

Residents in front of their current home, with Br. Jean-Baptiste

(*In the bustling and sprawling metropolis of Saigon, the Assumptionists run an orphanage that resembles a big family. The experience has been so positive and the needs are so great that the Congregation is considering building a new house as soon as possible, larger, more functional, and more welcoming.)*

It's early morning in Saigon. Frosted light with bluish tints rises over this southern city, re-baptized Hô Chi Minh City since the end of the Vietnam War in 1975. An overwhelming swarm of motorbikes fills the maze of the city's by-ways. Only a few narrow back streets, still asleep, escape this deafening invasion.

In the twelfth ward, located in the northwest section of the city, there is an alley lost among small shops still shielded by a closed metal screen. It leads to Dong Hung Thuan Street where, behind a iron gate crowned with a cross, you'll find a four-story square house rising toward the Asian sky. Who would have thought that this cramped, quiet dwelling was an orphanage housing thirty-two children aged 6 to 19, coming from thirteen of Vietnam's sixty-four provinces?

You hear no noise coming from the bedrooms where sleeping mats are rolled up in the flash of an eye. There is no unruly rush down the cluttered stairways. Soon all you hear are the intermittent sounds of hymns escaping from a small room cut off by a white curtain that moves gently back and forth with the drafts of warm, humid air. Sitting cross-legged, the children are reciting their morning prayers before they head off for breakfast. Even at breakfast everything is calm under the humming sound of the large ceiling fans. The children dip their French baguettes deep into bowls of steaming noodle soup.

It's Sunday and outside one can already catch a glimpse of people off to church in this neighborhood largely populated with Catholic families. Quickly, putting on their white shirts and a colored scarf around their neck, the children join the crowd of parishioners, pass a marketplace already a-buzz and make their way to their seats in a church teeming with youngsters their own age. Mass demands of them complete silence and then they leave, shoulder to shoulder, once again past colored marketplace stalls with the aroma of ginger and fried shrimp in the air.

Back to the orphanage and daily chores: sweeping the floors and cleaning the bathrooms for some, kitchen duty for others who wash the dishes or prepare the automatic rice-makers. Then they're all off to do homework that needs to be completed before the next day's classes in local elementary, middle, and high schools. It's a heavy program but one peppered with time for a nap, games, TV, friends' visits, and riding their bikes through the dizzying labyrinth of the city's alleyways. What you see at the heart of this orphanage as time goes by is the face of a huge family…





