MEDICAL AID FOR VIETNAM

Medical Aid Committee for Vietnam P.O. Box No: 100
36 Wellington St. London W.C.2
01-836 1350
Registered Charity No. 252906

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19/11/73

President:
Professor Dorothy Hodgkin, O.M., F.R.S
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Professor Henry Miller
Hon. Secretary:
Dr. Joan K. McMichael

Our aid goes to the Liberation Red Cross of South Vietnam, and to the Vietnam Red Cross for use in North Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia.

Dear Friend,

Bishop Gumbleton's Report on Political Prisoners in South Vietnamese Jails

Bishop Thomas J. Gumbleton, Auxiliary Bishop of the Detroit Arch-Diocese (U.S.A.), spent Easter week visiting political prisoners and their relatives in South Vietnam.

"I can state unequivocally that there are political prisoners in Saigon jails, and in jails throughout the provinces. They are in jail not for any crime, but simply because they are in political opposition to the present government. The proof is overwhelming. And it is clear that these prisoners are subject to inhumane treatment including deliberate and prolonged torture."

In this important eye-witness account of his meetings with released prisoners and prisoners' relatives, a copy of which is enclosed, Bishop Gumbleton makes only too clear that as they are released, each one of them will require long-term medical care and treatment. The infective sores from prolonged shackling with metal chains, the spread of infectious and contagious diseases from the appalling overcrowding, the semi-starvation, and the direct results of the torture inflicted will take months - perhaps years - of careful treatment. The Liberation Red Cross has already set up reception centres for the released prisoners, but reports have appeared in the press recently that at least one of these convalescent hospitals for released prisoners was bombed at Lo Go near the Cambodian border, and many were killed.

There can be no possible question of the continued and urgent need for medical aid. The Medical Aid Committee for Vietnam is currently assembling and packaging 20 sets of medical and surgical equipment at a cost of £1,000. each for the mobile teams of doctors and nurses from the Liberation Red Cross who will help to treat the sick and wounded, the released prisoners and the thousands of refugees in the countryside of South Vietnam.

We hope you will make this report known aa widely as possible. Donations to help our work will be warmly received.

Yours sincerely,

JOAN K. McMICHAEL M.B., Ch.B.,
Hon. Secretary

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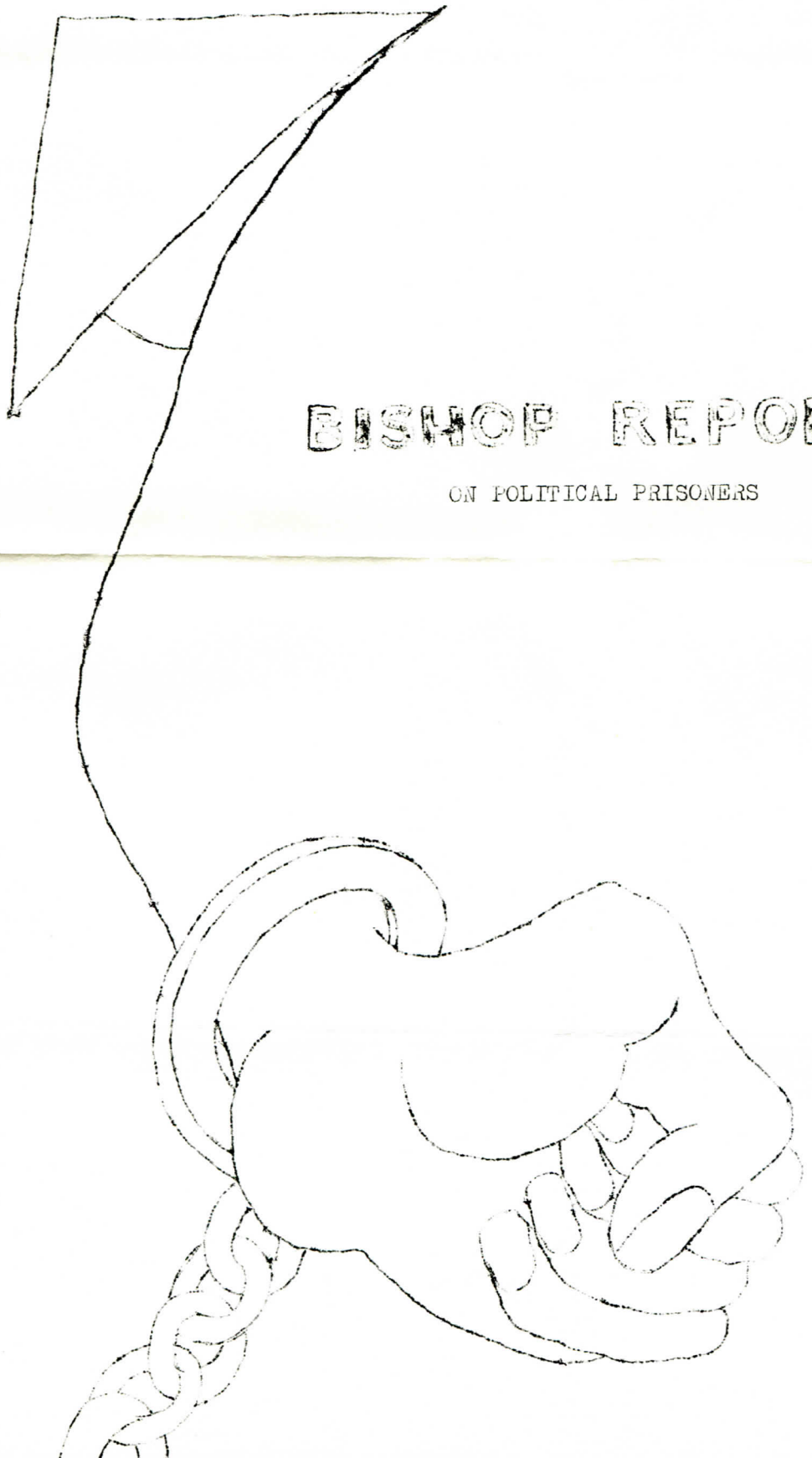

BISHOP REPORTS

ON POLITICAL PRISONERS

C/59/73
20/9/73

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BISHOP REPORTS ON SOUTH VIETNAM VISIT:

'JAILS HOLD POLITICAL PRISONERS'

Bishop Thomas J. Gumbleton, auxiliary bishop of the Detroit archdiocese, spent Easter week visiting political prisoners and their relatives in South Vietnam.

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About a year ago, I met with a small group of people who were concerned about political prisoners in South Vietnam. I shared their concern and in a kind of routine way - because it seemed to be a minimal thing to do - I became part of a "committee of concern" about this issue. But my involvement was based on a kind of abstract concern for justice.

Subsequently I obtained and read the booklet Hostages of War: Saigon's Political Prisoners by Don Luce and Holmes Brown. But frankly I read it with a certain skepticism. Perhaps I just did not want to believe it because such injustice would demand some involvement and action on my part if I really were convinced that it were true. Also, I just instinctively wanted to believe that we and our allies don't do things like that. I wanted to believe that there really were no political prisoners jailed in Saigon without trial.

All this is changed now after spending Easter week in Saigon and some nearby villages. With Father Robert Manning, chaplain at Holy Cross College, Worcester, Mass., I spent about 16 hours a day visiting and consulting with the families of prisoners, with government officials, with Catholic priests and lay leaders, with Buddhist leaders and with some young men who had been released from jail within the past few weeks. A good part of the time we were joined by three concerned people from Canada: Bishop Guy Belanger of Valley Field, Canada; Mrs. Thelma Baker of the United Church of Canada; and George Lebel, professor of law at the University of Quebec at Montreal. One evening Bishop Belanger and I met for about an hour and a half with the archbishop of Saigon, Paul Nguyen-Van-Binh.

I can state unequivocally that there are political prisoners in Saigon's jails and in jails throughout the provinces. They are in jail not for any crime, but simply because they are in political opposition to the present government. The proof is overwhelming. And it is clear that these prisoners are subject to inhumane treatment, including deliberate and prolonged torture. I do not make that statement lightly.

I will never forget the experience of meeting some young men who had just recently been released. One day we met three of the members of the Young Christian Workers. We were gathered in a small meeting room when two of them came in. Both were still in a very weakened condition. One of them was able to walk only quite slowly. A few minutes later, the third young man appeared. I shall never forget that moment when he came into the room. None of us knew what to say. He could no longer walk. He edged along in painfully slow movements, bent over in a sort of squatting posture. It was a pitiful sight. Here was a young man, who before his imprisonment was

vigorously healthy, and active. Now he was barely able to move. None of these three had ever been convicted of any crimes, and yet they had been held in prison and cruelly mistreated. They never received a court trial. They had been imprisoned by administrative decree for "disturbing the public order" - which can mean anything the president wants it to mean.

I was deeply impressed with their peaceful attitude in spite of what they had been through. They spoke without hostility or hatred. I would have expected them to speak with anger and perhaps a desire to do violence towards those who were responsible for their imprisonment. This was not the case. Their most urgent plea was not for themselves, but rather for those still in jail. They asked us to do whatever we could to intervene for the release of the thousands of others they knew about who were still in jail.

There were others just as tragic, just as unforgettable, just as helpless. In the village of Duc Hoa, about 30 miles outside of Saigon, we met four political prisoners who had recently been released. None could walk. One had spent six years in a tiger cage, most of the time shackled with irons on his arms and legs. All of them had internal injuries from beating. Their bodies had deteriorated because they had been severely underfed. And even now, after their release, they live in conditions which are dehumanizing. I don't know if I can adequately describe what it is like, but I'll try.

First of all, the village in which they live is crowded with some of the poorest people I have seen anywhere. Their homes were huts with many people crowded into each. The furniture consisted only of low pots, a few inches off the base ground. Their clothing seemed to be only what they were wearing. Of course, it was stifling hot with no way to get release from the heat or the insects. Such conditions for living would have been dehumanizing even for a healthy person.

This was the home of one of the young men. His mother took in the other three because they had no place of their own - and it is impossible for these men to move about in the country since their indentification papers are withheld when they are released. Such papers are necessary for travel of any kind. They are also necessary to get a job. But, no matter. These men cannot travel; these men cannot work. They cannot even stand up. Their legs are hopelessly deformed and crippled. They can only drag themselves about by their hands with a kind of crawling movement.

They spoke to us at length about their experience. None of them had been convicted of any crime. Each had suffered horribly and was now forced to live in this way without any hope that justice would ever be given them. Even if they had been convicted of a crime, how could treatment like theirs ever be justified?

And yet I was again deeply impressed by their lack of bitterness and hostility. They simply pleaded that we try to change the situation for others. They wanted political prisoners released and conditions in the jails made humane. For themselves, they asked only that their rights as citizens be restored, that they might have identification papers and be able to be taken to their homes.

While we were visiting these men, one of the priests who was accompanying us was interrogated by the local secret police. This could mean that some retaliation will be inflicted on these men. They were aware of this, but their plight is so desperate that they were glad to see us and to ask us to make some effort to awaken public concern about them.

We visited another village and discovered that this fear of retaliation was not unfounded. There were five men in this village whom we were to visit. But when we got there, we found the people of the village quite upset - and not very willing to see us. It turned out that three of these men had just been taken away again by the secret police. The other two were staying out of sight.

The people asked us to leave as quickly as we could. Their fear and complete helpless ness in the face of this kind of injustice made a deep impact on me.

I have tried to indicate how moving an experience it was to meet and spend time with these released prisoners. But there awaited me an experience just as sad - meeting the families of those still in prison. The next day I went to homes where wives, mothers and fathers, brothers and sisters waited and suffered for loved ones in prison. They were poor people, and to them it was unbelievable that two bishops would come to see them and sit down to talk with them. Yet I honestly felt that I was the one honored by their willingness to invite me into their homes.

The first homes we visited were those of the parents of the five leaders of the Young Christian Workers who had been jailed during the night of April 30-May 1 1972, just about one year ago. They have never been tried or convicted of any crime. Their "crime" evidently was joining in a movement for peace in opposition to the military policies of the government. Their parents, of course, are deeply worried about them. They can only guess what might be happening to their sons and the kind of horrible tortures and sufferings they are enduring.

I really felt I was visiting in the homes of parents of Christian martyrs, since their sons were in jail only because of their passionate and prayerful concern for justice. Terrible as the sufferings of the sons are, I felt even more profoundly the deep suffering of those poor mothers and fathers; I will not soon forget their faces, or their quiet voices, and the pleas each of them made that we intervene in some public way for their sons.

On the following evening we spent about three hours in a visit with a large group of Buddhists - the families of a sizable number of Buddhist prisoners. The meeting took place in a Franciscan convent in a quiet section of Saigon relatively speaking, since Saigon is now so crowded that there really is no quiet until after the curfew starts. Some of these people had themselves been in prison.

I was especially moved by the account of one woman who had been in jail seven months, tortured and later released. She was afraid to give her name for fear of what might happen to her. Her cousin is now in jail and she has not heard from him in about a year. His wife and children were killed in the bombing, and she is his only relative. He had been sentenced to 20 years in prison for "actions against the government". He also spent five years in Con Son Prison. Her last letter from him indicated that he was receiving very little food. She fears that he might already have starved to death.

'Torture Accounts become Routine'

This was also the case with some of the others. They just don't know where their loved ones are, in other cases, they do know and are allowed to visit them and bring food twice a week. But for most the suffering was intensified because they just didn't know what was happening or what the prisoners were suffering.

As the long, painful evening came to an end, one of those with us remarked that after awhile, the accounts of the torture and imprisonment of each individual can become something quite routine. Our senses become dulled, and we accept the dullness rather than the pain. But for each person there, the suffering, as suffering always is, was unique and profoundly personal. At the end of the evening, they too pleaded with us to intervene, to do whatever we could to bring some relief from their agony. They feel so voiceless, so helpless. We promised, and each day in Saigon the determination grew deeper.

Another time we visited the family of one of the most famous of the political prisoners, Madame Ngo Ba Thanh. She is an internationally known jurist and is qualified as professor of international law in three languages - French, Spanish, and English. She has earned a doctorate in law from the University of Paris, a doctorate in law from the University of Barcelona, and a master's degree in comparative law from Columbia University in New York.

We visited her husband and her 19-year-old daughter. Her husband has been unable to learn anything about his wife for several weeks. On the last visiting day, he was not allowed to see her. He was told she was too weak to see anyone, that she was in the hospital, but they did not tell him where.

Later we talked to a member of the Senate who was her legal counsel. He had taken her case to the Supreme Court and won. Her arrest and trial were declared unconstitutional. Yet she remains in prison. Somewhere.

Just as we were bringing our visit with Mr. Ngo Ba Thanh to a close, his son arrived home for a brief visit. He is serving in the Vietnamese navy and has done so for four years. I thought of how ironic this situation was - a son serving in the navy (with no idea when he will be discharged) while the same government that he serves holds his mother unconstitutionally in jail.

Testimony Conflicts with Thieu Statements

Of course, all of this testimony from priests, prisoners and the families of prisoners was in direct contradiction to the statements made by President Thieu in his recent trip abroad, In Rome he visited Pope Paul and told newsmen afterward about his unambiguous declaration to the pope that there are no political prisoners in Vietnam. He has repeated this declaration on many occasions.

I saw document presented to me by the parents of the Young Christian Workers, which carried on them an official notation indicating that their son was classified as a political prisoner. These documents are the official permission the parents received to visit in the prison.

I should remark that on the most recent documents the notation about the classification of the prisoner as "political" has been removed. This corresponds with the charge we heard expressed often that the government is trying to cover up the existence of political prisoners. The prisoners themselves told us that they were now being mixed in with those who were in prison because they had been convicted of crime. Previously, political prisoners were kept apart from others in the jails.

President Thieu also indicated when he visited in the United States that he had nothing to hide in the government's prisons. He publicly stated that he would welcome anyone who wanted to visit the prisons.

Bishop Belanger and I tried to accept his invitation. We prepared a formal request in writing to the minister of the interior to visit three particular prisoners and to inspect the jails where they were detained. We delivered the letter in person because we wanted to be sure that it got into the hands of the minister of the interior. He is also the prime minister and has responsibility for the prisons, including the power to authorise visits.

We were directed first to the head of the protocol office. We were told that he would arrange for us to see the prime minister. When we spoke to the protocol officer, we were told that it would be impossible to see the Prime Minister. We asked if there was anyone else we could see who was an immediate assistant to the primer minister. We were then directed to the head of the cabinet. We delivered our letter to him in person and received assurance that he would put it in the prime minister's hands as soon as possible. He also assured us that we would have an answer immediately. The answer never came. This really did not surprise us, since what we had already learned about political prisoners convinced us that President Thieu would not really welcome an open

inspection of his prison, nor would he wish us to interview an outspoken prisoner like Madame Ngo Ba Thanh.

I left Saigon determined to help these people in some way. The first thing is perhaps quite small, but it seems important to me now. I am convinced more than ever of the importance for me as an American, living in the richest nation ever in the history of the world to live "sparingly", as called for by the Synod of Bishops. The message of the gospel about being poor must be more forcefully taught by being more clearly lived. At the root of injustice in the world and at the root of war is the terrible imbalance in the distribution and use of the goods and resources of this world.

In addition to this, I will never forget the pleas of everyone I met - especially the prisoners' families and the released prisoners - to publicise what is happening to them. Their only hope for some relief is that enough people will come to know about them and bring about some kind of public pressure. It is necessary that large numbers of people join the effort to bring justice and freedom to these people. Left to themselves, they are helpless.

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When these prisoners are eventually released, they will need prolonged care and medical treatment. The Liberation ~~Red Cross of South Vietnam has already prepared health centres~~ to receive them. The MEDICAL AID COMMITTEE FOR VIETNAM will help to provide the necessary medical supplies and equipment to aid their recovery.