

You Helped Him Return



“Home” is a word that can have many meanings. It can be a place, a state of mind, a feeling of comfort and a sense of security. For Fr. Roger Kyaw Thu, SVD, Myanmar is home. Given the tumultuous civil unrest in the country formerly known as Burma, it may be hard to understand why someone would choose to return there, but that’s exactly what Fr. Roger intends to do.

After spending the past 10 years in formation with the Chicago Province of the Society of the Divine Word, Fr. Roger was ordained in May. Now he’s set to embark on his first assignment in Myanmar.

“I just want to be there for the people, especially at this moment” he said. “Sometimes I feel like I’ve been here and I watched them from afar going through all of this and it’s so painful. I might not be able to do a lot for them, but at least I can be there with them.”

Discernment

In 2007, Fr. Roger enrolled in a high school seminary in his homeland. He went on to study mathematics in college while receiving seminary formation with his diocese in Myanmar. At the bishop’s request, he and another young man named Boromeo Soe, agreed to relocate to the United States for three years to improve their English proficiency and study philosophy before returning to complete their formation.

The pair arrived at Divine Word College in Epworth in 2014, unsure of what to expect. After two years, Fr. Roger felt a calling to shift to formation with the Divine Word



Roger (left) and Boromeo (right) with National Vocation Director Len Uhal (center) when they arrived in Epworth 10 years ago.

Missionaries. In time, his Burmese classmate did the same.

“The first impression I had here was that we’re all treated as family,” he recalls. “In Burma, we’re very hierarchical. The priests are separated from seminarians and they don’t really interact unless it’s necessary. But when we came here, everyone was treated as an equal.” The missionary aspect of the SVD was also attractive. Fr. Roger said he was drawn to the way the SVDs learn from each other’s cultural differences and work to enrich one another with their diversity.

After finishing his studies at Divine Word College, Fr. Roger moved to Chicago to continue his formation. He studied at the Catholic Theological Union and participated in a Cross-Cultural Training Program in West Virginia. That experience presented some challenges as Fr. Roger found the people in the area guarded at first. In time, they opened up to him.

“One of my struggles was that I didn’t want to get attached to people and then have to say goodbye,” he said. “But at a certain point, I said maybe it’s worth getting to know people and then being heartbroken rather than to not try.” By the end of his time in West Virginia, Fr. Roger opened his heart and was welcomed warmly by the parishioners he served. He learned a valuable lesson about how to build a sense of community within a parish and connect with people.

Finding Freedom

When Fr. Roger arrived in the United States, he expected to improve his English skills and learn some philosophy. What he did not anticipate was the lesson he’d learn about freedom during his time here.

Living in America taught him the importance of critical thinking and empowered him to express his opinions confidently, both in academic settings and in his personal life. As a child, he learned to stay quiet and accept others’ opinions without protest to avoid criticism. This led him to suppress his talents and potential out of fear and shame for many years. Everything changed for him when he joined DWC, as he began to embrace his true self.

“It’s a freedom I’ve never experienced in my whole life – freedom to think, freedom to speak up,” he said. “Living

in fear is something that I dealt with my whole life until I came here and I still have that trauma. I feel a liberation in a way. I've been afforded the freedom to be myself."

Fr. Roger emphasizes that his ability to explore new freedoms in the United States was enabled by the generosity of individuals who support the Divine Word Missionaries. Without this financial assistance, he would not have had the opportunity to attend Divine Word College or continue his formation in Chicago.

"It's not just about me, it's about all these people who have allowed me to be here," he said. "Because of their decision to give and the choices they made, I'm here. I am really grateful for their sacrifice and their contributions to this college."

Returning Home

In May 2024, the two young men from Myanmar who nervously entered the English program at Divine Word College in 2014 stood side by side again. This time it was at their priestly ordination.

Fr. Boromeo will remain in the Chicago Province for his first assignment. Fr. Roger applied to join the relatively new SVD mission in Myanmar.

About five years ago, Divine Word Missionary Priests from Vietnam and India started working in a region of Myanmar with less conflict. One of them provides social services, builds homes for poor families and constructs churches for small villages. The other priest teaches in the seminary and offers counseling services.

Fr. Roger is aware of the risks, but despite the unrest in Myanmar, he remains steadfast in his decision.

"I have a desire to go back," he said. "I have been away from home since I came here almost 10 years ago. Honestly, I really wanted to be with the people in my home diocese because that's one of the most devastated areas by the war. About two thirds of the population there has fled. If I had the choice, I would prefer working there at least for a few years, but I know the SVDs have a plan for me in Yangon. Everyone there is struggling economically right now because of the political turmoil."

Fr. Roger anticipates needing to adapt to the culture upon his return, despite it being his own. "People here like it when you are authentic and speak your mind," he said. "That could be challenging when I return."

Fr. Roger's parents and six siblings eagerly anticipate his upcoming return, but they also worry about his safety. With the backing of his loved ones, he is ready to confront the new obstacles ahead. Following 10 years of formation by Divine Word Missionaries in the United States, he has come to realize that his family now extends beyond the borders of Myanmar.

"In some ways, I've felt like I didn't have family over the past few years, but I actually have a bigger family because the SVDs are my family now and everywhere I go, they treat me like family."

For further information on the mission in Myanmar, contact Fr. Linh Pham at lpham@dwci.edu

Fr. Roger Kyaw Thu, SVD following his priestly ordination. Beside him is the Most Rev. J. Terry Steib SVD, bishop emeritus of Memphis.

