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Thai Camillian nuns extend their reach

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RATCHABURI, Thailand ? It is well known that Thailand, being a ?mission country,? has many foreign missioners. Less well known is the fact that the Thai Church itself sends missioners abroad.

One example is two Thai nuns, who were working in a hospital caring for people with AIDS in Haiti when a powerful earthquake struck earlier this year. The two Camillian nuns, who had been in the Caribbean country since 2001, remained to care for survivors.

Besides Haiti, the Thai nuns from the Order of the Ministers of the Sick, popularly known as Camillians, have also sent missioners to Albania and India.

?The mission of the Camillian nuns is to support disadvantaged people excluded by society, not only in Thailand but anywhere in the world,? said Sister Suchitra Ngamwong, head of the congregation in Thailand, which is based in Ratchaburi, west of Bangkok.

She said Albania was the first mission country for the Thai Camillians. Two nuns have been in Albania since 1994 serving sick people and children with disabilities, as well as running projects to support mothers.

?In the beginning, our nuns had to stay in a car park without water or electricity. But now we have our own home from which we go out to visit mothers and children, and various sectors support us since they recognize the value of our work,? Sister Suchitra recalled.

?Albania is still a poor country and there are many marginalized people,? she said of the former communist country in southeastern Europe.

Another two Thai Camillian nuns have been working in Ranchi, capital of India?s Jharkhand state, for five years. They went there as social workers and live with Indian Camillian nuns. They visit the poor, elderly and women every day, give counseling and basic medical care, and send serious cases to the hospital.

Understanding poor and marginalized people

Speaking about her six nuns abroad, Sister Suchitra remarked: ?They understand the difficulties faced by poor and marginalized people. They learn how to be with them like Jesus Christ.?

On whether more Thai Camillians would be sent abroad, she said this is difficult because few are joining the congregation now.

However, the congregation does plan to make its overseas missions more formal ? by having nuns serve abroad for a fixed term of four to six years each. Presently, nuns doing missionary work stay abroad for as long as they can.

The Camillian nuns, established in Thailand in 1974, now have 36 members, including those abroad. They operate two hospitals ? in Ratchaburi and in Bangkok. They also run homes and centers for the elderly, poor youths, leprosy patients and people with HIV and AIDS in several parts of the country.

Bishop John Bosco Panya Kritcharoen of Ratchaburi, president of the Thai Bishops? Commission for the Mission, told UCA News, ?We are glad and ready to support in any way those nuns doing missionary work in poor countries.?

He noted that besides the Camillian nuns, Thai Redemptorists have also sent missioners to Laos, the Salesians have missioners in Cambodia and Laos, and the Thai Missionary Society (TMS), which comes under the Catholic Bishops? Conference of Thailand, has sent diocesan priests to Cambodia.

However the bishop admitted that fewer people are joining the Religious life and it is not easy to increase the number of Thai missioners.

Nevertheless he looks forward to the expected approval of TMS? constitution, after which it would be a formal congregation with its own capacity-building center for overseas missionary work.

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