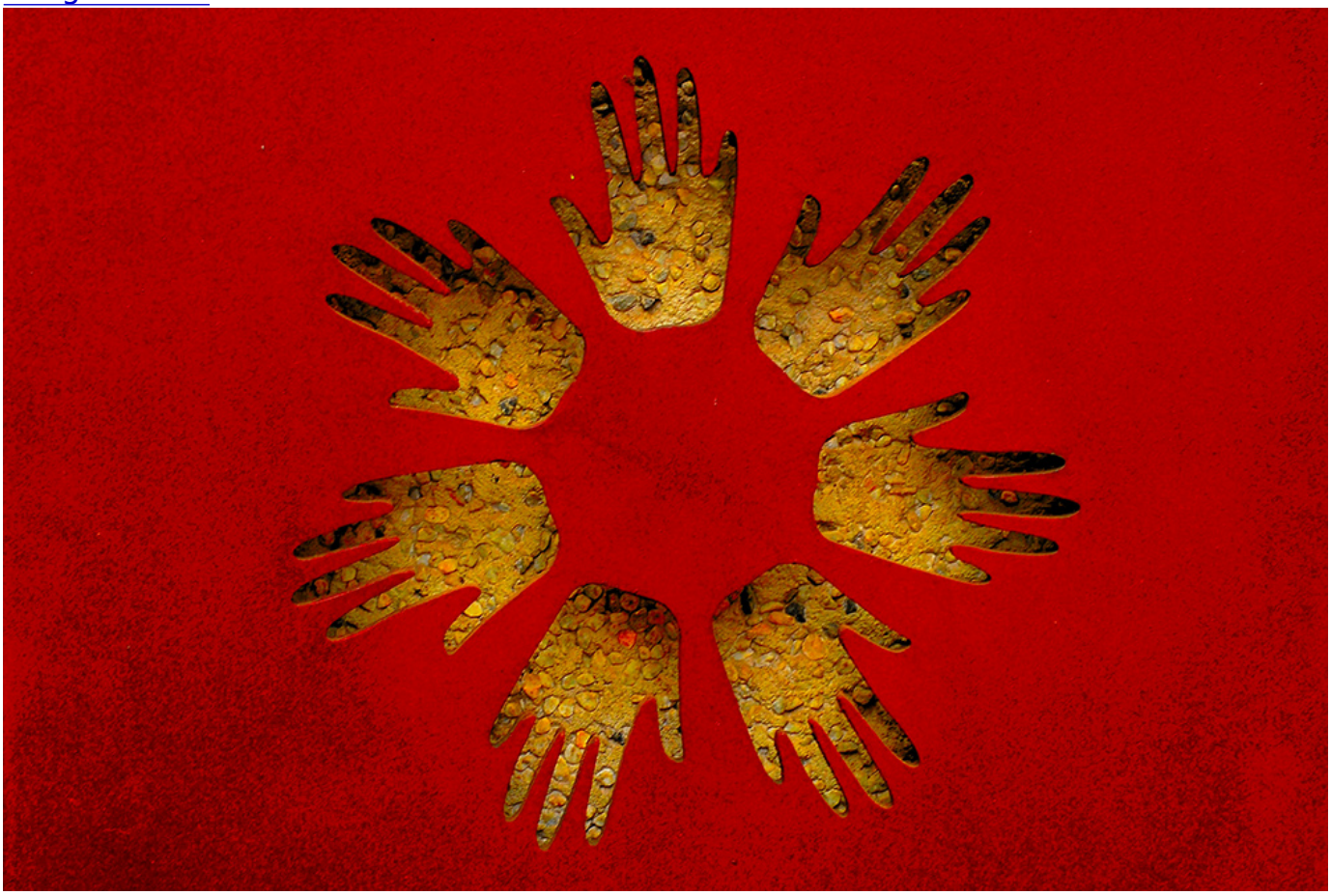
Voices of Sisters
Horizons
Religious Life



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by Sr. Ngoc Nguyen

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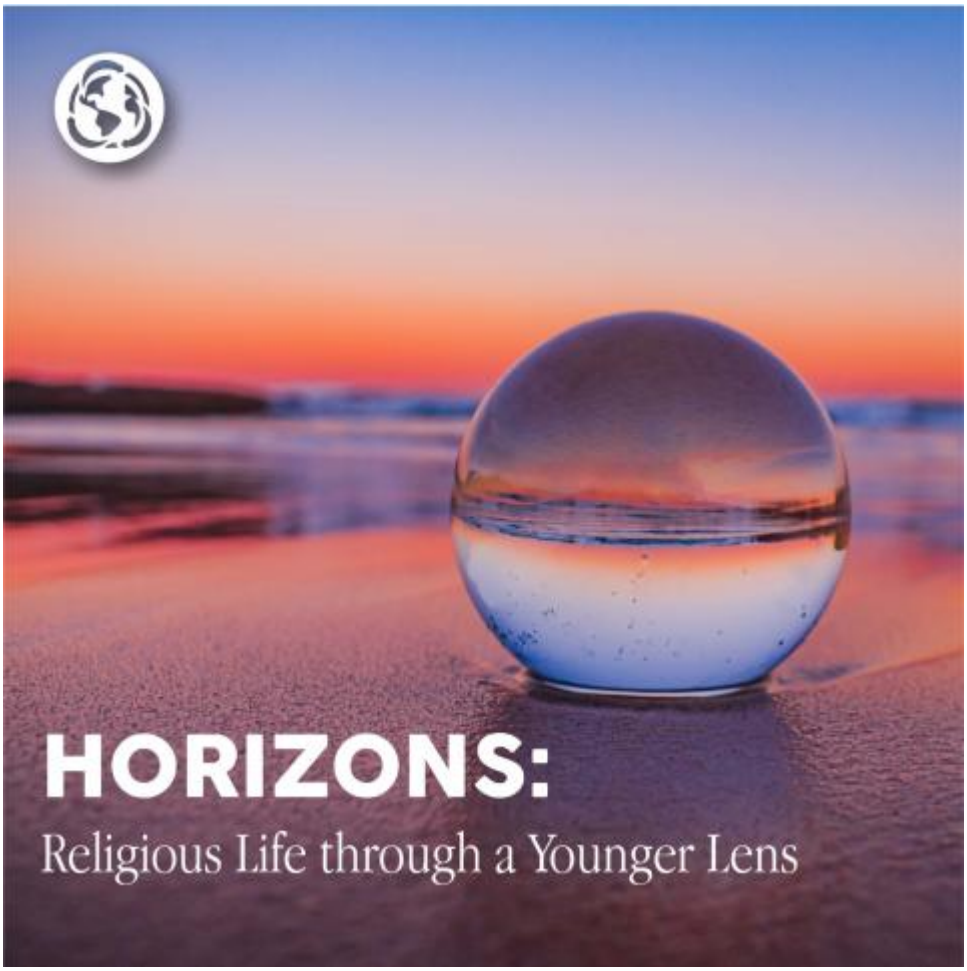

Vietnam has a culture of *Trọng chữ hiếu*, that is, valuing filial piety, which emphasizes gratitude and respect for our ancestors.

For the Catholic Church, November is a month dedicated to praying for the dearly departed, beginning with All Saints' Day and All Souls' Day. On Nov. 24, the Vietnamese Catholic Church honors the 117 Vietnamese martyrs who sacrificed their lives to grow and nurture the faith, and Nov. 20 is celebrated as Teacher's Day, when students praise, honor, and express gratitude to those who dedicated themselves to "growing people."

These practices raise the question of how Vietnamese religious sisters express filial piety when their vocation sometimes prevents them from fulfilling traditional family responsibilities. Does consecrated life change the meaning of filial piety?

Filial piety is rooted in Confucian teaching and can be found in the Bible and many teachings of the Catholic Church. Gratitude and respect for our family and ancestors is God's teaching. In the fourth commandment, God said, "Honor your father and

your mother." St. Paul, in his letter to the Ephesians, called the practice of filial piety the "first commandment with a promise, 'that it may go well with you and that you may have a long life on earth' " (Ephesians 6:2-3). Therefore, those living in consecrated life are not absolved of the responsibility of living out filial piety. Nevertheless, their filial piety must be practiced in new and broader ways, with a deep and spiritual meaning.

Vietnamese culture encourages children to take care of their parents, especially when the parents become sick, weak or elderly. With this requirement, consecrated religious who have ministerial and community requirements may not always be present with their families on special occasions or able to take care of their parents as much as lay people. This does not mean that those in consecrated life cannot live out filial piety. Rather, they may express filial piety through prayer, spiritual solidarity, gratitude, emotional support and caring for their parents whenever possible. This way, the consecrated life transforms the ways of living out filial piety but does not limit their love and responsibilities.

The story of Sr. Maria Bui Thi Lanh, posted on the website of the Lovers of the Holy Cross of Hanoi, is quite touching and helps to redefine the practice of filial piety in consecrated life. Lanh shared that she was unable to be with her family when they gathered on the occasion of the death anniversary of her father. She felt sad, of course, but was consoled by the many sisters in her community who also prayed for her father.

I was deeply moved when reading Lanh's story. The experience she shared reminded me of what I learned during my novitiate, that we give up earthly materials and our blood family to live in consecrated life. We join a bigger and wider family. We now consider every sister in the congregation as our sisters, their family as our family, and their parents as our parents. The expression of filial piety for her father was not traditional in the sense of going home to share a meal in celebration of his death anniversary and lighting incense, but through the shared prayers with many other sisters in the community.

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I have similar experiences of this alternative expression of filial piety in consecrated life. Living far away from my family and congregation while studying in the U.S., I

have often been absent from family events such as the Lunar New Year and death anniversaries. I was frustrated when my parents were sick and I could not be close by to serve them.

There have been numerous times, however, when the sisters in my congregation truly became a wider family in the expression of filial piety. For example, Lunar New Year is a time of family reunion, but I could not be present with my family because of the great distance. I was blessed to have sisters from my congregation visit my family on my behalf and wish them good health, happiness, peace and blessings for the new year. Additionally, when my parents recently became sick, the sisters in my congregation visited, encouraged and prayed for them. The actions of these sisters show how filial piety can be expressed through our wider family. This helps me to affirm that I haven't given up my biological family but gained a wider spiritual family.

Filial piety must also then apply to the broader family of sisters in the congregation. A Vietnamese Dominican sister shared her experience of how this can be expressed. She noted that for people who live in consecrated life, filial piety is also expressed for sisters in congregation, especially those who are elderly, because they have spent their lives contributing to the development of the congregation materially and spiritually. Visiting, encouraging and expressing gratitude is a good way to show filial piety for elderly sisters. Filial piety for our founders, predecessors and elderly sisters helps us to extend our mission and preserve the identity of the congregation.

In the consecrated life, Jesus is the model for living out filial piety. We see this in Scripture when Jesus is obedient to Joseph and Mary when returning to Nazareth (Luke 2:51), on the cross when he entrusts Mary's care to John (John 19:27), and in how he is obedient to his Father in all things, especially in becoming incarnate like us, to live among us and to suffer to save us (John 4:34). Jesus' filial piety can inspire consecrated religious to obey God through our superior's will and direction, while faithfully and rigorously living out our charism and ministry.

Reflecting on these experiences illustrates that filial piety in consecrated life is not limited to honoring our biological parents. It includes gratitude toward the sisters who came before us. Their sacrifices remind us that our religious vocation is a gift received through the faithfulness of others.

At the same time, our commitment to religious life does not lessen our responsibility to love and care for our parents. Rather, it invites us to express that love in different

ways, through prayer, communication, gratitude and practical support whenever possible. Consecrated life does not mean leaving filial piety behind. It means learning to live it more deeply, with a wider understanding of family, love and responsibility.