

FAST-GROWING PARISH

Catholics rejoice in new building

Vietnamese community celebrates freedom as they dedicate church

By KEN GARFIELD
Religion Editor

The Charlotte area's Vietnamese community of Roman Catholics celebrated the opening of its new church building Sunday with balloons, firecrackers and an appreciation for the freedom to pray as they choose.

"Brothers and sisters in Christ, this is a day of rejoicing," Bishop Peter Jugis of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Charlotte proclaimed to nearly 2,000 as he cut the ribbon outside St. Joseph Vietnamese Catholic Church in southwest Charlotte.

Moments after an explosion of firecrackers at a Mass dedicating the \$1.8 million church, Jugis said the Gospel reading from Luke 19:9 captured the day's meaning:

"Today, salvation has come to this house."

The opening of the worship center on Sandy Porter Road near Olympic High School in the Steele Creek community marks a rich moment for the 9,200 Vietnamese Catholics in the Charlotte diocese. Begun in 1981 as a mission of three Charlotte parishes, a Vietnamese Catholic parish was established in 1998 on the present site, in an old church



CHRIS KEANE - STAFF PHOTO

Members of the St. Joseph Vietnamese Catholic Church perform a liturgical dance during the dedication ceremony of the new church building on Sunday. The fast-growing parish, located in the Steele Creek community, is home to 385 families.

building that hardly looked like a sanctuary.

With Sunday's dedication of the 22,000-square-foot building featuring a sanctuary that can welcome 725, the congregation fi-

nally has a handsome, spacious home of its own. It is graced by a baptismal font, crucifix and other religious items made in Vietnam.

More than a church building, St. Joseph is a haven for the faith-

ful who came to the United States to escape political violence and religious persecution.

Hongloan Phan, 31, spent two years in refugee camps in Hong Kong and the Philippines before

settling in Charlotte in 1987. Much of her family is here, but she still looks forward to her sister's family joining them from Saigon.

While she waits, her family ap-

preciates the freedom of religion.

"Here," said Phan, "you just preach."

The Rev. Peter Tan Van Le, 59, was imprisoned for 13 years in Vietnam before coming to the United States in 1993. Held by the Communists, he celebrated Mass in secret when he wasn't being forced to plant rice and trees in the fields and forests.

"The faith of the people is very strong," said Tan Van Le, whose fast-growing Charlotte parish is home now to 385 families.

Sunday morning, Vietnamese Roman Catholics came from all over the region for a celebration marked by solemnity and fun.

While some adults wore native dress to watch Vietnamese dancers and listen to music from their homeland, a number of teens came in baggy jeans.

As Jugis anointed the altar with sacred chrism (or oil), worshippers packed into the sanctuary and an overflow room strained to get a look. Meanwhile, mothers in the nearby crying room pacified their fidgety babies, while volunteers outside began putting out huge trays of roast pork for the party to follow.

Everywhere, there was energy, excitement and pride.

"Freedom here is very good," Tan Van Le said. "I am very proud, very joyful. I feel all the people are proud and joyful, too."

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