



COVID-19 CHRONICLE 1 **March 17, 2020 - April 17, 2020**

*From the Church of OUR LADY OF THE SMILE,
in the middle of the rice paddies of Cambodia*

"TELL THE WORLD ABOUT US" **(Mgr Chhmar Salas - April 17, 1975)**

Christ is Risen, Hallelujah! Let's sing this Easter Sunday with joy.

Happy New Year! We wanted to be together on April 13-15 as Cambodia inaugurated the Year of the Rat, the 2564th year of the Buddhist era.

Moments of joy for us Christians after 40 days of Lent and the long Passion of our Lord.

Festive moments for families who gather together after several months of separation to celebrate the New Year!

But this year, I sang in the dark night: "Light of Christ" on the empty square of the Church with the response of the song of toads and frogs in the rice fields freshly flooded by the first rains of the season.

I offered my best wishes for the new year, alone at a Lourdes Grotto in front of a video camera.

Since March 17, 2020, gatherings and religious activities have been prohibited by the Ministry of Health and the schools have all been closed, until further notice by the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports, while the borders passes by air and land were gradually closing to people, allowing goods to pass through. Despite everything, tens of thousands of Cambodian workers returned hastily from Thailand.

At the start of Holy Week, we learned that New Years celebrations had been canceled and workers in particular, such as government and private sector workers, were ordered to go to work normally.

On the evening of Maundy Thursday, the interstate roads were closed in order to avoid massive returns to the villages for the New Year and to avoid possible community contagions.

On the morning of April 16, national travel was opened again, and the government announced 122 cases of contamination by Covid 19 with 98 sick patients: 1 Chinese, a Belgian, 2 Indonesians, 4 English, 37 French (including one group of 31 Alsatian tourists), 12 Malaysians and 41 Cambodians. There are still 24 Covid 19 patients receiving treatment in different hospitals in the Kingdom.

This week of April 13, the state of emergency law will be finally passed by the Senate, giving the government a tool to rule the country if the health situation worsens.

The Catholic Church in this context is trying to to organize itself. The three local ordinaries published a joint letter on March 22, in which they recall the following:

1. All gatherings in our communities: masses, common prayers, meetings, seminars are suspended, including the Chrism Mass.
2. Masses in religious communities presided over by an outside priest are suspended.
3. All our schools are closed according to the directives of the Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports (013 / MOYES 16 March 2020)

They also give some basic advice to our Christian communities:

1. Respect the strict hygiene rules: wash your hands several times a day, stay away while greeting in the traditional way ...
2. If you have a fever, if you cough, stay absolutely at home while wearing a protective mask.
3. Avoid gathering places: markets, cafes, wedding ceremonies, funerals, etc.
4. Avoid traveling from the city to the province and vice versa
5. Those who work, take care in your daily relationships with your colleagues / customers...: respect the prescribed distances of at least 1m.

***The Apostolic Vicariate of Phnom Penh
was very proactive during this period:***

1. As of March 12, I gave directives to avoid the comings and goings to the Pastoral Center of Phnom Penh, of people coming from contaminated countries. The borders did not begin to close until March 17.
2. I established a Covid-19 taskforce on March 19 with representatives from the various pastoral sectors and diocesan offices.

3. On Sunday March 22, we started celebrating a mass and a daily rosary "LIVE" on Facebook and You tube. Our Catholic Social Communications Service is on alert 24 hours a day to allow those who can benefit from internet services or a Smartphone to stay in communion, since the Eucharist can only physically gather 3 or 4 faithful.
4. With the announcement of the preparation of the Law on the State of Emergency, I asked each priest to settle in a community of the Vicariate from Palm Sunday until the Cambodian New Year in order to celebrate in these places, without the faithful certainly, but this presence is precious for the communities which are often small and new in the villages. Myself, I settled in the Parish of Our Lady of the Smile, 90 kilometers from Phnom Penh, where I had been parish priest for 10 years and which brings together the largest Cambodian community in the Vicariate as well as a large part of the programs education and development. I offer the Holy Mass here every day with a small group of Christians who take turns.
The Easter Triduum was retransmitted with the means at hand from my mobile cathedral in the middle of the rice paddies, but relayed to Phnom Penh in a professional manner by our communication service.
5. Our Catholic schools have set up e-learning courses and follow our students from primary schools to high school.
Next week, the Saint Paul Institute will start a comprehensive distance education program for our students. Online training has been set up for nursery school teachers.
6. I called our Alliance for Charity and Development which brings together our Catholic NGOs, religious congregations who work in different areas of society, the offices of the Vicariate in particular Health, Catholic Education, Businesses Social workers to prepare for the post-covid-19.
We have already participated in specific hygiene training actions for social distancing, at the moment we are distributing food, soaps and masks for the poorest.

It is certain that Covid-19 will leave lasting repercussions on the most vulnerable: lost work, debts that are soaring... through our social services and our NGOs, we will be do our best to be at the service of our neighbor at name of the Risen Jesus Christ.

In the coming days, we will certainly have more elements to guide our actions according to government directives, but we remain attentive and alert, because it is more important than ever to adopt this saying, seeing the situation in the world: "prevention is better than cure".

On Good Friday, I asked this question: "Isn't Jesus still the victim of violence and hatred in our world today because as the Lord said: all that you have done to the least of mine, you did it to me"(Mat 25)?

“In our world, our societies, our lifestyles, our wars, our hatreds, our famines, our struggles for more money, our speculations, our destruction of our natural resources and the Earth, the oppression of smaller ones, rejection of the one who is different, abortions, murderous jealousies, families torn apart by hatred and forgiveness, friendships damaged by jealousy and misunderstanding, exploited and abused children, those excluded by globalization, the landless poor, without houses, without schools and without hospitals, the so-called rich societies which close down on their problems and put development strategies in priority at the expense of the common good and the person and his fulfillment. God is replaced by money, churches emptied so that giant shopping centers can be filled, cultures become uniform from Tokyo to Paris, from Phnom Penh to Sydney... the same luxury brands, the same brands for those who have money, credits to exorbitant interests for the little ones who suffocate under the weight of their debts ... The displaced populations, the refugee camps where crowds add up without hope of a better tomorrow at the gates of Burma and in so many countries, migrants who capsize in the middle of the rough sea because nobody wants to welcome them, regimes that lock themselves in fear with weapons of mass destruction ... unlimited credits for the wealthy and so limited help for our little ones here at our Peace Village... over-connected children who no longer know the joy of games with their friends or the freshness of playing under the trees with birds and butterflies while their little unknown friends, whom they do not know because they are not connected, eat mud and its so saddening that the slightest illness takes their breath of life ...

Is it not all these humiliations, these mockeries, these modern floggings that Jesus endures in our world which has never been so populated but which has never been so divided and hateful, with such an unequal distribution of wealth, resources, rights, possibilities to develop as a person and to be accompanied to walk alone according to the principle of subsidiarity...

But there are all these women, all these men like Simon of Cyrene, who are there to try to soothe the wounds, who contemplate Jesus with love, who pray, who serve the poor and the sick, who take care of the hungry, the displaced, the foreigners...” (Extracts homily, Mgr Olivier Schmitthaeusler, Good Friday 2020).

I would like to entrust to your prayer: (according to the Rosary Meditation - Easter Sunday 2020 by Mgr Olivier Schmitthaeusler)

Our 70 catechumens who should have received the sacrament of new life across the Vicariate on Easter Night. May they remain strong in their new faith. I pray that on Pentecost Sunday, May 31, 2020, we will be able to come together again and baptize them in the joy of the Spirit.

Our forty priests from the Vicariate of Phnom Penh. Each priest here in Cambodia but also throughout the world celebrates the Holy Mass almost alone, but in the end didn't Jesus die almost alone and above all rose completely alone? The masses offered every day bear much fruit.

Our seminarians, our religious communities, our members of lay missionary institutes, our consecrated virgins. How many hours of prayers offered, how many rosaries and ways of the cross prayed fervently. I feel a great movement of prayer in the Vicariate like never before. GOD LISTENS TO US and He will hear us ... For nothing is impossible for God.

Our baptized, our Catholic families, those who seek God. Each one tries to pray and to join with our means in our prayers. I saw very touching photos of their children worshipping a small cross, others in front of their iPads in their family, others alone with the book that we prepared, trying to pray with all their hearts, others coming for a walk around the church so much they miss common celebrations.

Yesterday, April 16, 2020, we celebrated the 12 years of the discovery of the Statue of the Virgin of Lourdes by a Muslim fisher in the Mekong. It has become a place of national and international pilgrimage.

This morning, there was only Father David Journault, a Fidei Donum priest of the diocese of Laval in France, when in general there are more than three thousand pilgrims to come to pray and sing the wonders of God with the Virgin Mary.

In this long silence of Holy Saturday that we live, we know that the invigorating presence of the Lord strengthens us and prepares us to live a resurrection in our flesh with the whole world.

Wednesday, March 25, in Areyksat, I invoked the protection of the Virgin Mary for our country, our Church and our families in these difficult times.

May this prayer also be ours:

*Blessed Lady of the Mekong, with renewed gratitude for your maternal presence we join our voice to that of all generations who proclaim that you are blessed
We celebrate in you the great works of God, who never tires of bending over mercifully towards our broken humanity, afflicted by evil and wounded by sin, to heal and save it.*

Accept with your kindness of Mother the act of consecration that today we do with confidence, before your statue which is so dear to us.

We are certain that each one of us is precious to you and that nothing that happens in our hearts is foreign to you.

We let ourselves be touched by your very gentle look and we receive the consoling vision of your smile.

Keep our life in your arms; bless and strengthen all those who desire good; revive and nourish our faith; support and enlighten our hope; arouse and animate our charity; guide us all on the path of holiness.

Teach us your love of predilection for the little and the poor, for the excluded and the suffering, for sinners and those who are lost in their hearts.

Guard us from sickness and defend our world which is fighting against Covid-19.

Pray for all those who are at the hour of death.

Keep the Kingdom of Cambodia in Peace and Fraternity.

Keep us firm in Faith, Hope and Love: gather us all under your protective mantle and hand us all over to your beloved Son, Our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen

(From Pope Francis' Prayer to Our Lady of Fatima - May 2017)

April 17, 1975 - April 17, 2020

This year we are celebrating the 45th anniversary of the episcopal ordination of the first Cambodian bishop: Mgr Joseph Chhmar Salas, ordained in a private ceremony by Mgr Yves Ramousse, on April 14, 1975, despite rockets being fired over the Church of Our Lady in Phnom Penh where they are praying. On April 17, 1975, the Khmer Rouge entered to into Phnom Penh and evacuated the city. Mgr Chhmar Salas was deported to the North-East of the country (Tangkauk) where he died in 1977. He is the proto-martyr on our list of 14 martyrs whose cause for beatification is following due course since May 15, 2015.

This year, we are celebrating the 30th anniversary of the Resurrection of the Church in Cambodia (April 14, 1990), when Father Emile Destombes, MEP was able to celebrate Easter in a movie theater (Chenla) in Phnom Penh. When the power went out the flame of the Paschal candle was the only light left in the dark room.

Jesus is alive! This is what we celebrate 30 years later, in our world invaded by the darkness of death, fear and loneliness. Jesus is alive!

On April 17, 1975 before leaving on the dusty roads of Cambodia, the last words of Bishop Salas to Monsignor Ramousse, were: **"Tell the world about us"**.

Let us pray !

+ Olivier SCHMITTHAEUSLER
Apostolic Vicar of Phnom Penh
Titular Bishop of Catabum Castra
Cambodia