

Vietnamese woman helps to settle refugees

By Lee Strong
Staff writer

ROCHESTER — Ha Nguyen remembers what it was like to get off the plane in the United States as a Vietnamese refugee.

"When we first came here, we were so lost we just wanted to go right back home," recalled Nguyen, who arrived with her family in 1975.

When Nguyen and members of her family first settled in Naples, they were among the few Catholic Vietnamese families in the Rochester diocese. Thus, she and her family had few contacts with the country from which they had fled to help keep their spirits up — or to create a Catholic community.

"People who come here now are lucky that there are other Vietnamese here to meet them," Nguyen said.

Nguyen is someone new arrivals are likely to meet. Since Sept. 4, she has been the Diocese of Rochester's coordinator for ministry among Vietnamese.

In the newly created position — funded in part by \$11,000 from the Thanks Giving Appeal — Nguyen will be responsible for providing support and assistance to Vietnamese refugees living in the diocese.

Among Nguyen's chief duties will be serving as a liaison between diocesan officials and the Vietnamese Catholic Committee — an organization that helps to meet the spiritual and social needs of the approximately 100 Catholic Vietnamese families currently living in the diocese.

The committee, which has existed since the late 1970s, helps arrange for a Vietnamese priest to come to Rochester three times a year. The priest celebrates Christmas and Easter Masses in Vietnamese, and joins the local Vietnamese community on an annual pilgrimage to a Marian shrine.

The group has also organized a choir — which Nguyen co-directs — to sing at the



Babette G. Augustin/Staff photographer
Ha Nguyen, above, the Rochester diocese's coordinator for ministry among Vietnamese, also co-directs a 20-member Vietnamese choir. At right, Thanh Le (left) and Phuong Tran share sheet music during choir rehearsal Oct. 28.

Masses. In addition, committee members meet with refugees when they first arrive in an attempt to help the new arrivals get settled.

Nguyen's position, in fact, is in part due to the efforts of the committee.

"The diocese didn't even know that the committee existed all those years," Nguyen said. "That's why it was important to hire a lay person or a priest to coordinate with the committee."

As coordinator for the diocese, Nguyen will not only work with the committee, but will also assist as a translator for the Catholic Family Center's refugee resettlement program. In addition, she will help



Catholic Thanks Giving Appeal

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parishes provide sacramental preparation for Vietnamese.

For example, Nguyen is currently working with St. Anthony of Padua Parish to help prepare a number of Vietnamese children for first communion. She is also assisting a Vietnamese couple preparing for marriage at St. Charles Borromeo Parish.

Nguyen is also involved with a group working out of Lake Avenue Baptist Church to survey the needs of the Vietnamese community living in the Lake Avenue area.

Major needs among Catholic Vietnamese include religious education for children and a Vietnamese priest to serve the spiritual requirements of the community as a whole, Nguyen said.

"The main concern is to have a Vietnamese priest here to celebrate Masses so that the people can have a deeper understanding of God," Nguyen said. "We just go to Mass (now) on Sunday, say the prayers in Vietnamese, and try to follow along with the Mass."

Since few Vietnamese priests are available, Nguyen said that one alternative is to find a priest willing to learn Vietnamese. She will also be pushing for more Masses such as the upcoming liturgy incorporating Vietnamese prayers and songs to be celebrated Nov. 25 at St. Anthony's. The Mass will mark the first such bilingual service in the diocese, Nguyen said.

Nguyen is currently compiling a list of Vietnamese families and where they attend Mass in the diocese. One of her goals, she said, is to help the families develop a sense of parish identity, and to help them to feel more a part of the diocese.

As for new arrivals, Nguyen said, they can now receive help from her and the committee on a full-time basis.

"Those that are here just recently, because they have a language barrier, I can help them," Nguyen said. "If there is a need ... they can contact the committee or they can contact me."

Visit to Israel keeps Brother Casper out of Iraq

By Lee Strong
Staff writer

WASHINGTON, D.C. — Maryknoll Brother Eugene Casper, a Rochester native who was part of a peace delegation to Iraq, was denied access to the Middle Eastern nation because of a visit to Israel two years ago.

Brother Casper, a member of a Fellowship of Reconciliation delegation that went to the Middle East Oct. 17 in hopes of meeting with Iraqi President Saddam Hussein and other officials, was told he would not be allowed to enter Iraq with 17 other members of the group on Oct. 20 because his passport showed he'd

spent 10 weeks in Israel in 1988.

He remained in Amman, Jordan, for seven days, negotiating with Iraqi officials before finally being told to leave the country on Oct. 24.


Nevertheless, Brother Casper noted that his time in Jordan may have proven more profitable than the delegation's efforts in Iraq.

"I was able to move around in Jordan freely, meeting with eight or nine national groups that had left Iraq and Kuwait," Brother Casper said in a telephone interview with the *Catholic Courier*. The delegation, he speculated, had its itinerary strictly controlled by the Iraqi government.

"I suspect I may have gotten more sense of the situation by talking to the people," he said.

What he learned, Brother Casper said, is that the refugees disagree with the United States' military build-up in the Middle East, adding that it was only increasing tensions and the threat of war.

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