

## The growth of the Province of Mary Help of Christians (VTN) - Vietnam

# A river flows in many branches

### **Brief history of the Province**

The river of Salesian charism spreads across five continents, each branch carrying rich alluvium, bringing forth vitality and hope. In 1931, the communities in China belonged to the Province of “Saint Thomas the Apostle” India. In 1946, the China Province was established. However, due to the political situation, the sisters were forced to leave China and go to Macau - Hong Kong. In 1950, the headquarters of the Province was moved to Hong Kong.

From the Province of Hong Kong, the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians (FMA) came to Vietnam, initiating the flow of charism on this land. From the small seeds of the first missionary sisters, the Salesian charism with its abundant source of grace has nourished and grown a forest full of life – the FMA sisters who are dedicated and serving in many territories.

### **I. The charismatic river and the growth of the forest**

#### **The FMA missionaries came to Vietnam**

In 1952, the Salesians from the Hong Kong Province came to Vietnam for missionary work. Realizing that Vietnam was a poor country but rich in potential for vocations, in 1959, Father Mario Acquistapace asked the FMA sisters from Hong Kong to come and welcome some Vietnamese girls.

Mother General Angela Vespa sent Sr. Caterina Moore, Provincial of Hong Kong, and Sr. Teresa Merlo, Provincial of Thailand, to Vietnam for exploration. In 1960, the two sisters visited President Ngo Dinh Diem of the South, presenting their mission of serving poor children and the establishment of the Aspirantate to foster native vocations.

On May 28, 1961, with the approval of Pope John XXIII and the approval of Archbishop Paul Nguyen Van Binh, the FMA missionary sisters from Hong Kong officially set foot in Vietnam.

#### **The first community - Binh Tay, from 1961-1963**

The missionary sisters rented a house on Pham Van Chi Street, Binh Tay - Cho Lon, as an experiment for the new presence. The first group of sisters included: Sr. Rosa Zöller (German), Sr. Maria del Socorro Machuy (Chinese), Sr. Olivia Sadaya (Filipino), Sr. Anna Persico (Italian) and Sr. Elena Miravalle (Italian, arrived in Vietnam in 1964). The activities of the sisters were supported by a group of young women who want to find out their vocations.

The main mission at this time was to teach more than 100 Vietnamese and Chinese children, teach catechism and organize Oratory activities. Young women who showed signs of vocation were sent to Hong Kong and Italy for formation. Realizing that Vietnam was a large mission field with great potential, especially in the field of vocations, the Hong Kong Province decided to buy back the Seminary (belonging to the Vinh Diocese) in Tam Ha - Saigon, as a basis for a long-term presence.

### **1. Period: 1963 - 1975**

On May 13, 1963, the missionary sisters moved from Binh Tay - Cho Lon to Tam Ha, marking the establishment of the first headquarters of FMA in Vietnam. Setting foot on the new land, the sisters quickly integrated and enthusiastically served young women. The first headquarters was established at Tam Ha Parish, Thu Duc.

The presence of the FMA Sisters, with their Preventive System education, created a joyful, friendly family-like atmosphere, a value very close to Vietnamese culture. Students and local people were led to live serenely in the presence of God; young girls were loved, played freely without fear of criticism. The educational style based on love won people's hearts and became a bright spot in the educational context of that time. More and more children and young women came to the Sisters through primary and secondary school classes, catechism and Oratory activities.

### **In 1973, the second community was established in Thanh Da - Saigon.**

Despite the daily threat of war, the number of vocations continued to increase. The Aspirantate was opened in 1963, the Postulantate in 1972, and the Novices were sent to Hong Kong or Italy for formation. By 1967, the native sisters had completed their training and returned to serve, helping to increase the number of members every year. In early 1975, the community had 22 sisters, including 5 FMA missionaries, along with 96 senior and junior aspirants.

### **2. Period: 1975 – 1987**

On April 30, 1975, the civil war ended, opening a new page in the history of Vietnam. The political and social changes had a profound impact on the life of the Congregation. The missionary sisters left Vietnam, some returned to their families. The community had 16 native sisters, aged 27 to 33.

The period 1975–1990 was marked by silence, but the flame of love for God and apostolic zeal became even stronger. The sisters lived among the poor, sharing their poor lives. Without schools, the sisters focused on faith education, opening catechism classes in parishes and communities, attracting a large number of students. Catechist training was emphasized, inspiring a group of enthusiastic young people in the mission of catechesis.

In silence, the spiritual life took deeper root in the Word of God. The Eucharist became the beginning and center of each day. The presence of Mother Mary permeates every moment, helping the sisters overcome difficulties with ease.

The stream of charisma continues to be nourished by the Circular letters of Mother General Ersilia Canta and the new Constitutions of 1982. Through correspondence, Sr. Elena Miravalle divided the documents into small files and sent them to the sisters. With the spirit of self-formation and the courage to accept new vocations, in 1977, the Novitiate was established with three novices. From here, each year there were more vocations, and the number of vocations increased day by day.

### **3. Period: 1987 – 1990**

In the late 1980s, the Vietnamese Government began a policy of economic and political renovation, opening the door for foreigners to travel. On November 30, 1987, Mother Provincial of Hong Kong, Sr. Franca Dardanella, visited Vietnam after a 12-year disconnection. This visit opened the way for many subsequent visits by Mothers from the Center:

- **1996:** Mother Marinella Castagno visited Vietnam.
- **2005:** Mother Antonia Colombo visited.
- **2011:** Mother Yvonne Reungoat was present at the celebration of the 50th anniversary of FMA in Vietnam.

Since 1987, the number of communities has increased, expanding throughout the three regions of North - Central - South. Along with that, apostolic activities have also developed in many diverse forms.

Always following the growth of the Congregation in Vietnam, in 1990, Mother General Marinella Castagno invited Sr. Maddalena Ngo Thi Minh Chau and Sr. Maria Nguyen Thi Dung to attend the 19th General Chapter as auditors. At the same time, the Congregation expanded opportunities for Vietnamese sisters to study at the Auxilium Education Department, helping to train spiritually and prepare personnel to serve the Salesian charism mission more effectively.

## **II. Important milestones in the development process**

### **1. Period: 1990 – 1997**

The growth in personnel, community facilities and vocation potential, together with the geographical inconveniences between Hong Kong and Vietnam, prompted the Superiors to decide to separate Vietnam into a Vice-Province under the Hong Kong – China Province.

In 1990, the Vietnam Vice-Province was officially established with 4 communities and 22 sisters.

## 2. Period: 1997 – 2023

### Establishment of the SEA Vice-Province (1997)

In 1997, Mother General Marinella Castagno and the General Council decided to establish the SEA Vice-Province, consisting of Cambodia, Myanmar, East Timor – Indonesia and Vietnam, with the title Maria Nostro Aiuto. The headquarters is located in Phnom Penh (Cambodia), with Sr. Lina Chiadotto as Vice-Province Superior.

At the time of its establishment, the SEA Vice-Province had **13 communities**:

- 1 in Cambodia
- 1 in Myanmar
- 5 in East Timor
- 6 in Vietnam

The total number of members was 81 sisters, of whom 34 were temporarily professed. In addition, there were 39 novices.

In Vietnam, in 1997, the Congregation had 6 communities, 36 sisters, 19 novices and 12 postulants.

## 3. Phase: 2023 – 2009

### Establishment of the Vietnam Vice Province “Mary Help of Christians”

In 2003, the SEA Vice Province was divided into three Vice Provinces:

1. Cambodia – Myanmar
2. East Timor – Indonesia
3. Vietnam

On July 16, 2003, Mother General Antonia Colombo officially recognized the Vietnam Vice Province with the title of Mary Help of Christians. Sr. Rosa Vu Thi Kim Lien became the first Vice Province Superior.

**In 2003, the Vietnam Vice Province had:**

- 8 communities and 2 points of presence
- 99 sisters
- 22 novices, 17 postulants, 20 aspirants, 70 pre-aspirants

## 4. Phase: 2009 to 2025

### Establishment of the Vietnamese Province of “Mary Help of Christians”

From the seeds sown by few missionaries, a large, green forest has grown and is now beginning to blossom and bear fruit.

On August 5, 2009, Mother General Yvonne Reungoat announced the establishment of the “Mary Help of Christians” Province of VTN, marking the maturity of the Congregation in

Vietnam after 48 years of presence, with the Provincial Superior being Sister Teresa Uong Thi Doan Trang.

The event of elevating the VTN Vice-Province to a Province is considered a milestone marking the maturity of the FMA Congregation in Vietnam.

**In 2009**, the New Province consisted of:

- 12 communities and 2 points of presence
- 87 professed sisters
- 54 temporary professed sisters, 22 novices, 16 postulants, 14 aspirants, 86 pre-aspirants

**In 2025**, the Province consisted of:

- 24 communities and 4 points of presence
- 322 FMA (236 professed sisters, 83 temporary professed sisters)
- 24 Novices, 10 Postulants, 9 Aspirants, 24 Pre-aspirants

Of these, 296 FMA serve in 14 dioceses in Vietnam and 2 dioceses in Laos; 26 FMA work and study abroad. The number of *ad gentes* missionary sisters is 38.

### **III. More than 60 years of formation and development of VTN Province**

The stream of charisma is the source of nourishment that nourishes the seeds that are sown, helping them sprout, grow, reach high and be resilient against storms, challenges and the harshness of time.

On the journey of maturity, the FMAs have lived in faith and hope, constantly "filtering the muddy water to bring out the clear" stream of charisma amidst new trends and changes in society and young people. The province courageously opened up many new presences, bringing fresh water to irrigate and nourish lands that have not yet known God, responding to the longing of young people.

#### **Missions**

From a country that welcomes the flow of the charismatic water, the VTN Province continues to reach out, bringing the spirit of the charismatic spirit to the peripheries by sending sisters to missionary areas.

In 1999, a number of sisters were sent to Cambodia, marking the first time the Vietnamese Province sent missionary personnel abroad.

**Currently, in the VTN Province:**

- **In the country:** Communities and presences in the mission areas include: La Son, Loc Tan, Nam Po, Binh Phuoc, Vientiane (Laos), Thakhek (Laos).
- **Abroad:** 38 *ad gentes* missionary sisters.

## IV. Signs and messengers of hope

*“Give me souls, and take away the rest”* together with deep gratitude to God is the source of strength and apostolic enthusiasm of FMA Vietnam.

Throughout history, despite many ups and downs, each FMA Vietnam has continuously sung the Magnificat with a life dedicated to the mission, for the love of God, the love of young people and the spirit of belonging completely to the Congregation.

- **Educational ministry:** Oratories – teaching catechism, kindergartens, general schools, vocational schools.
- **Accompanying:** Dormitories for students, high school students, shelters, migrant youth groups, local youth groups.
- **Promotion:** Support in finding jobs, lending capital – small economy.
- **Educational network:** Past Pupils, Salesian Cooperators Center, VIDES volunteer group.

### Magnificat

#### ***Our souls magnify...***

*for the Lord's mercy is constantly poured out upon the Province of Vietnam  
for his faithfulness transcends darkness and light,  
so that history may become a history of salvation, for us and for the young.*

#### ***Our spirits rejoice...***

*Because the Lord has not considered us small, nor has our efforts been useless,  
but in our smallness, his grace has been all the more abundant.*

#### ***Because the Lord looked upon...***

*so that from the first small group of missionary sisters,  
a Province of great promise has developed.  
The Lord himself has looked upon,  
so that from a branch of the river of Salesian charism flowing,  
it has flourished, bringing many benefits to the younger generations.*

*The Lord himself looked with mercy,  
so that from a simple work of faith education, when sown,  
a vast field of diverse apostolic activities opened up.*

#### ***Because the Lord has blessed us...***

*he placed us under the protection and support of God and the Most Holy Mother.*

*We have not only survived over time, but have also grown thanks to the grace of the Holy Spirit,  
and in us God continues to write his faithfulness in history.*

***And the Lord remembers...***

*“the Daughters of Mary Help of Christians*

*are a living memorial of Don Bosco’s gratitude to Mary”.*

*The history of the Congregation has attested to this sentiment of gratitude,*

*through the dedication of many Daughters of Mary Help of Christians for the good of young people.*

***Magnificat***

*We vow to express our gratitude,*

*by living more fully the entrustment “I entrust them to you”,*

*which Mary entrusted to Saint Mazzarello and the Congregation.*

*May the presence of the FMA Sisters of Vietnam,*

*be a sign of hope,*

*and a reminder of Don Bosco's gratitude to Mary and to God.*