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Vietnamese Lovers of the Holy Cross Sisters with Sr. Mary Anne Ownes, the former provincial leader of the School Sisters of Notre Dame on Sept. 14, 2017, in the chapel of the motherhouse in St. Louis, Missouri. (Ngoc Nguyen)



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The mission of the School Sisters of Notre Dame is to "Transform the world through education." I vividly remember the first time I saw this phrase 10 years ago. It was displayed on a podium in an auditorium in St. Louis, Missouri. I thought that the sisters had chosen a profound and important mission in their emphasis on education. It was clear that they saw education as a means to positively change persons and create a better world.

From that moment, I have embraced this phrase in my approach to education and have continued to observe how the sisters carry out this mission. This has been especially poignant considering that many of them are retired and no longer in teaching positions.

After living with them for five years in St. Louis and witnessing their tireless contributions, I recognized their wisdom of indirectly carrying out their mission through a variety of ways. Instead of directly participating in education, they now contribute to promoting education by helping the Vietnamese sisters by opening their arms, hearts and houses to welcome us. They invite us to come to live with them without distinguishing who we are or to what congregation we belong.

In 2014, a small group of four sisters from my congregation of the Lovers of the Holy Cross of Hanoi became the first to live with them in St. Louis. Because of this, we often tease the other Vietnamese sisters who have gone to live there after us that we are "the first born" or "the favorites." In fact, the transformative love received from these sisters has not changed.

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An example of this was expressed by Daughters of Our Lady of the Holy Rosary Sr. Dung Khong, who lived with the School Sisters of Notre Dame in St. Louis, when she pursued a degree in theology at Aquinas Institute of Theology.

She fondly reminisced, "Despite being a stranger, the SSNDs embraced me without hesitation, enveloping me in their warmth and treating me as one of their own. In that embrace, I discovered a profound sense of belonging to this newfound family, a gift bestowed by God himself. Within their midst, I felt not just accepted, but cherished. Their kindness has left an indelible mark on my heart that will forever be

treasured."

Khong's experience with the School Sisters of Notre Dame has resonated with many other Vietnamese sisters who have been touched by the love and support of the sisters. This impact is evident in how Vietnamese sisters now include not only the initials of their own congregation when they sign their names but also add SSND. While this may only be a small thing, it shows how much the Vietnamese sisters have appreciated the support from the School Sisters of Notre Dame sisters during their studies in the U.S.

Recalling her time living with the School Sisters of Notre Dame, Lovers of the Holy Cross Sr. Nga Tran, stated "I feel I was blessed when I lived with the SSND. Their generosity and dedicated teaching were invaluable gifts for me."

Tran continued: "SSND sisters are always sensitive to the needs and struggles of others. This was the deepest lesson that I learned from the sisters, in addition to the invaluable English lessons they taught me. They were not only providing me with academic knowledge but also educating me to become a good and useful person for society and the Church. The way the SSND sisters care for the vulnerable and marginalized has influenced my ministry now as a nurse when I need to take care of patients, especially the poor."



Vietnamese Lovers of the Holy Cross Sisters are pictured with School Sisters of Notre Dame on Sept. 14, 2017, in St. Louis, Missouri. (Ngoc Nguyen)

The example of how the School Sisters of Notre Dame live out their mission through action has been absorbed by the Vietnamese sisters and has encouraged them to likewise care for people on the margins.

When asked about her experience with the School Sisters of Notre Dame, Dominican Sr. Yen Pham expressed, "I always thank God for having a wonderful place to stay when I studied at Aquinas. The SSND community where I lived surrounded me with love, care, generosity, goodness, and support. I want to say to them, 'Thank you so much for accepting me as a member of your community, teaching me valuable lessons, setting a good example and for your witness of the Gospel to the world; faithfully serving God's children in faith, hope, love, and justice. They are truly amazing role models, and I am forever grateful!' " As a leader of her congregation, Pham is now applying the significant lessons of generosity, love, sharing and justice that she learned from the Notre Dame sisters into her mission.

The love, care and support from the School Sisters of Notre Dame does not stop when we move to different places for further study or when we are far away from them. In June 2021, I was admitted to Marquette University in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, to pursue doctoral studies. While searching for a religious community to live with there, Sr. Kathleen Bauer, the former provincial councilor, and Sr. Mary Ann Owen, the former provincial leader, asked me about my plans after graduating from Villanova University. I told them that I would pursue further studies in Milwaukee. Without hesitation they said "Go back to live with SSND. You left us for a couple years, now is the time to go back." I said, "That would be such a good thing, but I heard that the Mother House in Elm Grove will be sold soon." "Do not worry," they said. "We still have many small houses."

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This conversation brought me back to the School Sisters of Notre Dame sisters and once again warmed my heart with affirmation that they really care and support my studies. They treat me as if I were a member of their community. The example of the sisters has transformed me. Many times, when I receive a request for help, in my heart, I really want to say no, but I recall how the School Sisters of Notre Dame has supported me. Sometimes I wonder whether the School Sisters of Notre Dame want me to do something to pay them back for their continuous love and gifts to me. No, they do not! They want me to do good things for others to mitigate suffering and to transform the world. They want me to love, which helps me to say yes to others who ask for my help.

The transformative love from the School Sisters of Notre Dame sisters will be sustained and carried out in the life and actions of all the Vietnamese sisters who could receive support for their education. This experience has taught us that as their mission states, "SSND are educators at heart, believing the world can be changed through the transformation of persons."

Over the last 12 years, more than 30 Vietnamese sisters have been sponsored by the School Sisters of Notre Dame congregation. Each of us has received invaluable

benefits from the congregation's education by words and by actions. These teachings have transformed our minds and hearts, encouraging us to act on them. I believe it is the success of the School Sisters of Notre Dame mission "Transform persons, transform the world."

As Lovers of the Holy Cross Sr. Linh Do affirms, "It's clear that the SSND sisters played a significant role in shaping me into the person I am today. Their teachings have left a lasting impression on my heart. Their impact is a beautiful testament to the power of love which I will treasure on my spiritual journey."

We are immensely grateful to be the recipients of the transformative love from the School Sisters of Notre Dame's education, influencing us to continue to transform the world through the education of faith, love, hope and generosity for all people, especially those in need.