

# Vocation Effort Hits Carthage, MO as 100,000 Gather

*Vietnamese gather in "Bible Belt" of Missouri for 25th year to celebrate Church*

Where do I begin to tell you about an incredible and unique display of faith in August in, of all places, Carthage, Missouri? Four hours outside of St. Louis, MO, Carthage is in the heart of the midwestern Bible belt! I cannot express how unique this powerful expression of faith was.

Stephen Tran, a vocation prospect from Stockton, CA joined me. He too had a powerful experience. He was lying on the floor pen in hand intently writing his journal about how the weekend impacted him. It definitely made an incisive impact that only a Vietnamese could really understand.

No one could not be moved by this Marian event. How could you not be impressed with the mass of people fervently in worship together. The last estimate of those attending was 80,000 to 100,000 people over the weekend !!

This event is now in its 23<sup>rd</sup> year. All the activities are hosted on the seminary grounds of the Vietnamese congregation of priests and brothers and their 200 seminarians. Many people were camping in tents all over the small city. They landed on people's lawns, in fields, in parking lots, any open space that adjoined the seminary in this rural town. It was a Vietnamese Woodstock.

Most of the local people, who are predominantly Baptist, have grown to accept and even welcome the event. The weather was horrifically hot. At its worst, it was 97 degrees with 98 %

humidity! It was at a constant 105-107 heat index! I was in habit most of the time, by my choice, in order to be noticed as a Carmelite in the throngs of people. The heat broke the talcum powder barrier!! But it was worth it. A good number



of Vietnamese now know the Carmelites exist!

What an incredible people of faith the Vietnamese are. Besides enduring the trials of being among 100,000 people in a space designed to hold far

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fewer, they participated in very long liturgies, processions with 300 or more priests concelebrating each liturgy. We walked the sun-baked grounds, eating the Vietnamese food and drink while their country's music wafted thru the air. I thought I had been transported back to Southeast Asia again!

The Masses and ceremonies were rich with Vietnamese culture, music, color, sound and dance. So beautiful! Several American bishops were there who are close to the Vietnamese community. The

focus was Eucharistic and Marian. A 67 year old Vietnamese Archbishop who had been imprisoned and tortured by the North Vietnamese for nine years was the one everyone waited for. He forgave his captors and has no

bitterness toward them.

Translated for me by Stephen Tran, the homily of Archbishop Francis was a beautiful and emotional account of his imprisonment. He spoke of how his faith kept him alive and strengthened

him. He attributes much to Our Lady in "watching over him" as his guide. Stephen was deeply moved by what the Archbishop shared! He got a chance to speak with him personally and had a photo

taken with him. That one moment made the weekend all worthwhile.

On Saturday afternoon about 15,000 of us processed around the town, a distance of half a mile or so. Young and old alike, 150 priests, with the 3 bishops in front of a float with Our Lady's statue made up a long line circling the entire town. The climax of the procession occurred when we returned to the seminary grounds to the high altar which had been set up. Hundreds of balloons were released and firecrackers exploded with a deafening sound as a salute to the Virgin. Cheers and calls were bel-

lowed out and a huge choir sang great, resounding Vietnamese hymns ! It sent chills up one's spine, even in the heat.

The young people were incredibly hospitable, fun loving and dedicated. Many thousands of them were present at all the liturgies. At least a quarter of the 100,000 were between 16 and 25 years of age. What a real sign of loyalty to their tradition and the faith! Special sessions were held for them with their hero, Archbishop Francis, who is like a father figure for them. Concerts were held at night for the young also. More than 30,000 of them sat on the ground as folk singers, light rock musicians, and Vietnamese dancing took place.

As for vocations we will see what happens. It has started! Some now are aware of Carmel and I know that I will be hearing from some. It is difficult to describe such a uniquely moving weekend! Pictures will not do it.

You had to be there sweating, see the smiles, and witness the tremendous dedication and devotion to their faith and in each other!

I am glad to have been part of such a festival and to have the opportunity to meet the Vietnamese and their culture full force, face to face!

*Photo: Kevin McBrien, O. Carm., and Carmelite Sisters of the Aged and Infirm join with Vietnamese at the Carthage gathering.*

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