News
Ministry

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Editor's note: *This story was originally published by UCA News.*

A group of Catholic nuns in Thailand have launched a feeding program in the country's largest slum in the capital Bangkok to assist hundreds of poor people for a token fee.

The nuns from the Congregation of the Sacred Heart of Jesus began the "One Hand Meal for One Baht" project in the slum in Bangkok's Khlong Toei district, Radio Veritas Asia reported on Sept. 21.

Sacred Heart Sister Orapin said the initiative was in response to Pope Francis' call to reach out to the poor on the borders of society.

"It implores us to take action for them. We do not have to go too far to meet the poor because our school is only a few blocks away from the biggest slum area in Bangkok," said Sister Orapin.

The nuns provide the food monthly to around 200 people in the slum area for only one Thai Baht (US $0.027) per meal making it virtually free for residents.

Sister Orapin said the fee per meal collected was "a symbolic participation fee" to make people feel that they are part of a project and not "passive recipients of charity."

Dubbed the "dialogue of life," the project aims to help the poor, understand their problems, and open a channel for interreligious dialogue among the people.

The Congregation of the Sacred Heart of Jesus nuns — based in Bangkok — is well known in Thailand for running some of the largest and best-rated schools in the country.

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The nuns say as part of their community outreach program they have been visiting families and observing firsthand the problems they face.

The feeding program in the slum is the brainchild of the superior of the congregation who decided to pair up with Xaverian missionary priests who have a community in Khlong Toei.

"We cannot solve all their problems because we have other commitments, but we can show empathy and offer some relief as they struggle for food every day," said Sister Orapin.

She noted the COVID-19 pandemic and the lockdowns wreaked havoc on residents, making survival a challenge. Some of the residents faced violence, drug abuse, and, sometimes, extreme poverty.

Most of the people residing in Khlong Toei were from villages who migrated to the city for a new beginning.

Many of the migrants returned to their hometowns and resumed farming, but those who could not leave were stuck in the slum.

The Khlong Toei slum area near the Bangkok Port is where many of the bustling city's poor are located. It has around 100,000 residents crammed into a land area of roughly 1.5 square kilometers that is relatively low-lying and prone to flooding during monsoons.

The Asian Development Bank estimated that around 6.8% of Thailand's population lived below the national poverty line in 2020.

The unemployment rate increased to 1.4% in 2021 from 0.7% in 2019, according to data from the International Labour Organization in June 2022.

As of 2019, Thailand had some 388,000 Catholics, accounting for about half a percent of its estimated 69 million population in the Buddhist-majority nation.

The Catholic Church in Thailand has two archdioceses, nine dioceses, and 502 parishes.