News
Ministry

by UCA News Reporter

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Le Van Hoat cleans his house and does the washing on a daily basis, simple tasks he could not perform for many years in the past.

In his old T-shirt and shorts, with a pensive expression on his face, the 50-year-old single man from Hue, the capital of Thua Thien Hue province in South Central Vietnam, would rarely speak, except for saying "thanks" to those who visited and offered him food and gifts.

Hoat, whose parents died years ago and has no siblings, has suffered from a mental disorder for the past 20 years.

"My health is improving gradually thanks to the Catholic nuns who care for me," he says.

Social worker Sr. Mary Le Thi Thu Huong, of Daughters of Our Lady of the Visitation, recalled meeting Hoat in December 2022 while she, along with some lay volunteers, were offering Christmas gifts to local people in need.

Hoat bowed to them with his hands folded and asked for cigarettes.

Huong and two other nuns from her congregation began visiting him regularly. They even helped reconnect the power supply to his house.

"We try to do something useful for his physical and mental health, like talking to him daily besides giving him food, medicines and clothes, and also teaching him to do the housework," Huong said.

The nun is happy that Hoat is gradually returning to normal behavior and has learned basic tasks like cleaning and washing.

Earlier, the neighbors used to avoid him for fear of being attacked but now treat him with respect and also help him.

Hoat's relatives said he was diagnosed with a mental illness in 2003 after suffering severe brain trauma in a road accident. Since they could not afford his medical care, he was left to fend for himself.

Hoat, who used to catch fish in the river for a living, began to wander aimlessly on the streets and eat leftovers at the local bistros.

He would sleep in the market, and whenever he had a seizure would shout at people, and tear at his clothes. As a result, no one dared to go near him.

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The province of Thua Thien Hue in 2022 recorded 4,895 cases of schizophrenia, epilepsy and depression, of which 450 patients were kept at a center for homeless people.

The Health Ministry reported last year that cases of mental disorders were on the rise and the country recorded nearly 15 million patients, accounting for 15% of its population.

Huong said her congregation gives allowances of one million dong (US$42) per month to 17 psychiatric patients including Hoat as a way to stave off their hunger and undernourishment.

Most of them become mentally ill after losing loved ones, or due to a brain injury or because of genetic reasons. Some live with their relatives while many are abandoned by their families and wander the streets alone.

"We also encourage their relatives to spend time tending, listening to, being with, and comforting them because they will only be healed if they get affection from their family members," the nun said.

Lovers of the Holy Cross Sr. Marie Truong Thao from Caritas in the Hue Archdiocese said Caritas workers, including five sisters from three congregations, help 50 mentally ill patients on a monthly basis in Thua Thien Hue province.

Many of them are former prisoners, drug abusers, and in the case of women, have had abortions and suffered domestic violence.

Thao, who has a degree in social work, said many live alone and those living with relatives have their legs chained inside the houses.

It is mostly out of fear that the mentally ill may cause them physical harm. Hence, Caritas workers educate family members about how to care for them.

Thao recalled her first meeting with 24-year-old Do Thi Oanh at her home in Hue in 2018.

Oanh stared at her in anger from inside her four-meter-square room which emitted a foul odor. She was disheveled and in bad shape.

Her parents, who are Confucians, assumed she was in demonic possession and paid 50 million dong (US$2,130) to a local shaman to heal her. But her illness only got worse.

"I smiled at her, touched her hands, and talked with her for a short while. Then I washed her hair and changed her clothes. She'd not been attended to for nearly a year," the nun, who looks after Oanh on a weekly basis, recalled.

It took several months to change her behavior. "She slowly became friendly to me but is still very quiet," the nun said.

However, Oanh learned to wash and arrange her hair, sweep the floor, be gentle with others, and no longer scream in fear.

Meanwhile, in another part of the city, Hoat is showing remarkable progress.

He calls the nuns and others who regularly visit him by their names.

The 50-year-old, who is not a Catholic, expresses his gratitude to the nuns.

"I wish the worst is over soon and I can do something for a living," he says while sitting and sipping tea in front of his modest house.