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Sisters in Vietnam help the poor enjoy a happier lunar new year

Joachim Pham | Jan. 31, 2014
Hue, Vietnam

Thanks to the efforts of local Catholic sisters in Vietnam, HIV/AIDS patients and others in need find simple pleasures during the festival of Tet (Lunar New Year). This help comes during an especially difficult time for many Vietnamese recovering from an economic downturn in 2012.

Hai Quyen (real name withheld) in her winter clothes enthusiastically clapped in time to the music, repeating words of the song Xuan Da Ve (Spring Just Comes) while watching traditional dances performed by a group of nuns.

Her face also lit up while she was talking with other people to wish them the best in the Lunar New Year.

Hai Quyen, 37, was among 152 people with HIV/AIDS who attended the year-end party held at a convent of Daughters of Our Lady of Immaculate Conception in central Hue City on Jan. 22.

They were treated to national dishes prepared by nuns and given sugar, cooking oil, candied ginger, Tet cards and money in traditional lucky red envelopes.

?The party is keeping me warm in spite of the cold weather,? Hai Quyen, mother of two, said. ?It is nice to meet people here and exchange best wishes on the Tet festival.

?We are deeply grateful to the nuns and volunteers for the special meeting. The Tet festival is an occasion for family members to reunite, visit their relatives and have parties. Without food, it is a bad sign for the new year,? she noted.

Hai Quyen said she started to sell plastic items for a living in 2012 after local nuns had offered her five million dong ($238.00 US) to get started. Her two daughters study at a local school, and they live together with her mother in a dingy 24-square-meter house in the Phong Dien district.

The woman, who was infected with HIV from her husband who died of AIDS in 2012, said that she used to run a small grocery but that it went bankrupt. The stigma of HIV/AIDS is still strong in Vietnam, and local people refused to buy goods from Hai Quyen because they were afraid they would catch the deadly disease from her family.

Sr. Maria Vu Thi Ngoc, who works with people with HIV/AIDS, said nuns had spent weeks producing grape wine, candied ginger and banh tet, a cylinder-shaped glutinous rice cake filled with green bean paste and fat pork that is eaten on the Tet festival.

?Tet is the biggest festival in a year, so we want to try our best to ensure these vulnerable people can fully enjoy the festival,? she noted.

She said that starting last November she and the other sisters collected donations from benefactors, NGOs, and charities at home and abroad.

Sr. Ngoc also said that 19 volunteers were delivering gifts to patients who live in remote villages and could not come to the party.

One of the volunteers, Andrew Nguyen Diem, 52, said he traveled 63 miles last Sunday on his motorbike to visit two patients and give them gifts. ?I am happy to bring Tet joys to patients, even though it is quite cold and it is dangerous to ride on wet roads,? he said.

In Nha Trang City, Sr. Mary Nguyen Thi Phuc of the Secular Institute of the Sacred Heart of Jesus said last weekend she and some benefactors gave rice, banh tet, cooking oil, fish sauce, sugar and 300,000 dong each to 70 people with HIV/AIDS. The patients were also given free medicine for their treatment.

This year?s Tet festival falls from Jan. 31 to Feb. 2, but Tet holidays started Jan. 27 and last for 10 days. During this time, Catholic parishes and congregations throughout the nation visit disadvantaged people and provide them with basic food, winter clothes and money. Recipients include the sick or those with physical disabilities, internal migrant workers and the homeless. Congregations are also holding charity fairs, selling goods at low prices for poor people.

Saint Paul de Chartres Sr. Ephrem Nguyen Thi Luu, 77, from Hue City said she offered 1,000 kilograms of rice and thousands of packages of instant noodles to about 200 people who live on boats on local rivers, work as motorbike taxi drivers, beg on the streets or suffer physical disabilities.

She said those people could not afford to buy and save enough food ahead of the Tet festival, when local markets, schools and agencies are closed.

Wider hardship

Vietnam?s economic situation, while improving, is complicated by recent weather conditions and other factors. Local media reports indicated that Prime Minister Nguyen Tan Dung has been asked to grant 23,889 metric tons of rice (about five million pounds) to people in 15 provinces who face famine during the Tet festival.

A man aged 29 who collected used items for a living was found dead recently in an abandoned house in Da Nang City, central Vietnam. He reportedly died of exposure to the cold.

Vietnam?s gross domestic product (GDP) expanded by 5.4 percent in 2013, up from the 5.2 percent recorded the previous year, but is still below the long-term average of 7 percent and the government?s target of 5.5 percent.

In October, Nguyen Van Binh, Vietnam?s central bank governor, told the International Monetary Fund (IMF) that ?business and production are still in difficulties,? with macroeconomic stability ?not firmly rooted.?

Hundreds of businesses decided not to offer Tet bonus to their workers and even many others could not afford to pay their workers salaries in time, before the banks shut for the holiday.

Many letters appeared in the public opinion column of the state-sponsored Cong Giao va Dan Toc (Catholicism and Nation Weekly) based in Ho Chi Minh City about hardships this year. For example, some readers said that since they had no money to buy bus tickets to return home, they would have to remain in the city and tightly limit their expenses.

Nguyen Thi Loan from the northern province of Thai Binh said she had left home for the city in 2003 to sell foods on streets for a living.

?I have not returned home to see my children for three years, so this year I have to borrow money from my friends to buy bus tickets to go home,? Loan said.

Another reader called Thu Thuy said her children were not getting any Tet bonus from their companies, so she would try to buy some basic foods for the Tet. She said she would not to decorate her house or buy flowers as she has done in the past, so as to ?avoid getting into debt.?

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

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