

Historic event at local church: Carmelites ordain first Vietnamese

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The Rev. Pat McGuigan of St. Paul's RC Church in Bullville, left, and other priests, at left, lay hands on Stephano Tran Quang Huy and Giuse Tran Thang Hung during their ordination in the church at the National Shrine of Our Lady of Mount Carmel in Middletown on May 7, 2007. Times Herald-Record/TOM BUSHEY

Middletown — Last Monday, a historic first took place in Middletown.

Stephan Huy Quang Tran, born in Saigon; and Joseph Hung Thang Tran, born in Dong Nai; became the first Vietnamese to be ordained into the 800-year-old international Carmelite order. The two men are not related.

Adding to the solemnity and beauty of the Catholic occasion, more than 100 Vietnamese flew in from around the United States to bear witness at the ceremony held at The National Shrine of Our Lady of Mount Carmel.

While the men wore formal dark suits, many women wore traditional Vietnamese ao dai dresses, decorated with flowers and patterns spun in gold.

The joy of the moment was tempered for many of the older Vietnamese by memories of a homeland ravaged by war, and the brutality of the Communist takeover 32 years ago.

Vang Cong Tran said that, as a youth, he escaped on the last helicopter as the Communists closed in on Saigon in April 1975. Now a Redemptorist missionary in Virginia, he can never go home again because he's a Christian.

A Vietnamese proverb says, "If you swallow the sun, you carry the darkness within you." Although Vietnam has reopened to the world, the "darkness" still affects Christians.

There was sadness in the face of a nun, in her 80s, from the convent in Silver Springs, Md. She said in halting English that she regrets she'll never see the 3,000 islands jutting out of the sea at the legendary Ha Long harbor in Vietnam — now popular with American tourists.

Several of the Vietnamese at the ordination said they'd been tortured for their faith in "re-education" camps — a system so widespread in the years after the war that every Vietnamese present had family members who suffered.

Behind the altar at the church at St. Albert's Chapel at the shrine were two tapestries.

The one on the right carried a Vietnamese symbol of a butterfly, a symbol for new life or resurrection — and for the age-old pageantry that took place before it.

That pageantry was enhanced, not just by the ancient rituals of communion and ordination, but also by remarkable music.

St. Albert's choir, which is composed mostly of women, was joined by a Vietnamese choir from Washington, D.C. The Vietnamese sang two hymns: "Tua Lan Tram Huong" ("Like Incense Rising to Heaven") and "Khuc Cam Ta" ("Song of Thanksgiving").

The combined choirs sang the Latin "Song and the Silence" during the anointing of hands, as Bishop Dominick Lagonegro of Newburgh performed the ancient rite.

During the music, several birds perched outside the church doors, singing in the greening trees. For the Vietnamese, birds singing during an auspicious event is a symbol of joy. The bird-singing was at its loudest when the new Communion hymn by Ragan Courtney and Buryl Red was sung:

"In remembrance of me, search for truth.

In remembrance of me, always love.

In remembrance of me, don't look above,

but in your heart. In your heart.

Look in your heart for God."

That last line was appropriate for the two new priests.

Born in Vietnam, they first heard about Christianity at home, but really began to study the faith when they came to America to go to university.

The two, who both have a master's in divinity studies, will serve in Middletown. Father Joseph has been assigned to St. Albert's beginning June 14; Father Stephan will be assigned to Mt. Carmel in time to celebrate his 34th birthday on August 19.

Following the Mass, the two new priests gave hugs, blessings and prayers to long lines of the congregation.

Then it was time for lunch, with speeches in both languages.

And a boisterous Vietnamese custom ended the affair, as the two priests went table to table, and with whooping shouts, toasted everyone.