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Nuns bring Christmas joy to Vietnamese orphans, disadvantaged children

Joachim Pham | Dec. 21, 2013
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Local sisters and other Catholic groups held a charity fair Dec. 15 to bring Christmas joy to orphans and disadvantaged children.

Orphans from church-run homes and children whose parents are infected with HIV/AIDS, 120 in all, played traditional games of chance and skill and "bought" food, soft drinks, milk, confectionaries, clothes, children's books, notebooks, pens and toys. Each child was given 50 tokens to "buy" the goods and play games at the fair, held in the compound of Holy Family Church run by the Society of Divine Word priests in Nha Trang, central Vietnam.

Vinh, a Buddhist, said sisters visited her and suggested she take her three grandchildren, ages 2 to 9, to the fair.

"They bought milk, confectionary and toys that I cannot afford to give them," she said. The children's father died from HIV/AIDS and their mother was infected after stepping on a used needle on the beach. The children's mother is too weak to work.

Vinh earns 40,000 dong (U.S. $1.90) a day by selling street coffee to support her family. Two of the children attend a local school, which Vinh said does not know the family's background with HIV/AIDS for fear of discrimination.

"We are happy to come to the fair, where we are respected and loved by others," Vinh said with a smile, watching her grandchildren playing games.

Sr. Mary Nguyen Thi Phuc of the Secular Institute of the Sacred Heart of Jesus said her institute worked with local groups -- Catholic college students, the Boy Scouts and Divine Word novices -- to organize the event. The Boy Scout members oversaw the games; college students sold goods, danced and entertained the children; and novices gave advice on which goods to buy or played games.

"We cooperated closely in the planning of the fair and (saw) that mutual cooperation is the key to succeed in serving the poor. We will continue to hold such an event in the future," Phuc said. "We are happy that many local benefactors supported our work and provided free goods and money to the fair."

At the fair, children wrote their hopes and dreams for the Christmas season and the coming new year on pieces of colorful paper. Minh Xuan, an orphan boy, wrote on a piece of green paper: "I dream people love one another and have a wish to study well and to be a doctor in the future."

Although Christmas is not a national holiday in the communist country, many local Catholics take Christmas Day off to attend Mass and have Christmas parties with family members and friends. In some provinces, government authorities organize end-of-term exams before or after Christmas so students can enjoy the global

celebration. Shopping centers attract customers with Christmas carols and decorations of trees, Santa Claus, angels, reindeers and snowmen.

On Dec. 10, the Vietnam Record Book Center granted a certificate to the country's tallest Christmas tree, which is 98 feet tall, weighs 5 tons and is strung with 100,000 LED lights. The tree is located in a major urban area in Hanoi.

[Joachim Pham is an *NCR* correspondent based in Vietnam.]

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