

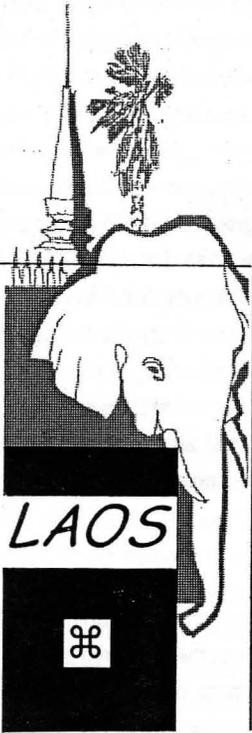
MEKONG

CIRCLE INTERNATIONAL

SEPTEMBER 2006

145-60 Helma Avenue, Ohio 45013 USA

www.mekongcircle.org



Welcome to the
14th issue of
our Newsletter !

Notes From Our 6th Reunion

Letter Of Appreciation

Board Members 2006 - 2008

Minutes of Board Meeting

Next Reunion: Philippines 2008

Member News

Historical Notes

Filipino Writer Discovers Buddhism

Guide to Laos Guidebooks

Interview with Fr. Lucien Bouchard

Summer 2006 is winding down. But not our spirits after another great reunion. Our reunions are designed not only for merrymaking and reconnecting but also to rejuvenate our dedication to our Association. We wish our new set of Board members and Officers (more to be chosen) a productive term. We assure them that Mekong Circle members have always stood ready to share their skills and resources as they have always done in the past. For that reason our Association can always look forward to an endless, sunlit summer.



All dressed up on the open sea. Mekong Circle cruisers were invited to meet the ship captain at dinner. The dress code specified formal. So here are most of us posing for a souvenir photo on Deck 12 before we went to the Mirage dining room. No, the captain is not in the photo. Other members were absent for the photo shoot.

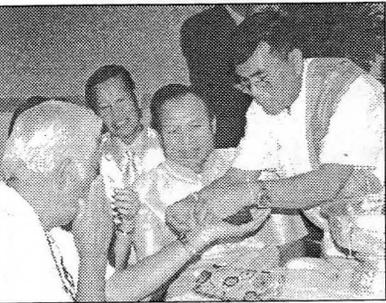
REUNION AUGUST 10 -14 2006



NOTES FLORIDA & THE BAHAMAS

TAPPING THE POWERS OF THE BACI

Phouxay Puangmaly, husband of **Chanthalom**, from Aurora, Illinois was the moh phon (blessing master) at the baci held August 10 at the Symposium ballroom of the Florida Hotel in Orlando. The phak khuan ceremonial aluminum urn was transported by **Chuang Chomthipe** from Hoschton, Georgia. As we all know the all-purpose baci ritual (welcome-best wishes-goodbye-congratulations-get well) is mandatory for those embarking on an extended journey. Hence the white cotton strings looped around our



wrists promised safe passage to and from the Caribbean during the three-day sailing. And the strings also marked us among the 2,629 passengers roaming 12 decks, each 880 feet long. And they worked - no one fell off the decks, no hurricane, no 50-ft waves, no nausea for **Linda Mendoza** (who

FROM MAJESTIC MOUNTAIN TOPS TO VAST SEASCAPES

was hit by motion sickness at the 4-hour yacht cruise around Manhattan during our 2002 New York reunion).

For those who did not believe in the baci's powers **Fr. Lucien Bouchard** celebrated Mass at the Navigator Conference Room at 5 pm as the ship left the dock. For almost two decades Father Luke trekked up and down the rugged terrain of Xiengkouang province to say Mass for his Hmong converts. While the Navigator offered a view of a calm sea stretching to an infinite horizon, it was not quite the sweeping, breath-taking vistas from their mountain top villages. See inside for an interview of his missionary days there.

KABAYANS ALL OVER

Our cruise ship "Sovereign of the Seas" (one of about 20 operated by Royal Caribbean International RCL) said it carried 859 crew members from 59 nationalities during our Florida-Bahamas sailing. We met quite a number of Filipinos among them. "I estimate that 200 to 300, the majority of the crew," is from the Philippines, said **Edwin Bacalla**, of the Housekeeping staff. Others worked the kitchen, the bar, the engine room. Filipino cabin stewards, waiters, plumbers, electricians, musicians, engineers we bumped into along the hallways and lounges - kabayans all (compatriots) -- were helpful to us, offering tips and advice not contained on the ship's daily newsletter. That's how, for us who shunned pasta and salmon at the Mirage dinner room, got to order "tinola" and bowls of steamed white rice not on the menu. At her table **Chanthone Chinyavong** said the sinigang beef soup reminded her of OB Sayaboury where she ate her meals with the Filipino staff. Jerry, a Pampangeno headwaiter kept sneaking in local dishes to Pampangeno **Tony Sazon**. To shed off the extra calories, Tony took brisk walks on the ship's jogging deck with **Rusty Ramos** who really needed some shedding. The three Filipino musicians, serenading the diners from table to table, oblig-

ed with a Visayan song "Usahay", then accompanied **Lydia Palma's** "Maalaala Mo Kaya", "Bituin Marikit" and "Gaano Kita Kamahal". At CocoCay island, an RCL employee **Edmundo Caingat**, from Pandacan, Manila, carried around a tray of drinks from picnic shed to picnic shed, offering a concoction called Coco Loco, a mix of mango, orange juice, papaya and grenadine liqueur. It felt like 110 degrees under the shade on the island, so you needed a lot of that loco to cool the coconut atop your neck and shoulders. The draining heat inspired some lamvong among the picnic table aisles and bursts of Lao songs.

PILLS WITH THE OMELET

The Windjammer on Deck 11, open for breakfast from 7 am to 11 am (other restaurants closed breakfast at 7 am or 9 am) was the preferred spot for an early coffee-only privacy contemplating the vastness of the waters, before the breakfast mob turns the floor into a Grand Central bus and train terminal. There **Melanie Reyes** secluded herself at one table, sitting by herself "before returning to our cabin and our two young grandchildren." Another early riser is **Tony Liwag** who fished out from a small bag six vials of assorted pills, in various colors and shapes and sizes, that are consumed with his coffee. Indeed much of the talk at the breakfast table among Mekong Circle members, most of whom are in their late 50s or 60s, revolved around triple bypass heart surgeries, Medicare coverage and osteoporosis.

SHOPPING FOR DREAMS

Deck 5 and its Shops On Board was another favorite drop-by where we saw **Sumatra Malaythong**, **Vanessa Tongma** and **Kemphone Phaiboun Vongphakdy**, graduates of the OB School of Nursing, rummaging through



Lamvong along the picnic table aisles at Cococay Island

bins of cargo pants for males. Said Sumatra "I am looking for a size that will fit my husband's expanding waistline. It's hopeless." **Khemphone** and **Phounsouk Sisouphone** marked birthdays August 14 on our way back to Florida. We watched **Sam**, Sumatra's husband's impressive display of salesmanship during the special reception for our Lao colleagues at the Voltage Lounge on August 13. He gathered orders for and sold right on the floor our two Mekong Circle history-memoir books - "Filipinos In Laos" and "Goodbye Vientiane." **Manit Saguansack** with his portable musical system and his wife **Linda** at the microphone, together with **Chuang Chomthipe** got the lamvong going round and round with their ballads and Hak Bo Leum's.

A CHANGE OF CLOTHES FOR THE CAMERA

The flyer slipped under our cabin doors summoned us to gather on August 12 for a "formal" Mekong Circle group photo on the open air basketball court on Deck 12. And so there we were, attired in barong tagalog, sinhs and shawls, coats and ties. And t-shirts and shorts. Those wearing the latter - among them **Vitoy** and **Joji Naranjo** -- hurried back to their cabin to change and return, just in time for the last shots. **Father Luke**, arriving at exactly 4:45 pm for the appointed shoot, saw no one there, returned to his cabin "to resume my prayers." How do you bunch up some 90 heads into one sardine can shot? The ship's official photographer, another Filipino, herded us by calling all the men "Oy Senador, a little to the left!"; the women were addressed as, what else -- Tita. Contact **Tess Papa**, our travel agent (888 278 3415) if you were not able to get your copy of a print. On the same deck is the 200 ft high rock climbing wall. Unless any geriatric Mekong Circle member can present proof that he / she scaled it, we can say none of us did anything more strenuous during the entire cruise than slicing our dinner steak. **Ken Fuentecilla**, 29 years old and friend **David Gomez**, 15, parasailed 400 ft above CocoCay's blue waters. Oh to be young again and fearless!

SOME WINNERS & LOSERS

We did need the baci's powers to intercede for us. Early morning of August 10, the liquid bomb plot in Britain delayed U.S. flights to Orlando's airport. Latecomer Mekong Circle members checked in after our hotel reception ended, bearing tales of gels, shampoos, lotions, sodas, mouthwashes and perfumes confiscated from them by airport security screeners. A large delegation of 21 members from Los Angeles, California led by **Cecile**

Datu made it. So did a larger group from Nevada and California led by **Seb Eusebio**, all 22 of them - and all with family ties to him. **Sounthaly Lapitan's** luggage got lost (retrieved later before we sailed the next day). Another confirmation that baci works - call **Pete Gonzales** who hit it big (how big?) at the ship's Casino Royale and his wife **Lewie** who also hit it big (bigger?) at the Atlantis Resort casino on Paradise Island across from Nassau. How big and bigger? Let's say big enough to help clear their bills for the hotel reception and the Mekong souvenir t-shirts. At the Bingo, **Lily Abad** lost a three-winner pot because she was too slow to announce her winning card. Bingo winner **Cora Sazon** also bagged a free cruise at Tess Papa's raffle contest.

A BAHAMIAN PAMPAGUENO EATERY

Its sign said it's a videoke restaurant. Cabalen is not among the shore excursions or tours listed by the ship. Located inside the Moses Shopping Plaza at Bay St. corner Elizabeth Avenue in Nassau and operated by its cook Jason, a Pampagueno, its menu includes Bistik Tagalog, pisang tilapia, pinangat tilapia, escabeche tilapia, fried bangus, ginataang kalabasa, ginisang sitaw baboy and itlog maalat (they run out of balot the day we lunched there). There were nine Filipinos at the ten tables, clear plastic sheets protecting their green linen covers. Sizzling adobong pusit seems to be the favorite dish ordered. Along with the menu folder, a booklet is offered listing karaoke selections that are played on a plasma screen monitor on the wall. How many Filipinos in the Bahamas, we asked Jason. About 400, he said, many of them doctors and nurses at a local hospital and in hotels. We wished they were better



Schoolmates reunite once more. from left Chanthone Chinyavong, Phikoun Keomahathai, Sivone Urai Chandara, Thongsai Mitsri, Sivone Sivongxay.

schoolmates gathered -- **Khamsy Siharath** and sister **Bouadeng**, **Bounmy Somchit**, **Dustin** and **Liza Saythong**. Also in attendance **Cecile** and **Manding Datu**, **Bouncey Orense**. In Washington, **Laureen** and **Tricia Lapitan**, daughters of Sounthaly, were hosts to cruisers from Virginia and Tennessee **Phikoun Keomahathai**, **Lamphoune Brenzikofer**, **Cindy Luangrath**, **Phetje Sayasan**.

Congratulations Lewie & Pete Gonzales

August 16, 2006

On behalf of the new Board of our association, let it be known (and recorded) that our 6th reunion was truly a splendid event that will rank as one of the most remarkable among our past gatherings. I say this because as I was circulating with my notebook, taking interview notes and photos for our next Newsletter that will describe this reunion, I was told again and again by our members there that it was overwhelming from beginning to end of our four-day event.

It was all the more remarkable because this reunion was basically a three-person organizing effort - by both of you and Tess Papa. Past reunions had organizing committees of several dozen people. It was difficult to convene your Florida chapter members. And so most of the work was all on your three shoulders. Yet you pulled off a perfect job. It's true that a Caribbean cruise loads up much too many activities to overwhelm the senses. But there were activities unique to our Mekong Circle event that made our gathering our very own:

- The baci welcome ceremony and reception at the Florida Hotel
- The Mass celebrated by Fr. Lucien Bouchard, OMI, aboard the cruise ship
- The special reception for our Lao colleagues at the ship's Voltage Lounge
- The group photo session in formal wear on Deck 12
- Selected seating at the main dining room to cluster Mekong Circle members
- The two spacious picnic sheds reserved for Mekong Circle at CocoCay Island (strategically located beside the drink stands and the barbecue grills) for our impromptu lamvong and songs.

Much credit should go to Tess for arranging at short notice some of these events which were not in our planned program. Moreover, she was attentive to the last minute, making sure every member and their luggage was on the right bus out of Port Canaveral on our arrival.

All in all, a grand, stupendous reunion that will take some doing to top it. Congratulations and many, many thanks from all the members.

Pete Fuentecilla, Chairman, 2006-2008 Board of Directors



DEAR TONY, YOU FORGOT TWO ZEROES

Our former treasurer **Tony Victa** and wife **Fenny** have moved out of California and are getting their condo in Makati, the Philippines, set up for their retirement days. We thank Tony for those precious letters during his term advising us of donations we made that we can report as tax-deductible on our Federal tax filings due to Mekong's tax-exempt status. He (and his letters) will be missed. But despair not. **Bik Marquez** has taken over his post. Bik, as we all know, has served as chairman and president of Mekong Circle for several consecutive terms beginning in 2000. He has provided a steady, progressive stewardship of our association since its incorporation. We are confident his guiding hand and CPA skills will keep our ship on course and solvent. Expect soon a letter from him to all members soliciting donations to keep the ship afloat.

BEST WISHES TO ALL

Congratulations to **Gina Liwag**, who retired as an RN at the University of Cincinnati Medical Center in Ohio on June 2, 2006 after 33 years. A few days later, the hospital wanted to hire her back (there's a national nursing shortage, you see). But first she was told she had to pass a drug screening test and a competency test. Bravo also to **Chanthalone Smith** of Toronto, Canada, daughter of **Noun Vongphrachanh** (who joined us from Ontario at our Bahamas cruise). She will earn her doctorate degree in child clinical psychology next year. As far as we know she is the first second-generation Mekong Circle member who will have a PhD degree. Best wishes to **Michael Marchetto** and **Faye Guevara**, daughter of **Joe and Fely Guevara**, married May 27, 2006 in Las Vegas.

A surprise 65th birthday party given by **Fely Navera's** children at Porto Alegre restaurant in Pasadena, California was attended by her nursing staff and managers at Gateways Hospital where Fely is Director of Nursing. Her daughters **Debbie** and **Fides** attended our 2004 Chicago reunion with their husbands.

"Manang" **Pet Sismaet Duruin's** card from Australia celebrating her 80th birthday June 11, 2006 said "Being with OB at its humble beginnings in Vietnam to almost its end in Laos crowns (my) career." To send your own greetings, she's at 35 Teleta Crescent, Corio 3214, Victoria, Australia.

Bella and **Nards Hilario** welcomed at their North Hollywood, California residence **Grace Luarca** and her husband, visiting from Austria. Among the guests: **Philip** and **Jessie Cruz**, **Joe** and **Jojo Barcelona**, **Rudy** and **Greer Alforque Papa**, **Ding Yoro Trinidad**.

ANOTHER ROUND FOR LAO SCHOLARS

The Second International Conference on Lao Studies will be hosted by Arizona State University in Tempe, Arizona, May 3 to 7, 2007. The first conference, organized by Northern Illinois University in DeKalb, Illinois from May 20-22, 2005 attracted 350 participants from 36 countries who were treated to 35 presentations on Lao history, art, economics, literature, religion, archeology, culture and all other things dear to diehard Lao devotees. An "amazing" historic event, recalled **Dr. Karen Olness**, former USAID-Laos Public Health Advisor during the 1960s who attended with husband **Hakon Torjesen**. (They manage a medical residency training program in Vientiane). Mekong Circle members **Pete Fuentesilla**, **Penny Flores** and **Menchu Domingo Kirk** each gave presentations. Pete's paper "Lessons of Refugee Survival: Experience of Lao Nurses in the USA" will be posted on our website.

GROWING, GROWING, GROWN

The U.S. Census Bureau released this August statistics from the American Community Survey for mid-decade benchmarks after the 2000 national census and before the next one in 2010. The 2005 data shows that the Asian population in the U.S. has grown to 12.4 million, a 23 percent increase over the 2000 count. The three fastest growing Asian groups: Asian Indians (2.32 million, a 41 percent growth over 2000); Vietnamese (1.42 million; 28 percent growth); Filipinos (2.28 million; 22 percent growth). As in Census 2000, California, New York and Texas remain the top ranked states for Asians. However New Jersey with a 29 percent Asian growth since 2000 has already eclipsed Hawaii to become the fourth largest Asian state. Top five cities with high Asian growths: Las Vegas 58 percent; Atlanta 46; Phoenix-Mesa 46; Sacramento-Yolo 41; Dallas-Fort Worth 37. For Filipino-Americans who contemplate voting in the Philippine 2007 elections, they can now apply for dual citizenship.

THESE TIMES YEARS AGO

- August 28, 1965 – Continental Air Services begins operations in Laos, hiring Filipino aircraft technicians.
- August 30, 1973 – Lao government renames OB Vientiane Hospital as Settathirath Hospital in honor of 16th century king. (In 2001 a new Settathirath 175-bed hospital built with Japanese government aid was inaugurated in Dongkoi, some 20 minutes by car towards Tha Deua. The OB Hospital was demolished in November 2002. In its place is a half-finished park).
- September 17, 1965 – Philippine Consul Rodolfo Sanchez, first resident diplomatic officer, arrives from Myanmar to open the Philippine Embassy in Vientiane. "Rody" passed away January 28, 2006. He was our keynote speaker at our 2004 Chicago reunion.

LAO STORIES BY A LAO

In our September 2005 issue, we reviewed a number of English language fiction by Western writers where the setting is Laos and populated mainly by Caucasian characters. We asked "where oh where is that novel in English by a Lao author with a Lao setting and Lao characters?" It turns out there is such a product. Not a full novel but a collection of short stories. "Mother's Beloved: Stories from Laos" was translated into English and published in 1999 in Thailand (Silkworm Books, Bangkok). The writer Outhine Bounyavong lives in Vientiane. We have not obtained a copy. An Asiaweek magazine reviewer wrote that the 14 stories of "farmers, civil servants, teachers and children are evenly cut from humanity's cloth and conflict usually arises from human mistakes of his characters' failure to correctly interpret people and events." If that grabs you, order the book from amazon.com.

SOME NUMBERS FROM OUR REUNION CRUISE

Total Number of Passengers on Board - **2,629**
 Number of Mekong Circle Members on Board - **179**
 Where Most Came From: California **63**; Florida **20**; New York **12**
 Number of States & Countries Represented: **13**
 Members at Orlando Hotel Reception But Did Not Board - **7**
 Maximum Speed Ship - **21 knots**
 Number of Decks - **12**; Length of Ship: **880 feet**
 Distance Traveled Our Cruise - **552 nautical miles**
 Gross Tonnage of Ship - **73,192 tons**

MEKONG CIRCLE INTERNATIONAL

Minutes Board of Directors Meeting

Sunday, August 13, 2006

The biennial meeting of the Board of Directors of Mekong Circle International was held on Sunday, August 13, 2006, at 1:30 in the afternoon on CocoCay Island, the Bahamas, presided by Bik Marquez, Chairman.

Members present were Pol Custodio, Pete Fuentecilla, Pete Gonzales, Bik Marquez, Vito Naranjo, Jojo Pablo, B.J. Reyes, Tony Sazon, and Sivilay Sivongxay, comprising a quorum.

(The Board had circulated an invitation to all members present at the reunion cruise to sit in as observers).

The minutes of the previous meeting were read and approved as presented.

Treasurer's Report

As of July 28, 2006 the organization has a fund balance amounting to \$3,385 comprising of \$1,630 in *Iskolar ng Mekong* funds, \$813 held by the Midwest Regional Chapter, \$942 held in the organization's bank account in California. The funds in California include \$360 in Leyte Mudslide Victims Relief funds awaiting disbursement to the Philippine victims. The Board stressed the Leyte funds should have been disbursed. The Board called for a summary of funds received and disbursed for the *Iskolar ng Mekong* from inception to date.

Old Business

Status reports on our ongoing projects were reviewed.

- *Iskolars Ng Mekong* – Pol Custodio moved the extension of program to Lao students in Laos and the USA. Motion carried.
- Medical Mission to Laos – Placed on hold until a sponsor – a government agency or a non-governmental organization (NGO) -- can partner with Mekong Circle as a financial guarantor.
- Lao Nurse Training – Two schools of nursing in Thailand which offer nursing scholarships were contacted but there were no results.
- Publication Projects – Two books were published during the last two years a history-memoir "Filipinos in Laos" authored by Pete Fuentecilla and Fr. Miguel Bernad; and an anthology "Goodbye Vientiane" compiled by Penelope Villarica Flores. Sales of both volumes have been weak.

New Business

● Promote the sale of published books. Moved by Pol Custodio, seconded by Jojo Pablo, approved by Board. Each member will market five (5) books each. A percentage of each sale will be donated to Mekong Circle.

● Increase visits to our website. Moved by Tony Sazon, seconded and approved by the Board. B.J. Reyes, Information Technology Officer will enhance features of our site in order to encourage more visits (among them: more photos, a monthly online newsletter). More email addresses will be solicited from members (we have only about 100 addresses in our database; our directory has close to 500 names). Deadline to add more addresses: November 30, 2006. (Results of a survey of website usage from reunion participants – 10 members said they visited the site 6 to 10 times a year; 15 respondents visited 6 times a year; 16 never visited).

● Solicit funds to continue newsletter publication. Moved by P. Fuentecilla and carried by the Board. Annual contribution (tax deductible) of \$30 per member family will be solicited to cover cost of printing and mailing which now average \$650 per issue of 8 pages. The donations will supplement the current "round-robin" financing of the newsletter whereby the regional chapters take turns paying for each issue. (According to survey at the reunion, 29

avored continuance of current "round-robin" funding while 6 disagreed. Nineteen were willing to donate an annual subscription price that ranged from \$1.50, \$2.50, \$5, \$10, \$20 and \$30).

Frequency of Reunions

Two surveys were conducted. One that we had asked Puring de Jesus, Membership Coordinator, to conduct, received 15 respondents; 13 favored biennial reunions; 2 preferred yearly reunions. The second survey conducted during our 6th reunion received 50 respondents; 44 favored biennial reunions.

Pol Custodio raised the issue of the desire of our Philippine chapter to host a 2007 reunion in Manila. After extensive discussion, a consensus emerged that attendance from U.S.-based members may be problematical because of costs; that the U.S. chapter cannot guarantee financial assistance in the form of "seed" money; that 2007 is an election year in the Philippines, possibly posing security issues. Pol, however, said that Mekong Circle should not discourage our Philippine chapter from continuing to hold their mini-reunions as they have been doing and to invite members from the USA to attend them.

The Board requested Doming Menguito who joined the Board deliberations as a non-voting observer to convey to the Philippine chapter the results of this discussion.

2008 Reunion

Moved by Bik Marquez and approved by the Board to hold the 2008 reunion in the Philippines.

Term 2006-2008 Board Members.

Board moved and approved the following members to the designated positions on the Board:

Pete Fuentecilla as Chairman.

Tony Sazon as Vice Chairman.

Sounthary Lapitan to replace Sivilay Sivongxay for our Lao sector

Fidel Padayao to represent Southern California region.

Doming Menguito for the Philippine chapter.

The Board retained the following Board Members from the 2004-2006 term to serve in the 2006-2008 term:

Angie Angelo, Pol Custodio, Dr. Raul de Jesus, Red Del Rosario, Pete Fuentecilla, Dr. Pete Gonzales, Ciony Agbayani Ljungar, Bik Marquez, Fred Mendoza, Jovito Naranjo, Jr., Jojo Pablo, Dr. Pete Paluay, Tony Sazon, and BJ Reyes

The Board accepted the resignation of the following 2004-2006 Board members:

Dr. Ding Yoro Trinidad, Vic Lagleva, and Sivilay Sivongxay

The Board appointed the following Officers:

Bik Marquez as Treasurer

BJ Reyes as Information Technology Officer

The Board will be appointing additional officers including a President, a Secretary, regional vice presidents or representatives and Committee Coordinators.

Meeting was adjourned at 4:00 p.m.

Submitted by: Anita A Marquez, Secretary

"IT WAS MY ADOPTED COUNTRY"

Father Lucien Bouchard, 77 years old - *Father Luke* - to all who knew him in Laos almost missed our cruise ship. The day we boarded at Port Canaveral, Florida August 11, 2006 for the Bahamas, he did not have his U.S. passport. A copy of the appropriate page was faxed from Miami where he helps the pastor at the Christ the King Catholic Church. He said Mass on the ship for our Mekong Circle members on board

Fr. Luke was a special guest of Lewie and Pete Gonzales who live in Kissimmee, Florida. When both were assigned to the OB Sam Neua team in Xiengkhouang province, Fr. Luke was an occasional visitor to their remote northern outpost to say Mass after which he was treated to "lechon" (roast pig) by grateful team members who can go months without hearing Mass. He also visited OB teams in Attapeu, Paksong, Pakse, Sayaboury, Houie Sai and Phong Saly. He officiated at the nuptial Masses for **Dickie and Cely Labao, Lily and Dicknoi Abad, Bik and Baby Marquez**. Here are excerpts from an interview with Fr. Luke aboard the ship.

Mekong Circle (MC) Is this your first cruise?

Father Luke (FL) : In the 1950s, I took a three-week crossing of the Atlantic from New York to France. Not this type of ship.

MC: Tell us about your 18 years as a missionary in Laos of the Oblate order.

FL: I arrived in Paksane, Laos in November 1956 at the age of 26. There I spent a year in Lao language training while teaching geography, math, religion to Lao students from 5th grade to high school. I taught in French. My parents are from France. Then I was posted in Sam Neua from which I covered my villages.

MC : How did you do your missionary work ?

FL : Another Oblate missionary and I were assigned 10 villages each in Sam

Neua. We tried to visit all in one week. To get from one to the other can take one hour to four hours of walking jungle trails, climbing hills and mountain tops where our flock, mainly Hmong, live. The villagers would return home in the afternoon from their fields or the forest. That's the only time I can begin my catechism lessons to prepare the adults for baptism. I would stay the night with them, singing and praying. Then on to the next village in the morning. It takes 52 weekly visits to complete the lessons for 20 to 30 Hmong.

MC: What is the day like during the baptism?

FL: What a joyous day. Fifteen to 25 villagers are baptized. Then we have a feast. We roast one to two pigs for the entire village.

MC: How did the war affect your work?

FL : Beginning in 1961, for the next 14 years, I went from refugee camp to refugee camp of Hmong, driven from their villages by the war. I would also visit and say Mass to the Hmong outposts on the mountains guarding the camps. Sam Thong was my base.

MC: Was your life ever in danger because you were traveling war zones?

FL: During my time there, seven Oblate missionaries were killed by the Pathet Lao. We were doing the same work, trying to win hearts and minds. They saw us as competitors.

MC: In 1975, the new Communist government banned missionaries. Where did you go?

FL : I was assigned to Indonesia, in Borneo, beginning in January 1977 to June 2005. The villages and life is very similar to Laos. I served 22 villages, which takes two months to visit all.

MC: What do you miss most about Laos?

FL : The people. It was my adopted country.

AN INTRODUCTION TO BUDDHISM

Vicky Mendoza, a freelance writer based in Manila, spent eight months in Laos in 2005, working with the staff of *Vientiane Times*, a government English language daily newspaper. She was sponsored by Frødkorpset ("Norway's version of the Peace Corps" as she describes it) as part of a journalist exchange program. She tells us that "they (the Lao) have fond memories of the Filipinos". Here is a feature that she first wrote for the newspaper.

I am a Roman Catholic. I have been one since birth. I know every ritual, from baptism to first communion, confession and confirmation, attending weddings and masses. And then there are the celebrations: Christmas, Assumption, Lent, and I still believe in most of the core beliefs.

Now that I am living in Laos, I have become acquainted with the rituals of Buddhism, and now find myself regularly visiting a temple here in Vientiane.

I found Wat Inpeng by accident. A friend told me to go to the last temple on the Setthathirat, nearest to the intersection. So I went to Inpeng. It turned out later on that she was referring to Wat Mixay, thinking the three temples were one. At any rate, I started going to their 6 o'clock prayers about once a week. I quickly befriended a monk named Noy who taught English to other monks.

After prayers, I would sit with him and talk to him about his English lessons, or he would tell me about Buddhist rituals and traditions. He told me about the origin of Buddhist Lent.

When my parents came to visit me, I brought them there. We lighted incense sticks, and prayed. Before my parents went back to the Philippines, we came back, so Noy could wish them well and tie strings around their wrists. I go there, not understanding a word of their chants. Yet they never force me to learn them, nor ask me why I come. I just know I am welcome. There are times when I achieve a measure of peace afterwards. Sometimes, I am just glad to spend some time with the monks.

When I became a victim of a drive-by snatching incident, an officemate suggested that I go to the temple so a monk can perform a ritual that will make me feel better. One afternoon, I went early before prayers to tell Noy what happened to me. He was very sympathetic, and told me he will perform a ritual after the prayers. We sat down to prayers for thirty minutes, after which we both went near the altar. I knelt down as he sprayed



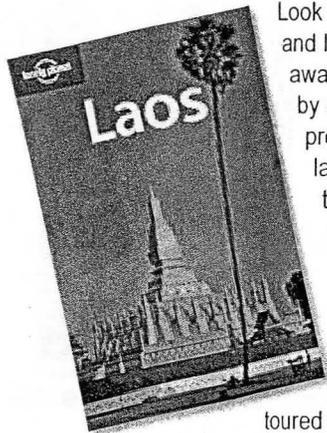
Vicky (2nd from left) with parents and Noy

holy water on me. Next we moved out of the main hall, and then moved to the little altar on the side. He gave me three candles to light, to pray for all bad things to be banished from me and to give honor to my parents. I don't really know if it made me feel better, but on our way out to the gate, he asked me, so you lost your cellphone. It must be hard for you to reach your friends. I will lend you mine. That nearly brought me to tears. A man I hardly know was willing to lend me his cellphone, with the possibility of never

seeing it again. That was what made me feel a whole lot better, the humanity and spirituality of this Buddhist monk, his innate trust in the goodness of man. He reached out to me, and it did not matter of what religion he or I was. We were of one human family.

GUIDE TO LAOS GUIDEBOOKS

When the year 2000 was proclaimed Visit Laos year by the Lao government's National Tourism Administration, a collective groan from the legions of backpackers resounded across the planet. For years these young, mainly Western adventurers, with all their traveling necessities encased in one expandable pack on their backs like camel humps, considered Laos their one last, pristine playground. Where else in the world can you stay in a decent guesthouse for two dollars a night, with hot water; where a fulsome meal goes for three dollars, tops; where no beggars and sharks will rip you off you as you exit the airport. Laos was their secret and they did not want the world to know what a wonderful place it was.



Look at Thailand across the Mekong, they say, and look at Bangkok, only a short plane hop away and see how hordes of tourists, drawn by a highly successful government tourism program, have over-commercialized (translation: high prices) the industry to the point that it is no longer much fun to visit there.

Laos, having been isolated after the Communists took over in 1975, has kept its exotic land and people unblemished. Visitors were restricted if not unwelcomed. In 1990 only 14,400 people visited compared to the millions who toured Thailand and Vietnam, its neighbors.

Very short of cash, the Lao government figured tourism can generate revenue. They were right. Beginning in 1986 they opened up the country. The backpackers were among the first to discover its pleasures.

By 1997, there were 463,200 tourists (spending \$73 million); 735,662 tourists in 2003 spent \$113 million; in 2004, more than 894,000 came and earned Laos businesses \$120 million. During the first six months of 2005, some 550,000 tourists visited. And the clientele has changed - the \$10 dollar a day backpacker still roams the land but so are Europeans and Americans who can afford the \$180 a night Settha Palace hotel in Vientiane.

What explains the rising tourist growth? For the same reasons that drew the backpackers - low costs, unspoiled environment, simple delights. The government also credits "word of mouth, the internet," and Laos' hosting of the 2004 summit of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations. Feeding the interest is the publication of several guidebooks to Laos. In the past, publishers lumped into one volume a guide to Cambodia, Laos and Vietnam. Lately, single Laos-only volumes are now available. Here is a selection that is available from amazon.com or from your local library.

Having worked in Laos for an average of two years during the 1960s and 70s, Mekong Circle members are not exactly uninformed about the country and its people. But in the three decades after we left, much has changed there. Indeed as the pace of Lao tourism speeds up, information in the guidebooks gets obsolete fast. The more popular guidebooks are updated every two years in order to serve the increasing number of tourists. With plans to stop by Vientiane on our way back to the USA from our 2008 Manila reunion, what the guidebooks say now about a place that once captured our hearts can startle or amuse our recollections. Because our Lao language fluency is by and large non-existent by this time, Lonely Planet's 10-page Lao-English commonly used phrases (included) will be very helpful. Can you say "where is the toilet" without meaning "I am thirsty?"

Lonely Planet Laos. The latest update, its 5th edition, was published in January 2005, three years after the January 2002 edition. By most accounts, it is the most authoritative and comprehensive guide. The publisher is famous for its series of guidebooks to "roads less traveled" - its slogan - into places only the hardy and perhaps foolhardy go to. It was the first to issue in 1994 a Lonely Planet guide to Laos. And every edition since then bears its

distinctive mix of history, art, archeology, culture and customs with well researched information on room rates, menus and transport. Lonely Planet guidebooks are renowned as backpacker bibles. Reading its scouting reports on Lao guesthouses outside the provincial capitals, it's evident they actually poked around. Some excerpts (from the 2002 edition) about three places where many of us lived and worked 30 or more years ago:

Sayaboury capital- now features Nok Noy Nightclub, "open 8 pm to midnight daily. A live band plays Lao and Thai pop at the only dance club in town. Very popular on weekends." During our time there staffing the hospital, we spent the nights putting together jigsaw puzzles. Absolutely no nightlife. No electricity at nights. Only light for miles around comes from the hospital generator.

Champassak - Sad looking villages with dilapidated thatch houses on stilts would appear here and there along the one-lane asphalt road between the capital Pakse and Paksong town about 50 kms away. That was then. Today, the Tadlo Resort's complex of 15 bungalows "come with fan, veranda and attached bath" at \$30 for a single room. It offers rides on two elephants (\$4.40 per elephant for two hours) through forests, streams and an Alak village.

Attopeu - a map of the main town lists four guesthouses (from \$2.50 to \$5 a night). Yingchokhay Hotel (\$12 double room) is recommended, has "air-con, fridge, hot water and satellite TV; VIP rooms have a bath tub." During our time there, travelers are billeted at the local wat. The bath tub was the nearby Sekong River. The map indicates a hospital. That's not the OB Hospital which we were told no longer stands there.

Travel writers tend to echo the clichés that journalists habitually use to describe Laos - "sleepy, laid-back, unhurried, exotic, remote." They are the result of short visits. We are fortunate that our longer stays have given us the opportunity to see beyond the obvious; to appreciate the true Lao character; to savor their generosity and charm. An American visited the country in 2003 for the first time (Howard Dean, the 2003 U.S. Democratic presidential aspirant who lost to Senator John Kerry who lost to George Bush) to retrieve the remains of his brother, then 24 years old, who disappeared down a river in 1974. Dean told the New York Times:

"Once I got there, I understood it immediately. It was an incredibly beguiling place. Sweet, nice, gentle people. And the landscape is surprising. There is no place like it on earth. When I got there I instantly understood what was going on. I knew why he went down that river."

We, like Dean's brother, were in our twenties during our times in Laos. We understood why it was so easy to fall in love there.

BEWARE OF OUTDATED LAOS TRAVEL GUIDES

Several publishers, following the lead of Lonely Planet, have issued their own series of backpacker-type guides. Their Laos editions, in many cases, do not cover as much territory and contain as many details.

Rough Guide's Laos was first published in November 1999 and was followed by a second edition in November 2002. A four-year old guide to Laos may as well be yesterday's newspaper.

Laos Handbook from Footprint 4th edition came out on January 2006 and is therefore the newest. For Mekong Circle members, one way to gauge the value of a guidebook is to scan excerpts about a city most familiar to him. Take Vientiane, which we all knew then street by street. This edition writes that judging from the fading French villas "Vientiane is more of a French colonial outpost than a Lao city." This was not true 30 years ago and blatantly cross-eyed to anyone who has visited Vientiane as late as 2002 (which we did).

Laos: A Quick Reference Guide. Published as part of the Insight Compact Guide books, it is compact, alright, at 96 pages. But the information is circa 2000. It's useless.

Culture Shock! Laos. Published in 1997 (Ugh ! How dated can you get?) The cover says "A Guide To Customs & Etiquette". We know all that, having been there, done that. Don't bother to read it.

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