

# Vietnamese nuns give funds to keep students in school during pandemic

(CNS) Nguyen Duy Phuong, a 12th-grader, thought he could not afford to go to school this year. His father, who used to work as a day wage earner in Ho Chi Minh City and became jobless during the delta variant phase of the COVID-19 outbreak, returned home and still has no work.

His mother died years ago at a young age. He lives with his grandparents, one of whom has Hansen's disease.

Phuong said he received 1.5 million dong (\$66) in early October from Sister Mary Nguyen Thi Hong Hoa to get books and other basic supplies for his studies.

"I am walking on air about the generous gift. My family is deeply grateful to the nun and benefactors," Phuong said, adding he hopes to finish high school.

Sister Hoa, a member of the Lovers of the Holy Cross of Cai Mon based in Ben Tre province, said, "We offered scholarships to 33 students, including Phuong, so that they could buy school uniforms and books and share internet service fees with one another as they gather in groups to learn online lessons."

She said scholarship students are in third through 12th grades in the two southern provinces of Ben Tre and Tra Vinh. They receive \$22-\$88 each, depending on their situations.

Sister Hoa said she also offered her own laptop to a group of students so they could attend online classes together. Their parents have been left unemployed by the COVID-19 pandemic in recent months and could not afford to get computers and other supplies for their studies.

As of Nov. 5, Vietnam's Ministry of Health had recorded 953,547 COVID-19 infections that include 22,412 deaths since the coronavirus hit in early 2020. By late October, all schools in Tra Vinh still provided online courses, while in Ben Tre some schools had reopened and others still held virtual classes.

Sister Hoa said most of the scholarship recipients have relatives who work in industrial zones in Ho Chi Minh City and in other provinces.

"Those students will surely drop out of school or perform poorly at school if they are not given financial support. They will take manual jobs with low wages to support their families and be caught in the poverty trap like their parents," Sister Hoa said.

The nun said she tries to support students in need regardless of their backgrounds as all people are God's children. Most of the scholarship students are from families of other faiths who have been badly affected by the contagion.

The nun said benefactors of Vietnamese origin abroad make donations to her to forward to those in need.

Sister Therese Nguyen Thi Kim Dung, a member of the Lovers of the Holy Cross of Cho Quan, said this year more than 100 students from Ho Chi Minh City and four other provinces have been given financial support by sisters. They are offered school fees, clothes, books, school supplies, bikes and food.

Sister Dung, who is in charge of scholarships for poor students, said their families are badly affected by the pandemic due to loss of jobs and incomes. Parents of some have died of COVID-19, while many others had to bring their children home from Ho Chi Minh City because they could not support their studies.

On Oct. 4, Archbishop Joseph Nguyen Nang of Ho Chi Minh City

called on local congregations, parishes and associations to provide material and emotional support to 1,500 students in the city who were orphaned during the COVID-19 pandemic.

A Dominican sister from a convent based in Bien Hoa, the capital of Dong Nai province, said her order works with benefactors in the country and abroad to provide students in second to 10th grades \$22 each so that they can buy textbooks and other supplies. The nun, who asked not to be named, said the children are in families who migrated from southern provinces.

She said their parents work at local markets and construction sites, sell lottery tickets and food on the streets, and drive motorbike taxis for a living, but they have become jobless since June because of the coronavirus outbreak. They were not given financial support by the government because they have no personal papers.

She said the nuns regularly provide them with food and offer to pay their rent and fees for running water and power.

Sister Mary Nguyen Thi Ha, a member of the Daughters of Mary Immaculate from Thua Thien Hue province, said the nuns provide 40 bicycles for students whose families are affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. She said parents of many students lost their jobs so they could not afford their children's school fees and bicycles to go to school. Many students had to collect used items at dump sites, work at bakeries and do other work to save money to support their families and pay for their studies last summer.

Nuns from St. Paul de Chartres and Daughters of Our Lady of the Visitation in Hue also have given scholarships to hundreds of students whose parents were left unemployed in recent months. Without the scholarship help, college students were staying home to support their families and unable to stay in school.

*Pham has been a National Catholic Reporter correspondent since December 2013 and regularly contributes to Global Sisters Report. He is based in Vietnam.*