

SR. MARTHA'S VOCATION STORY

*"You have seduced me, Yahweh,
and I have let myself be seduced;
You have overpowered me; You were the stronger."
(Jr 20:17)*



I was born on January 13, 1970, to Paul and Maria Trinh of PhanRang, Vietnam. I have one brother who is the oldest child and only son in a family of ten children, including a sister who died at age seven months. We are very close to each other. My father was a CIA agent for the southern government and my mother was a housewife, and both were very pious and devout Catholics. When we were very young, my mother would wake us quite early to attend Mass. At night, we prayed together as family. We made our examination of conscience and made a public apology to the whole family. As a young child, I was very religious. My sisters and I were involved in all of our parish church's activities, including CCD classes, choir, Eucharistic Youth group, Christmas play, prayer group and the soup kitchen team to serve the poor. Three times a week, all the girls in my hometown gathered at one house and "played" Mass. I would dress up as a nun with the bath towel on my head. Another girl would be a priest, and others would act as the altar servers and attendees. I believe all of these early faith experiences were a preparation for my religious life and for my vocation as a member of the Sisters of St. Paul of Chartres (SPC).

At the end of the war in 1975, Vietnam was a broken place and its citizens were in jeopardy. Those who had been involved in the military of the south were sentenced to concentration camps for a certain number of years (depending on their rank and position) and their children could not go to college unless they were willing to pay a lot of money to the Communists. My father lived in one of these camps for eight years, including one year in a confining cell without human contact. During this difficult time, my mother had to work very hard to earn a living and at the same time take care of nine children. Her hard work paid off and we were able to build a restaurant. The business went well, so my older brother and sisters were able to finish their college degrees and my younger sisters and I were able to continue our education.

In 1983, a great joy came; my father was released from the camp and came home. The entire family shed tears for joy. However, even after his release, he did not have total freedom. He had to report to the local officers each day; he was not allowed to live with us and was told to stay at my grandparents' house. But my father continued to stay mostly at our house despite these warnings and the risks involved. Sometimes the officers would come at night to check for my father's presence. It was a very stressful and dramatic period for my parents.

Unfortunately, in 1984 the Communists confiscated our house and all of our properties. As a result, we became homeless and our family was scattered for one year. Then my parents decided to move to the city of Dalat where one of my older married sister lived. In Dalat I attended Thang Long High School, which was located next to the convent of the Sisters of St. Paul of Chartres. When I graduated from High School, my dreams were to become a professional singer or a kindergarten or elementary teacher. To test my singing talents during my first year of college, I added some vocal training classes to my regular curriculum (without notifying my family!). However, since my family did not view singing as a suitable career, after much thought I chose to become a teacher. After five

years, I was certified as a kindergarten teacher and later earned a Bachelor's Degree in Elementary Education.

It was while working on my education degree that I became interested in religious life. I visited the SPC community quite often and saw how gentle they were, how they cared for the children as well as the poor. Their hospitality and simplicity touched my heart. I thought they were angels living among us. One time, Sr. Christian Le Tien invited me to go to Saigon to attend a perpetual vows celebration at the Provincial house and to meet with the vocation directress. I was so excited to go. It was the first time that I witnessed the sisters making their vows to God through the Church. I was thrilled and moved by their dedication. As a result, in 1987 I decided to join the SPC community. My father agreed with my decision, but it was a big shock to the rest of my family, including my grandmother, because they did not want me to become a nun for various reasons, not the least of which was that in their mind, joining the sisters meant being a maid and my life would be miserable. Despite the misunderstanding from my family, I went on with my decision because I felt very strongly that God was calling me to become a religious sister. I prayed hard for my family and at the same time I asked God to help me sustain my vocation. I made my first vows on August 2, 1992 in Vietnam.

In 1995, our SPC General Superior Mother Anne Marie Audet visited Vietnam and tried to negotiate with the Communists to let the sisters study abroad and return to help Vietnam provinces. She asked if I would be willing to go to the United States with my family under the Humanitarian Operation Departure status (HO) granted by the U.S. government, and from there go to Rome to do some studies in Theology. Deep down I did not want to go, but because of my vow of obedience I agreed on the condition that I would be able to return to Vietnam after my studies.

In March of 1995 my family and I arrived in Orange County, California. Two months later I joined the SPC of the U.S. District in Marquette, Michigan, where I spent 2 ½ years before leaving for my theology studies in Rome. A year later I returned to Marquette, where I took my final vows on August 15, 1998, then returned to Rome to complete my studies. In February of 2002, I received a Master of Art in Religious Sciences degree and soon after returned to Marquette, Michigan, not Vietnam, as had been my hope and my plan.

This plan to return to my home country was altered by a request from Sr. Mary Ann Laurin, a superior of the U.S. District at that time, who petitioned my provincial in Saigon for me to remain in the U. S. to help the U.S. District after finishing my studies rather than return to Vietnam. After much prayer and thought, I accepted it as God's invitation through my superior. God opened my eyes and heart to understand better the Christocentric-paschal spirituality as a SPC and as a missionary spirit. My work now is at the Bishop Noa Nursing Home, Escanaba, MI as in-service coordinator and part-time as vocation director for my SPC U.S.A District.

As a SPC, I love working with all people, especially the children, adults and families in need or neglect. They have been teaching me a lot through my ministries. Like the prophet Jeremiah, I want to say, *"You have seduced me, Yahweh, and I have let myself be seduced; You have overpowered me; You were the stronger."* God called and I responded. Becoming a sister of St. Paul of Chartres was the **best** decision I ever made!

I am awed, humbled, and thankful to God.

Sr. Martha Trinh