Spirituality
Soul Seeing



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April 11, 2026
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I was born in Vietnam and immigrated to the United States at age 11, carrying with me schoolboy memories of village roads and family stories told around low wooden

tables. Over the years, the United States became home. After my ordination as a Redemptorist priest I was sent to pastor a parish in Tucson, Arizona. The sparse, dry expanse of cactus-filled desert could not be more different from the rice fields and dense, lush green of my home country. But it has become my home. The desert, the people, the unique blend of cultures here shaped me in new ways. Still, I wondered what I might discover by returning to the land of my birth after so many years away.

Returning to Vietnam last summer was more than a visit; it was a coming home to my roots and an affirmation of heaven in life's simplest moments.

As the plane descended, I felt something inside me soften. Towering limestone mountains, hidden caves and grottoes, winding rivers and countless terraces of rice moving like waves in the wind — everything stirred memories buried deep within me. Every road, every hillside, every stretch of water whispered stories of the ones who walked here before me. This sacred land marked by their footprints, nourished by their sweat and sacrifice, forms the very bedrock of our people.

Among all these stirring sights, what moved me most deeply was finding the grave of my ancestors, the resting place of my great-grandfather and his father. The site was simple, but standing before it, I felt the weight and warmth of heritage. I knew again how proud I am to be a child of this land, rich in history, with roots sunk deep in this soil, with family whose lives still steady mine. From that quiet, holy ground, I was drawn into the full, joyful embrace of my living family.

> Heaven isn't somewhere else. It's wherever love is given freely.
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Happiness rose like a high tide as we gathered after so many years apart. We prayed and sang at the church where my grandparents were baptized. I blessed my cousins' homes. The sound of our voices weaving through rooms, turned ordinary spaces into sanctuaries.

There was joy in the smallest things: sipping strong Vietnamese coffee as its aroma mingled with the cool morning air; traveling with family to places I had known only through stories; sharing a steaming bowl of phở or a warm, crusty bánh mì. These simple meals, yet rich with family affection, were seasoned with laughter and the tenderness that comes with deep belonging. Each moment felt sacred. Not

metaphorically, but actually sacred, the way ordinary things become when love is present.

It was here — in shared coffee and rising laughter, in the simple act of being fully present with the people I love — that heaven unveiled itself. Not as a distant promise or a future reward, but as this: this table, these faces, this grace-filled moment. I had traveled thousands of miles to discover what had been true all along: heaven isn't somewhere else. It's wherever love is given freely, wherever ordinary life opens to reveal the divine presence that sustains it.

Looking back on this life with its countless ups and downs, with joys and sorrows intertwined and woven together, if it could be named, it would be grace. Each breath, a gift. Each meal, a thanksgiving. Each smile, a small miracle.

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Now back in Arizona, I carry this recognition with me. Every shared meal with a parishioner, every cup of coffee with friends, every conversation after Mass, every moment of laughter or tears, of joy or sorrow, of pain or wonder — everything, even the most common of things, is filled with the Divine Presence. The landscape is different here, yes — sparse desert instead of lush green, cactus instead of rice fields. But heaven is no more present in Vietnam than it is in Tucson. It is present wherever we learn to see with the soul's eye, wherever we treasure life's simplest gifts, wherever we know how to love and be loved without condition.

Heaven is closer than we imagine. It is in every gentle breath, every tender glance, every warm embrace, every act of care. Let us choose to love, to forgive, to hope, and to believe in the beauty God places before us — not only in the homelands we journey back to, but in the ordinary ground we stand on every day. And so we give thanks:

> Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good,
> his love endures forever.
>
> Give thanks to the God of gods,
>
> his love endures forever.

Give thanks to the Lord of lords,

his love endures forever (Psalm 136).