

Our Lady of La Vang Parish Turns 25

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Processing slowly into the church Sept. 3, filling the pews and choir loft so there was standing room only, parishioners of Our Lady of La Vang, Dundalk, raised their voices in praise to the Blessed Virgin Mary as they celebrated the 25th anniversary of their parish.

For parishioners of Our Lady of La Vang, many of whom are former refugees who fled the Communist take-over of Vietnam in the 1970s, the lively Mass marked 25 years of a persevering faith.

When the predominantly Vietnamese faith community first formed in 1981, less than 80 parishioners met in a small school hall in Baltimore City. The community moved to St. Ursula, Parkville, until they saved enough money to purchase a small church on Old Eastern Avenue in Essex.

"They renovated the church building and made it quite nice for liturgy and gatherings," said Sister Constance Gilder, S.S.J., assistant to the eastern vicar. "However, the community grew so rapidly that they were spilling out the doors within a few years."

As the community started to reach the 250-parishioner mark, they began looking for a bigger church. Three years ago the parishioners of Our Lady of La Vang purchased the closed Christ the King church off of Dundalk Avenue.

"To me that is a big achievement. This new place allows us to do everything we need to do," said Anh Dang, who has been involved with the formation of the parish from its beginning. "We now have a rectory for the pastor and guests to stay, a place for Sunday school and a hall for activities."

Mr. Dang said that the parish is more than just a place to celebrate Mass every Sunday—it is where the younger and older generations can come together and keep the Vietnamese culture alive.

"The older Vietnamese people are so lonely in this new culture, and this community helps them adapt," said Mr. Dang. "They can't wait for Sunday to come so they can interact with other people that speak the same language."

The older people are not the only ones who look forward to coming to Mass every Sunday. Parishioners travel from as far away as Howard County just to live out their faith in the culturally-filled Mass they love and adore.

"At present I see a united and lively community of different ages, careers and experiences," said Father Francis Nhi Nguyen, pastor. "I see on the faces of parishioners such pride in their parish, which their contributions of time, talents and treasure have made possible."

In the course of its 25 years, Our Lady of La Vang has supplied the Catholic Church with a Vietnamese priest, two Brothers and three seminarians.

"It is no small wonder that these past years have seen a growth in the church," said Bishop Mitchell T. Rozanski, eastern vicar and one of the celebrants of the Mass. "It is a faith that is not only vibrant in Vietnam but around the world especially in the United States."

After the Mass and before everyone processed out to the sound of Vietnamese drums, parishioners gave thanks to the late Bishop P. Francis Murphy, who was "instrumental in gathering the Vietnamese people into a Catholic community" years ago, said Sister Constance. The community also thanked Bishop William C. Newman, retired eastern vicar; the support of Sister Rosalie Murphy, S.N.D. de N.; Sister Edithann Kane, S.N.D. de N.; Deacon Paul Mann and Father Hy Tan who traveled from Rockville every Sunday for three years until the parish was assigned a pastor.

Parishioners hope that in the next 25 years, the 500 member parish will continue to grow and reach out to the neighboring churches and community.

"We would like to open the door to welcome everyone in the surrounding area," said Mr. Dang. "We would like to attract people to come to our church with activities for the old and young people."

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