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U.S. Vietnamese preserve ties to their 'first home'

Tom Roberts | Jul. 7, 2009

Fr. An Vu (NCR Photo/Tom Roberts)

SILVER SPRING, MD.

Just off New Hampshire Avenue here, part of a stretch that includes a string of structures representing several world religions, is a striking white building with a red-tile roof that has the appearance of a pagoda except for a singular detail -- a cross atop the highest peak.

Our Lady of Vietnam Catholic Church is a soaring representation of that ethnic group?s presence in the Washington area, where large numbers of Vietnamese settled following the fall of Saigon in 1975. The church was built under the direction of its first pastor, the late Msgr. Peter Long, who was among the first wave of refugees to arrive in the United States in the mid -1970s.

Fr. An Vu, 51, pastor for the past year, represents the story that is known by hundreds of thousands of Vietnamese of his generation: living through a war that was eventually lost, escape on the high seas, months in a refugee camp before making it to the United States through an orderly departure program that ran from 1979 through 1994.

In Vu?s case, the escape came in 1980 when he was 22 years old. His parents were originally from the North and moved to what was then South Vietnam to escape the Communist regime in North Vietnam. He was born in 1958 in a small village in Vietnam?s most southern tip, part of a Catholic community that had earlier moved wholesale from the North.

He said he believed the percentage of Catholics among Vietnamese in the United States is high because of that exodus from North to South in 1954, when Vietnam defeated the French in a decisive battle at Dien Bien Phu. In an interview at his parish in mid-May, Vu said that pastors at the time brought their congregations to the South to escape communist repression, and many of those Catholics later escaped and found their way to the United States.

In a 2006 article for New America Media, Andrew Lam, author of *Perfume Dreams: Reflections on the Vietnamese Diaspora*, reported, ?Though only10 percent of Vietnamese in Vietnam are Christians, in America

the figure is 30 percent, and much of that population are Roman Catholics.? He also reported that while Asian Americans make up just 1 percent of the Catholic church in the United States, ?they account for 12 percent of all Catholic seminary students nationwide. And the majority of those are Vietnamese.?

Vu had a desire from an early age to be a priest and entered a minor seminary in the sixth grade. When the war intervened, he escaped first to a refugee camp in Thailand, where he stayed for four months before being reunited in Philadelphia with an aunt, a nun who had come to work and study in the United States prior to the fall of Saigon.

His first degree was in computer science from Temple University in Philadelphia, but he pursued his dream of ordination to the priesthood, eventually ending up at Mount St. Mary in Emmetsburg, Md.

He?s now lived more than half his life in the United States and this son of the East has become quite comfortable as a citizen of the West. For several years before taking over Our Lady of Vietnam Parish, he was an associate and then pastor of a parish that was 90 percent African-American. ?And I was comfortable with that,? he said. He became so comfortable with English-speaking Catholic communities that he has had to ?relearn to work with Vietnamese.?

In his parish of about 650 families, some 1,500 to 1,700 attend Mass on weekends and maintain a strong ministry for children, including weekly Vietnamese language classes taught by Vietnamese nuns.

Vu understands in his own experience the mixed feelings of his parishioners, many of whom arrived after years of incarceration in reeducation camps. His own father, who died in 1990, was jailed for being a police officer for the South Vietnamese government. ?I think many of us feel comfortable here now. We consider this our second home, but Vietnam is always our first home.?

Preserving the language is one way parishioners maintain the link to their first home. Another way, for those who have the money to do so, is to send older children back to Vietnam during the summer to reestablish ties to family members still living there and to experience the culture firsthand.

And there is always the church community and that distinctive building, a reminder of where they came from. Hanging above the front entrance are further reminders of that heritage, gifts sent to Msgr. Long from three different dioceses in Vietnam: a huge drum from Saigon, a bell from Hanoi and a gong from Hue.

Tom Roberts, NCR editor at large, is traveling the country reporting on parish life. He is on the first of several trips he plans to take, this time moving through Ohio, eastward into New Jersey and on to the nation?s capital. His e-mail address is troberts@ncronline.org. Read the full series here: **In Search of the Emerging Church** [1].

Follow Tom Roberts on his journey "In Search of the Emerging Church." Sign up to **receive an e-mail alert** [2] when his stories are posted to this series. If you already receive e-mail alerts from NCR, click on the button that says "update my profile."

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