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Daughters of Mary of the Immaculate Conception Sr. Mary Teresa Pham Thi Lai (center) distributes Christmas cakes to people affected by natural disasters at her community in Hue, Vietnam, Dec. 23, 2025. (Joachim Pham)

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On Christmas Eve, as floodwater stains still marked the walls of his damaged home, 75-year-old Le Cuoc lit candles and offered food in gratitude — not only to heaven and his ancestors, but also to a God he had never celebrated before.

A Confucian follower who lives alone in Hue, central Vietnam, Cuoc marked Christmas for the first time after religious sisters helped him repair his house and survive in the aftermath of devastating disasters.

"I understand Christmas now — that God is with people and that we must love one another," he said. "That is what I learned after the sisters helped me."

Across Vietnam's flood-battered central provinces, nuns observed Christmas quietly, scaling back decorations and celebrations to redirect resources to those whose homes, crops and livelihoods were swept away by storms and floods.

Instead of bright lights and large Nativity scenes, they focused on rebuilding roofs, paving muddy paths and restoring dignity — finding in these acts a deeper meaning of the season.

Cuoc lost two sections of his roof when Typhoon Bualoi struck in late September. A widower who survives by growing cassava and weaving bamboo baskets, he had no savings to make repairs. His only daughter works in a southern province and has not visited him for more than four years.

He said nuns provided him with funds to buy roofing sheets, food supplies for Christmas and ongoing support until Lunar New Year, or Tet, falling in February. Volunteers are scheduled to complete repairs in January.



On Dec. 23, 2025, Le Cuoc sits in front of his home in Hue, Vietnam. Its roof was damaged by Typhoon Bualoi. (Joachim Pham)

"They also promised to give me food until Tet," Cuoc said. "That kindness gives me strength to keep going."

Record flooding caused by heavy rain and successive storms across eight central provinces from October to November inflicted especially severe damage. According to the Vietnamese news website VnExpress, 163 people were dead or missing, and more than 170 others injured. Some 400,000 homes were damaged or destroyed. Nearly 115,000 hectares of rice and other crops were affected, and more than 200,000 livestock and poultry were lost. The total losses were estimated at 29.32 trillion dong (US$1.1 billion).

Daughters of Mary of the Immaculate Conception Sr. Mary Teresa Pham Thi Lai said her community supported 15 elderly people, including Cuoc, whose homes were damaged by the storms and floods. Though their own convent and preschool also

had damage, the sisters chose to reduce spending and appealed to benefactors to assist disaster victims.

"This year, we didn't build a large outdoor Nativity scene," Lai said. "We made a small one from old materials and branches broken by the storm, and we took turns in eucharistic adoration."

She said savings from Christmas activities helped fund home repairs, estimated at about 40 million dong (US$1,500), to be carried out Jan. 11-28.

On Dec. 23, the sisters hosted a Christmas meal and distributed gifts to tens of cyclo drivers, porters, used-items collectors and street vendors in their neighborhood.

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"Our service is meant to bring God's love to those who are struggling," Lai said. "Christmas calls us to humility, solidarity and sharing with those who are suffering."

On the outskirts of Hue, Lovers of the Holy Cross of Thanh Hoa nuns offered a Christmas gift that will outlast the season: a concrete road.

One of the nuns, Sr. Scholastica Pham Thi Anh, said the 30-meter-long path built on Dec. 21 cuts through Thuy Dien cemetery and serves 15 families who live on boats and take shelter among the graves when floods hit.

Anh said the 50 million dong (US$1,900) project, funded by the sisters and their benefactors, now allows children and elders to move safely to school and markets.

"This is a Christmas gift with lasting value for the poor," she said. "Sharing Christmas with people who are lonely and deprived made this season deeply meaningful for us."

For resident Le Thi Buon, the road has already changed daily life.

"It's like winning the lottery," said Buon, who lives with her five-member family on an 8-meter-long fishing boat. Her two older daughters dropped out of school in fifth grade, and only her youngest son, now in sixth grade, remains enrolled.

"Before, our children walked through mud to school, sometimes arriving late or returning home soaked, their books ruined," she said. "Now they walk with

confidence and dream of a brighter future."

Most families earn their living by fishing and collecting recyclables, rowing more than five kilometers daily. During floods, they are often isolated without food reserves.



Workers extend the concrete road funded by Lovers of the Holy Cross of Thanh Hoa nuns. The road runs through Thuy Dien cemetery to connect the area with a nearby village in Vietnam Dec. 27, 2025. (Joachim Pham)

Though an ancestral worshipper, Buon, 45, said the sisters' presence helped her family understand the meaning of Christmas.

Despite the winter cold, she cycled with her son accompanying others to see Nativity scenes and lights at some churches on Christmas Eve. The next day, she decorated her family's boat with flowers and cooked *bún bò*, a traditional dish, to celebrate.

"This was the first time we celebrated Christmas," she said. "Through the sisters, we learned it is about love and bringing joy to those who need help."

Buon said that, inspired by the new road, residents decided to extend it to connect with their village — "a sign of community solidarity as the year turns."

In neighboring Da Nang, St. Paul de Chartres Sr. Veronica Cao Thi Hanh said the sisters reduced daily expenses and postponed convent repairs to raise funds for 35 college students from families affected by the disasters.

Nguyen Thanh Tuong, a second-year engineering student, received 5 million dong (US$189) to cover rent and food.

"My family has nothing left to send me — our rice and poultry were washed away," Tuong said.

Instead of partying as in past years, the non-Catholic wrote cards to the sisters and attended Christmas Mass at a church.

"This Christmas, I experienced its true meaning," he said.

Other congregations echoed in similar efforts.



A Nativity scene built by the Daughters of Our Lady of the Visitation stands amid the remains of a chapel destroyed by Typhoon Bualoi in Mai Duong Sub-parish in Hue, Vietnam. (Joachim Pham)

Daughters of Our Lady of the Visitation sisters built Nativity scenes from debris collected after floods, using solar-powered lights to reduce environmental impact. They also provided Christmas food to 100 flood-affected families.

"Climate change threatens the poor most," said Sr. Anna Nguyen Thi Hong. "We must care for our common home."

Other sisters said they plan to help disaster victims rebuild homes, repair vehicles and provide small business capital to restart livelihoods in the new year.

As central Vietnam continues to recover from one of its most destructive flood seasons on record, local sisters say their work will continue into the new year, focusing on rebuilding homes, supporting students and restoring livelihoods.

Cuoc said the sisters' help has sparked renewed hope.

"My daughter was moved when she heard what the sisters did," he said. "She promised to bring her children home for Tet."

For Buon, the meaning of Christmas now stretches beyond December.

"Thanks to the sisters, we are no longer cut off," she said. "This road connects us to others — and to hope for the year ahead."