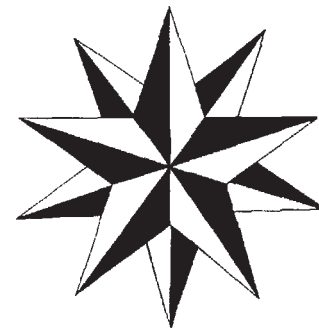


A SHORT ACCOUNT

OF THE LIFE

OF

**Brother Leopold Kiet Pham, F.S.C.
1919 - 1998**



SIGNUM FIDEI

TOUR OF DUTY

- 1939 - Saigon, Viet-Nam (Institute Taberd)
- 1940 - Hai Phong, Viet-Nam (Ecole St. Joseph)
- 1943 - Hue, Viet-Nam (Ecole Pellerin)
- 1948 - Saigon, Viet-Nam (Institution Taberd)
- 1951 - Pnom-Penh, Viet-Nam (Ecole Miche)
- 1953 - Hue, Viet-Nam (Ecole Pellerin)
- 1958 - Dalat, Viet-Nam (Ecole d'Adrau)
- 1960 - Saigon, Viet-Nam (Ecole duc Minh)
- 1970 - Thu Duc, Viet-Nam (Juniorate)
- 1975 - Saigon, Viet-Nam (Thanh My Community)
- 1981 - (May 22) Escape from Viet-Nam
- 1981 - (May 27 - Oct. 20) Refugee Camp in Indonesia
- 1981 - (Dec. 12) Accepted into the New Orleans-Santa Fe District (USA)
- 1982 - (Feb. 8) New Orleans, LA (De La Salle High School)
- 1995 - (July) Lafayette, LA (Magnolia)
- 1998 - Died Aug. 22 at Oakwood Nursing Home in Lafayette

Brother Leopold Kiet Pham 1919 - 1998

Have you ever seen a large field of sunflowers stretching out as far as the eye can see? Breathtaking! Sunflowers are not only beautiful, they are a powerful image for our spiritual lives. Sunflowers have a peculiar little habit not found in many flowers. They always follow the sun. This means they literally turn their broad, round faces in the direction of the sun, no matter where it is in the sky. In the natural movement of the sunflower one can see an image of how we should relate to God. Like the sunflower, we should turn always toward God who is our sun, our source of life and nourishment.

Brother Leopold passed over into eternity during sunflower season. Like the sunflower he turned to the sun for life and spiritual nourishment!

Brother Leopold was born on May 1, 1919, in Nam Dinh, Vietnam. He was the son of the late Dinh Quang Pham and Tan Thi Tran. He is survived by two brothers, Pham Tu Lap of Baton Rouge, La., Pham Duc Counz of Montreal, Canada; one sister, Mrs. Phan Dins Pa of Brussels, Belgium; and a large number of nieces and nephews.

It was in July of 1931 that Brother Leopold entered the Junior Novitiate of the Christian Brothers in Hue Dha Trang, Vietnam: he was only twelve years of age. At the completion of the Junior Novitiate he received the Habit of the Christian Brothers in March 1936. He referred to this occasion as: "putting on the religious dress." One year later he pronounced his first vows, and on August 25, 1943, he made final profession of vows. His academic studies earned him a B.A. in French in 1939.

Sunflowers are not only beautiful, they are bountiful, producing millions of seeds that are put to good use. Some seeds are saved to plant the following year. Some are roasted, creating a tasty snack. In addition, some seeds are crushed to produce a rich oil for cooking. Jesus never spoke about sunflowers, but his frequent

attests to the fact that he fancied them.

What about the seeds of Brother Leopold's life?

His first teaching assignment was in Saigon, Vietnam at the Taberd Institute. During his teaching career, he taught in seven schools in Vietnam. From 1970 - 1975 he was on the faculty of the Junior Novitiate in Thu Duc, Vietnam.

In 1975, when the communists took over the country, all the Christian Brothers schools and community houses were confiscated by the communist regime. The Brothers were forced to live a very precarious life full of hardships and had to perform hard labor. In a letter dated November 1, 1981, to Brother Raphael Bodin, then Visitor of the District of New Orleans-Santa Fe, Leopold writes:

"During the time of hard labor, I was always faithful to my religious life."

This period of hard labor and privation lasted six years. During his religious formation, teaching career and trials, the seeds that were planted produced a harvest. Countless individuals were touched by their contact with Brother Leopold.

In the homily at the funeral, Brother Clarence Fioke, Visitor, summed up the seeds of Brother Leopold's life:

"His whole life in Vietnam was devoted to Christian education. No amount of suffering can undo the good he accomplished there nor take away the influence he exerted on the youth with whom he came in contact."

Due to the harsh regime of the communists, many citizens of Vietnam sought to escape from the country. Brother Leopold, along with 25 others tried to escape on October 31, 1980; that attempt failed. In a memoir entitled the: "The Story of Our Escape or The Sailing to

Freedom,” he gives the reason for this aborted attempt:

“Our three small groups could not reach the meeting place on schedule. Luckily nobody was caught.”

The second attempt to escape came on May 22, 1981, at 7:00 p.m., on a new moon (very dark) night. Again we turn to Brother Leopold’s memoir for the story:

“ We left, headed for Singapore. The sailing during this first night was filled with anxiety and tension of mind because we were afraid of encountering at any moment the communist cutters or ‘state-owned’ fishing ships,” Brother Leopold wrote. “If caught, we would have been brought back to shore, stripped of all our belongings, put into jail or sent to ‘reeducation camps.’ So we tried our very, very best to reach the high seas as soon as possible to get out from under the Red control.”

The group ate rations of rice and dried fish or canned meat twice a day. Members of the group became seasick, sunburnt and dehydrated. They ran out of potable water. To make matters worse, it appeared that monsoon season had begun.

“The only things to do then were to cling tightly and desperately to the boat with all our might, pray to God and our patron saints, and wait patiently until the rains and winds stopped and our soaked clothing got dried,” Brother Leopold wrote. “If we tried to get down to the tiny motor room, we were suffocated by the heat, smoke and smell of the gas oil fume...But at the very moment, the instinct of preserving life and the longing for the freedom were the overwhelming incentives, and we were ready to accept any hardships, to overcome any difficulties.”

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On the fourth day of their journey, still more than 240 miles from Singapore, a commercial ship rescued the group. The captain of the ship liked Brother Leopold and had a son in a Christian Brothers school in Singapore.

The Captain sent for the doctor and gave the group food -- cookies, boiled eggs, apples and hot milk. The next day the group arrived at Jemajakaku Island Indonesia refugee camp, where they met thousands of other boat refugees who had made a similar voyage.

Brother Leopold remained in the refugee camp until October 20 of 1981. Having written to his brother Lap Pham in Baton Rouge, LA., U.S.A., Brother Leopold received the necessary affidavit of relationship and sponsorship. He took these papers to the American delegation for refugees and was approved for resettlement in the United States. On October 20, a charter flight took him and other refugees to the United States. On October 22, he arrived in Baton Rouge, LA. He wrote:

“From now on, I am in the USA, this ‘America Beautiful,’ this ‘Land of Freedom’ which is becoming my beloved adopted country.”

On November 1, 1981, he again wrote to Brother Raphael Bodin who was Provincial at that time:

“I arrived in the States on October 22 and am now staying with my brother. My prospect now is to join again a community of the Brothers. I would like to see you at any convenient time. “

In February of 1982, Brother Leopold rejoined his fellow Christian Brothers at De La Salle High School in New Orleans, LA. During his stay at D.L.S. he became a U.S. citizen on May 11, 1987. He also earned a certificate from the University of Michigan in English Proficiency.

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As a member of the De La Salle community, he was always eager to help. He watered the many plants around the community, supervised in the school library and served as sacristan.

In July of 1995, Brother Leopold was sent to De La Salle - Christian Brothers (Magnolia). He tended to chores, prayed regularly at 4:30 a.m. and collected scraps of clothing and food in his room. One chore that Brother Leopold took seriously was watering the many plants (even the artificial ones) around the community.

Brother Leopold tried to visit Vietnam in 1996, but he became disoriented at the airport, losing both his ticket and luggage. Later, after being examined by his doctor, the Brothers were informed that he had suffered a stroke. The same year he was also diagnosed with Alzheimer's disease. His poor hearing and poor health were a source of great suffering for him, and caused him to isolate himself from the community. In July of 1998, Brother Leopold was moved to Oakwood Village Nursing Home so that he could receive around-the-clock medical attention. On the morning of August 27, 1998, he was found on the floor of his bathroom at the nursing home, semi-conscious. He was rushed to Our Lady of Lourdes Hospital, where he died shortly after 4:00 p.m.



"Sunflower"

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Funeral services for Brother Leopold were held in the chapel at De La Salle - Christian Brothers in Lafayette on August 31, 1998. Vietnamese relatives and friends who were in attendance were wearing their traditional white band of mourning. A spray of orange sunflowers adorned the casket and others were placed around the chapel. In his homily at the Mass of Christian Burial, Brother Clarence Fioke, Provincial, made the following comments:

"I am told that the sunflower has special significance among some Oriental groups as a symbol of life and resurrection. The sunflower is indeed beautiful. Brother Leopold, in his way, imitated the radiance of this flower. Each morning at breakfast he was careful to greet each Brother with a gentle "good morning." He followed Jesus, who was meek and humble of heart, and in his way, displayed the humility of a true follower. He was ever on the lookout for extra food or clothes or other items he could give away to help others in need.

One of the great mysteries of life is why suffering is needed to work out our salvation. In Brother Leopold's case, his cross was heavy -- heavier than most. While no one can give an answer to this reality, it is obvious that he accepted his burden with faith and thus was able to achieve the gift of salvation through his perseverance. Only in eternity will we know the great amount of good that was accomplished through his acceptance of God's Will. Our founder, St. John Baptist de la Salle, insisted that the Brothers renew each day of their lives, their desire to do in all things the will of God in our regard. Brother did that extremely well.

I am informed that some 200 years ago, there was an appearance of the Most Blessed Virgin in Viet Nam under the title of Our Lady of La Vang. Indeed, Brother Louis Welker, Director, has obtained a picture of our Lady of La Vang. Today we will conclude these remarks by asking our blessed Lady to see to

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it that she presents our Brother Leopold to her Son in a special way. Her job as mediatrix requires this -- her title of Our Lady of La Vang indicates that she has a special reason to introduce this Vietnamese Christian Brother to her Son for being a true and faithful servant of His.

May his soul, and the souls of all the faithful departed, rest in peace."

In conclusion, Brother Leopold's life, like the sunflower, depicts the full cycle of life - from bud to drooping blossom. His vibrant life and suffering celebrate a theme of resurrection. The challenge that his life gives to each of us is: keep facing the right way, keep moving in the right direction - toward a loving God who beckons us with open arms.

Brother Leopold was buried in De La Salle cemetery in Lafayette, LA.

By: Brother Louis Welker, FSC
Director of De La Salle - Christian Brothers
Lafayette, LA

ADDENDA

Our Lady of LaVang



In his bedroom Brother Leopold Pham kept a picture of Our Lady of La Vang. Most Catholics are familiar with the Blessed Virgin's appearances in places like Lourdes and Fatima. What is not well known is that Marian apparitions have been reported in many non-western settings as well -- in Africa, for example, and in Asia.

Among the Marian visions granted to Asian Catholics, the 200 year-old apparitions at La Vang, Vietnam, have attracted attention in recent years. The following is a summary of the message of La Vang.

In the 18th century what is now Vietnam was divided into two kingdoms: The north, with Hanoi as its capital, was ruled by the Trinh family and the South, ruled from the city of Hue, was governed by the Nguyens. These southern rulers sought the help of the French in 1787 as part of their campaign to subdue the north. However, a group of intellectuals, known as Van Than, opposed French influence and led a palace revolution that placed a king who shared their point of view on the southern throne. Quang Trung died shortly after reuniting the country, leaving the reins of government in the hands of his ten-year-old son, Canh Think.

On August 17, 1798, in an action reminiscent of the edict of Japan's shogunate two centuries earlier, (8) the young king's advisers issued a

ordinance forbidding the practice of the Catholic faith by Vietnamese on the grounds that it was a foreign religion. The Van Than clique saw native Catholics as a “fifth column” responsible for the growing French presence in the country.

Like its Japanese counterpart, the decree commanded nothing less than the wholesale extermination of Christianity in Vietnam. Churches were destroyed, foreign and native clergy arrested and killed, and Vietnamese believers were given the option of apostasy or death. In the century of persecution and civil war that followed -- a war that ended with a French protectorate over what was then called Indo-China in the late 1880's -- more than 100,000 Vietnamese Catholics were slain.

When the king’s decree was first issued in 1798, many Catholics fled into the jungles. The dense foliage of La Vang, a hill about 40 miles from the city of Hue in central Vietnam, provided a haven from persecution for thousands of believers, although other dangers stalked them there -- wild animals, famine, disease.

Families gathered every night beneath a large tree in the forest to pray the rosary and seek God’s help. According to the traditional account, one night Our Lady appeared to them, bearing the Child Jesus and surrounded by angels. She promised them her protection and assured them that their prayers would be heard. Most of all, she urged her supplicants to be faithful.

“Have trust, be willing to suffer hardship and sorrow. I have already granted your prayers,” she told them. “Whoever will come and pray with me here will receive favors and blessings.”

As a sign, she instructed the faithful to boil the leaves of certain trees and many of those suffering from diseases were cured.

Other apparitions followed, and a series of small straw chapels were built to commemorate the site.

The oral tradition is that Our ⁽⁹⁾Lady appeared every night to

age the people. When the war against the Church ended in 1886, pilgrimages to La Vang increased. Beginning in 1901, national pilgrimages to the site were organized, usually every three years. By 1928, the shrine had become an independent parish. During his pontificate, Pope John XXIII raised the parish to the status of minor basilica. La Vang has been a place of many miracles. In a certain way, Vietnamese Catholics -- their survival, their faith -- is the greatest miracle of Our Lady of La Vang.

Summary of Our Lady of La Vang
By: Brother Louis Welker, FSC

