Columns
Ministry



Sister Anna measures blood pressure for a patient at the charity clinic she runs. Dominican Missionary Sisters of the Phu Cuong Diocese established the clinic in 2002 for people in need. (Courtesy of Mary Nguyen Thi Phuong Lan (Nguyen))



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In 1963, the St. Holy Family community, Dominican Missionary Sisters of the Phu Cuong Diocese, was officially established, and situated on the land of the Thai Xuan Parish belonging to the Xuan Loc Diocese.

At that time, the Thai Xuan land was a dense, unexplored forest with many wild animals and malaria-bearing mosquitoes, but priests, Catholic families and especially, the Dominican sisters struggled to make a living in the woods, and formed a tiny Catholic village.

The Thai Xuan land is naturally very fertile and suitable for agricultural use, so it attracted many people from all over Vietnam who moved here to settle and build their lives. They made a living planting perennial, economically valuable crops such as coffee, rubber and cashews, and some fruit trees like rambutan, durian, avocado and jackfruit.

Every year they can harvest the cash crops once, but they have to work very hard — digging a well to water the plants, or staying up overnight to get water from small streams in the dry season. In addition, some of them have to work as hired labor for others: digging wells, watering and picking fruits to earn extra money.

In the harvest season, they have to climb the trees to pick the fruit themselves, because the income from one year's harvest is too low to hire any workers. When working hard, their health can be affected by back pain, arthritis or other illnesses. The low income from crops is often not enough to cover the daily expenses of some families, especially poor working families. This is the reason why some poor persons are very afraid of going to the hospital to check their health, or get treated for a serious illness.

Understanding the difficulty of the life situations of citizens here, the Dominican Missionary sisters decided to establish a charity clinic in 2002.

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The purpose of this clinic is to provide free health care for the poor. On the average, sisters have welcomed around 60 patients every day including elders, youth and babies. Most of them are from the poor laboring class. Some are parishioners of the

parish, others are from neighboring parishes, and some are non-Catholic patients. Because they can't afford to go to the hospital for their treatment, all of them find their way to the sisters' clinic.

The healing methods the sisters use at the clinic are a combination of traditional Asian medicine and Western medicine, and are combined with prayer to God. Thus, most of the patients coming for treatment with acupuncture, physiotherapy, or water infusion can both have their illnesses treated and at the same time listen to hymns or sermons that help them to ponder on God's words; then they have more steadfast faith in God as they face the suffering of sickness. When they experience who God is in their lives, they surely believe that God will heal their illness.

When entering the clinic for treatment, patients are asked to keep silent and not make noise, to create a holy atmosphere for both patients taking a rest and those praying with God. Prayer is a good remedy for both physical and spiritual ailments.

When I interviewed Sister Anna who is in charge of the clinic, she shared that not all of us sisters are professional doctors, as in the hospitals. So the most important requirement for patients here is that they must be thirsting to pray with God when coming to the clinic for treatment of their illness. We are just the middlemen who bring them to God; only God, a talented physician, can truly heal them from their sickness. So, in daily prayer, we always offer all of the patients to God so that he — not us — will heal them.



Patients listen to homilies while their illness is being treated. (Courtesy of Mary Nguyen Thi Phuong Lan (Nguyen))

I met a 45-year-old Catholic patient with spine disease, who said that his illness has been very serious. The doctors suggested an operation, but there was only a 50% chance of success. In addition, the hospital cost for spine surgery is about 80 million Vietnamese dong (around $4,000). So he really worries and feels sad about his illness. Hearing about the Dominican sisters' clinic, and their methods of therapy, his mother took him there for treatment.

Understanding the severity of the young man's illness, Sister Anna spent much time talking to him the first time he came. And then she took him to pray with St. Martin, who is the patron saint of the patients. He comes every day to the clinic for treatment and listening to hymns, sermons, and especially the good news, like the story in which the blind man in Jericho was healed, and gained stronger faith in God (Matthew 20:29-34).

Now, he believes that God will heal his cancer as he cured the blind man. With steadfast faith he attends daily Mass, not only Sunday Mass as before, and spends his own time praying and reciting the rosary as well as other prayers at 3 p.m. every day. Perhaps thanks to these spiritual activities, he has a more optimistic spirit, and worries less about his illness. Now his health is better than before. "I am really very grateful to Dominican sisters for their spiritual encouragement to help me courageously accept my illness with joy and faith in God. Hopefully, I will [live] longer," he said.

Another time, I talked with a poor patient at the clinic, who is doing physical therapy for a degenerative neck condition that is leading to numbness in her hand. She has received therapy in the clinic for nearly two months without paying any fees. "I am very grateful to Dominican sisters for supporting me to have a good place to treat my illness, because I cannot afford to go to the hospital for this treatment," she said. Presently, her health is better than before, and she patiently continues her therapy until she can recover.

Looking back on our nearly 20 years of doing charitable work with our poor patients, we Dominican sisters constantly thank God for his abundant graces — particularly for sending us charitable organizations and benefactors from inside and outside of Vietnam to aid us in this ministry.

We are also grateful to the Conrad N. Hilton Fund for Sisters, for helping us to build the spacious and comfortable clinic, which gives us the opportunity to treat the poor, to carry out both the mission of the church and our congregation: to bring God's peace and healing to the poor.

"Those who are well do not need a physician, but the sick do." (Matthew 9:12).