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Children enjoy the different foods at the Christmas festival in the Archdiocese of Ho Chi Minh City. (Nguyen)



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"Merry Christmas" is a greeting used by millions of people all over the world to express their desire for another person to be joyful, and have a wonderful holiday with all their family members.

Besides that, Christmas gives us a chance to show our concern and share good things with the poor, the suffering, disadvantaged children and others.

Every year on the Christmas festival, the Caritas Department of the Sai Gon Archdiocese (also known as the Archdiocese of Ho Chi Minh City) holds a Christmas Day festival for all children at centers located in the archdiocese, including Catholic and non-Catholic children. Most of them are cared for and fed by sisters from different congregations in the archdiocese.

Every year, the Caritas Department of Sai Gon welcomes the numerous children who attend this Christmas festival — around 1,000 children or more. Most of the children are from special circumstances. Some of them were abused by their parents (for example, splashed with boiling water) and then abandoned; others were left crying in the hospital: they have never felt the warmth and sweetness of their parents. Some have genetic diseases, and some have severe disabilities; all were nurtured by the sisters belonging to different congregations, such as the Charity Missionary Sisters, the Dominican Missionary Sisters and the Paul Sisters.

In addition to children with special circumstances, there are also adults. Some have congenital disabilities; being with the children brings them joyful smiles.

Understanding that their lives lack the love of parents and relatives, the Caritas Department of the Sai Gon Archdiocese organizes a Christmas day festival at the Archdiocesan Pastoral Center, to bring happiness and joy to these children. We hope this event gives them joyous childhood memories. As Jesus Christ lay in the poor manger, welcomed with joy by all, just so children today are shared and loved by everyone.

Archbishop Joseph Nguyen Nang, present at a recent Christmas Day festival for children with special circumstances, encouraged them with the thought that "God is always merciful, the mystery of the Son of God was born into the world in poverty to love and share human suffering, and you are full of joy today because I feel that you are greatly loved, hoping that you become useful persons for society and church in the future."



Archbishop Joseph Nguyen Nang shares some encouraging words with children at a Christmas Day festival. (Nguyen)

In addition, this festival is a good chance for volunteers and parishioners of the archdiocese to share their love for less fortunate children by providing many game stalls, free souvenir stalls and cooking different dishes to serve them. One of the parishioners said, "On this occasion, I feel happy to make fried chicken for children because this is their favorite, and this dish is always out of stock first." She added, "This is also the Christmas gift that I want to send to the poor."

When I interviewed one of the kids attending the festival, he said, "I am very excited and looking forward to coming to the pastoral center to enjoy the fried chicken, play many games, get souvenirs, and watch the Christmas drama and dance — especially to play the lottery for Christmas gifts."

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I asked a 16-year-old girl, one of the orphans staying with the Charity Missionary Sisters, "How do you feel about the festival Christmas day?" she said she was very grateful to the sisters for welcoming her and her young brother.

Several years ago, she and her brother had to sell lottery tickets to feed her grandmother. Her parents had died in an accident and she lived with her grandmother in a rented house. When her grandmother passed away, she was not able to pay to rent the house, and the landlord demanded his house back. Then, she and her brother had to sleep down in the sewers after a day of selling lottery tickets.

Just by chance, while selling lottery tickets in the church yard, she met a kind parishioner. Understanding the difficulty of their lives, he took her and her brother to the Charity Missionary Sisters center on Christmas Day. The sisters welcomed them warmly and gave her and her brother Christmas gifts. This made an impression that she will never forget. Attending this Christmas day festival, she feels very happy because she is loved by many people, especially the Charity Missionary Sisters.

On behalf of the sisters who are in charge of caring of children with special circumstances, we would like to express our heartfelt gratitude to Archbishop Joseph Nguyen Nang, the Caritas Department of the Sai Gon Archdiocese, volunteers and parishioners of the archdiocese for organizing a yearly Christmas day festival for children. It is a meaningful program that shares God's love for everyone, especially the poor children. May God's love and peace be with you always. Merry Christmas!