

# Songs of a Shared Journey, Simple Faith

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Vietnamese American Catholics are known for being highly traditional and loyal -- taking Communion by mouth and not by hand, praying together as a family before bed, sending hundreds and hundreds of their sons and daughters to become priests and nuns.

Yet there is another, more subtle characteristic that also distinguishes the community, one that can be sensed and heard even without understanding Vietnamese: the singsong quality of their prayer.

Almost every word is in Vietnamese and is sung or chanted -- not spoken -- at Mass, of which five are held each weekend at the booming Holy Martyrs of Vietnam parish.

The first Vietnamese parish in the United States, Holy Martyrs sits on an otherwise quiet back street in Arlington. When the church opened in 1975, 25 families belonged. Today, it has 1,500 and is one of only two parishes in the Washington region with Masses celebrated only in Vietnamese (the other is Our Lady of Vietnam in Silver Spring).

Packed to the point that the church is about to begin a multimillion-dollar expansion, Holy Martyrs reflects the tight braid of faith and ethnic identity among Vietnamese Catholics.

People come to pray, to fill the aisles of this open, bright, wooden, barn-shaped sanctuary, to open the worn blue book of hymns and to sing along to the folky, electronic music. But they also come to take Vietnamese classes and make sure their children know their native language, and to volunteer with the parish's radio station, which, through the Internet, reaches Vietnamese speakers across the country with news, stories and sermons.

They come to meditate on the three-story-high mural parishioners face in the sanctuary, a dramatic image that tells the story of their unique faith journey. At the center of the mural is an enormous, beaming Jesus in a white robe, bathed in a loving, orange light and surrounded by a sea of Catholics holding palm fronds. Among them are figures meant to be the first European missionaries who brought Catholicism to Vietnam and the tens of thousands of Catholics killed there for their faith -- the "martyrs" for whom the parish is named. This tie to their history fuels their loyalty, something the Rev. John Baptist Doan Binh Minh, the parish's vicar, calls "a more simple faith."

The number of Vietnamese Catholics who become priests and nuns in the United States is disproportionately high, notable at a time when few choose such religious vocations.

The future is evident at Holy Martyrs, where older women in traditional *ao dai* tunics sit beside boys in NBA tank tops. A large, glass-walled room in the back of the sanctuary is reserved for children and is packed for most Masses. The door to that room is left open, so there is a second soundtrack laid atop the singsong prayer: children squealing and jabbering.