

A Refugee Herself, Sister Alice Serves Old and New Refugees More Than 30 Years

by Peter Tran

BELLEVILLE, IL – The sound of laughter echoed in the big conference hall of the National Shrine of Our Lady of the Snows whenever the 60-some-year-old sister stopped and greeted the participants attending the thanksgiving celebration of the 17 martyrs of Laos.

Sister Alice Thepouthay, SCSJA, knew most of these participants, some 300 Lao, Kmhmu and Hmong from across the country who made their pilgrimage mid-June to celebrate the martyrs, known as “Joseph Thao and his 16 Companions,” at the shrine in Belleville, IL. She got their attention when she walked up to them. She was greeted with “Sabai dee Khun Me,” or “how are you, Mother (as sisters are called). She returned their greetings, asking them about their trips and well-being and welcoming them to the weekend celebration. At the end of the celebration, they told her how proud they were to have the martyrs of their “own,” and proud to be in the same family of faith. They also congratulated her for the success of the celebration, of which they claimed she is the “heart and soul” of the planning committee.

Alice has known these participants – Lao, Kmhmu, Hmong and Karen and Karenni – and visited them in their homes and cities since 1984 when she began working in the Lao ministry in the United States. Laos has various ethnic groups; the majority of the people are lowland Lao. Kmhmu and Hmong people are from the highlands in the north. Born in Paksan, Laos, she knew some of them while they were still living in Laos or in a refugee camp in Thailand or the Philippines. Today her ministry continues at St. Michael’s in Milwaukee, but with a new group of refugees from Myanmar – Karen, Karenni, Chin and Kachin.

A Refugee Herself

The story of Alice being a refugee began after 1975 when Communist Pathet Lao forces took over their country. As a Lao, being an educator and fluent in French and English was not an ideal situation with the communists. She remembers when the communist forces came in Vientiane, where she was teaching. They confiscated the Catholic school where she taught. Priests were arrested and sent to the re-education camp, while the sisters were forbidden to carry on their work but were sent to work in the farm. They were forbidden to read any foreign-language books.

“I don’t know anything about rice farming. I was trained to be a teacher and that was all I did,” Alice said. It was “oppressive,” and life was difficult living under the authority’s scrutiny, being watched when going to church and being watched in every move. “There is no freedom.” She “prayed hard and asked God what she should do.” About three years of farm labor and with heavy heart, she discussed with her superior on her plan to flee across the border – the Mekong River – and entered a refugee camp in Thailand. With some of her relatives, they escaped and declared themselves as refugees. After being vetted and officially declared as a refugee by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, she then landed in a transit refugee camp in the Philippines waiting for sponsorship from the West.

It was a trouble time with the fall of Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos to the Communists in 1975. Millions of Vietnamese, Cambodian and Lao people undertook a dangerous journey to become refugees, living in camps in Thailand, Malaysia, the Philippines and Hong Kong. Hundreds of thousands died along the way. About 2.5 million were resettled in the West, mainly in the United States, Australia and Europe. Hundreds of thousands were repatriated.

Alice was one of the more than 300,000 Lao people who escaped from the communist regime. In 1981, a Christian church in Ohio sponsored her and brought her to the United States. A few months later, her congregation found out where she was and brought her to Milwaukee where she has lived and worked ever since.

Social and Pastoral Care

Like many immigrants and refugees' generations before, pastoral care involves ethnic priests or sisters providing educational, religious and sacramental programs for their people. There were German, Italian and Polish churches. Vietnamese Catholics also have their churches in many dioceses. However, for Lao Catholics due to the lack of priests who speak Lao, a unique pastoral care model was organized with Alice as the center of it. She is the only active Lao sister active in this ministry in the country.

It is at St. Michael's Church in Milwaukee that she began her ministry to the Lao people. In the beginning of her ministry she helped them resettle, looking for housing, jobs for the then newcomers, translating for them at social service offices or hospital, and most importantly organizing religious services for the small community of Catholics. She organized a group of young people, teaching catechism, organizing singing practice in their language, praying and worshipping together.

Through the network of the United States Catholic Bishops' Office for Pastoral Care of Migrants and Refugees in the early 1980s, she met the two Lao-speaking priests. One was a Foreign Mission of Paris priest who just began a national Lao Pastoral Center in Fort Worth, and another a Redemptorist priest working with a Lao community in Chicago. She explained to them that there was a great need to provide pastoral care to the Lao refugees across the country. Together they formed the Lao Mission Team. They began their first mission in Massachusetts, and later their mission took them to Texas, California, Connecticut, Pennsylvania, Washington, Iowa, Illinois, Wisconsin, South Dakota, New York, Ohio, Arkansas, Louisiana, Florida and Canada.

In the summer, they were joined by a MEP Bishop Pierre Bach, who was a former vicar of Thakhek (later Savannakhet vicariate) but had to leave Laos after the communist takeover. The French bishop who was appointed by the Vatican to be responsible for pastoral care of Lao Catholics in diaspora came to the United States to visit Lao Catholics. Their mission lasting four or five days in each city would include home visits, discussion with the family, religious service in the evening, and celebration of Mass and social gathering of the community on the final night. It was Alice who made contact to these various Catholic communities around the country. The team asked local diocese officials or priests to visit Lao Catholics in each city, and to organize religious services. Alice said it was an "effective" means of outreach at that time, introducing the Lao Catholics to their "local parish," encouraging them to be active church goers, holding Mass

and Confession in Lao once a year, visiting in their homes and listening to their hardship and joy as they began their new life in the new country.

In the late 1990s, with the death of the MEP priest, Alice was asked to take over the Lao Pastoral Center and moved its office to Milwaukee. Since that time, Lao Americans have become more integrated in society. Their children have grown, gotten jobs, have married and moved out. Some of the old-timers have passed away, while others have retired. With Bach's encouragement, Alice and the Lao communities in North America have organized a national pastoral conference every two years. Lao Catholics from both Canada and the United States have come together in a Canadian or US city for workshops examining pastoral and cultural issues and celebration. At the last gathering, prior to the celebration of the 17 Martyrs in Belleville, they met in Vancouver and the theme was the "Year of Mercy." In 2019 they will meet in Dallas/Fort Worth area.

Meanwhile, Alice's local ministry for the Lao and Hmong people at St. Michael's Parish in Milwaukee continues. And then a new group of refugees began to arrive.

New Refugees, Same Ministry

"I'm so busy this summer with the Bible camp for the Karen and Karenni children at St. Michael's," said Alice, now the parish's pastoral associate. She organized religious summer class for 130 children before taking off for the Convocation of Catholic Leaders: The Joy of the Gospel in America, on July 1-4 in Orlando. She reflected on her refugee ministry with the people from Laos and Myanmar. It is like a new cycle, but the ministry is the same. She recounted how she stumbled into this new group three years before. "I was in an Asian grocery store and I noticed a group of a dozen people. I listened to them talking, and I know it was not Lao, not Kmhmu, not Hmong, not Vietnamese, not Thai either. I had no idea what language that was. They were talking animatedly. I went up and asked them who they were. They told me they were Karen from Myanmar. They were going to walk home carrying the heavy grocery they bought. I offered them a ride in my old car. I told them who I was and where I worked. They insisted on having me to visit them and introduced them to a Catholic family."

Alice said the Catholic family was happy to see her. They all talked to each other and said they wanted to come to St. Michael's for worship. In the beginning, there were some 10-15 Karen families. Then they introduced her to more Karenni Catholics in Milwaukee's south side. After they found out about St. Michael's, they began to move into the neighborhood to be closer to each other and near the church. A few years later, there are Chin and Kachin families. "Now we have some 80 families of Karen, Karenni, Chin and Kachin - or some 400 people. These people bring joy to the U.S Church. It was a joy working with them," Alice said.

Picture: A group of parishioners and Sr. Alice during Bishop Banchong's visit from Laos.

This new group of refugees escaped the armed conflicts and brutal human rights abuse and persecution by the Burmese military. They first arrived in Thailand in 1984. Throughout the 1980s, 1990s and 2000s they continued to escape their country and settled in various camps along the Thai border. The majority of refugees were Karen, 80%, and Karenni about 10%. They were officially registered as refugees by UNHCR, and tens of thousands were resettled in the United States annually in the last 10 years. Most of the Karen and Karenni are Christians.

Back to St. Michael's, once again Alice's ministry to the new group of refugees has been finding homes, jobs, social services, but most importantly organizing young people to come together for prayers, singing practice, worshipping together, joining the other Lao and Hmong Catholics of St. Michael's.

One of the Karen leaders told her, "Mother, when you retire, don't go away. Please come and sit in the office so we know that you are there. You don't have to run around helping us."

Alice was amused by that statement. The Karen leader didn't know this, but his words appropriately described Alice's refugee ministry after all these years. It is a ministry of accompaniment.