

## Vietnam Catholic pastoral work, one child at a time.

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### HUE, Vietnam



On a Monday in September, while playing with her

classmates in the front yard of their elementary school, a second-grader shouted out happily "There you are!"

Ha Thi Dao, 7, and other students came to welcome St. Paul de Chartres Sister Marie Nguyen Thi Luu, who had arrived on a motorcycle taxi. In addition to a helmet, she was carrying a bag of money.

The children led Sister Luu to meet their respective teachers so the nun could pay for their school fees.

"We love her very much, because she helps us go to school," Dao told UCA News. Even though she does well at studies, she said her teacher warned her three times since school started on Aug. 18 that she could not stay in the class if she did not pay the school fee, she noted.

Sister Luu paid 400,000 dong (US\$24) for Dao and also paid the fees for four more of the 34 pupils in her class.

Dao, whose face is weather-beaten despite her few years, said her six-member family lives on a boat on the Huong River, where her father fishes. The boat measures 8 meters in length and 2 meters in width. Her mother sells tea at a local market and her three older sisters, who all dropped out of first grade since they could not



She recalled that when she met Sister Luu for the first time, while collecting discarded items on the streets, the nun encouraged her to go to school.

Sister Luu, 65, told UCA News she visited four schools in Hue in September to pay school fees of 400,000-600,000 dong each for 250 poor students from first to 12th grade. Their parents scrape a meager living from fishing or working as daily wage earners such as bricklayers, motorcycle-taxi drivers and porters.

The sister, stationed in this city, 660 kilometers south of Ha Noi, explained she has been paying poor local students' school fees since 2003 with help from a Paris Foreign Missions priest and HopeToday, a U.S.-based charitable organization.

The nun said most beneficiaries are from about 1,000 households with 7,000 family members who live on boats. Their children have to drop out of school in an early stage to collect algae, mussels and discarded items, or sell fruit at markets to support the families, she added.

Noting that the cycle of poverty in which the boat families are trapped has gone on for generations, she said the only hope for the children to break free of this is education.

Sister Luu also invites an elementary teacher to provide basic education for 26 illiterate children who she said cannot be enrolled in state-run schools because they do not have birth certificates. A state-run elementary school lets them use the building for this.



According to Nguyen Nhat Nam, an eighth-grader, Sister Luu

also gathers 100 children aged 5-15 at her convent on Sunday mornings so they can sing, read children's books, watch videos, play chess and eat. She invites seminarians from Xuan Bich Major Seminary to cut the children's hair, the youth added.

Three of Nguyen Van Thi's four children attend school, and Sister Luu pays all their fees. "I am extremely grateful to the local Catholic Church," the 38-year-old man told UCA News. "Without Sister Luu's assistance, my children would have dropped out of school long time ago."

Sister Marie Nguyen Thi Luu teaches a 15-year-old girl how to write at her convent in Hue on Sept. 21. The Saint Paul de Chartres nun provides scholarships to poor students in central Vietnam.

Father Joachim Le Thanh Hoang, head of Hue archdiocese's Committee for the Laity, told UCA News the archdiocese has no scholarship fund but many local parishes ask benefactors for funds for poor students. As an example, the 74-year-old parish priest said his St. Francis Parish offers monthly scholarships worth 20 million dong to 40 poor students in its area.

Benedict Doan Van Tien, a Phu Cam Cathedral parishioner, said the parish has provided 900 million dong a year for the past 10 years to help poor local students. Tien, 57, said the cathedral parish also gave a gold ring to each of the 20 students who passed the college entrance exams this year.

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Sister Marie Nguyen Thi Luu with students she sends to school in Hue, on Sept. 21. The Saint Paul de Chartres nun provides scholarships to poor students in central Vietnam.

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