Columns
Ministry

Children at the Binh Trieu Development Center receive gifts from the volunteer group. (Mary Nguyen Thi Phuong Lan)

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My community, the Dominican Missionary Sisters of the Phu Cuong Diocese in Vietnam, has done social work for more than 20 years at the Binh Trieu Development Center; presently we work with nearly 300 poor children in Ho Chi Minh City.

Most of the children are from immigrant families from different areas in Vietnam. The children immigrate with their parents who hope to earn a better living and have a better life in Ho Chi Minh City. Because they are immigrants, the children do not have the documents they need to attend the public school.

In 1993, Binh Trieu was still a neighborhood of Sai Gon, one that was sparsely populated and often flooded. Following his dream, Tran Van Soi (Mr. Thomas), a founder of the Friends for Street Children program, chose the Binh Trieu Center to start "charitable" classes for poor children. Students are not charged a school fee for these classes, and they pay only half of the cost of textbooks and supplies. If the children are not able to pay, the sisters waive the costs.

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Mr. Thomas saw that the classes would not only provide the children with an education, but also would address other aspects of their lives — such as their health — and would show them how to live healthily, joyfully and well.

We Dominican sisters are still faithful to the spirit of the founder, continuing the charitable classes and warmly welcoming all children from families living in poverty or coming from other difficult situations, and we help them enroll in the center so they can have a better future.

Our center's curriculum follows the curriculum and policies of the public elementary schools — using the same textbooks and giving tests for all grades both semesters. They also learn extra English and have computer and life skills classes. Our hope is that later, children who manage to get the documents they need, can catch up with the classes at the public schools.

When children succeed in their studies, they get a prize or scholarship at a ceremony at the end of the school year.

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  Members of a volunteer group dance with the children at the Christmas festival at Binh Trieu Development Center. (Mary Nguyen Thi Phuong Lan)

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Mrs. France, a volunteer English teacher, talks to the children at the opening summer class. (Mary Nguyen Thi Phuong Lan)

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A Japanese group of volunteers talk to the children about tooth care. (Mary Nguyen Thi Phuong Lan)

We also invite some volunteer groups to the center, to talk with the children. Normally, the volunteers come to visit the children at the Mid-Autumn Festival, Christmas, or Easter. They often have activities to bring childhood joy, confidence, and happiness for the poor children: singing, dancing, telling humorous or educational stories to help them be good human beings in the future. And perhaps most notably (for the children!) they also give gifts to each child on these occasions.

Children are also given health examinations by foreign volunteers. For example, every year a team of Japanese doctors and youth volunteers come to the Binh Trieu Center to teach the children how to brush their teeth and how to protect their teeth better; doctors examine, fix and extract the children's decayed teeth. At the end they give the children toothpaste, medicines and brushes to prevent tooth decay.

For about two months in the summer, we have free classes for poor children from 5th to 10th grades. The summer courses are intended to encourage students not to waste their time playing games or getting into mischief, and to teach them useful things.

We also invite volunteers with expertise in math and English to help students review what they have learned and prepare them for the next school year. In particular, we bring in some native English speakers to teach conversational English. It is very helpful for students to practice or improve their speaking skill with teachers from other countries.

Additionally, the center also provides scholarships for the students coming from poverty, and encourages their parents to join the Saving Credit Fund which helps them create a better and financially more stable life for themselves.

Looking back on our more than 20 years of doing social work and helping children in poverty, our sisters constantly thank God for giving us his abundant graces, particularly for sending us volunteers, charitable organizations and benefactors from inside and outside of Vietnam so that we can complete the mission of the church and that of our congregation: to bring God's joy and happiness to the poor. "Whenever you did this for these little ones who are my brothers and sisters, you did it for me" (Mathew 25:40).

[Mary Nguyen Thi Phuong Lan is a Dominican Missionary Sister of Phu Cuong in Vietnam. After studying at universities in Vietnam and at De La Salle University in Manila, the Philippines, she worked in formation programs in Vietnam. Now, she is in charge of caring for 32 orphans at Binh Trieu Development Center in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam. She was a contributor to the first round of the GSR series The Life.]

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