News
Ministry
Religious Life



Sr. Kimberly Nguyen, second from left, is a vocation director of Lovers of the Holy Cross of Los Angeles. Here, she poses with Sr. Oanh Nguyen, far right, and three biological sisters — Monica Do, Lorraine Do, and Catherine Do — at the Aug. 4-7 Marian Days celebration in Carthage, Missouri. (Peter Tran)



by Peter Tran

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Vocation directors of various women's religious congregations say personal contact with young people — inviting them to weekend retreats or to a "come and see" event to experience community life in addition to continuing phone calls, emails, or other social media outreach — is important in vocation work.

Young people "are searching for their purpose, their sense of happiness," said Sr. Kimberly Nguyen of Lovers of the Holy Cross of Los Angeles. "They try to experience God in daily life."

Sister Kimberly, Sr. Mai-Dung Nguyen of the Dominican Sisters of Peace, Sr. Tuyet-Mai Nguyen of Daughters of Our Lady of the Holy Rosary, and Sr. Janine Van Tran of Congregation of Mary Queen, all vocation directors and Vietnamese American sisters, spoke to Global Sisters Report about their congregations' vocation ministries during the 43rd Marian Days celebration Aug. 4-7 in Carthage, Missouri.

High school and college students and young adults were among the tens of thousands of Vietnamese Americans from across the United States who came to this religious and cultural festival, attending outdoor services and workshops or trying snacks and drinks from various food stalls.



A booth run by Lovers of the Holy Cross of Thu Duc sells religious gifts and toys at the Aug. 4-7 Marian Days celebration in Carthage, Missouri. The congregation, which is based in Vietnam, has several sisters in the United States earning degrees in theology and spiritual direction. (Peter Tran)

Many visited booths of congregations of women religious, who took the opportunity to connect with young women who seek purpose, a sense of belonging, opportunities for service, and a strong relationship with God and may consider religious life.

"It is a blessing to listen to all the stories from the young people," said Sister Mai-Dung, who has been a vocation director of the Dominican Sisters of Peace since 2019.

The Marian gathering is a great opportunity for sisters to interact with youth from all over the country, said Sister Kimberly, who added it is "good to see the youth actively participating in adoration, liturgy, praise-and-worship sessions. After all,

they are the church."

She said she has contacted more than 100 young people in the course of a year in her vocation work.



Tens of thousands of Vietnamese Americans participated in 43 Marian Days Celebration, held Aug. 4-7, at Carthage, Missouri. This religious pilgrimage is being held annually except 2020 and 2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The event included Eucharistic adoration, Mass, confession, workshops for youth and families, and Marian procession. It is organized by priests of the Congregation of the Mother of the Redeemer. (Peter Tran)

Personal contact with candidates is important, Sister Tuyet-Mai said. Last year, she said the Daughters of Our Lady of the Holy Rosary invited 15 candidates to a come-and-see experience. The congregation continued to stay in contact with them during their discernment to let them see the sisters' daily life.

"We posted perpetual vows events, jubilees, Christmas and Easter celebrations, our pictures, and our reflections" to the congregation's website and Facebook page, she said.

Although the sisters' ministry is to promote vocations to religious life, they find their role is more of a spiritual guide.

"We help them discern whether religious life is theirs or not," Sister Mai-Dung said. "Some women who tried our lifestyle realized that this is not their call. They told us that they have learned a lot about a community life. Now they are married and are happy about it."



Sr. Mai-Dung Nguyen is a vocation director of the Dominican Sisters of Peace. The Dominican Sisters are working in 22 U.S. states, Peru, and Nigeria. They have about 400 members and 750 associates and are part of the worldwide Order of Preachers. (Peter Tran)

Sister Tuyet-Mai said when she asks young women if they want to join religious life, "most of them say no."

She surmises that young people do not want to give up their lifestyles. Religious life is a "sacrifice," she said, and "sacrifice is hard": giving up a family and material things and committing to a life of service to others.

Sister Mai-Dung said she struggled with her vocation when she entered her Dominican community in 2000 after graduating with a degree in chemical engineering.

"I saw my friends who graduated with me starting their lives with high-paying jobs and having beautiful homes. What about me? I don't have a house of my own," she said. "Materialism makes it hard to let go. Some people thought I was crazy to become a nun. After much prayer, I feel I have been enriched by the religious life. I chose to serve God because I received so much."



Sr. Tuyet-Mai Nguyen is a vocation director of Daughters of Our Lady of the Holy Rosary. (Peter Tran)

Sister Tuyet-Mai, who professed her first vows 21 years ago, said young people have misconceptions about religious life and often ask, "What do you do, Sister? Do you pray a lot, all day long?"

Young people do not realize that the sisters see their "work" as a ministry.

"Our ministries include faith formation, education and parish ministry. Some sisters work as nurses, pharmacists or physical therapists," Sister Tuyet-Mai said.

Sister Mai-Dung said another misconception is that women need to be holy to be sisters.

"We are not perfect," she said. "We are still human beings. We make mistakes. When we enter the convent, we learn how to help each other become a better sister."

She added that some young people thought religious life would stop them from exploring the many other opportunities available to them. She said she explains to them that religious life is different today than before the Second Vatican Council: The church now encourages sisters to engage in society and develop their gifts and talents to serve the people of God.

Sister Janine said everyone, whether in marriage, priesthood, or single or religious life, is called to be in relationship with Jesus Christ.



Sr. Janine Van Tran is vocation director of the Congregation of Mary Queen. (Peter Tran)

"For religious, we are called to make visible what it means to encounter Christ, to be in love with him and to share that love," she said. "Our life is a consecration to God."

As part of her ministry as vocation director, a job she has done for the last 10 years, Sister Janine organizes "come and see" retreats at her community. She said it is important to invite candidates to experience religious life and exercise their freedom

to choose.

"Sometimes, when potential candidates come to the door, we want to grab them and not let them go," she said. "No, we must let them go to let them decide what they want to do with their lives."

Sister Kimberly said many young people have an idea of what religious life is like from watching movies.

"They imagine that sisters are on their knees praying 24/7 in the chapel," she said. "When they are with us during the come-and-see weekends or retreats, they see us laugh and joke around. They weren't expecting that. They ask why these sisters are so joyful. Their sense of religious life changes."

She said many of the people they journey with go to church and say the rosary, "but they don't realize that there is a God who has a plan for them or loves them. There is a God who wills their greater good. They need to encounter that personal God. Once they are open to encounter God, then they are open to whatever God is calling them to do. That's the only way to get anyone to even consider a religious life."

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Sister Kimberly's Lovers of the Holy Cross of Los Angeles has mostly Vietnamese American sisters, but it is open to other nationalities and ethnicities.

"We currently have a Hispanic sister. We have two Caucasian sisters and an Indonesian sister. We speak and pray in Vietnamese and English," she said. "At the dining table, it varies. We recognize that when we speak Vietnamese, one of our sisters will always translate for the other."

The vocation directors said they find their ministry challenging. Sister Kimberly said her struggles include the pressure from her desire to have her community grow, questioning her competence, and not knowing the right thing to say.

"Of course, it's all God's work," she said. "At the end of the day, I always say, 'OK, Lord, I did my best. You made up for what I have [that] is lacking, especially journeying with these sacred souls who open their hearts to us.' I am trying to maintain my wellness so I can continue to serve God's people, especially those who are discerning."