Columns
Spirituality



Parishes organize stuffed sticky rice packages for the poor during the Lunar New Year celebration. (Mary Nguyen Thi Phuong Lan)



by Mary Nguyen Thi Phuong Lan (Nguyen)

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Lunar New Year, also known as Traditional New Year or simply "Tet," is the celebration of New Year according to the lunar calendar of East Asian countries like China, Taiwan, the Korean peninsula, and Southeast Asian countries such as Singapore, Malaysia, Indonesia and Vietnam.

Tet is celebrated on the first day of the lunar calendar (or the first day of January) throughout Vietnam and in a few other countries where there is a Vietnamese community. An indispensable preparation in the days leading up to Tet is the purchase of peach and kumquat trees in the North, or apricot trees in the Central and Southern regions.

To people in the East, Lunar New Year represents the communion between heaven and earth, and between humans and gods. But the most sacred aspect of the day here is that it is a reunion day for all families in Vietnam. When Tet comes, no matter what job they do, or where they are, Vietnamese people look forward to reuniting with their families in these three days of Tet.

As the whole country prepared to welcome Tet, Vietnamese Catholics were busy buying peach blossoms and apricot flowers, shopping, cleaning the house, cleaning the altar. A special sacred way we welcome the new year is that we prepare a pure soul by going to confession, doing charitable works, and visiting and giving gifts to the poor and the disabled. Vietnamese believe that these actions will bring luck and blessing for their families and children in the future. Vietnamese parishes often organize the preparation of stuffed sticky rice cake packages and buying gifts for people living in poverty or with disabilities.

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Vietnamese sisters made the most of those days of preparing for Tet by visiting people living in poverty, (both Catholic and non-Catholic) and the ethnic people in remote areas. They took gifts like rice, instant noodles, cooking oil, and soy sauce, fish sauce, and sugar to families. Tet gifts for the children included milk, cakes and candy. The sisters included wishes for a happy New Year with their family and children, without having to worry about making money for meals during the

celebration.

When I met and talked to some people living in poverty, I understood better how difficult their lives are. Parents at home work as hired laborers to earn daily meals. Their children go to the city to work but if they do not have a job they have had to return home for Tet a month early. The economic situation of Vietnam after the COVID-19 pandemic is very bad: a number of domestic businesses have reduced their orders. Many businesses lack capital and production materials, so they cannot pay the workers, who are forced to stop working early. Parents depend on their children's salary for money to shop and to cover expenses during the New Year holidays. Thus, their life was really difficult in the season of Tet.

After our New Year visits, we Dominican nuns have many concerns, because this year many people living in poverty could not have a family reunion. Many workers chose to stay in hostels in the city because they didn't have enough money to return home to celebrate with their families. They wanted New Year to pass quickly so they could go to work and earn money.

Indeed, facing the difficulties of the poor during Tet, we didn't know what to do for them, but only prayed to God for them.

On the night of Jan. 30, most parishes in Vietnam have a New Year's Eve Mass. In this moment between the old year and the new year, Vietnamese Catholics attend Mass to give thanks to God for the upcoming year and to ask God to help us use the coming year, according to God's will. At the same time, we also apologize to God for our shortcomings toward God and toward brothers and sisters, especially our lack of concern for the poor around us — because they are the image of God.

Vietnamese Catholics attended Mass on New Year's Day to pray for peace in the new year, for the country and for the faithful. They always trust this new year is in God's hands, and they ask God to guide them in living better each day for the family, for the Church and for society: "Entrust the way of life to the Lord, trust in him, and he will take action" (Psalm 37:5). We also asked God to give the poor people a peaceful and happy new year.



Dominican sisters bring Tet gifts to the poor during the Lunar New Year celebration. (Mary Nguyen Thi Phuong Lan)

On the second day of the Lunar New Year, the church is dedicated to remembering and praying for the deceased ancestors, asking God's mercy to forgive the mistakes they made while alive and asking God to bring them to heaven. We also ask that God bless the poor who have passed away — that they may sit in His heart and be embraced like Lazarus was embraced by Abraham — because they had suffered all their lives.

On the third day of the Lunar New Year, Vietnamese Catholics are invited to pray and ask God to sanctify their jobs throughout the new year. We offer to God all jobs of everyone, especially those who are unemployed and those living in poverty. May God bless them with a new year and success in their jobs so that they can earn a living.

In the spirit of the first days of spring and the new year, each Vietnamese person constantly gives thanks to God and entrusts our lives to him; because he has always been the God of spring, the God of Love and the God of Life. When we are willing to open our hearts to others, it is easy for us to open our hearts to God.