News
Ministry



Daughters of Our Lady of the Visitation Sr. Martha Tran Thi Toan removes weeds from a neglected grave on Nov. 6. She is among a group of nuns and volunteers who restore abandoned graves in rural villages in Huong Thuy town, Vietnam. (Joachim Pham)

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Every Monday, five nuns joined by 10 volunteers set out to clean and restore abandoned graves scattered across rural villages in Huong Thuy town in Vietnam's central province of Thua Thien Hue.

Those graves, neglected for decades, are hidden beneath overgrown weeds and bushes, battered by years of rain and flooding. Often, only crosses or gravestones remain.

As part of their grave restoration apostolate, the group also offers incense and prays for the departed souls.

"We care for around 100 graves, most of which date back to 1968 and 1974," said Lovers of the Holy Cross of Hue Sr. Marie Odile Ngo Thi Lam, who leads the project.

Lam said these years were marked by fierce fighting during the Vietnam War between U.S.-backed South Vietnam forces and Northern communists, leading to numerous deaths in the region.

Families of the deceased either fled the area during the war or have since passed away, leaving graves abandoned, she said. The graves represent a range of religious backgrounds, reflecting the diverse community affected by the conflict.

> 'Our work is meant to comfort the departed and pray for their souls to receive God's grace.'
> —Sr. Marie Odile Ngo Thi Lam
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The nun started the grave restoration project in 2017, and so far, her group has repaired and rebuilt 50 severely damaged graves with funding from local benefactors.

"Our work is meant to comfort the departed and pray for their souls to receive God's grace," she told GSR. "We hope that, in time, their relatives will return to honor and visit their graves."

Six families have been able to locate their relatives' graves through the group's work, although distance and financial constraints prevent them from visiting regularly.

Lam emphasized that the project also seeks to foster respect for graves as the final resting place of the deceased. "Caring for these graves is a Christian act of charity toward the departed," she said, underscoring the importance of honoring the dead.

She noted that this effort helps dispel the misconception that Catholics neglect ancestor worship, showing instead that Catholics value caring for the deceased as a sacred duty.

The Hue Archdiocese serves over 68,000 Catholics among a population of about 2.3 million in the Thua Thien Hue and Quang Tri provinces. The region is home to faiths that include Buddhism, Catholicism, Confucianism, Taoism and Indigenous beliefs such as ancestor worship, Cao Dai and Dao Mau.

One volunteer, Simon Truong Vinh Sang, explained that he maintains an ancestral altar in his home, asks for Masses for the souls of the departed each November, and holds memorial services to teach his children the importance of honoring their ancestors.

"Honoring the dead is a way to witness the Gospel, something I hadn't realized before," Sang, 58, told GSR.

He also raises public awareness by cleaning neglected graves often used as dumping grounds by others.



Srs. Anna Le Thi Chuc and Marie Odile Ngo Thi Lam and lay volunteers offer incense as they pray before an unattended grave on Nov. 6. (Joachim Pham)

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St. Paul de Chartres Sr. Mary Irène Huynh Thi Ngoc Loan shared that she and her relatives visit the village cemetery in November to care for their ancestors' graves, some of which have been forgotten by distant descendants.

She also supports the elderly who have no family, and she promises to pray for them after they pass away.

"Honoring ancestors is a cherished Vietnamese tradition," she said.

Loan added that other nuns also make pilgrimages to the Shrine of Our Lady of La Vang (Basilica of Our Lady of La Vang), a monument to Vietnamese martyrs, to pray for the souls of the departed.

Daughters of Our Lady of the Visitation Sr. Teresa Tran Thi Dung said the sisters hold prayer services and eucharistic adoration for parishioners in November, praying for those who have passed away. They also encourage catechism students to save money for Mass offerings and participate in cemetery clean-ups to foster respect for the dead.

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Le Phung Gia, a 68-year-old Buddhist, admires the Catholic dedication to praying for the dead during November. He recalled his family's close relationship with their Catholic relatives, with both families working together to tend to ancestral graves and pray for their ancestors.

Despite past tensions over differences in customs — such as Catholics not bowing before ancestral altars or partaking in food offerings — Gia sees common ground in their shared reverence for the dead.

"This collective work of caring for abandoned graves and honoring the departed reflects both the Christian and Vietnamese values of respect for ancestors, bridging communities in acts of charity, memory and prayer," he told GSR.