Vietnam Diocese Grateful for "Miracle" of Hosting 10th FABC Plenary Assembly

Hosting the 10th Plenary Assembly of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC) was a wish come true for officials of Xuan Loc diocese.

Cardinal John-Baptist Pham Minh Man of Ho Chi Minh broached the idea of hosting the gathering of Church leaders from around Asia four years ago when he inaugurated the buildings in Phase I of the construction plan for the Xuan Loc Pastoral Centre complex east of Ho Chi Minh City.

In an interview on Dec. 14, Monsignor Vincent Dang Van Tu, the diocese's vicar general, remembered Cardinal Man's remarking, "I saw a miracle happen here."

Monsignor Tu recalled that the cardinal inaugurated the complex at the close of a meeting of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Vietnam (CBCV) held at the center. He said that Cardinal Man was surprised to see the debris and litter scattered around the six-hectare complex completely removed the next day in time for the ceremony.

"In that moment on Sept. 26, 2008, Cardinal Man mentioned the idea of hosting the FABC plenary in 2012 here. Four years ago, that was his vision," the vicar general said through Monsignor Pietro Nguyen Van Tai, assistant of the Papal Legate to the plenary assembly, who was translating the priest's Vietnamese remarks into English.

Monsignor Tu tells the story of the "miracle" which he said began many decades ago, soon after the 1975 victory of communist forces in their war with the Americans:

"Right on April 30, 1975, the bishop decided to establish a parish here because the building might run the risk of being confiscated. He transformed it from just a minor seminary into the center of the parish.

"Because of this parish, the faithful can enter and exit the six-hectare area, so relations between the bishop and the faithful have not ceased. The government of that era would have liked to abolish the parish, but the government could not do so due to the strong will of the people.

"At that time, the minor seminary was a building with three floors. But it could only use one floor for the seminary after the government confiscated or 'borrowed' the other two floors for use as a nursing school.

"Also at that time, the big grounds were planted with all kinds of vegetables and fruits. The buildings and facilities were run down with the transformation of the facility into a plantation. The minor seminary closed because they were not given the permit to accept students. We only had the nursing school and the parish facilities. That old church was demolished to build this new one.

"The principal of the nursing school was good enough to recognize he was only borrowing our building. Later, he returned it to the Church even as, up to now, much of the property of the diocese is still in government hands," Monsignor Tu said.

When Saint Joseph Major Seminary reopened in Ho Chi Minh City archdiocese in 1986, Xuan Loc could only send a maximum of 20 seminarians to study there. The local ordinary, Bishop Paul Mary Nguyen Minh Nhat, proposed in 1995 to open a major seminary in Xuan Loc. The CBCV approved and sought government approval for it. In 2005, permission was granted to open Branch 2 of the seminary in Ho Chi Minh.

Bishop Dominic Nguyen Chu Trinh, Xuan Loc's new bishop, also requested permission to rebuild the bishop's house, which had been damaged in a bomb explosion in 1976. The Popular Committee of the Dong Nai provincial government in 2006 also allowed this.

During the celebration of Vietnamese Martyrs Day on Nov. 24, 2006, Bishop Trinh signed four contracts with companies to build seven facilities to be inaugurated by Sept. 26, 2008. "This plan was completed in time for the inauguration, except the building where the FABC plenary is taking place," Monsignor Tu said.

The plenary building was part of Phase 2 construction aimed at accommodating diocesan priests who came to the center for meetings. "In 2010, there were already more than 300 priests, and this diocese now has more than 400 priests," the vicar general added.

The number of seminarians was also growing, raising concern about space and facilities that initially had planned for 300 seminarians. About 75 new seminarians are accepted annually, up from 45 planned for at the start.

"In August 2010, the bishop submitted another request to the Dong Nai provincial government for approval to build the facilities you see now," Monsignor Tu pointed out. Dong Nai Popular Committee issued the permit in November of that year and by January 2011, the government's construction committee allowed the erection of a new building. It was completed by last April, in time for the CBCV meeting and first visit of Archbishop Leopoldo Girelli, non-resident Pontifical Representative for

Vietnam. "Now it is the big building you see being used for the FABC meeting," Monsignor Tu said.

Raising funds for the project was another miracle, Monsignor Tu said. Even without funds, the bishop went ahead with the construction and the funds started coming in.

"The Church had this property, but his living expenses were in the hands of the faithful," the vicar general continued. "The bishop had nothing, but he can do everything because of the faithful. That is the richness of the diocese - the faithful. It is the work of God."

Xuan Loc was created in 1965 from places under the pastoral care of Ho Chi Minh City archdiocese. In 2010, more than 35 percent of the 2.34 million people living in the diocese were baptized Catholics. Monsignor Tu estimates there are at least 8,000 lay Church members who serve as volunteer catechists among some 10,000 volunteers in various apostolates. More than 1,700 women religious are helping in Church ministries.