



Fr. Yves Bertrais

by: Xia Vue Yang

PRESS RELEASE :

Fr. Yves Bertrais, AKA Txiv Plig Nyiaj Pov for the Hmong people, the founder of Hmong Romanized Alphabets (RPA), died last Sunday, 8 AM, May 27, 2007 at his retirement residence in France. He is 86 years old.

Born 30 July 1921, in a small French vilage called Prinquiau, Reverend **Yves Bertrais, OMI** began living among the Hmong of the Gaurs Mountain at the age of 29. While his love would have been to share his faith with these people, he realized that he must first be content only to live amongst them, to study their language and absorb their culture.

Studying their language would not be easy, since it did not exist in written form. At first he began to create his own transcription system by assigning Latin letters to the Hmong sounds, as far as possible. This lasted for three years, when he learned of an American Protestant minister who was working in another village and developing his own transcription of Hmong. With the aid of a linguistics specialist and two Hmong friends (for exact pronunciation), the two collaborated in an effort to develop a uniform system, the "Hmong R.P.A. Script" (Romanized Popular Alphabet), the one in current use.

The next task was to teach the written form to the Hmong. Each evening, after work ended in the fields, the village youth, some adults and other Hmong from as far as 20 miles away, gathered to learn the script. A small catechism was developed at that time.

From 1963 to 1975 the Hmong people were seriously affected by war, at which time many came to stay with Fr. Bertrais at the School of Masters in Christian Teaching. During this period the script spread rapidly and during vacations the students would return to their mountain villages where they taught their friends to read Hmong. A Hmong newspaper and radio station were also created, as were many publications in the Hmong script.

The Laotian government was not favorable to R.P.A. script, requiring all ethnic groups to use Laotian characters, even in the mountain schools where all the students were Hmong. Beginning in 1975, however, use of the R.P.A. script spread to tens of thousands in the refugee camps of Thailand. And as they were resettled in the United States, France, Australia, Argentina and Guyana — so, too, R.P.A. script found new homes.

With so many learning to read and write came the necessity to create books to place in their hands. At that time Father Bertrais approached Archbishop Renato R. Martino, then apostolic nuncio to Thailand who, understanding this important need, assisted tremendously in procuring funds from specialized organizations. One of the many fruits of this was the birth of the Hmong Cultural Heritage Association, with its headquarters in the Hmong village of Javouhey, French Guyana. Thus, the language and script were brought into the computer age.

Since 1985, R.P.A. script has spread among the Hmong in China.

R.P.A. script been successful for many reasons: its use of Latin letters which are in current use throughout the world; its easy adaptation to the dialects of both the White and Green Hmong; the

perseverance of the teachers of the script 40 years ago; the tragic events over the past four decades which, at the time, seemed like fatal blows for the diffusion of the script but which, in fact, contributed to its ever-greater expansion; the many people who have generously worked to produce publications and to find funding for research, composition, printing and distribution; and especially the Hmong peoples themselves, who passed the script on to family and friends.

Father Bertrais is very hopeful of the script's continuing spread. He writes: "Writing is necessary for the survival of a language. And a language is the most important element for guaranteeing the lasting originality of a culture. And we must hope that the Hmong culture lasts a long time; not in opposition to other cultures, but so that everyone on earth not end up dressing the same way, speaking the same language, listening to the same music and becoming unable to sing in his or her own language."

For his perseverance and commitment to the Hmong people, particularly his efforts in developing a written form of their language, the Path to Peace Foundation is pleased to bestow upon Reverend Yves Bertrais, OMI, the title of "Servitor Pacis" — Servant of Peace. >>>>

Addendum: During the stay of Father Bertrais in French Guyana from 1977 to 1996, the mayors wanted to honor his work in favor of the Hmong of Guyana. They first then awarded him the National Merit Medal, and some years later, the medal (insignia) of the Knight of the Legion of Honor.

Fr. Yves Bertrais, 86 years old, passed away this 27th day of May, 2007 at his retirement

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Funeral for Fr. Yves Bertrais will be at

Salle de St. Marc

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Contribution to Fr. Bertrais' funeral can be sent in Money order or Check to :

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