

Refugee resettlement officials still seek 'Christian response'

By Teresa A. Parsons

Like the rest of last year's fashions, Southeast Asian refugees have fallen out of vogue.

Instead, the pictures that tugged at the nation's heartstrings and pursestrings this past year showed victims of the volcanic eruption in Columbia, the earthquakes in Mexico City, and the famine in Ethiopia.

Meanwhile Thailand, a nation beset by economic and social problems, is still host to 450,000 "official" refugees and an estimated 30,000 more displaced persons who have not been granted refugee status according to a report last October from Intercaritas, the publication of Caritas Internationalis, an association of Catholic relief agencies.

Southeast Asian refugees may no longer capture popular interest, but the miserable conditions that caught the world's attention remain consistent. There, and in refugee camps around the world, children are growing to adulthood without identity or prospects for the future.

"Refugees are the victims from the outset — they're caught in the middle," said Jim Delaney, local representative of the U.S. Catholic Conference's Resettlement Office. Unable to return home, they are unwelcome in the border countries to which they have fled. They are thus utterly dependent on the humanitarian whims of Western, industrialized nations. "If we don't respond, they're stuck," Delaney said, "and they're not going away."

In the United States, publicity about the flood of Cuban and Haitian refugees in 1980 and concern over a rising number of illegal aliens in the country have combined to chill the reception all "foreigners" face. At the national level, the chill has resulted in tighter quotas for all refugees. From a peak of more than 166,000 Southeast Asians accepted in 1980, the numbers have declined by more than half. Intercaritas reports that in 1985 the United States agreed to accept 50,000 Asian refugees.

Not nearly that many actually got here. One reason is a lack of sponsors. Every one of those 50,000 people needed someone — whether a church community or a relative already established here — to sponsor their resettlement. And at the local level, the chill toward foreigners is compounded by the vast array of social concerns clamoring for the attention of church communities.

In response to declining interest, Delaney and the Catholic Family Center initiated a 1983 campaign in which Bishop Matthew H. Clark asked each parish in the diocese to sponsor two families each during a five-year period. Of 180 potential parishes and comparable religious communities, only about 30 percent (slightly more than 50) have responded so far. Those numbers are driving Delaney crazy.

"It's not exactly an overwhelming response," he commented dryly. "And I don't have time to sit here and say 'Gee, look how



well this case is going' or 'Isn't it great how many we have helped?' because the phone rings and I have 10 or 20 more cases."

Compassion fatigue and xenophobia are two of the reasons he cites. Because they all look and sound "foreign," refugees tend to be lumped together with illegal aliens and other unwelcome strangers. Somehow, that brings out what Delaney terms the "red-neck" in people.

"You never really know until you have contact with them that they're just like you, and that they deserve a break," Delaney said. "If we can overcome our own fears, we can become more enlightened in the process."

Curiously, Delaney said that well-endowed parishes are more susceptible to compassion fatigue than poor parishes. "I think that people get caught up in their own small material worlds ... it's typical American suburbia, not just Catholics," he said. "We've got a lot to protect, but at the same time, we have a lot to give."

In relation to what it accomplishes, sponsoring a refugee family doesn't require a lot, according to Delaney. Generally, most of the effort connected with resettlement should be completed in 90 days and should require no financial commitment from the parish. The Catholic Family Center, through the USCC, provides resettlement funds when necessary to support the refugees until they become eligible for public assistance or move out of the diocese. Household items and furnishings as well as food and clothing for the refugees to start with are usually gathered through donations.

According to parish sponsors, one of the biggest stumbling blocks to meeting that timeline is the social services bureaucracy. Once the refugees have arrived, the sponsor

arranges and transports the newcomers to a series of appointments with such agencies as the Catholic Family Center, the departments of Social Services and Social Security, health clinics and schools. Normally, three to five weeks elapse between the date the refugee applies for public assistance and the time the first check is mailed. But in worst-case situations, the process can take months.

Finding housing is another obstacle for sponsors because landlords are doubly reluctant to rent to refugees because they are on public assistance and foreign.

Once the refugees are housed, enrolled in language school and receiving public assistance, sponsors should only be needed for support and help when the refugee is ready to find a job.

Despite hard economic times, Southeast Asian refugees as a group have adapted amazingly well, according to most reports. The first Vietnamese to arrive were the best

educated and adapted most easily to resettlement. Laotians, Cambodians and Vietnamese from rural areas make up the bulk of more recent arrivals. Although job skills and education tend to be more limited in this later group, unemployment among Southeast Asian refugees remained only slightly above the national average, according to a report issued last January by the federal Office of Refugee Resettlement.

Most parishes simply refuse to try, but Delaney continues to accept cases, hoping that a sponsor will turn up. A cadre of nine dedicated volunteers back him up by taking on the families who arrive without sponsors.

Between now and June, Delaney needs sponsors for 20 cases, but it's an unusually good month when he finds two. Experience has made him pessimistic, but no less determined. "I'll just continue to pressure the Christian community — strangely enough — to make a Christian response," he said.



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IIIC Sacraments	Rochester—St. Anthony of Padua School	February 26, March 5, 12, 19, April 2	3:00-5:00 p.m.
IID Christian Moral Life and Social Justice	Rochester—St. Charles Borromeo Conv	April 8, 15, 22, 29 and May 6	7:30-9:30 p.m.
IID Christian Moral Life and Social Justice	Rochester—St. Anne's Church	April 14, 16, 21, 23	7:30-9:30 p.m.

FINGER LAKES

IB 4.5 Basic Doctrine	St. Thomas—Wolcott	January 19, February 23	3:00-5:00 p.m.
IIIC Sacraments	St. Mary's School—Canandaigua	April 8, 15, 22, May 6, 13	7:00-9:00 p.m.
IIIC Sacraments	St. Patrick's School—Seneca Falls	March 6, 13, 20, April 10, 17	7:00-9:00 p.m.
IID Christian Moral Life and Social Justice	Holy-Cross Church—Ovid	February 23, March 2, 9, 16, 23	1:00-3:00 p.m.

SOUTHERN TIER

IIIB Church	Our Lady of Lourdes, Elmira	February 6, 13, 20, 27 & March 6	3:15-5:15 p.m.
IIIC Sacraments	St. Mary Our Mother, Horseheads	January 24 & January 25	7:00-10:00 p.m. 9:30-2:30 p.m.
IIIC Sacraments	St. Patrick's, Owego	February 22 & March 8	9:00-2:00 p.m. 9:00-1:00 p.m.
IID Christian Moral Life & Social Justice	Immaculate Conception, Ithaca	February 19, 26, March 5, 12, 19	7:30-9:30 p.m.
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