

# Father Martino: A pillar of faith

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By KENT W. COCKSON

The slight woman and her 7-year-old son again were tackling the overnight trek through jungle wilderness to attend Sunday Mass at a Catholic mission. It was 1983 in South Vietnam. Every weekend, they walked from the refugee camp where they lived near the Cambodian border - the only home the boy had ever known - through dense jungle, crossing streams and a small river to attend services.

At last, early on this particular Sunday, mother and son approached the mission church. There in front, scrawled on a tattered piece of paper, was an unexpected message: Priest Arrested, No Mass Today. "When I grow up," little Nguyen Ba-Thong told his mother, "I am going to be a priest." Despite numerous obstacles, some of them life-threatening, the youngster made good on his boyhood vow.

Today, Nguyen Ba-Thong (pronounced Gwen Bah Thong) is known as Father Martino to parishioners at St. Frances Cabrini on Middleground Road.

Martino was assigned to the southside parish in July as parochial vicar. "That's just today's way of calling me 'assistant pastor,'" he said with a wide smile and shining eyes of dark agate. Cabrini's pastor, Monsignor Francis J. Nelson, says the congregation of some 750 families easily accepted Martino. "Very much so," said Nelson, 67, who guides the church and founded the parochial grade school there in 2000. "People enjoy hearing his homilies. And he is a great help to me. He visits the school regularly. He visits the sick and the hospitals. He is making a great difference."

Nelson said he calls Martino "the young rebel," a reference to his extroverted style and non-traditional eulogies. Martino - belying his small stature - is 50 decibels louder than most who grace a pulpit. "I am loud because I try to keep myself awake," he laughed. How he got here is a story of overcoming challenges, personal triumphs and, Martino will tell you, the grace of God.

His mother and father, employed by the U.S. government during the war in Vietnam, became instant enemies of the state when Saigon fell to communist dictator Ho Chi Minh's North Vietnamese Army in 1975. His mother was an administrator. His father had been Saigon commander of the Quan Cahn, commonly called the QC - the South Vietnamese military police.

They were sent to separate prisons: Martino's mother was jailed in Saigon, his father in North Vietnam. Martino's mother, starving and on the verge of death in her seventh month of pregnancy, was later released to her brother to survive in the streets of Saigon. After Martino was born, mother and son were sent to a refugee camp in Long An Province west of Saigon near the Cambodian border. Ten years later, in the summer of 1986, Martino's father was released from prison. The family of three was reunited in Xuan Loc, a town north of Saigon.

While the communists tolerated the Catholic church, practicing was not without its perils.

At 14, Martino began teaching catechism classes. Before he turned 17, he had been arrested four times.

Each time, he was thrown into a windowless prison cell no bigger than a shower stall. He would get a bowl of rice and a cup of water a day.

Detained for days at a time, Martino said when he was interrogated, he was beaten, slapped, kicked and struck repeatedly with the butt of an AK-47 assault rifle.

"The last time," he said, "the fourth time, it was pretty bad."

He was told that if he could prove the existence of God, his interrogators would let him go. "I don't know how to do this," Martino said he was thinking at the time. "God, you gotta gimme da answer."

Before his next interrogation began, Martino said he asked that his hands be untied. As soon as his hands were free, he hit one of the guards in the arm as hard as he could.

"Did that hurt?" he asked the guard before the favor could be returned. "Yes," the guard hissed. Martino: "How do I know that?" Guard: "Because I feel it."

Martino: "Yes, but I cannot feel it. So, how do I know?" Guard: "Because there's a red mark where you hit me." "Oh, that," Martino said. "That could be from the sun." "OK," the guard said, "there's no way I can prove it if you can't feel it." "And that's how I know there is a God," Martino said to his interrogators. "But I cannot prove it if you cannot feel Him." Then, he said, "they beat me up and sent me home."

Under an agreement between the United States and Vietnam, Martino, then 17, and his parents qualified for a repatriation program and on Feb. 5, 1993, the Nguyens landed at Chicago's O'Hare Field.

They had \$49 among them. And they did not speak much English.

"In fact," Martino recalled with a chuckle, "a man walked up and asked me something in Spanish. I had to tell him: I no speak-a English."

Martino graduated from high school in 1995, then from college four years later. During college, he landed a job with Blue Cross Blue Shield, quickly rising to be an investment broker.

### **On to Calcutta**

In the summer of 1999, at age 23 and with his bachelor's degree secured, Martino took a one-month "vacation" to India to be a volunteer for Mother Teresa.

When he arrived, he was put to work at the headquarters of the Missionaries of Charity of Calcutta. "They sent me to the house of death and dying," Martino said.

His first assignment was to shave a man sharing a large room with others - India's version of a hospice. With deep skepticism, Martino eyed his nun-supervisor.

"What?" he asked her, as she thrust a razor, a small bar of soap and a towel into his hands. "I cannot do this. I am an accountant, not a barber."

But she sent him packing. Martino said he found the man, unconscious and unwashed, sweating in the 115-degree heat of the day.

"His hair was like this," Martino said, reaching down and stroking the carpet under the chair in which he was sitting for the interview. "And you know how I could tell he was still alive? You know how I could tell? When I touched him, he was still warm."

When he had finished the shave, Martino slowly peeled back the sheet covering the man.

Up and down his legs were open sores, untreated and alive with maggots.

Martino said he removed the maggots and, with a towel and a bowl of warm water, he bathed the man and carried him back to his cubicle. Martino then dressed the man in a pair of his own pajamas. Sitting down on the floor, Martino used one of his thighs as a pillow for the man's head.

Minutes passed before the frail man opened his eyes, nodding at Martino in a gesture of thanks. And then, the man died. At that moment, Martino said, he knew what God had called him to do with the rest of his life. Before the end of Martino's month-long stay with Mother Teresa, at least 40 people would die in his arms.

### **Religious commitment**

Martino enrolled at Mount St. Mary's Seminary in Emmitsburg, Md., when he returned. At age 28, he was ordained at the Cathedral of St. John the Baptist in Savannah.

Presiding over the ceremony was the Most Rev. Kevin Boland, 71, bishop of the Savannah Diocese. "He is very vibrant ... very articulate," the bishop said. "He has so many of the qualities you want to see in a priest. ... And his spirituality is contagious."

Boland initially assigned Martino to St. Mary's on the Hill in Augusta, where he served for about two years. At Cabrini, Martino said, he has no daily routine. "My typical day," he said, "is to be with the people and to help them get what they need." He is devoted to youngsters and works with them naturally. And they reciprocate.

"I'm happy here," Martino said. "I'm laughing and I'm jumping. And I love the children - they're the future of the church."

On that day in 2004 when Martino took his vows of ordination to become a priest, he said he knew he'd made the right decision. During the ceremony, he and the four other candidates for the priesthood lay prostrate, face down on the carpeted granite floor of the cathedral's sanctuary.

In front of him was the crucifix above the altar, a larger-than-life image of Jesus Christ nailed to a cross. At his feet behind him were scores of believers in the pews, including his parents. An image flashed through Martino's mind: At that moment, between the crucifix and the pews, there was a bridge. "The priest lays down his life for the people," Martino said. "I am the bridge. The people walk over me to get to God."