News
News
Religious Life



(GSR illustration/Olivia Bardo)

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Maria Huynh Thi Kim Yen, member of the Association of the Daughters of Our Lady of the Visitation, brings meals daily to Le Thi Nga, 79, who lives alone in a dilapidated house.

Yen also cares for the Buddhist woman when she is unwell, respecting her Buddhist beliefs.

"Visiting and caring for people of other faiths is our top priority in our apostolic work," explained the head of 20 association members at the Van Quat Dong Parish in Thua Thien Hue Province's Huong Tra district.

The lay association, run by the Daughters of Our Lady of the Visitation, aims to extend love to diverse religious communities.

"We are caring for 43 families of various religions to bring God's love to them," Yen said, adding that local people mainly embrace Buddhism, Confucianism, ancestor worship and other indigenous beliefs.

Yen notes that despite only two to three conversions to Catholicism each year, they remain committed to their efforts. Her husband, also an active member, plans to serve as the godfather of a Confucian neighbor who embraced Catholicism in October to marry a Catholic, despite past tensions with the neighbor's family.

The 46-year-old mother of three joined the lay group last year after being invited by her friend, Sr. Maria Lucia Nguyen Thi Nong. Since then, she has recruited five new members.



Maria Huynh Thi Kim Yen, member of the Daughters of Our Lady of the Visitation Association, cares for Le Thi Nga at her house on Aug. 11. (Joachim Pham)

"We emulate the example of Our Lady of the Visitation by working with the nuns to bring the Gospel to pagans," she told GSR.

Yen and other members, dressed in blue ao dai or traditional Vietnamese dress, gather weekly at the church to pray and discuss their apostolic plans.

Hue Archbishop Joseph Nguyen Chi Linh established the lay association in 2018. Sr. Maria Dao Thi Thu Thanh, superior of the congregation, said that the association "aims to facilitate the participation of laypeople in our mission and to collaborate more effectively with us serving in the church ministries."

Thanh explained, "The sisters and laypersons work together to care for the poor, the sick, the elderly without relatives, single mothers and their children, street children, and former sex workers." They also hold catechism classes for youths at parishes.

She emphasized the importance of respecting the laity's initiatives in their apostolic work, noting, "They have opportunities to bear witness to Christ through their daily

lives and actions, and they create their own paths to holiness right within society."

The nun said the lay members gather at their parishes and engage in apostolic work, with the sisters accompanying and guiding them following the association's regulations.

"Their collaboration aims to foster a participatory and synodal church," she told GSR.

She highlighted the group's significant growth, increasing from 38 members since its inception to over 400 in the archdioceses of Ho Chi Minh City and Hue and the dioceses of Da Nang and Ba Ria.

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She said that the sisters select and train newcomers to the association. During this process, trainees study the association's regulations, the congregation's history and the principles of social apostolate. They also participate in retreats focused on the congregation's spirituality.

They are expected to pray, attend daily Mass, lead virtuous lives, engage in apostolic work, sanctify their families and communities, and strive to be "leaven" within their communities.

After three years of mandatory training and practices, they can permanently commit to the association.

Three more associations, with 3,150 members total, are managed, respectively, by the Daughters of Mary of the Immaculate Conception, Lovers of the Holy Cross and the Discalced Carmelites under the Hue Archdiocese. Such associations are established by local bishops.

The sisters explained that the laity learn about the mission and history of the congregations, devotion to the Blessed Mother, building positive relationships with others and serving those in need. They emphasize prayer, reflection and sharing God's word to strengthen their faith.

Daughters of Mary of the Immaculate Conception Sr. Mary Hoang Yen mentioned that the group enables laypeople to engage in the congregation's spirituality and mission, creating synergy to bring divine love to those in need.

"We cannot care for all the poor, so it's wonderful for the laity to make contributions. Laypersons make up a significant part of the church and have ample resources for apostolic work," Hoang Yen, who oversees the Daughters of Mary of the Immaculate Conception Association members in Hue, noted.

Established in 2006, the Daughters of Mary of the Immaculate Conception Association has 1,712 active members in seven dioceses in the Southeast Asian country. Its members receive the New Testament, wooden crosses and green T-shirts for uniforms.



Daughters of Mary of the Immaculate Conception Sr. Mary Hoang Yen and lay members visit a Pako ethnic woman on July 17 in A Luoi district of Thua Thien Hue province. (Joachim Pham)

Hoang Yen praised the laity's efforts, noting that they help many people come to know God and join the Catholic Church. They also contribute financially to the congregation's activities and show solidarity with the congregation by participating in the nuns' celebrations and visiting and supporting elderly or sick sisters.

Association members foster a strong sense of community and unity by visiting the motherhouse, making pilgrimages to religious sites, sharing experiences in apostolic

work, and providing spiritual and material support to members who are ill, have accidents or die.

"All these activities aim to strengthen the bonds between the laity and the sisters, creating a family-like connection," Hoang Yen noted.

Paul Phan Ngoc Quyet, an association leader, noted that lay members come from diverse professional backgrounds and collaborate with the sisters to deliver essential services. These include health care and basic education for ethnic minorities, abandoned newborns, orphans, children with physical disabilities, natural disaster victims, and patients with HIV and cancer.

Quyet emphasized the synergy between laypeople and nuns in their efforts. "The nuns provide emotional and material support for us to reach out to sex workers and drug users in inns, bars, discotheques, gaming venues and karaoke bars — where they have [limited] access to," he explained.

He said they cover all their activities with their own resources and public donations.

Lovers of the Holy Cross of Hue Sr. Anna Truong Thi Dung said the Lovers of the Holy Cross Association, established in 2016, "encourages the laity to collaborate with the sisters in continuing Christ's mission of salvation."



Two lay members of the Lovers of the Holy Cross Association wash a patient's hair at Quang Tri General Hospital on Aug. 10. (Joachim Pham)

Dung said their efforts focus on evangelizing those who do not know God, bringing lapsed Catholics back to the church, and praying for peace in the world.

"They participate in various activities, such as teaching catechism at parishes, joining choirs at mission stations, providing basic education and vocational training for ethnic youth, and caring for the sick and vulnerable," she said.

She noted that the association has 1,200 members working across five dioceses.

Catherine Vu Hong Bich, 41, who leads 14 members from the Dong Ha Parish, said they assist the sisters by distributing food to hospital patients, delivering the Eucharist and providing coffins for the poor. On weekends, they wash the hair of 50-70 patients at Quang Tri General Hospital, with the nuns supplying funds for shampoo and transportation.

"We are delighted to work with the nuns to serve the patients as a way to share the love of Jesus," she said.

Mai Kim Xuan, a 45-year-old Buddhist with a broken leg, shared her gratitude for the Catholic volunteers who washed her hair and massaged her on Aug. 17.

After a week without a bath, she expressed her discomfort and thanked the volunteers for their kindness despite being a stranger to them.



Carmelites Association members in their uniform pose for a picture after their monthly meeting at the Discalced Carmelites Convent on Aug. 18. (Joachim Pham)

Lucia Dang Thu Chuc, a member of the Carmelites Association, explained that the Discalced Carmelites live a contemplative, enclosed life and call on benefactors to support local church activities. In contrast, the association members are actively engaged in apostolic work, serving the needs of the local church.

Chuc, 58, said that the laity visits the sick, provides relief supplies to victims of natural disasters, serves meals during training sessions at parishes, and funds the

construction of church facilities.

They meet once or twice a month for eucharistic adoration, reciting the rosary, and attending Mass at the Carmelite convent.

The mother of three expressed deep affection for the Discalced Carmelites for encouraging her eldest daughter to join the order. Her daughter entered the convent in 2008, professed her vows in 2012 and is currently with the Carmelite community in the Lam Dong Province.

"She is very happy with her vocation and inspires her relatives to pursue religious life," said Chuc, whose three siblings include a Benedictine and two nuns from the St. Paul de Chartres and Daughters of Our Lady of the Visitation.

Four lay associations have contributed some 420 vocations, many their children and relatives, to religious orders.

"Thanks to the associations, we can live out our laity vocation to the full and have good chances to work for the common good," Chuc said.