Apocalypse again: Violence makes priest lose faith in community
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Joseph Mai works behind a locked door and rarely goes out alone.

He cautions residents to travel in groups.

He has moved his family several miles north, out of harm's way.

Mai is a Vietnamese immigrant and an Episcopal priest in City Heights who has learned the hard way about violence in America.

In his five years as a pastor here, Mai has been beaten while motorists watched from behind rolled-up windows; comforted a frightened 79-year-old man whose throat was cut a week later; and blessed the body of a 14-year-old boy who lay dead in an alley less than a mile from his church.

All this before 48-year-old An Van Thai was stabbed to death on the last weekend of August -- in an attack that would become a rallying cry for Mai and thousands of other new citizens who are tired of being afraid.

"Every day I confess my sins and offer my soul in God's hands," says Father Mai, tears welling up in his dark brown eyes. "If they come in to kill me, I don't know what I can do but only have faith in God.

"I ask God to send an angel to protect me. I have no faith in the police or the power of the government right now."

These are harsh words for a man of the cloth. But these are harsh times for the 43-year-old minister, who preaches the gospel of the Lord -- and of leaving these mean East San Diego streets for neighborhoods with lawns and bike lanes and a feeling of normalcy.

"I tell them have a strong faith in God, accept others," says Mai. "Besides that, I ask them to try working hard, to save their money to move out of this community to a good location to raise their children in a clean area."

Mai shocked many residents at a Sept. 1 community meeting when he vented his rage at a panel of city and police leaders. The leaders had come to quell the fears of residents in the wake of the slaying of Thai, who was stabbed more than 20 times outside his apartment near 54th Street and El Cajon Boulevard.

"A priest -- he should not have done that," said one long-time Vietnamese activist after
listening to Mai say that he had lost faith in the authorities.

At first, hope

Mai did not always feel this way. When he first moved with his wife and five children to their home near Wightman Street and Highland Avenue, Mai was excited.

"I had a big hope to build a Vietnamese church," says Mai, who is the San Diego Episcopal Diocese's only Vietnamese priest.

The area was fast becoming home for replanted Southeast Asians. Drawn by inexpensive housing and relatively cheap business rents, refugees were opening up restaurants and grocery stores by the dozens along the El Cajon Boulevard corridor.

It also became fertile ground for faith communities -- Buddhist temples cropped up in former houses and Christian denominations scrambled to establish special-language ministries within existing churches.

Mai shared space with the Episcopal Church of the Resurrection on Fairmount Avenue as a mission outreach to new Christians who had never heard of Episcopalians.

When the outreach grew to almost 100 members, Mai needed more space, so he moved four blocks north on Fairmount to rented quarters in a Baptist church.

By then, however, three things had happened that dramatically altered his view of the neighborhood.

The first was the killing of a 79-year-old Vietnamese poet known as Nam Phan.

"One week before he died, I came to his house to visit him, and he felt afraid," Mai recounts.

"He said he felt very afraid, and he wanted to move somewhere . . . he asked me to pray for him."

Phan was found dead in his apartment on April 24, 1989. He had been stabbed several times in the neck, and his 47th Street apartment was ransacked.

Cries ignored

The second incident occurred about a year later, as Mai was walking along Highland Avenue from his home to his church. It was 5 p.m. on a Saturday, and he noticed two men about to throw a brick through a window.

"I said, 'Hey, what are you doing?' " Mai remembers.
The men turned on Mai and began beating him. Mai, a slight man who stands just a few inches over 5 feet tall, started running.

"I was crying for help, help, help. Nobody helped. When I came to Wightman, many cars were stopped, but they closed up their windows to safety and sat in there."

He could have run home, he says, but he was afraid the attackers would find out where he lived and hurt his family. So he ran over to some people who were standing outside and convinced them to call 911. The attackers left before police arrived.

The third tragedy came on Jan. 2, 1991, when Mai was called to an alley off 49th Street where one of his Boy Scouts had become the first homicide victim of the year. Fourteen-year-old Liem Nguyen had been shot in the head.

"I blessed him there in the alley," says Mai.

**Fear of retaliation**

"They ask me to cooperate, to work together, but I ask myself, 'How can we work together?',' says Mai, who worries as much about retaliation as he does about the initial crime.

"Who will protect me? That is my question?"

Capt. Dan Berglund, commander of the police department's eastern division, thinks Mai's fears are exaggerated.

"We're showing more presence," such as the mobile command unit that was at Colina del Sol Park last weekend, said Berglund. "I've brought in motor officers from Traffic Division. . . . I have pulled any resource that's available."

Berglund believes the solution lies in more officers throughout the city, not just shifting around the patrols.

"What they need to do is, they need to contact their council person, they need to contact city government and state government officials and let them know we need additional help."

In the Thai stabbing, it took officers 18 minutes to get to the scene because they were already responding to an incident in which four people had been shot and a suspect was being pursued.

"It's frustrating," says Berglund. "Believe me, we are doing everything we can to make them understand that we are responding as soon as we can."

Barbara Howard was representing the mayor's office at the Sept. 1 meeting. She
defends the city as "working very hard" to make things safe.

"There is a very genuine caring," says Howard, who lives in nearby Oak Park and is the assistant to the mayor for community services development. "I think that the situation is very symptomatic of our society."

Violence, she says, is an unfortunate part of any big city -- and of the world right now. And as for not going out alone, Howard says she does not like to go out anywhere by herself -- even to La Jolla.

**In need of a plan**

Mai, meanwhile, is also at odds with authorities over the reason for the violence against the Vietnamese. Many of the assailants have been African-American, a fact that authorities say is more coincidence than racism.

Berglund "absolutely disagrees" that there is any racial connection. He says the problem is gangs.

Howard concurs. "The reason these two (groups of) people are involved is they happen to be the primary residents of the area."

But Mai thinks racial conflict is a primary motivator. He believes that the two groups have isolated themselves and have not taken the time to get to know each other.

The proliferation of Vietnamese businesses might make it appear that the country's newest refugees are becoming "rich property owners" that "overcontrol" the area, Mai offers.

Of all the people he has heard speak about the problems in City Heights, Mai says perhaps the most frustrating thing is that none of them have a concerted plan for solving these problems.

San Diego needs to rebuild City Heights, he suggests, with better housing and effective security. Mai also thinks it is time that religious leaders pull together to be a part of this plan.

"The whole system needs to be rebuilt . . . and there needs to be a way to protect the people," Mai says.

**Moving on**

But until that happens, he will continue to advise his people to move -- if they can afford it. Mai moved his family shortly after his beating. He was able to buy a house in Mira Mesa with the help of a friend who loaned him $14,000.
One thing he does not advocate is buying weapons.

"I don't know why this country allows the citizens to carry guns. I don't think that is the way to protect. If one person has a gun and every other person has a gun, we will have civil war."

Mai knows something about civil war. His family fled from North Vietnam to a coastal village in South Vietnam when he was 6. When he was 13, he was taken by a Roman Catholic missionary into the hills, above the escalating conflict.

He managed to stay out of the war until he was 25, when he was finally drafted into the army in November 1974. When his country fell to the Communists the following year, he escaped in a boat with two of his brothers.

But like so many others in the military who had to suddenly flee or be killed, Mai was forced to leave behind the rest of his family -- including a pregnant wife who was in another town when the Communists invaded.

He and his wife and daughter were reunited about four years later. His new life was a jigsaw puzzle of experiences, starting with joining the Assembly of God church that sponsored his resettlement and ending in 1988 when he was ordained an Episcopal priest.

With what has become characteristic bluntness, Mai says that nothing in Vietnam prepared him for the streets of East San Diego.

Comparing his community in Vietnam and City Heights, he says, "it is 10 times more violent in this community."

Caption: 3 PICS
1. Father Joseph Mai: in the Baptist chapel he uses on Sunday afternoons. 2. City Heights: While police step up protection, Father Joseph Mai urges followers to save enough money to move out. (E-4) 3. Father Joseph Mai: Episcopal priest finds no peace in City Heights. (E-4) 1,2,3. Union-Tribune / JOHN GIBBINS
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