

# Vietnamese Catholics endure sweat, work for Marian Days

written by Maryanne Meyerriecks |



FORT SMITH — Every August Vietnamese Catholics from all over the United States and abroad come to the small town of Carthage, Mo., population 12,000, to celebrate Marian Days. Pilgrims attend large, outdoor daily Masses, reconciliation, prayer services and nightly concerts of Vietnamese folk and popular music.

The Blessed Virgin Mary holds a special place in the hearts of Vietnamese Catholics.

Throughout the 19th century, Catholics were persecuted by the Vietnamese monarchy. Our Lady of La Vang first appeared to peasants who had fled to the forests of central Vietnam in 1798, the year the persecutions began. Many people also credit Mary for their protection as they fled the country during the Vietnam War.

“If you visit Vietnam today, you will see many churches, but worship is covert,” Nhat Le, leader of Fort Smith’s Vietnamese Catholic Community, said. “When people were running away from Communism in boats, some saw Mary’s picture in the clouds, protecting them during hurricanes and storms.”

Dozens of priests and brothers from the Congregation of the Mother Co-Redemptrix relocated from Vietnam to Missouri in 1975. Three years later, the Vietnamese religious order held its first Marian Days. Only a few hundred families attended. This Aug. 2-5, 70,000 Vietnamese people attended, making it one of the largest Catholic festivals in the United States.

The Vietnamese community at Christ the King Church in Fort Smith was one of the event’s principal food providers.

About 90 parishioners, ages 4 months to 91 years old, attended and worked at the event.

“We begin cooking a few months in advance, especially in the last two weeks,” Le said. “When we get there we work from 4 a.m. until midnight each day. Father Peter (Quang Le, associate pastor) comes at midnight and says Mass for all of us.”

After food, transportation and refrigeration costs are taken into account, the Vietnamese ministry, which has provided food at Marian Days for six years, raises between \$40,000 and \$50,000.

The group has a special goal in mind — setting up a place of its own on the Christ the King Church grounds.

"If we didn't have devotion to the Church, we couldn't do it," Le said. "Working 20 hours a day in 100 degree heat for four days is hard. The first year, we hired a few people to help us and they couldn't do it. They left."

The Vietnamese Catholic community's dream of having its own building began several years ago when they bought a building in a rural area of Van Buren. The building, which is currently for sale, was in bad shape. Bishop Peter J. Sartain had suggested it might be best if the community could meet its needs on Christ the King's grounds and they are working with Father Tom Elliott, Christ the King's pastor, to see how that goal can be accomplished.

"We are not only Catholics, we are Vietnamese Catholics," Le said. "We have to carry our own culture to the next generation."

Their history and cultural heritage, struggling to maintain their faith despite persecution and Communist domination, is something precious they want to pass on to their children.

Father Peter Quang Le, who has ministered to the Vietnamese at Christ the King for 10 years, is "to me, #1 in following God," Nhat Le said.

Father Le said his ministry is focused on educating the children in the faith.

"We bring, we lead our children to come to God and God knows how to do, how to lead our children," he said. "It is really difficult to invite our children and everybody come to God to pray. It is easy to invite everyone go out to eat, to watch movies and go fishing."

After the congregation meets for 2 p.m. Sunday Mass, they participate for different activities afterwards. The Vietnamese Eucharistic Youth Group meets in the gym for two hours, the choir practices in church, and various other meetings take place in whatever space is available.

Father Elliott agrees that Christ the King needs more room. It recently began a feasibility study for an expansion of its physical plant, and he said the entire parish's space requirements would be met in the new plan. Vietnamese religious art and decorative elements will be incorporated into the design, he said.

"The good news is that Christ the King is growing and by the blessings of God we're able to provide for the needs of all the members of our parish, both Anglo and Vietnamese," Father Elliott said.