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Vietnamese nuns work with internal migrants for human promotion

Joachim Pham | Jan. 17, 2014
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For the past decade, Lovers of the Holy Cross of Cho Quan Sr. Elizabeth Huynh Thi Uu has been paying visits two or three times a week to groups of Vietnamese migrant workers at Saint Paul Church to provide pastoral care.

"Other religious and I offer catechism courses to those who want to convert to Catholicism, give marriage preparations to couples, and teach basic catechism to their children," Uu said. The sisters also hold seminars on human values and living skills for migrant workers.

Saint Paul Parish, located on the outskirts of Ho Chi Minh City, is a parish where migrants outnumber local Catholics, 8,000 to 5,000.

Joseph Mary Vu Van Hung, a lay leader of Saint Paul Parish, said the parish offers free courses to migrants in English, computer skills and living values and gives basic education to those who are illiterate. The parish also provides clean water and affordable wedding services.

Hung said local Catholics provide free lunch for about 50 people on Sundays, and they hold entertainment programs for those who have no money to return home for the Lunar New Year. They also set up Catholic altars at migrants' boarding houses.

Uu, 62, who obtained a master's degree in parish ministry in the Philippines, said local migrants sell used items they collect to raise funds for their activities. They go on annual pilgrimages to religious sites, host summer camps, and visit homes for disadvantaged people and retired clergy.

"These activities aim to provide migrant workers opportunities to express their love, respect and gratitude to others," Uu said.

They also gather weekly to visit and pray at their boarding houses and help each other when faced with illnesses or financial problems.

During the archdiocese's Week of Migrants observation earlier this month, migrant workers gathered to share the Word of God and attend eucharistic adorations at local churches and their boarding houses. They also did charitable work and visited poor children, people with physical disabilities and retired religious.

Sitting on the ground while attending the Jan. 5 opening ceremony of the Week of Migrants, Uu said most of the migrants are from poor families across the country and have only finished primary or secondary school. Although they work hard at local garment and shoe companies or as housemaids, they only make a meager living.

Some have well-paid jobs, but some have no job at all. Uu sends the unemployed to study English, computer

and other vocational skills, such as making clothes and hairdressing.

She said many are interested in religious life but are unable to join local religious congregations because of their poor education -- local congregations admit those who finish high school or college.

Maria Nguyen Thi Tam, 29, a sixth-grader from northern Nghe An province, said she has failed to study further to join a congregation because for the past seven years, she has worked for a local garment company to send money home to support her five siblings.

"I am grateful to nuns and local Catholics who love me as their child and teach me how to live a good life," said Tam, who serves as an organist in weekend Masses for migrants at Saint Paul Church.

Mary Nguyen Thi Hanh, 30, also from Nghe An, said she moved to Ho Chi Minh City in 2005 and earns her living as a housemaid. With scholarships from the nuns, she is able to study medicine courses.

"My life changed thanks to nuns' support. Now I am a novice of a secular institute that serves poor patients," Hanh said while preparing costumes for cultural performance at the opening ceremony of the Week of Migrants.

Ho Chi Minh City archdiocese reaches out to migrants

Throughout the archdiocese, religious men and women from six congregations work with migrants at Saint Paul Parish, which receives 160 converts to Catholicism annually.

At other churches, local congregations provide pastoral care, good advice and vocational skills for migrants, too.

Coadjutor Archbishop Paul Bui Van Doc of the Ho Chi Minh City archdiocese presided at the Jan. 5 opening ceremony of the Week of Migrants, attended by 2,000 people at the compound of the Don Bosco-run center in the city.

Doc asked local priests and religious to cooperate closely with one another in bringing equal opportunities, solidarity, fraternity and justice to 150,000 Catholic migrants among a total of 2 million internal migrants in Vietnam's southern metropolis. Most internal migrants are from throughout the countryside and move to the city for economic reasons.

The archbishop, who heads the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Vietnam, urged migrants "not to demand the local church serve them but to actively work with its people for a better society."

Afterward, participants discussed family values and challenges and studied Pope Francis' message [1] for the World Day of Migrants and Refugees, then shared their own stories on faith practice and gave a cultural performance.

Mary Hoang Thi Thanh Xuan, 26, told the gathering that she had been a non-Catholic and that her Catholic boyfriend abandoned her while she was attending a catechism course. "I was very disappointed with him, but I tried to finish the course and got baptized," she said.

Xuan, who is from the central highlands, attends church-run activities for migrants and serves as a choir member at a parish. "I am happy to be a Catholic, although I walk alone 45 minutes from my house to meet other people at the church."

Because of the work being done by women religious and supported by the laity in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnamese migrants have better opportunities.

In "Migrants and Refugees: Towards a better world [1]," Pope Francis said, "Never lose the hope that you too are facing a more secure future, that on your journey you will encounter an outstretched hand, and that you can experience fraternal solidarity and the warmth of friendship."

The local closing ceremony was Jan. 12 at Saint Paul Church. The Roman Catholic church celebrates the 100th World Day of Migrants and Refugees on Sunday.

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

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[1] http://www.news.va/en/news/popes-message-for-word-day-of-migrants-and-refugee