



FROM THE KILLING FIELDS TO COMPASSION

by David R. Aquije; photos by Sean Sprague

Cambodia then and now as seen by a Maryknoll missionary and his driver

Siphal Op knows the work of the Maryknoll missionaries very well. He has been the Maryknoll Fathers and Brothers' driver in Cambodia for 25 years. These days he frequently chauffeurs Father Kevin Conroy, a Maryknoll priest associate, around the Southeast Asian nation.

On a sweltering day in March, Siphal takes a team of reporters from MARYKNOLL magazine to visit the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum

in Phnom Penh, the capital of Cambodia. The museum is located in a former elementary and high school that the communist government of the Khmer Rouge turned into Security Prison 21, or S-21, a center for detention, torture and execution between 1975 and 1979. It is estimated that 20,000 people were killed at Tuol Sleng. All told, an estimated 2 million Cambodians were murdered in the Khmer Rouge reign of terror.



Father Kevin Conroy consoles and brings palliative care to a Cambodian woman with cancer.



The Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum, top left, in the Cambodian capital of Phnom Penh was once the high school of Siphil Op, top right, who has been the driver for the Maryknoll Fathers and Brothers in Cambodia for 25 years. In bottom photo, Father Conroy gives a homily in the Khmer language and in Cambodian style, barefoot in a pewless church.

Siphal waits outside while his passengers visit the museum. He has never entered the museum. He says he never will. This was his school. He studied there until 10th grade, when the Khmer Rouge took it over and turned it into a house of death.

“I don’t want to remember the nightmare of the time of Pol Pot,” Siphal says, referring to the communist dictator and leader of the Khmer Rouge. “I don’t want to see this place that was once mine. We lost our teacher. I have such sadness in my heart.”



Very early the next morning, Siphal steers the four-wheel-drive vehicle to the fishing village of Arey Ksach, on the border with Vietnam, about 50 miles from Phnom Penh. Father Conroy plans to celebrate Mass in Khmer, the official language of Cambodia, for the small, immigrant community of Vietnamese Catholics living along the Mekong River. During the two-hour drive Siphal and Conroy pass the time like old friends, laughing and telling stories of mission.

Father Conroy celebrates the Mass barefoot, like the rest of the faithful in the congregation. The San Jose Church has no pews and the nearly 300 people sit, kneel or stand on rugs. The majority of them are children and youths. More than half of Cambodia’s 15 million people are under 17 years old.

After Mass as he waits while Father Conroy talks with parishioners, Siphal continues his account of life and death during the years of the Pol Pot bloodbath. He was 15 years old when his school was seized by the Khmer Rouge. He was accused of being a Muslim in the primarily Buddhist country and sentenced to hard labor at an agricultural camp, where he saw hundreds of other prisoners die.

In the camp, Siphal says, there were 1,000 workers, but only 75 survived. Thanks to his ability to fish, something his father taught him, Siphal lived. “They only gave us a little portion of rice a day,” he says. “But I secretly ate fish, shrimp, frogs and crabs raw.” To treat the diarrhea that came with this diet, Siphal ate the bitter bark of a me-

dicinal tree that he knew about, and when he could, he made a saline solution of water, salt and sugar.

Siphal's saddest memory is when the Khmer Rouge let him see his parents for a mere 10 minutes before they were executed. Yet, he says, he knew he had to transform the pain of their deaths into gratitude for life. He says he is fortunate to work for Maryknoll and he is hopeful for Cambodia's future.

As Siphal narrates his life story, Father Conroy is in big demand among the Vietnamese community. The adults wait their turn to greet him, while the children cling to his side. When everyone who wants to visit with the priest has done so, it's time for another mission visit.

This time Siphal takes Father Conroy to the Takeo Eye Hospital, a project begun by Maryknoll. The hospital, which was inaugurated in 2010 by Cambodia's King Norodom Sihamoni, was an initiative of Maryknoll Father John Barth, who was serving in Cambodia at that time. Maryknoll supporters funded the hospital construction. Today, Father Barth is a missionary in South Sudan, where he plans to build another eye hospital to serve the poor of that new nation.

Father Conroy converses with Doctor Te Serey Bonn, a program director at the hospital, which is now operated by Caritas Internationalis, a worldwide Catholic relief and development organization, and the Daughters of Charity. The young doctor finished his medical studies with a scholarship arranged by Father Barth and says the hospital continues to be inspired by

the spirit and compassion of the Maryknoll missionaries in its day-to-day operations.

"The existence of this hospital is due to the work of the Holy Spirit and the hospital's principal objective is to be of service to the poor," says Te Serey.

Father Conroy, from the Diocese of Cleveland, Ohio, is a busy missionary. Besides offering pastoral service to Vietnamese immigrants, he directs a mental health program sponsored by the Maryknoll Fathers and Brothers, a project designed to respond to the lack of such service in the country following the devastation of the Khmer Rouge, who executed the majority of the country's professionals.

"The trauma inflicted by the war and the moral deprivation the people suffered at the hands of the Khmer Rouge is still a constant torture for the survivors," Conroy says.

Among the ailments people suffer are post-traumatic stress disorder, severe depression, anxiety and trauma, schizophrenia and other psychological disorders, he says. To maximize the program's efforts, local people are trained to help patients in their communities, Father Conroy says.

With a doctorate in clinical psychology and counseling, Father Conroy is also a professor at the Royal University of Phnom Penh, where he began a master's degree program in psychology. He also helps supervise another program of the Maryknoll Fathers and Brothers, Seedling of Hope, which offers services for those affected by the HIV/AIDS pandemic (*see page 26*).



A photo from Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum in Phnom Penh, Cambodia, shows life under the Khmer Rouge in the 1970s, when Cambodians were driven into forced labor in the countryside. (From Tuol Sleng Museum)

Before signing on with Maryknoll, Father Conroy served as a missionary in El Salvador. He says his basic work has been the same in both countries: to share the love and compassion of God with the most needy. He quotes his role model, martyred Salvadoran Archbishop Oscar Romero, saying, “The Church has to be a servant.”

Accompanied by Siphah and a Daughter of Charity, the missionary goes to see a woman suffering from terminal cancer. He sits beside the woman, who lies on a wooden platform in a humble house. She has

an enormous tumor in her abdomen and complains of the pain, yet she is all smiles for the missionary. He has brought medicine to help alleviate her suffering. As he prepares to leave, the woman’s family surrounds him, thanking him for his visit and his attention to their ailing loved one.

And Siphah, who in a quarter of a century working for Maryknoll has traveled countless roads with the missionaries, stands as an eyewitness to their compassion and service. “These men are here to help our people,” he says simply. ✠