Christopher Sta. Ana, CSsR

The Tea Ritual in Vietnam: A Challenge for Inculturation

ABSTRACT

This paper presents the Vietnamese as a people naturally inclined to welcoming strangers. Despite wars and negative impressions of communism, Vietnam continuously maintains a harmonious rapport not only among themselves but also with foreigners. Fortunately, Vietnam's religions have a moral and religious assent to doing good and building rapport with one another amidst chaos. They view these as spiritual tasks. This natural inclination to strengthening relationships is embedded in their tea culture. Unfortunately, over the course of time, the Vietnamese tea culture has been appreciated just as a commonplace activity, sweeping away its profound metaphysical meaning. Hence, this paper is devoted to unravelling the meaning, which seems to have been relegated to oblivion.

INTRODUCTION

My heart was pounding. Memories of warnings echoed in my mind. I should not say that I am a Redemptorist. I should not identify myself as a religious. Then it was my turn. The officer set his gaze upon me. I was composing myself, trying to be calm. But I could feel the surge of tension and shook. I handed

him my passport. He looked at me intently. He asked for my plane ticket. I immediately gave it to him. He stamped something on my passport, and said, "Welcome to Vietnam, Sir!" I cleared my throat and uttered the words "Thank you."

I was assigned in Vietnam for one year, and I brought with me prejudices, unnecessary anxieties, and mistrust. The experience above manifested unwarranted fear, that is, the fear of the unknown. With Vietnam being branded as a communist country where religious men and women are being persecuted, I couldn't help but feel afraid. However, the simple response of the immigration officer proved otherwise. I was expecting an interrogation, but instead, he gave me a welcoming attitude. I was a stranger, yet I was welcomed.

Words of welcome alone, be these half- or whole-heartedly uttered, reassure a stranger as being worthy of trust and acknowledges him/her as being one with them. The postmodern context of migration, rampant criminalities, and terrorism affects the very mindset of every person. Watching the news, reading tabloids and even browsing Facebook, one will always find that crimes abound. Our human tendency is to secure ourselves from these alarming truths and by so doing, we gradually sever our connectedness with the Others.[1] One saying even goes "Don't trust a stranger." But, have we looked at the face of this stranger?

I am a stranger. A missionary is always and will always be a stranger. This is the inescapable truth that a missionary experiences before one proclaims the gospel and enters into a dialogue of culture. Although missionaries might be able to develop an insider perspective through time and immersion, they will not be able to

[1]Following the philosophical viewpoint of Emmanuel Levinas, a philosopher of Ethics, I would like to borrow his usage of the Other (with a capital "O"). *Autrui* (the Other), in French, refers to the personal other, the other person; *Autre* (the other), refers to the otherness in general, to alterity. The nuances of these words are important because the former denotes already our personal responsibility and moral obligation to another person. See Richard A. Cohen, trans., *Emmanuel Levinas Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985), 17.

think and function totally as a local.[2] But, here lies the problem. Being sent to mission, one acknowledges that the missionary is a stranger because he/she does not know the language, culture, and the people. However, the missionary is in fact not a stranger at all. To be a missionary is to be part of, to belong to the Catholic Church, an institution that is recognized throughout the world. In this sense, the missionary assumes that the locals must have an idea of him/her because of his/her linkage to the Universal Catholic Church. Hence, the missionary is not a stranger at all, but the locals are the strangers to the missionary.

In this paper, I would like to see myself as a missionary but at the same time, a real stranger. This paper would reflect my experience in Vietnam as a stranger whom the locals consider as a missionary. Hence, I am the Other in the mission area. This paper is an attempt to present that the mission of God is taking place even in the simple gesture of welcoming a stranger. Furthermore, this paper will deal with the simplest form of Vietnamese hospitality and welcoming act, that is, the tea culture. This will be read in the philosophical perspective using the lens of Emmanuel Levinas' face-to-face encounter hand-in-hand with the missiological viewpoint of Antonio Pernia. Lastly, this paper is an attempt to see mission not only as Proclamation and Evangelization but also as ethical responsibility that genuine relationship precedes indoctrination.

MY EXPERIENCE OF TEA CULTURE

"*Mo'i Thay! U'o'ng tra*!" (Please, Brother! Drink tea!). These were the words uttered by a seminarian who hurriedly stood up and signaled me to his table when he saw me approaching the veranda. I responded with a gentle smile since I could not yet understand the language. I was wondering what those words meant. I only understood from his gestures that he wanted me to

[2]Kang San Tan, "The Problem of an Alien Jesus for Asian Christianity with Special Reference to Chinese Buddhists." *Encounters Mission Ezine* 16 (2007): 3, quoted in Terence Wee, "When the Chinese Met Jesus," *Budyong* 1, no. 1 (2016): 29.

sit with him. At the table were other seminarians who were smiling at me while I was approaching their place. Upon sitting with them, the seminarian who invited me immediately grabbed the teapot and poured tea into the extra cup on the table.

He, then, cheerfully gave the cup to me repeating those words. I thanked him. I could feel the warmth of the cup. The tea was still hot. I blew it several times to lessen the hotness. Then, I took a gentle sip. To my surprise, it was awfully bitter, but I tried to smile politely. I looked at them and gave them a "thumbs up" sign. They were all laughing at me since my face showed otherwise. I asked them, "What is this?" They said, "*Tra.*" Dumbfounded, I asked once again what "*tra*" is. One seminarian who can speak a little English translated it for me. He said, "Tea! That is a Vietnamese tea, Brother!"

This was my first experience of drinking tea with my Vietnamese confreres. I thought it was just an ordinary invitation for me to drink that bitter green leaf immersed in hot water. There seemed to be nothing extraordinary about this experience. Apart from the bitterness of the tea and the intricate designs embossed on the teapot, I found nothing else unusual about it. This experience was just a common insignificant moment until it became my daily routine while I was in Vietnam.

THE VIETNAMESE VIEW OF TEA

In my stay in Vietnam, I experienced neither the Chinese symbolic tea appreciation nor the Japanese tea ceremony. Although there is an existing legend that the tea culture of the Vietnamese came from the Chinese, the Vietnamese hesitate to accept this. This belief was strong because of the Taoist influence in the country. Another theory stated that the Vietnamese were already drinking tea prior to the conquest of the Chinese. In any case, one thing can be construed; Vietnamese has a unique tradition with regards to tea.

Like rice, tea is a Buddhist plant, known in China in the 7th century and Japan in the 8th century, although the date of its diffusion in Vietnam is not fixed.[3] The Vietnamese drink Chinese tea, green Vietnamese tea, dried, grilled or consumed under the shape of tea flowers' buds.[4] Vietnamese tea varies from one place to another. For example, in the highlands, people often prefer fresh leaves tea to warm their mornings. In the city, however, people prefer dry green tea that can either be served hot or cold.

"Green powdered tea is stirred up in boiled water [until it is] frothy; it is consumed with lesser sophistication compared to that of a tea ceremony."[5] This already indicates that Vietnam did not adapt the ways and philosophy of the Japanese with regards to appreciating tea. Furthermore, the different types of tea in China (fledgling's tongue, corn grain, cicada wing, white monkey hair, yellow haze) do not have the same importance in Vietnam.[6] These are rare teas usually offered to prominent individuals and distinguished guests. Clearly, the Vietnamese did not put special metaphysical attributes to their tea compared to the Chinese. How, then, do the Vietnamese see tea?

As early as the 13th century, the Vietnamese believed that tea assumed many philosophical values; it was a source of spiritual purity.[7] In other words, for the Vietnamese, tea has metaphysical meaning that signifies their own understanding. Just like in Japanese and Chinese culture, these metaphysical realities always point to different values and ethics. For the Vietnamese, they believe that tea binds people together and expresses hospitality.[8] You can find tea drinking everywhere, such as in gatherings of friends and family, guest visits; street vendors sell tea, tea cafés, tea houses, tea boats

[3]Pierre Huard and Maurice Durand. *Viet-Nam: Civilization and Culture,* trans. Vu Thien Kim (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1998), 252.
[4]Ibid.
[5]Ibid.
[6]Ibid., 253.
[7]*Sophia Chu, "Vietnamese Lotus Tea," Sweetooth Design,* April 25, 2014, http://sweetoothdesigntea.blogspot.com/2014/04/vietnamese-lotus-tea.html.
[8]Ibid.

offer tea, etc.[9] In Hanoi, it is trendy for youngsters to hang out at a street tea café, which they call *Trà chanh* (literally "lemon tea") or a slang for "hangout."[10] Tea is also the essential beverage for all types of rituals and celebrations.[11] For example, in a traditional Vietnamese wedding, the groom and the bride will serve tea (or wine) to their parents in front of all their family and friends, and their parents would take turns in giving their blessing and advice about marriage and family to the couple.[12] In my experience, tea from a Vietnamese viewpoint pertains to harmonious rapport. The Chinese consider tea as an insignia of magnanimity, and the Japanese see tea as the heart of aesthetic sophistication. The Vietnamese, on the other hand, use tea to promote and to further relationships. Indeed, for the Vietnamese, tea is the starting point of relationships. The first time I was invited to drink tea, I was so absorbed in the bitterness of its taste. However, obliviously, I was already entering into a relationship with them. At that very moment, I was already participating in a relational activity that tea can bring.

Tea binds people together. Whenever they are together at a round table, they settle themselves as a Vietnamese proverb would say "*Tu'u tu, tra tam, phien nhi*" (Four [people] for alcohol, three for tea, and two for opium).[13] People, especially the Japanese and the Chinese, would prefer to drink tea alone to attain peace of mind and to stimulate philosophical thoughts. On the other hand, Vietnamese because of their relational characteristics, make use of tea to bring everyone to the table. In this gathering, jokes, stories, principles in life, sharing of one's self will automatically be subjects for conversation. In a neighborhood, especially in the rural poor, everyone knows everyone because of the frequent occasions that the community, families or individuals

[9]Ibid.
[10]Ibid.
[11]Ibid.
[12]Ibid.
[13]Huard and Durand, *Viet-Nam: Civilization and Culture, 254.*

are gathered together. And every time they gather, tea drinking is inevitable. Perhaps they gather not because of tea, but, every time they gather as a community, tea should be served. To have tea is to signify a more personal relationship, a longer time for conversation, and a gathering of everyone to listen and to share. Hence, the Vietnamese culture of tea does not only bind people together, but it strengthens the bond when they take time to listen and share in the communal gathering.

Tea expresses hospitality. "On short visits, drink the tea that is offered, even if you do not like it and are afraid of the local water because it shows that you are welcome and well respected."[14] Instead of being afraid, the Vietnamese will show that they are eager to know you through their invitation to drink tea. In my experience, they will always ask three important questions. First, they will ask your name. For them, to be called by your own name is considered polite; it is an assurance that they want to be your friend. Second, they will ask your age. They have an adage "If thou meet an old man, call him grand-father, a middle-aged man, call him uncle, and someone of thine age, call him elder brother, and if thou cede a pace to other people, thyself will be well off."[15] In Vietnam, politeness to people is a certain characteristic of hospitality. "The personal pronoun measuring the degree of intimacy or respect for one's desires to express to one's interlocutor are at this point difficult, for any incorrect application constitutes a serious impoliteness."[16] One must be mindful of one's age when talking to strangers. At some point, if they are uncertain, they will always assume the lower position. Lastly, they will ask for your salary. For Filipinos, this will seem to be unusual, if not rude to some extent. However, their point of asking such a query is for them to have a role model. The Vietnamese give high regard to

[14]Ann Caddell Crawford, *Customs and Culture of Vietnam,* foreword by Henry Cabot Lodge (Rutland, Vermont and Tokyo, Japan: Charles E. Tuttle, Co., Inc., 1966), 113.
[15]Huard and Durand, *Viet-Nam: Civilization and Culture, 138.*
[16]Ibid.

people who have high salaries because it presupposes that these people are working hard, therefore, worthy of such a privilege.

My daily experience of tea culture brought me to the awareness that I was a stranger. Although I was a stranger, I was invited to drink tea. This invitation signifies hospitality and their eagerness to know me. The host or the one who invited me would be the one to humble himself/herself and serve me by pouring tea in my teacup. This act is always accompanied with utmost respect. Most of the time, I felt that I was not worthy that they should receive me in such a manner for I was a stranger, a person they did not really know. Vietnamese hospitality comes before the existence of my being a stranger. Their sense of responsibility transcends not only to their loved ones but also to the Other. This sense of responsibility is not just a mere accommodation or a welcoming gesture; the eagerness to relate and to know the Other, that is, the stranger, is innate in them. The succeeding section is a profound analysis of this Vietnamese tea reinterpretation using Levinas' face-to-face encounter. This aims to deepen the understanding of Vietnamese hospitality in the light of ethics and philosophy.

REINTERPRETING VIETNAMESE TEA CULTURE

Do we exist first before we relate or do we relate first before we exist? Rational thinkers by virtue of logical reasoning would argue that existence precedes relationship. One cannot relate before existing. However, for Levinas, it is the other way around. Relationship is always the reason of existence. A child cannot exist without presupposing a relationship with one's parents. Now the question pertaining to Vietnamese tea culture is: Is this a culture because of the existence of tea or the relationship it signifies?

There is this wonderful adage that says "A bell is not a bell until you ring it, a song is not a song until you sing it, and love is not love until you give it away." The same is true with tea. In

my experience in Vietnam, I would say that tea is not tea until it is shared with the Other. Tea is just a mixture of leaves immersed in hot water. It is a plain thing. It is just an ordinary liquid with all its potentiality of healing and other benefits. However, once it is shared, it assumes a culture. To be specific, this is hospitality in Vietnamese culture. This hospitality expresses bonding, relationship, and responsibility. Thus, Vietnamese tea culture is precisely culture for this very signification. It is in this premise that I would like to begin the attempt to reinterpret Vietnamese tea culture.

Vietnamese tea culture will always begin with an invitation. The host invites the guest. This is, in other words, the "I" inviting the Other. This might sound simple if this happens to family or people who have known each other for a long time. However, this invitation can happen even beyond this familiarity. One Vietnamese characteristic that I will not forget is their courage to invite a total stranger into their household without any hesitation and suspicion. While I was in Vietnam, every time I would pass by an area where a group of people would be drinking tea, I would always be invited. (In these visitations, I would not be just by myself; I would always have someone to accompany me.) But, what amazed me was the invitation that made me feel part of the family or the group. The group or the host would always smile and attempt to look at me straight in the eye. It was a look without any judgment, only a pure invitation, a genuine request for my presence. Even as their communist-led nation had been ravaged by war, the Vietnamese would still be trusting and caring towards me as an Other to them. Thus, the proximity of their hospitality, through invitation, extends far to include people they know as total strangers.

Then, the Other accepts the invitation. A genuine invitation is always the most difficult offer to decline. It felt like such a great privilege to be a stranger—an Other about whom they have no

knowledge—who would suddenly be invited to drink tea. I was lucky that they were not offering me alcohol or else I would have been very drunk before I reached my destination because of the many invitations along the way. My point here is it is only when the Other accepts the invitation of the "I" that tea drinking assumes a culture, a relational responsibility. This acceptance distinguishes invitation from imposition.

Then the host will get a chair, placing it in a vacant space at the round table. The guest is immediately requested to sit with them. This is the start, this is where the face of the "I" faces the face of the Other. The doorway of the face-to-face encounter happens during the acceptance of the Other to be accommodated by the "I". In this very acceptance, the "I" or the host is already fulfilling his very responsibility to the Other. Conscious or not, the host is explicitly pronouncing that I am responsible for you, knowing that you might not even reciprocate this responsibility. Hence, a nonsymmetrical relation is forged between the "I" and the Other.

Then, the host will check the teapot to see if there is sufficient tea for the guest. In case it is not, the host will immediately boil water to be able to replenish the tea. Most importantly, it is the host who will pour the tea into the teacup of the one being invited. It is the "I" being responsible for the guest, the Other. This act of service is important among the Vietnamese. It does not only show respect for the guest, but it also shows the humility and the politeness of the host. This is the very gesture of hospitality that the Vietnamese manifest during tea drinking.

After ensuring that the guest is comfortable, the actual encounter begins. A casual conversation takes place. The host will ask queries to know the guest better; the same is true for the guest. Soon, the conversation will veer towards whatever topic the group is interested in. It transpires naturally. One is always free to openly discuss opinions about society or whatever is happening. This is the quintessential part of the Vietnamese tea culture. This is the

face-to-face encounter of the "I" and the Other. This is where the Other openly discloses vulnerability to the "I". And this is where the "I" receives the vulnerabilities of the Other. In this regard, the appropriate response of the "I" is to assure the Other that he/she is welcomed and respected. And thus, the "I" is being responsible for the Other.

From time to time, the host will ask the guest whether he/she wants more tea. This is a sign that the "I" is being sensitive and attentive to the needs of the Other. Moreover, during conversations, the guest can also pour tea into the cup of the host. I see this not as reciprocation of responsibility but as the "Other" becoming the "I". Becoming an "I", I deem now, is the responsibility to Others. This is not a change of status from being a guest to host, but a metaphysical, that is, ethical, change. I was shown how it is to be received unconditionally, and thus, this will become my standard when I receive Others, my visitors. From a stranger, from an Other, I become another "I," a sign that I am not just welcome to the table, but that I have become part of that community. This does not mean that the host is diminished or reduced to becoming an Other for the "I" will always be an "I". As Levinas argues, "Responsibility is what is incumbent on me exclusively, and what humanly, I cannot refuse."[17] Hence, "I am I in the sole measure that I am responsible, a non-interchangeable."[18]

From the unknown to the known, from the faceless Other to the accepted one, the one thing that cannot be denied is the relational impact of tea drinking. Levinas' philosophy is somewhat ideal and utopian in nature. However, when it was used as a lens in reinterpreting Vietnamese tea culture, its metaphysical meanings came to the fore. We are now able to view the metaphysical dynamic interplay of drinking tea. In this section of the paper, we understand that Vietnamese tea culture is not just for healing or health purposes. It is not just a manner of hospitality and an act

[17]Cohen, *Emmanuel Levinas Ethics and Infinity, 101.*
[18]Ibid.

of service. Viewing it in its metaphysical realm, we discover that it is actually an ethical system. It is an act of human persons that requires us to be morally good and thus responsible for the Other. Not only that, we also witness its transforming influence on the Other to be a subject "I". Another "I" that will be responsible for the Other. Hence, in the Pananagutan song, "I am responsible for you, you are responsible for me, and we are responsible for one another."

At this point, there is only one thing to fathom. What is the connection of this tea culture to mission? The succeeding section is an attempt to synthesize the implication of this culture on mission and its effect on the missionary.

VIETNAMESE TEA CULTURE AS ENCOUNTERING GOD IN THE FACE OF A STRANGER

How do we seek out the stranger? Does the Church wait for the stranger to come knocking on the doors? Should we seek them outside the walls of the Church? Or should the Church be a stranger first? One cannot give what he/she doesn't have. I cannot give love if I did not experience it. The same is true in doing mission to strangers. The Church cannot attend to the stranger's cry, if the Church has not experienced becoming a stranger. The Church is a pilgrim community that is sent forth by Jesus to seek the Other face of God. Hence, the church as long as she is faithful to this mandate, should and will always be a stranger. "It takes recognition from one's self to truly embrace and accept the reality that we have a [stranger] within us and when we appreciate the [stranger] within, hating the foreigner outside is not a possibility anymore."[19]

[19]Niño P. Memorial, "Washing of the Feet: A Proposed Missiological Paradigm in Doing Mission with the Exiled Myanmar Migrants in Ranong, Thailand," *Budyong 1, no. 1 (2016): 64.*

In order to have this stranger's heart and perspective, one needs conversion, as Pernia puts it. A change of paradigm is not just a change in one's external condition. When the Church opened its door to the world, it did not mean more missionary activities externally. Rather in my own understanding, it was opened for the Church to be converted into becoming one with Her surroundings. The Church has changed its paradigm not only because we saw that She has programs for the poor, for the stranger, for the needy, and others. Genuine change is because the Church has the heart and perspective of the Other, that is, the poor, the migrants, the strangers, the LGBTQs and other people who are considered marginalized. In other words, the Church must first have an inner conversion within Herself. In this part, I would like to present Pernia's concept of conversion in doing mission alongside my own experience of the Vietnamese tea culture.

According to Pernia, *Missio Dei*,[20] as the new paradigm of mission, "entails some fundamental conversions in our way of doing mission today."[21] He enumerates five conversions that are required today, namely, from activism to contemplation, from individualism to collaboration, from superiority to humility, from only evangelizing to also being evangelized, and from burden to privilege. To Pernia's notions, I add my own insights on the Vietnamese tea culture, which were established in the previous sections of the paper. I believe that these two concepts can lead us to understand mission as an inner conversion, and by so doing, bring us to an encounter of God as a stranger.

[20]As we know, Vatican II's document on the missionary activity of the church *Ad Gentes,* traces the origin of mission to sending by the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit in order to bring about God's universal plan of salvation (AG 1-2, 9). This idea has come to be known as the "Trinitarian origin of mission." This notion is parallel to the *Missio Dei* of Protestant theology, by which mission is derived from the very nature of God. Triune God is a missionary God, and mission is seen as the movement from God to the world. Hence, it is not the church that has a mission, but it is the mission that has a church. See Antonio M. Pernia, "Mission Today: And the Conversion It Requires" (Conference handout, Holy Family Retreat House, 2016), 2.
[21]Ibid., 5.

From Activism to Contemplation

When one sits to have a cup of tea together with people sitting around a table, this very act is already an invitation to momentarily detach from one's ordinary activities. In tea drinking, we pause from our daily work to sit, savor tea, listen, and give our time to the Other. During tea drinking, we are invited not only to drink tea but also to contemplate on our life and the things that we do. For Pernia, this contemplation is an important aspect in mission. He further says that "missionaries frequently fall into the danger of 'activism' —that is, the danger of thinking that the best way to do mission is to become effective in what we do and so we work and work and work, and give our attention almost exclusively to the effectivity of what we do."[22] Missionaries become so occupied with the work of mission that they do not see themselves as a place for mission. Missionaries rejoice at the conversion of others but unfortunately fail to convert themselves. Hence, the aspect of contemplation is a necessity in order for us to pause and seek the missionary God doing mission in our own self.

Seeing mission as *Missio Dei* makes us realize that our participation in mission is fundamentally an encounter with mystery—"the mystery of the Triune God who calls all of humanity to share in his life and glory, the mystery of God's salvific plan for the world, the mystery of the presence and action of Christ and the Spirit in the world."[23] It is important to note here that mission is primarily an encounter with mystery. Preoccupation with missionary work and duty lessens our opportunity to encounter this mystery. Moreover, encountering this mystery requires contemplation. Pernia postulates that "contemplation entails not just an ascending moment of prayer, meditation, and adoration but also a descending moment of gazing at the world with the eyes of

[22]Ibid., 6.
[23]Ibid.

God."[24] Hence, the very fruit of contemplation is the ability to gaze at the world with the eyes of God.

The conversion from activism to contemplation is an important aspect to seek the Other in the face of God as a stranger. Contemplation provides us with the gift of God's eyes that can see everything as a part of God's plan of universal salvation. As Pernia puts it, "Under the gaze of God's eyes, enemies become friends, separating walls become open doors, strangers become brothers or sisters, borders become bridges, diversity leads not to differences and conflict but [to] harmony and unity."[25]

From Individualism to Collaboration

The Vietnamese tea culture's uniqueness is that it becomes a symbol of community for it gathers people together and it strengthens the bond that they have. In this very gathering, one realizes that he/she is not alone. Moreover, one discovers the struggles and joys of the Other and that he/she does not face life alone. Life becomes easier knowing that he/she has companions in this journey we call life. This is collaboration par excellence. The individual person, when he/she participates in the Vietnamese tea culture, learns to collaborate with others.

"Often we think that we are the only ones [the Church] that is called to mission."[26] We tend to work alone and only by ourselves. The others are just seen as objects of mission. However, seeing mission as *Missio Dei* makes us realize that our call to mission is really a call to share in God's mission, which implies a call to collaborate with God, first of all, and with all others who are similarly called by God.[27] It is important to note that mission is always a collaborative effort. There is no such thing as a one-man mission.

[24]Ibid.
[25]Ibid.
[26]Ibid., 7.
[27]Ibid.

Encountering the stranger is in other words letting him/her participate in God's mission. Mission ought to transform strangers to missionaries. They are not just objects of mission but missionaries in their very selves. Indeed, it is only through collaboration that we can see the Other, especially strangers possessing a very important role in God's universal plan of salvation.

From Superiority to Humility

The host pours tea into the cup of the visitor. This is the traditional custom in Vietnam during tea-drinking sessions. This act is seen as a service, a form of humility. This humble act of the host is seen as the "I" being responsible for the Other. To humble one's self is a sign that one is ready to relate and be responsible for the Other. Hence, humility is also an important conversion that a missionary ought to have.

"Coming largely from Christian Europe, many missionaries indeed acted as if the Gospel was theirs – that is, as if it was part and parcel of their European heritage and of their European identity."[28] Because of the Europeans' cultural and economic advantages, the Gospel was seen as a symbol of power. Thus, those who spoke in the name of the Gospel were seen as powerful and superior to others. Apparently, this assumed superiority gave them the right to impose the Christian Gospel on peoples who were considered "culturally primitive," "religiously pagan," "economically poor," and "technologically backward."[29] However, seeing mission as *Missio Dei* makes us realize that the Christian gospel is not the possession of any one people of a particular culture, that it is meant for all peoples and cultures, and for all times and generations.[30] Hence, to proclaim the Good News requires humility since the Gospel belongs to God. Missionaries are servants of the Gospel.

[28]Ibid.
[29]Ibid.
[30]Ibid., 8.

This means that today the missionary is called to evangelize from a position of powerlessness, lowliness, and humility.[31]

We need to approach the stranger with all humility since the Gospel is meant also for them. Moreover, humility is the language that every stranger understands. As a stranger in Vietnam for one year, I was always moved with a sincere act of humility every time people would invite me into their homes. Even though I do not understand their language, their act of humility assures me of their good intentions. Therefore, in seeking the face of God in strangers, mission must always begin with humility since it is the language that transcends cultures.

From Only Evangelizing to Also Being Evangelized

One of the things that make the Vietnamese tea culture interesting is that in every drinking session, one has an equal opportunity to speak and listen. When one shares about something, the people around listen, and a series of comments will follow afterwards. This process creates a perfect atmosphere for dialogue. In this process the topic that is being discussed in the conversation is enriched and becomes relevant to everyone.

In the past, mission was thought of as a one-directional activity where evangelization was done only by the missionary to the people.[32] In our postmodern context today, this method is already considered obsolete. Since our thrust to do mission necessitates dialogue, the one-directional activity is its opposite. Dialogue underlines the fact that Spirit is at work in the people being evangelized as well as in the evangelizers, and that mission is a two-way exchange of gifts between missionaries and the people with whom they work.[33] It is only this way that the Gospel becomes enriched and made relevant to both the people and the missionaries.

[31]Ibid.
[32]Ibid.
[33]Ibid.

Encountering the strangers is at the same time letting them be evangelizers. This is only possible if we have already God's eyes where everything we see and encounter is a part of God's universal plan of salvation. In the road to Emmaus, the two disciples let the stranger, without prejudice whether he is a Jew or a non-Jew, interpret the scripture for them. This implies that even non-Christians can be evangelizers of the Good News. By acknowledging this stance, Christians are at the same time accepting that we do not have the monopoly of God's words and that the words of God are also found in the Other non-Christians. Thus, a genuine proclamation of the Good News as dialogue with strangers happens when we recognize that they too are called to evangelize us.

From Burden to Privilege

Before, I felt that drinking tea with other people was a burden. It required me to get out of my comfort zone and forced me to face unfamiliar people. Not only that, I found it an inconvenience since a lot of time was seemingly wasted during conversations. Being with the unfamiliar Other made it a burden to me. But when I learned that tea drinking was a Vietnamese way of hospitality, it changed my mindset. I see now the invitation to drink tea as a privilege and not a burden.

Before, mission was viewed as a sacrifice because it entails giving up one's home and country in order to go to faraway lands, giving up a life of comfort and the readiness to live a life of deprivation and hardships in conditions of life which are often "primitive."[34] Mission is something that a missionary must endure in order to fulfill the command of God to preach the Good News.

[34]Ibid., 9.

However, seeing mission as an invitation of God to participate in his saving acts can alter our perspective. Mission is God's mission, and our call to mission is really a call to participate in God's mission, therefore, it is a privilege and a gift.[35]

When we seek the stranger, it should not be seen as a burden. It is a responsibility because by the very nature of it, encountering the face of a stranger is a mission entrusted to us by God. As we come face to face with strangers, we encounter Christ with them. This very reason suffices to look at the task of welcoming and encountering the stranger with joy. Encountering Christ in every stranger is more than enough to call mission as privilege and a gift. Pope Francis says in *Evangelii Gaudium* that every genuine encounter with Jesus is an experience of joy and that in mission, "God asks everything of us, yet at the same time he offers everything to us."[36]

The Vietnamese tea culture in Pernia's understanding offers an inner movement to further enrich the concept of mission. These inner movements are seen in the five conversions that were mentioned above. These conversions are necessary to have a heart and the perspective of the Other, as in this case, the stranger. In this notion, we can say that missionaries are not called only to encounter strangers, but they are called to collaborate and be evangelized by them. This is because *Missio Dei* affirms the very face of Christ who is present also in the Other. Hence, the simple Vietnamese tea culture read in the missiological notion of Pernia provides us elements to encounter God in the face of the Other as stranger.

[35]Ibid., 10.
[36]Francis, "Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium of The Holy Father Francis to the Bishops, Clergy,Consecrated Persons and the Lay Faithful on the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today's World," 24 November 2013, no. 12.*

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Chu, Sophia. "Vietnamese Lotus Tea," Sweetooth Design, April 25, 2014. July 16, 2016. http://sweetoothdesigntea.blogspot.com/2014/04/vietnamese-lotus-tea.html.

Cohen, Richard A., trans. *Emmanuel Levinas Ethics and Infinity: Conversations with Philippe Nemo.* Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1985.

Crawford, Ann Caddell. *Customs and Culture of Vietnam.* Foreword by Henry Cabot Lodge. Rutland, Vermont and Tokyo, Japan: Charles E. Tuttle, Co., Inc., 1966.

Francis. "Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* of The Holy Father Francis to the Bishops, Clergy,Consecrated Persons and the Lay Faithful on the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today's World," 24 November 2013.

Huard, Pierre and Durand, Maurice. *Viet-Nam: Civilization and Culture.* Vu Thien Kim, trans. Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1998.

Memorial, Niño P. "Washing of the Feet: A Proposed Missiological Paradigm in Doing Mission with the Exiled Myanmar Migrants in Ranong, Thailand." *Budyong* 1, no. 1 (2016).

Pernia, Antonio M. "Mission Today: And the Conversion It Requires." Conference handout, Holy Family Retreat House, 2016.

Wee, Terence. "When the Chinese Met Jesus." *Budyong* 1, no. 1 (2016).