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THE SEVEN MARTYRS OF SONG KHON

№ 16 and 26 December 1940

espite a long history of evangelization, Catholics in Thailand had always been a minority. For centuries, Buddhism has formed the nation, infusing its people with the values of the great Eastern master. Christianity in northern Thailand originated with Laotian Catholics who established themselves along the banks of the Mekong River.

The northeastern province of Mukdahan lies at the border of Thailand (formerly known as Siam) and Laos (formerly part of the French protectorate of Indochina). Laotian Catholics fleeing persecution in Indochina settled there in the latter half of the nineteenth century. In 1881, the vicar apostolic of Siam, Bp. Jean-Louis Vey (1840-1909) of the Paris Foreign Mission Society (MEP), entrusted the evangelization of the area to the members of his society. In May 1899, the Church erected the Apostolic Vicariate of Laos whose jurisdiction covered all of what is now northeast Thailand and modern-day Laos.

Situated at the Thai banks of the Mekong River, some 33 kilometers north of Savannakhet (Laos), is the village of Song Khon [สองคอน]. Its residents welcomed Fr. (later bishop) Constant-Jean Prodhomme (1849-1920) and Fr. François Guégo (1855-1918), both MEP priests, in 1881. Soon many of the natives were baptized into the faith. The number of believers steadily increased. By 1907, about 200 of the villagers were



Banner for the beatification of the Martyrs of Song Khon on 22 October 1989: (clockwise from top) AGNES PHILA, PHILIP SIPHONG ONPHITHAK, CECILIA BUTSI, BIBIANA KHAMPHAI, AGATHA PHUTTA, MARIA PHON, and LUCIA KHAMBHANG.

baptized. Through the efforts of the MEP priests, the diocesan congregation of the Lovers of the Cross of Xieng Vang, and local catechists, more natives sought acceptance in the Church. In 1925, the village came under the direction of MEP priest Paul-Pierre Figuet. In 1940, the Catholics of Song

Khon numbered 700. By then they had their church, presbytery, and school.

THE FRANCO-THAI WAR

Border disputes between Thailand and France began in 1893. The latter, which controlled Cochin China, Tonkin, and Annam (today all united as Vietnam), forced the government of Siam to cede Cambodia and all its territories east of the Mekong. In 1904, more territories east of the river were yielded to France. Until then, Thailand was under an absolute monarchy.

Because of their nationality, the MEP priests were viewed with much suspicion by local authorities. The Church, however, continued to enjoy the favor and goodwill of three successive kings: Mongkut (1851-68), Chulalongkorn (1868-1910), and Vajiravudh (1910-25). Ministers of foreign affairs had assured the missionaries that they and their work would not be harmed despite their nation's territorial aggression. The amicable relationship continued during the reign of Prajadhipok (1925-35).

In 1932, however, a constitutional government replaced the monarchy through a bloodless coup. Not long after, the country's conservative military faction took power. In 1936, Thailand denounced all treaties it signed with foreign nations. During the tenure of Field Marshall Plaek Phibunsongkhram (or simply Phibun) (1939-1941), the government adopted a strong nationalistic policy. In 1940, with encouragement from the Japanese, Thailand demanded that France return all territories it had ceded since 1893. The government declared war against the French in neighboring Indochina in October of the same year

In line with its new policy, the government considered national unity a priority. Any form of cultural or religious pluralism was viewed as a threat. Since Buddhism, the official religion, was a part of Thai culture and identity, Catholicism was considered an alien faith. Thai Catholics were looked upon as foreigners in their own land and traitors to their national heritage and were pressured to renounce their faith. The tension was greater in the northeastern provinces as these were close to the contested areas. The local police endeavored to make Catholics to apostatize. Situations were even worse at Song Khon.

A police force had already been sent to the border town in August 1940. They arrived at Song Khon after crossing the Mekong through a boat. All the inhabitants of the village were summoned. The police formally announced that Thailand had entered into a war with the French Indochina. Later, six established themselves in the village.

The police realized that the majority of the villagers professed the Catholic faith. Consistent with national policies, they exerted every effort to make the villagers renounce their faith. The presence of Fr. Figuet had strengthened the resolve of the people to resist their pressure. With the help of the sisters and the catechists, he encouraged the beleaguered flock to remain steadfast. On 29 November 1940, Fr. Figuet was expelled from Song Khon. Lu Muangkhot [ลือ เมืองโคตร], the police chief of Song Khon, believed that with the ejection of the missionary, the people would lose heart. The opposite proved to be true.

With their pastor gone, masses and sacraments ceased to be celebrated in the parish church. However, the local catechist **PHILIP SIPHONG ONPHITHAK** [ฟิลิป สีฟอง ฮอนพิทักษ์], and the two consecrated women running the parochial school, Sr. **AGNES PHILA** [อักแนส พิลา] and Sr. **LUCIA KHAMBANG** [ลูซ์อา คำบาง], continued to minister to the priestless community.

THE GREAT TREE

Siphong was born on 30 September 1907 in the village of Nong Saeng, Nakhon Phanom (Thailand). His parents, Intong and Pheng, were new Christians baptized by Fr. Prodhomme. He began his studies in the local parochial school. Later, Siphong took his secondary studies at Sacred Heart Seminary at Nok Kwaek with the end of becoming a priest. This was not to be, however. About his third year, he became ill and was brought to Saint Louis Hospital in Bangkok. While convalescing, a priestfriend visited Siphong and convinced him to go and watch a movie. Word of this reached the procurator of the Bangkok Mission, Rev. Louis-Auguste Chorin, who passed on the information to the seminary rector, Rev. Maurice-Joseph Carton. For that act, Siphong was dismissed from the seminary. After returning to his village, Siphong continued his studies at the Piyamaharachalai School in nearby Nai Mueang.

In 1926, at the end of his studies, Siphong was invited by Fr. Figuet to teach at the parochial school of Song Khon, some 80 kilometers south of Nong Saeng. Besides his normal teaching load, he also taught the intricate art of Thai embroidery. Siphong actively assisted the pastor in his ministry and helped the sisters in teaching catechism. In 1931, he married Maria Thong. The couple settled in Song Khon where they raised their five children.

The villagers were won over by Siphong's irreproachable conduct. He was very honest in all his affairs, observant in his faith, and compassionate and charitable to all. He and his family were deeply esteemed by the people of Song Khon. To them, he was their "father" and his wife their "mother". After the expulsion of Fr. Figuet, Siphong continued the pastor's work. Frequently, he



A picture of the students of the parochial school of Song Khon with PHILIP SIPHONG ONPHITHAK (right arrow) and Rev. Paul-Pierre Figuet, MEP (left arrow).

assembled the Catholics to pray for the grace of constancy in their period of trial.

Lu noticed that he could not bring the people to abandon their religion because of the pastoral work of Siphong. For the villagers, the catechist was "the great tree" under whose shadows they sought shelter. For his objectives to be realized, Lu had to find a way to dispose of the catechist. He tried to make the catechist follow Fr. Figuet but Siphong refused. Only one measure was left.

One day in mid-December 1940, Siphong received a letter. It was supposed to be from the sub-prefect of Mukdahan, summoning the catechist to proceed to that city and report to him immediately. The letter, a hoax, was drawn up by Lu and his men. The plan was clear: if Siphong fell for the trap, he would be assassinated.

Fellow Christians were informed of Siphong's planned departure for Mukdahan. They tried to dissuade him from pushing it through. He was not enjoying the favor of the local police because of his active ministry. Anything could happen along the way. Nonetheless, Philip, believing in the veracity of the letter, resolved to go on: "I must go." He left his people, somewhat aware of the danger that was lying in wait for him.

ASSASSINATION

Siphong bade farewell to his wife and children on the afternoon of December 15. He departed for Mukdahan on his bicycle. Lu offered to accompany him along with a policeman from Mukdahan named No. Evening came and the three decided to spend the night at Ban Yai. A friend lodged Siphong in his house that night. The next day, Siphong and the two policemen were on their bicycles once more.

In the afternoon, the three crossed a brook called Huai Tum Nok (now Huai Yang). The village of Ban Phaluka was not so far away from there. Lu followed Siphong from behind. They entered the woods. Without the slightest suspicion of the catechist, the policeman took his gun and fired two shots. One of these hit Siphong at his right chest.

The catechist fell, writhing in agony: "Lu, why are you doing this? Why are you killing me?" He then signed himself with the cross.

The policeman came close and scorned the wounded catechist: "Do you think your magic will save you from this?"

Lu fired another volley. The bullet pierced Siphong's heart. He died instantaneously.

The policemen, then, commanded some residents of Ban Phaluka to bury the body. They dug a pit some 300 to 400 meters from where Siphong fell. After burying the cadaver, they covered the makeshift grave with brambles, as it was the local custom when interring a murder victim. The belief was that these would prevent the victim's ghost from leaving the grave to haunt the living.

The next day, news of the assassination arrived at Song Khon. The villagers were thrown into lamentation and dismay. Pheng, a student of the assassinated catechist, requested from the policemen permission to bring the body of his teacher back to Song Khon.

"That is the body of a wicked man." Fearing that the ghost of the catechist would haunt them, they threatened Pheng: "If you bring it here, we will also kill you." The matter was closed.

LOVERS OF THE CROSS

The "great tree" was fallen. Lu believed that the villagers would, at last, abandon their religion. He miscalculated the influence of the two religious sisters in the mission school. With Philip gone, they continued his work of heartening the harassed faithful. With the transpiration of these events, Sr. Agnes Phila and Sr. Lucia Khambang powerfully felt that the time for them to shed blood for the faith was in the offing.

The two sisters belonged to the diocesan congregation of the Lovers of the Cross. This religious family has had a long glorious history. Founded in 1670 in what is now Vietnam, the apostolate of the religious included the instruction of catechumens and works of charity. For two centuries, the sisters had withstood the religious persecutions raging in their mission areas. The sisters were sent to far-flung villages to instruct converts due to the lack of priests and catechists. There they sheltered all hunted Christians, nursed those wounded by barbaric tortures, and covertly brought the Eucharist to those who were to die for the faith. Many of them eventually suffered martyrdom. The Lovers of the Cross later established themselves in Cambodia, Laos, and Thailand. In 1919, the Lovers of the Cross in Xieng Vang (Laos) became an autonomous diocesan congregation.

SUPHI PHILA was born in 1909 in the village of Na Hi, Nong Khai (Thailand) where most of the inhabitants were unbelievers. Years later, her Christian parents migrated to the Christian village of Wiang Khuk where she was baptized in 1924 with the name Margaret. On 7 December of that year, Suphi left her family and went to Xieng Vang to join the Lovers of the Cross. She made her profession on 10 November 1927 and was given the name **AGNES**. She started to teach at the mission school of Song Khon in 1932.



The Lovers of the Cross of Xieng Vang who taught at the parochial school of Song Khon: AGNES PHILA (second row, first from left) and LUCIA KHAMBANG (second row, first from right).

LUCIA KHAMBANG was a native of Wiang Khuk (Thailand). She was born on 22 January 1917 and was baptized the following 10 March. One of her aunts was the baptismal godmother of Phila. On 3 September 1931, Khambang joined the Lovers of the Cross at Xieng Vang and made her profession on 15 October 1937. She came to teach at Song Khon at the beginning of 1940.

Lu did whatever he could to make the sisters apostatize but to no avail. He was able to convince Phila and Khambang to remove their religious habits by promising them that no harm would befall the faithful. Secretly, Lu hoped that the people would take this as a sign that the religious had renounced their faith.

"It is better that you wear the same dress used by the other women in the village. Don't you see that your dress was made in Europe for the use of Europeans? Besides, we are in a state of war, and the border is very near."

Phila replied: "If because of the war or for whatever motive it is necessary to dress like the other village women, we would abandon our habits." She quickly added, "But we will abandon neither our religion nor our yows."

With the two religious lived **AGATHA PHUTTA** [อากาหา พุดหา]. She was 59, unmarried, and a native of Ban Kengpho, Savannakhet (Laos). She was the only Christian in her family, having been baptized on 3 March 1918. From that moment, she offered her service to missionaries as a cook. Described as an industrious and generous woman, Phutta served at the Sacred Heart School of Nongseng and the mission at Pakse before eventually serving the missionaries of Song Khon.

Local Catholics of Song Khon frequently sent their young daughters to the sisters not only to receive catechetical lessons but also to assist the sisters in any way they can. This explains the presence of three girls at the convent on the evening that preceded their day of martyrdom. Evidence also points out that there was an orphaned toddler named Phuma whom the sisters were taking care of at that time.

A TENSE CHRISTMAS

Christmas that year was quiet. There was neither mass nor confessions. The atmosphere was tense. Realizing that his ploys were not bringing the desired result, Lu decided to take drastic measures. He passed by the convent of the Lovers of the Cross that day only to discover that the sisters were giving catechetical instruction to several children. Furious, he confronted the two sisters: "I have told you many times not to speak about Jesus. You must not

mention God in Thailand, otherwise, I will kill you all."

Phila became indignant and retorted: "Mr. Policeman, do you mean to say that you will kill us all because we are Catholics and loyal to our Catholic Faith. Do you truly mean that, Mr. Policeman?"

Lu responded: "Yes, I do. I will kill all of you if you continue to talk about God like this."

"Be sure you have enough guns and bullets then," exclaimed the sister.

"Oh yes," rejoined Lu. "We have enough guns and bullets to kill you all."

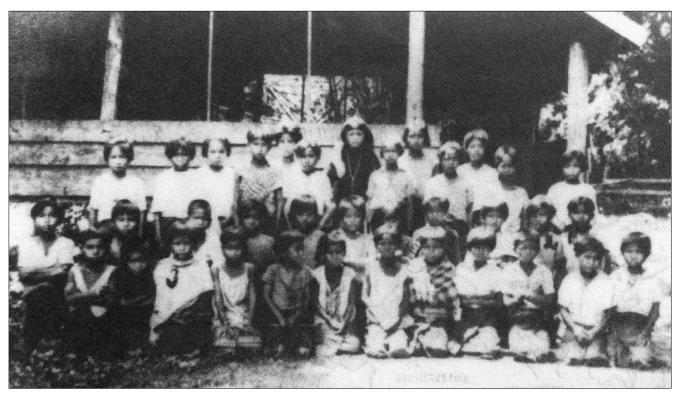
"Then be sure you polish the barrels of your guns lest the bullets get stuck," countered Phila.

Toward the evening of that same day, Lu ordered all the villagers to assemble in front of the church. The people squatted on the ground, surrounded by armed police officers. Lu ascended the steps of the church. With one hand he raised his gun. With the other, he brought out a purported command from his superior officers.

"I have been ordered to prohibit the future exercise of the Catholic religion here. Whoever would want to continue in its observance shall be shot. If anyone wants to profess the Catholic religion, let him or her rise in front of this assembly."

There was a moment of silence. Then one young woman bravely stood up.

"I am ready to die for my faith!" declared **CECILIA BUTSI** [เซซีลีอา บุดสี]. The valiant sixteen-year-old assisted Agatha Phutta at the kitchen of the convent. She was a native of Song Khon, born on 16 December 1924, and was fondly remembered for her cheerfulness.



In this photo (taken in 1940) of the students of the parochial school of Song Khon can be found the three youngest martyrs: MARIA PHON (first row, third from left to right), CECILIA BUTSI (second row, second from right to left), and BIBIANA KHAMPHAI (third row, fourth from left to right).

Lu ignored her for the moment and dismissed the assembly. However, he had

been able to make his point clear to everyone – either apostatize or die.

On their way home from the assembly, Madame Thiep, Butsi's mother, scolded her daughter for her boldness. "Why did you stand up when not even Mother Agnes stood up?"

Phila swiftly rebutted, "If the police had shot Butsi, I would have gotten up so that they could shoot me also."

Butsi followed up, "I stood up because I do not want to observe the religion of *Phra Kodom* [i.e., the Buddha]. I want to be faithful to the religion of Jesus Christ. If I die, it does not matter since I will die for this religion." She accompanied Phila back to the convent that evening in the company

of another young woman named Maria Buakhai.

Khambang returned to the convent at a later time together with a young girl named Cecilia Suvan. Although it was hardly nighttime, she immediately went to bed because she did not feel very well. As night fell, however, Khambang silently stood up and went to the henhouse to close its door. On returning to the convent, she suddenly fell ill. Phila put her sister to bed but Khambang continued to be restless and began shaking. She cried out: "I will certainly die today. Bring me my holy habit. Oh, I am no longer able to raise myself! The devil has already written my name!"

Phila also felt that the supreme moment to give witness to her faith had come. She and Khambang put on their habit again. Later that night, Phila wrote a letter to the police chief on behalf of the other women staying in the convent:

Yesterday evening you received the order to wipe out the name of God, the only Lord of our lives and minds. Sir, it is God alone whom we adore. Some days earlier, you told us that you would not wipe out God's name and we were quite pleased with this news, so much so that we put away our religious habits which indicated that we were God's handmaids. But it is not so this time.

We profess that the religion of Christ is the only true religion. Therefore, we would like to give our answer to the question you presented yesterday evening to which we had no chance to give our reply because of our unpreparedness. Now we would like to give our response.

We ask you to carry out the order on us. Please delay no longer. Please carry out the order. We are ready to give back our lives to God who has given them to us. We do not wish to be preys of the devils. Please carry out the order. Open the door of heaven for us so that we may confirm that outside the religion of Christ no one can go to heaven. Please do it. We are well prepared. When we are gone, we will remember you. Take pity on our souls. We will be grateful to you for it. On the last day, we will see each other face to face.

Do wait and see, please. We have kept your commands, O God. We desire to be your witnesses, dear God.

We are Agnes, Lucia, Phuttha, Butsi, Buakhai, Suvan. We would like to bring little Phuma along with us because we love her so much.

We have already made up our minds, dear Sir.

Early the next day, Butsi delivered the letter to Lu's office along with a small bottle of coconut oil for the police to clean and polish their gun barrels. A local Christian named Joseph Akat declared in the diocesan inquiry of the beatification process that he saw her returning to the convent in a cheerful mood.

FINAL HOURS

Some seven to eight hours passed between the time when Cecilia Butsi delivered the letter and when Lu acted upon it. During the interval, the sisters prepared themselves and their companions by praying and singing all through the night. As day dawned, Maria Buakhai's resolve broke down and she decided to leave the company of the sisters. This is her account of what happened: "The two sisters were lying down at the door of their sleeping chamber awaiting those who would come to shoot them. When I saw this, I became so fearful that I went to ask the Sisters for permission to return home. Mother Agnes replied: 'You want to go back to your place. Well then, leave."

On her way home, Buakhai was seen by her aunt **BIBIANA KHAMPHAI** [บีบีอานา คำไพ], a girl just like her. She had been in a pensive mood since the previous evening.

On seeing her niece, Khamphai asked her, "What are you doing?"

"I am going back home," replied Buakhai.
"I am afraid because the Sisters had written a letter to the chief of police telling him to come and kill them at their house. The Sisters had put on their habits again."

Khamphai was a native of Song Khon, born on 4 November 1925. A frequent visitor to the convent of the sisters, the villagers agreed that she was a truly good girl, finding no blame in her conduct. Her mother added that although Khampai possessed an obstinate character she "was not attached to earthly things." She recalled that on that same morning, she urged her daughter to busy herself with weaving: "Weave? Why engage in such earthly things? We have enough to wear. That is enough."

True to her character, Khamphai unceremoniously left her home for the convent of the sisters to take the place of



Lu Muangkhot, Chief of Police of Song Khon from 1940 to 1941 and responsible for the deaths of the seven martyrs. He later converted to Catholicism and testified about his actions during the informative process from 1952 to 1955.

her niece.

At some point that morning, MARIA PHON [มารีอา พร] joined the women in the convent. Like Butsi and Khamphai, Phon was from Song Khon, born on 6 January 1926. Her mother, however, was an apostate Catholic who turned her daughter over to her mother to raise. Phon was remembered as a frequent communicant in the mission church and left a reputation for good conduct.

Local Catholics slowly got wind of the plan of the sisters and several signified the desire to join them. Some witnesses of the diocesan inquiry testified that Phila sent several slips of paper to the villagers on which were written pious phrases. They were to use these to draw lots to decide who among them would join the sisters. A young girl named Cecilia Son gave the following testimony: "(That) morning, my parents

exhorted us all in the family to go and die with the Sisters. I heard that the sisters had sent slips of paper to the house of my aunt Nang to be drawn by lot. I went there and drew the following ticket: 'The one who hides will not die.' I then returned to our house, took my festive clothes, and I left for the house of the sisters. By the time I arrived, I saw Sr. Agnes, Sr. Lucia, Cecilia Butsi, Bibiana Khampai, Cecilia Suvan and, Maria Phon all in prayer."

The testimony of another local witness, Michael Sitchon, recounts the disposition of Maria Phon that morning: "The sisters sent Maria Phon to my house to take the slips of paper my wife had taken from them to draw lots. I asked Phon, 'So have you decided to accompany the sisters?' She told me, 'I don't know yet. I still can't say.' Then she left taking the slips of paper with her."

At noontime, Khampai's mother went to the convent to see her daughter: "I went to the house of the religious, worried since my daughter has not taken anything to eat since the previous night. Taking a look inside the kitchen, I said, 'Eh! Why is there no fire for cooking rice? My daughter has not eaten anything since yesterday evening."

"That is not at all important!" Khampai emphatically responded. Pointing a finger to the skies, she continued, "Up there, everything is already prepared. In a short time, the door of heaven will be opened to us."

At some point that morning, the sisters entrusted the toddler Phuma to one of the local Catholic women.

Between two to three in the afternoon, an irate Lu and his men barged into the convent. They gathered the eight women in the house.

"Now ... your God... abandon him, yes or no?" Lu demanded with rage.

"No! We will never renounce him!"

"Very well, if you will not renounce your God, come down to the Mekong," the police chief ordered. "I will do there what I am obliged to do."

Phila refused to follow this order: "No, that is not the place for us to die for Christ. We must go to the cemetery – a sacred place."

Years later, Lu confessed that he never received any order to execute those who refused to renounce their faith. His hatred towards Christianity and his subsequent tragic actions, by his admission, were all personal. He also acknowledged that he wanted to kill the women at the river so he could later report to his superiors that the women attempted to cross the border and were shot because they refused to come back.

MARTYRDOM

The eight marched to the local cemetery while praying and singing religious hymns. Catholic villagers came out of their houses to witness the spectacle: "Goodbye," bade the women. "We are going to heaven. We are going to become martyrs for Christ." Several signified their desire to join the band, but the police angrily drove them away with their rifle butts: "We only intend to execute those in the line."

Along the journey to the cemetery, the father of Cecilia Suvan grabbed his daughter to save her. Suvan desperately clung to Phila begging her: "Mother Agnes, help me please, I want to die with you and go to heaven."

"But you are too young to die," said her father. He whisked her away, brought her home, and locked her in a room.

It did not take long for the police and the seven remaining women to arrive at the cemetery. The large trunk of a fallen tree was lying at the roadside.

"We will make use of this," Phila said to Lu. Then, she spoke to her companions: "Let us lean on it."

Phila again addressed the police: "You may kill us but you cannot kill the Church and you cannot kill God. One day the Church will return to Thailand and will flourish more than ever. You will see with your own eyes that what I am saying now will come true. So we thank you from our hearts for killing us and sending us to heaven. From there we will pray for you."

She then addressed her companions: "My dear friends, we will soon be in heaven."

Having prepared herself and the others, Phila looked at Lu and said: "Mr. Policeman, we are ready, please do your duty."

The police aimed their gun at the seven women leaning on the trunk and fired. The cracks of each volley echoed throughout Song Khon. When it was over, the police left the cemetery and shouted at the villagers who were watching the execution behind nearby bushes: "Bury them like dogs! They are bad people." The people immediately rushed to the scene of the carnage and began shaking the bodies to see who among the seven were still alive. Khambang, Phutta, Butsi, and Khampai were already dead. Son, who knelt at the end of the line, stood up dazed, her clothes splattered with blood.

"Where is heaven?" she asked.

The villagers asked her if she was wounded. "I'm afraid I am not. I don't feel any pain."

Realizing that she was unscathed, they told her to go home immediately and hide.

Phila and Phon were not as fortunate. They were still alive but were mortally



The tombs of the six martyred women at the cemetery of Song Khon where they were killed. The photo was taken after the end of the Second World War.

wounded. Seeing the crowd surrounding her, a confused Phon asked: "Where is heaven?"

Phila asked those around her: "Where are the police?"

"They've already left."

"You better call them back. I'm not yet dead."

One of the villagers went to the police station and informed them about the situation. They returned to the cemetery and finished off the two wounded women.

POSTSCRIPT

Not long after the killings, the parish church of Song Khon was burned to the ground. It would seem to be the end of the Catholic Church in Song Khon.

The Franco-Thai War ended in May 1941. Once peace was restored, Italian members of the Salesians of Don Bosco came to Song Khon and other northeastern Thai Catholic villages to minister to their needs. The alliance of Field Marshall Phibun with Japan brought Thailand into war with Allied forces during World War II. In June 1944, Thai opponents to the Japanese alliance forced Phibun out of office and replaced military rule with a civilian government. Not long after becoming prime minister in August 1944, Khuang Aphaiwong restored full religious freedom in Thailand.

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THE DECREE ON THE MARTYRDOM OF AGNES PHILA, LUCIA KHAMBANG, AND THEIR FOUR COMPANIONS, ALONG WITH PHILIP SIPHONG ONPHITHAK, WAS PROMULGATED ON 1 SEPTEMBER 1988.

THEY WERE BEATIFIED ON 22 OCTOBER 1989.

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