

**LEWIS LEONG**

## **Light in Absolute Darkness**

The tall buildings of the engineering department cast shadows on the University of California, Irvine Interfaith Center. It is located in the middle of a cluster of impromptu bungalows, which, without close examination, can be easily overlooked by passersby. The only things that announce what is inside the bungalow are the faded pale blue letters that read, "UCI Interfaith Center." There is a worn, wooden walkway that directs its parishioners to welcoming double doors. Inside the Interfaith Center are stacks of mismatched chairs varying in hues of grey, green, and brown in a single room the size of four-car garage. There are holes in the ceiling revealing the wiring underneath of the web of microphones that the choir uses every Sunday. Though the building shows signs of wear from the elements, Father John Francis Toan servers as a pillar for the building and its parishioners.

It is 10 o'clock on a sunny Sunday morning. The choir comes to life as Father John Francis Toan makes his way to his alter at the center of the room, dressed in a pure white robe. Behind him is an imposing three-foot tall crucifix. He greets the congregation with a warm smile and begins his sermon. Everyone is attentive except for the babies and young children of a few families who entertain themselves by flipping innocently through the pages of their parents' Bible and seek companionship with the other children. The choir sings and lulls one baby to sleep in his mother's arms. Everyone knows the song, "Lamb of God," the choir is

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singing. Everyone sings autonomously on cue, as if they had rehearsed many late nights for a televised production.

As the sermon winds down, Father Francis asks everyone to stay afterward to “enjoy the company.” He lets everyone know that there are doughnuts in the kitchen to his left and to help themselves. With a smile, he tells the same joke he does every Sunday; “Have some of our doughnuts. I blessed them this morning so they have no calories!” The congregation breaks up but most stay behind to chat with their friends and many have a taste of the blessed doughnuts. Father Francis makes his rounds, thanking people for attending mass and checking in to see how they are doing. He smiles warmly, with his seemingly permanent jolly disposition. His demeanor seems out of place for someone who has lost his brother, sister, and both parents to the Communist regime in Vietnam.

In 1975 after the fall of Saigon, the Communists took over Vietnam, stripping away the rights and freedoms of the rich, the religious, and whoever got in their way. Before he knew what was going on, Francis, who was 23 years old at the time, found himself taken away to what the Communists called “labor camps” in the “free economy zone.” Unbeknownst to Francis at the time, it would be the last time he would see his mother and father. His father, a member of the South Vietnamese military, was a target for the Communists immediately after the fall of Saigon. He was sent to a “labor camp” soon after Francis and would stay there for 11 years until his death.

People were loaded onto trucks and busses, hauled off to remote villages in the middle of the jungle. No one knew where they were and most would never find out where they were. The Communists promised families that they would return their sons after a few weeks but a few weeks turned into a few months and a few months turned into several years. Francis went almost four years without contact with his family.

The labor that Francis had to do in the alleged “labor camps” constituted hard labor usually left for convicts. The government wanted to modernize and wanted to create an

aqueduct system. Father Francis says, “It’s like those people cleaning up trash along the freeway today.” Though the labor may have been similar, the difference lies in the fact that Francis had no choice. The government took anyone who was associated with the Southern Vietnamese government or would not relinquish his or her faith in God. Francis, after reflecting on his experiences at the “labor camps” has decided to call them “concentration camps,” refusing to call them by its Communist euphemism. “We had to wake up very early in the morning and we only had one bowl of rice to eat,” says Father Francis. His days were spent knee deep in water in ditches he dug himself with a make shift shovel that resembled a tube tied to a bamboo stick.

Though the work was tough, the men in the “labor camps” were paid 200 *đồng* a month, It was not enough to cover the expenses for necessities like clothing and food. “It was only enough for one week. We were only allowed nine kilograms of rice per house per year. In actuality, we got three kilograms. We were lucky to have one kilogram of meat a week. It would be all fat and bones. We could only afford potatoes and bread but they did not keep. After one week, they would be rotten potatoes and moldy bread. You have to be clever,” says Father Francis. By “clever”, Father Francis meant buying contraband from the black market. People across Vietnam did not have enough to eat during the communist regime and resorted to smuggling food past Communist patrols by bribing them. Since food was so scarce, inflation hit Vietnam in full force, making it exponentially more difficult to obtain anything to eat.

Realizing that he and his family would never have enough food to eat and could not practice their Catholic faith openly and without fear, Father Francis and his family decided to escape to America. Though his parents were still trapped in a labor camp, Francis and his brother and sister decided to split up and regroup with each other on a boat to Thailand’s refugee camp. By splitting up, Francis and his siblings had a better chance of escaping. If one was caught, the others could still make it to the United States.

On December 28<sup>th</sup>, 1979, Father Francis made his way to the coast disguised as a farmer with fake identification

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papers. Separated from his brother and sister, Father Francis made his way through the dense, green jungles, following others with the same goal of meeting a boat at the coast. Unbeknownst to Father Francis, he was 300 kilometers from Vietnam's largest city, Saigon. To this day, Father Francis and many other southern Vietnamese refuse to call the city by the name Ho Chi Minh City because of the animosity toward the Communists for taking away their family, friends, and lives. After many hours, Father Francis found himself standing on the shore, reunited with his brother and his sister.

Francis was told that the boat waiting for them was "big." To his surprise, the boat was 30 feet long and about 8 feet wide. How could the 120 people standing on the shore fit on a boat that small? Unfazed by the improbability of fitting 120 people on to such a small boat, everyone hurried on. Below deck were the sleeping quarters though not much sleep was actually achieved. Everyone stood shoulder to shoulder. There was no room to move or to adjust. The air was humid and suffocating. "The boat was almost sinking because there were so many people," said Francis. Days passed and a storm battered the tiny boat, which was surrounded by an endless horizon on all sides. "We had to throw out two thirds of our drinking water to keep the boat floating," says Father Francis.

Something approached the boat. At first it was a small dot on the horizon. As it approached, it became apparent that it was not another boat but a ship. "It was four to five times bigger than our boat," said Father Francis. As the ship slowly crept toward Father Francis's boat, the heads of the ship's crew suddenly appear.

Thai *pirates!*

They boarded Francis's boat and towed it in its wake, unbalancing the smaller vessel. The pirates looted what they could and took twenty people hostage. With everything valuable taken off the boat, the pirates released the boat. The people on the boat, including Francis, were relieved that the pirates had spared their lives. As the Thai pirate ship pulled away, it doubled back, heading for the tiny

boat, head on and at full force. The Thai pirates had rammed their ship into the boat with a deafening crack. The boat sank. One hundred people struggled for their lives in the water, like ants caught in the rain. Many did not know how to swim and drowned. Francis knew how to swim. Others in the water instinctively latched on to him. He began to drown under the weight of everyone holding desperately on to him and their lives.

Out of the dark abyss, a hand grabbed Father Francis and pulled him onto the deck of the Thai ship. It was a Chinese man, a member of the Thai pirate crew. Barely conscious, Father Francis faintly recognized the Cantonese he spoke. He heard the Chinaman arguing with his crew. He wanted to rescue the people in the water who are still alive. “He was the only good man on that ship,” said Francis. Overcome with exhaustion and shock, Francis lost consciousness.

When Francis regained consciousness, he found himself on a sandy beach. The pirates had thrown the survivors off the ship onto an uninhabited island. On the island were rocks and caves. The rocks and caves had instructions on how to survive, permanently chiseled in their sides by the island’s previous guests. On the sandy beach, Francis counted the number of survivors. There were 18 left of the 120. He realized the faces of his brother and sister were not among the 18 survivors. Overcome with grief and shock, Francis was unable to cry. “My mind was scattered. I couldn’t even cry at the time. I was so scared. I was scared and uncertain about my own future. I wanted to drown myself in the water so I would not be tortured but it was more important for me to let my parents know I was alive. It was more important to be a *witness*,” recalled Francis.

Though the survivors were alone, they were not alone for long. Other pirate ships often visited the island in search of prisoners and women. Women were often captured and raped. Father Francis told stories of twelve-year-old girls getting raped before his eyes. Some women hid in bushes to avoid being captured. The Thai pirates were wise to this and set the bushes on fire. Some women suffered severe burns and even died to avoid being captured and raped.

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After the other pirates had their way with the survivors, they left them to die a second time. There was no food on the island and more importantly, no water. To survive, the remaining people had to boil and drink their own urine for hydration and hunted rats to sustain themselves.

A week passed.

A ship appeared on the horizon. It belonged to the United Nations. The deserted island is known as the KRA Island where Thai pirates left many other Vietnamese refugees there to die. The UN knew about the KRA and would routinely check the island for survivors. The UN ship was too large to get close enough to the shore to pick up the survivors. A rope was thrown to the survivors who have to pull themselves onto the boat. Some survivors were swallowed by the sea, too exhausted and malnourished to hold on for their lives. "I don't know how I survived," says Francis but he did survive. The UN ship took him to the Songkhla refugee camp in Thailand. Francis estimates that there must have been close to 20,000 people in the camp.

In 1980, Father Francis would be sponsored to go to the United States, landing in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Though he suffered immense hardship, Father Francis' faith in God was stronger than ever. He decided he wanted to spread the word and the grace of God. He moved to Cambridge, Massachusetts to study theology, and graduated in 1993 from The Weston Jesuit School of Theology. He continued his endeavor to become a priest in California, teaching French at Loyola High School. In 1997, Father Francis officially earned his title as a priest in the Jesuit order. "It was very humbling and I was so happy," says Father Francis reflecting on his promotion. Father Francis always wanted to teach and spread the word of God and was happy to accept an invitation to teach at the University of California at Irvine as the local pastor.

"It's not just a job," says Father Francis. To him, it is a way to prove to God that he has given his life to His Holiness. Father Francis is more than just a priest. He is a shoulder for students to cry on. Students come to him for

advice or just for his company. His smile, warm hugs, and the glint in his eye all tell you that he loves not only God, but also the students at UCI. They are his children. They are the reason he keeps doing what he's doing. "I love the opportunity to encounter people. It is a privilege to listen to people and have them confide in me. I love the journey with people and see their growth and to be compassionate," says Father Francis.

The UCI Interfaith Center is where students can find Father Francis everyday. He gives a daily mass and is available to hear confessions. Students who are stressed out, need a shoulder to cry on, or just need someone to talk to can find Father Francis in his office. He is always there for them. Father Francis is also the head of several faith groups including the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults and is responsible for setting up those groups and events. "I don't have a secretary. I do everything myself. I set up the tables and everything," says Father Francis.

Evan Grossman, an alumnus of Loyola High School and current UCI student, remembers Father Francis. "You could tell he always had a huge heart. It was always crazy to see students line up to do confession with him [when] other priests were available. And he is just as caring as always. He still keeps in touch with a lot of students from high school," says Grossman. Anne Nguyen, a second year psychology major at UCI and member of the Interfaith Choir recalls, "The first time I met [Father Francis], I started to realize how much I missed home. Him being able to speak Vietnamese with me made me think of speaking [Vietnamese] with my parents. He was always welcoming with all the students that came to visit."

It is, Sunday, June 8<sup>th</sup>, 2008. The sun warm rays beat down on the UCI Interfaith Center. It is the last mass of the school year. Though it is the Sunday before finals begin, students and their families show up to hear Father Francis one last time before the academic year comes to a close. The choir sings louder and more energetically than the previous Sunday. The congregation stands together. Fingers become intertwined as everyone holds hands and pray. Father Francis gives prayer to a student's grandmother who passed

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away that very morning. Salty tears run down a few cheeks. As the final mass of the year winds down, a line forms to take the blood and body of Christ. Though this particular mass brought tears, it also brought with it hope for better days ahead. There is a potluck for anyone who wants to stay and enjoy each other's company. The blessed doughnuts make their weekly appearance in their pink boxes. Surrounded by good company, everyone leaves mass at the UCI Interfaith Center with a full stomach, high spirits, and their souls warmed by the undying spirit of Father Francis and God Himself.

