News
Ministry



Sr. Anna Vo Thi Ngoi Khen (second from left) and followers of other faiths stand in front of a big crèche on Dec. 12 at her convent in Thua Thien Hue province. (Joachim Pham)

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With people in the region beset by devastating floods and effects of the lingering COVID-19 pandemic, sisters from the Daughters of Our Lady of the Visitation convent in Tien Thanh thought that nativity sets would help bring some joy and hope to area residents amid the difficulties.

Seven sisters and some local youths made more than 60 nativity scenes since Advent began Nov. 28 through Dec. 11. The crèches, about 30 inches by 27 inches, are made of cardboard boxes, thick paper, bamboo and Christmas decorations, and include nativity figurines.

"We have offered all those crèches to poor families, elderly people without relatives and patients as our Christmas gifts so as to console them and bring them Christmas joy," said Sr. Anna Vo Thi Ngoi Khen, head of the convent based in Kim Doi Parish in the central province of Thua Thien Hue.

Families were also given 200,000 dong (about $9) to get basic food to celebrate the coming Christmas, Khen said.

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The parish serves 500 Catholics among a population of 7,000. Restrictions to isolate villages infected with the Delta variant of COVID-19 in the region were lifted on Nov. 20.

The nun said local people have been extremely depressed by the prolonged pandemic and floods that destroyed their crops and houses in late November, and consequently many of them start to ignore their faith life. They fear having no jobs and the difficulties next year may bring.

"Crèches are absolutely indispensable to local Catholic families in the Christmas season as they bind the material and spiritual worlds together. However, this year many feel down in the dumps and are not interested in making crèches. We want to help them maintain the Christmas spirit," the 46-year-old nun said.

Anna Nguyen Thi Hoa, 84, said her granddaughter from Da Nang died of COVID-19 in 2020. She lives with her grandson, who is not Catholic, in a 400-square-foot house

provided by benefactors.

"We are really delighted to be given a crèche by the nuns, who bring Christmas atmosphere to our home," Hoa said. The care of the sisters and reminder of Christmas eases some of her grief for her dead relative.

She said she also receives food and money from the nuns.



People sell fish for a living in cold weather at Dong Ba Market in Hue. (Joachim Pham)

Khen said many villagers could not land jobs in Hue and have only two simple meals per day. The sister said the nuns provide rice, bread, fish, meat, vegetables and milk for people in need.

Anna Tran Thi Tuyen from Van Quat village said floods in November washed away all fish on her farm and destroyed more than 37 pounds of rice. She and her husband have to sell duck eggs and dumplings all day to support their three children.

Tuyen said they have no time to make crèches in their homes to celebrate the coming Christmas as they did in the past. "We gratefully get a crèche from the nuns. That is a generous gift to us in this Christmas," she said.

The Daughters of Our Lady of the Visitation nuns also held a special gathering for 36 single pregnant women on Dec. 10 at their Thien Xuan convent in Luong Van parish in Phu Vang district.



Two young nuns from Missionaries of Charity of Vinh feed an elderly woman and her son in Ha Tinh province on Dec 12. (Courtesy of Teresa Tran Thi Oanh)

Sr. Mary Bui Thi Vinh, head of the convent, said participants prayed with candles in hands, listened to a Bible passage, sang carols, received Christmas gifts and enjoyed

a hearty meal. Gifts including cash, medical oil, clothes and shampoos costing 2.5 million dong (about $109) each.

Vinh said the donations come from benefactors and families whose members have joined the congregation.

The pregnant women, who live with their families, are from Hope Group, set up in 2016 by the nuns. Members meet monthly at the convent to share their joy and sadness and help one another to overcome challenges.

"The gathering is an opportunity for those women, most of them are Buddhists and followers of other indigenous faiths, to understand the meaning of Christmas and be interested in Catholicism," she said, adding that Christmas joy will lend them emotional strength to overcome the pandemic's negative effects.

The nuns started to work among local people in 2015, visiting and offering material support, providing scholarships and giving health care to the elderly. They also furnish the pregnant teens with accommodations, food and health care until the birth as a way to keep them from having abortions.

In previous Advents, the nuns took Hope Group members to visit and offer incense at Ngoc Hoi cemetery, where 45,000 aborted fetuses have been buried. They also have made pilgrimages to the national Shrine of Our Lady of La Vang in Quang Tri province. This year they could not do such tours, to avoid COVID-19 infections.



Daughters of Our Lady of the Visitation nuns and young Catholics offer a crèche to 84-year-old Anna Nguyen Thi Hoa at her house. (Joachim Pham)

A Buddhist participant whose family name is Hoang said she felt the warm atmosphere of the coming Christmas. "The gathering is a chance for us to meet one another and maintain sisterhood among us. We are really appreciative of all the help the nuns have given us," she said.

Vinh, 53, said 18 additional people, including five women from the group, have embraced Catholicism since the nuns started to serve in the parish.

Floods have been a major issue in some regions, said Missionaries of Charity of Vinh Sr. Teresa Tran Thi Oanh from Ninh Cuong community based in Huong Khe district of Ha Tinh province. Local people lack clean water after floods destroyed water supply systems in the region in late November. Poor people must use polluted flood water as they have no money to buy clean water, she added.

"We daily produce 50 to 100 bottles of clean water, 20 liters each, and deliver free of charge to people in need regardless of their background," Oanh said.

The 36-year-old nun said the sisters use motorbikes to deliver water to the elderly and people with physical disabilities.

On Saturdays during this Advent, the community of five nuns and four novices visit and offer food to 50 families whose members live with mental disabilities, she said. Most of patients have mental disorders at birth and their parents had been in the military. The families face starvation, as the COVID-19 pandemic has left their relatives unemployed for months and other charity groups could not offer them donations.

One particularly painful case involves a woman in her 70s who looks after her three adult children, who have mental disabilities.

"Many shed tears of happiness when we visit and hand food to them. They feel warmth and love of Christmas in this cold winter," she said, adding that the nuns will continue visiting them after Christmas.