

THE FIRST WITNESSES OF THE CHURCH IN LAOS

***THE MISSIONARY OBLATES OF MARY IMMACULATE
AND THEIR LAOTIAN COMPANIONS***

Biographical Notes

Provisional text prepared by Roland Jacques, OMI
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Postulation des Martyrs du Laos
94120 Fontenay-sous-Bois, France
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MAP OF LAOS

The administrative boundaries indicated on this map do not correspond exactly to those from before 1975; these differences are nevertheless without importance for the history of the martyrs.

SEVENTEEN WITNESSES OF THE CHURCH IN LAOS

1. Father Joseph Thào Tiến
born on 5.12.1918 at Muang Xôi (Houaphan)
diocesan priest thái-deng of the Vicariate of Thanh Hóa
died on 2.6.1954 at Ban Talang (Houaphan), Vicariate de Vientiane.
2. Father Jean-Baptiste Malo, m.e.p.
born on 2.6.1899 at La Grigonnais, diocese of Nantes (France)
priest of the Foreign Missions of Paris in China and in Laos
died on 28.3.1954 at Yên Hội (Vũ Quang, Hà Tĩnh), diocese of Vinh (Việt-nam).
3. Father René Dubroux, m.e.p.
born on 28.11.1914 at Haroué, diocese of Nancy (France)
diocesan priest of Saint-Dié (France) and then of the Foreign Missions of Paris
died on 19.12.1959 at Palay, Vicariate of Paksé.
4. The Hmong catechist Shiong Tho [Thoj Xyooj, Khamse]
born in 1941 at Kiukatiam (Louang Prabang)
died on 1.5.1960 at Muang Kasy (today the Province of Vientiane),
Vicariate of Louang Prabang.
5. Father Mario Borzaga, o.m.i.
born on 27.8.1932 at Trent (Italy)
Missionary Oblate of Mary Immaculate
died on 1.5.1960 at Muang Kasy (today the Province of Vientiane),
Vicariate of Louang Prabang.
6. Father Louis Leroy, o.m.i.
born on 8.10.1923 at Ducey, diocese of Coutances (France)
Missionary Oblate of Mary Immaculate
died on 18.4.1961 at Ban Pha (Xieng Khouang), Vicariate de Vientiane.
7. Father Michel Coquelet, o.m.i.
born on 18.8.1931 at Wignehies, diocese of Cambrai (France)
Missionary Oblate of Mary Immaculate
died on 20.4.1961 at Sop Xieng (Xieng Khouang), Vicariate of Vientiane.
8. The catechist Joseph Outhay Phongphumi, widower
born in 1933 at Kham Koem, diocese of Thare & Nongseng (Thailand)
died on 27.4.1961 at Phalane (Savannakhet), Vicariate of Savannakhet.
9. Father Noël Tenaud, m.e.p.
born on 11.11.1904 at Rocheservière, diocese de Luçon (France)
priest of the Foreign Missions of Paris in Siam et in Laos
died on 27.4.1961 at Phalane (Savannakhet), Vicariate of Savannakhet.
10. Father Vincent L'Hénoret, o.m.i.
born on 12.3.1921 at Pont l'Abbé, diocese of Quimper (France)
Missionary Oblate of Mary Immaculate
died on 11.5.1961 at Ban Ban / Muang Kham (Xieng Khouang), Vicariate of Vientiane.

11. Father Marcel Denis, m.e.p.
born on 7.8.1919 at Alençon, diocese of Séez (France)
priest of the Foreign Missions of Paris
died on 31.7.1961 at Kham Hè (Gnommalath, Khammouane), Vicariate of Savannakhet.
12. Father Jean Wauthier, o.m.i.
born on 22.3.1926 at Fourmies, diocese of Cambrai (France)
Missionary Oblate of Mary Immaculate
died on 16.12.1967 at Ban Na (Xieng Khouang), Vicariate of Vientiane.
13. The student catechist lavên Thomas Khampheuane Inthirath
born in May 1952 at Nong Sim (Champassak), Vicariate of Paksé
died on 12.5.1968 at Paksong (Champassak), Vicariate of Paksé.
14. Father Lucien Galan, m.e.p.
born on 9.12.1921 at Golin hac, diocese of Rodez (France)
priest of the Foreign Missions of Paris in Chine and in Laos
died on 12.5.1968 at Paksong (Champassak), Vicariate of Paksé.
15. Father Joseph Boissel, o.m.i.
born on 20.12.1909 at Loroux, archdiocese of Rennes (France)
Missionary Oblate of Mary Immaculate
died on 5.7.1969 at Hat I-Et (Bolikhamsay), Vicariate of Vientiane.
16. The Kmhmu' catechist Luc Sy, father of a family
born in 1938 at Ban Pa Hôk / Kung Hrông Tnéc (Xieng Khouang)
died on 7.3.1970 at Dène Din (Prov. of Vientiane), Vicariate of Vientiane.
17. The *saravat* Maisam 'Kèo' Pho Inpèng, Kmhmu' layman, father of a family
born in about 1934 near Sam Neua (Houaphan)
died on 7.3.1970 at Dène Din (Prov. of Vientiane), Vicariate of Vientiane.

Nota bene: 1. The Hmong catechist Thoj Xyooj and Father Mario Borzaga, o.m.i., were the subjects of a separate diocesan inquiry begun in the Archdiocese of Trent (Italy).
2. In the entire text, the term "bishop" is used to indicate the hierarchical rank of the persons thus named. In Laos, the bishops have the title and the function of Apostolic Vicars. For example, when one says "bishop of Paksé," one should understand it to mean "bishop, Apostolic Vicar of Paksé."

I

A watchman at the front:

Father Mario Borzaga, o.m.i.

(1932 – 1960)

Addio, monti sorgenti dall'acque, ed elevati al cielo; cime inuguali,
note a chi è cresciuto tra voi, e impresse nella sua mente...
Chi dava a voi tanta giocondità è per tutto e non turba mai la gioia de' suoi figli
se non per prepararne loro una più certa e più grande.

Alessandro Manzoni, I Promessi Sposi, cap. VIII

You, son of man, I have appointed watchman for the house of Israel;
when you hear me say anything, you shall warn them for me..

Ézékiel, 33, 7



Father Mario Borzaga, o.m.i.

Witness of Christ in Laos,
Presumed to have died a martyr about 1 May 1960 at Muang Kassy (Laos)

“I prayed, I succeeded at my studies, and I dreamed...”

Mario BORZAGA was born in 1932 in Trent, at the foot of the mountains in northern Italy. He was the youngest of a family of four children: three boys and a girl.

He had an lively personality and the solid build of the mountain people. In his native city, he was known to like adventure: he loved to climb trees, race through the streets on a bicycle that was too big for him, and walk in the mountains.

Growing up in a family atmosphere that was deeply Christian, he felt the attraction of the priesthood. He went to the diocesan minor seminary. Remembering this period, he wrote: “I loved Jesus in the sacraments, and Mary. I prayed, I succeeded at my studies, and I dreamed...” When he entered the major seminary, his love of nature remained intact. Thanks to that, he learned to observe people and things in a penetrating way; and he regularly noted his observations in his journal.

In a well-known photo sent from Laos, one sees Mario seated at the typewriter; the expression on his face is one of deep concentration and attention to his task. He filled many a page, in fact, in the course of his brief missionary life: today, his journal and his letters are a treasure which reveals, besides his activities, also his internal journey. His fellow seminarians would later say that they were already aware of this growing spiritual depth; they guessed that it would lead Mario to a deeper commitment.

A missionary dream

He was just 20 years old when a missionary came to speak to the seminarians. Mario listened to him attentively and he became aware that God was calling him to the foreign missions: his vocation would be that of a Missionary Oblate. The Oblates, a congregation founded in France in 1816 by Saint Eugene de Mazenod, was, in fact, sending missionaries into many countries.

To realize this vocation, Mario knew that it was necessary to cut the close ties which joined him to his family and to his friends. It was in that spirit that in 1952 he began his year of novitiate. This is how he defined it: “It is a year when you will test your ability to give yourself completely to the Lord. It is a year when you learn to renounce self, to empty yourself completely of self, like you would empty a waste basket, without regrets.”

Then Mario prepared himself for missionary life through several years of study. During these years, he had a precise spiritual goal: to let himself be fashioned as much as possible to the image of Christ the priest, victim and apostle. He wished to achieve this through the Eucharist and Mary Immaculate: the Eucharist as the broken bread, fruit of the sacrifice on the Cross -- that is to say, of love; Mary Immaculate, because she gave Jesus to the world. Mario wished to imitate her to the extent of becoming a missionary like her and bearer of Christ the Savior. From that time, the thought of martyrdom was present in his spirit.

Mario was ordained a priest in 1957. It was a beautiful celebration for his family and his parish. The same year, the Oblates of Italy sent their first team of missionaries to Laos. Mario, with the heart of an apostle, was chosen to be part of the group and he accepted joyfully: his dream was going to be realized. He confided his feelings in his journal: “Feast of the Visitation. One of the most important days of my life: I have received the obedience for Laos. I will go in the name of the Lord. Immaculate Virgin, help me! Jesus, Jesus, Jesus, I want to belong to you, like Peter, Paul, Barnabas, Luke, James and John.”

In Laos: disappointment

Arriving in one of the poorest countries in the world, with a small number of Christians, was a shock for him. He spent his first year in the mission of Kengsadok. There, he had to learn the language, the local culture and missionary life. His missionary zeal was just waiting to be used. He loved to be with the people; he wanted to learn everything from them as quickly as possible so he could proclaim to them the Gospel of salvation.

In reality, it was a very difficult year. He felt isolated, lost, far from his compatriots and his friends. He tried very hard to learn Lao, but he was unable to communicate with the people, unable also to really exercise his priestly ministry.

This situation made him feel useless. He writes in his journal: “My cross – it is myself; I am my own cross. My cross is the language which I do not manage to learn. My cross is my shyness which keeps me from pronouncing a single word in Laotian.” He was thus getting a taste of the great difficulty of being a foreign missionary. But in his pain, he sought the presence of God. He wrote this prayer: “Everything belongs to you, Lord, even the anxiety, the suffering, the regret, the darkness... I love you because you are Love.”

Kiukatiam

Mario Borzaga was 26 years old when he was sent to his first mission post. Kiukatiam was a Hmong village, some 80 km from Louang Prabang, along the route that goes in the direction of Xieng Khouang and Vietnam and which they then called the Astrid Road. Mario followed there a seasoned Oblate missionary whom he greatly esteemed, Father Yves Bertrais: the foundations of Christianity had been solidly laid. Helped at first by Father René Charrier, o.m.i., Mario took to the task with his whole heart: he did all he could to be up to the task by following the example of the two older priests.

From 1959, he was in charge. Teaching catechism, teaching how to pray, visiting families, receiving the sick persons who daily gathered at the door of the mission dispensary: that is how Mario spent his time and his strength. He was also put in charge of the formation of young Hmong catechists. He was in a hurry, like someone who already knew that the apostle's life was short, and that it should be entirely spent for the Kingdom of God.

But he did not have the experience, and often the needs threatened to be more than he could handle: how to take care of those who were already Christians without neglecting those who were still far off? How to direct a school for the formation of new catechists, all the while studying Hmong, a new language so different from Lao? How each day to take care of the long lines of sick and at the same time, respond to the demands of far-off villages which the Gospel had not yet reached?

These were hard challenges, and Mario often felt the crushing weight of his responsibilities. It was in his great love for Jesus that he found the needed strength to believe again, to not give up. Yes, he was at that place because God wanted it. He wrote: “We missionaries are made that way: for it is normal to leave; it is necessary to move around. Tomorrow the roads will be our houses. If we are forced to stop temporarily in a house, we transform it into a road that leads to God.”



*Mario Borzaga (last one on the right) among the Hmong.
The other missionary is Bishop Alessandro Staccioli, o.m.i. – The catechist Thoj Xyooj is the one with the pompom hat.*

Bishop Étienne Loosdregt, o.m.i., had invited all his missionaries to be prepared for persecution. In August 1959, Mario confided his thoughts to his journal: “All of us, all of us know the instruction given by the Holy See in time of persecution. What will happen to us? Nothing, because we are in the hands of God. So be calm.” The instructions were to remain at one’s missionary post, in solidarity with the faithful.

Portrait of a missionary

The Oblate confreres who got to know him at this time paint a nuanced and very positive portrait. Father René Charrier said:

“Mario was big and shy, but also very kind and generous. He never refused a service. He was very modest and did all that he could not to stand out. I remember an episode: I had left with Mario to go buy some medicines. After two hours walking, I noticed that I had left the money at home. In spite of my protests, Mario went back immediately; a great walker, he arrived at the meeting place at the same time that I did.

“He actively studied the language but did not speak much with the people. When they were taken aback, I had to explain that he was still learning. After my departure, when he had been put in charge of the mission, he undoubtedly had more self-assurance. In any case, the Hmong loved him. He was a hard and courageous worker, with the personality of a mountaineer. He was talented in various areas, for example in singing. He had composed a very beautiful Salve Regina.”

Fr. Jean Hanique, o.m.i., adds: “Father Mario Borzaga was remarkable in his missionary apostolate. He was a good person, a leader, and truly serious man. He was always on target for the mission. I was his provincial and I had an excellent general impression of him.”

The Hmong gave Father Mario Borzaga the nickname in their language: “Serious and sincere heart.”

Among the young student catechists whom Mario had with him, their recollections are

imprinted with a lot of tenderness toward the one who was a real father to them. One of them wrote: “Father Mario Borzaga was very patient and had a good heart. He loved everyone. He understood a little Hmong; I am the one who taught him.” Others testify:

“I lived with the Father about a year. I was only 16 and did not know how to build a house. We went to talk to the Father. For a house of 6 by 8 meters, he calculated on a piece of paper that for the tiles, the wood, etc., it would cost 9 bars of silver. I agreed; then we went to cut some big trees and we brought them for the Father to saw. There was also a Brother there to help Father Borzaga: they sawed the wood to build my house and we put it up.

“When we finished, I was so tired that I was seeing double in looking at the mountains; I was dizzy in the head when I got up, as if I were going to fall. The Father gave me some medicine to drink, 10 drops in some water. It was clear as alcohol and very acidic. After a few days, my head returned to normal. Then each evening, after the meal, we went to learn to sing the prayers with Father Borzaga. He had a beautiful and strong voice.”

Another says: “He was very kind, smiling, and handsome. He was very available. He took good care of the sick and watched attentively over his student catechists who had come from other areas to study with him. We lived in a little house situated behind his. He bought us some clothes and some flashlights. He was very patient and never got angry; he was quite determined. He watched over us. The one in charge, who was older than we were, was often invited to his table.”

The final call

The missionary experience of Mario Borzaga was brief: he would never arrive at his 28th birthday. From the end of April till the beginning of May 1960, the adventure was going to come to its climax in the solitude of the forest, along a mountain path, as he returned from an apostolic journey with one of his students – undoubtedly the biggest rebel of them all – the young Hmong, Thoj Xyooj (ໝໍ ຊຽວຊີ, Shiong).

On Sunday, April 24, 1960, after the Mass, Mario was getting ready to treat the ill at the dispensary. A small group of Hmong presented themselves and asked him to come to their village, situated a three-day walk to the south. They said they were interested in religion. Without a doubt, there was also the question of giving some medical attention: among other things, it was question of caring for the dying father of a young postulant who was studying with the Sisters at Xieng Khuang. It was not the first time that some possible converts made this approach, but up till now, Mario felt he had to refuse so as not to leave his young intern, Antonio Zaroni, o.m.i., alone in the village. This time, he could take the occasion because two other Oblates were there for the Easter vacation: Fathers Bramante Marchiol and Pierre Chevroulet.

It seems that the thing was not discussed much; Mario was a man of decision: he promised these people he would follow them the next day. His plan was to visit several villages in the same area and go up the Mekong valley to the west to Luang Prabang -- a good missionary visit before the start of the rainy season. He invited the young catechist Xyooj, who was still single, to go with him; He promised to be back after a week or two.

A journey toward death

On Monday, April 25, 1960, feast of Saint Mark the Evangelist, they set off, bringing the Good News of Jesus and his love for the poor and the sick. Among the witnesses of the departure, there was the young Tito Banchong, future Apostolic Administrator of the Vicariate of Luang Prabang, then 12 years old. They saw Mario leaving, carrying his backpack, wearing a beret, dressed all in black like a Hmong; after just a few hundred meters, he disappeared with his partner around the corner to plunge into the bush and go down towards the Nam Ming River. His parishioners and his colleagues would never see them again, neither him nor his catechist.

The days, the weeks passed. What had happened? The investigation begun when their disappearance was evident revealed nothing certain. It was known only that he had arrived at the intended village, Ban Xua Phoua; there he had treated patients, and he then left with the catechist, promising to return a few months later. They were headed for the town of Muang Kassi, where they hoped to find a boat or a passing truck. It was also known that guerrilla elements had infiltrated the area and moved around there unimpeded.

In fact, it took more than forty years for tongues to begin to loosen, so that we could begin to reconstruct the tragic events of those days. Those who indirectly provided details of the last moments were members of the guerrillas. They were very young at that time.

Journey toward life

On May 1 in Muang Met, a Lao and Kmhmu' village between Ban Phoua Xua and Muang Kassi, a patrol of guerrillas met Mario, whom they considered an "American", and his young companion. Today we cannot know if it was coincidence or if they had been betrayed by some people of the village, guerrilla sympathizers. The guerrillas hated all that, in their view, was American and even Christian or white. Some Kmhmu' of village had warned the travelers to leave quickly.

It was as they left the village that they were taken. They tied the Father's hands and forearms behind his back, and said harsh things to him. The young catechist shouted: "Do not kill him, he's not an American but an Italian, and he's a very good priest, very kind to everyone. He does only good things." They would not believe him: they decided to kill them without further ado, but quietly, without witnesses, a little away from the village. They brutally beat the catechist to silence him.

During this time, Mario remained calm and silent, like Jesus before his accusers – like a lamb brought to be slaughtered.

A former soldier recounts:

"On the path along the Mun Phou ridge, we met an American spy, accompanied by a Hmong. We forced them to dig a hole. It was I who shot them. The Hmong died instantly but the American, falling into the hole, cried: 'Why have you shot me, the Father?' Without waiting, we covered them with earth; then we rummaged through the backpack of the American. There was not much: some granulated cords with two pieces of crossed iron, some pictures of a radiant woman, alone or with a child, and those of a man with the heart on the outside..."

Rosaries, images of the Sacred Heart of Jesus and of the Virgin Mary -- that was the missionary's treasure, his only weapons. That May 1 was a Sunday. It is probable that in the non-Christian village, Mario had celebrated, alone with his catechist, a very early Mass: it was his viaticum.

Mario Borzaga's former student catechists also give their testimony:

“In April 1960, he went to his death, and I watched over his house and took care of his animals till July. Then they came to kill all his animals, chickens, pigs... They took all the Mass wine, took all his clothes and wrecked the house. I had to get out of the house and flee into the forest.

“I love him and I always think of him: he had a good heart and was very patient. He loved everyone; he loved me and he is dead. I wept and I still weep. Actually, I always think of him because he is like my father. I believe and I am sure that he is praying the good God to help me each day. I am sure and I am confident that Xyooj and he are with the good God; because those two had a path that was too hard. Xyooj and the Father are surely saints on earth and eternally in heaven.”

Why this crime? Another of his former students declares:

“We are all convinced. As a student catechist of Father Mario, I firmly declare that he was killed because he was going to that village to expel the spirits and let the people embrace Christianity. He was killed because he had gone to proclaim the Good News of Jesus and to care for the sick.”

The dream of a man called to happiness

Those who killed Mario Borzaga interrupted forever on this earth the wonderful dream of this young missionary. But the sweat, the tears and the blood of this young man today bear their fruits in the lives of those who knew him or are learning to know him. In the true life, before God, his dream is being realized.

Father Mario Borzaga has left a spiritual testament of great value. His life gives evidence that the missionary vocation is a veritable path to holiness. Yes, to give one's life for the poor, in living the command to love, can lead to perfection: “I want to develop in myself a faith and a love as deep and solid as a rock,” he had written. “Without that, I cannot be a martyr: faith and love are indispensable. There is nothing other to do than to believe and to love.”

Just before making his perpetual oblation in 1956, Mario had described in his journal the dream of happiness that he had for his life:

“I have realized my vocation: to be a happy man, even in the effort to identify myself with the crucified Christ. How much suffering remains, Lord? Only you know, and I, at any moment of my life, I say *fiat voluntas tua*, ‘Thy will be done.’ I want to be, like the Eucharist, a good bread to be eaten by my brothers, their divine food. So I have to go first through the death on the cross. First the sacrifice; then the joy of giving myself to my brothers throughout the world ...

“If, without first converting myself through sacrifice, I were to give myself to my brothers who are hungry for God, I would be only giving them human trash, the dregs of hell. But if I accept my death in union with that of Jesus, it is Jesus himself that I can give with my own hands to my brothers. It is therefore not so much renouncing myself as reinforcing all in me that is capable of suffering, of being immolated, of being sacrificed for the souls that Jesus has given me to love.” (Father Mario Borzaga, OMI, *Diario di un uomo felice*, at the date of 17 November 1956).

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For further reading

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- G. CELLUCCI, *P. Mario Borzaga missionario oblato di Maria Immacolata, martire nel Laos*, testimonianze raccolte e coordinate da G. Cellucci, Roma, M.G.M., 1995
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- N. FERRARA, *Biographie de Mario Borzaga* (en italien – en préparation).

→ A more developed bibliography can be found on the internet: <http://www.marioborzaga.it/bibliografia.html>

II

Trusting to the end:

Father Louis Leroy, o.m.i.

(1923 – 1961)

Biographical Notes

**Provisional text by Roland Jacques, o.m.i.,
Diocesan Postulator**

**Postulation des Martyrs du Laos
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November 2011**

Trusting others is already killing oneself a bit.
Louis-Ferdinand Céline, Voyage au bout de la nuit (Livre de Poche, 1952, p. 184)

Trust is one of man's divine possibilities.
Henry de Montherlant, Service inutile (Paris, Grasset, 1935, p. 33)



Father Louis Leroy, o.m.i. (1923 – 1961)

Witness of Jesus Christ in Laos,

Presumed to have died a martyr on 18 April 1961 at à Ban Pha (Laos)

Louis' young years

Louis LEROY was born on October 8, 1923, in Normandy (France), in the village of Ducey (50). He was baptized on the next day in the parish church of the village which belonged to the diocese of Coutances. He was the oldest of a rural family of four children.

In 1932, Louis was 9 years old. His father died. His mother then moved with her four children to a farm at Villiers-le-Pré. The town church was rather far away; his family attended the parish church in Carnet, where one day he would celebrate his first solemn Mass.

Being the oldest of the boys, after attending primary school in the town of Villiers-le-Pré, Louis worked on the family farm for ten years. After his military service, at the age of 22, he turned his attention toward missionary life which he had desired for a long time. He was admitted to the juniorate of the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate at Pontmain for two and a half years of remedial secondary studies.

Endowed with a strong practical intelligence, he would never succeed in mastering Latin, and he suffered over that. He made up for this handicap by the earnestness which he put into everything he did. On the report, the superior wrote: "Applies himself well, with average results." From then on, headaches would afflict him the entire time of his studies.

In 1947, with a friend and future missionary in Cameroon, he made a pilgrimage from Pontmain to Lisieux: 150 kilometers on foot to pray at the tomb of Saint Therese of the Child Jesus, patroness of the missions. That same year, he confided to another friend, with the calm assurance that greatly astonished him: "I joined the Oblates to go to a difficult mission where I might be able to die a martyr."

In 1948-1949, he was at the novitiate at La Brosse-Montceaux (Seine-et-Marne), a place made famous by the massacre of five Oblates by the Nazis in 1945.

His novice master sketches his moral portrait: "Very respectable, hard on himself and on others. Good enough intelligence, more practical than speculative; has the good sense of a Norman peasant which no one can sway; stubbornness which is softened by great charity and docility..."

The portrait is completed by one of his companions: "Louis Leroy was very serious about everything, very focused on his studies and his spiritual life. He was very joyful, very brotherly. He was a friend. His desire for the foreign missions was very strong."

There were then six years of philosophy and theology at Solignac¹ (Haute-Vienne). A classmate, also of peasant origins, describes their friendship and adds:

"I considered Father Leroy very serious and much focused on all that he did: studies, prayer, and community life. He was very devoted to his missionary vocation. It could be said that the idea of martyrdom was one of his dreams. He was also joyful and liked to laugh, but always sincerely."

One of his professors, in remembering him, speaks of an event that must have marked the life of Louis:

"Father Louis Leroy kept the calm and the balance of his peasant origins. I have one particular recollection about him: when the Carmelite Sisters of Limoges moved from

¹ Solignac is located ten kilometers south of Limoges. Founded in 631, the abbey had survived through many ups and downs, until the French Revolution. From 1939 to 1945, it housed the Normal School of Teachers of Obernai in Free France. There, in 1946, the Missionary Oblates established their house of studies (major seminary or scholasticate). Students seriously participated in the restoration of the premises and construction of the large building needed to house a hundred young religious.

the city to the country, he helped them organize their farm and their crops. After he went to Laos, he continued to support them with his prayer and his advice. After his death, he continued helping them and some Sisters speak of him admiringly.”

On September 29, 1952, Louis made his perpetual oblation. On July 4, 1954, he was ordained a priest at Solignac Abbey. He wrote then to the Superior General of the Oblates:

“Before I knew the Oblates, I was attracted by the Asian missions, and it was for these missions that I decided to leave behind my occupation as a farmer... The knowledge of the Oblate missions led me to want Laos, and the difficulties which this mission has encountered and will encounter even more have only made my desire for this country to grow... I would receive my obedience for Laos with great joy if you think it would be good to send me there...”

His marching orders for Laos is dated June 11, 1955.

A missionary with a generous heart

The six years of Father Louis in Laos are mostly known through his correspondence which he maintained with the Carmelites of Limoges: he gives his advice for the little dairy business of the sisters and tells them of his joys, his hopes and his missionary challenges. He was patiently studying the languages – Lao and Kmhmu’, and later, Thaï Dam – but was handicapped by premature deafness. He admits that he had achieved “average” results; but that was compensated for by his quality of friendliness and his smile, by his untiring devotion to the service of the sick, by his love of the poorest, and by his patience for sinners.

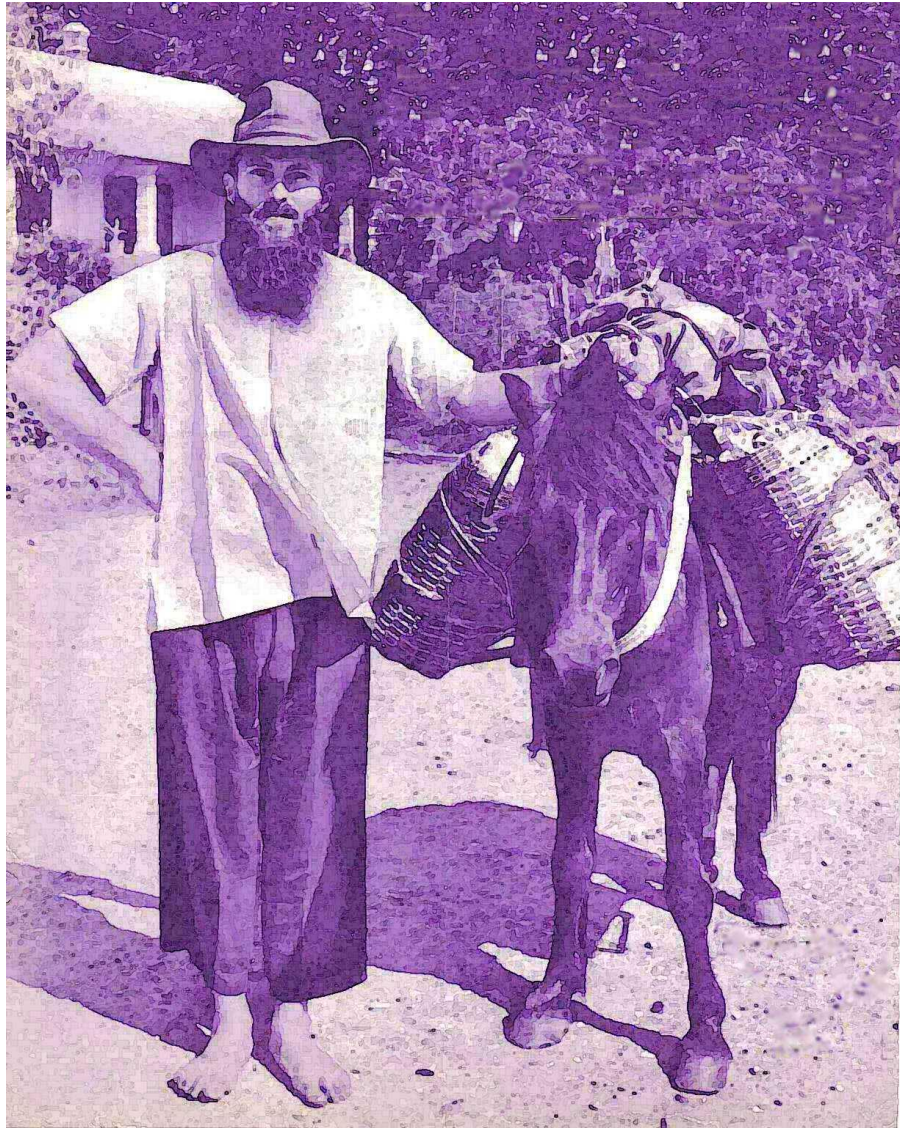
Having arrived in Laos in November 1955, he was sent shortly afterwards to Xieng Khouang. After a year, perplexed by the multiple languages and dialects of this region, he asked to spend some months in the Mekong valley to better familiarize himself with the official Lao language, spoken on the plain. He did this extended period at Tha Ngon, near Vientiane.

At the end of 1957, Father Louis returned for good to Xieng Khouang. From there, he reached his final posting at Ban Pha in the mountains. It was still a neophyte village, evangelized by Father Joseph Boiseel, o.m.i. Thaï Dam was spoken there, a language new to him! All around, there were several Christian villages of the Kmhmu’ language, as well as a large area to look into, where the Gospel had not yet penetrated.

During the following three and a half years, Father Louis scrupulously updated the journal of the mission, called the “codex historicus” among the Oblates. He tells there of his joys and his sorrows as a missionary; he expresses his sorrow in view of the tepidity and the lack of constancy of certain Christians; he especially gives there a testimony of his constant faith and of his unlimited devotion.

Tirelessly, while continuing to instruct the community of Ban Pha, he visits villages entrusted to him, at two, three or five hours walking distance, in all weather, on impossible paths. He writes:

I happened to spend the night in pagan villages to try to let them know about our religion but, at least apparently, what I said did not seem to interest them much... [The missionary] realizes quickly that only the grace of almighty God can convert a soul.



Father Louis Leroy, o.m.i., in his missionary uniform

And in another letter:

From July 1, 1959, until July 1, 1960, there were 73 baptisms of which 37 adults... About 3,000 persons have come seeking care; sometimes it's a question of mild cases, sometimes serious cases; and to make that happen, at least 3,000 kilometers on foot, carrying a backpack. Some days, it's hard, especially when my health is not so great, but I am very happy to be working in this area.

The final act

During the general guerilla offensive in April 1961, his presence had been reported to the assailants by persons who looked disapprovingly upon the Christian presence in the area.

On April 18, 1961, Father Louis Leroy was praying in his poor church. A detachment of guerilla soldiers came looking for him. According to the villagers, he knows that his departure would be final: he asks to put on his cassock; he puts his cross in his cincture; he takes his breviary under his arm and says farewell. Head bare and barefoot, he follows the soldiers on the uneven path.

According to a witness, Louis Leroy was interrogated, beaten and burned on his face till it was disfigured. Some Christians from another village who were passing through there saw the scene from afar, but they did not recognize him. A bit later, some shots were heard in the forest and it was over... His dream as a young man had come true.

Many years later, a non-Christian of the village would tell a Laotian priest, detained with him in a camp, about his hatred for priests, and he would tell him: “They killed him, the one from Ban Pha le Haut – ເຂົາ ຈາກ ບ້ານ ພາ ລຳ ຫຼວງ ບ້ານ ພາ ລຳ ຫຼວງ ອີ!”

The makeshift grave was found some days later by some devoted parishioners. Only two years later, an Oblate was able to visit and rapidly bless it... It is now found in a rice paddy which a Christian woman bought in memory of Father Leroy. Yes, the good seed of the Gospel has been buried in Laotian land, awaiting the time to grow.

According to comments gathered later, Louis could have easily escaped. When the royal troops abandoned the village of Ban Pha, the soldiers insisted that he leave with them. He calmly refused, saying that it was his duty to stay with his people, according to orders received from his superiors. He added: “I am ready to die for the Lord – *Pho nhom tai pheua Phrachao*.” A young man who had been part of that detachment states that he had come back only two hours later, at risk of his life, to try again to convince him to leave. Upon the arrival of the soldiers from the other camp, his neighbor Anna, a Christian woman totally devoted to the mission, begged him in her turn. But it was in vain.

Louis Leroy, like his confreres, strictly adhered to the Roman order to stay in the midst of the Christians, even at the risk of putting one's life in danger (in fact, the order to withdraw by his provincial superior was already on the way, but the messenger did not arrive in time). He was heroically living his consecration as a missionary religious, literally interpreting the solemn call of the Founder of the Oblates, Saint Eugene de Mazenod, to his sons: “[The Oblates] feel themselves called to renounce themselves entirely... ready to sacrifice all their goods, their talents, ease, self, even their life, for the love of Jesus Christ, the service of the Church, and the sanctification of their brethren.”

A letter from Father Louis Leroy to the Carmelite Sisters of Limoges (1959)

[...] Having a little free time today, something that does not happen often, I am going to give you some news about me and my area.

You have probably heard on the radio and in the papers about what is happening in Laos. Presently, as far as one can tell, it's rather calm; in my village, once about seven hundred soldiers passed through. They said nothing, neither to me nor to the people. For the future, we know nothing; so we carry on as in the past, having confidence in the Good God.

As for me, my spirits are excellent; I am very happy about my hard but splendid missionary life. My former desires, about missionary life in the bush, have been fully realized. As for my apostolate, I have a lot of work to do. During the past year, I distributed more than 4,000 communions; heard more than 2,000 confessions; baptized 19. This number will be higher next year because I am instructing 70 catechumens, the majority of whom could be baptized around Easter 1960.

Does that mean to say that everything is perfect? – Certainly not. Lately, an apostate Christian woman let her baby of 10 months die without being baptized. An apostate Christian has gotten himself initiated into witchcraft. Another man, baptized last year, has practically never set foot in church since he became a Christian. In one of my

villages, where the Christians are a minority among the pagans, the sorcerers are active and succeed in upsetting one or the other Christian, telling him that when he is sick, only his return to the cult of the spirits can heal him. Fortunately, this wicked advice is not always heeded.

The sick and injured monopolize a lot of time and require long and tiring journeys. Among the patients I treat, a Christian who was burned on the face, hands and knee. I traveled for him three times; now, to go, it takes three and half hours of walking in the mountains, and wounded or sick of this kind are not very rare.

The many pagans who surround me, whom I meet each day, who come to be cared for, have not decided to become Christians.

So that's a little glance at my area which, once again, I earnestly commend to your prayers. Pray also for me, so that the good God might accomplish through me all the good that He wants to accomplish.

[...] I leave you now, telling you that my prayers for all your intentions are more frequent – and how much more! – than my letters. No day passes that I do not speak of you to the Lord and the Most Holy Virgin, in whom I repeat my religious devotion

Louis Leroy, o.m.i.

The last days and the death of Father Louis
as told by Bishop Étienne Loosdregt, Vicar Apostolic of Vientiane

This account of events was written for the missionaries. It is based on the testimony, absolutely trustworthy, of Anna Boun, the young Christian woman of Ban Pha mentioned above. The text has been slightly adapted to make it more understandable and accessible to a wider audience, and ensure consistency of vocabulary.

On Saturday, April 15, 1961, around 5 pm, guerilla troops come into Ban Pha, after two or three days of fighting in the area and some artillery fire. Sunday (the second Sunday after Easter) and Monday are calm. The soldiers move around in the village, and political agents begin their propaganda and ask many questions about the Father: “Is he in touch with the Americans? Has he helped the right-wing party? The Hmong? Is he a spy? Doesn’t he have a transmitter or weapons?” Some come to take a curious look at the mission, exchange a few words with the Father.

On Tuesday morning, April 18, Father Leroy celebrates Mass and takes breakfast as usual. At around 9:30, the soldiers surround the house. They order Anna, the neighbor, to call the Father. She finds him in the chapel. He goes out to meet the leaders, at the gate of the enclosure. They tell him that a radio order from the government has arrived, an order for the Father to go to the Mission Center at Xieng Khouang. The Father answers that he does not want to leave his Christians, for he is the only one at Ban Pha to take care of them, while at Xieng Khouang there are already several Fathers.

They ask him to give them his revolver. He tells them that he does not have one, and that he has never had one; he is a priest. They want to search him. He takes off his cassock and his shirt without being asked. In his pockets, they find his rosary and his handkerchief; that’s all. Having dressed again, he goes into the house accompanied by two soldiers who immediately confiscate his shotgun and quickly forage through the room looking for the famous revolver; they speak among themselves in Vietnamese. Anna wonders if the so-called revolver is not merely the large cross that the Father wears in his cincture... Finally the soldiers go out after some polite words. The Father goes to the chapel to pray and tells Anna also to pray a lot.

Scarcely a half-hour later (11:30), a large group of guerillas come to Father Leroy. A few moments later, Anna, who is at home preparing a meal, sees everyone leave. The Father has closed the windows and the door, put the keys in his pocket and leaves ahead of five or six soldiers: bare headed, barefoot, in his cassock with his cross in his cincture and his breviary under his arm. Passing in front of Anna’s house, he answers her question: “I am going to see the commandant who is asking for me.” Other soldiers stay in front of the house, forbidding access.

Around 2 in the afternoon, some soldiers return; they have the keys and they tell Anna, who has asked where the Father is: “He has left for Xieng Khouang; we have come to take inventory and sort through his things.”

In the evening, around 8, the village population was assembled for a *khosana* – a propaganda meeting. “The Father has not been killed,” they say, “although he is a spy and a traitor. He is evil. He has been taken to Xieng Khouang; later on, a better one will come to replace him.”

Two or three days later, the guerilla soldiers totally ransacked the mission: they tear up images and burn whatever they cannot carry off.

The day of Father Leroy's capture, a woman from Ban Pha Teu saw the Father passing by, surrounded by soldiers, in a rice field on the edge of the village. A short time later, she heard several shots and thought they were killing the Father, not far from there, in the forest. In the afternoon, a group of women from the same village, while going out to get wood for heating, came upon some soldiers who chased them away. They hurried home frightened. On the following days, they spotted in the forest, in that same place, a new grave which someone had tried to make look old by covering it with twigs and dead leaves. It is whispered that the Father is buried there and no one dares to go closer.

***Father Pierre Chevroulet, o.m.i., adds some notes to this stor*²**

When they took inventory of the church, Anna managed to save the Blessed Sacrament and the sacred vessels. Later, at the beginning of May, she would recognize the grave and would purchase it in the conviction that the Father is really buried there. This would be confirmed years later when a Father was able to return to the place.

Bishop Étienne Loosdregt's document is dated June 15, nearly two months after the fact. It took him that long to find out what had happened. The guerilla soldiers, who have never admitted their deed, have tried by all means to cover over the truth of their actions. We read in the codex historicus of Xieng Khouang the account of all the steps taken in vain by Father Henri Rouzière³, o.m.i., superior of Louis Leroy, to get information on his disappearance and that of his colleague, Father Michel Coquelet.

² Pierre Chevroulet, o.m.i., 1924-2004, arrived in Laos in 1956; he was the provincial superior of the Oblates of Laos from 1964 till 1970.

³ Henri Rouzière, o.m.i., 1919-1994, arrived in Laos in 1947.

Resources for the biography of Father Louis Leroy

Unpublished resources:

Statements of direct witnesses:

- Bishop Louis-Marie Ling Mangkhanekhoun, Vicar Apostolic of Paksé
- Bishop Alessandro Staccioli, o.m.i., former Vicar Apostolic of Louang Prabang
- Père Lucien Bouchard, o.m.i.
- Father Jean-Marie Chuffart, o.m.i. (+)
- Father Armand Clabaut, o.m.i. (+)
- Father Ernest Dumont, o.m.i. (+)
- Father Alexis Fuseau, o.m.i.
- Father Jean Gaudin, o.m.i. (+)
- Father Jean Hanique, o.m.i. (+)
- Father Lucien Jolly, o.m.i. (+)
- Father Yvon L'Hénoret, o.m.i.
- Father René Motte, o.m.i. (+)
- Father Jean-Marie Ollivier, o.m.i. (+)
- Father Joseph Pillain, o.m.i. (+)
- Father Gérard Sion, o.m.i. (+)
- Father Jean Subra, o.m.i. (+)
- Mrs. Anne Boun
- Mr. Paul Moune (+)

Documents

General Archives O.M.I., Rome, Dossier Louis Leroy

- Notes et documents divers concernant la formation religieuse et sacerdotale de Louis Leroy.
- Various letters of Louis Leroy, 1949-1958, notably:
 - Letter of Louis Leroy to the Superior General for the first obedience, January 6, 1955.
- Hand-written note of E. Loosdregt « pour le nécrologe OMI », and various press clippings.
- Anonymous report on the death of Fathers Leroy and Coquelet (original and carbon copy), 2 sheets.
- Report of Fr. Rouzière, 8 June 1961, « Événements de Ban-Pha » (carbon copy), 2 sheets, with a note of Étienne Loosdregt
- Letter of Jean Drouart to Jean Hanique, 21 September 1961 (carbon copy), 2 sheets

General Archives O.M.I., Rome, other dossiers

- Codex Historicus of Ban Pha 1950-1959: Box B-402, doc. H a 63.
- Codex Historicus of Xieng-Khouang 1957-1963: Box B-403, doc. H a 68, cahier 4.
- Letter de Bishop Étienne Loosdregt to Father Léo Deschâtelets, 24 June 1959: *ibid.*, Dossier "Letters Deschâtelets 1958-1960."
- Collective letter signed by Louis Leroy, 17 November 1959 : Box 35 "Loosdregt, E. # 4630", Dossier "Letters Drouart 1959-1960".
- Étienne Loosdregt, o.m.i., « Quelques nouvelles du Laos, ce 17 mai 1961 », dossier Vincent L'Hénoret; other news bulletins coming from Laos, not categorized.
- Codex historicus of the Seminary of Paksane, 3 May 1961: ...
- Letter de Jean Hanique to Jean Drouart, 15 September 1961 : PFXI/1, dossier Jean Hanique.
- Letter of Jean Drouart, o.m.i., to Léo Deschâtelets, o.m.i., 3 April 1964, dossier Jean Wauthier.
- Jean Subra, o.m.i., various dossiers and unpublished texts « Évangélisation des Kmhmu' », General Archives O.M.I., O.M.I. Library, not categorized.

Archives of the OMI Province of France, Marseille

- Dossier Louis Leroy

Archives of the Postulation

- Letters of Louis Leroy to his relatives, 1953-1960.
- Letters of Louis Leroy to the Carmelites of Limoges, 1955-1960.
- Letters of Father Yvon L'Hénoret, o.m.i., 23 May, 10 June et 19 July 1961.
- Pierre Chevroulet, o.m.i., « Étude sur la persécution au Laos (1954-1975) ».

Published resources:

Books

- Pierre Chevroulet, o.m.i., *Oblats au bord du Mékong*, Rome, O.M.I., 1998 (collection « Héritage oblat » n° 14); text reprinted under the title « Oblats témoins de la foi au Laos » in *Documentation OMI* n° 229 (1999), p. 2-31 ; 2^e éd. : *Oblats témoins de la foi au Laos*, Fontenay-sous-Bois, O.M.I., 2000.

Articles

- *Missions O.M.I.*: 1963, p. 508 ; 1966, vol. b, p. 548 ; 1968, p. 6.
- « Scoperta nel Laos la tomba del Padre Leroy », *Osservatore romano*, 9-10 sept. 1963
- Henri Reignat, o.m.i., « Pourquoi sont-ils partis si tôt... ? », *Petites Annales*, March-April, 1968, pp. 1-4.
- « Laos : terre déchirée et hasardeuse. Cette drôle de guerre a tué cinq Oblats », *L'Apostolat des Missionnaires Oblats de Marie Immaculée* (Richelieu, Canada), November 1964.
- Angelo Pelis, o.m.i., « Martiri del Laos », *Missioni OMI*, n° 7/2005, pp. 14-17.

III

At the service of all adversity:

Father Michel Coquelet, o.m.i.

(1931 – 1961)

Biographical Notes

**Provisional text by Roland Jacques, o.m.i.,
Diocesan Postulator**

**Postulation des Martyrs du Laos
94120 Fontenay-sous-Bois, France
November 2011**

In every town where you enter and where they welcome you, eat what they serve you;
heal the sick and tell the people:
“The Kingdom of God is near you.”

Gospel of Luke 10, 8-9

The poorest whom people reject, once they are trusted,
once they trust us, everything changes.

Joseph Wresinski, Rapport moral 1981-1982 du Mouvement International ATD Quart Monde



Father Michel Coquelet, o.m.i. (1931 – 1961)

Witness of Jesus Christ in Laos

Died for the faith on 20 April 1961 at Sop Xieng

The childhood years

Michel COQUELET was born on August 18, 1931, in northern France, at Wignehies (59), in the bosom of a modest working and actively Christian family. He was baptized on the following August 23 in the village's parish church which belongs to the diocese of Cambrai.

His father, Louis, was an electrician at E.D.F.; his mother, Françoise Grassart, was a professional stenographer who quit her job to take care of the children. Michel was the third, after Denyse (3 years old) and Jean-Louis (18 months). Three other children, Raymond, Marie and Thérèse, would come along to enrich and give joy to the household later on, between 1937 and 1946. Together, they made a joyful and closely united family, as attested to by their correspondence with Michel – 228 of his letters to his family have been kept, back and forth from 1948 till the eve of his death – which came upon him by surprise when he had not yet turned 30.



At the end of 1931, when Michel was still in diapers, his parents left the North to move to Chaintreaux near Nemours en Seine-et-Marne; they lived in the hamlet of Grande Borde, amidst the beet and wheat fields.

Michel will barely remember these old family places: when he was five, the family moved 30 km farther on, to a little village of Puiseaux in the Loiret (March 1936). It was there that he would enter school. The studious and mischievous little scholar, at the end of the following school year, together with his two older siblings, received the Honor Prize, the highest award.



Puiseaux (Loiret) : parish church — The old boys' primary school

This distinction won by his three children earned their father the congratulations of the mayor. Until then newcomers, now they were well established in the town! “The mother, a model Christian,” says a witness, “must have hardly slept. Six well-kempt children and many hours at church services...”

Thanks to a teacher that had Michel as a student in 1940-1942 – and who, by his own admission, was then on the side of the “laïcards” [today: “secularists”] – we can learn more intimately the work of grace in the child’s heart. Nearly 50 years after the missionary’s death, he wrote:

Michel Coquelet, my brilliant student, so gentle and well-behaved, too clever... This child was already imbued with mysticism... A too perfect student, a puzzle for me; but his commitment to the service of God and man did not surprise me at all... Every morning, Michel, a model altar boy, served Mass with devotion. Catechism was taught by a model priest, Fr Jacques Barenton. This priest gave him the example of risking one’s life, in spite of being beaten, to go to the aid of an elderly man who was victim of the Gestapo. He surrendered himself to the Gestapo to take the place of an old priest who had been seriously wounded in 1940. They took both of them. Jacques Barenton died in a concentration camp.

According to the teacher, these two heroic priests played a central role in the youth of the future missionary. And he concludes: “Michel is now part of my prayer intentions each evening...”

Maurice, a classmate, confirms this admiring portrait: Michel was “a very nice friend to be around... He was very studious, always first in class, without acting proud, never the last one in studies! He was an example for us.”



Pithiviers (Loiret) : The Collège Saint-Grégoire – The church.



In spite of the hard life and the privations of the war years, the Coquelet family chose to give Michel a real Christian education. In 1942, he passed the test to enter the 6th grade, necessary at that time to continue one’s studies, and he became a boarding student at the Catholic Collège Saint Grégoire de Pithiviers, 20 km from home.

It is in this framework that there took root in Michel’s heart the desire to follow into the priesthood the two priests, witnesses of charity, who had influenced his years at Puiseaux. Father Yves, one of his classmates, testifies:

Michel was a quite original character. A bit timid, reserved, he nevertheless stuck to his opinions. During a meal when there were six of us around the same table, one of us asked the others: “What do you want to do later on?” Michel answered: “I want to be a priest; I will go to the seminary after my studies here.” I answered that I did not know; I did not dare say it for fear of being made fun of... Afterwards we had some meetings

of the “minor seminarians,” a group of five or six, and Michel Coquelet certainly took part in these meetings. [...] Michel loved to sing, all alone. He would lean against a wall or a pillar and would sing some old song... We had a mathematics teacher, Father Moufflet, called “Maouf”, a real character. Michel was sort of his favorite. We often heard: “Coquelet, to the blackboard!” and Coquelet went to the blackboard; he would begin to blush and look a little bashful which greatly amused Father Moufflet.

The long preparation of a missionary

Michel finished the fourth form upon the arrival of the Liberation. His parents had taken his priestly vocation seriously: at the beginning of the 1945 school year, they sent him as boarder to the Minor Seminary of Saint-Michel of Solesmes, in their diocese of origin, Cambrai (59). In this school he prepared and achieved, in 1948, the Baccalaureate in Latin and Greek Literature.



The Minor Seminary of Saint-Michel de Solesmes (59)

With his “bac” in hand and very positive recommendations, Michel Coquelet entered that same year the novitiate of the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate at La Brosse-Montceaux (Seine-et-Marne) – a place marked by history, where several Oblates had been killed in 1944 by the Nazis. One of his companions remembers, a long time later: “I knew Michel from novitiate on. He was, at the same time, modest, happy, and full of humor. He was a serious, kind and fraternal brother. He was surely generous and faith-filled. He was very engaging.” The novice master, on the other hand, gives a more nuanced and less flattering judgement: “The subject is only average but can become very good if he continues to let himself be guided and further develop.”



La Brosse-Montceaux (77), the estate which housed the Oblate novitiate, and the monument to the victims of the Nazis.

What had happened? What had become of the “brilliant student.... too perfect,” “always first in the class,” as those from Puiseaux remembered him? Undoubtedly, Michel’s shyness, his refusal to stand out and put himself in the forefront, negatively influenced the view of his new superiors. Michel was very reserved and would always be hindered by this very real shyness which he will never totally overcome.

In September 1949, after having pronounced his religious vows, Michel was sent, with his co-novices, to the new Oblate scholasticate, the Solignac Abbey in Haute-Vienne. He did there the required studies in philosophy and theology, and he prepared himself in an intense spiritual and community life for the future he had chosen: to become a priest and to exercise the priesthood as a missionary religious.



Solignac and its Abbey

Michel would stay at Solignac until his departure for Laos in 1957, except for 18 months of military service, from January 1952 until June 1953.

During all these years, he remained very close to his family: the frequency and the warmth of

his letters demonstrate this. He will always keep at heart a deep gratitude for those who gave him life and an education, who nourished his faith and promoted his vocation. He shows concern for all family happenings, large and small; especially, there was the premature retirement of his father in 1952, which obliged his mother to take a job at the retreat house in Puiseaux, for there were still two younger sisters to care for.

As for obligatory military service, it was not entirely lost time. Michel discovered for the first time far-off lands: he had “classes” at Oued Smar, near the airport of the White House in Alger. There, he was briefly assigned to the infirmary: this period greatly touched him, but, despite his request for an assignment in a hospital, he was sent as a meteorologist to Ouargla, an oasis on the edge of the Sahara.



Ouargla

Upon his return to Solignac, Michel resumed his studies and his life as a future missionary. But he brought back from Algeria a real passion for caring for the sick, to which, until his death, he will give all that is required – with tact and competence as always. Indeed, the scholasticate superior takes note: “As head infirmarian, Michel gives himself to this task with great charity, a supernatural spirit and lots of tact. He is also quite competent in this regard.” He adds that all of this is done “always in obedience and regularity: he never profits from his job to get around the schedule.”

On June 29, 1954, Michel made his perpetual oblation as an Oblate of Mary Immaculate.

On February 19, 1956, he was ordained a priest in the abbey church at Solignac, in the presence of his parents and his brothers and sisters, brought together with the same pride and emotion – even though they were a bit sad and worried in seeing the approach of a long separation! They will keep an image of him that remains fresh and lively at the end of many decades: “Quiet about what he was deeply feeling, always ready to chat and minimize the risks to his being... he was simply himself: happy, playful, intelligent, warm, attentive to others and in love with life!”

As part of his preparation for ordination, Michel had written, according to the custom, to the Superior General of the Oblates to ask for his obedience:

I am volunteering for the Missions, and very especially, for the Mission of Laos! This desire, which I have had since novitiate, when I recall having been greatly impressed

by a conference by Father Louis Morin⁴, since deceased over there from typhus... He had such enthusiasm in speaking to us about his “poor Mission of Laos” that I felt myself ready to follow him there... This thought has helped me in my life of work and prayer at the scholasticate...

On January 25, 1957, he received his marching papers. After a brief stay in Paris to gather some indispensable items – whatever is needed to celebrate Mass or take care of the sick, etc., Michel flies off to Laos, where Vientiane will welcome him on April 1, 1957.

Missionary in Laos

Around Easter 1957, he was at work. His nearly four years of missionary life in Laos have left few traces in history. His Oblate formators in France had found him unsuitable for teaching; but his Oblate superiors of Laos immediately had a different image of him: they made him a faculty member at the Minor Seminary of Paksane (1957-1958). Michel did not disappoint them. He must indeed have had a special gift for communicating with children because Bishop Louis-Marie Ling, Bishop of Paksé, is happy today to have had, at thirteen, in 6th form, such a good French teacher!

At the same time, Michel began to study the Lao language. His progress was so rapid that after only a year, he could be sent “into the bush”; and there, he had to immediately begin the study of a completely different spoken language, Kmhmu’, besides the rudiments of the Thai-dam dialect! Without making an intellectual genius of him, it is necessary to point out the error of some learned writers of certain reports about his aptitudes...

At the annual retreat at the end of 1958, Michel received an obedience for the mission of Xieng Khouang, the very place where Father Louis Morin had done the pioneer work. One photo which served as the cover for the magazine *Pôle et Tropiques* shows him leaving for his village of Sam Tôm, barefoot, bush hat on his head, with a big smile, pulling behind himself his pack horse. The village where he had been assigned was poor, a village of Kmhmu’ neophytes whose instruction had not taken place on a regular basis. Michel’s reflections on this subject, as noted in the journal of the mission, give an idea of his suffering as a missionary, but also of his great spirit of faith, touched with the humor that was one of the attractive characteristics of his personality. He is simply there; he becomes everything for everyone...

Father Joseph Pillain, o.m.i., who was a missionary in Laos for more than twelve years, gives a rather general testimony about Michel and some other missionaries:

They were all admirable missionaries, ready for every sacrifice, living very poorly, with unlimited devotion. In those troubled times, all of us, more or less, desired martyrdom, to give our whole life for Christ. We were not afraid to expose our lives and venture into areas called dangerous... The missionary team of Laos was deeply united among themselves and tightly united with their bishop. We all wanted to go to the poorest, to visit the villages, to care for the sick, and especially, to proclaim the Gospel...

⁴ Louis Morin, o.m.i., 1912-1950, arrived in Laos in 1936. Died at Xieng Khouang on 1 October 1950, he was the first Oblate to be buried in Laos.



Father Michel Coquelet, o.m.i., at Xieng Khouang, setting out on a missionary journey.

Out of necessity, Michel's letters to his family would become more and more rare. They allowed his parents, his brothers and his sisters to imagine a little of his far-off life, his missionary work. They have the same impersonal tone, the same humor; he stays very quiet about his difficulties and his suffering.

Nor did he let these difficulties weigh upon those whom he was sent to evangelize. A witness from this period, who at the time was a young child in a Kmhmu' village served by Father Coquelet, paints his picture in this way:

He taught us catechism... then he gave us candy. We helped him in his garden or to carry water. He lived in the church: in fact, there was only one building divided in two – on one side the church and on the other, Father's lodging... I remember that he also went around the village with his book, praying. He had a black cassock and a big cross. When they saw him, the people were put at ease: he had expelled the evil spirit... He was calm, not demanding; he did not shout like the other Fathers. He willingly loaned

his horse...

Another witness calls to mind, with a brilliant flash of light, the beloved priest of his childhood, and he reveals a little incident that sums up very well the personality of this man:

When I was very small, Father Coquelet came into my village and lived with my family. Every Sunday, he came to celebrate Mass. I remember it well. There was no road into the village; he came on his horse. He spoke Kmhmu'. After Mass, he gave out some candy. One day when I was about five, I was stung on the foot by some insects and I could no longer walk. He gave me one of his shoes and I kept it. He left barefoot.

In 1961, Father Michel Coquelet lived in Phôn Pheng, a remote Christian village near Tha Vieng in the Province of Xieng Khouang, and which was also called Ban Houay Nhèng. He took care of a rather large area: the canton of Nam Say, and then of Xieng Khong and the region of Tha Vieng, at the foot of the imposing Phou Xao mountain, on the dirt road which goes, in dry season, from Xieng Khouang to Paksane. According to one witness, the Fathers had been reported as spies by the inhabitants of non-Christian villages who were jealous of the progress accomplished under the influence of the mission. Like the other missionaries of the region, Father Coquelet wore a beard so as to be identified as a missionary and not as an American.

Follow Christ to the very end

On Sunday, April 16, 1961, Michel celebrated the Second Sunday after Easter with his Christian community. On Monday the 17th, he took his leave: he had been called to care for an injured person at Ban Nam Pan. He was supposed to come home on Thursday, the 20th, by bicycle. He did not know what had happened on the 18th to his confrere and friend, Louis Leroy, in another area of the same region.

Some testimonies make it possible to postulate the events which surrounded this departure. Here is the first one:

My father had been rather seriously injured in his leg; the guerillas had fired at him. We called Father Coquelet who came to take care of him. In my village, there was no church nor residence for the priest; so he lodged with my family and he stayed there a few days. But the injury was too serious and my father had to be operated on at Phonsavane. While he was with us, the catechist from Houey Nhèng came to call him : another sick person needed him urgently. Father Coquelet also took his bicycle to go back home. Two or three days later, some other persons came from Houey Nhèng, insisting that they really needed him urgently. So he left us but he never arrived there! So the people of my village began to look everywhere for him, all the way to Xieng Khouang, without finding even a trace. Then someone said they had seen some soldiers between Nam Pane and Houey Nhèng pick up his bicycle and put it in an army truck. At the designated place, they dug and Boun Ma hit the head of the Father with his pickaxe.



Views of the Province of Xieng Khouang

A second witness with independent information tells the final story. Not far from Xieng Khong, Michel was stopped by the guerillas. The soldiers told him: “Your superior wants you to return to Xieng Khouang.” He answered: “That is not true: my superior would have told me otherwise; there are enough persons going to Xieng Khouang and coming back.” Leaving the bicycle behind, the soldiers take him along the old French road toward Ban Sop Xieng. A little away from the road, they tell him to dig his grave. Michel throws the shovel aside. He would die standing up, fearless, for Christ and for the Laotians.

His parishioners could not find his grave; a passerby told them not to look any more: his executioners came back and threw his body in the river. At the same time, the house-chapel of Sam Tôm was ransacked and destroyed by another detachment. Then it was the turn of Phôn Pheng; the village chief, a Christian, and his secretary were beaten, bound and led through the village and then shot, like the Father, on the edge of the road.

Father Michel Coquelet had been killed without a trial and without mercy. He was not yet 30

years old. From that moment, the blood he shed enriches the laotian land.

* * *

Michel's sister who was closest to him tells of how the family took the event: "I don't think he desired to die a martyr, but he accepted it when the time came, very likely regretting that he could longer continue his mission."

Bishop Alessandro Staccioli, o.m.i.⁵, Vicar Apostolic Emeritus, states his view of the spirit that animated these Oblate "martyrs," who died at the beginning of the 1960's, of which Michel was among them:

Perhaps they were not thinking explicitly about martyrdom, but they did not exclude it: they knew that staying in Laos, given the situation and the hatred of the guerillas for the Church, they risked being killed. Aware of this eventuality, never, ever did they say that they would be willing to abandon the mission of their own accord.

Each of them made it clear that, for the Gospel in that country, they were giving themselves entirely, that they fully shared the suffering and the misery of the people. The Church was born of the Cross and of sacrifice. That is true also the Church in a mission land.

When news of the disappearance of Father Coquelet arrived in Paksane, one of the Oblates wrote in the community journal:

The tragedy, when the struggle is with that kind of enemy, is that they manage to stifle even that testimony, to distort it into a political crime: that's the worst perversion, the devil's signature... Prayer, abandonment to Providence, the Kingdom of God is sown in tears and through sacrifice.

Some years later, in reading the journal ("Codex historicus") of the mission station of Sam Tôm, held in 1958-1959 by Michel, his confrere Jean Subra wrote:

It was with emotion, a deep emotion, that I understood in this text... the difficulty of the apostolate at Sam Tôm that Michel Coquelet experienced for long months, less than two years before the sacrifice of his life, generously accepted so as to "stay in place" among the Kmhmu' who had been confided to his care. If some day one wishes to show how an Oblate missionary was an apostle like the Lord asked, let him read this *Codex historicus*... I admire and I marvel at the spirit of service of Michel toward the Kmhmu'.

The Kmhmu' had been baptized too soon (it seems to me). It was Michel who had to bear the heavy fallout of these baptized persons who had perhaps never made a real act of faith. Michel was aware of the weakness of these people. Nevertheless, he held up. He was a man of humor, of wonderful humor; and he loved them... The Good Shepherd. Michel did not run away... He fell, he was killed at his post... Will we ever know exactly what kind of death he suffered? But he surely accepted that for the Kmhmu' of Sam Tôm whom I had begun to visit about ten years [earlier] (1951), from the village of Ban Nam Mon. May Michel Coquelet help me now to stay faithful to Jesus Christ in all that he will yet ask of me the service of the evangelization of the world.

From the ransacked and ruined church of Michel Coquelet, later on they found a small ciborium, today kept at Paksane. It was in prayer before this ciborium, which contained the

⁵ Bishop Alessandro Staccioli, born in 1931, arrived in Laos in 1957, bishop since 1968; he was, from 1968 till 1975, the second Vicar Apostolic of Louang Prabang.

sacrament of the Body of Jesus Christ, that Michel had found the strength to follow his Master till the very end, till the supreme gift of his life for Laos.



*The Abbey church of Solignac (Haute-Vienne, France)
where Michel Coquelet was ordained a priest on 19 February 1956*

***Letter of Michel Coquelet
to Father Léo Deschâtelets, o.m.i.,
Superior General of the Missionary Oblates***

Solignac, 1 October 1956

My very Reverend and Beloved Father,

“Studiis absolutis, Superiori generali... singuli præsto erunt. [At the end of his studies, each Oblate will put himself at the disposition of the Superior General.]” It’s after having read and reread this article from our Holy Rules that I take pen in hand to write you, not to “ask” for an obedience of my choice, but to offer myself to the service of the Lord of the Harvest, in the field where you will wish to assign me.

So I also will be very happy to repeat for you here the old formula: “Ecce ego, mitte me! [Here I am, send me!] But I fear that this indifference might seem to you to be a lack of enthusiasm for the different ministries of the Congregation. On the other hand, I know that you want to know the desires placed by the Good God in our hearts, and especially, that you only send volunteers to the Missions.

So, that is what I will tell you simply: I volunteer for the Missions and very especially, for the Mission of Laos! I have this desire since the novitiate where I remember having been greatly impressed by a conference of Father Morin, since deceased, down there, of typhus. Something special and supernatural emanated from this Father, and he had such enthusiasm speaking to us about his “poor Mission” of Laos, so in tune with the Congregation, that I felt I was ready to follow him. The superficial enthusiasm of youth? Maybe. But there must have been something else, because it is still there, after seven years, and this thought has helped me in my life of work and prayer at the scholasticate.

I tell you this in complete obedience, happy to accept your decision, for it would be difficult for me – each one being a bad judge of his own case –to depend on nature and grace. I ask the Good God now in my prayer for the grace to be able to accept your decision, whatever it might be, agreeing or not with my desires, solely out of obedience to his good pleasure.

Please accept, my very Reverend Father, with the assurance of my humble prayer, the expression of my filial respect and my total obedience, in Our Lord and Mary Immaculate.

Michel Coquelet, o.m.i.

Scholasticate of Solignac

Resources for the biography of Father Michel Coquelet

Unpublished resources:

Statements of direct, face to face, witnesses.

- Bishop Louis-Marie Ling Mangkhanekhoun, Vicar Apostolic of Paksé
- Bishop Alessandro Staccioli, o.m.i., former Vicar Apostolic of Louang Prabang
- Father Lucien Bouchard, o.m.i.
- Father Pierre Chevroulet, o.m.i. (+)
- Father René Charrier, o.m.i.
- Father Jean-Marie Chuffart, o.m.i. (+)
- Father Ernest Dumont, o.m.i. (+)
- Father André Durand, o.m.i.
- Father Michel Frémaux, o.m.i.
- Father Alexis Fuseau, o.m.i.
- Father Adrien Gaillard, o.m.i. (+)
- Frère Hervé Givelet, o.m.i.
- Father Jean Hanique, o.m.i. (+)
- Father Yvon L'Hénoret, o.m.i.
- Father René Motte, o.m.i. (+)
- Father Jean-Marie Ollivier, o.m.i. (+)
- Father Joseph Pillain, o.m.i. (+)
- Father Gérard Sion, o.m.i. (+)
- Father Jean Subra, o.m.i. (+)
- Mr. Régis Vincent (+)
- Mr. Bouakèo
- Mr. Boun Ma
- Mr. Paul Moune (+)
- Mr. Phétsamone
- Mr. Bonaventure Sivilay
- Mr. Paulo Sompèng
- Mr. Somsy Phantarasmy
- Mr. Tham

Documents

General Archives O.M.I., Rome, Dossier Michel Coquelet

- Various notes concerning the religious and priestly formation of Michel Coquelet.
- Various letters of Michel Coquelet, 1949-1956, notably:
- Letter of Michel Coquelet to the Superior General for his first obedience, 1 October 1956.
- Various reports on the death of Frs. Leroy et Coquelet
- Notes of the General Archivist O.M.I. concerning the disappearance and death of Michel Coquelet, 1963 and 1967.

General Archives O.M.I., Rome, other dossiers

- Codex historicus of Ban Pha 1950-1959: Box B-402, doc. H a 63.
- Codex historicus of Sam Tôm 1958-1959, Box 3-402, doc. H a 65
- Note of Father Jean Subra o.m.i., 18 avril 1994, *ibid.*
- Codex historicus of Sommeng – Nam Hay – Phon Pheng 1954-1959, Box B-402, doc. H a 66
- Codex historicus of Xieng-Khouang 1957-1963: Box B-403, doc. H a 68, notebook 4.
- Letter de Bishop Étienne Loosdregt to Father Jean Drouart, 10 September 1959: *ibid.*

- Collective letter signed by Michel Coquelet, 17 November 1959: Box 35 "Loosdregt, E. # 4630", Dossier "Letters Drouart 1959-1960".
- Codex historicus of the Seminary of Paksane, 3 May 1961 : ...
- Étienne Loosdregt, o.m.i., « Quelques nouvelles du Laos, ce 17 mai 1961 », dossier Vincent L'Hénoret; other circulars and news coming from Laos, unsorted.
- Letters of Henri Delcros to his family (typed copies), 1961
- Letter of Jean Hanique to Jean Drouart, 15 September 1961 : PFXI/1, dossier Jean Hanique.
- Letter of Jean Drouart, o.m.i., to Léo Deschâtelets, o.m.i., 3 April 1964, dossier Jean Wauthier.
- Jean Subra, o.m.i., various dossiers and unpublished texts « Évangélisation des Kmhmu' », General Archives O.M.I., O.M.I. Library, unsorted.

Archives of the O.M.I. Province of France, Marseille

- Dossier Michel Coquelet, among others:
- Four letters of Michel Coquelet in line with his first formation.
- Notes of Superiors and various documents relative to his first formation.

Archives of the Postulation

- Bishop Étienne Loosdregt, o.m.i., P. Henri Rouzière, o.m.i., *et al.*, « Rapport sur la disparition des PP. Leroy et Coquelet ».
- Letters of Father Yvon L'Hénoret, o.m.i., 23 May and 19 July 1961.
- Pierre Chevroulet, o.m.i., « Étude sur la persécution au Laos (1954-1975) ». Archives of the Postulation.
- Letters of Denyse Coquelet
- Letters of Régis Vincent
- Written testimony of Abbé Yves Driart

Administrative military archives, Pau

- Military dossier of Michel Coquelet

Ministère des Affaires Étrangères, Service central d'État-Civil, Nantes

- Acte de décès de Michel Coquelet

Family archives

- Correspondence of Michel Coquelet with his family:
 - 148 letters from France (1948-1951 and 1953-1957)
 - 37 letters from Algeria (1952-1953)
 - 40 letters from Laos (1957-1961)
- Letters of François Péron, o.m.i., to the Coquelet family, 1961-1965
- Various letters of Jean Wauthier, o.m.i., to his family, 1961-1965
- Letters of Charles Loison, o.m.i., to the Coquelet family, 1962-1967
- Letters of Jean-Marie Ollivier, o.m.i., to the Coquelet family, 1962-1967
- Letters of Jean Subra, o.m.i., to the Coquelet family, 1963-1967
- Letters of Henri Delcros, o.m.i. to the Coquelet family, 1963-1967
- Letter of Henri Rouzière, o.m.i., to the Coquelet family, 1964
- Letter of Raoul Lalanne, o.m.i., to the Coquelet family, 1965
- Letter of René Charrier, o.m.i., to the Coquelet family, 1966
- Letter of Yvon L'Hénoret, o.m.i., to the Coquelet family, 1967

Published resources:

Books

- Pierre Chevroulet, o.m.i., *Oblats au bord du Mékong*, Rome, O.M.I., 1998 (collection « Héritage oblat » n° 14) ; texte a été repris sous le titre « Oblats témoins de la foi au Laos » dans *Documentation OMI* n° 229 (1999), p. 2-31 ; 2^e éd. : *Oblats témoins de la foi au Laos*, Fontenay-sous-Bois, O.M.I., 2000.

Articles

- Deux lettres de Michel Coquelet aux Oblats de Solignac, *Cor Unum* (Solignac), Noël 1957 et Pâques 1958.
- *Missions O.M.I.* : 1963, p. 508 ; 1966, vol. B, p. 548 ; 1968, p. 6.
- Henri Reignat, o.m.i., « Pourquoi sont-ils partis si tôt... ? », *Petites Annales*, mars-avril, 1968, pp. 1-4.
- « Laos : terre déchirée et hasardeuse. Cette drôle de guerre a tué cinq Oblats », *L'Apostolat des Missionnaires Oblats de Marie Immaculée* (Richelieu, Canada), novembre 1964.
- Angelo Pelis, o.m.i., « Martiri del Laos », *Missioni OMI*, n° 7/2005, pp. 14-17.

IV

A Breton among the Thaï Deng:

Father Vincent L'Hénoret, o.m.i.

(1921 – 1961)

Biographical Notes

**Provisional text by Roland Jacques, o.m.i.,
Diocesan Postulator**

**Postulation des Martyrs du Laos
94120 Fontenay-sous-Bois, France
November 2011**

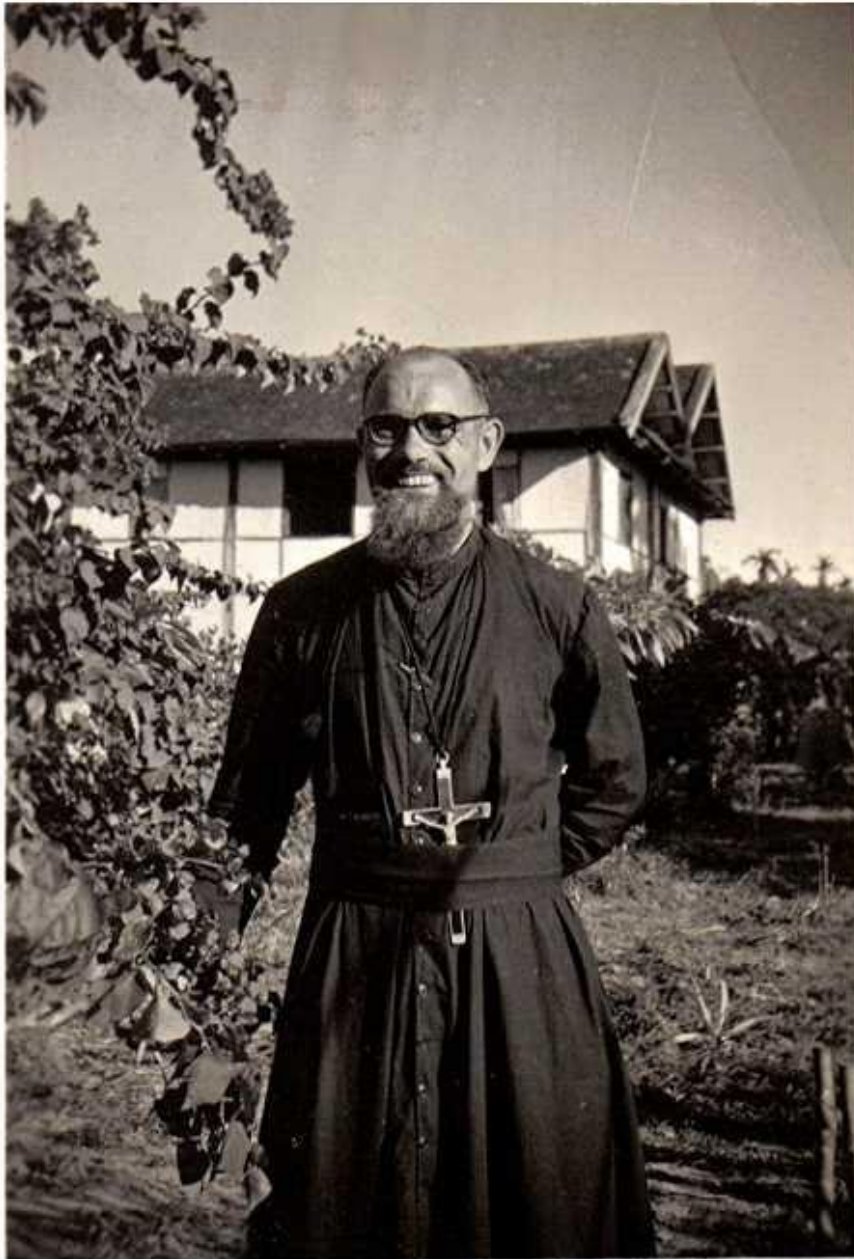
Den n'en deus brasoc'h karantez eget an hini a ro e vuhez evit e vignoned.
No one has greater love than to give his life for his friends.

Gospel of John 15, 13.

Da guenta, songeal alies er benefisou resevet digant Doue ; [peh] en tra ze a cresq ar carantez.
Goudeze songeal [ez eo] ema tost ar maro, pehini a zeu da lamet an amser dober mat...

First, think often of the gifts received from God: that makes love grow.
Then think that death is near, which diminishes the time for doing good

Dom Michel Le Nobletz, « Contre la paresse » (Annales de Bretagne, 64, 1957, p.430-431)



Father Vincent L'Hénoret, o.m.i. (1921 – 1961)

Witness of Jesus Christ in Laos

Died for the faith on 11 May 1961 at Ban Ban

Vincent L'HÉNORET was born on March 12, 1921, at Pont l'Abbé (29); he was baptized that same day in the village church which belongs to the diocese of Quimper in Brittany. That is a region of France which has sent many missionaries to the four corners of the world. Coming from a deeply Catholic family of 14 children, Vincent attended primary school at the *Collège catholique Saint-Gabriel* in his hometown. Then he was a boarding student at the juniorate of the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate at Pontmain (Mayenne, France), for his entire high school years, 1933 till 1940.

A youth marked by the war

The little village of Pontmain is famous for an apparition of the Blessed Virgin. During the war of 1870-1872, Mary had written in the sky the following message for some children: "My children, pray. God will hear you shortly. My Son let's himself be moved." The closeness of her whom at Pontmain they call "Mother of Hope", as well as her message, had to have touched in an unforgettable way the heart of the young man.

Furthermore, at the end of Vincent's studies, there is a new war. With other friends, he asks to consecrate his life to God, in view of the mission, in the Oblate family. They will do their novitiate in the same house at Pontmain, next to the basilica of Our Lady. In his report, Vincent's novice master describes a kind and shy young man, with modest intellectual gifts – so much so that he becomes easily discouraged – but also a man with good sense, virtuous, religious and devout. Later on, when he will be in charge of the little hut of a school in Ban Ban, Laos, Vincent will baptize it, with humor and pride, his "university"!

For his studies in philosophy and theology, he was sent to La Brosse-Montceaux in Île-de-France. There, he personally saw the drama of July 24, 1944: the summary execution of five Oblates of his community by Nazi German soldiers. He and his confreres were deported to a prison camp at Compiègne; but they would be liberated shortly thereafter, at the beginning of September, by the advancing allies.

Upon his return to La Brosse, Vincent made his perpetual oblation on March 12, 1945, and he was ordained a priest on July 7, 1946. Peace had returned, but for his first Mass, he had himself photographed in front of the monument dedicated to the murdered Oblates, where there is an engraved inscription on the stone this sentence of Jesus: "No one has greater love than to give his life for his friends." For the rest of his life, this would be for him a motto to which he would always remain faithful.

Vincent L'Hénoret is now ready to leave for the mission. In a note to his superiors, he wrote:

I have always desired the foreign missions. I liked the mission of Laos, but now that a difficult mission is being founded in Chad, I would willingly accept going there, since I am ready for any sacrifice, even that of my life for the cause of Christ and his Holy Mother. Nevertheless, if Christ calls me elsewhere, I will follow that call, because all souls have been saved at the price of his blood, no matter what climate they are in.

To his Superior⁶ in Rome, who must decide about his assignment, he writes in the same sense and adds: "My health can withstand the harshest shocks; unfortunately, my intellectual gifts are not of the same stature. I have had a lot of difficulty with my studies; so as to avoid English, I want either Laos or Chad, or if that's not possible, Hudson Bay."

Nice misconception of a future missionary: he does not yet know about the linguistic complexity of Laos! On May 19, 1947, he receives his assignment.... For Garoua (Cameroon)!

⁶ Father Hilaire Balmès, o.m.i., Vicar General of the Oblates.

But this destination is later changed, on August 10, on almost the eve of his departure: it is indeed to Laos that he will go to proclaim the Gospel.

Missionary in Laos

The period of his first stay in Laos was in the area of Paksane on the banks of the Mekong: first at Kengsadok, the oldest Christian community in north Laos; there, he needs to learn the language, the customs and the method of missionary activity. He is then sent to be in charge at Nong Buoa (Nong Veng); then to Paksane itself. At Nong Bua, he found a strong community of 400 Christians. So he wrote to his confreres still studying in France:

I am in a difficult mission, not yet the most difficult, but that will come; the mountains are not far from here and, when I will have a bit of experience, I hope to settle there or to go north to the real bush; here too, there is the bush in all its wild beauty, among very nice people. I've come out better than I had hoped.

Caring shepherd, rather strict, he knows how to be loved by these Christians sometimes called "old" because they were already in the third generation. Two witnesses, who at the time were children, remember him:

He knew how to build: he worked on the church and changed a lot of things; he did manual labor. He was a man of faith, generous.... He read; he prayed a lot; he went from here to Paksane by horseback while reading his breviary and praying...

In 1956, Vincent took his only vacation: a few months in France. In November, he was back for a year, to the same field of ministry. Leaving the valley of the Mekong, he then went definitively to the mountains in the north, the "bush" of which he had dreamed: in November 1957, he joined the missionary team of Xieng Khouang. His posting was at Ban Ban.

At the eastern end of the Plain of Jars, on the road that goes down toward Vinh in Vietnam, Ban Ban, today called Muang Kham, was a little cluster that had only a handful of Christians. In the neighborhood, however, several villages of Thai Deng refugees coming from the province of Sam Neua had settled there since 1952-1953.

The pastoral and missionary work was not easy: these people had suffered the vagaries of endemic war which had hardly spared them for years; they needed something like a new conversion. There was much to do, especially in giving self-confidence to dislocated families. For Vincent, this assignment was a real challenge. He got to work courageously, even passionately, becoming the "servant of the poor" according to the words of Father Jean Subra.⁷

In the final months of 1960, the dissident regime installed in Sam Neua extended its grip over the whole region. The system was organized with its sequence of indoctrination meetings and barriers to the free movement of persons. To go to the villages he served, every time Vincent had to bring the pass stipulated by the authorities; they usually gave it to him without much trouble. He had informed his superiors that after the fears of the beginning, a kind of 'modus vivendi' had been established between the new authorities and the missionaries, and it worked pretty well.

Father Jean-Marie Ollivier⁸ was a member of the team; but when Ban Ban was occupied, he was kept from returning to his post. From the beginning of 1959, for ministry to the Kmhmu', they had the help of Father Jean-Baptiste Khamphanh, a newly ordained Laotian diocesan priest.

⁷ Jean Subra, o.m.i., 1923-2000, arrived in Laos in 1949.

⁸ Jean-Marie Ollivier, o.m.i., 1926-2004, arrived in Laos in 1954.

Portrait of a missionary

After Vincent's death, his bishop, Bishop Étienne Loosdregt, o.m.i., would say of him:

Father Vincent was one of the Fathers who spoke fluent Lao the best. He was not a brilliant intellectual, but he worked hard at it and he got it. I myself have seen him rise at four in the morning to prepare his catechism class when he was at Nong Vent. If we assigned him to Ban Ban, a difficult spot and destined to become the district center, it was because he had all our trust.

Others too filled out his portrait at the time of his death. In a letter from his parishioners, written by a catechist to his mother and widely disseminated, we read:

... As for your son, when he arrived among us, he had some difficulties; he was far from being at ease. He taught us many things; he helped us to know the Good God; he made us live the virtues; he was always there to heal us. He made us avoid sin; he gave us the grace of God. He tried to help us in our lives. He helped the students; some are studying to be priests; others, to be catechists. He helped us find food; he helped many to acquire knowledge...

Sister Jeanne-Vincent, a Thaï Deng who had him for spiritual direction, testifies:

Father Vincent was worried about the practices of his Thaï Deng parishioners. He fought the sacrificing of chickens: when someone is sick, our people sacrifice a chicken to the evil spirits that cause illnesses, so as to appease them. My grandmother did it secretly. The Father scolded us when he found out. He reminded us that it is not good to work on Sunday, for example, cutting rice. But he was less strict about that...

As for his strictness, his cousin, Father Yvon L'Hénoret⁹, explains:

His strictness was a sign: it showed his preoccupation of safeguarding the faith of the youth. That is why he forbade them to participate in Buddhist feasts. Keeping with the spirit of the times, one tended to protect youth by strictness... So he was strict in his ministry according to the mentality of the times... But in his family, there were 14 children and all of them were full of joy.

The judgement of other confreres is equally positive: "Vincent was very close to the people." Jean-Marie Ollivier adds: "He was a good religious and very brotherly in community." Bishop Alessandro Staccioli, who knew him before he became bishop at Louang Prabang: "Father L'Hénoret was a very open man. He willingly spoke of his life and his little adventures at his mission post."

The events of Ascension Thursday 1961

On Wednesday, May 10, 1961, Vincent L'Hénoret received a pass to go celebrate the feast of the Ascension at Ban Na Thoum, a village some 7 km away; at that time, Ascension Thursday was an obligatory feast for Laos as well as for Vietnam. He planned to return to Ban Ban the next day for the feast day Mass.

⁹ Yvon L'Hénoret, o.m.i., born in 1932, arrived in Laos in 1959.



Father Vincent L'Hénoret, o.m.i., and his church at Ban Ban

On Thursday morning, May 11, he was seen leaving Na Thoum by bicycle at seven in the morning, as he had announced to his parishioners. A little later, between Ban Na Thoum and Ban Fai (ပဲခူးလွင်), he was stopped by three men wearing guerilla uniforms. A peasant woman who was working in her field was witness to the first part of the scene: the Father brought out a paper, his pass, undoubtedly. That seemed to satisfy the soldiers, because the Father got on his bicycle again and took to the road.

The peasant woman did not see what followed, but a little later, she heard some shots: she barely paid attention because that had become common. Nevertheless, as she returned to the village, she found the bicycle and then saw a body barely covered in a trench. Terrified, she did not dare say or do anything for the moment. The next day, a little group of villagers went to the site. At about 1500 meters from the village, they saw a large pool of blood on the road and discovered the body of the Father which had been carried to ditch farther into the forest. Frightened, they just covered it with a little earth and branches. On Saturday, they went to get Father Khamphanh, and with him proceeded to give a dignified but quick burial, without dawdling because all remained aware of the danger. A cross was placed on the grave.

There was never any explanation given for the murder. The military authorities stationed in the region chose to purely and simply deny everything; even their neutral allies did not have the courage to concede the facts, much less dare to accuse the perpetrators.

According to a witness, who still lived at Na Thoum for a few years, the new masters demolished their church and forbade the Christians to meet. The young generations have no longer been able to be catechized; they only know the school and the propaganda, and they do not know about the Christian religion.

The motives of a murder

As for the death of Vincent, we have sought to know the motive for his death: did they want to eliminate with him what remained of the French presence in this region?

For the witnesses who were living there at that time, there is no doubt: it was truly the priest and not the foreigner they wanted to eliminate. Therefore, after more than 40 years, Father Khamphanh continues to insist on it: Vincent died in this way because he was a Catholic priest.

It is he that they were watching; it is for him that they had laid a trap. This is confirmed by Bishop Louis-Marie Ling, Bishop of Pakse, who personally knew Vincent as a child and who knows the area of Ban Ban: “I believe he was killed out of hatred for religion and, especially, of the Catholic religion. “

When Vincent L’Hénoret died, Sister Jeanne-Vincent was in the convent. She tells of what she was told later by the she called her grandmother – the aged relative who raised her:

The soldiers who shot him were mercenaries who had been paid by [the new masters of the region] to do that. The men who killed the Father spoke Vietnamese among themselves, as well as the other soldiers. Those people did not like French priests.

Father Khamphanh came then to sleep in Father Vincent’s house. The soldiers said: “That one is not afraid... Does he want to die like his big brother?” The cook heard them and the people knew well that this was a threat. So Father Khamphanh had to leave; he slept no longer in the house. They did not kill Father Vincent because he was French, but because they did not like religion and especially the priests. I am certain about that: otherwise, why would they have threatened Father Khamphanh?

The meaning of a life given, a death offered

Was Father Vincent L’Hénoret ready to encounter the final test in that way? Indeed, at the end of his formation, he had written: “[I am] ready for any sacrifice, including that of my life for the sake of Christ...” That could be considered the simple dream of youth, words in the air. We must listen to those who knew him best as a missionary in Laos.

Father Jean-Marie Ollivier, who was very close to him, testifies: “Vincent did not want to leave his post. He stayed in spite of the danger, along with Father Khamphanh, a Laotian priest.” In 1961, he had already written to the mother of his confrere:

He wanted to stay with his Christians, faithful at his post till the end, in spite of the presence of the enemy. And that is how he died, fulfilling his priestly work... Pray to him in your heart; for me; there is not even the shadow of a doubt that he has received from God his reward, and from on high, he looks upon his mother, he watches over her and the whole family.

This point of view is largely corroborated by other witnesses. Father Pierre Chevroulet, who was the provincial superior of the Oblates of Laos, adds to these subjective considerations an objective element of prime importance: “The missionaries, that is to say, Fathers Louis Leroy, Michel Coquelet and Vincent L’Hénoret, adhered strictly to the directive from Rome to stay with their Christians, even *in periculo mortis*.”¹⁰

In a letter written to Vincent’s mother, just after his murder, Bishop Étienne Loosdregt, his bishop, develops this thought:

Your son stayed at his post by obedience. [Rome] last year had given the directive that the Fathers having charge of souls had to stay at their post: that is why Vincent stayed at Ban Ban. He could no longer do much, but it was to be a witness to Christ in these difficult days, and it was acting as a priest that he was killed. The enemy will say that he was a spy, that he was involved in politics; that is absolutely false. It is exclusively as a priest that he was living at Ban Ban, and it is exclusively for priestly ministry that he moved about. He died because he was a priest and because he was faithful to the

¹⁰ Latin saying: “In case of danger of death”. For Fathers Louis Leroy and Michel Coquelet, see the preceding chapters.

directives of the Holy See.

In his homily, the bishop added: “Just as in the past the apostles died a violent death out of fidelity to Christ, so too Vincent died a violent death out of fidelity to Jesus whom he wanted to serve, cost what it may. Evidently, he will have the right to the reward of the good and faithful servants.” Father Yvon L’Hénoret, who reported these words, concludes:

Vincent certainly was not ignorant of the feelings of [the new leaders] in respect to the Fathers, but he thought he could still remain for the spiritual good of his Christians. This is where his witnessing actually begins... For us, what counts is that God has deigned to call to Himself Vincent in the exercise of his priestly ministry by the witness of blood. This is the Christian meaning of this death, and for me there is no other.

Father Ernest Dumont takes a broader perspective, where he embraces at a single glance Fathers Louis Leroy, Michel Coquelet and Vincent L’Hénoret:

I cherish the memory of apostolic men in the prime of life, living fully as witnesses to Jesus Christ, radiating a joy and enthusiasm for which I have always envied them. All of them lived close to the poor conditions of the people in their small villages lost in the mountains. Between them, at Xieng Khouang on [the Oblate feast] of 17 February 1959, there reigned a manly friendship; we can only thank the Lord for having so joined them in their ministry before bringing them together in a single testimony of faithful authenticity until death.

For me, as a young missionary, it is a guiding memory, like a gift from God, even a milestone in the unfortunate insignificance of my often feeble missionary activities. I still see these young Oblates, bold and uninhibited -- they were happy to live in an uncertain political and military climate; they envisaged a brutal death lucidly, as possible, normal, in line with the Passion and the Cross ...

Some memories of a spiritual daughter of Vincent L’Hénoret

Sister Jeanne Vincent, Thai Deng herself, had asked to be able to bear in religious life, next to the name of the founder of her congregation, that of her spiritual father. In addition to her comments reported above, she brings valuable insight into the life of Vincent:

The roads and paths were very bad, but that did not discourage him; he was not afraid. He had a jeep, but to go to most villages, he could not use it. If he had not so loved the people, he would have gone only to places where there was a highway. But he wanted to go everywhere...

It is he who took me to the convent; I owe him my vocation. The first time, I was still very young. He took me to the sisters and he left by surprise. Later on, he asked me if I wanted to leave with him, but I wanted to stay; he always cared for me and often asked about my news. Father Vincent was a deeply good man...

His last sermon, at the evening Mass at Na Thoum, touched the people: he dedicated it totally to death. He said he was always ready, for the Lord comes like a thief... He died on the road, the next day between 7 and 8 in the morning. Two or three soldiers asked him for his pass. Everything was in order. He got on his bicycle again. That is when they shot him. He fell crying, “Ohhhh!” He was not dead; he mopped at his blood. Then they came back and shot him again. The handkerchief with which he had wiped up his own blood stayed red for three days: all the people of the village could see that...

I am certain that Father Vincent gave his life; he gave himself entirely. He really loved the people. He knew he was risking his life. He went everywhere, to all the villages. He had asked for a pass for that, but he knew that it was nevertheless dangerous. He was not afraid: he gave his life beforehand. Since 1960, the situation had become very difficult, but he continued his work without fear. He only thought of the Christians who needed the good God. In the village of my grandmother, half the people were animists; so he went there often to help them understand the faith better.

Among the Catholics, everyone has the same opinion of Father Vincent, because he was someone who really gave himself to them. He knew he was risking his life, but nevertheless, he went out to the Christians. The soldiers detested him, but the Father gave his life for the Christians. Since his death, till today, the priests have never been able to come back.

I was still very young at the time of his death, but everyone spoke in the same way. I went to visit my grandmother in the month of June, some weeks after his death. Everyone was talking about it; everyone was saying: "He sacrificed his life for us." I cried a lot, because it was Father who brought me to the sisters and he always took very good care of me. It is in memory of me that I bear, as a religious, the name of "Sister Jeanne-Vincent".

Resources for the biography of Father Vincent L'Hénoret

Unpublished resources:

Statements of direct, witnesses (eyewitness):

- Bishop Louis-Marie Ling Mangkhanekhoun, Vicar Apostolic of Paksé
- Bishop Alessandro Staccioli, o.m.i., former Vicar Apostolic of Louang Prabang
- Rev. Jean-Baptiste Khamphanh Vorachak, prêtre du Vicariat apostolique de Vientiane.
 - Father Ernest Dumont, o.m.i. (+)
 - Father Jean Hanique, o.m.i. (+)
 - Father Yvon L'Hénoret, o.m.i.
 - Father Jean-Marie Ollivier, o.m.i. (+)
 - Father Joseph Pillain, o.m.i. (+)
 - Father Pierre Khamhung Sikasak, o.m.i. (+)
 - Father Gérard Sion, o.m.i. (+)
- Sister Jeanne-Vincent
- Mr. Paul Moune (+)
- Mr. Laneuk, de Vientiane
- Mr. Kampol, de Nong Veng
- Mr. Lan, de Nong Veng

Documents

General Archives O.M.I., Rome, Dossier Vincent L'Hénoret

- Notes and various documents concerning the religious and priestly formation of Vincent L'Hénoret.
- Letter of Vincent L'Hénoret to the O.M.I. Vicar General for his first obedience 12 January 1947.
- Report of Fr. Rouzière, o.m.i., on the death of Vincent L'Hénoret (1961)
- Étienne Loosdregt, o.m.i., « Quelques nouvelles du Laos, ce 17 mai 1961 », dossier Vincent L'Hénoret ; other news bulletins coming from Laos, not sorted.
- "P. Vincent L'Hénoret, o.m.i.": circular of Bishop Étienne Loosdregt, o.m.i. (1961)
- Letter of Thai Deng Christians to the mother of Vincent L'Hénoret, translated and annotated by Bishop Étienne Loosdregt, o.m.i.

General Archives O.M.I., Rome, other dossiers

- Codex Historicus of Pha-Phong 1950-1957: Box B-402, doc. H a 64, cahier 3.
- Codex Historicus of Xieng-Khouang 1950-1957: Box B-403, doc. H a 68, cahier 1.
- Codex Historicus of Xieng-Khouang 1957-1963: Box B-403, doc. H a 68, cahier 4.
- « Sur Ban Ban », rapport de Vincent L'Hénoret, 16 February 1958: Box B-403, doc. H a 68, 4 p.
- Lettre collective signée par Vincent L'Hénoret, 17 November 1959: Box 35 "Loosdregt, E. # 4630", Dossier "Letters Drouart 1959-1960".
- Letter of Bishop Étienne Loosdregt to Fr. Jean Drouart, 10 September 1959: *ibid.*
- Jean Subra, o.m.i., various dossiers and unpublished texts: « Évangélisation des Kmhmu' », General Archives O.M.I., O.M.I. Library, non sorted.

Archives of the O.M.I. Province of France, Marseille

- Dossier Vincent L'Hénoret, among others:
- Documents and notes in relation to his first formation
- Letters of Vincent L'Hénoret to the scholasticate of Solignac, 1948-1949

Archives of the Postulation

- Letters of Vincent L'Hénoret to his family, 1953-1960.
- Letters of Père Yvon L'Hénoret, o.m.i., to his family, 1960-1962.
- Letter of Mgr Étienne Loosdregt, o.m.i., to the mother of Vincent (1961).
- Letter of Père Jean-Marie Ollivier, o.m.i., to the mother Vincent (1961).
- Letter of Laotian children to the mother Vincent (1961).
- Pierre Chevroulet, o.m.i., « Étude sur la persécution au Laos (1954-1975) ».

Published resources:

Books:

- Pierre Chevroulet, o.m.i., *Oblats au bord du Mékong*, Rome, O.M.I., 1998 (collection « Héritage oblat » n° 14) ; texte a été repris sous le titre « Oblats témoins de la foi au Laos » dans *Documentation OMI* n° 229 (1999), p. 2-31 ; 2^e éd. : *Oblats témoins de la foi au Laos*, Fontenay-sous-Bois, O.M.I., 2000.

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- « Laos : L'assassinat du R. P. L'Hénoret » ; « Une lettre de chrétiens laotiens à la mère du Père L'Hénoret, o.m.i., assassiné le jour de l'Ascension, *La Croix*, 19 septembre 1961.
- Léon Trivière, « La grande pitié de la mission du Laos », *Missions Étrangères de Paris*, n° 116, 1961, p. 7-12
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V

Martyr of Charity:

Father Jean Wauthier, o.m.i.

(1926 – 1967)

The missionary is a man of charity:
to be able to proclaim to each of his brothers that he is loved by God and that he too is able to love,,
he must show charity towards all, spending his life for his neighbor.

John Paul II, Encyclical Redemptoris Missio, n° 89

The happiness of a life, which depends on the tranquility and the satisfaction of a well-bred mind,
the resolution and the assurance of a well-tempered soul,
should never be credited to a man before we have seen him play
the last act of his comedy, which is probably the most difficult.

Montaigne, Essais, Livre I, ch. 19



Father Jean Wauthier, o.m.i. (1926 – 1967)

Witness of Jesus Christ in Laos,

Died for the faith on 16 December 1967 at Ban Na (Xieng Khouang)

The years of preparation

Jean WAUTHIER was born on March 22, 1926, in the North of France, in the little town of Fourmies (59). He was baptized on March 25 in the parish church of Notre-Dame in this town which belongs to the archdiocese of Cambrai.

In his adolescence, Jean experienced the sufferings of the exodus of 1940 – the flight of civic populations before the German invasion – which led his family into exile on the other side of France, at Sainte-Livrade (47). After two years at the minor seminary of Solesmes (North) and some months at the Collège Saint-Pierre de Fourmies, he was then off to the minor seminary of the diocese of Agen, at Notre-Dame de Bon Encontre, where he finished his secondary studies (January 1941 until June 1944).

In November 1944, he was admitted to the novitiate of the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate at Pontmain (Mayenne), and he became an Oblate of Mary Immaculate on the feast of All Saints, November 1, 1945. After two years of studying philosophy, first at La Brosse-Montceaux (Seine- et-Marne), then at the Abbey of Solignac (Haute-Vienne), he was called to military service. Robust of physique, and of unfailing moral character, he chose the corps of parachutists for his military service.

After his return to the scholasticate of Solignac for four years of theology studies, he was one of those who did not snub the most difficult manual labor during these days of remodeling the old Abbey of Saint Eloi where a good hundred young Oblates were studying. It was there, on December 8, 1949, that Jean Wauthier pronounced his perpetual vows with the Congregation of the Missionary Oblates. On February 17, 1952, he was ordained a priest in the abbey church.

Two months earlier, he had written to the Superior General of the Oblates:

Since my childhood, I have always desired the missionary life. That is why I entered the Congregation; it to this one end that I spent my years at the scholasticate. Among the many Oblate missions that I could admire, ever since the novitiate, I was taken by the desire to bring the Gospel to the country of Laos. Since then, I have never changed my mind. My spiritual director has not disapproved of these aspirations; he always encouraged me by trying to make them more and more spiritual.

That is why, my Very Reverend Father, I ask you to send me to Laos. [...] I believe I have the needed physical abilities. I can handle the cold quite well; during my military service in the South-Moroccan, I was able to discover that heat caused me no trouble. I was never sick during the scholasticate. Finally, the sometimes difficult manual labor of these last six years and my military service with the paratroopers seem to show that I possess good physical resistance.

Whatever the case, I am ready to accept whatever field of ministry. In this first Obedience, I want only the will of God, sending me to the best place where I can more easily sanctify others and raise myself, with the help of the Blessed Virgin, of Saint Joseph and of our Venerated Founder “usque ad apicem perfectionis.”¹¹

So it was to Jean’s greatest delight that, at the end of the school year, he received his “obedience” – his missionary marching papers – for Laos.

On mission in Laos

¹¹ “To the very summit of perfection”, an expression used by Saint Eugene de Mazenod to urge the Oblates to sanctify themselves to be good missionaries.

Upon his arrival in the country on October 26, 1952, he was immediately sent to serve at the mission among the poorest, the Kmhmu'. He will be almost always with people from the same villages, whom he follows through their displacements during the war years. It was he who encouraged them to leave Nam Mon, where they were baptized, for Khang Si, a better location, where they could benefit from the inundated rice fields. There he put in a water supply system of bamboo, to the delight of the villagers. Alas, this installation would only last a few years: in 1961, the whole village was forced to retreat to the edge of the Plain of Jars, to Ban Na first, and then to Hin Tang.

After the threat of January 1961, Jean was removed for a time from this area. He did an internship of two years at the minor seminary of Paksane (Oct. 1961 - December 1963). He could be trusted for whatever task that was required, whether teaching, sports or music. Every Saturday, he got away from the seminary for Sunday ministry in the villages. But it was quite clear that he wanted only to return as soon as possible to his beloved mountain people.

In December 1963, he rejoined the ministry team among the Kmhmu'. So there would be frequent comings and goings between Vientiane, where the work was primarily the formation of catechists who would be sent to the villages, and the mountain. There, among all these refugees which the war had chased from their homes, misery had settled in: uncertain crops, attacks, mines just about everywhere along the paths, lack of medications...

Jean spends most of his last years in Hin Tang and devotes himself to the difficult task of an equitable distribution of humanitarian aid. This is where the drama takes shape, because even in the worst misery there are still the exploiters and the exploited. He defends the poor Kmhmu' without favoring them because he knows how to be of service to all. His activity displeases the Special Forces, who assume the amply serve themselves first. Jean is now aware that his life is threatened.

The last act

On the night of December 16 - 17, 1967, Jean Wauthier was killed at close range. He had come to spend two nights in the tiny village of Ban Na, catechumens for about three years, in a region near the Plain of Jars. At 800 meters from there was a small military post on a hill. Those who sought his life feigned a guerrilla attack.

At once he was up, knapsack on his back -- because in this region permanently at war, one had to be always ready to run for the forest. He gathered the two children who were staying with him and a couple of catechumens and went down with them to a flowing stream at 200 or 300 meters below the village. He sheltered them in a gully in the ground and reassured them: "Do not move, do not be afraid, pray," he told them.

He moved away to assess the situation and took a few steps while reciting the rosary. The children hear "Kill the Father." A shot rang out. Hit at the the base of the neck, Jean Wauthier begged his attackers hidden behind a small hedge, "Why do you shoot me? Stop! I am really hurt." "Stop talking!" was the reply. And the shooting resumed. Shot three times in the chest, he collapsed. The children ran away, terrified. Father Jean Wauthier has given his life so that the Gospel might bear fruit in Laos.

Jean's body was taken to Vientiane. He rests in Laotian earth, in the Catholic cemetery of the town.

The reasons for the murder

The sequence of events of that night which was fatal for Jean Wauthier, and reasons which armed the hand of his murderers, have been revealed by Father Lucien Bouchard, o.m.i., who at that time was his closest collaborator.¹² Here in brief is his testimony.

From time to time, I visited Father Wauthier in his village of refugees: I brought him his mail and some medications for his people. For about two years of his stay with the Kmhmu' refugees, he had lived just beside a large village of refugees of another ethnic group. The military authorities of the place also belonged to that ethnic group... These two villages were supplied at the same time with rice by parachute. The military authorities decided the amount of rice to be distributed to each village.

As it was evident that the soldiers were keeping the lion's share for their own people, Father Wauthier went to find the military commander to let him know that the Kmhmu' refugees were not getting their fair share. These complaints fell on deaf ears...

That is when Father Wauthier's Kmhmu' refugees were transferred to another site where the parachuted supplies would be destined directly for them. When the transfer took place, the concerned military chiefs were furious against the Kmhmu' and Father Wauthier: they would no longer be able to feed their pigs with the part of the rice meant for the Kmhmu'. It was therefore this story of the pigs that had disgusted Father Wauthier.

Father Wauthier lived about a year or two at this new site. A few days before his death, he went by foot to visit the former site: there were still in the area some Kmhmu' catechumens in the village of Ban Na, and he wanted to visit them.

During his brief stay in this village, the military authorities feigned an attack against the village of Ban Na, and they took the opportunity to kill Father Wauthier during this dummy attack. Father Wauthier led a group of people with some children to shelter, a little outside the village, and it was at that place that he was killed by a soldier from the neighboring village.

I consider Father Wauthier to be a martyr since he died because of his fight for justice which he was demanding for his refugees.

The day after the death of Father Jean Wauthier, one of the catechists would write to his parents: "Father John died because he loved us and did not want to abandon us."

¹² Lucien Bouchard, o.m.i., born in 1929, arrived in Laos in 1956.



Father Jean Wauthier, o.m.i., on a missionary excursion

IN MEMORY OF JEAN WAUTHIER

The biographical note below was drafted early in 1968 by Father Jean Subra, OMI, who was for many years the companion and friend of Jean Wauthier. The text, written for his fellow Oblate Missionaries, has been slightly adapted to make it more easily understood by a wider audience. Subtitles were added.

The major moments in a missionary life

Father Jean Wauthier came to Laos in the second half of 1952. He learned the language at Paksane during some months spent at the minor seminary; he would need to come back there for one or the other stay of a few months in 1962 and 1963. In May 1963, Bishop Étienne Loosdregt, o.m.i., Vicar Apostolic of Vientiane, assigned him to the Kmhmu' area.

At that time, the province of Xieng Khouang was in the midst of war: the French Union had just retaken the capital after having clearing the Plain of Jars from the Vietnamese threat. Father Jean Wauthier stayed in the city of Xieng Khouang for a few months to perfect his Laotian, and it was during the month of September of the same year that he came with me to begin with the Kmhmu' neophytes of Ban Nam Mon.

As of March 1954, faced with a large movement toward conversion which had begun on October 3, 1953 in Ban Nam Sai, I asked the Bishop to be relieved of Ban Nam Mon in order to adequately take care of hundreds of new catechumens. The Bishop then put Father Wauthier in charge of Ban Nam Mon and Ban Nam Lieng, which already totaled 450 neophytes and 150 catechumens.

From that time until his death, that is for 13 years, the apostolic life of Father Jean Wauthier was immersed in the life and the wanderings of this group of Kmhmu' Christians. Subsequently, various waves of refugees added to their number, all the way to the village of Hin Tang where there were about 900 souls.

The village of Nam Mon was moved in late 1956 to Ban Kouang Si, south of the Plain of Jars in a wonderful site for growing rice. Helped by the advice of Father Wauthier, this village became the pilot village in Xieng Khouang province.

In April 1961, the entire village fled by night to Ban Na night to avoid bombing and reprisals. Father Wauthier finally rejoined them, with great joy, at the end of 1963, after a time when his superiors kept him at Paksane. These two years of separation were very hard for him.

In late 1965, it was on his advice that the Ban Na Christian refugees moved into the Hin Tang valley and everyone agrees that the beautiful village that grew there was more his work from than that of anyone else.

After the death of Father Wauthier, on December 16, 1967, the village fled elsewhere, to Na Louang, in line with what had been foreseen by the elders and Father Wauthier: all because of the immediate closeness of the war.

The first years (1953-1961)

A long apprenticeship in ministry

Father Jean Wauthier came to us at Xieng Khouang alive with a great apostolic zeal. From the outset he loved the Kmhmu' passionately, and he gave himself completely to them. The article published in the Paris newspaper *La Croix* on Sunday, December 24, 1967 reports one of his comments on the risk of death from the war: "This is what might happen to me... but you have to choose. I gave them my life..."

Upon arriving in Xieng Khouang and later in Ban Nam Mon, he immediately begins his priestly ministry: careful preparations of each of his catechism classes - and that lasted until the end of his life. The handwritten notes that remain reflect this; preparation of each of his homilies or sermons was no less careful.

Since he sang well, he made the liturgies at Ban Nam Mon very lively, all the while suffering a lot because of the lack of adaptation of the liturgy to the people of Laos: at that time, everything had to be done in Latin.

Also upon arrival at Ban Nam Mon, he expressed at once his charity for people by caring for the sick: he gradually became like a real doctor, arousing the admiration of a military doctor who visited him often. Without him, many children would have died, any number of childbirths would have ended in disaster, and how many lepers would have been thrown out and abandoned in the forest! Everyone, Christians and non-Christians, Kmhmu' and non-Kmhmu', came for treatment, aware of his competence and dedication.

He acted this way to show the face of the charity of Christ and to be his witness.

By day or by night, whether it was raining or was cold, near and far, whether at risk of meeting the enemy or not, one could be sure that for an emergency, he could be found ready to go and bring help.

Bringing the Gospel to the most remote

During these early years of ministry, Jean Wauthier had charge of a large mountainous area: about thirty kilometers by thirty; this is exhausting as it is situated in the foothills of Mount Phou Bia (2,817 m) or the mountains that border the north.

Jean had to pace his ministry accordingly, visiting non-Christian villages as much as the many Christian communities under his charge gave him the opportunity. If these visits to non-Christians had to be rare at times, they heard so much about him and they so often came to visit him, that his life and his charity were the best preaching.

The patient work of an educator

In the village, Jean Wauthier wanted to educate the Kmhmu', to raise them up socially.

He worked at this with all his might, with the weak material resources at his disposal. For that, he even went to work with them in the fields; and then he agreed to forego his morning mass. He taught them how to organize their village, to make water pipes, to space the houses sufficiently so as to prevent catastrophic and unfortunately too common fires that destroy entire villages at a blow during the long cold season. He taught them to saw planks and to plant groves of fruit.

It is true that his temperament led him to this, and this is one more reason why he left his Christian villages relatively seldom to visit the other villages.

At the beginning, arriving from France and marked by his military service in the paratroopers, he was passionate, authoritarian, even hard: he would have tended to build rather than educate. In this he could have serious difficulties in being accepted. But what made him fully accepted by his followers was his passionate love of the Kmhmu'. And these same Kmhmu', often surprised and confused by his harsh manner, were never fooled by him: they never doubted the extraordinary love that Father Jean Wauthier had for them.

Indeed, from the day of his obedience to the Kmhmu', he loved them and gave himself body and soul for the spiritual well-being as well as for the social progress.

When, along with Father Bouchard, on December 21 at 10 in the morning, we left by helicopter, and the entire population of Hin Tang came to see us off, it was touching to see how much

they loved their Father: everyone was crying. The oldest in the village, an intelligent chieftain who was greatly esteemed by Jean and by all those who knew him, sobbed like a child, and many others whom I had never seen weep and whom I would have believed incapable of weeping, also wept, inconsolable. And I am evidently not speaking of a bunch of women.

They could say only one thing: "We have lost our Father!"

The tempering of a true missionary

Jean Wauthier had remarkable qualities of a leader and formator: his personality naturally brought them out when he met Kmhmu' or non-Kmhmu', Christians or non-Christians.

The children, whom he sometimes guided strictly, knew that with Fr. Jean Wauthier, one could not mess around with impunity, yet they doted on him. He knew how to play them, make them laugh, but also how to require them to work hard, filling holes or digging to build the village. In the evening they returned exhausted, but happy to have worked with the Father, because he worked with them.

During the last months of his life, while he was in Vientiane, one morning, he took the children of the boarding school to go weed around the orphanage of Chinaimo. He had asked only for volunteers, and there were many who answered his call: that day too, he worked with them all day, and therefore the less hearty were obliged – so as not to lose face - to work too. By evening, a considerable work had been accomplished, and everyone was happy despite the fatigue.

In the village he was always that way with everyone. By temperament he preferred to be alone rather than with others; he could have given others greater responsibility sooner than he did. But it is undeniable that the work that was done by him or under his inventiveness or under his leadership caused the admiration of all who knew him, Laotian or not.

He taught them a sense of order which he made the rule meticulously.

Becoming a man of dialogue

One should not conclude from this that he commanded indiscriminately. Upon his arrival in Ban Nam Mon, he knew how to discretely discuss with leaders and notables. It required him to bring them together to seek their views and offer them work plans, even regarding the pastoral plan itself, especially for marriages, often so difficult in a country where most people are not Christians.

It happened that at these meetings, especially in the beginning, the notables and leaders were impressed by the direct way of the Father. Once he realized this, he sought to modify his reactions and behavior to make them less intense. His temperament was not changed, but the efforts were successful, and people, who realized it, accepted his way of doing things.

That is how he learned to dialogue with the people as he sought more and more to put them at their ease.

I think his very smile was gradually transformed, becoming more and more human, and thereby letting him show better and better the love of Christ that inspired him. I think his colleagues have noticed, throughout these years, all these changes that made his testimony of Christian love more real.

With the poor Christ among the poor

Finally, so that this apostolic witness might be stronger for everyone, Christians and non-Christians, Jean Wauthier wanted to practice poverty.

He accepted Kmhmu' food, first of all rice and chili peppers, and God knows how much the Kmhmu' like chili peppers; but also bitter or tart sauces. He was one of those who never had trouble eating rats, squirrels, bats, larvae of all species, dried or chopped buffalo meat when available.

His health certainly suffered from this effort at adaptation. Some have even said that he went too far; and one or the other time, if he lost consciousness during Mass or in other circumstances, I think these ailments came in large part because he wanted to live and eat like the people.

He said to me recently: in ten years we will not be able to take to the road. He recognized that his strength was not the same as at the beginning. And like all of us, he knew he must be fit to take to the footpath in any weather, climbing, descending, crossing rivers by swimming at high water time; when he risked drowning, as happened in 1954 at Sai Nam; when spending hours walking in streams or in swamps; when there were leeches.

But Jean wanted to live like the people so as to bear witness. The retreat he made at Citeaux in 1966 with his brother, Pierre Wauthier, a worker priest in South America working in the Institute of the Mission Worker of Saint Peter and Saint Paul, founded by Father Jacques Loew, only confirmed him in this vocation.



Father Jean Wauthier, o.m.i., among his people

Jean had some difficulties accepting the new pastoral plan -- the evangelization of the villages was to be done by catechists, while the missionaries would remain in town to train them. Certainly he felt the urgent need for this pastoral plan for the evangelization of the Kmhmu'; but he was afraid that the priest would not take a leadership role, while living apart in comfort, far from the realities. As for him, he wanted to continue bearing his testimony of poverty and living like the Kmhmu' he was evangelizing.

The last years of the life of an apostle (1963-1967)

Looking death in the face

The apostolic life of Father Jean Wauthier took place entirely among the Kmhmu', in the midst of war and uncertainty.

In September or October 1963, while leaving Nam Mon, on the small hill leading down to Ban Pong of the Thai Dam, there he was, on horseback, when he met an armed group of soldiers. He saw that they were not dressed like those who usually passed by. He greeted them: "How are you? Sabaidi bo!" The answer was, it seems, very angry: that day Providence took pity on him because it was a group of Vietnamese reconnaissance, who came from the south to the outskirts of the city of Xieng Khouang.

Since the taking of the Plain of Jars by neutralists on December 31, 1960, the village of Khang Si was in a critical position; it became a no man's land. At that time neutralists and the guerrillas marched hand in hand.

In January, an artillery battery located three kilometers from Khang Si fired on the village: at the request of the Christians, Father Wauthier, accompanied by Father Jean-Marie Ollivier, o.m.i., and two village elders, went to ask the leaders of this battery to no longer fire on Khang Si, since there are no combatants. The Fathers were both taken both and put before the firing squad. They owed their salvation to the rapid intervention of a neutralist officer, who placed his jeep between the firing squad and the two Fathers.

Some months of respite

In the months that followed, as I have already said, Khang Si disappeared into the bush. Father Wauthier therefore stayed away from them for over two years. It was a heavy cross for him.

But during that time, all the tasks that were requested of him for the apostolate, by obedience, were performed by him with his usual thoroughness and generosity. Everywhere - Nam Tha, Huay Sai, the Minor seminary of Paksane, Keng Sadok, everyone has good memories of him, as a companion, a friend making an effort to listen to others, trying to understand ministry problems that were not directly his.

Return to his own

Jean Wauthier was finally back in Ban Na in December 1963, to his overwhelming joy! He says that when he arrived, as extraordinary as it was, the elders spontaneously threw themselves around his neck to kiss him: I have seen a similar case only once, in 1961. No doubt this joy was like that of St. Paul ranging going to see his Christian neophytes after a long absence and multiple dangers.

Since then, each time he went back there, this joy was renewed, and it was filled with thanksgiving to the Lord.

When he went back up there last June (1967), accompanied by four Sisters of Charity of Savannakhet, what joy he experienced! For a long time, he had been asking for the Sisters to be able to visit their families in the village, because they had left there almost ten years before. He was literally transfigured: in the little Porter plane, he had them pray the rosary, a rosary of thanksgiving during the 40 minute flight. They will not be able to forget that.

I said "joy each time he went back," except the last time, last November 24... For me, the only acceptable explanation, together with the various incidents told to me by the people of the village, was that he had a foreboding about his coming death, and it was the last time he went back there, toward the supreme sacrifice.

In the face of danger, some courageous choices

In going up there, he actually knew well what he was risking.

There were surely military posts; there were the partisans and all the friends who were doing everything to assure the safety of the Father, but in the mountains and in this jungle, how could one avoid the possibility of an ambush or a commando raid?

Better than anyone, Jean Wauthier knew what would happen to him if he fell into the hands of those who were making propaganda against the Christian religion. If some were able to delude themselves in other times, he was never one of them.

In going up there, he therefore knowingly accepted the risk of being taken and killed, under the pretext of spying or for any other propaganda motive... but the only thing that counted for him was the judgement of God.

To the very limit of love

During those years, it was impossible to travel. Jean therefore remained among the Christians, purposely ignoring the others as it was necessary to do so. He accepted all the disadvantages of this life as a hermit, with its difficulty of getting provisions and more and more like that of the people. Lack of the most ordinary conveniences of life, lack of mail, and always remaining on guard, ready to escape into the forest at the first alert.

But the people loved him more and more, and on his part, his love for them was purified.

So he worked a lot for the lepers and to help the thousands of refugees: he made friends among the Laotians and the non-Laotians. One only has to go up there to see the esteem they had for him. And when his body was laid out on Sunday, the 17th, and Monday the 18th of December, who could not be moved to see his best American friends weeping inconsolably for long moments before him?

But then, strangely enough, in the last year, his apostolic activity expanded more and more; he was able to visit many non-Christian villages in the area where he was, and it was during these visits that he met death.

As I said earlier, I think the last purifying test of his apostolic spirit was new pastoral plan, made official by the Bishop, with the apostolate by the catechists in the northern regions. He agreed to comply with them and to sacrifice part of his time by staying at the center in Hong Kha. He put himself totally into this work which he did not like: I was amazed at the work accomplished by him in such a short time.

To give one's life by giving it

Jean Wauthier left us on December 16, 1967. He gave his life for the Kmhmu'.

He followed Father Louis Morin, o.m.i., who died of typhoid on October 1, 1950: he was the first to move to Nam Mon, and he died a few days before the entries into the catechumenate.

He followed Fathers Coquelet and Leroy, killed like he was – in April 1961.

I don't think anyone will mind my closing these few recollections about Father Jean Wauthier, missionary among the Kmhmu', with these words of those who were dearest to him on the earth:

And it is up there that Jean is going to celebrate Christmas, in the Peace of the Lord, the Joy, and the Light. And we weep, filled with hope of the heavenly reunions. But despite our Fiat, our poor heart of flesh is suffering and bleeding in abundance.

We knew that he was often in danger, but he had escaped so many times that we were hoping that this new return would be without major difficulty...

Jean was the friend of his parishioners of Hin Tang, their confidant, this father, there moral and physical support; he will continue being so.

(Response of Mr. and Mrs. Wauthier to the letter telling them about the death of their son.)

Resources for the biography of Father Jean Wauthier

Unpublished resources;

Statements of direct (face-to-face) witness:

- Bishop Louis-Marie Ling Mangkhanekhoun, Vicar Apostolic of Paksé
- Bishop Alessandro Staccioli, o.m.i., former Vicar Apostolic of Louang Prabang
- Father Lucien Bouchard, o.m.i.
- Father Charrier, o.m.i.
- Father Pierre Chevroulet, o.m.i. (+)
- Father Ernest Dumont, o.m.i. (+)
- Father Alexis Fuseau, o.m.i.
- Father Jean Guéguen, o.m.i.
- Father Jean Hanique, o.m.i. (+)
- Father Yvon L'Hénoret, o.m.i.
- Father Michel Lynde, o.m.i.
- Father Gilbert Monnin, o.m.i. (+)
- Father René Motte, o.m.i. (+)
- Father Jean-Marie Ollivier, o.m.i. (+)
- Father Joseph Pillain, o.m.i. (+)
- Father Gérard Sion, o.m.i. (+)
- Father Jean Subra, o.m.i. (+)
- André Tsong Ying Yang, Voluntas Dei
- Sister Marie-Céline, Sister of Charity, Thakhek, Laos
- Miss Bernadette Sim, o.m.m.i.
- Miss Marielle Sounthane Xayamongkhoun, o.m.m.i.
- Miss Marie Ien Hounghmany, o.m.m.i.
- Mr. Paul Moune (+)
- Mr. David Sy (+)
- Mr. Pierre-Nhinh Thepkaisone, Lille, France.

Documents

General Archives O.M.I., Rome, Dossier Jean Wauthier

- Various notes and documents concerning the first formation of Jean Wauthier, notably:
- Letter to Léo Deschâtelets, o.m.i., for the first obedience, 20 December 1951.
- Travel journal of 20 October to Sunday 26 October 1952.
- Letter of the Red Cross to Mr. Fernand Wauthier, 18 April 1961.
- Journal / personal notebooks, 1963-1967.
- Letter of Jean Drouart, o.m.i., to Léo Deschâtelets, o.m.i., 3 April 1964.
- Bishop Étienne Loosdregt, o.m.i., « Mort du P. Jean Wauthier, o.m.i. » (1967).
- Letter of Father Henri Delcros, o.m.i., to Father Raoul Lalanne, 20 December 1967.
- Letters of various persons of Laos on the occasion of the death of Father Jean Wauthier, o.m.i.

General Archives O.M.I., Rome, other dossiers

- Codex Historicus Khmu 1950-1968, Box B-402, doc. H a 62, cahier 2.
- Codex Historicus of Pha-Phong 1950-1957, Box B-402, doc. H a 64, notebook 3.
- Codex Historicus of Sommeng – Nam Hay – Phon Pheng 1954-1959, Box B-402, doc. H a 66.
- Codex Historicus of Xieng-Khouang 1950-1957 : Box B-403, doc. H a 68, notebook 1.
- Codex Historicus of Xieng-Khouang 1957-1963 : Box B-403, doc. H a 68, notebook 4.
- Codex Historicus of Pha Thong 1954-1958, Box B-405A, doc. Ha88.
- Collective letter signed by Jean Wauthier, 17 November 1959: Box 35 "Loosdregt, E. # 4630", Dossier "Letters Drouart 1959-1960".
- Étienne Loosdregt, o.m.i., « Quelques nouvelles du Laos, ce 17 mai 1961 », dossier Vincent L'Hénoret.
- Jean Subra, o.m.i., various dossiers and unpublished texts: « Évangélisation des Kmhmu' », General Archives O.M.I., O.M.I. Library, unsorted.

Archives of the OMI Province of France, Marseille

- Dossier Jean Wauthier, documentation on the formation years and various.
- Letters of Jean Wauthier to his confrères of Solignac (1952-1954)

Archives of the Postulation

- Letters of Jean Wauthier to the Clarisses de Fourmies (1952-1967).
- Pierre Chevroulet, o.m.i., « Étude sur la persécution au Laos (1954-1975) ».

Published resources:

Books:

- Pierre Chevroulet, o.m.i., *Oblats au bord du Mékong*, Rome, O.M.I., 1998 (collection « Héritage oblat » n° 14) ; texte a été repris sous le titre « Oblats témoins de la foi au Laos » dans *Documentation OMI* n° 229 (1999), p. 2-31 ; 2^e éd. : *Oblats témoins de la foi au Laos*, Fontenay-sous-Bois, O.M.I., 2000.

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- Jean Wauthier, « 103 nouveaux baptisés dans une petite vallée laotienne », *Pôle et Tropiques*, avril 1955, pp. 14-17
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- « Avec les réfugiés du Nord-Laos », témoignage de Jean Wauthier, *Famille Éducatrice* 21, n° 9, novembre 1966, p. 4.
- « Témoignage : Un missionnaire... Le P. Jean Wauthier tué au Nord-Laos », *La Croix*, 24-25 décembre 1967, p. 12.
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- Jean Subra, o.m.i., « Laos dans la tourmente : Mort du Père Jean Wauthier, missionnaire », et « "Je leur ai donné ma vie" : 13 ans d'apostolat chez les Kmhmu' », *Pôle et Tropiques*, mars 1968, p. 72-80.
- « Laos : Un père Oblat tué et deux Oblates blessées », *Jeunes du Monde*, 65, 9/1969, p. 182.
- Divers articles biographiques et témoignages publiés dans *Liens – Trait d'union des anciens du petit séminaire de Bon-Encontre*, n° 46 et 47, 1996, 49, 1997, et 50, 1998.
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VI

The man “who sneezed loudly”:

Father Joseph Boissel, o.m.i.

(1909 – 1969)

Biographical Notes

**Provisional text by Roland Jacques, o.m.i.,
Diocesan Postulator**

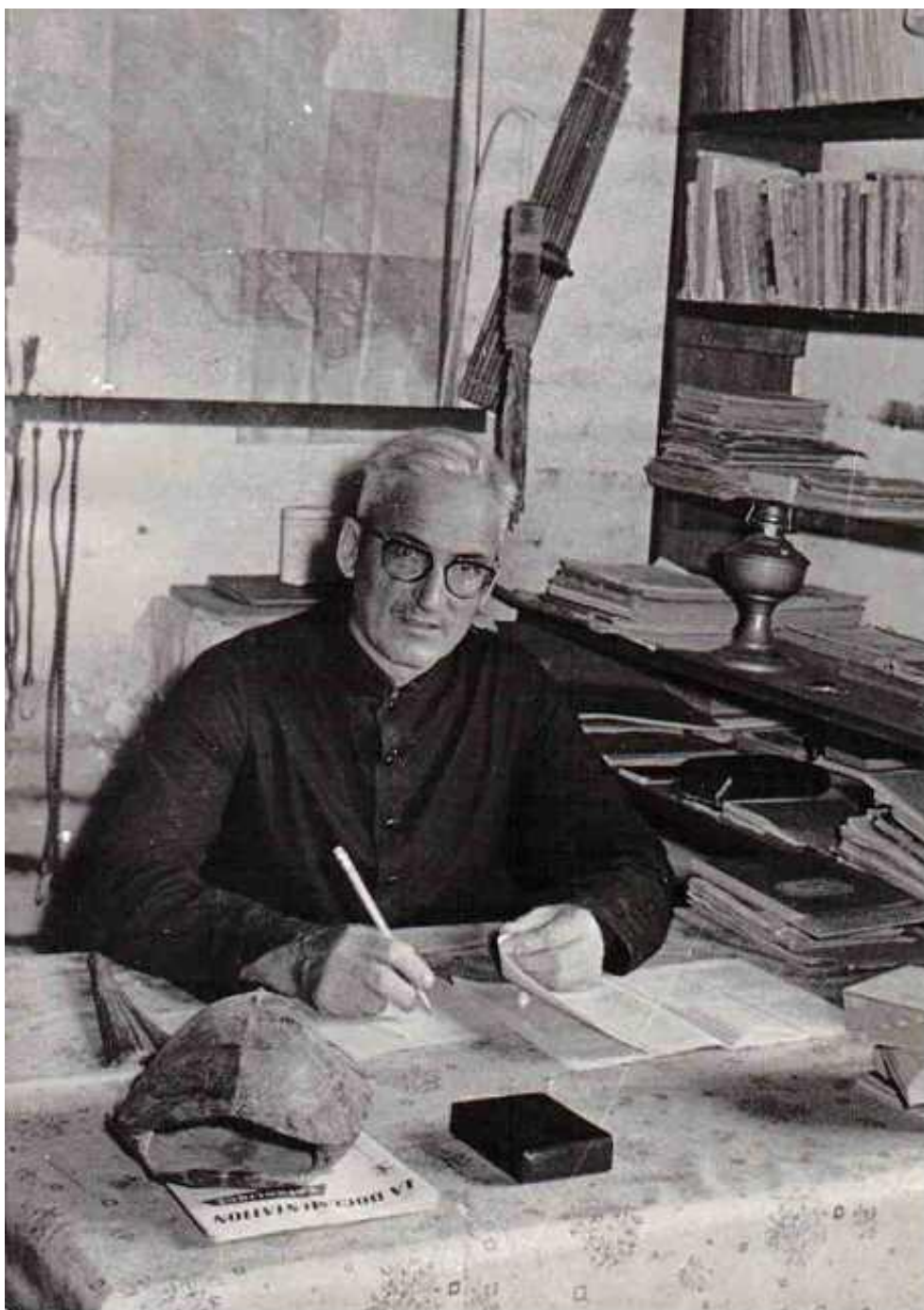
**Postulation des Martyrs du Laos
94120 Fontenay-sous-Bois, France
November 2011**

Death has taken my loved ones and I, I suffer for being still alive,
War has wiped away the smile of the kids...
I feel more sorrow than rage
Brother, where is Christ?
I wonder what if anyone cares, after the war; the toll is heavy
And only the devil calls that love.

Bisso Na Bisso, Racines, « Après la guerre »

The earth that covers the face for five hundred years
cannot make us forget love.

Lao proverb



Father Joseph Boissel, o.m.i. (1909 – 1969)

Witness of Jesus Christ in Laos,
Died for the faith on 5 July 1969 at Hat I-et

A Breton peasant, from a small village near Pontmain, Joseph BOISSEL was a strong man, a hard worker, with extraordinary strength that will prompt the admiration of the people of Laos. At Pontmain, Mary, Mother of Jesus appeared to some children in 1871 to ask them to pray and to hope despite the war. This proximity to the war of the Virgin, Mother of Hope, will mark his life.

The years of preparation: an international path

Joseph Boissel was born December 20, 1909 in the marches of Brittany (France), in the hamlet of La Tiolais, outside the town of Loroux (35), into a family of poor farmers. He was baptized the same day in the parish church of the village, which belongs to the Archdiocese of Rennes (France).

A young vocation, Joseph had his seven years of secondary education at the juniorate of the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate, in Jersey (UK). He then entered the novitiate on Berder island in the Morbihan (France); his novice master judged him to be a “very ordinary subject, not very intelligent.” Yet Joseph was accepted for his other qualities, and went on to study philosophy at the seminary of Liege (Belgium), then theology at the one in La Brosse-Montceaux (Seine-et-Marne, France).

In the meantime, he did his military service where he “showed himself always to be a good religious while in the military uniform.”

Jean Denis, o.m.i., one of his old friends who was sent as a missionary to Northern Canada, remembers the years spent together at the novitiate and the scholasticate:

I liked him a lot. He was three years older than I, but for me, he was one of the wisdom figures. It was easy to talk with him about serious things.

In the scholasticate community, he was the master barber, and his clients were many and always satisfied... He had beautiful handwriting and he was often asked to copy songs and hymns for the mimeograph. He had carefully made copies of the song to Mary: “O good mother of the missionary, be his support, watch over him. On earth, he has no homeland; he has only the Cross and you, Mary.” That made him tremble. He was living it!

He did not pretend to be an intellectual in the clouds, but he studied well and willingly entered discussions so as to always know more for his practical life and his ministry.

As for the judgement of his superiors, it is more nuanced, but positive:

Energetic and honest character... weak intelligence; a little narrow of judgment; but with good application, he is making quite significant progress... He shows sufficient skill in material or artistic work... Very devoted, humble, regular; of a docile spirit of faith when he would be naturally inclined to attach too much to his own ideas. A good confrere, concerned about the spiritual welfare of others. Very attached to his vocation.

Another judgement throws some light on the end of his life: “Of a very generous nature, he is not afraid of sacrifice.” It is in this spirit that Joseph Boissel made his perpetual oblation at the hospital of Montereau on September 29, 1935.¹³

¹³ The reason for the hospitalization is unknown.

On July 4, 1937, he was ordained a priest. On May 26, 1938, with three of his companions, he received his assignment to Laos¹⁴; he was 29 years old. Strangely enough, contrary to the usual practice of the Oblates, he had not wanted to ask of his Superior General any precise mission, saying that he was ready to go anywhere; nevertheless, Laos corresponded perfectly to his deep desire.

A pioneer of the mission in northern Laos

Joseph Boissel was part of the group of pioneers of the Oblate Mission in Laos – those who knew all the shocks of the war from the beginning. Having arrived in this country in October 1938, he was sent quite soon toward the area of Xieng Khouang where evangelization was just beginning. Many years later, he still speaks with regret about the posting at Nong Ether, an established mission station in Xieng Khouang province, then called Tran Ninh, on the Vietnam border on the road to Vinh. Because of the war, he had at one time to abandon this position: with the 1939 declaration of war, he was mobilized, but could fulfill his obligations in Laos itself. But soon, he was again back in the mission “in the bush,” which he loves.

Without making any conversions, he had aroused a real feeling of friendship, especially among the Hmong. He was the first among the Oblates to become a friend of this proud people. Twenty years earlier, other missionaries had very different feelings about them: “A nasty people, for they cultivate a lot of opium with which they flood the country, to the great detriment of the natives. As far as evangelization goes, we will not have to deal with them.”¹⁵

From a Hmong chieftain, he would receive the following letter in 1946:

If we almost all stayed alive after the bad times, it is because God protects us. I always remember with emotion that you said some prayers for a layman that you love well; I am that layman. Without knowing the Christian religion... I have an inborn feeling about the existence of a Supreme Being who watches over us and over our acts... My great wish is to see you again in the near future; we all think of you, Father, like a ‘parent’, according to the Meo expression...¹⁶

In March 1945, the Japanese hit Laos. On June 1, Joseph Boissel was captured with his companion Father Vincent Le Calvez, and the Apostolic Prefect, Mons. Jean Mazoyer, OMI. All three were taken to Vinh, Vietnam, where they were held among a hostile population.

Back in Laos in 1946, Joseph again found his Tran Ninh and contact with the Hmong. The mission of Nong Ether was sacked and devastated. In a short time it becomes inaccessible because of persistent insecurity. He writes: “It is time to settle permanently; I know exactly where I will establish myself; the first job will be to choose a property, then to saw some wood, become a carpenter and the rest.”

¹⁴ The other obediences were given to Fathers Paul Cuisy, Thurien Cariou et Georges Kolbach. On May 13, in Canada, Father Leo Plante had also received an obedience for Laos.

¹⁵ J.-B. DEGEORGE, M.E.P., *À la conquête du Châu-Laos*, 2^e éd., Hong Kong, Imprimerie de la Société des Missions-Étrangères, 1926, p. 4.

¹⁶ ‘Méo’ is the term, of Chinese origin, generally used at this time to designate the Hmong.



A missionary at work: Father Joseph Boissel, o.m.i.

"The one who works must work with hope." (1 Cor 9, 10)

The material conditions were very precarious. Father Boissel himself planted rice to live on. He received no help from the French military, except for an unexpected gift: a hundred empty gasoline drums. "I cut them to cover my little Meo house," he wrote in 1947. "With a roof like that, it can rain stones!" He ends his letter to Mons. Mazoyer who was then in Europe:

In ten days, you will be at the feet of the Holy Father; what will he think of Laos? Poor Laos, poor Indochina; nothing seems to go right; madness reigns always and everywhere. We remain attached to God and have confidence in him. He knows what we need. – P.S. I hope that you will find some Sisters; three for Xieng Khouang would be well received. I am preparing a house for them.

The following year, he wrote to his superiors in Rome:

The missionary work in Laos, because of the enormous distances to travel and the poverty of the country, for many long years will remain doubtful and difficult. We need pioneers ready to suffer everything, both at their posts and traveling... Each one at his own place has suffered enough to get an experience of the people of the country... If the missionaries of Laos did not have a burning faith in their hearts, they could wonder what crime they had committed to have been sent there.

In 1948-1949, Father Boissel left for France to restore his health so tried by privations, as he explains to readers of *Pôle et Tropiques*, the missionary magazine of the Oblates.

After spending ten years in the Indochina bush in the most bizarre circumstances, we are happy to return for a few months to France. On October 18, 1948, on the first plane that had come to inspect the runway at the start of the dry season, I managed to take off from Xieng Khouang, and in less than thirty-five minutes, I was in the center of

Vientiane, avoiding an arduous journey and some twelve hazardous days on the trails...
I am now resting with my family at Loroux.

Back in Laos, for several years, he ensures the formation of Kmhmu' catechumens and neophytes in various villages in the mountains of Xieng Khouang around Ban Pha where he resides. The people of Ban Pha, the Thai Dam, meanwhile remain distant from any movement to conversion. In November 1957, he will leave the village and the area in the hands of Father Louis Leroy.

The mature years: with the displaced

In November 1957, Joseph Boissel therefore permanently left Xieng Khouang and departed for France for a new well deserved leave. Only his sister Victorine remained of his family; therefore he began to carry out a project dear to his heart: a tour of Europe as a pilgrim. With the "rector" (priest) of his village, Father Louaisil, he went to Rome in the latter's small Renault 4L. Sleeping most of the time in a tent, they would go through Solignac, the scholasticate of the Oblates, Lourdes and Ars, to finally reach the Eternal City. His superiors, however, had curtly forbidden him to go to Fatima, or even visit the shrines of neighboring Belgium.

Upon his return, Joseph takes up a new phase of his missionary life: he is assigned to the district of Paksane where he would work until his final day. He is first of all in charge of a rice-producing village of Nong Veng; then, beginning in 1963, he moves to Ban Na Chik at the 4 km mark of Paksane toward Pak Kading – the famous Lak-Si.

Father Henri Delcros¹⁷, o.m.i., had helped the Kmhmu' Christian refugees from the region of Xieng Khouang to settle there in several villages: Vang Khoma, Hat I-Êt, Pakvang and Nampa. Joseph Boissel succeeded him in this role. He uses doleful words to describe the living conditions of his new parishioners.

My sector is spread along a dirt and stone road on which my poor 2CV is severely jolted. Almost all families suffer the consequences of a war that drags on. Here, women whose husbands are in the military, displaced families...; where entire villages have fled the combat zone and fled into the plain.

At about ten kilometers from my village, on the banks of the Nam Nhiep, I have a group of sixty Christian families who have abandoned all their possessions and their rice fields under the threat of the guerrillas, preferring to save their faith and the faith of their children. While waiting to find a forest area to resume their crops, they live mainly on aid...

I receive and I visit everyone, trying to comfort and assist each one to the extent of my poor means: care of the sick, support for the neediest. We cannot say enough about the horrors of war for the little people of Laos... For more than ten years their armed groups repeat the same slogans, promising wonders and marvels once the victory has been achieved... Meanwhile, there are only requisitions of rice, favors by serving the combatants, arrests and disappearances, a climate of fear and suspicion...

It is under this threat that we all live today. But we must hold on until the day when God will give us peace. So I continue to visit all these people regularly, to give them all words of hope, and to the Christians, supernatural assistance that helps them to sanctify these miseries of the moment. Most often I come empty handed and I suffer from these bright eyes that gaze upon me, waiting for some material relief that I cannot

¹⁷ Henri Delcros, o.m.i., 1925-1994, arrived in Laos in 1950.

bring them... Crushed by such miseries, we remain with death in the soul, distressed by our powerlessness.

He circulates among the villages, despite his defective eyesight because he had completely lost the use of one eye. A jeep will replace the Citroen 2CV, which had itself succeeded his brave horse named Deng. In those years, taking the road was always risky: since late March 1969, the threat of the guerrillas had widened so much that he had to forego celebrating Holy Week in these villages. Only in early June, Father Boissel dared to venture again on this road of ambushes.

The young missionaries had their first stage of apprenticeship in language in the area Paksane Bishop Alessandro Staccioli, future bishop of Luang Prabang, recalls the fascination with which he and the other young men listened to Father Boissel tell of the Indochina war, and especially his experience as a missionary in the bush:

For him, the mission was to proclaim the Gospel, to live with the people, to care for the sick and to live in poverty. He was generous, always ready to render service to the people. He said that he had given his life for Laos, that he wanted to die there and that he certainly did not want to return to France. I think the Lord heard his prayer.

The same witness also reported a striking example: “One day, the guerrillas had advanced to the vicinity of his village. He escaped on horseback, one hand holding the flange and in the other the ciborium with the holy reserve. This is how we saw him arrive in Paksane “.

Portrait of a veteran missionary

The difficult years experienced by Father Boissel in the mission hardened some features of his character, yet without spoiling his good qualities. Father Joseph Pillain, o.m.i., who himself spent over twelve years in Laos, recalls: “Father Joseph Boissel was a man of great heart, all of a piece with his frankness, a deeply religious man of prayer, faithful to the district meetings, very kind in community.”

His portrait is painted with more colors by the Laotian witnesses, among which is one of the two consecrated women - Oblate Missionaries of Mary Immaculate¹⁸ - who almost died with him.

Father Boissel was a complete man, quick but generous, fulfilling all of his responsibilities. He had a strong voice; as for his character... In short, he was an ardent man, fiery, but he took care to each one individually, especially the little ones, the poor, the children... He was concerned about their Christian formation, because they were recent converts.

The people liked him a lot. Each family brought him food – a basket of rice and another plate. Sometimes the plates were very spicy. He was sick; he had constant stomach aches, but he ate of everything just the same, without a word, to honor them.

Upon his arrival in each village, he rang the bell, calling the Christians to confession; then he celebrated Mass. Then he spoke with the village catechist, with the people of the village, and with the elders. He authorized the baptisms and the future marriages...

¹⁸ The Oblate Missionaries of Mary Immaculate (ommi) are a secular institute, founded in 1952 in Canada by Father Louis-Marie Parent, o.m.i. The members are lay women, living alone or in small communities, and variously involved in their family, professional or social milieu, or an ecclesial service. In Laos the institute is present since 1957, mainly serving the mission. In 2005 there were 15 Laotians, living mainly in Paksane and Vientiane.

He made sure that the registrations were done in advance. He slept in the churches. We Oblates sleep with one family or the other.

He was attentive to the sick whom he cared for himself, including difficult births. He was attentive to everyone in a pastoral way – totally giving himself. Whatever he said and whatever he did came from his heart, from the depths of his heart, from the depths of his faith...

He had great faith; he was very prayerful. He had made the gift of his life to the Lord. His most remarkable trait was love for the poor.

Two witnesses, elderly lay persons, add:

He was cordial and franc, close to the people. He faithfully visited the sick, the elderly; he loved many children. What he did was really beautiful. He was a good man; everyone came to his burial. When he celebrated Mass or preached, he was a man of God... He was zealous. Parish life was well organized: feasts, processions... he did everything wholeheartedly; people came from everywhere.

He instilled the sense of confession, encouraged people to improve their lives. He had a great spirit of faith and a great love of the elderly and the sick. If he was told about a sick person, he left immediately. All remember his sacrifices, his faith, his love for all. He did everything for others.

As for his own confreres, they saw him in the same way. One of his close collaborators, Father Ernest Dumont, says:

His was a fiery temperament, generous. He doubted nothing, never hesitated to begin, always with the desire to go to the poor ... He was really close to the people who loved him in turn: we forgave him his outbursts, his rants, his imprudence, because he was basically good and did not dislike anyone. His zeal to heal the sick was admirable: he treated them throughout his missionary life, regardless of his discomfort or his time. He was happy to serve.

When he came to Paksane, he put some life into the community: he spoke loudly; he laughed loudly. He always had some surprising stories to tell. Father Boissel lived most of his ministry alone, in different posts, but he felt the need to meet with his Oblate confreres.

The last adventure of an eventful life

It was the rainy season. Every Saturday at the end of the day, Father Boissel went to one of the villages and came back on Sunday around noon. On Saturday, July 5, 1969, he decided to go to Hat I-Êt, a village of Kmhmu' refugees a good 20 kilometers from Paksane, going up along the River Nam San. Because of the lack of security, that year he was unable to go there for ministry for several months. The catechist André Van was there and he needed to know that he was supported.

Setting out around four in the afternoon, he took two young Laotian Oblate Missionaries with him; as usual, they were to help him with the visits, the care of the sick and the religious service. The nephew of one of them, 10 years old, had also secretly climbed aboard the vehicle. Upon learning of the child's presence, Father Boissel stopped the car and made him get out: "You should not come with us... I, the priest, and the two Oblates, we have given our lives for the Lord. For us, to die, that makes no difference: our lives are offered to the Lord. But you, you must not come with us!"

Then, all along the road, he talked about death. He said: “We should not fear death. We have already given our lives to the Lord. Traveling as we are, we are not safe; it is not prudent... There is always danger.” The two young women listened... without responding.

The following is told by one of the two passengers, the only survivor able to do so:

Two or three kilometers before arriving at the village, at a bend in the road, I heard a burst of gunfire aimed at us. The tires blew out and I was hit in the hand. I saw a red flag moving in the forest bordering our route. A second burst of gunfire and Thérèse was hit in the head; since I am smaller, the bullets did not hit me. The firing came from the left, on the driver’s side.

Father Boissel was hit in the head – near the mouth and in the skull. The jeep went into a ditch, turned over on us and burst into flames. Father’s glasses were broken; he died on the spot... His big eyes were open. All three of us were completely covered with blood.

Father Boissel was dead; Thérèse was unconscious. I was in a huge daze... not moving... like dead. But I saw three young Vietnamese soldiers going around the vehicle three times. He said: “Let’s kill them!” – “Let’s burn the vehicle and its occupants!” They moved away and threw a grenade at the car. The grenade exploded – it was the explosions that caused our injuries. I said, “O Lord!” but veil of darkness came over me...

I don’t know how long we stayed like that in the car. But Thérèse came to first. She pushed me to get out... The grenade had deafened us... It was difficult for us to communicate, to understand one another... Both of us prayed to the Lord: “If you still need us... send someone to help us.” We went to sleep along the road. I put my hand on Thérèse’s heart and she put hers on my heart: united in suffering.

Oh, we had to wait a long time, from 4:30 until about 9:30. Finally some people arrived to pick us up. Father’s body had been burned to the point that his face was totally unrecognizable. Thérèse, hit in the head, remained mentally handicapped as a result of the attack. She really has no happiness in living.

We thank God who still keeps us among the living till now. May Father Joseph Boissel protect us!

At the solemn funeral, Bishop Étienne Loosdregt, Vicar Apostolic, preached the homily:

Father Boissel, you remain with us... This violent death astounds us, a death in the breach, in full apostolic mission, a death that Joseph had cheated many times, a beautiful missionary death. But it is his life that astounds: the life of an apostle with a heart afire, a life given, the finished life of a man of God for whom nothing else mattered but to announce Jesus Christ to the poor...

Why did Father Boissel die?

As to the death of Father Boissel, first of all the question must be asked: who wanted him dead, what purpose armed his killers? Father Ernest Dumont, who loved him as a father, gives a rather complex explanation:

He was a dynamic and passionate man, but probably gauche. He had publicly expressed criticism of his catechist. He basically said: I am already old. I come to you risking my life and you do not care; next time, I may come to you. This speech had displeased

some, and certain people rose up against him. They probably went to find those guerrillas to tell of his movements, and they ambushed him.

This interpretation is not very satisfactory. A Kmhmu' Christian, even when angry, would not have gone to look for the Vietnamese... The passenger who escaped furnishes a simple and direct response:

Father Boissel died for his faith in Jesus Christ, because of a desire to see the Catholic religion disappear. It was known that Father Boissel went to one village or the other every Saturday at around 4 o'clock. There was hatred – for foreigners, for priests, for the Catholic religion.

The deeper meaning of the death of Father Boissel

Like the other missionaries who died a violent death in Laos, Joseph Boissel was, in his own way, with his personality, his talents, and also with his limitations, a man of God who knew what it meant to do the work to be done for Jesus Christ and the poor, who knew the risks of the venture, but who did not hesitate to give his all for love.

Father Jean Hanique, o.m.i., friend of Fr. Boissel and former provincial of the Oblates, testifies: "Joseph did not seek to be killed, but he did nothing to avoid it. He went into danger knowingly. Everyone was in the same situation. He knew very well what he was risking."

Bishop Jean Sommeng Vorachak, Bishop of Savannakhet, develops this idea in a larger context:

The usual life of these Apostles -- and of all of us who are working and risking our lives for the Faith -- in my opinion, is sufficient to tell us that they offered their lives once and for all, for better or for worse, ready to face any obstacles. Father Dubroux, Father Boissel, like Father Tien and all the others... all died for the cause of the Church and of religion... Whether the Church canonizes them or not, whether it recognizes them as saints, in the end, it matters little. All these priests and catechists died for the Faith, so I believe and I am certain they are in Heaven.

Didn't Joseph Boissel explain it himself to his friend, the priest of his native village, during his third and last vacation in France in 1968?

He knew that they wanted to kill him. He avoided death several times. He was rather sure that they would kill him because of the faith. There were hostile people; he could not have been surprised. For the people of the village, his death was a surprise, and at the same time, they knew it.

Father Louaisil concludes: "He is surely in Paradise!"

As for the surviving passenger, she speaks with passion about him whom she had known during two years of mission together:

Father Boissel knew about the dangers of these trips. He was ready to give his life for Jesus Christ.

At his burial, almost everyone came. They said: "He died for the faith, because he was going to say Mass in that village." He knew that something was going to happen someday, during all this moving around; but he went because it was his work. Often people remind me: "Father Boissel did this or he did that..." They remember him; he left a living memory: one could say that he was a martyr. But he has not yet done any miracles!

Father Ernest Dumont, one of the first to go to the place of the murder, writes:

We had only to wrap his remains in the wrapping given to us by Father Jean Fagon, his companion in ministry for more than 30 years; we did it like the first Christians had done with the torn bodies of the witnesses to the faith.

The last word goes to Father Jean Denis, the companion of his young years, whom he had never seen again since his departure for Laos:

My memory of Father Boissel is that of a serious and generous man without compromise. I see very well that he would have given his life for his religious beliefs. And what a joy it would be to see an ordination confrere beatified and canonized... I will see him in heaven before that, of course, but then we will rejoice together... I am happy to give that testimony. He was an Oblate, a man who did his job well, without ostentation but for the Lord.

Homily of Father Douangdi for the funeral of Father Boissel (translated from Lao¹⁹)

Dear brothers and sisters,

Who says that the Fathers are foreigners? Who says that the Fathers are not good? Who says that we are traitors because we profess the religion of our Fathers?

Father Boissel lies before us dead now. His life is the response to our questions and to our faith.

If Father Boissel is a foreigner, why did he come to live in Laos for 31 years? Why did he come to mark our Laotian country with his bright red blood, so that it would become “the village where he was born and the village where he rests”? Why did he agree that our Laotian earth would cover his face?

If Father Boissel is not good, why does heaven not strike him, why does the plague not devour him? Why had he moved with haste and devotion to get to his children in the village of Hat I-Ét? It was only his dedication to his children – whom he loved – that drove Father Boissel to them, without thinking of his own blood, his own flesh, his life.

And if we are traitors, why are we sitting here? Why and for what reasons are we come together here to weep over Father Boissel?

You dignitaries, you teachers who knew and visited Father Boissel, know and remember this: he was a good man, generous with the people, with the poor. Although Father Boissel was a man direct with his words and “who sneezed loudly”, remember his kindness which he left as an edifice built wherever he went.

We Christians, who ate at the same table, who tasted the same dishes as he, remember that Father Boissel was priest of God, who had a warm and generous heart for his children, for you, the uncles and aunts who came to see him to ask for help. Father Boissel was an example, a fountain from which you could drink in the love of God for man.

Dear brothers and sisters, soon we are going to take the body of Father Boissel to bury it in a plot of land in our country of Laos. What can we do to thank him for his goodness

¹⁹ Pierre Douangdi, o.m.i.: Laotian Oblate born in 1934 and ordained a priest in 1964. The translation into French was done by Father Pierre Kykèo Pradaxay, o.m.i.

which he fostered for us and which he has left with us? Nothing but to see his face for the last time, but we cannot because it was completely burned.

Father Boissel, who came to live in our Laotian country for 31 years, what did he reap? To show our appreciation, we only have our prayers. We have only a handful of earth that we will take to cover his body when we have laid it in the grave. We ask nothing for him, nothing but Paradise. May he share happiness in the joy of God's glory in Paradise.

"The earth that covers the face for five hundred years cannot make us forget love", because God has given us Father Boissel to support us, to love us.

"The earth that covers the face for five hundred years cannot make us forget love", for Father Boissel was an example, a fountain overflowing with Christ's love for us.

"The earth that covers the face for five hundred years cannot make us forget love", for Father Boissel is a martyr who died for his faith to our benefit.

Neither the day nor time can erase the memory of Father Boissel from our spirit or our heart. Neither the falling rain nor the resounding waters can erase the bright red blood of Father Boissel, which colored this Laotian soil, because we believe that the sacrifice of the life and blood and flesh of Father Boissel will bring to our Laotian people beneficent tranquility and blessed peace.

Biographical resources for Father Joseph Boissel

Unpublished resources:

Testimonies of direct witnesses:

- Bishop Louis-Marie Ling Mangkhanekhoun, Vicar Apostolic of Paksé
- Bishop Jean Sommeng Vorachak, Vicar Apostolic of Savannakhet
- Bishop Alessandro Staccioli, o.m.i., Former Vicar Apostolic of Louang Prabang
- Père Jean Denis, o.m.i. (+)
- Father Ernest Dumont, o.m.i. (+)
- Father Jean Hanique, o.m.i. (+)
- Father Yvon L'Hénoret, o.m.i.
- Father Joseph Pillain, o.m.i. (+)
- Father Gérard Sion, o.m.i. (+)
- Father Jean Subra, o.m.i. (+)
- Rev. Louaisil, archdiocese of Rennes
- Miss Marielle Sounthane Xayamongkhoun, o.m.m.i.
- Miss Marie Ien Hounghmany, o.m.m.i.
- Mr. Pierre-Nhinh Thepkaisone, Lille, France.
- Mr. Kampol, of Nong Veng
- Mr. Lan, of Nong Veng

Documents

General Archives O.M.I., Rome, Dossier Joseph Boissel

- Letters and documents about the first formation of Joseph Boissel.
- Various correspondence of Joseph Boissel, 1937-1958, notably:
 - Letter of Joseph Boissel to the Superior General for his first obedience, December 1937.
- Newsletter of Joseph Boissel, 1966 : « Victimes de la guerre au Laos ».
- Telegram of Bishop Loosdregt announcing the death of Joseph Boissel, 6 July 1969.
- « Viens, serviteur bon et fidèle » = « La dernière piste du Père Boissel » :
 - test of Ernest Dumont, o.m.i., 9 July 1969.
- Sermon for the burial of Father Boissel (Father Douangdi).

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- Codex historicus of Xieng Khouang 1939-1946: Box B-402, doc. H a 67, notebooks 1 et 2.
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- Letter of Henri Rouzière to Joseph Boissel, 6 April 1953, Box B-403, doc. H a 68, insert.
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- Codex historicus of Ban Pha 1950-1959: Box B-402, doc. H a 63.
- Collective letter signed by Joseph Boissel, 17 November 1959 : Box 35 "Loosdregt, E. # 4630", Dossier "Letters Drouart 1959-1960".
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- Dossier Joseph Boissel: notes and documents about his first formation.

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- Pierre Chevroulet, o.m.i., « Étude sur la persécution au Laos (1954-1975) ».

Published resources :

Archives M.E.P., on the Internet (<http://archivesmep.mepasie.org/>) :

- Rapport annuel des évêques du Laos, 1970

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- « Panorama du Laos », Petites Annales 52, 1947, p. 29.
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MARTYRS WHO WORKED WITH THE OBLATES IN LAOS

A Hmong catechist among the Hmong:

Paul Thoj Xyooj

(1941 – 1960)

Biographical Notes

**Provisional text by Roland Jacques, o.m.i.,
Diocesan Postulator**

**Postulation des Martyrs du Laos
94120 Fontenay-sous-Bois, France
November 2011**

“Tiam sis nws hais rau kuv tias : Kuv lub txiaj txaus koj lawm, lub hwj huam nres nroos tus muag luav...
Ua kuv txaus siab rau kev muag luav, raug tsawm, raug quab yuam,
raug tsim txom thiab txais kev txhawj xeeb vim Leej Pleev ;
yog kuv muag luav txawm cuab kub zog loj thaum ntawd.”

“The Lord told me: ‘My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.’
Therefore, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships,
persecutions, and constraints, for the sake of Christ;
for when I am weak, then I am strong.”
Second letter of St. Paul to the Corinthians, 12: 9-10

“For love of the Lord, he dedicated all his strength to the service of the Church,
helping the priests in their mission.
He persevered, even to shedding his blood, so as to remain faithful
to the love of Him to whom he had totally given himself.”
*St. John Paul II, homily for the beatification of André de Phú Yên
19 year old catechist, protomartyr of Vietnam (5 March 2000).*



The Catechist Paul Thoj Xyooj

Witness of Jesus Christ in Laos,
Died a presumed martyr on about 1 May 1960 at Muang Kassy (Laos)

I – Preparation and first successes of the “little prince of the Hmong”

The evangelization of Laos within the Catholic missions, from the late nineteenth century until the third quarter of the twentieth, still awaits its definitive historiography.²⁰ Today, the local Catholic Church wants to revive the memory of its past and especially of those witnesses who gave their life for the mission. Among them, a privileged place went to a young Hmong catechist who died at 19, Thoj Xyooj.²¹

The life of the young Paul Thoj Xyooj is exemplary in more ways than one: a catechist's journey, as remarkable as it is short, for which his heroic death - subject of a future article – contributed to his final greatness. Many testimonies have come in successive steps to shed light on this exemplary figure of the mission in Laos. Research into the archives has made it possible to position his life, with its lights and shadows, within a solid historical setting.

The resulting biography juxtaposes, in a fascinating counterpoint, the view of Europeans about Xyooj and that of his countrymen.

* * *

Thoj Xyooj (or Thao Shiong²²) was born in 1941 in Kiukatiam in Luang Prabang province. Kiukatiam was a Hmong village, called in that language Nyuj Qus Roob, that is to say, the “Mountain of Gaur.” The village was located at 1,000 meters above sea level, atop a mountain just south of Highway 13, northwest of Mount Phou Khoun towards Luang Prabang, the royal capital of Laos, 80 km away.²³ The first evangelization there had been undertaken by Father Yves Bertrais, O.M.I., who lived there from 1950 to 1958.²⁴

The childhood and adolescent years

The young Xyooj is part of the first generation of villagers who embraced the Christian faith. He had lost his father, who was the chieftain of the village, before the age of nine. In 1950, when Father Bertrais arrived for the first time among the Hmong of Kiukatiam, it was his

²⁰ See R. Costet, m.e.p., « Histoire de l'évangélisation au Laos », EDA, *Dossiers et documents* 10/99, Supplement to *Églises d'Asie*, 299 (1999), p. 18-19 ; text reused in 2000 by the electronic review SEDOS, www.sedos.org/french/costet.htm (8.6.2007) ; R. Costet, *Siam – Laos : Histoire de la mission*, Paris, 2003. See too: R. Jacques, « Laos : le choc des indépendances. Témoignages sur la mission, du protectorat à la guerre civile. La correspondance de trois missionnaires oblats français, 1948-1967 », in C. Marin (dir.), *Les écritures de la mission en Extrême-Orient. Le choc de l'arrivée, XVIII^e-XX^e siècles : de l'attente à la réalité*, [Turnhout], Brepols, 2007, p. 311-464.

²¹ The approximate pronunciation of the name is “Thao Shiong.”

²² The Hmong clan name Thoj corresponds to the Chinese surname Tao / T'ao, “pottery; happy,” and can be transcribed in Western languages as “Thao” or “Tho.” The personal name Xyooj corresponds to the Chinese Xiong / Hsiung, which means “strong man, courageous, glorious...”; in Western languages, the Hmong pronunciation could be “Hsiong” or “Shiong.” In Vietnamese, the complete name is written “Đào Hùng”.

²³ In 2007, the village of Kiukatiam still exists, but the site has been moved along the main road, now paved and busy, that used to be called “Queen Astrid Road” (from Luang Prabang to Vinh Vietnam via Xieng Khouang). Although in poor condition, the monument to the Queen of the Belgians is still visible not far away.

²⁴ Yves Bertrais, o.m.i., (1921-2007) missionary from 1949 to 1975 in Laos, where he was the first apostle of the Hmong ethnic group. He is one of the originators of the Hmong writing known as RPA, and a world-renowned specialist in the Hmong culture.

mother who received him and prepared him his first meal.²⁵ Xyooj was soon a young catechumen, convinced, intelligent and alert. He attached himself more and more to the mission and the missionary. One of his nephews explains:

“My father told me that the day the missionary came to the village, his little brother Xyooj fell in love with the Gospel. He greatly loved religion, and that’s why he went everywhere with the priest, to proclaim and teach religion in one village after another, going wherever the Father went.”²⁶

At age 16, Xyooj told Father Bertrais of his desire to be a priest.²⁷ Believing he had the abilities, they decided to send him to a formation program at the Minor Seminary of Paksane. The previous year, the Mission had opened there a new section, for the training future catechists. Xyooj would be a student there; as for the priesthood, they would consider that later. His mother was against it: she would not hear of this new sort of thing; it would be ultimately one of Xyooj’s two big brothers, with whom they lived, who would make the decision.

There was still a problem: the seminary candidate was only a catechumen, and the baptisms were not planned until the following year. Never mind that: Xyooj was baptized on Sunday, December 8, 1957, by Father Bertrais. On this occasion, he received the name of the apostle Paul, a name he would bear with honor.²⁸

On December 11, an expedition set off to Paksane via Vientiane, led by Oblate Missionaries of Mary Immaculate who had come to get a group of four Hmong girls who were to study with them; there were also two boys headed for the seminary, including Xyooj. It is not without a tug at the heart that these Hmong youth left for the Mekong valley, so far from their people and their mountains.²⁹

At Paksane, one of Xyooj’s study mates was Louis-Marie Ling Mangkhanekhoun, future bishop of Paksé; he was only 11 years old, but he remembers well his older companion who spoke a language so different from his own (Khmhu’). At school, Xyooj was known by his Laotian name “Khamse.” He left behind the memory of a lively, energetic and likeable youth. However, he had a health problem; an ulcerous wound in his leg, the result of an accident in his childhood which had never healed and which handicapped him quite a bit.³⁰ Bishop Ling states: “In the hours of class and recreation, he was always with us, but whenever it was a

²⁵ Statement of A. – N.B. The names of Laotian witnesses, except for those who hold official positions, have been replaced in the text by a neutral alias: A, B, C, according to the order of their appearance in the text.

²⁶ Statement of B.

²⁷ On the date of November 16, 1957, Father Bertrais noted in the *Codex Historicus*, which is the journal of the Mission: “Sionj says he wants to be a priest. He has what is required for that.” Rome, General Archives OMI, B-401, collection Ha52 : *Codex historicus de Kiukatiam [= ChK]* (internal title: *Codex historicus de Trong-Nu-Kru*), 1952-1961, p. 129. In spite of the spelling used, the context leaves no doubt that that Sionj refers to Xyooj.

²⁸ On the same occasion, two girls were baptized who also were to leave for Paksane to study with the Oblates. *ChK*, p. 130, dated 8 December 1957.

²⁹ Cf. *ChK*, p. 130-131, dated 13 December 1957 : “On the 11th...at about 14 hours, there was the departure of Yis, Mas, Diav and Ntoum , plus Sionj and Xab by jeep and 2 CV: the whole village was there since 10 o’clock, awaiting the departure. That was a real spectacle, even more among the pagans than among the Christians. The attitude of the Christian parents was admirable: they all encouraged their children to leave , to study well and to be docile. On the other hand, many of the pagans said things that were not very nice: that the girls were leaving to become prostitutes, that they were heartless to leave their parents to do all the work, etc.”

³⁰ According to the official testimony of C. and other witnesses of the childhood years, it was at the age of eight, while playing with his friends on a kind of rolling cart they had made, that Xyooj had suffered a bad compound fracture of the femur bone. Father Bertrais had nursed him to the best of his ability, but the wound was infected and ulcerated, and took years to heal.

question of sports, he had to sit down and amuse himself by watching us. For a young man of his age, it was a real burden.”³¹ Later on, his mother would manage to heal the wound with the help of traditional medicine.³²

Xyooj did not complete his formation at Paksane.³³ At the end of a year, he was back at Kiukatiam. Nevertheless, he remained committed to his vocation as catechist and was going to continue his preparation under the direction of the missionaries, little by little becoming involved in the task at hand.

At the village school, he taught the children the Lao and Hmong languages; as catechist, he was a beginner but greatly appreciated. Witnesses from this period unanimously describe a young man of great kindness, smiling and open, always ready to render a service and filled with compassion for those who were in difficulty. One of his students explains: “He loved God and working for God. He was not conceited; he was humble.”³⁴

A young catechist is sent on mission

That same year, 1958, the mission in the region of Louang Prabang (the northwest of Laos) had been entrusted to Italian Oblates under the direction of Father Leonello Berti.³⁵ The leaders took care of the province of Louang Nam Tha, bordering Burma and China. The Hmong of the big village of Na Vang³⁶ soon heard about their brethren who had become Christians; they too wanted to know “these ‘Jesuses’” who gave out medicines to heal illnesses.”³⁷

The village was located in the district of Ban La Xeng (Npam Laj Xees in Hmong), near Vieng Poukha and Ban Takeo, a day and a half’s walk to the southwest of the capital of Nam Tha³⁸. The missionaries who were sent there, Alessandro Staccioli and Luigi Sion³⁹, spoke only Lao

³¹ Statement Bishop Louis-Marie Ling Mangkhanekhoun, Vicar Apostolic of Paksé.

³² Statement of D.

³³ The reasons for this return are apparently multiple: the health of Xyooj plays a role, but also the uncertainties of adolescence. Father Bertrais speaks in the Codex about a retreat given to the seminarians at home for the Hmong New Year celebrations: “Everyone was very happy with the day. They all love their studies. They all want to be priests ...” Apparently disappointed, he added a note about the two boys who left the previous year: “Xyooj is not returning to the seminary; he could be syphilitic (so say the doctors in Vientiane): he quickly got back into the life of the young boys of the village who are looking for wives! X. is not returning either: he does not like the life at Paksane ... And we are happy, because he cannot study.” ChK, p. 155, on the date of 16 December 1958. The motivations are different for the two young men; for Xyooj, health seems to have been the prevailing element. We note that Father Bertrais, who had treated Xyooj, distances himself from the hypothetical diagnosis of the doctor in Vientiane. The latter had recognized in Xyooj’s ulcerative wound a sign of syphilis or perhaps yaws; the latter disease, caused in children by the treponoma bacteria, similar to that of syphilis, causes skin damage. Anyway, the diagnosis was clearly wrong, but the missionaries kept the word “syphilis”, which will have serious consequences for the reputation of the teenager.

³⁴ Statement of E.

³⁵ Leonello Berti, o.m.i. (1925-1968), successively coadjutor of the Vicar Apostolic of Vientiane (1962) and then first Vicar Apostolic of Louang Prabang (1963), died in an airplane accident in Laos on February 24, 1968. The first group of Italian Oblates, sent to Laos as reinforcements for their French and Canadian confreres, also included Alessandro Staccioli, Mario Borzaga, Bramante Marchiol, Luigi Sion, all priests, and Pierino Bertocchi, religious Brother.

³⁶ The missionaries often write rather incorrectly, “Nam Vang.” The Hmong spelling is “Naj Vas.”

³⁷ Statement de F., former catechist, taken by G.

³⁸ Of a distance of 60 kilometers, 38 kilometers of the road were under construction; sometimes the missionaries could use a jeep for this journey. Cf. letter of Bishop Loosdregt au Fr. Jean Drouart, o.m.i., 22 January 1960: Rome, General Archives OMI, 35, Loosdregt E. # 4630, folder Letters Drouart 1959-1960.

³⁹ Alessandro Staccioli, o.m.i., born in 1931, ordained a priest in 1956, would be Vicar Apostolic de Louang Prabang from 1968 till 1975. Luigi Sion, o.m.i., born in 1932, ordained a priest in 1957; several Oblate missionaries in Laos had the same surname.

which the Hmong did not understand; so they asked Kiukatiam to loan them a Hmong catechist. Xyooj was available: upon the recommendation of Father Berti, it was he whom Father Mario Borzaga⁴⁰, now in charge of this mission, decided to send.⁴¹ He would be under the guidance of Father L. Sion, he too a newly arrived young missionary.

The departure took place on April 21, 1959; for the young man, it was a great adventure in service of the Gospel. He was “full of enthusiasm and courage.”⁴²

A few days later, he was at work. In the journal of the Mission of Nam Tha, Father Staccioli noted:

“Father Sion heard ... that the pastor had gone to visit some Hmong villages that seem well disposed; he decided to go too. Just the day before yesterday, a Hmong catechist from Kiukacham arrived to sound out the outlook for the Hmong in this region. Therefore, they left yesterday, Fr Sion, Xyooj (the Hmong catechist) and Khamphone.”⁴³

When he arrived in Na Vang with Father Luigi Sion, o.m.i., and Kamphone, a Laotian Christian teacher from Paksane, Xyooj made quite a hit. It was a Friday evening, May 1 1959⁴⁴. According to the exact recollection of a young man from the village who later on would become a catechist as well, it was in the middle of the harvest season and the families were coming in from the fields.⁴⁵ Xyooj was wearing his Hmong attire and a black hat with a pompom, as well as three silver necklaces he had received from his father and of which he was quite proud.

Later on, he himself liked to tell about this incident, as a witness would recount:

“The Hmong of Nam Tha were saying: ‘The Hmong king is arriving, with his necklace as round as an arm.’ They called the Father ‘Jesus.’ I told them: ‘I am not a Hmong king; I am only a young boy who has come with the Father. I am not a chieftain; I have come only to fulfil a duty: to proclaim and to teach the Good News of God’.”⁴⁶

⁴⁰ The Servant of God Mario Borzaga, o.m.i. (1932-1960); Xyooj will be his companion in the last missionary journey, in which the two would be killed out of hatred for the faith, 1 May 1960.

⁴¹ “Probabilmente tra qualche tempo Xyooj [andrà come] catechista a Nam Tha, questo è il desiderio di Padre Superiore. » (Eventually Xyooj will probably go as catechist to Nam Tha; it's the desire of Fr. Superior.) *ChK*, p. 167, 7 April 1959. The names of ‘Hwb’ and ‘Xyooj’ have here erroneously the tonal mark ‘b’. Beginning in December 1959, Fr. Borzaga will spell them correctly with the tonal marker ‘j’: ‘Hwj’ and ‘Xyooj’. On the same date, he wrote in his journal using phonetic spelling: “A Nam Tha hanno bisogno di un catechista meo. Ci manderemo Schiong.” (At Nam Tha, we need a Hmong catechist; we will send Xyooj.): *Diario di un uomo felice*, p. 533. – At this time, the Hmong people were usually called by the noun or adjective “méo”, (苗 “miao”) of Chinese origin, which today is no longer used in Western language

⁴² “Xyooj parte tutto entusiasta e pieno di coraggio”: *ChK*, p. 168, 21 April 1959. The author adds some interesting details about the caravan of trucks to Louang Prabang, first stage (p. 168-169). The second stage, to the capital of Nam Tha, was by plane.; Xyooj was accompanied by Fr. Plante, a veteran of the mission (ibid.). Leo Plante, o.m.i., (1909-2002), Canadian, had been in Laos since 1938.

⁴³ “P. Sion... ha avuto notizia che il pastore è andato a visitare alcuni villaggi Meo che sembrano ben disposti, ha deciso di andarci anche lui. È arrivato giusto l'altro ieri un catechista meo di Kiucathiam per vedere le disposizioni dei Meo di queste parti. E così ieri sono partiti P. Sion, Schiong (il catechista meo) e Khamphong. » Rome, General Archives O.M.I., B-401, Collection Ha54, *ChNT*, 1958-1961, p. 17, 2 May 1959. Khamphone should surely be read Khamphong.

⁴⁴ The date is well proven by the documents. Father L. Sion gives a quaint detail: “La missione è incominciata dal primo Maggio, quando insieme a Kham Phon e Kham Se siamo partiti alla ricerca di un villaggio meo di cui non conoscevano nemmeno il nome.” (The mission began on May 1, the day I left with Khamphone and Khamse, [= Xyooj] looking for a Hmong village whose name we did not even know.) Rome, General Archives OMI, B-401, Liasse Ha55, *Codex historicus de Na Vang [ChNV]*, 1959-1960, p. 6, at the date of 15 July 1959.

⁴⁵ Statement of H.

⁴⁶ Statement of J.

They asked him for some explanations. Xyooj told them that Jesus was the conqueror of all the demons.

That was the first time that these Hmong heard it told that a man, Jesus, was not afraid of demons and that he even expelled them. They said among themselves: “So the new God is going to come.”⁴⁷ They also wanted to know whether, during marriage ceremonies, during funeral rites, during traditional feasts, etc., they could eat meat; actually, some Protestants had passed by there and had told them that they should not eat pork nor drink alcohol. Xyooj reassured them on the subject. So they invited him to stay with the Father in their village and they lodged them first of all with some families.⁴⁸

The first proclamation

The next day, May 2, the people continued to come to see and listen to the travelers, forgetting about their farming for two entire days. They took turns in inviting them to come and eat at their homes, according to the friendly customs of the Hmong. Without delay, Xyooj began to teach the first basics of the catechism with enthusiasm and faith. The first days, this was in open air, and then in the house of the village chieftain, in the light of gas lamps. Since he was short in stature, he had to perch on the bench of a shaman in order to be seen by all. He put the children in front and the older ones in the rear. Several witnesses recall these days:

“Older women would check to see how heavy his silver necklaces were, feel his Hmong cap, feel his smooth fingers; they wanted to weigh his necklaces on a scale. He smiled at them and they laughed... When he smiled you could see his all white teeth. Everyone fell silent. Xyooj then began to speak. He said he came to teach some books. He came to teach the young some songs. He was going to teach the Doctrine of Heaven. He had come to tell them to reject the worship of spirits. Three days and three nights in a row, everyone came to listen to Xyooj.”⁴⁹

“When he taught the prayers, the people did not understand well because that was new to them; Xyooj, who was very intelligent and cunning, took the tender bark of a reed and folded it accordion-style to explain each part of the prayer and to help them to understand that it was comprised of a certain number of words. He had a very orderly and clear way of speaking; he was a very patient teacher.”⁵⁰

Everyone quickly learned the “Our Father” and the “Hail Mary.” Other prayers followed; the Credo offered the occasion to tell the history of salvation. H. remembers the details:

“Xyooj spoke of God and of his work of six days to create the heaven and the earth, and of the rest on the seventh day, which the Christians observe to remember God. He told about the sin of the first couple, Adam and Eve. He spoke about Moses, the big-hearted shepherd who was watching his sheep in the desert when he saw a burning bush what was not consumed by the fire, and the voice that told him: ‘Make my people Israel go out of Egypt.’ He told the story of the Virgin Mary who became pregnant with the baby Jesus and who has left for Paradise without her body changing as happens to us poor mortals.”⁵¹

⁴⁷ Statement of K.

⁴⁸ Statement of K. and F.

⁴⁹ Statement of J.

⁵⁰ Statement of K.

⁵¹ Statement of H.

For a migrant people like the Hmong, familiar with exile, the story of the Exodus was, of course, extraordinarily powerful.

The Good News falls on good ground

From the outset, Xyooj was seen as different from the other boys, full of love for people. He had the gift of speaking. He was very joyous and open with everyone, without exception. Everyone loved him; everyone, from the youngest to the oldest, wanted to hear about the religion of Heaven, the Good News of Jesus who had died and risen, conqueror of evil on the earth and victor over demons.

Xyooj also taught prayers and religious songs. He sang very well, with a beautiful voice that attracted the people. He sang with the old people and with the young, and that warmed the hearts of all the villagers. A witness relates:

“When he taught songs, he didn’t do so only with his mouth but also with his hands. That way, everyone was singing at the same time. That’s what I saw and that’s the truth.”⁵²

Thus, the young catechist was sowing the Word of Jesus in several ways, and everyone was filled with enthusiasm. The witness, who at the time was just a little girl, says:

“What I heard and what I saw with my eyes was that Xyooj did a fantastic job; no one could do it like he did; that warmed my heart deeply. Some Protestants had passed by twice with their propaganda, but that had not touched us. When Xjooj arrived, what he did in two or three days was inexplicable, so much were our hearts set afire and touched. We had never heard anyone speak like he did. Every day, I went to work in the fields and I thought all the time about the evening, after work, that I was going to go listen to him teach and that warmed my heart so much.”⁵³

The Word thus received began to grow in their hearts. They asked: “If you chase away all the shamanic spirits, what will we do? There will be no more spirit to watch over our homes.” He replied:

“When you become believers, all the spirits that you honor will be driven away; there will be the priest and the catechist with you. God is the greatest of all and, at that time, there will be no more demons to fear. When you go through wild places, near ponds and thickets of bushes, you will no longer be afraid of the demons.”⁵⁴

Xyooj’s words forcefully touched the life and heart of his hearers. They all saw that his words were wise: it was not a lie. A witness concludes:

“Without Xyooj, we don’t think we would ever have become Christians, because we did not understand the Father. He did not know our language well and nevertheless, he took care of us and loved us, but he could not teach like Xyooj.”⁵⁵

From the seed fallen on the ground, a community of believers is born

⁵² Statement of L., wife of F.

⁵³ Statement of L.

⁵⁴ Statement of L.

⁵⁵ Statement of F.

By the third day, impressed both by the messenger and his preaching, half the families in the village, that is seventeen homes, had asked to enter the catechumenate to become Christians.⁵⁶ That same day, from noon till evening, Xyooj accompanied Father Sion to chase away the shamanic spirits in each of the houses of the catechumens, beginning by that of the village chieftain. He himself destroyed the shamanic altars and shrines dedicated to household spirits; he had no fear. He had everything burnt: smoke was coming from all the houses. They had never seen anything like that before: a man with the courage to do such a thing.

In the Christian calendar, that May 3 was the fifth Sunday after Easter, just before the Rogation Days when seeds were blessed and the feast of the Ascension. On that Sunday, the Mass would be celebrated publicly for the first time in a village that still had no Christians, but which did have catechumens. The liturgy began with a very appropriate text:

“Proclaim it with cries of joy: let them hear it! Share it to the ends of the earth: the Lord has freed his people! Alleluia, alleluia!”⁵⁷

And the Gospel of the day repeated the words of Jesus at the last Supper:

“Amen, amen, I tell you, whatever you ask of the Father, He will give it to you in my name; ask and you will receive, so that your joy might be complete... for the Father himself loves you.”⁵⁸

The news spread quickly to the neighboring villages and people began to come to listen to Xyooj. Two or three hours and even an entire day of walking did not keep them from coming to hear the Good News of Jesus, and they began to love Him. They admired the teaching style of Xyooj and his devotion. He certainly could not do everything, but with his patience and his good will, he managed to teach everyone.

The number of catechumens never ceased growing, to the great joy of the catechist: twenty-one families in just a few days, twenty-five in two weeks, soon thirty; by the end of the year, there was a total of four hundred persons.⁵⁹

The news went around the country quickly and spread across the borders. Indeed, on May 5-6, Bishop Loosdregt and Bishop Giuseppe Caprio, who was filling in at the Apostolic

⁵⁶ According to witnesses, the exact number varies; these differences are undoubtedly explained by the different ways of counting households where two generations lived together – they counted either those in the house or families in the Western sense. In his statement, H. speaks of twelve families four the first day and nine for the second, or twenty-one all together. Seventeen is the average number, cited in a letter of Mario Borzaga on August 31, as found *Lettera agli Amici del Laos* (Naples) n° 4, Septembers 1959, p. 4. Several months after the event, Fr. L. Sion, for his part, gives the number of thirteen: “Il 3 Maggio ho gettato i *Phi* in tredici famiglie... Il primo a gettare i *Phi* è stato il capo del villaggio » (On May 3, I expelled the spirits in thirteen families... The first to chase them was the village chieftain.) *ChNV*, p. 6, 15 juillet 1959. At the beginning of July, Fr. Borzaga, with first-hand information, spoke of twenty-eight families who had become catechumens (*Diario di un uomo felice*, p. 580-581). Furthermore, J. furnished a list naming thirty families for the first six months.

⁵⁷ Introit of the Mass (*Isaiah* 48, 20 et *Psalms* 65) : “Vocem iucunditatis annuntiate, et audiat, alleluia : nuntiate usque ad extremum terræ : liberavit Dominus populum suum, alleluia, alleluia !”

⁵⁸ *John* 16: 23-30.

⁵⁹ The number is given by Bishop Loosdregt in his letter to Father Drouart on 22 January 1960, quoted above.

Delegation⁶⁰, were visiting Nam Tha and were able to get the information directly from the mouth of Father L. Sion who had hurried down the mountain⁶¹.

Father Borzaga, at Kiukatiam, was keeping abreast of the situation and was happy for his choice. At the end of May 1959, he made his first review which appeared in the bulletin of the Association of the Friends of Laos:

“We thought it a good idea to send as catechist, to back up the Fathers [at Nam Tha, Na Vang] a young man from Kiukatiam: Paul Xyooj, gifted with good intellect and an even greater enthusiasm, he left his fields and his family to go to Nam Tha. The activity of this fine lad quickly showed good results... In May, Father Sion and Xyooj began a tour that has aroused much hope.”⁶²

In August, he would write to the same publication:

“Na Vang... has converted to the Catholic religion. Fathers Staccioli and Sion awaited the arrival of a fine young man from Kiukatiam, Paul Xyooj, believing he would be the best one to contact the Hmong and speak to them about the Catholic religion... Up till now, all the work [at Nam Tha] has been done in Laotian. With the arrival at Nam Tha of our Xyooj, there has been a parade of Hmong; for entire days, they came to the Catholic Mission to hear from the mouth of an authentic Hmong who spoke their language about the religion of the Lord of Heaven.”⁶³

As for Xyooj, who remained in charge from May 5 for two weeks, together with a Laotian instructor who in the circumstances stayed quiet, he did not slow down. The community of believers increased and grew stronger.⁶⁴ Soon it needed its own place. H. comments:

⁶⁰ Bishop Étienne Loosdregt, o.m.i., 1908-1980. Having arrived in Laos in 1936 with the first Missionary Oblate team, his was the first bishop of Laos: Apostolic Vicar of Vientiane from 1952-1975. Bishop Giuseppe Caprio (1914-2005) was named in that same month of May 1959 as pro-nuncio in China, and later as Internuncio in India. He would conclude his career as a Cardinal, with different functions in the Roman Curia.

⁶¹ “Ieri, alle 10 di mattina sono arrivati Mons. Caprio e Mons. Loosdregt... Mons. Caprio era meravigliato dello stato di povertà in cui vivevano i padri. Si è interessato di tutto e ci ha promesso il suo aiuto. Alle 3 quando i monsignori stavano per partire è arrivato P. Sion gridando un villaggio Meo si è convertito ed è entrato nel catechumenato. La nostra gioia non poteva essere maggiore.” (Yesterday... at 10 in the morning, Bishop Caprio and Bishop Loosdregt arrived... Bishop Caprio was astonished at the poverty in which the Fathers were living. He was interested in everything and promised his help. At 3 o'clock, when the prelates were ready to leave, Father Sion arrived exclaiming: “A Hmong village has converted and entered the catechumenate!” Our joy could not have been greater. *Codex Historicus de Nam Tha [= ChNT]*, p. 17-18, 6 May 1959.

⁶² “... Si pensò di inviare come catechista in aiuto dei padri un giovanotto di Kiukatiam, Paolo Schiong, dotato di buon'intelligenza e ancor più di entusiasmo, lasciò i suoi campi e la sua famiglia e si recò a Nam Tha. L'azione del bravo ragazzo si mostrò ben presto efficace... A maggio, p. Sion e Schiong fecero una tournée che lascia adito a delle buone speranze.” Letter of 26 May 1958 published in *Lettera agli Amici del Laos*, n° 3, August 1959, p. 3.

⁶³ « Na Vang, villaggio Meo, a due giorni di marcia a sud di Nam Tha, si è convertito alla religione cattolica. I Padri Staccioli e Sion attesero l'arrivo di un bravo giovane di Kiukatiam, Paolo Schiong, il quale meglio avrebbe avvicinato i Meo e parlato loro della religione cattolica... Tutto fino allora si era fatto in laotiano. Coll'arrivo a Nam Tha del nostro Schiong, fu una processione di Meo, che per intere giornate venne alla Missione cattolica per sapere da un autentico Meo che parlava la loro lingua, che cosa fosse la Religione del Signore del Cielo. » Letter du 31 August 1959, published in *Lettera agli Amici del Laos*, n° 4, September 1959, p. 3.

⁶⁴ Father Luigi Sion returned à Na Vang on 20 May, with provisions of medicines, books and blankets, in time to supervise the construction. He will later come and go each month. Cf. *ChNV*, p. 6, 15 July 1959, and *ChNT*, p. 18-19, 20 May 1959.

“When the twenty-one families became Christians, [Xyooj] was really happy, and he told us to come and gather all together to thank Heaven for having saved us. He urged us to rapidly build a church where everyone could come to pray and sing the faith, and a school where the whole village could come to learn the catechism and to read and write Hmong.”⁶⁵

The chieftain of the village took over the building site; next to the big house for teaching, he had built a small house for the Father. Xyooj went out with everyone into the forest to cut the necessary trees and bring them to the village for the construction.⁶⁶

Portrait of a young catechist

Xyooj had the qualities and flaws of his age and culture. But it was these human and spiritual qualities and talents that made a lasting impression on all the villagers. He not only believed in God with firm faith, but he was honest and hardworking. The testimony of H., who lived with Xyooj at Na Vang but also at Kiukatiam in the last weeks of his life, is the most thorough on the subject:

“Xyooj was someone who did not boast, was not arrogant and did not speak unkindly. He was quick to the task, enthusiastic and patient ... He was strong in his religion and energetic in his work for Jesus.

“I can say that Xyooj loved God, people, the Church and Christians. I say this because I saw him work hard for God, for the Church and Christians. The work that I saw him perform are: (1) teach catechism - he loved to teach catechism to the Hmong people; (2) teach the Hmong language; (3) distribute medicines and give shots to the sick of the village or to those who lived far away; (4) show the people how to pray at home.

“As for village life, young or old, men or women, children, mentally disabled or intelligent, Xyooj loved us all in the same way. He talked to everyone. I saw he was not conceited. He talked and laughed with everyone. He loved Yeej, a simple soul, and Kawm, the sick man. We were eating together and I had given a chicken leg to Xyooj for him to eat, but instead of eating it, he gave it to the Yeej, the simple soul. He said: ‘He is very unhappy. He watches us eat with envy: why don’t we give him anything? He too is a child of God like all of us.’”⁶⁷

Another witness agrees:

“His love for others was so great that he liked to speak with everyone: youth, old people, the poor, the children, always tenderly. He smiled a lot and was never angry. What I say, what I have seen, that’s the truth.”⁶⁸

What did the missionary, his direct supervisor think of him? He necessarily had other assessment criteria and therefore a more critical view. The formation of Xyooj as a neophyte and as a catechist was altogether unfinished.

⁶⁵ Statement of H.

⁶⁶ In his August 31 letter already quoted, Father Borzaga mentions it: “Al villaggio di Na Vang si è stabilito p. Sion con il suo catechista. I Meo hanno costruito loro una capanna, che serve loro da Chiesa e da scuola. P. Sion intanto ha cominciato con ardore lo studio della lingua.” (Father Sion moved with his catechist to the village of Na Vang. The Hmong have built them a hut, which serves as a church and a school. As to Father Sion, he has begun eagerly studying the language.)

⁶⁷ Statement of H.

⁶⁸ Statement of L.

On July 13, Father L. Sion wrote: “I have no complaints about the conduct of the catechist; unfortunately I am still not able to seriously prepare the catechism with him, because I have just started to study the language. I must be content to give him some advice in Laotian.”⁶⁹ A month later, he adds: “The school continues to function well even if there is a more urgent need for someone who can give a solid formation.”⁷⁰ The missionary is however obliged to note that in his absence the fervor of the catechumens was not waning, and they had learned to pray by themselves.⁷¹

Faith grows and becomes stronger

Many listeners remember precisely the teaching given by Xyooj in the weeks and months following the conversion of the village. A witness, who at the time was a young girl, said:

“Xyooj has a heart on fire to teach everyone. Every day he strikes the gong three times to summon the village. In the morning and again in the afternoon, he calls young people to study writing. At night, the whole village studies the Doctrine of Heaven. When we arrive, he goes around to welcome everyone. He questions the adult women about their preparing the ground, about the rice growing on the path going to the fields... On Sundays, the gong calls believers to come to the worship of Heaven. Xyooj first teaches the Doctrine of Heaven to all, then he teaches some songs. Then begins the Sacrifice to Heaven... He’s just a young man, but he speaks with the dignity of a teacher who has been teaching the path of faith for many years⁷²...

“We children, we study the Doctrine of Heaven, and we practice reading Hmong writing. We study sixty-three instructions of the Doctrine of Heaven, so that it will be well etched in our heart. We look at the drawings so we can understand the meaning. Each lesson has its picture. Each evening we study a new image and review that of the day before.”⁷³

These images were the “Bernadette pictures,” very simple drawings in black and white, produced by the Bernadette Sisters of the Benedictine community of Thaon-les-Vosges in France.⁷⁴

The teaching of catechism was paired with the teaching of the Hmong language and culture. In that, he was an attentive pupil of Father Bertrais. Another witness tells about it:

“Every evening, Hmong writing was taught to the adults and the youth. When it got late, some went home. But Xyooj stayed behind, telling stories and legends or simply chatting with those who wanted.”⁷⁵

By the end of two months, all the youth could read and write Hmong.

⁶⁹ “Non ho da lamentarmi sul comportamento del catechista, purtroppo non posso ancora preparare con lui seriamente il catechismo perché ho appena incominciato a studiare la lingua. È già abbastanza se gli rivolgo qualche esortazione in laotiano.” *ChNV*, p. 5, 13 July 1959.

⁷⁰ « La scuola prosegue benino, anche se si fa più urgente il bisogno di uno che possa dare una formazione solida. » *ChNV*, p. 12, 14 August 1959.

⁷¹ Cf. *ChNV*, p. 16, 4 September 1959.

⁷² Statement of J.

⁷³ Statement of J.

⁷⁴ Explanation furnished by Father Yves Bertrais, o.m.i.

⁷⁵ Statement of J.

Father René Charrier, who spoke this language, was called upon for one month, to begin forming future leaders of the Christian community.⁷⁶ In early July 1959, he brought to Kiukatiam a young couple with a baby and three young men; there, in the best-established, young Hmong Christianity, they would enhance their learning of doctrine and of Christian life, to be catechists in their turn.⁷⁷ H. and K. were part of the group. K., who prolonged his stay for six months at the request of Father Borzaga, will be the last inhabitant of Na Vang to see Xyooj alive.⁷⁸

Other visitors came to inspect or admire what was happening in Na Vang: Father Leonello Berti, head of the Italian missionaries; from 12 to 28 September at the request of the latter, Mario Borzaga came there in turn to give a hand, accompanied by one or the other catechist.⁷⁹ One of the notable services rendered was to give some private lessons in catechism to Xyooj, “who appears to understand something,” he wrote.⁸⁰

In January 1960, after the departure of Xyooj, Bishop Étienne Loosdregt, Bishop of Vientiane, would come in person to verify the advance of the faith and the establishment of the Church in Na Vang. Hmong witnesses still remember his long beard. He left, as a report, a detailed letter that casts a new light on the action of the catechist during some seven months of his presence, and again raises the issue of formation:

“I am writing in the middle of a band of Meo who admire the ease with which I write. [...] Father Luigi Sion has, in the mountain, an area quite difficult to reach. For several months, almost a year that he is here, he has visited many villages, has a very modest school chapel and a house that is not really a house; one corner serves as a pharmacy-clinic (much, much care of the sick), another corner with his bed, another corner for his catechist, and a large common room always full of people; he has 400 catechumens méots [sic]; thirty people every day, including a village chieftain and some delegates from other villages, who are learning religion, Meo, Laotian; plus those who come at night to study. All that Fr. Bertrais produced for prayer, singing, Mass attendance, is used here. People crowd around the altar to see and they sing for you into the priest’s ears with great conviction and enthusiasm. Some young people are studying at Luang Prabang and two young households at Kiou Kacham ... In short, there is spirit.

“The downside is that Father uses primarily catechists, one who studied three years at Paksane, the other who stayed 3 or 4 years with Fathers Bertrais and Charrier. Father goes very often to the sick on the mountain, understands Meo but does not yet speak it; the danger is that he usually leaves the instructions to the catechists. In any case, as for comforts for Fr. Sion, zero; no kitchen, eating at the home of the inhabitants at very different times and very simple meals.”⁸¹

⁷⁶ Having left Kiukatiam on June 3, Father René Charrier returned there on July 6. Cf. *Diario di un uomo felice*, p. 564-565 et 580.

⁷⁷ Here is how Father Luigi Sion explains it: “Poi venne P. Charrier per darmi una mano e dare un’indizzo [sic] alla nuova fondazione. Dopo un mese di proficuo lavoro P. Charrier è ritornato a Luang Prabang portando con se tre ragazzi ed una famiglia (padre madre ed un bambino di pochi mesi). In seguito spero di mandarne ancora.” (Father Charrier then came to give me a hand and put the new foundation on track. After a month of useful work, he moved on to Luang Prabang taking three young boys and a family - father, mother, and a child of a few months. Eventually, I hope to send more) ChNV. p. 6, July 15, 1959

⁷⁸ Statement of K.

⁷⁹ Cf. *Diario di un uomo felice*, p. 617 et 624-632. The text is not explicit enough to know if he was accompanied by one or by several catechists.

⁸⁰ *Diario di un uomo felice*, p. 627.

⁸¹ Letter of Bishop Loosdregt to Father Jean Drouart, o.m.i., 22 January 1960, quoted above.

The Good News proclaimed by Xyooj

What sort of catechesis did Xyooj give to the catechumens? H. reveals the content in all its naïve beauty:

“The words which Xyooj told us and which made us fully believe are the following: ‘You are people with original sin, so you are sinners, and we are going to live only for a time on this earth for we are going to die and become dirt. Nevertheless, God loves us a lot; he does not abandon us; that is why he sent us his only son Jesus, who was crucified so as to bear all our sins. He was buried for only three days and he has risen. He is with his Father in heaven. Jesus is going to come back for believers to raise them up like he was raised. Then all the men will be handsome and the women, beautiful; everyone will be in good health and they will have eternal life. They will live with God in Paradise, with love, like birds which fly the sky, without having to work but having food and clothing for eternity!’”⁸²

An old grandmother could not understand the question of spirits and demons. Xyooj went to her home. Other witnesses remember his words:

“When you honor the spirits, the spirits are hungry. So they bite you and you become sick. If you give them something to eat, they can take you wherever they want. But from the day that you convert and believe in the Lord of Heaven, the spirits can no longer bite you. When the day arrives that the Lord of Heaven will call you, you will go to Heaven, that’s for sure!”⁸³

Others were worried about the guerillas, already present in the region and who did not like Christians. Xyooj spoke frequently about the example of the martyrs of Vietnam who had given their lives for their faith, young people and old, missionaries, catechists and simple faithful. He showed how one could die for the sake of the Doctrine of Heaven, endure sufferings when others persecute us because of our faith in Heaven. He spoke also about the persecuted Christians of China. He added:

“If they force you to abandon the Doctrine of Heaven, and you end up denying God, and if they kill you, you will go to hell, that’s for sure!”⁸⁴

To the adult believers, he frequently repeated four principles of conduct:

- “You must study and be sufficiently instructed to receive baptism. Then you will be children of God and you will go up to Heaven.”
- “Parents should dress their children; even if they are poorly dressed, they should have something so as to learn modesty.”
- “Believers allow their daughters and their sons to study; don’t just let the boys study, because your daughters, it’s the Lord of Heaven who gave them to you.”
- “If a girl cannot study during the day, she should study in the evening.”⁸⁵

And Xyooj would cite for them the example of some girls of Kiukatiam who had left to study with the Sisters at Xieng Khouang.

The Hmong took all these words to heart; they said: “Xyooj is right! We must do as he says!”⁸⁶

A witness concludes:

⁸² Statement of H.

⁸³ Statement of J.

⁸⁴ Statement of J.

⁸⁵ Statement of J.

⁸⁶ Statement of J.

“In a short time, the villagers were transformed; they had become more charitable, more amiable and they loved one another.”⁸⁷

As for Xyooj, he never stayed inactive in the village; he went to see everyone, and occasionally, he went to other villages in the vicinity to speak about God.

The apostle of the sick and of the poor

Whenever he was not busy teaching, Xyooj was filled with passion to help those in need. He visited the very aged and that touched them greatly.

During the rice planting time, he went to help the mothers of families to do their planting. If a family was finishing its house, he was there to help them. As soon as that work was finished, someone would come to ask for medicine...

Indeed, every day the sick would come to ask for medicine to cure their ills. It was Xyooj who received them. They were afraid to go to the Father, a foreigner who did not understand their language, but they had total confidence in Xyooj. After reassuring them, he took them to the Father. He was also very brave to go visit those who were gravely ill. It was sometimes already well into nighttime when the Hmong would still come looking for him to visit their sick.

The father of a family had fallen from a rock and was gravely injured; but on that day, Xyooj had gone to pray to Heaven for a sick Hmong in another village. Two young girls went to look for him. One of them recalls:

“The Hmong told me and my big sister to go call Xyooj. Both of us ran, we ran a long way to the Old Village, to the house of the sick person. Xyooj was praying for them. They were singing ‘The Good Shepherd cares for his flock.’ My big sister and I waited a long time. Xyooj kept on praying. I went to him and said: ‘Uncle Xyooj, great-uncle Teem fell from the limestone cliff and is seriously injured. They want you to come back to the village.’ Immediately Xyooj left everything and came back with us to the village.”⁸⁸

Everyone brought vegetables and rice for Xyooj and the Father. On the bed reserved for the examination of the sick, they placed vegetables, cucumbers, sugar cane, fruit gathered in the forest. Xyooj distributed a lot of it to poor families.

The whole village admired his behavior.

Plans for marriage

According to a Hmong custom, at the age of seventeen, all of Xyooj’s friends were married. He himself believed that the time had come to prepare for his adult life. Today, there are numerous witnesses of his dating during that period.

Indeed, at Na Vang, among the young girls, there were many who loved Xyooj. They always came as a group to get to know him better. Many mothers of families would have liked to have him as a son-in-law; one of them went to speak to him about her daughter. Xyooj liked to chat with the girls, but he could not stay long with them because he wanted to be available to everyone.

Furthermore, in his heart, Xyooj had made his choice, as was customary among Hmong boys. It happened without embarrassment, in a frank and open way. If the chosen one arrived at class

⁸⁷ Statement of F.

⁸⁸ Statement of J.

a little before the others, Xyooj played her a funny little tune, just for her. Sometimes for a joke, he would put her name into the words of a song, much to the amusement of the other girls.

The end of an adventure

The beautiful adventure of Na Vang would last no more than seven months. At the date of December 12, 1959, the journal of the Mission notes laconically: “Xyooj left for Louang Prabang.”⁸⁹ Those in charge had specifically let him know that he should return immediately to Kiukatiam and could no longer return to Na Vang. What had happened? One cannot respond directly to this question because those who made the decision did not give clear reasons. Today, there is nevertheless a group of indirect witnesses who help clarify things somewhat.

First of all, the unusual and rapid success of Xyooj’s preaching led officials to question its content. In the experience of the missionaries, the Christian religion is a demanding religion that well-structured societies like the Hmong have great difficulty in accepting. It normally takes years to get the result gotten here in a few weeks... There is in particular the whole area of sexual morality which it takes a long time to explain, without any real guarantee of success. The young man urgently needed a more solid formation; the private lessons received from Father Borzaga in September remained insufficient.

From that, there was only one step to suspecting the familiarity Xyooj had with the girls. Had the young man used his success, his charm, to seduce and take advantage of them? Had he misinformed them on the issue of Christian chastity?⁹⁰ It was even thought that the ulcerative wound he suffered, and which it had been mistakenly believed to be a sign of syphilis, was a proof of his misconduct.⁹¹

The *Cours de pastorale pratique* used by the missionaries of the Vicariate of Vientiane cautioned them on these points:

“The missionary must never let the catechist work without supervision, even if he has received a catechetical formation of several years... You must absolutely trust your catechist, but that does not mean that you should be naive; you should sometimes mistrust the teaching they are giving and which may be incorrect, and also you should beware of their moral conduct... When a catechist has made public slipups with girls, we must get tough... Sometimes it is difficult to dismiss the catechist when the work is really urgent, but in some cases it is necessary to resort to this solution ...”⁹²

In Xyooj’s case, the Hmong witnesses and those who know the Hmong culture best forcefully reject these suspicions that it was a question of careless teaching or bad conduct. According to his friend H., “as far as girls are concerned, he behaved simply as a young man, and everyone respected his behavior.”⁹³ Father Charrier, who had spent a month in Na Vang with Xyooj and who dedicated his whole life to the Hmong, declared:

⁸⁹ « Xyooj è partito per Luang Prabang. » *ChNV*, p. 24, 12 December 1959.

⁹⁰ Cf. statement (by hearsay) of Bishop Alessandro Staccioli, o.m.i.

⁹¹ See above. One could probably interpret similarly the terse mention by Father L. Zion, o.m.i., evoking “double dealing”, cited below.

⁹² Jean Subra, o.m.i., *Cours de pastorale pratique* (dactylographié), [Keng Sadok, Laos], 1959, p. 186. A copy is kept in the General Archives of the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate in Rome. It is the course which was followed the previous year by Fathers L. Zion and Borzaga.

⁹³ Statement of H. In general, the Hmong witnesses confirm that Xyooj behaved in an irreproachable manner according to the customs of his people, and they emphasize the ignorance of the European missionaries, at that time, concerning the moral rules and customs of the Hmong.

“The accusation does not fit at all with the reality of the village nor that of the Hmong of Laos. Relationships between the youth of both sexes were strictly regulated and governed by Hmong society, and moral rules were effectively applied. Adult supervision was real ... There was no key on the doors but a boy could not enter with impunity into the house of a girl. The adoption of the Christian faith has certainly not eased these traditional rules.”⁹⁴

Likewise, Msgr. Tito Banchong Thopanhong, the Apostolic Administrator of Louang Prabang, who is also Hmong and was personally questioned concerning the life and death of the young catechist, concludes:

“Xyooj always acted like a Hmong boy of his age, according to the customs and practices of his people; he committed no fault.”⁹⁵

Another interpretation is discreetly mentioned by several witnesses: Xyooj has been the victim of slander caused by jealousy. It was learned much later that one of the Protestant apologists, having been there without any success, had spread in his turn malicious rumors. These rumors could have been repeated, among others, by one of the coworkers of the mission, who had cast his eyes on the same girl as Xyooj... Had there been a stormy quarrel between the two men?”⁹⁶

Nevertheless, with hindsight, the decision, unpopular as it had been among the villagers of Na Vang, may appear to have been wise. Despite all his good qualities, his zeal and charity, Xyooj was still a young man with little experience of life. His success, the unanimous admiration with which he was surrounded, the gifts he received, all this could have possibly, one day or another, sidetracked him from his beautiful ideal, or awakened in his heart pride or complacency, making him underestimate the workers of the Gospel who had less success than he did. Also, the neophytes and catechumens of Na Vang had to learn to completely follow Christ himself, and not the one they readily considered their “little Hmong prince.” His sudden departure was going to be a test for the depth of their conversion.

The departure

The witnesses report the departure with an emotion that remains powerful even after so many years:

“The whole village came to see him off, and everyone was crying. He comforted us by saying that someone was already there to replace him. We told him: ‘Goodbye, think of us, will you come back?’ His last words were: ‘I do not know.’ He never returned! When

⁹⁴ Conversation of the author with Father René Charrier, 14 January 2004.

⁹⁵ Comments reported by François and Marie Le Blanc on 11 October 2007, following their conversation with Bishop Tito Banchong Thopanhong.

⁹⁶ A shameful episode was played out in the mission of Na Vang during the visit of Mario Borzaga the night of September 21 to 22; the two missionaries allude to it separately. Father L. Sion posted in the mission journal: “Noterella a margine: un catechista anche se timido, perde la sua timidezza dalle 11 di notte alle 4 del mattino. – Il wischy è buono ma la carne è andata a male.” (Marginal note: a catechist, even a timid one, loses his shyness between 11 at night and 4 in the morning. Whisky is good, but the flesh has succumbed.) *ChNV*, p. 19, 22 September 1959. Was this about Xyooj who was by no means timid? On the same date, Father Borzaga notes in his personal journal: “Abbiamo fatto una lavatina di capo ai nostri due catechisti perché se la meritavano veramente. Gigi era arrabbiato e ho dovuto fare di tutto per calmarlo.” (We had to do a little head washing (reprimand) for our two catechists and they truly deserved it. Gigi (Fr. L. Sion) was angry and I had to do all I could to calm him). *Diario di un uomo felice*, p. 630. The allusions are obscure, but alcohol plays a role in the episode, and the alcohol loosens the tongue...

they learned he had gone, the Na Vang villagers cried and were very sad. The little Hmong prince was gone!”⁹⁷

“The day that Xyooj left, a great many of the believers wanted to go with him. I was there with other girls and I was skipping beside the road. We had already gone pretty far when he told us to all go back to the village; but no one left. The old women were crying. Xyooj stopped. He covered his eyes with his hands. He was crying and we were crying with him, even the men and women. Through his tears, he told us: ‘My mothers, my aunts, go back, I beg of you! I am afraid I will never see you again!’ Three girls, including the one he loved, went with him all the way to Louang Nam Tha. He pinned to the dress of each one, as a souvenir, a medal of the Holy Virgin.”⁹⁸

Was the village converted through the efforts of the catechist Xyooj going to pass the test of his absence? The shock was harsh, as attested by many witnesses:

“When Xyooj had gone back home, there were few Hmong that converted to the faith. In the end, there was just one family...”⁹⁹

“Other catechists came, but there were no other conversions; except when the catechist H. came back to Na Vang [after his formation in Kiukatiam], there were later some families who converted... Subsequently, we have never felt, in other catechists, something that attracted us to Jesus and that radiated from Xyooj.”¹⁰⁰

“After the departure of Xyooj there was a new catechist to teach the path of faith, and a teacher to teach writing. Nobody liked them. We did not go very often to study the teaching of the faith, because the gong did not sound very often, and when it sounded, it was very late in the morning and late at night. Two or three families returned to the ancient cult; others resumed shamanic séances. The faith dwindled until a new priest arrived and our catechist H., formed at the Mountain of Gaurs, returned to help the believers.”¹⁰¹

With hindsight, however, things appear in a different light. Despite countless difficulties - the various exoduses caused by the war, exile and dispersion throughout the world – the Christians of Na Vang like those of Kiukatiam remained fundamentally true to their faith. The messenger was gone, but the message was continuing to bear fruit.

II – The Supreme Testimony

*If, despite his young age, the local Catholic Church recognizes Paul Thoj Xyooj as one of its founding fathers, this is not due to his success as a preacher. Instead, it wishes to perpetuate his memory by recognizing him as an authentic martyr of the faith. The goal of the cause introduced in Rome is to establish the fact of violent death, the reasons that led to it and the attitude of the young man faced with his death. Many witnesses have spoken; because of the general situation of the country and tradition of omertà of their people, they asked for anonymity, which will be respected.*¹⁰²

⁹⁷ Statement of F.

⁹⁸ Statement of J. Among the Hmong, to honor a notable guest, the custom is to go along with him to the end of the road.

⁹⁹ Statement of J.

¹⁰⁰ Statement of F.

¹⁰¹ Statement of J.

¹⁰² As in the preceding article, the names of Laotian protagonists and witnesses are replaced here by a succession of alphabetical letter.

Based on these testimonies and archive documents, the following lines recall the last months of the life of the young catechist and his last moments. Subjected to the hasty judgments by European missionaries, removed from his apostolate to the regret of the Hmong, Xyooj revealed his very human side in the ordeal. He was in no way a superman. But the supreme ordeal comes very quickly and will permanently seal the exemplary worth of his journey as a neophyte and a beginning catechist.

Return to Kiukatiam: marriage plans

In the *Cours de pastorale pratique* used at that time in Laos for the instruction of missionaries, it says, “Never let the new catechists just coming out of school lose face.”¹⁰³ In context, it explains that the catechist should be able to marry as soon as he finishes school so as to avoid missteps like of this sort. Xyooj was old enough, but he was not married.¹⁰⁴ As for loss of face, it was obviously hurtful for him. How would he react? The love he had previously shown for Jesus Christ, for the Gospel, for the Church and its ministers, would it withstand the storm? It is there that we must look for true signs of holiness, the true preparation for his martyrdom -- a martyrdom he had so often mentioned in his catechesis in Na Vang.¹⁰⁵

At Kiukatiam, Father Yves Bertrais¹⁰⁶, his spiritual father, had left in December 1958 for other missionary possibilities. Xyooj had known his replacement, Father Mario Borzaga¹⁰⁷, for only a short time; his knowledge of the languages and his experience were still limited, but the Hmong had given him the nickname *Txhiaj Tshaj*, “Sincere heart.” Xyooj was lucky enough to find in this priest someone who also had overcome serious frustrations, someone who was going to accept him a priori, and who decided to give him another chance in the name of the call of Jesus Christ.¹⁰⁸ In finding each other, the two men had no idea to what point they were going to be forever joined in the supreme act of giving their lives.

The intention of the superiors was that Xyooj would stay in Louang Prabang, at the center of the mission, to follow there the formation organized for the catechists. But they were dealing not with a man of studies but with a man of action, wounded in his dignity; the inevitable tensions were going to reveal themselves quickly.

Xyooj showed up at Kiukatiam, his dear Gaurs Mountain,¹⁰⁹ on December 22, in time to celebrate the birth of Jesus the Savior, but also for the Hmong New Year.¹¹⁰ The notes of Father Borzaga in the mission’s history and in his journal show some doubts or a certain displeasure:

“Since December 22, Xyooj, the catechist of Father Zion is here in town for a brief vacation. He is still determined to be a catechist. He has two wishes: to marry, and to study the catechism better. There is nothing wrong with that: let him therefore seek a wife, and

¹⁰³ Jean Subra, o.m.i., *Cours de pastorale pratique*, typed manuscript, [Keng Sadoc], 1959, p. 189.

¹⁰⁴ In Laos, the Hmong boys generally married at seventeen. Information furnished by Father Yves Bertrais, o.m.i., specialist in Hmong customs.

¹⁰⁵ See the preceding article.

¹⁰⁶ Yves Bertrais, o.m.i. (1921-2007), missionary from 1949 till 1975 in Laos, where he was the first apostle of the Hmong people. He is one of the creators of the Hmong writing, called RPA, and a world-renowned specialist in the Hmong culture.

¹⁰⁷ Servant of God Mario Borzaga, o.m.i. (1932-1960), missionary in Laos since November 1957

¹⁰⁸ The journal of Mario Borzaga has been published: M. Borzaga, *Diario di un uomo felice (1956-1960)*, Trent, Vita Trentina Editrice, 2005.

¹⁰⁹ Kiukatiam (variable Romanized spelling) is the Laotian name in current usage. The Hmong called the village Roob Nyui Qus, that is to say, the Mountain of the Gaurs (wild buffalo).

¹¹⁰ The Hmong New Year is traditionally set for the new mone nearest the winter solstice; it fell therefore on December 29, 1959. The festivities last several days, usually a week.

then as soon as he can and it is possible to do so, he only has to study, although his intelligence is rather unimpressive. Anyway, he has not lost his enthusiasm for teaching: the other day I took him with me when we went among the Kmhmu'; he spoke very well, even if he simply repeated in Lao the four ideas that he is able to express in Hmong."¹¹¹

"Yesterday, together with Xyooj, we went to visit the Kmhmu'. In his self-disclosure, he was as brilliant as ever. [...] He told me very interesting things about Na Vang and how, among other things, it would like to take a wife. I have nothing against it; let him do as he wishes."¹¹²

Indeed, for the young Hmong, the New Year period is the right time to go courting and find a soul mate. This happens in the form of a ritual game called *pov pob*: dressed in their finery, boys and girls face each other; in pairs, they throw to one another a cloth ball, the girl singing questions and the boy having to sing appropriate responses. If she is not satisfied, they change partners. Every day, the game lasts for hours. In the case of an agreement, negotiations will begin between the families for the marriage to take place in the first month of the year; everything must be settled before the month of June.¹¹³

On January 1, Father Borzaga notes in his journal that Xyooj had participated in *pov pob* all day long, with no result. On January 4 and 8, he continues the same theme:

"The New Year's celebrations continue, which means that the young men are looking for a wife; and because we have some young men at the mission, we have to keep our eye on them... [*There follow the deeds and actions of three other young bachelors.*] – Xyooj tried hard to find a wife, but it seems that he has not succeeded. He wants a good one, but among the girls, it is not easy to find one [who is free]. All these days, although he played the "cute one" and the "show-off," he was present at all of the liturgies in the church and he took communion almost every day."¹¹⁴

"Xyooj will not get married, and that's all there is to it. The girl he chose is not willing. [...] That's the big difficulty for marriage with the pagan girls: they do not want to learn the catechism and then be baptized before marrying. [...] The pagans understand nothing

¹¹¹ « Dal giorno 22 dicembre Xyooj il catechista di Padre Sion è qui al villaggio per un breve periodo di vacanza. È sempre deciso d'essere catechista; ha due desideri: sposarsi e studiare il catechismo un po' meglio. Nulla da dire se non che si cerchi moglie, e quando potrà e si potrà non ha che da studiare, benchè la sua intelligenza sia abbastanza piatta. In ogni modo il suo entusiasmo per l'insegnamento non è venuto meno, l'ho preso con me l'altro giorno quando andammo dai Phu Thoeng, ha parlato molto bene, benchè non abbia fatto che ripetere in laoziano quelle quattro idee che sa dire in meo. » *Codex historicus of Kiukatiam*, p. 194, 30 December 1959. – Luigi Sion, o.m.i., born in 1932, ordained a priest in 1957, left the same year as a missionary in Laos. – "Phu Theung", or "Phou Theung", is the name, common at the time, but today unused, of the Kmhmu' ethnicity.

¹¹² « Ieri dunque sono stato dai Phou Theung assieme a Xyoo : egli è stato brillante come sempre nella sua esposizione. [...] Xyooj mi ha raccontato cose assai interessanti su Na Vang e come tra il resto vorrebbe prendere moglie : nulla in contrario. Faccia come vuole. » *Diario di un uomo felice*, p. 673, dated 29 December 1959.

¹¹³ For marriage customs of the Hmong, see Yves Bertrais, *Le mariage traditionnel chez les Hmong blancs du Laos et de la Thaïlande*, Chiangmai, Thaïlande, s.n., 1977 ; Kao N. Vang, « Hmong Marriage Customs : A Current Assessment », in B.T. Downing et D.P. Olney (ed.), *The Hmong in the West*, Minneapolis, MN, Southeast Asian Refugee Studies Project, University of Minnesota, 1982, pp. 29-45.

¹¹⁴ « E le feste del primo dell'anno meo continuano, il che significa che i giovanotti cercano moglie, e il fatto che pure alla missione abbiamo dei giovanotti significa che bisogna tenergli d'occhio. [...] Xyooj si è fatto in quattro per trovar moglie, ma pare che non ci sia riuscito. Ne vuole una per bene, e fra le ragazze per bene non è troppo facile trovarne. In questi giorni Xyooj benchè avesse fatto l'elegantone e lo smargiasso, fu presente a tutte le liturgie celebrate in chiesa e quasi tutti i giorni ha fatto la comunione. » *Codex historicus of Kiukatiam*, p. 195-196, 4 January 1960.

of our Christian customs; they are forced by their parents to follow the pagan customs up to the last minute.”¹¹⁵

Is it any wonder that Xyooj repeatedly failed to find a wife? He had left his heart in Na Vang; even if he was already resigned to no longer having the woman he loved there, how would he now choose another? In addition, he was not ready to compromise his Christian ideal. In April 1960, upon leaving for his last journey, he wrote to the Christians in Na Vang: “Very soon I will return to take a wife in your village.”¹¹⁶

The *Cours de pastorale pratique* has the following recommendation: “The missionary should encourage his catechist to marry, especially when the young man is tempted by the girls, but he should not exercise indiscrete pressure to contract this or that marriage...”¹¹⁷ Father Borzaga therefore decided to go to Louang Prabang to discuss this question with the Mission superiors: should Xyooj be allowed to return to Na Vang to marry?¹¹⁸

Father went alone into the city on January 7; on the 13th, on the occasion of a retreat, he was accompanied by Xyooj. The response was decidedly negative. The superiors decided to keep the young man in Louang Prabang, as foreseen, for the purpose of perfecting his formation while he would give classes to the Hmong refugee children in the city, while another catechist would leave for Na Vang.¹¹⁹

An adolescent in crisis

That was when Xyooj really had a crisis, a crisis mentioned in the journal of Father Borzaga and in the Mission chronical. He did not want to stay in the city, far from the Hmong villages; furthermore, he said, it was too hot. One of his companions added, not without a bit of mischievousness: “It’s because in the city, there are no girls,” i.e., no Hmong girls to marry. Left there in spite of everything, Xyooj began to write some letters to some people of his village; he complained about everything, even a lack of food. Father Borzaga notes a few days later, in a report of the Mission for the month of January:

“Y. has left for Na Vang where he will be replacing Xyooj, whom Father Sion has refused to take back. Y. left happy, but Xyooj, who stayed behind, is far from it. We put him at Louang Prabang to give classes to the little ones and to take care of the catechumens; but he has already let it be known that he absolutely does not want to stay there and that he will return to the village. This Xyooj, it’s hard to know how to take him.”¹²⁰

On January 23, Father Borzaga notes in his journal:

¹¹⁵ « Xyooj non si sposerà e basta: la ragazza da lui scelta non è d’accordo. [...] Grande difficoltà per il matrimonio colle pagane : esse non vogliono studiare il catechismo e quindi essere battezzate prima di sposarsi. [...] I pagani non comprendono affatto i nostri costumi cristiani : le ragazze, pur non avendo nulla in contrario d’essere cristiane, sono costrette dai genitori a seguire i costumi pagani fino all’ultimo momento. » *Codex historicus of Kiukatiam*, p. 196-197, 8 January 1960.

¹¹⁶ Statement of J.

¹¹⁷ Jean Subra, o.m.i., *Cours de pastorale pratique*, p. 186.

¹¹⁸ This whole passage repeats facts told in the journal of Father Mario Borzaga.

¹¹⁹ Cf. Rome, General Archives O.M.I., B-401, Collection Ha60, *Codex historicus de Louang Prabang*, 1959-1960, p. 83, on the dates of 12, 14 and 17 January 1960.

¹²⁰ « Y. è partito per Na Vang dove sostituirà Xyooj che P. Sion a rifiutato di riaccettare. Y. è partito contento, Xyooj non altrettanto contento è rimasto. L’abbiamo messo a Louang Prabang per fare la scuola ai piccoli e interessarsi dei catecumeni, ma ha già fatto sapere che assolutamente non ci vuole stare, che farà ben tosto ritorno al villaggio. Questo Xyooj non si sa come prendere. » *Codex historicus of Kiukatiam*, p. 200, January 1960, under the title “Personale della missione”.

“I wrote to [Father] Marchiol to send Xyooj back to me; I take on this dangerous responsibility because no one else wants to do so.”¹²¹

Having returned to the village, the young man got another idea into his head: since life as a catechist had come to a dead end, well, he was going to become a policeman; that way, he could at least earn some money to start a family. He told Father Borzaga about it and he was shocked; then he spoke openly about it to those around him.

One should not think that Xyooj represents the occurrence of an isolated case. Actually, the Cours de pastorale pratique had foreseen such a scenario. Concerning the perseverance of catechists formed in the schools, it warns: “... think of the great temptation they have when they go away from their villages, to enter the administration, the police or the army, or the civil administrations where they would receive considerable salaries...”¹²²

Beneath the ashes, the fire smolders

Despite these new plans, Xyooj never really left the mission. The love of Christ was always present in his heart. Among the European missionaries, however, Father Mario Borzaga was the only one who believed it; on February 5, he notes in his journal:

“Xyooj is here; he goes around everywhere and he hides from no one his intention to be a policeman. Some sympathize with him. Whatever the case may be, for my part, I still like him.”¹²³

On February 7, he writes: “Xyooj is beginning to move farther away; I did not know how to take that.”¹²⁴ But the next day, he says that he has “brought him back a little.”¹²⁵

His aloofness, his lack of drive, did not keep Xyooj from being of service when the Father asked him. On February 1 and 2, he accompanied him on a brief missionary trip, to visit an isolated missionary post threatened with being surrounded by the guerillas, Long Vai on the mountain of Pha Thoeng.¹²⁶ In the absence of a catechist, he replaces him by evening courses for the older youth and the adults. He does moderately well, according to his chronicler.¹²⁷ He is available for the catechumenate of some older women, but it is someone else that will ultimately be chosen because he has to have the class for the children at the same time.¹²⁸ The

¹²¹ « Ho scritto a Marchiol che mi rimandi a casa Xyooj, di cui prendo la responsabilità pericolosa, visto che nessuno se la vuol prendere. » *Diario di un uomo felice*, p. 692-693, dated 23 January 1960. Bramante Marchiol, o.m.i. (1932-1997), ordained a priest in 1956, was local superior of the Mission of Louang Prabang.

¹²² Jean Subra, o.m.i., *Cours de pastorale pratique*, p. 188. These ideas must have circulated; on 18 February 1960, the missionaries would discuss in Louang Prabang the “problem of the catechists”. Cf. *Codex historicus of Louang Prabang*, p. 84, 18 February 1960.

¹²³ « Xyooj è qui che va e viene e non nasconde a nessuno la sua intenzione di fare il poliziotto per guadagnare soldi. Qualcuno pure lo compassiona. In ogni modo io gli voglio ancora bene. » *Diario di un uomo felice*, p. 700, 5 February 1960.

¹²⁴ « Xyooj comincia ad andare già lontanuccio, non sapevo proprio come fare. » *Diario di un uomo felice*, p. 701, 7 February 1960.

¹²⁵ « ... Ho agganciato Xyooj un pochino. » *Diario di un uomo felice*, p. 702, 8 February 1960.

¹²⁶ Cf. *Codex historicus of Kiukatiam*, p. 201, February 1960, under the title “Viaggi”; and *Codex historicus of Louang Prabang*, p. 84, 1 and 2 February 1960.

¹²⁷ « Xyooj si è prestato volentieri a sostituirlo, ma faceva quello che poteva. » (Xyooj willingly accepted to replace him [the absent one], but he did what he could). *Codex historicus of Kiukatiam*, p. 207, March 1960, under the title “Scuola”; cf. *ibid.*, p. 202, February 1960, same title.

¹²⁸ Cf. *Codex historicus of Kiukatiam*, p. 203, February 1960, and p. 209, March 1960, under the title “Catecumeni”.

judgment of the missionary remains generally positive: “His conduct in the village is good; he frequents the sacraments.”¹²⁹

There is nevertheless a dark spot: he is given the task of teaching the Hmong language to a young Italian missionary in training, Father Zanoni – an important task because the latter types lessons to send them on to Father L. Sion at Na Vang.¹³⁰ It happens that Xyooj neglects this task.¹³¹ The one who had been judged poorly by the Europeans, it seems that once again he was distancing himself.

Fortunately, there were some young Christians there. Among them, some future catechists in training lived in a little house near that of the missionary. Xyooj, who was staying with his mother in the family home, was close to them and visited often. One of these young men remembers that they went together to cut some bamboo for the irrigation system or wood for the fire or to gather grass for the pigs – good occasions to talk freely, heart to heart.¹³² Xyooj was friends with H. and K., the young converts from Na Vang, come here to study in July 1959; like him, K.’s father had died.¹³³ With them, Xyooj was able to remember the best hours spent there. Could he, the big brother whom they all admired, who liked to tell them of the great events of the Gospel among the Hmong, could he disappoint them?

To his credit, it must be said that Xyooj never complained directly before the other youth of the mission about those who had sent him away from Na Vang. Upon his arrival at Kiukatiam, H. asked him why he had not stayed with the people of his village, why he had left them. He simply answered:

“It was the priest who told me to leave to evangelize and teach the catechism in another village. That’s why I had to leave.”¹³⁴

It was the friendship of these companions that saved Xyooj’s vocation. When, at the end of April, Father Borzaga decided to go to respond to the appeal of a village for help, he had originally chosen to accompany him a veteran catechist of Kiukatiam. But since he had gotten married, he first asked H. and then K., because the latter was going to extend his stay as a catechist at Kiukatiam. The young man, however, considered himself less experienced than his friend Xyooj to evangelize a Hmong village: he asked him to go in his place. Xyooj answered

¹²⁹ « Il suo comportamento al villaggio è buono, frequenta i sacramenti. » *Codex historicus of Kiukatiam*, p. 207, March 1960, under the title “Scuola”.

¹³⁰ Cf. *Codex historicus of Kiukatiam*, p. 194, 30 December 1959. After the final departure of Father Borzaga and Xyooj, Father Zanoni will remain at Kiukatiam with Father Pierre Chevroulet who had come as reinforcement; they would be the first witnesses of the drama. – Antonio Zanoni, o.m.i. (1932-1972) ordained a priest in 1958, missionary in Laos until his death in a motorcycle accident between Kiukatiam and Louang Prabang on 26 December 1972. – Pierre Chevroulet, o.m.i. (1924-2004), ordained a priest in 1955, missionary in Laos from 1956 until 1970. From 1964 until 1970, he will be the provincial superior of all the Oblates in Laos

¹³¹ “Xyooj non viene più a fare la scuola a Zane, bisogna dirglielo di volta in volta. Che tipo!” (Xyooj isn’t coming any more to give classes to Father Zanoni; he has to be reminded each time. What a fellow!) *Diario di un uomo felice*, p. 734, 13 avril 1960.

¹³² Statement of M., who was not a catechist and who lived, like Xyooj, in his own family home. Cf also *Codex historicus of Kiukatiam*, p. 209, March 1960 : “Sia col trattore che con la jeep sono stati effettuati vari viaggi per il trasporto di bambù (tutta la condotta del villaggio), legna da ardere, sia per noi che per gli altri. Gli allievi catechisti hanno cominciato a occuparsi di un giardinetto. Fr. Donato e Pierino hanno costruito una stalletta provvisoria per i maiali.” (Whether by tractor or by jeep, they made a number of trips to carry bamboo – the entire water flow system of the village – and wood for heating, for us as well as for others. Brothers Donato and Pierino have built a little hog barn). – Brothers Pierino Bertocchi (born in 1929) and Donato Cianciullo, o.m.i. (born in 1930) were Missionary Oblates who were not priests, especially in charge of the material work associated with the mission.

¹³³ Statement of K.

¹³⁴ Statement of H.

yes, but added: “I do not know if the Father will accept me.” K. spoke about it with Father Borzaga who accepted the proposal.¹³⁵ It was then that Xyooj wrote to the Christians of the beloved village the last letter anyone would receive from him. “I am going to teach the doctrine of Heaven at the Hmong village of Phuaj Xuab.”¹³⁶ Yes, the flame had surely been relit.

The last journey

It is not necessary to recall here the reasons that induced Father Mario Borzaga to start his final journey: his biographers have done so, and sufficient clues are in the journal of the Mission of Kiukatiam from the pen of Father Zanoni.¹³⁷ The fact is that in the final analysis, he agreed to take Xyooj along as his companion. For the latter, what was important was that it was a desperate appeal of a village ready to expel the spirits and open themselves to the presence of Christ, and where the sick were awaiting a compassionate hand. Among the Hmong, if someone asks a service of you for the second or third time, you must absolutely respond and do what you can for him.

Among the persons who insisted that Father Borzaga take on this missionary journey, we must mention N.: she had been the first adult baptized by him. After her baptism, she had gone to Xieng Khouang with other girls from Kuikatiam, to study with the Sisters of Charity of Saint Jeanne-Antide Thouret.¹³⁸ She wanted to give a written testimony of what had happened in the village at the end of April 1960, along with her brother P., who was one of the companions of Father Borzaga for the first part of the journey.¹³⁹

On April 25, 1960, with Father Borzaga and the messengers who had come to invite them, Xyooj left, never more to return. On that day, he had put on his Hmong clothing and was wearing his triple silver necklace. He had two changes of clothes and an all-purpose Hmong knife which served to clear the road.

The rest of the narrative depends heavily on the testimony of K., who at one time was enrolled in the royal army. In 1962-1963, he was able to do a personal investigation in the region; but his oral report to the bishop was not kept. His principal sources were two other Hmong soldiers; one was originally from Ban Phoua Xua (Phuaj Xuab in Hmong), the village where they had invited the missionary to come, and the second was from a neighboring village.¹⁴⁰ These companions had given him first-hand information on the journey of the two travelers and their final moments.

At Ban Phoua Xua, Father Borzaga and Xyooj spent two nights. Many villagers came to see them and to converse with the Father; they spoke about the Christian religion. This was undoubtedly not the fascination of the first contact with Na Vang, but foundations were laid for the future. Several asked to be instructed in order to convert. The Father took their names and promised to send someone to teach them.¹⁴¹ As for Xyooj, he seems to have stayed quiet, in the shadow of the missionary.

¹³⁵ Statement of K.

¹³⁶ Statement of J.

¹³⁷ *Codex historicus de Kiukatiam*, p. 213, 25 April 1960. Father Antonio Zanoni will take up this event in detail in his memoirs: *Piste senza ritorno*, Rome, Éd. Missioni OMI, 1970, p. 49-51.

¹³⁸ Cf. *Diario di un uomo felice*, p. 474, and *Codex historicus de Kiukatiam*, p. 154, 14 December 1958.

¹³⁹ The testimonies of N. and P. are elucidating, but they still leave some details in the dark, because diverse subjective and objective elements are interwoven to form the substance of the story.

¹⁴⁰ The villages of Ban Phoua Xua and Muang Met were quite close and maintained neighborly relationships. At this time, the people spoke about the circumstances of the death of Father Borzaga and Xyooj.

¹⁴¹ Cf. Statements of N. and Q.

On the third day, the travelers left by a different route. They were again accompanied by two young guides from the village. The most plausible reason for the change in itinerary is quite simple: Father Mario Borzaga had injured his feet – it had taken them three days to get there.¹⁴² So they would take a short-cut to get to highway 13 to Muang Kasi, with the hope of finding a vehicle going directly to the village.

The first leg of the return took them to Muang Met, a village situated on the two rims of a little valley. It was a mixed village, a rather modest Kmhmu' side and a more important Lao side. The Hmong did not relate with the latter. The road arrived at the side of the Kmhmu': these folks showed interest in the travelers and in their message. They invited them to spend the night with them so as to chat longer and to meet everyone. The Father promised only to return on the occasion of the next trip.

So the Kmhmu' advised them to turn back because the guerillas had already infiltrated the other side, in the large Lao village. Xyooj understood the situation immediately. "Father, let's be quick; it's very dangerous." The Father answered: "Don't be afraid; I am not an American." Then they went, as is the custom, to lodge at the home of the Lao village chieftain. He reassured them that the path presented no difficulties all the way to Ban Nam Lik, in the middle of the rice fields in the valley, and from there, they could easily get back to Muang Kasi. The next morning, the Father and Xyooj sent home the Hmong guides from Phoua Xua and took to the road, armed with a snack offered by the village chieftain.¹⁴³

The critical moment

Shortly after leaving the village, the two travelers met a group of guerillas. Was it an ambush; had they been betrayed? Still today, these questions remain unanswered. They must be asked, nevertheless, because the names of Xyooj and the Hmong guides have been linked to this unfortunate encounter. But one must first of all look at the facts, just as they have been patiently reconstructed through partial and indirect testimonies, derived from former rebel soldiers themselves, whom this event still haunts tens of years later. As for the village chieftain and his people, they have always said that they heard nothing more after the departure of their guests.

Here is the testimony of a Hmong who was closely connected to these events; an anonymous testimony but of utmost importance, given more than forty years later to those who were still trying to find out:

"Search no longer: Father Borzaga and the catechist Xyooj are dead; they were killed. At the village of Muang Met, which was located between the village of Phoua Xua where the Father had been with Xyooj and that of Muang Kasi, where the Father wanted to go, the Laotian rebels stopped an American accompanied by a young Laotian. Since they hated everything which, in their eyes, was American or even white, they decided to kill him, saying to the young Laotian: 'You, you are from our country; run away; go home; we will not kill you.' The young Laotian said: 'Do not kill him because he is not an American but an Italian, and he is a very good priest, very kind to everyone; he does so many good things!' But they did not want to believe him. So he said: 'I will not leave; I am staying with him. If you kill him, kill me too. Where he dies, I will die, and where he lives, I will live.' The rebels answered: 'You are really stubborn; do you want to die too?' He answered: 'Yes!' And so they killed the two of them"¹⁴⁴

¹⁴² Cf. Statement of C.

¹⁴³ This whole passage is based on the testimony of K. and N.

¹⁴⁴ Statement of R., taken by C. and his wife. – The phrase "Where he dies, I will die, and where he lives, I will live," is surprising in French. It probably represents a feature of the Hmong syntax; However, translators have

K. reports other details, heard from the very mouth of the soldiers. They had tied the wrists and elbows of Father Borzaga behind his back, not without many insults, while he remained silent. But Xyooj did not remain quiet; he argued with them and tried to stop them. Greatly angered, they hit him with the butt of their rifles with such violence that one of his ears, torn off, fell on the ground. They told him: "You do not want to save yourself; you are stubborn; you are a fighter; we are going to kill you along with the white man."¹⁴⁵ They had already taken the silver necklaces of the little Hmong prince to sell them at the market.¹⁴⁶

Then they took them further down the path along the ridge of Mount Phou Mun and into the forest, beside a ditch. It was their practice: they could not risk prying eyes. They forced the condemned to widen the pit. When the shots rang out, the Father cried: "Why have you shot me, the Father?" Xyooj died instantly. Then the soldiers pushed the bodies into the ditch and threw dirt on them to cover them.¹⁴⁷

Xyooj, the "little prince" or rather the apostle of the Hmong, lover of the Gospel, had made amends for his weaknesses – limited as they were – and completed his great act of love.

The grave itself was never found. It remained in the insecure area, where no one could venture. After a few years, hope was useless. On the other hand, some objects belonging to the victims can identify them with certainty. The mother of Xyooj formally identified his silver necklaces; but the family refused to recover them, because according to custom they were the inalienable property of her dead son.¹⁴⁸ In addition, the testimony of a soldier taken -- indirectly -- by Bishop Tito Banchong explains:

"We searched the backpack of the American; there was not much: some granulated cords with two crossed pieces of iron, pictures of a dazzling woman, some alone, some with a child and a man with the heart on the outside..."¹⁴⁹

They were the missionary's treasures: his rosary and some images of the Sacred Heart of Jesus and of the Blessed Virgin.

The reasons for a tragedy

Many reasons have been alleged for the summary execution of Thoj Xyooj and Father Mario Borzaga; the very name of Xyooj has been tarnished. It is necessary therefore to examine them briefly so as to shed as much light as possible on this exceptional destiny.

1. Was Father Borzaga betrayed or eliminated by the Hmong guides who had left them that very morning? That was the hypothesis adopted at first by the civil authorities of Louang Prabang, but rejected by the bishop and forcefully rejected today by the

resisted the temptation to write more simply: "If he dies, I die, and if he lives, I live." Indeed, we should see a very strong theological expression, expressing fraternal closeness and a community of destiny that are realized beyond death as they are realized in the lives of Christians. This is probably an echo in Jesus' discourse at the Last Supper: "When I go and prepare [a place], I will come back and take you to myself, so that where I am, you will be also" (*John 14*" 3).

¹⁴⁵ Statement of S. taken by K. -- Another witness, who was at the scene without anyone's knowledge, hidden in the vegetation, appeared recently. He substantially corroborates the story and gives some other details; but he asked that his words are not used outside the canonical process.

¹⁴⁶ Statements of B. and V.

¹⁴⁷ Statement of T., taken by U. and sent to Bishop Tito Banchong Thophanhong, Apostolic Administrator of Louang Prabang.

¹⁴⁸ Statement of V., catechist, taken by Father Umberto Nespolo.

¹⁴⁹ Statement of T., taken by U. and sent to Bishop Tito Banchong Thophanhong.

Hmong.¹⁵⁰ The latter have always protected and defended the missionaries who lived among them, except when they were members of the guerillas.

2. Was Father Borzaga a victim of the revenge of fathers of families who were unhappy with his action concerning the marriage of girls? As in the preceding hypothesis, the death of Xyooj would then be collateral damage. This hypothesis is rejected both by those who knew the Father and those who know well the Hmong milieu. It is contradicted by the testimonies of the very ones who killed him.
3. Had Xyooj become an accomplice of those who wanted to take the life of the Father and had he been eliminated as an embarrassing witness? This hypothesis has been suggested.¹⁵¹ Those who knew well of his loyalty and his Christian faith consider it absurd;¹⁵² it can absolutely not be accepted in the face of the likeminded testimonies taken from those who killed him.

Concerning these three hypotheses of betrayal, Bishop Louis-Marie Ling, Bishop of Paksé, has wished to testify:

“The Hmong never betray a friend. They are frank and direct, and if they want someone’s life, they let him know to his face, rather than act by pretense or deception.”¹⁵³

4. Did they specifically target travelers coming from the village of Kiukatiam which was partially Christian? The entire village was notoriously faithful to the legitimate government of the country and had recently defended itself against a guerilla attack. They had tried in vain to get some defensive arms for the villagers. That was possibly a sufficient motive, but it is unlikely that, so far from the village, the guerilla would have bothered to mount a punitive operation.¹⁵⁴

On the other hand, these two men could have symbolized for them the presence of the Catholic Church. Many testimonies and real events indicate that, at this period, the guerrillas wanted to radically eliminate the Christian presence in the country.

For those who knew Xyooj, it is clear: he loved the religion and wanted to help the missionaries in their apostolate; for that reason, they eliminated him. As his preaching in Na Vang shows, he himself knew that in choosing the Christian faith, and still more, in personally becoming involved in service to the missionary endeavor, he put his life in danger.¹⁵⁵

A witness originally from Na Vang remembers something that touched him: “When Xyooj taught the religion of Heaven, he told us that if one of his friends was in danger of death, he would not abandon him, but he would be ready to sacrifice his life to save him.”¹⁵⁶ They were also the words of Jesus at the Last Supper: “There is no greater love than to give one’s life for one’s friends.” (Jn 15:13)

¹⁵⁰ Cf. statement of Q.

¹⁵¹ Cf. statement of Father Luigi Sion, November 1997: “Sì, faceva il doppio gioco, era un tipo da fare il doppio gioco... anche per eliminare le prove hanno ucciso il catechista.” (“Yes, he was playing a double game; it was in his nature to play a double game... They killed the catechist among others to eliminate the evidence.”). The opinion of Father L. Sion is therefore based on an a priori and not on proof and convincing evidence

¹⁵² Cf. Statement of Bishop Alessandro Staccioli, o.m.i. “I consider it totally implausible that Shiong the catechist was the accomplice of those who perpetrated the fatal ambush.”

¹⁵³ Conversation of the author with Bishop Louis-Marie Ling Mangkhanékhoun, V.DEI, 9 January 2004.

¹⁵⁴ Cf. also the statement of Bishop Alessandro Staccioli, o.m.i. : “I consider unlikely that the cause [of the ambush against Mario Borzaga and Xyooj] can be attributed to arms hidden by the missionaries.”

¹⁵⁵ The anonymous testimony quoted above, note 44, clearly establishes this religious motivation for the death of Thoj Xyooj.

¹⁵⁶ Statement of W., published in *Notiziario Borzaga – Thoj Xyooj* n° 8 (June 2006).

An exemplary life, a death that is a sign of hope

A witness from Na Vang, who when Xyooj arrived was a young girl of 17, expressed the common feeling: after almost a half-century, she keeps alive in her memory his height, his face, his smile, “and especially his words which still echo within me.”¹⁵⁷ The news of his death upset the village that he had evangelized, causing much sadness and tears; but it did not affect their faith in Jesus, conqueror of all evil on earth, in whom they had believed upon his testimony.

As for those of his own village who knew him before his conversion and when, as a young preadolescent, he was preparing for baptism, they speak of him with emotion and of the example that he left them in taking the Gospel to other Hmong village in the region. Father Umberto Nespolo, o.m.i., who was a missionary at Kiukatiam and has dedicated his life to ministry among the Hmong of Laos who had emigrated, is certain:

“To this day, today, I can assure that these villages have remained faithful to Christ and to his Church.”¹⁵⁸

* * * * *

As the conclusion of this presentation, totally based on the statements of those who were actors or witnesses and on the in depth research on site and in the archives, it will suffice to cite some qualified witnesses:

“Xyooj was with us only a year; but the things that he did for us were many. The Hmong who received the faith remember the beautiful things he did... Xyooj is a model of a zealous man to make the Lord of Heaven known among the Hmong. He is a model that I have tried to imitate all my life [...]. Xyooj often told us that he would give his life for teaching the faith, and that’s what happened to him.”¹⁵⁹

“Here is something I have had in my heart and which I wanted to say for a long time: the catechist Xyooj, killed with Father Mario, is also a true martyr of the Gospel.”¹⁶⁰

Those who knew the young catechist Thoj Xyooj in the past, and those who hear about him today, are delighted to hear these words. They trust that the Catholic Church will formally recognize what God has done in his life and in his death, and offer it as a model for all believers.

¹⁵⁷ Statement of L.

¹⁵⁸ Statement of Father Umberto Nespolo, o.m.i.

¹⁵⁹ Statement of J.

¹⁶⁰ Statement of Father Umberto Nespolo, o.m.i. – Bishop Tito Bangchong, Apostolic Administrator of Louang Prabang, has clearly expressed the same thought in a statement to the postulator, 21 May 2005.

RESOURCES AND BIBLIOGRAPHY

Statements of witnesses

As a precaution, the names of Lao witnesses except those holding official positions have been replaced in the text by a neutral designation: A, B, C, in the order of their appearance in the story, as in the previous article. Many of them were called as witnesses in the diocesan process, but these are out of court statements.

The letters X and Y designate two persons, of whom it also seemed preferable to conceal their names to respect their privacy.

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The first Kmhmu' witness:

The catechist Luc Sy

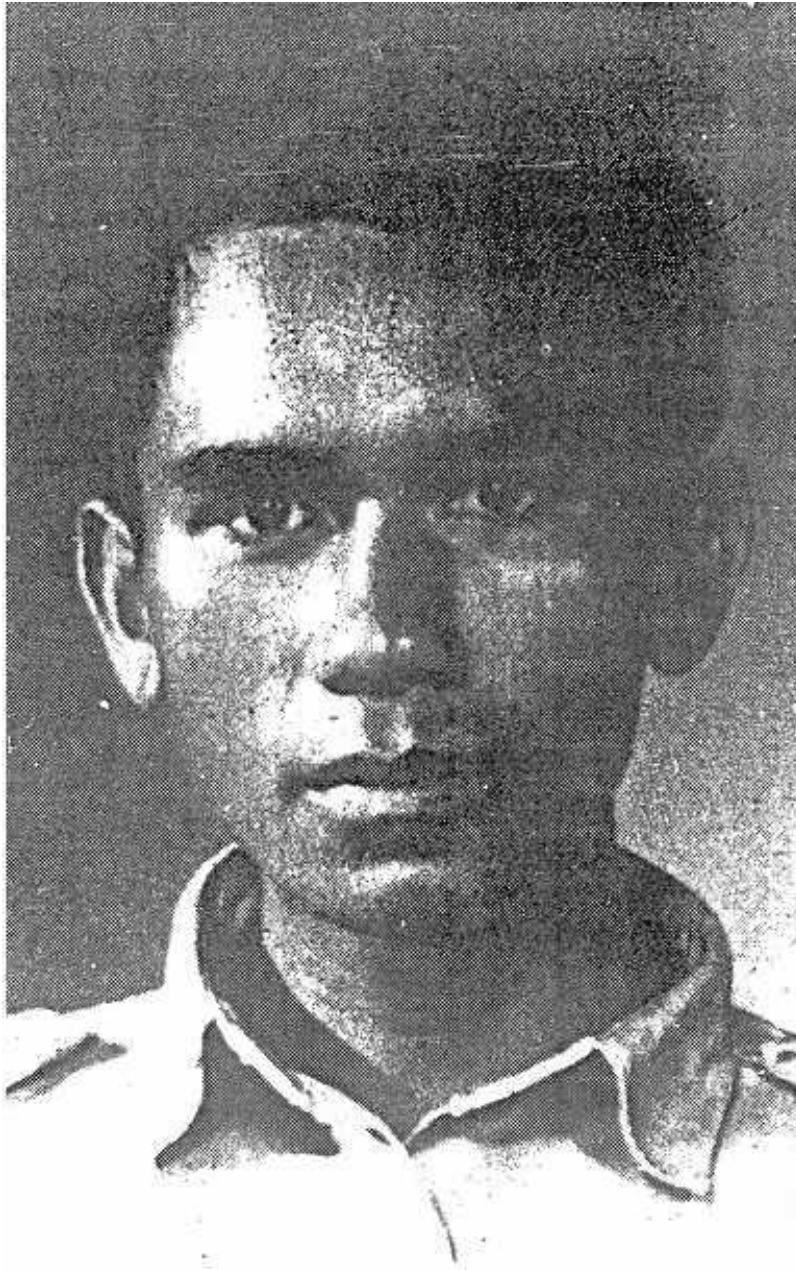
(1938 – 1970)

Rejoice Jerusalem and all who love here; gather and rejoice!
Be happy, you who are sad; you will be joyful and satisfied!

Isaiah 66, 10 (Liturgy of the 4th Sunday of Lent)

The present moment is the pathway designated for every new beginning.

Father Louis-Marie Parent, o.m.i.



The Kmhmu' catechist Luc Sy (1938-1970)

Witness for Jesus Christ in Laos

Died for the faith at Dène Din on 7 March 1970

The young years of a bright child

Luc Sy (ສົງ) was born in 1938, the last child born to a family of six children: two girls and four boys. The family lived at Ban Pa Hôk, a village of the Kmhmu' minority, some four hours by foot into the mountain to the south of Xieng Khouang, below Ban Nam Mone, in the province of Xieng Khouang. In the Kmhmu' language, the village was called Kung Hrông Tnéc.

Ban Pa Hôk entered into the catechumenate in October 1950, just after the death of Father Louis Morin, o.m.i.¹⁶¹ Sy was twelve years old when he learned of the Christian faith from a new missionary, Father Benjamin Rancœur, o.m.i.¹⁶² After a year of catechumenate, he was baptized on October 28, 1951, feast of Christ the King; he received the name of Luc.

Luc had been one of the first students at the school opened in 1950 at Ban Nam Mone by Father Jean Subra.¹⁶³ In his writings, the latter remembers a shy child, docile, candid, and studious at school and at catechism. In fact, Luc was a good student, gifted for both work and for studies. In 1952, when he knew well how to read, write and count, it was decided to send him to Saint Joseph Catholic School at Xieng Khouang, capital of the province. During this period, in April-May 1953, military operations caused the evacuation of the town. Father Subra remained hidden in the forest for an entire month; taking turns with two of his friends from school, on this forced school holiday, Luc came to keep him company for two weeks.

In that same year, the missionaries of the region, whose superior was Father Henri Rouzière¹⁶⁴, decided that it was urgent to form some catechists among the Kmhmu', elite Christians and perhaps future priests; but Xieng Khouang had become a war zone...

Leave your country, your family and the home of your father...

On June 15, when Luc and his friends returned to the mountain, the school was not open; they would await the moment to depart for the minor seminary which the Missionary Oblates had opened in Paksane, in the Mekong¹⁶⁵ valley. For the four Kmhmu' youngsters, the occasion presented itself on August 13, 1953. Father Rouzière writes in the journal of the Mission:

Called to Vientiane by the bishop... Father Rouzière brings with him five student Thais Hai¹⁶⁶ catechists for Paksane. They are: Jean Lo [Hlo], Luc Si [Sy], Paul Mun [Moune], David Si [Sy], Joseph Son. Thanks to Colonel Sore, commandant of the area, their transportation is taken care of by the army... Uneventful journey by air; a bit of excitement on the part of the children, of course, but no fear.

Besides the fellow students from Xieng Khouang, a fifth study mate of Luc will be Yang Dao¹⁶⁷, a young Hmong who did not speak Lao, but Vietnamese and French because his family had been refugees in the region of Dien Bien Phu in Vietnam.

¹⁶¹ Louis Morin, o.m.i., 1912-1950, arrived in Laos in 1936. Died of typhus at Xieng Khouang on 1 October 1950; he is the first Oblate to be buried in Laotian soil.

¹⁶² Benjamin Rancœur, o.m.i., 1923-1998, arrived in Laos in 1947.

¹⁶³ Jean Subra, o.m.i., 1923-2000, arrived in Laos in 1949.

¹⁶⁴ Henri Rouzière, o.m.i., 1919-1994, arrived in Laos around 1947.

¹⁶⁵ Cf. *Codex historicus of Xieng Khouang 1952-1953*, notebook 2 (P. Henri Rouzière), dated June 15, 1953.

¹⁶⁶ 'Thai Hai' at this time is the common name, more respectful than 'Phu Theung', of the Kmhmu'.

¹⁶⁷ *Codex historicus of Xieng Khouang 1952-1953*, notebook 2, at the date of 13.8.1953.

Luc stayed at Paksane four years and learned enough French to easily converse in that language. In July 1957, the five Kmhmu' friends left the seminary to enter the service of the mission.

Father Jean Hanique¹⁶⁸, who knew Luc as a student and again, later on, as a catechist, would say of him: "He was modest, but very devoted. He was a fine fellow with many beautiful qualities."

The career of a catechist too quickly interrupted

The following year, the prefect of Xieng Khouang went to Vientiane to meet with the Vicar Apostolic, Bishop Étienne Loosdregt¹⁶⁹, o.m.i. He wanted to encourage the Kmhmu' of his province, and asked the bishop to point out some young Christians capable of becoming administrators. The friends Paul Moune and Luc Sy were chosen. The was to have a great public service career: until the end of 1975 he was an esteemed *Chao meuang* (sub-prefect).

As for Luc Sy, also made available to the administration, he was assigned as a teacher at the public school of Ban Kangsivilay (Kangsi, for short), a village 7 km south of the Plain of Jars. From there one could see the comings and goings of aircraft at the military airfield of Ban Ngoua. His students have retained wonderful memories of him. His position led him to work closely with another great missionary, Jean Wauthier¹⁷⁰, who was able to share with him his apostolic spirit and give him the example of self-giving. In the village, Luc was also responsible for religious education, thus pursuing the vocation of catechist that had become important for him.

This peaceful career did not last more than two years. In the month of August 1960 a coup came to change the balance of political forces in the country. In 1961, Luc Sy, who was young and well-built, was drafted into the army. Soon he had the rank of corporal. This was the beginning of a life of wandering: with his unit he traveled across the country. During these years in the army, he remained a good Christian; whenever he could, he contacted the missionaries, and was always concerned for his own people.

In 1967, Luc was wounded in action in Champassak province, in the far south of Laos. Cared for and then discharged there, he naturally got to know Father Jean Nheuag Boun, a Laotian priest of the mission of Paksé who oversaw various Christian communities in the foothills of the Boloven plateau. The Father welcomed him as a catechist in his own area.

Luc married Nang Sot, a young Catholic widow from Phon Thong, belonging to the Laven minority, who had a girl and a boy from her first marriage. The marriage was celebrated by Father Boun Nheuag himself. After returning to the north, the couple had a daughter, Som Det, who was not yet weaned at the time of her father's death.

The call of the Kmhmu'

Luc Sy, however, had kept in his heart the desire to return with his family to his home region. He felt strongly the call of his people, the Kmhmu': displaced by war, humiliated and victimized, they had a pressing need to deal with their situation and to deepen their human and

¹⁶⁸ Jean Hanique, o.m.i., 1922-2005, arrived in Laos about 1949, was provincial superior of the Oblates in Laos in the 1960's..

¹⁶⁹ Bishop Étienne Loosdregt, o.m.i., 1908-1980. Arrived in Laos in 1935 with the first Oblate missionary team; he was the first Bishop of Laos: Vicar Apostolic of Vientiane from 1952-1975.

¹⁷⁰ Jean Wauthier, o.m.i., 1926-1967. Arrived in Laos in 1952, he died for the faith, in service of the Kmhmu', at Hin Tang on 16 December 1967

Christian formation. The missionary that Luc was the closest to, Jean Wauthier, tragically died in December 1967 because of his love for the Kmhmu' people and loyalty to their cause; but others took up the torch.

That's when Luc had news of his cousin, Louis-Marie Ling¹⁷¹, son of the sister of his father. The latter had just returned to Laos from Canada, where he had begun theological studies for the priesthood, for a two-year internship as deacon. He joined the administrative team of the new Centre for Ministry with the Kmhmu', in the Apostolic Vicariate of Vientiane, at Hong Kha in the suburbs of the capital.

The Hong Kha Centre was animated by three Oblates besides Louis-Marie: Fathers Jean Subra, Henri Delcros¹⁷² and Andre Hebling.¹⁷³ The most important activity was the formation, first and continuing, of Kmhmu'. Its focus was on both religious education and human development: health and hygiene, agriculture, home economics, etc. Women catechists had their own program, with the help of the Missionary Oblates of Mary Immaculate. Young Kmhmu' boys, students at schools in the capital, had lodging facilities at Hong Kha. They had begun to set up there a farm-school, so that the catechists might become agents for the development of their people.

In these circumstances, after so many lost years, Luc Sy resolved to resume his former commitments as a catechist. He told this to Father Boun Nheuung, who informed Louis-Marie and gave a favorable opinion. When Louis-Marie proposed the admission of Luc Sy to the Centre's team, all were enthusiastic. Father Subra, in particular, had not forgotten his young companion in the solitude of 1953; he had already had the idea of making Luc, after a time of formation, the lay leader for the entire catechetical ministry among the Kmhmu'.

On August 2, 1968, there arrived at Hong Kha this 30 year-old man, already seasoned by life, burning to serve the Church and the Kmhmu' people. The group of catechists gave him a very joyful welcome.

Joined to the five catechists there for refresher courses in 1968-1969, Luc Sy was the oldest among them; he contributed a greatly appreciated stability. He was also among the brightest and most capable. The program suited him because he wanted both to work to promote the Kmhmu' and tell them about Christ. The missionaries were struck by his attentiveness to the work and to the program, although demanding and designed for younger men. Luc knew how to take time to go to the chapel to pray; the Fathers often saw him there.

Thus there was created among the directors, priests or deacon, and the group of student catechists, a real apostolic community: a community of prayer and of faith, a community of study for an adapted catechesis, and a community of ministry for the most abandoned.

At Christmas of 1968, Luc Sy went to visit his relatives in their new village of Ban Na Louang, to the west of the Plain of Jars; he had not seen them since 1960. On this occasion, the civil authorities contacted him. They offered him a good job in the army or as one of the government teachers, with significant material advantages since he had a family to care for. But Luc Sy turned it down: he had chosen, once and for all, to serve his brethren as a catechist.

At Hong Kha, the formation of catechists originally included three years of theoretical formation, followed by one year of practice in the field. Then there was another year of theoretical training followed by two years of practice. Later on, the project expected to alternate

¹⁷¹ Louis-Marie Ling Mangkhanékhouné, *Voluntas Dei*, born in 1944, bishop and Apostolic Vicar of Paksé since 2000.

¹⁷² Henri Delcros, o.m.i., 1925-1994, arrived in Laos in 1950.

¹⁷³ André Hebling, o.m.i., born in 1937, missionary in Laos from 1965 till 1975; then in Indonesia.

a year of theory with three years of practice. The purpose of this formation is explained at length in a letter by the directors and members of the Center to a group of high school students in Vientiane, a few months after the departure of Luc Sy and just weeks after his death:

Maybe young people do not know enough about how we understand the ministry [of catechists]. Indeed, we believe that if we focus only on the supernatural aspect of the Christian life, we would be unfaithful to the Gospel. We want to integrally evangelize the person; we want to promote the whole person, the spiritual as well as the temporal, on the social and economic level: we believe that the Gospel requires this.

So we work with all our strength to advance the Kmhmu' in the social order by schooling, hygiene and medical care; by cleanliness and economic development in the villages. For this work to be effective, it is necessary that the Kmhmu' learn brotherhood, solidarity and mutual support and selflessness in regards to others. And this is new for them because the Kmhmu' who live in the jungle traditionally have a clannish mindset or family spirit, closed in on itself. They cannot see beyond the clan they belong to.

They also have a traditionalist mindset, tied to ancestral beliefs which, in itself, tends to prevent or at least hinder economic and social development. [...] But when it comes to Christians whom we tell not to use sorcery but to go to the nurses, we (catechists) are heard. The mortality rate of 10 to 20% in the first months has disappeared; tragic situations are being avoided. In these two cases, evangelization has given immediate efficacy for social and economic promotion and for the good of the group.¹⁷⁴

Luc Sy had received his formation on the move, but he already had very appreciable personal experience. He quickly assimilated the education offered -- aims and means. Also, by Christmas 1969, his formation was considered sufficient.

A new departure

At that time, the directors were concerned about the isolation which, in the concrete conditions of the country, would be increasingly the lot of rural catechists. A way was needed to assure that they had real spiritual support. Those who were in formation in Hong Kha were therefore encouraged, in this regard, to join an established Christian movement. For Luc Sy, the way was paved. His cousin, Louis-Marie Ling, was a member of *Voluntas Dei*¹⁷⁵, a secular institute. The institute had just admitted as associate members some married couples, and Louis-Marie was in charge of the formation of its members in Laos.

As for the spirituality of the institute, it fit well the personality and the experience of Luc Sy. It insists on a spirit of recollection, humility and fraternal charity through the following practices: the presence of God – not criticizing people – not complaining – being of service – being a builder of peace. That was a program of life suited for him.

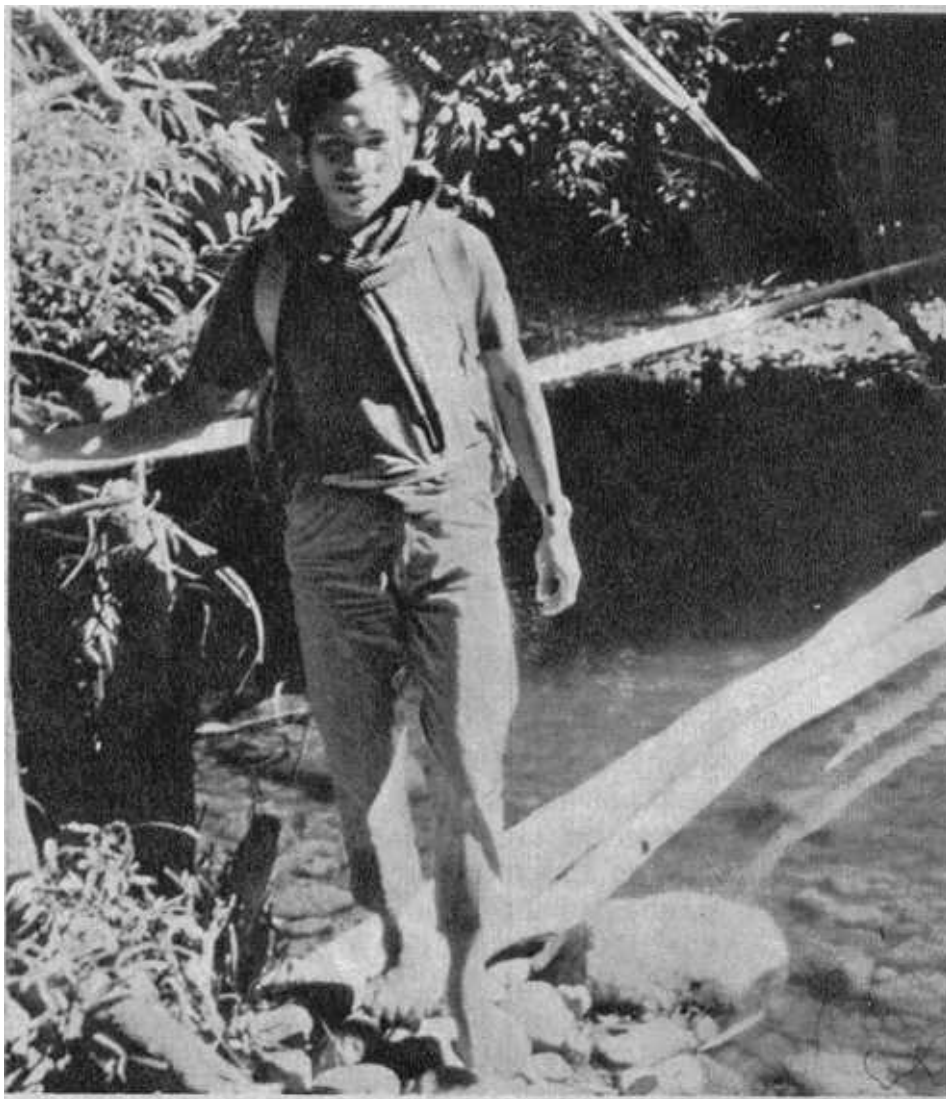
On January 26, 1970, Bishop Loosdregt presided at Hong Kha over a double ceremony: in the name of the Church, he accepted Luc Sy as an associate of the *Voluntas Dei* Institute for a trial year; and in the name of the Vicariate, he officially commissioned him to be in charge of the Kmhmu' in the region north of Vang Vieng. This vast area is located along the Mekong, at about 170 km north of Vientiane, midway on the road to Louang Prabang. During this missioning ceremony, Luc was given permission to distribute communion.

¹⁷⁴ Letter of the second trimester of 1970, in a letter received by Henri Delcros; text cited in Jean Subra, *Mission des Oblats de Marie-Immaculée chez les Kmhmu'* (manuscript), 1995, not paginated.

¹⁷⁵ The *Voluntas Dei* Institute was founded in 1958 in Canada by Father Louis-Marie Parent, o.m.i.

At the end of January, Father Henri Delcros drove Luc Sy to Houey Phong (or Na Phong), the village where he was to reside. There were a dozen catechumen families there. On the first evening, there was an installation ceremony. Luc addressed the dignitaries: "You had a good catechist, Somgkham, whom you loved. As for me, I do not have a lot of experience, but I put myself at your service. Help me to fulfill my mission." His sincerity was so obvious that the people were immediately won over.

According to the new rules for catechists, Luc had to make a monthly report to the Hong Kha Center. His first report was received on schedule -- death would not leave him time to make a second. His days were taken up by catechism and care of the sick. He began visiting Christians and non-Christians in the villages as far as Dene Din, with the intention of doing it regularly. He prepared his catechumens of Huay Phong for baptism whose celebration was planned for Easter...



Luc Sy – "Keep your belts fastened and your lamps lit." (Luke 12, 35)

During these intense weeks, some non-Christians, who liked him, had questioned him about Christ; he proclaimed the Gospel to them. He seriously busied himself developing his village in human terms: cleanliness, running water, food hygiene, care for the sick. In a refugee village

nearby, he had persuaded the uprooted families to make larger rays¹⁷⁶, so as not to count on external aid for their rice, and to raise more chickens and pigs for food richer in protein. He urged them to make a beautiful garden.

In the midst of all these occupations, he strove to remain faithful to personal prayer, in the tradition of his Institute.

Father Louis Hernot¹⁷⁷ mentions in a letter an episode that, according to its context, should probably be attributed personally to Luc Sy, and which indicates well his evangelical spirit. “A Kmhmu’ catechist who was located to the north of Vang Vieng” had been stopped by the government soldiers because he had agreed to care for some members of the guerilla. This took place shortly before the death of Luc Sy. The episode caused a certain tension between the mission and the military authorities. But didn’t Jesus say: “Love your enemies; do good to those who hate you?”

The events of March 7, 1970

On Sunday, March 1, 1970, third Sunday of Lent, Luc Sy was at Houey Phong, where he was in charge as catechist. He was joined by Louis-Marie Ling. On Wednesday, the 4th, they were together for the monthly retreat, animated by Louis Marie. There was no other retreatant. It was a full day, given totally to prayer and meditation.

On Thursday, the 5th, they left together for Dène Din, a village located 20 km further north, or 30 to 40 km from Vang Vieng. They were going to ensure the instruction of a new group of catechumens – six families – and visit the sick. They were accompanied by a layman, Maisam, called “Kèò” or “Pho Inpeng,” the *saravat* of Houey Phong; in the jargon of the mission, they called the layperson in charge of the Christian community the *saravat*. The name Dène Din means “the border,”¹⁷⁸ because the old border between the kingdoms of Vientiane and Louang Prabang passed through there. Father Henri Delcros had come to this village a few months earlier to “chase out the spirits,” that is to say, carry out the rite of purification which marked the entry into the catechumenate.

The three missionaries passed through the village again on the night of Friday to Saturday. But in the morning, they had to quickly leave for the south: Luc Sy and Pho Inpeng were expected at Houey for *Laetare* Sunday. Louis-Marie would follow as far as Vang Vieng, the mission center, to help Father Louis Hernot. The departure was delayed because of the number of sick to visit and care for. Luc Sy tried to find a way to leave by car; a little after 10 a.m., a passing military truck stopped and agreed to take them aboard. What a gift, instead of walking 20 km under the burning sun!

The travelers had heard that the guerillas were sometimes patrolling this area, but in their haste to leave, they forgot about that information. Barely a kilometer after leaving Dene Din, the truck was ambushed. Shots from an AK 47 machine gun rang out. The truck stopped and the soldiers jumped to the ground... one of them, hit by a bullet inside the truck, would be burnt up in the flaming vehicle.

Louis-Marie’s life was spared because, at the last second, Pho Inpeng had gotten in front of him. The *saravat* had followed him, leaping between shots, and when he got to him, two bullets

¹⁷⁶ The ‘ray’ is a technical term in Southeast Asia designating clearing by fire, similar to the controlled burning. Depending on the context, it also means the area cultivated by this technique

¹⁷⁷ Louis Hernot, o.m.i., 1931-2005, arrived in Laos in 1957. He was at that time in charge of the mission of Vang Vieng.

¹⁷⁸ Litterally, “territorial border” or “earthly border.”

hit him in the forehead. He collapsed on the deacon, who escaped with a big wound caused by a bullet on the bridge of the nose, as well as scratches on his forehead. With a few leaps, Louis-Marie lay down at the edge of the forest, playing dead. As for Luc Sy, he was seriously wounded in the thigh when he was still in the truck. When he jumped to the ground, he was hit by a second bullet; he fell, his throat pierced through.

Twenty minutes later, after having looted and burned the truck and killing a wounded man, the attackers, all Vietnamese, disappeared.

Louis-Marie, who had to tell the two families about the death of their husband and father, looked in Luc Sy's pocket, thinking he would find there a little money or some valuable object; but the catechist had on him only his rosary, broken by the bullet. It was the only souvenir the deacon brought to the family.

Louis-Marie Ling returned to the nearby village, but afraid of meeting the enemy, he crossed through the bamboo forest and climbed the limestone rocks: it took two hours to go one kilometer. With friendly families, he went back to the place of the ambush to see the dead and the wounded. There was only one wounded; the attackers had thought he was dead. And they had not looked around the truck; otherwise they would have found the deacon hidden 15 meters from there, and they would have surely killed him.

Luc Sy was buried with the *saravat* at Dène Din itself. He rests among those whom his bishop had entrusted to him and for whom he gave his life.

Reflections on the death of Luc Sy

In the testimony of Father Yvon L'Hénoret¹⁷⁹, who remained in Laos until 1975 and was then national chaplain of Laotians in France, from the beginning there was a real aura around Luc Sy. He was and remains a living example for other catechists. Kmhmu' Christians immediately revered his memory.

That having been said, it is evident that the events of March 7, described above, can be interpreted in different ways.

One could accept the thesis of a more or less fortuitous accident. Thus, Father Louis Hernot, who was responsible for the mission of Vang Vieng, writes: "I do not doubt the generosity of Luc Sy. And I do not consider him a martyr, because I think he was killed, not as a catechist, but because he was a passenger on a military truck."

Others have a more nuanced judgment; Father Yvon L'Hénoret writes: "There is all the ambiguity of the situation. Was the group the direct target? Probably not as Christians, but because of the charitable work he had undertaken."

Indeed, one cannot doubt that the guerrillas had set up an ambush on the outskirts of Din Dene. It was probably not a coincidence: the Vietnamese were waiting for the passing of someone. Were they awaiting the military truck? This hardly seems logical, as the truck came from afar, and they would have had to have a major intelligence infrastructure to predict the location and timing of this passage.

By contrast, no one in Dene Dine, friends or enemies, was unaware of the presence of three representatives of the Catholic mission. Both their charitable activity and their evangelization work greatly displeased their opponents, who wanted to see their territories and the whole country free from any Christian presence and influence. Health care had the effect of disposing the people to highly regard the mission, thereby nipping in the bud contrary arguments. Ten

¹⁷⁹ Yves L'Hénoret, o.m.i., né en 1932, arrived in Laos in 1959.

years before, in this same region, Father Borzaga and the young Hmong catechist Thoj Xyooj were also eliminated during a missionary tour where they had cared for the sick.

Father Pierre Chevroulet¹⁸⁰, regarding the persecution in Laos, mentions the death of Luc Sy in connection with that of two foreign missionaries killed at the same period, Lucien Galan and Joseph Boissel; he develops a corresponding argument:

For these three cases, we can highlight some similarities: most obvious is that every time, the attack took place on a Saturday; is it a coincidence? Although it is not certain that the attackers could assume that Louis Ling and Luc Sy would return to the village of Huay Phong for Sunday, nor could they have guessed they would be riding on a military truck, on the contrary, there can be no doubt that those who hated the two Fathers, Lucien Galan and Joseph Boissel, knew well that Saturday was the day they could grab them on the road. Both were on the way to the Sunday celebration with the Christians for whom they were responsible.

Second similarity, the presence of Vietnamese soldiers... It is supposed... at the death of Luc Sy; it is more than likely in the case of Lucien Galan because of where the attack occurs on the Boloven plateau; finally it has been proven for the ambush of Joseph Boissel.

It is a fact that we have no certainty about what the attackers knew or assumed; but the three travelers from March 7, 1970 had certainly made no secret at Din Dene about their intention to leave for the south. It was enough that one villager was in league with the guerrillas; this was almost always the case. As for the presence of Vietnamese, according to the testimony of the survivor, Louis-Marie Ling, it is irrefutable.

From a wider point of view, recalling the recent persecutions against Catholic and Protestant Christians, this final note:

In certain regions of Laos, the Name of Jesus or of Christ is considered a deviation, consequently the prohibition of pronouncing that name: [so it was in the province of] Xieng Khouang in the Vicariate of Vientiane. Is it a question of politics...? Hatred of the Christian faith...? Hatred of religions...?

He continues, in a summation of those who died for the faith, of which one must count Luc Sy and his companions:

That's the reality; no one can deny it. If these missionaries were not missionaries voluntarily, would they have died this violent death?

In this country, Christianity is a minority, if not insignificant, poorly appreciated by the majority, especially by the opposite camp. Moreover, these missionaries were well aware of this very delicate situation, if not precarious and even dangerous; but the strength of faith, the love of Christ and one's neighbor, led them to brave the real dangers. Without the power of faith and Christian charity, that daring cannot be justified. To make missionary visits, we only know the date of departure; the return is often conjectural, if not random: we never know when we will get back...

The definitive meaning of the life and death of Luc Sy

¹⁸⁰ Pierre Chevroulet, o.m.i., 1924-2004, arrived in Laos in 1956 ; he was provincial superior of the Oblates in Laos from 1965 until 1970.

So there are the dispositions of heart and soul with which the three companions of March 7, 1970, had started their apostolic journey. In advance, they accepted the consequences of their actions; they had in mind only the salvation of God for the world, and the good of the Church.

Father Jean Subra, who knew Luc Sy from his childhood until his death and was his mentor, has amply spoken about the meaning of this brief existence. The following reflections are largely borrowed from him.

Luc Sy died on the eve of the fourth Sunday of Lent, *Lætare* Sunday. The liturgy sings: “Rejoice Jerusalem, all who love her, gather and rejoice! Be glad, you who were sad, you will be happy and fulfilled!” In recovering the battered body of Luc Sy, the missionaries to whom he was so dear pondered these words. Fr. Jean Wauthier, apostle of the Kmhmu’, had already died on Saturday, the eve of Gaudete Sunday: “Rejoice in the Lord always!” This coincidence appeared to them as one of the mysteries of the Kingdom. It can be explained only in the heart of God.

When Louis Marie Ling gave the homily at the Mass of burial of Luc Sy and Pho Inpeng, he himself bore the visible evidence of his injury. He expressed the common sentiment: “The Lord judged that it was enough for Luc... We do not understand... He took him away when we thought we had an excellent catechist, and for two years we had no one to put in the area north of Vang Vieng.” On the road to Dene Din, it is the Lord who awaited Luc Sy to welcome him with open arms.

Father Subra still remembers his last visit to his grave, at the time he was leaving Laos:

I stop the truck... I go to the left side of the road... There is a wooden cross on his grave... I reminisced, I prayed, I was sad... May he help us... I had seen his at his baptism on October 28, 1951... A beautiful boy... Sadness... the bush takes its course, it invades everything... I must cut it a bit before leaving..

For them, the missionaries of the Kmhmu’, there is no doubt that Luc Sy shed his blood for the Kmhmu’. He bore witness to the end; he was the first of them who died for the Gospel.

Resources for the biography of the catechist Luc Sy

Unpublished resources:

Declarations of direct witnesses::

- Bishop Louis-Marie Ling Mangkhanekhoun, Vicar Apostolic of Paksé, eye-witness of the death.
- Father Ernest Dumont, o.m.i. (+)
- Father Jean Hanique, o.m.i. (+)
- Father Yves L'Hénoret, o.m.i.
- Father Louis Hernot, o.m.i. (+)
- Father Jean Subra, o.m.i. (+)

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- Jean Subra, o.m.i., various dossiers and unpublished texts: « Évangélisation des Kmhmu' », General Archives O.M.I.; O.M.I. Library, unsorted.

Archives of the *Voluntas Dei* Institute, Trois-Rivières (Québec)

- Personnel card of Luc Sy.
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- Louis-Marie Ling, « Histoire du Voluntas Dei au Laos » (1992).

Postulation Archives

- Pierre Chevroulet, o.m.i., « Étude sur la persécution au Laos (1954-1975) ».

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- Pierre Chevroulet, o.m.i., *Oblats au bord du Mékong*, Rome, O.M.I., 1998 (collection « Héritage oblat », n° 14) ; texte a été repris sous le titre « Oblats témoins de la foi au Laos » dans *Documentation OMI* n° 229 (1999), p. 2-31 ; 2^e éd. : *Oblats témoins de la foi au Laos*, Fontenay-sous-Bois, O.M.I., 2000.

IX

A lay apostle:

The *saravat* Maisam 'Kèò' Pho Inpèng

(1934 – 1970)

From their very union with Christ the Head, the laity have the duty and the right to be apostles...
They make of all their activities spiritual offerings,
and to give witness to Christ in the whole world.

Vatican II, Decree of the Apostolate of the Laity, Apostolicam actuositatem, 3

Martirologio ... che possa offrire ai fedeli
ed alle Chiese locali
l'ampiezza della straordinaria testimonianza di fede
ancora velata e nascosta nelle pieghe della storia...

Martyrology.... that can offer to the faithful
and to the local Churches
the breadth of their extraordinary witness of faith
still veiled and hidden in the folds of history...

*Marco Gnani, « Non c'è tramonto all'eroismo di fede »
« L'héroïsme de la foi ne connaît pas de crépuscule »
(Tertium Millennium, n° 2, juin-sept. 1996)*



The *saravat* Maisam ‘Kèo’ Pho Inpèng (1934-1970)

Witness of Jesus Christ in Laos

Died for the faith at Dène Din on 7 March 1970

[as seen by an artist]

For the death of Maisam Pho Inpèng, see the text above about the death of the catechist Luc Sy, and the text below by Louis-Marie Ling.

When Luc Sy was called by his Lord, he had at his side Maisam, called ‘Kèo’ or ‘Pho Inpèng’ (ພໍ່ອໍ້ນັ້ນ), a lay leader of the community¹⁸¹. They died together; it would be wrong to separate them on the list of candidates for the title of martyrs.

Pho Inpèng was a Kmhmu’, born around 1932 in the province of Houaphan. He had been an officer in the royal army where he had achieved the rank of captain. When he was freed of his military obligations around 1966, his province of origin had passed into the hands of the guerillas. He settled in a village of Kmhmu’ refugees originally from his region, Houey Phong in the region of Vang Vieng. He found his wife there, but especially the Christian faith. An educated man, respected and influential, after his baptism he became the layperson responsible for the local Christians. The rest of the village was made up especially of catechumens.

In the absence of the missionary and the catechist, it is he who led prayer and taught catechism to the children.

During the retreat of Louis-Marie Ling and Luc Sy, on March 4, 1970, Pho Inpèng was present to serve them. When he learned that Louis-Marie Ling and Luc Sy were to go to Dene Dine to teach the catechumens, he spontaneously offered to accompany them. Actually, the two of them were quite young and lacked experience. Pho Inpèng teamed with them and fully participated in the activity of evangelization.

* * *

Father Subra always designates Pho Inpèng with the job title of ‘saravat’¹⁸². This job title is often translated as ‘sacristan’; but in many cases, that is a bad translation. Pho Inpèng’s work, in any case, had nothing to do with the sacristy; he was really the lay person in charge of the Christian community of the village.

Here are some excerpts about the role of the *saravat* in the *Cours de pastoral pratique* compiled by Jean Subra in 1959:

[The saravat] is charged with the upkeep of the church and also the sacristy, and often with the upkeep of the Father’s house. Pass on through him the work projects for the church. Give him as many projects as possible with the catechist for whom he will organize the mundane side of the Christian feasts... Have him ring the bell; have him find paddies and other things. He should gather information about the weddings in progress.

From the religious point of view the *saravat* is No. 3 after the catechist and the missionary, and in the absence of the catechist, it would be good that he becomes the leader of the Christians if he is capable of that. He should preside, in the absence of the missionary and the catechist; he administers baptism and does as much as he can the main functions of a catechist.

¹⁸¹ “Pho Inpeng” is the traditional name in Laos: “father of,” followed by the name of the eldest son. Like many Kmhmu’ at that time, Maisam had no family name. In the village, he also had the nickname “Keo”; his baptismal name is unknown.

¹⁸² Only once he uses the term ‘Samian’, but it is probably a slip. ‘Samian’ means an official of the first rank, usually rendered as “Secretary” (of a village)

[We must] make him take his role seriously, trust him, and not change him too easily. Do not let him lose by loss of face the authority that he needs; if you have any comments to make, make them as needed. Do not take a bad Christian or an insecure Christian as *saravat*. Take someone who well considered in the village, who has experience and who has influence on people; it is helpful to let the people participate in his choice.

According to Louis-Mari Ling, Pho Inpèng fit well this ideal portrait.

Account of the death of Luc Sy and Pho Inpèng by Louis-Marie Ling, eye-witness.

Two days before the death of Luc Sy, I preached for him a monthly retreat at Ban Na Phong northeast of Vang Vieng. After that Luc Sy, Pho Inpeng (the Sarawat of Huay Phong) and myself were off to Den Dine, a village newly converted for less than a year. We spent one night there and the next day, late in the morning, around 10 am, we wanted to go back to Vang Vieng. Now at that hour there were no more cars; there was no transportation, neither for Phong Na nor for Vang Vieng. We had hitchhike... Suddenly a military truck passed. We signaled to them; they stopped and we climbed in.

After driving just two kilometers, we fell into an ambush. Shots bombarded us. My two companions, Luc Sy and Pho Inpeng, were severely hurt. Luc Sy had a thigh pierced by bullets; he died instantly. Pho Inpeng had a fractured skull; a bullet hit him in the forehead. He died on the spot, in front of me. It was likely that the bullet was meant for me, as it happened just as he was moving past me. He fell in front of me; I had time to see blood flowing on his neck; I thought at first that he was injured. As he did not move, I jumped over her body and lay face down, not moving for about ten minutes, maybe more, I do not know.

The firing stopped. At the sound of whistle, our attackers came out of their hiding places and robbed the truck before setting it on fire. From my hiding place, helpless and trembling with fear, I watched them ... After that, another whistle and they headed toward the west, while I was to the east. Providential for me...! They all spoke Vietnamese; none of them spoke Lao.

After they left, I tried to reach the village of Den Dine by the way of the bush and climbing mountains. Around 2:00 in the afternoon, I reached the village. Once I regained my strength, with some villagers -- men, women and children -- I went immediately to the place of the ambush. Among the fourteen passengers of the truck, eight died: six soldiers, Luc Sy and finally Pho Inpeng. Two soldiers were seriously injured; with another who was slightly injured, they were taken to Muang Kasi; and I was the last one, unharmed, with small scratches on the forehead, nothing serious.

To make matters worse, while we gathered the bodies to put them at the edge of the road, Kasi soldiers arrived and sprayed us with their guns. Fortunately at this point the road passes into a low spot; the bullets passed over our heads and no one was hit. Everyone was shouting so loud that the shots stopped. After a long discussion with the military, without good results, I asked the villagers to take care of the two bodies of my friends.

As for myself, I had to go to Vang Vieng to warn Father Louis Hernot, so that he could notify the Fathers at Vientiane and at Huay Phong, and to inform the two families about the loss of their fathers; and especially to look after family of Luc Sy, and then take this family to Center for the formation of Kmhmu' catechists at Hong Kha (Vientiane).



*Father Ernest Dumont, o.m.i., and a young Khmu' guide
at the grave of Luc Sy and of Maisam Pho Inpèng, 1970*