

Laotian National Catholic Conference 2016

By Akarath Soukhaphon



Independence Day weekend 2016 – The parish office was busy greeting wave after wave of faithful Laotian Catholics from across the United States and around the world as they descended on the inner-city parish of St. Michael's in Milwaukee, WI for the 11th Laotian National Catholic Conference on July 1-3, 2016. With smiling faces and open hearts, over 100 participants gathered to be renewed in spirit and to learn and discuss the future of Laotian Catholics in diaspora. The excitement was palpable as hugs were exchanged and a seemingly vulnerable faith community was once again made whole. For Laotian Catholics throughout the United States and the world, this triennial conference served as a space for healing, conversation, and conversion.

In this Year of Mercy declared by Pope Francis, the planning committee decided that the conference theme would be “Come and Follow Me” in order to challenge participants to take a closer look at the ways they can be involved in their local parishes, focusing on Christ’s call for all to serve. The message was echoed in the opening remarks of Most Reverend Pierre Bach (Vicar Apostolic Emeritus of Savannakhet, Laos) reminding the faithful that we cannot always rely on priests and sisters, but that all are called to do the work of the Church and we must be proactive in keeping our communities strong in the faith. As discussions ensued, a sense of hope and reassurance filled the church hall. The Spirit was indeed stirring.

On the second day, other good news came in the form of the 17 Blessed Martyrs of Laos presented by Reverend Roland Jacques, OMI, Vicar Provincial of the Oblates for Vietnam. The martyrs are the first ever from Laos to be recognized by the Church. A celebration of the 17 Martyrs will be held June 2017 in the National Shrine of Our Lady of the Snows, Belleville, IL. News of the celebration will be shared with Laotian communities throughout the world. Closer to home, Sr. Myrna Tordillo, MSCS, from the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops presented on the state of Asian and Pacific Island Catholics in the United States. Rich Harter and Eva Diaz from the Archdiocese of Milwaukee also presented important messages of mercy and how, as Catholics, we can impact our own families, local parishes, and dioceses.



The conference concluded on Sunday with a Mass with the entire community of St. Michael's, followed by a Baci ceremony, lunch, and cultural entertainment filled with youth performances from the Lao, Karen and Karenni communities. Overall, the

conference was met with positive feedback. Many were excited to take back Rich Harter's message of practicing real mercy in our lives, to share the good news of the martyrs, and to lead their communities in the faith by inviting back the young people to share in the mission. In the past, we followed the good priests and sisters who lived among us in Laos, loved us, and formed us in the faith. We are at a crossroads. With our communities scattered and our challenges numerous, we now walk side by side with each other with our eyes fixed always on Christ who leads us. The journey continues in 2019, as the Laotian Catholic community of Dallas/Ft. Worth, TX has agreed to host the next conference.



Sr. Alice Thepouthay (standing, to the right of the picture of Mary) with other members of the Laotian Catholic community