Voices of Sisters
Horizons
Spirituality



The Way of the Cross (Pixabay/Didgeman)



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On Ash Wednesday, Archbishop Joseph Nguyen Nang of the Archdiocese of Ho Chi Minh City (also known as Saigon) sent a pastoral letter for Lent and Easter 2023 to priests, monks and the Christian community. He reminded us that the poor are always with us, in our neighborhoods, in our parishes — even in rich countries.

I noticed particularly that he said:

> God wants us to take care of each other. To share and help the poor is to do for God. The more we practice charity, the more we prove that we are God's true friends. If we can be God's friends, we will not let our hearts become indifferent and emotionless to the needs of others, especially the poor. Thus, I call on parish and religious communities to carry out concrete acts of charity towards the poor in your region.

Responding to Archbishop Nang's invitation, a number of parishes of the archdiocese have plans to visit and prepare gifts for people living in poverty in their parishes, regardless of whether they are Catholic or not. Some parishes also give attention to diocesan orphan centers by bringing them foods, cakes, candies and milk in this Lenten season.

A few parishes are also caring for the people living in poverty in other dioceses like the Can Tho Diocese and the Kontum Diocese, to share and bring them happiness. In another practice, most religious congregations in Vietnam live the spirit of Lent by reducing unnecessary expenses or deducting a small amount from the market expenses each week to help the needy during Lent.

Indeed, Lent is an opportunity for us to have a close relationship with those living in poverty, to understand their difficulties and be willing to share with them — because they are the special image of God. When we serve them, we are serving God, as Matthew says: "And the king will say to them in reply, 'Amen, I say to you, whatever you did for one of these least brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me' " (Matthew 25:40).

This Scripture passage touches Sr. Cecilia Pham Thi Nhuong, of the Thu Thiem Lovers of the Cross congregation (in the Saigon Archdiocese), to live the spirit of Lent throughout her whole life by quietly and humbly sacrificing her life to aid the poor.

At the age of 69, Sister Cecilia is still engrossed in apostolic activities. In addition to her hours of activities in the community, every Saturday morning she comes to serve at St. Joseph's parish in Ho Chi Minh City, to iron worship items, holy towels, and vestments. This is a small parish of 2,000 parishioners, some of whom are Vietnamese of Chinese origin.



Sr. Cecilia Pham Thi Nhuong provides goods to young people (cropped for identity). (Mary Nguyen Thi Phuong Lan)

In addition, she has a spirit of charity that extends to the broader community, especially children and people who live in poverty. For more than 25 years, she has

been in charge of managing scholarships to support area children who live in poverty. Currently, there are 24 students officially receiving scholarships each month. Knowing about Sister Cecilia's activities, every day more sponsors silently join hands with her, donating to help the poor — regardless of their religion.

With the development of urbanization in Thu Duc city, Vietnam, rows of high-rise buildings grow up every day, which indirectly pushes people into more difficult situations. Workers, people in poverty, immigrants without money to buy a house — they can only stay in the row of shacks built temporarily by the river or under the bridge. Understanding their situation, Sister Cecilia spends her time visiting them, sharing food with them — a package of noodles, a bunch of vegetables … and constantly encouraging the children to go to school every day.

Having had an opportunity to meet Sister Cecilia, I noticed that she had an enthusiastic spirit of serving the poor. Although she is getting older, when she hears that there are people in poverty anywhere, she is willing to visit and help them. I admire her generous heart towards people living in poverty, especially children; she always tries to help provide them with an opportunity to go to school. She says that only education can help them get out of poverty.

Taking this opportunity, I also interviewed her.

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When I asked how she feels when she is helping those who are less fortunate, she responded that she feels very happy, because helping the poor is her duty. They are the image of God, and when she helps them, it means that she pleases God.

My next question was about what motivated her to work with the poor. She noted that as a religious, the congregation supported her and theoretically she did not have to work hard to earn a living, and had nothing to worry about. But when she eats something or works at any job, she always thinks of the ones who do not have food to eat, or no money to live on. So when she heard about people in those

circumstances, she felt she had to visit and talk to them.

I asked her what her plans were to do that ministry during Lent. She said she does not have much money to give those in need, but has many good friends and generous benefactors who always support her in her charitable work. This Lent, she intends to take them to visit and share in giving the gifts to the people in need who she knows, so that they can understand clearly about the suffering and difficulties of those living in poverty.

And then, they realize they should thank God for giving them a rich and abundant life. Thanks to that, they are willing to open their heart in sharing with those who are less fortunate. She thanks God for sending those benefactors and friends who have helped her in her ministry. She is grateful to them for helping to carry out both the mission of the church and our congregation: to bring God's peace and happiness to the poor this Lent.

Meeting Sister Cecilia was a blessing for me. She reminded me that Lent is a favorable time to revive our relationships with God and with others. Almsgiving, a gesture of charity, will show our compassion towards those in difficulties, and it also reminds us to gaze toward others. Prayer will speak to our deepest desire for our heavenly Father and then we turn back to him. Fasting will be a joyful spiritual practice, helping us give up things that burden us so that our inner selves become freer and — as Pope Francis said in his Ash Wednesday homily, more able to "return to the truth about ourselves."