baby in the morning for surgery. My vehicle was damaged, so I called the airport and rented a van and picked up my sister and finally we got to the hospital in Kansas City that night.

After nine months with five surgeries that cost over \$1.7 million, we were told that there was nothing the doctors could do for her. My brother-in-law called while I was driving to the Cathedral for a Confirmation Mass and told me what the doctors had just told him. I cried and cried until I got to the cathedral. He said that the doctor said that we could leave the baby in the hospital and in a few days she would die or we could bring her home and she would die at home. I told him that we love her and we will have her every moment God gives her to us. So, she came home with my brother-in-law and my sister and lived with us for 21 days before she died. Once she came back from the hospital, I stayed with my sisters' family every night. On the afternoon of her death, I looked at her while she was in my hands, and I was asking God, "God, where are you?" Immediately I told myself that I couldn't do this to God, I couldn't doubt him because I'm His priest.

That evening before I went to bed, I held my niece for the last time in my hands, blessed her and said to her, "May the Lord give you a restful night and a peaceful death." At around midnight, she died. Everyone in my family gathered around my niece with the Easter candle light, we prayed together and then the funeral home came and took my niece to get her ready for her funeral. In the morning, I called Bishop Olmsted and he did the funeral Mass for my niece at Catholic Care Chapel, and she was laid to rest at Ascension Cemetery. It was very hard on my sister and my family during this very sad time. Every time I talk about my niece, I have tears in my eyes. It took me about two years to heal from my loss. Now, my family and I believe that we have a little angel in heaven praying and watching over us. Thank God for her nine months with us, they were very precious moments. Since then, my sister has had a beautiful girl and an ornery boy and her and her husband are happily married. They live right next to my parent's home. Jennifer runs the "Asian Market," an Asian

grocery store in Wichita. Long, her husband, works as a senior accountant at Beechcraft. God just blessed her with another pregnancy, and we hope and pray that both mother and baby will be healthy, since she has already had three C-sections. Every time Jennifer has had a child, there has been danger to her life, but she was like my mother and her aunt Vui, they gave to their family the best gift of all gifts in the world, the gift of life - precious, sacred and full of love.

ASHLY & FRANCIS: Before their wedding day, I had a special meeting with them because Francis was converted to our faith to make sure that he knew what our Catholic religion expected of every couple. For better or for worse marriage is for life until death. I was so happy that he married my sister out of love and will take good care of her. Like my other sister, I did the wedding for them and after a few years of marriage, they were blessed with a little angel girl. My sister Ashley wanted a good Vietnamese name for her daughter, I gave her one, Duyen, and she loves it. My dad likes the name as well. I hope my niece will like it, if not I will have a lot of explaining to do to her when she gets older. She is truly their little precious piece of gold but very shy. They take great care of her and love her. Francis is a pharmacist and so when they had their baby, my sister quit her accountant job and dedicated her entire time to her baby. I am happy for them, seeing them take good care of each other. Life will surely be an adventure for them. I hope the best for them, but there is no place like home. My parents and I surely want them to continue to live close to us.

JULIAN & THUAN: Thuan got a computer engineering college degree from Wichita State, but he chose to work for his dad as a mechanic and auto body repair man. He can fix a car and make it look nice. He calls himself a plastic surgeon and we get a kick out of it. Julian on the other hand is an electrical engineer working at Boeing Aircraft. She likes her job, especially when she had a baby, since she didn't have to go back to work for about four months. She really spent a lot of time with her first born girl and a baby boy. She just returned to work and she learned that she got a raise. I was shocked to learn that they had not laid her off yet due to Boeing leaving Wichita. She must do great work for them. I am proud of her. Their beautiful children are growing up fast as I am getting older and uglier. They bought a nice house on the west side of town, not too far from my parents. We all get together on either Sunday night or Monday night for a family meal and have fun together. Yes, we eat a lot and we love to eat together as a family.

YOUNGEST SISTER ALICE: Alice has a daughter named Van. Alice graduated from KU with her doctorate degree in pharmacy. She is very intelligent and can pronounce words that I have no clue how to say. I can't believe my baby sister

(who was eight-months-old when we escaped) now is an adult who has achieved what she wanted for her life. She loves to shop and bake for the family. If one day I become a fat brother or priest (fat pastor) because of all the sugar I ate, it will be her fault and she will have to give me all the drugs I need to live. I love my baby sister and also her daughter, too. I had the privilege to give my niece her first name, her Vietnamese name - Van. I named her after my first sister who died when she was a month old. I never met this sister and I want my niece Van [or Angela, which is her American name] to be the joy of my family, especially my parents, since she eases the loss so many years ago of their first daughter Van. Currently she is attending school at St. Francis and she loves it.

ONLY AMERICAN-BORN SIBLING, MY BROTHER THU: Thu was born in Wichita in 1989 after my dad finally united with us after we escaped. My mother had my brother at Wesley Hospital in Wichita when she was close to 40 years old. My dad and I were standing outside the room looking through the window at my new baby brother in his heated bassinet, and he asked me, “What name should we give your brother?” I said to my dad, “We need to give him a short and easy name so that Americans can read and pronounce it without difficulty.” For this reason, both my dad and I came up with the name Thu, which means that God brought us together as one family. He is the only one among my siblings that was born in the USA. My parents had him in their older age, so he has always been well-loved by everyone in my family. He went to Catholic schools and finished his studies at Wichita State. Now he is getting his doctorate study in pharmacy at KU, at a Wichita satellite location. He was blessed to be among many students chosen for KU’s first medical program in Wichita. He likes what he studies and he also loves to cook. He can really cook good BBQ, it is really bad to the bone. Now you can see why I don’t have to go out to eat because I have sisters who love to cook and bake and a brother who can give me all the good food I want. No place like home and nothing beats home cooking and no one loves us more than our parents and siblings.

MY TACOMAS: I love my parishioners so much that before I bought my latest vehicle, I asked for their opinion as to whether I should buy a car or a truck. They all said, “Father, we want you to buy a truck because it will be safer for you. You always have Mass for us, even on a snowy day. You don’t cancel Sunday Mass for any reason. You love to fish and hunt, we want you to be safe.” I was very happy with their suggestions. What color should I buy? How about yellow, it’s my favorite color. They all said, red! It’s more visible and safer. I said ok. The next day, I went to the dealer and there was only one red 4x4 Tacoma truck available and it was what I

wanted, so I bought it and brought it to the rectory. The next morning before daily Mass started, I parked my truck in front of the church and said to everyone in church after Mass, “I have a special package that needs everyone to go outside right now and help me open it.” They all came out and saw my red pickup. They started laughing and laughing. After they were done checking out my truck, they loved it and finally we blessed it and took some pictures together with my first brand new truck with no car payment. God was so good to me, and he knew that I would never put myself in debt.

It happened this way. I bought my previous Tacoma in Ohio for less than \$7,000, and put new tires on it and drove it for over 70,000 miles. During that time, it suffered hail damage, therefore the car was not worth more than \$4,500. However, due to a Toyota recall on the frame, Toyota was willing to buy my truck for \$10,500, with an additional \$1,000 off a new Tacoma. At the same time, my mom had a used car she wanted to get rid of, so I traded it in, and the dealer gave me additional discounts. At the end, I didn’t pay much at all for my brand new vehicle, and I love to drive it.

THANK YOU: A special thanks to Rose Davidson who encouraged me since the day she met me to put what I went through throughout my life in writing. She is my biggest helper, correcting my grammar and putting everything I wrote into a booklet. She has been my secretary and also my best friend and American friend to my family. I thank God for Rose, her husband Greg, their children Sarah and Rachel. They fed me well and taught me how to shoot a gun and get addicted to hunting wildlife, especially deer. I had never held a gun before I came to this parish, I was afraid to handle a gun, but since I have been with the Davidsons, I am a professional killer and I am licensed to kill. I have killed many doves and dear deer in the past seven years here, some with my crossbow and many with my Accu-trigger Savage 30-06 rifle. I am looking forward to using my new muzzleloader for deer hunting. On my truck, I installed the antlers of my first deer on the dash. It was a nice young buck but had only one antler. I still remember it took me about 15 minutes before I could pull the trigger because it was my first time pulling the trigger to kill. One shot and he was down—dead.

Thank you also to the many parishioners such as Kimberly & Marty Kroupa, Barbara & Alvin Kroupa, Jeannie & Don Vinduska, Phyllis & Richard Hein, and Lorena & Paul Magathan and all their families for allowing me to hunt at their farms or go hunting with me. I will surely take time off to go hunting every year during hunting season. I also enjoy fishing for crappies, white bass, wipers, walleye and catfish at the Marion reservoir. I caught more fish than I could eat. I have met more people while fishing than I can remember. They always get a big kick out of the fact that I am a

Catholic priest. What do you do for a living, they ask and I say, nothing. Don't you have a job, or don't you work? I say no, and then I explain to them that being a priest is not a job. It's my life and I love being a priest, a fisherman and a hunter.

CONCLUSION: Now, God is calling me to serve the people of McPherson County. I will do my best to serve my Lord through His people. I will love them like I always have since I was ordained and that will be the next chapter of my life beginning at the age of 40. It will be very difficult for me to leave Holy Family Parish, my first parish as a pastor. I have grown closer and closer to my parishioners each day for the last seven years and I will be heartbroken for myself and for many of them, especially those who attended daily Mass. Thank God for the many good times my parishioners and I had together as children of God. I love you all...and my life will continue...one day at a time...to be continued for another 40 years. By that time, I will be so old, ugly and forgetful that I won't be able to even write one page, which is best, because the best is yet to come....that's eternal life—life with God in heaven—and so please God bless us with it.

LIFE IS PRECIOUS & SACRED

THANK GOD FOR MY LIFE. DRIVE SAFE.

When you see this sign on a pickup, you will know that it's my truck and the driver is very grateful to God: He gave me my life, family, friends, and parishioners to care for and love. Please pray for me, as you will be in my heart and prayers.

Now that you have finished the story of my life, please say one Our Father, three Hail Mary's, and one Glory Be for the salvation of our souls, the souls of our loved ones, and for all of humanity.

Feel free to make copies of this story of my life for your family and friends, but do not sell it – no one is authorized to make a profit from this story.

**Father Hien Nguyen can be contacted
through the Catholic Diocese of Wichita, Kansas.**

Stay tuned for the second half!

But first turn to the back cover and read a beautiful poem written for me by Harriet Bina, of Pilsen, Kansas.



At 13, Father Hien in refugee camp: jumping into the water, & with his 4 sisters.



Fr. Hien's fishing & hunting adventures
Below: many more loved ones added to his life



His first years in USA with his mom and 4 sisters. His dad has yet to escape to join them.



Fr. Hien became a US citizen, and celebrated with a root beer float.



Seminary graduation and priesthood ordination.
Ordained to be fisher of men for the Lord.



Above: Long & Jennifer, Alia, Noah. Francis & Ashley, Alexandria. Thuan & Julian, Sophia, Ethan. Alice & Angela. Right: Thu & Alice. Whole family went to KU for Alice's doctorate degree.

