



'Father Joe' remains a force

[By Nancy Pasternack/Appeal—Democrat](#)

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His personality is as strong as his foreign accent, and sometimes the homilies he delivers take on an admonishing tone. But if Joseph Mary Nguyen Xuan Huong were any less sure of himself or his faith, he might not have survived to become a priest.

"I would be in prison, or die long time ago," said the North Vietnam-born pastor of St. Joseph's Catholic Church in Marysville.

Huong, 61, best known now as "Father Joe," spent Thursday night with parishioners, delivering the Mass of the Lord's Supper in both Spanish and English, and then leading a Stations of the Cross procession to the parish hall for a service that lasted until midnight. He took a brief respite from church duties Friday morning to share bits of his personal history, before launching into a packed schedule of Good Friday services and festivities.

The U.S.-trained former military pilot who is in his second year as St. Joseph's head priest, spoke about his life with the same sense of spontaneity and urgency as he had done the night before from the pulpit. "You have to fight yourself," he said Friday morning. "You have to change the way you think and change the way you behave. I challenge them (parishioners) to correct themselves." That intensity may well have been the key to his mortal salvation, and that of 37 countrymen, when a moment of decision on April 29, 1975, changed their lives forever.

Huong had been working under orders to help protect an air base near Saigon from Viet Cong and North Vietnamese Army attack and was forced to take cover when lines of communication were destroyed by enemy rocket fire. He and fellow Army of the Republic of Vietnam soldiers stayed in an underground tunnel through the early hours of what became the fall of Saigon. Huong convinced the others to sprint with him through a hail of rocket fire to Huong's EC-47 plane so he could fly them to safety.

"We run like chickens without heads," the priest says, before releasing a sudden fusillade of high-pitched laughter.

Like many other foreign-born priests serving in the U.S., Huong's early life was colored by economic strife and war. In 1954, Communist forces took the region that included Hanoi and the nearly all-Catholic village where Huong and his family lived. His family, along with about a million other North Vietnamese, headed south, and Huong spent the rest of his youth and young adulthood in Saigon. They enjoyed less than a decade of peace before Communist forces began to invade the southern provinces.

The 1963 assassination of South Vietnam's president, Ngo Dinh Diem, sent the country into "trouble and chaos," Huong says, and within a few years, he and thousands of his countrymen had joined the U.S.-backed ARVN forces against the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese Army. In his role as a pilot, he delivered supplies to

ARVN troops, often having to fly low above the dangerous Ho Chi Minh Trail. By the time of the Tet Offensive — a massive onslaught from the Viet Cong and North Vietnamese Army in 1968 — death had become a familiar sight to the young airman.

"This really break my heart," he says. "I lost many relatives. Every week I have to bury a friend of mine." "Many other friends of mine were missing in action. We have a party together, and next day, they never return," he says. "It's a very sad experience." "We lived in a situation in which we really don't know what's going on," he says of the 20-year proxy war. "The reasons only are in Washington, D.C., and Moscow." A desire to overcome that sense of powerlessness, he says, helped fuel his aspiration to become a priest.

One day in the midst of the bloody days of Tet, he says, he encountered a South Vietnamese soldier whose foot had been blown off by a land mine. The young man had been left to die. "I wanted to console this soldier and give him hope for the life to come," Huong says. "I say to myself, 'Some day, I want to give Communion.'" His background in Vietnam allows him now, he says, to feel an easy kinship with people around him who are struggling — particularly those for whom English is a second language. He continues to study Spanish, and is comfortable delivering Mass in both Spanish and English, he says.

"Father Joe is very brave," says Sara Sullivan, 79, a lifelong member of St. Joseph's. "He knows what he wants, and nothing daunts him." Huong's forceful nature sometimes gives offense, according to some longtime parishioners. But Sullivan says he's "lovable and passionate." "I have gone toe to toe with him myself, at my peril," she says. "But he's absolutely solid."

Huong says he realizes that newcomers to the church often have difficulty with his English pronunciation. But eventually, he says, they adjust — even to his unique take on the name "Jesus," which in Huong's speech, becomes, "Zee-sus."

When Huong speaks about his escape flight out of Vietnam, he lowers his voice. With no contact at all with the ground, he flew the aircraft — overloaded with his fellow countrymen — to safety in Thailand. "I left behind my family," he says, "my parents, brother, sister and all my relatives. I did not know what happened to them." His mother and sister now live nearby. They attended Thursday night Mass, and often are on hand when Huong is preaching.

Like most seminarians of his generation, Huong is accustomed to the temporary nature of his service. Marysville is his sixth parish in the Sacramento Diocese since ordination from St. Joseph College in Mountain View in 1985. He was at St. Isidore in Yuba City from 1993 to 1998. He says the short stints help him stay focused on what he wants to accomplish in each place.

Upon arriving at St. Joseph in September 2006, he launched an ambitious project to renovate the basement of the 153-year-old church building, which had previously been unused for more than 50 years. It now houses the church's food pantry and youth center.

Recently, he returned to Vietnam for the first time since that fateful flight in 1975. Sullivan says he has shared his impressions of that return trip with the congregation. But the memories that came to him on Friday were bittersweet. Saigon was not too difficult. But his hometown in the north was another matter. "I could not recognize anymore," he says. "Only river and church. The rest, no." The long and complicated path of his life, he says, is made sure only because of faith.

"God has his way to run the show," he says, piercing the air again with laughter. "We really don't know what's going on."

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