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Vietnamese nuns commit themselves to serving poor patients

Joachim Pham | Feb. 21, 2014
Hue, Vietnam

On a chilly day with drizzling rain, Conception Sr. Maria Nguyen Thi Hien stood at the gate of the healthcare clinic warmly shaking the hands of each patient who came in.

?We are delighted to welcome all of you. We will try our best to provide medical treatment and loving care for you and to relieve your physical pains,? Hien told them.

Thirty-five healthcare workers from various religious backgrounds and 175 patients attended special celebrations Feb. 11 at the Kim Long clinic based in Hue City in central Vietnam. The event marked the 22nd anniversary of the World Day of the Sick and also observed the feast of Our Lady of Lourdes, the patron saint of the sick. Coincidentally, it is also the clinic?s 22nd anniversary year.

Many elderly patients who traveled to Kim Long from remote villages had to come by three-wheeled cycles, sitting three or four people to a cycle because they did not have enough money to take motorbike taxis.

Patients attended a Mass and picked ?sacred buds? from a tree hung with leaves containing Bible passages offering educational and moral advice. This is a play on a Vietnamese tradition. On the eve of Lunar New Year, or early the next morning, many people go out and pick buds or young leaves from plants in parks and temples in the belief that doing so will bring them good luck and prosperity throughout the year.

While waiting for doctors to see them, patients were also treated to cake and tea and listened to songs performed by sisters and healthcare workers.

This was the first day the clinic run by the Daughters of Our Lady of Immaculate Conception was open again following the Lunar New Year holidays.

Sr. Hien, 52, director of the clinic, said serving ailing people is a way to express God?s great love for human beings, especially the suffering. She also urged patients ?to pray for us to be faithful to our mission.?

Dang Thi Suu, 71, who is from the Quang Dien district, said that since she cannot afford medical insurance or to pay the hospital?s upfront fee of two million dong (US $95), she could not get treatment for her rheumatism. The sisters? clinic provides an important safety net.

?I am recovering from my disease after two weeks of receiving treatment here,? said Suu. ?I am grateful to the nuns who offer me food, medicine and even travel money.?

Sr. Mary Vu Thi Ngoc, the clinic?s coordinator, said this year the sisters plan to install an X-ray machine and equipment to run blood and urine tests. This will save time and allow for quicker diagnoses. Until then, patients will still have to have tests done at state-run hospitals, where fees are high and simple procedures can take all day ? or even two.

She said they will also establish a ?blood bank? and invite young people to donate blood for the sick in need. Last year, some 40 people volunteered to donate their blood to poor patients.

The clinic, founded in 1992, provides free tests, ultrasounds, acupuncture treatments and medicine for patients, including people living with HIV/AIDS. On average, the clinic treats 20,000 people a year. Benefactors at home and abroad cover its expenses.

The clinic?s staff also goes out to provide medical treatment to thousands of people in remote areas, including ethnic minority groups. They offer wheelchairs to people with physical disabilities and give financial support for heart patients? operations. They provide food, mosquito nets and clothes to the blind and people with mental problems or leprosy.

Redemptorist Fr. John Baptist Nguyen Thanh Hung, a chaplain who ministers to the sick and people with HIV/AIDS in Hue City, invited non-Catholic patients there that day to pray to Mother Mary to ease their sufferings. Some 20 such patients stood praying in front of a statue of Our Lady of La Vang that was erected in the compound of the clinic in November.

Fr. Hung, 45, said God always answers the prayers of the sick. He recalled a time last year when he asked a lung cancer patient to pray for parishioners who had stopped practicing their faith to return to the church. A week later, some 200 people had come to confession.

He urged patients to consider their ailments as the grace of God and to use that grace to do useful things for themselves and others.

Church's consolation to patients

On Feb. 11, Bishop Joseph Nguyen Tan Tuoc of Phu Cuong Diocese celebrated the feast of Our Lady of Lourdes at Tan Dinh Church in Ho Chi Minh City. Some 1,000 present patients were anointed with oil and given gifts.

?Today I am anointed with oil and I get spiritual strength and bravery to accept my fate,? said Therese Le Thanh Thuy. ?I am happy to carry a cross as Jesus did.?

Thuy, 45, suffers from deformation of her legs and arms and was abandoned by her parents when she was three months old. She said she prays to God and Mary to heal her poor eyesight and sore throat; she has no money to cover medical expenses.

The 1.4-meter-high (4.6-foot) woman said she saw many people at the celebration suffering from total blindness or final stage cancers or who otherwise have lives that are worse than hers.

?Here I was also given milk, sugar and cookies. I am very happy because I have never been given such gifts in my life before,? she said while waiting her friends to carry her to a home for people with physical disabilities.

In his message for this year?s World Day of the Sick, whose theme is Faith and Charity, Pope Francis asked Mother Mary to help the sick to bear their sufferings in fellowship with Jesus Christ and to support all those who care for them.

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

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