

Ministering to Vietnamese Youth

A Glimpse into the Vietnamese Culture

by Sr. Cecilia Nguyen

How can a Catholic live out his/her faith authentically? The answer to this question depends on to “whom” the question is posed. Who are the Vietnamese in general? The phrase “be proud of yourself” captures the Vietnamese history and culture. Vietnamese parents often remind their children of their roots and remind them of how much they have struggled and achieved in this new land.

Vietnam is a land of 80 million people, which claims its existence for 4000 years, a mythical founding rather than a precise number. Mythical stories are an important characteristic in forming the people, both individually and communally. The legend of the people born of a union between *Lạc Long Quân*, a powerful dragon from the water of the North, and *Áu Cơ*, a mystical phoenix from the mountain of the South, is known to every Vietnamese.

Since the fall of Saigon, more than 1.5 million have settled in the US, making it the sixth largest immigrant group. Most Vietnamese came as refugees, not as immigrants. An immigrant migrates from one location to another on a voluntary basis, who, prior to the migration, has a destination in mind; a refugee is a person who has fled his/her country and is unable or unwilling to return to that country because of a “well-founded” fear of persecution.

Vietnamese Migration

Most Vietnamese in the U.S. have experienced the effects of war directly. It is not possible to understand them without comprehending their experience of war and escape. Vietnam fought a thousand-year war with China, and one hundred-year rebellion against France, its own civil war, and the war against the US with 3 million casualties, including the lives of 58,000 Americans. After 1975 the Communist victory triggered a massive escape effort by the people from Vietnam costing another million lives.

The escape from Vietnam after the final occupation of the Communist in 1975 began in April of 1975 and lasted until the early 1990s. More than 1 million Vietnamese escaped, mostly by boat. The ones left behind were punished by the new regime to be jailed in brutal, torturous “re-education camps.” Today, the exodus has ended but the Vietnamese people continue to immigrate to the US to be united with their families. In 2000, the USCCB estimated there were about 320,000 Vietnamese Catholics living in the United States. The Vietnamese Catholic Federation reports having 650 priests (diocesan and religious), 1,100 Sisters, 41 Vietnamese parishes, 3 diocesan pastoral centers, and more than 200 communities functioning within the local parishes.

Vietnamese Culture

The Vietnamese culture is strongly influenced by Chinese ideologies and religious beliefs due to the thousand year war against Chinese rule and assimilation. Under the Chinese rule, Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism were introduced. Though inevitably affected to some degree by the Chinese culture, Vietnam managed to preserve its own national identity through acculturation, and not through assimilation or trans-culturation. The Three Religions or Triple Religions (*Tam Giáo*) were harmoniously blended together as a way of life for the Vietnamese people. Each contributed some significant aspects to the Vietnamese culture.

French colonialism and the American involvement in the South added some Western elements to the traditional Vietnamese culture, as reflected in art, architecture, music, attire, the education system, literature, gender equality and social mores. The Vietnamese cultural value system is strongly guided by four main factors: (1) strong attachment and loyalty to one's family, (2) high respect for education, (3) humanism or a "heart oriented" approach toward life, and (4) harmony-oriented concept in all personal interrelations. Among these, family bond is the most important, the center of one's individual life and the backbone of society. It is common to see several generations living in one household, but this is beginning to change. Vietnamese are strongly attached to family and deeply concerned for family welfare, prestige, reputation and pride. Elderly parents are respected, loved, and cared for by their children. Family loyalty puts strong pressure on each family member. The misconduct of a person is blamed, not only on that member, but also on that member's family.

Vietnamese have a strong sense of religion. Some religions are based on popular beliefs (Ancestor Veneration, animism), others were either brought to Vietnam from the outside (Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, Christianity) or are indigenous to it (Caodaism and Hoà Hào Buddhism). Culturally Vietnamese believe that honoring one's parents is the highest moral value. Reverence for parents strengthens the bond between the living and the dead. In most homes, especially those who practice this form of religion, an altar is erected to remind them of the presence of the dead and to ask for their protection. The most reverent act is to celebrate the anniversary of the death of a deceased member of the family. On important occasions, such as relocating a house, marriage, starting a new business, the birth of a child, or whenever a person needs guidance or a favor, the ancestors are consulted.

Roman Catholicism was introduced in Vietnam in the early the 16th century by missionaries from Spain, France, and Portugal. Catholicism is in debt to Alexandre de Rhodes, a Frenchman who came in 1624 with a group of MEP, Mission Étrangères de Paris, who romanized the Vietnamese language (Quốc Ngữ National Language). In the early 19th century, the French people used reason to protect French missionaries and Christians. They occupied Đà Nẵng in 1858 and then Saigon and Hanoi several years later. Vietnam became a colony of France. In 1954 the Geneva Peace Accords were signed and divided Vietnam into two zones. About 900,000 Vietnamese left North Vietnam and migrated southward, nearly two-thirds were Catholic. After the Fall of Saigon in 1975, a large number of Catholics fled to other countries. Today, Catholics comprise of about 8% of the population of 80 million people. In 2004, VN Bishops report 5,572,525 Catholics, 25 dioceses, 42 bishops, 2,269 diocesan priests, 432 religious priests, 10,377 religious sisters, 1,920 religious brothers, 1,085 seminarians, and 1,712 candidates waiting to be approved by the government and accepted by the dioceses. Protestants in Vietnam comprise around 1% (less than 1 million). In the US, 5% of the Vietnamese people are members of protestant churches due to many converting to Protestantism.

Vietnamese Saints and Holy Days

The proudest moment for Vietnamese Catholics living in Vietnam and throughout the world was the canonization of 117 Vietnamese Martyrs in Rome on June 21, 1988 by Pope John Paul II. The martyrs' feast day is solemnly celebrated each year on November 24. The Vietnamese have a special devotion to our Blessed Virgin Mary under the title of Our Lady of La Vang--the Madonna of Vietnam. This devotion dates from the persecutions in 1798, when a group of Catholics saw a beautiful lady who consoled those who had been persecuted, calmed their fears, and strengthened their faith. Some 50,000 Vietnamese Catholics gather every year at

the Congregation of the Co-Mother Redemptrix in Carthage, MO for a week of Mass, prayers, and spiritual workshops. They also have special liturgical rites for the major feasts of the Church, such as Christmas, Holy Week, Easter, the month of Mary, and the month of the Rosary.

Vietnamese celebrate ancestral commemorations, a time of remembrance of the deceased parents and grandparents by their children. Each year the family organizes a memorial or anniversary of the death of the loved one and invites close relatives and friends to attend a memorial Mass for the deceased and to share a meal with the family. It is a popular practice among the Vietnamese to have Masses said for the deceased on the anniversary of their death or on November 2.

The Vietnamese have several national holidays; the most important of these is Tet (Lunar New Year) in late January or early February, which may last for three days, a week or a month. On New Year's Day, Catholics go to Church to ask God and the Blessed Virgin Mary for blessings in the New Year, and then go from house to house offering good wishes to clergy, family and friends. They may give children new lucky money in red envelopes. The newlyweds are also given money to help them begin a new life together.

Practical Tips to be Welcoming to a Vietnamese Teen or Family

- Be informed of their ethnic identity (strong family unity, celebrations of weddings & funerals, etc.)
- Reaffirm their faith
- Be patient with those who have not mastered the English language
- Be attentive to their social needs
- Keep in touch with the parents and affirm the relationship between parents and teens

Holy Martyrs of Vietnam Parish, Arlington, VA

The Vietnamese community who gathers daily for Mass or once a week on Sunday proudly claims their Holy Martyrs of Vietnam Catholic Church to be the first Vietnamese Catholic Church in the US. In the beginning there were only 25 families. Since its inception in 1976, there are now 2,000 families and 8,000 members. They are currently working on a multimillion dollar expansion due to an increase in the number of church members. The community first met at a church in Annandale for the first six years, and soon the church was unable to hold all the attendees; plans had to be made to move its members to their current location on Wakefield Street. The size of the church grew rapidly, as did the Vietnamese population in the Washington metro area, due to a refugee camp at Fort Indiantown Gap near Harrisburg, Pa. that provided initial housing for more than 22,000 immigrants. Because of its historic nature, the Holy Martyrs of Vietnam Church serves Catholics from throughout the Washington, D.C. area. Parishioners come from as far as Woodbridge, Manassas, Leesburg, and Ashburn to take part in the Sunday Mass in their native tongue in Arlington. A few families even commute from Maryland and D.C. The parish has several programs and activities that are offered for all age groups, including Religious Education, Eucharistic Youth Movement, Dominican Third Order, Senior Citizen Association, Altar Servers, Blue Army, Marriage Family Enrichment, Knights of Columbus, Catholic Youth Association, Sacred Heart Association, Parish Mothers Group, Lion Dance Group, and nine different choirs.

Conclusion

The identity crisis” (living “betwixt and between” in a new land) affects both the first and the second generations. The first generation Vietnamese in America are mostly refugees whose identity was hung between two worlds. For the people in Vietnam, they are the “Viet Kieu” (Vietnamese living abroad). The second generation grows up with ambiguity, uncertainty, and tension about who they are. They claim their primary ethnic identity according to their parents’ identity. At home, living with their parents, they speak Vietnamese, eat rice, and observe the Vietnamese customs. At school, they try to “act” or “be” white in order to be accepted. Two problems arise from these tendencies: (1) some youth take up the Euro-centrist values and criticize the customs and traditions of their parents as inferior to American practices; (2) others feel obliged to defend customs/traditions about which they know little. Today, the identity of “hyphenated” Americans, such as Vietnamese-Americans or Indian-Americans, seem to be more acceptable. To be “betwixt and between” is not totally negative. There are opportunities to fuse both worlds together and to create a new and better world, so that they stand not only between, but also beyond their differences. The encounter of the Vietnamese culture and the American culture brings both cultures into a reciprocal engagement in such a way that both are transformed from within, by mutual criticism and enrichment. It is no longer an encounter of just “East meeting West,” but “East and West” transforming one another!

A Catholic can live out his or her faith authentically by encountering, discovering, and appreciating the past, culture, and values of others.

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