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Buddhist Nun Wants Orphans Returned to South Vietnam

By Mark Frankland

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SAIGON—One of the best-known Buddhist nuns in South Vietnam not only opposes the mass adoption of Vietnamese orphans abroad but she wants the 2,000 orphans who have already been flown to America, Europe and Australia in the last month to be returned to Vietnam.

Huynh Lien is the head of an order of nearly 1,000 Mendicant Buddhist nuns famous in Saigon for their opposition to the war. Their headquarters, a pagoda in the city's northern suburbs, is kept under permanent watch by plain-clothes police who stop Huynh Lien each time she tries to go out.

The pagoda is now the temporary home of 50 children from the order's orphanages in the Central Highlands. Most of them are little girls.

They wear light green vests, their names embroidered on the front, and long, baggy trousers. When visitors arrive they cross their arms on their chest and bow—the Vietnamese child's traditional, but these days usually forgotten, gesture of respect to elders.

It is really not so hard to understand the nun's point of view. "We have lost too many people in this war already," she argues. "So why should we send away our

children too? Also it is an insult to Vietnamese women to suppose that they cannot look after their own children."

The argument that half-caste children, born of a Vietnamese mother and American father, should be sent away because they will be badly treated by ordinary Vietnamese is an insult to a woman like Huynh Lien. "I feel Buddhist love towards all people. It does not matter who the father of a child is. Why send the child elsewhere?" she says.

The nuns have 72 convents throughout Vietnam, most of them very small, and several of them run orphanages. They have had no help from the government since 1965, although they have from time to time been assisted by foreign organizations such as Caritas and the Red Cross.

Ordinary Vietnamese provide most of the money. The nuns themselves have few needs and they think that it costs them less than \$7 to feed and clothe a child for a month.

Her argument is — and her attitude to the orphan problem follows logically from it — that the South Vietnamese must take control of their own affairs instead of relying on foreigners.

She believes they must devise solutions to their problems that fit Vietnamese

customs and can be supported by the means available in Vietnam. Many of the foreign aid experts who have worked here would agree with her.

However, it is easy to feel sorry for little children, and the temptation to help build orphanages and run them has been great. But child-care experts realized a few years ago that the more orphanages that were built the more abandoned children there would be, because many poor families would give their latest baby to an institution where they knew at least it would be properly fed.

One organization, the North American Foster Parents Incorporated, fought against this by asking Americans and Europeans to "adopt" a baby without removing the child from Vietnam. The baby would stay with its family which would be held together with money given by the foster parents.

"That's the way foreigners should be helping," says Huynh Lien.

To people like this, Vietnam is not a country to be escaped from but their home where they want to live, whatever happens. The idea of a young child "forgetting its native language and losing its Vietnamese identity" angers as well as saddens them.