

## Our Lives in a Leprosy Camp, as Told by Sisters

Dear sponsors and benefactors,

Today, people still hold prejudices against leprosy. They consider it a formidable disease, and so, have abandoned the afflicted. As such, lepers remain societal outcasts, even within their hometowns and communities. This is not the only disadvantage patients suffer: There are lepers with no family or relatives, enduring their old age in loneliness and sorrow. In the afternoons, they sit on chairs, looking into a distant realm, waiting for sympathetic hands to help their pain and suffering.

We — Sr. Maria Nguyen T. Nguyen and Sr. Anna Phan T. Toan, of the congregation of the Lovers of Holy Cross, Diocese of Vinh — have served in a leprosy camp for a long time. Every day, our work includes visiting patients regardless of their religion. We take turns bathing, cutting hair, and caring for the sick and lonely. We help those who are no longer able to take care of themselves.

We listen to their stories here. There are seniors with painful pasts. They've been abandoned by their own relatives, by society, and they've had to not only leave their home but, in some cases, their homeland. Quynh Lap leprosy camp is now their home. A relative once told a senior living at the camp: "*When your hands and feet regrow, then come back home.*" When I heard this, I felt so much pity for him.

At Quynh Lap camp, many people have lost their arms and legs and have blurred vision and deformed faces and noses. They want to eat but have no one to feed them. They want to bathe but have no hands to wash themselves. They want to itch, but there is no one to scratch them. They want to leave their rooms, but there is no one to lead them. Their only friends? A small room, with ragged old uniforms, and a simple bed. They sit all day waiting for someone to pass by, just so they can ask questions, talk...alleviate their loneliness.

Because of the epidemic this year, charity teams have not visited as they once did. Older patients asked, "*Sister, Friends of the Lepers have not visited this year, right?*" We told them: "*Since Covid-19 is spreading and causing harm across America, they cannot visit you.*" Lepers indeed need us to share materially and financially, but they also need our handshake, our conversation, and our warmth.

In the leprosy camp, there are many sorrowful cases, including an older man named Luong Kham Phoi. He doesn't remember his birthday. He came to the camp blind in both eyes and living in darkness. We eventually took him for eye surgery. He was overjoyed when he could see again! The first person he saw was a sister, and to this day, he thanks the sisters for giving him his eyesight back. Every day, he waits for the meals we bring him. We bathe him. Every time we

leave, sadness appears on his face. He prays: *May Mother Mary, Lord Jesus bless these two sisters to be peaceful and healthy, and make me get well soon so that I do not disturb them!*

There are many more sad lives. A 94-year-old man confided: *"Sister, if I knew ahead that I would have such leprosy... My parents should've strangled me when I was born. Would I be less miserable now?"* There are elderly people who hate their parents because their parents, once aware of their infliction, brought them to river and let them float away. Someone saved them, but now they live with resentment and hate for their own parents.

For the past 25 years, Friends of the Lepers has worked to help support those inflicted. In the beginning, lepers were not well known. Their parents, neighbors, and society at large shunned them. Even now, lepers feel inferior — many people keep far from them when they're near. Yet 25 years ago, this association chose to be "friends" and removed barriers of inferiority and fear. This charitable group has helped alleviate physical and mental pains.

The name "Friends of the Lepers" has always stuck with our patients, as the group provides monthly gifts and assistance. Thanks to benefactors, the lepers' lives here have improved. Moreover, Friends of the Lepers also helps provide Quynh Lap camp with medicine, housing, nutrition, and education. The group helps children and grandchildren of patients pay tuition, so they can go to school, study in universities, and simply do normal things in regular society. So far, many patients' children have graduated from universities and manage stable jobs.

To our delight, Friends of the Lepers have also helped cured lepers reintegrate into society and become self-sufficient in life.

**Thank our Lord for people who still love each other!**

The Congregation of the Lovers of Holy Cross, Diocese of Vinh

Quynh Lap leprosy camp, Nghe An, Ha Tinh