

The World's Most Unique Catholic Parish, Holy Redeemer, Bangkok, Thailand

By Rev. Chuck Beierwaltes, C.Ss.R.

If you ever exit your flight at Don Muang Airport in Bangkok or get off the train at the Bangkok train station, tell the taxi driver, "Wat Maha Tai Soi Ruamrudee." He will know immediately where to take you.

The large building you would see as you climbed out of the cab might be mistaken for a Thai Buddhist temple, because of its size and style of architecture. It is Holy Redeemer Parish church, built and administered by the Redemptorists of the Viceprovince of Bangkok.

As unique as is the architecture of Holy Redeemer, Bangkok, the ministry it provides is equally unique. It is multi-cultural and multi-lingual embodying the variety of traditions and forms of worship among the people it serves. There are Catholic customs, old and new, from many lands making it a truly Catholic church, for the worshipers come from the four corners of the earth.

How It Began

In 1948, the Bishop of Bangkok asked the Redemptorists of the then St. Louis Province to establish a foundation and parish in Bangkok to serve the large English-speaking population of that international city. The Redemptorists accepted the invitation. In May 1948, four Redemptorists arrived in Bangkok to meet the bishop's request. There were Father Clarence Duhart, superior of the mission, Father Roger Godbout, Father Robert LaRiviere and Father Edward Kane.

The task of finding a suitable place in the city of Bangkok first where they might take up residence and later establish a permanent foundation took time and patience, especially for American foreigners. The task was given to Father Roger Godbout and Father Charles Cotant. Father Cotant had joined the pioneer community shortly after their arrival. Father Godbout and Father Cotant began by renting what might serve as a house not far from where the present Holy Redeemer Parish church now stands. They dubbed the chapel "Our Lady of the Garage Chapel," and immediately began holding services in it. Eventually, however, they found a suitable piece of land for a church and a large rectory. The land was purchased and blessed in 1954.

The idea of building the present Holy Redeemer church in the style of a Thai Buddhist temple was suggested by the late Bishop Fulton J. Sheen, while visiting the Redemptorist community in Bangkok. He suggested to Father Roger Godbout, then the rector of the little band of Redemptorists, "Father, when you get around to building a permanent church, why not build it in the style of Thai architecture." Father Godbout did just that a few years later.

After the Redemptorists had purchased the suitable piece of land for the church, they built a small school with two classrooms on the parish grounds. Today, that school has grown into two very large schools. One of these schools is on the parish property for Thai students. The other school is the International School now on a property outside the city. Each of these schools has an enrollment of approximately 2,000 students.

What Makes Holy Redeemer Unique

What is unique about this Redemptorist parish in Bangkok aside from its remarkable history and appearance? Well, for openers, there is a very large congregation of worshipers made up of a melange of people. Some live and work in Bangkok. Others are visitors from all five continents of the globe speaking a variety of languages. It is the Universal Catholic Church in reality coming together to worship and be nourished spiritually by word and sacrament. Among worshipers, are the very wealthy and beggarly poor. Ambassadors kneel beside shopkeepers, and beggars sit next to American tourists.

To see the entire sweep of society like this has the beauty of contrasts like the patriarch Joseph's coat of many colors. It also, however, poses difficulties of its own, as each group brings to church its own spirituality, its own devotional practices, its own prayer forms and its own cherished customs.

Its Ministries

The Redemptorists at Holy Redeemer minister to thousands of God's people every weekend with overflowing crowds of worshipers. Liturgical services on Sunday include seven Masses in English and seven in Thai. On Wednesdays, there are six novena services in honor of Our Mother of Perpetual Help in both Thai and English. Hundreds attend these services. After each novena service, people of all races and nations gather outside the church to greet each other and chat. The church itself is not air-conditioned, but generally there is a breeze moving through the church since the sides and rear of the church are open. Of course, this openness often allows a stray dog to join the congregation. It is not uncommon to see a few birds flying around the beams of the ceiling (signs of the Holy Spirit, I'm sure).

The church is well known for its many and colorful weddings, especially between a bride and groom of different cultures. All the Thai parishes in Bangkok send their couples who are preparing for marriage to the Pre-Cana instructions given at Holy Redeemer. It might be remarked that the church is also a favorite place for wake services and funerals. Wakes, incidentally, may last as long as five evenings.

Its Outreach beyond Holy Redeemer Parish

When a person reads the 25th chapter of St. Matthew's gospel where Jesus speaks of the last judgement, he or she has a good idea of the criteria Jesus uses in judging who will enter the kingdom of his Father. Jesus says to the blessed: "For I was hungry and you gave me food; I was thirsty and you gave me drink; I was a stranger and you made me welcome; naked and you clothed me, sick and you visited me, in prison and you came to see me (Mt 25:35-37). Caring for the hungry, the thirsty, the homeless, the naked, the sick, the prisoners is the daily routine of the Redemptorists at Holy Redeemer, Bangkok. It is these ministries that make Holy Redeemer a most unique and blessed place.

Each week, eleven American women in the Bangkok prison are visited by one of the Redemptorists from Holy Redeemer. The women receive some extra food and a few magazines. They suffer from homesickness and hopelessness as they face long sentences. It is the affirmation of God's love for them with a rekindling of hope that means the most for these unfortunate women. When the priest or brother leaves, he feels that he has received more than he brought - or as some say, more ministered to than ministering.

Not far from Holy Redeemer is the large immigration detention center that some call the "immigration prison." A few among the detained may be criminals, but most of them are helpless refugees from their war torn homelands. They fled their homeland in an attempt to find a safer and better way of life because it was so bad from where they came. Most of them do not have the proper documents needed to return and reenter their homeland. Some of them have documents, but have no desire to return to the smoldering ruins they left. Some have not the money to pay for the trip back home, so they are held until they can pay for their passage. Among these detainees are infants with their mothers, small children with their brothers and sisters, entire families and elderly people with on one. The rooms at the center in which the detainees are held are not large. Sometimes, 350 people are housed in one rather small room. They do not leave it until they are processed for departure. To say that the immigration detention center is a depressing place is an understatement.

Volunteers from Holy Redeemer go to the detention center during the week to visit the detainees and assist the medical staff and others. Volunteers are needed to distribute food, especially when some of the hotels deliver leftover bread smeared with a little jelly. Volunteers are needed to supervise the

children at playtime, and volunteers are needed to attempt to give the young ones the rudiments of an education.

Bangkok is a seaport with ships from around the world loading and unloading their cargoes. The Redemptorists act as chaplains to the crews of these ships. Mass is celebrated for the crewmen who do not have the opportunity to attend Mass and receive the sacraments very often.

Bangkok is also a city with a large population of English-speaking residents apart from the thousands of English-speaking visitors. For the children of these permanent residents who speak English, Holy Redeemer has a very large religious education program that takes place each Sunday. After a family Mass, the young people in grades pre-K to senior high school meet with their teachers for instruction, while their parents meet for adult instruction or a cup of tea with other parent parishioners. The greatest difficulty with these instructional classes is securing teaching materials. It is not easy to find good Catholic books and articles of devotion in a country that is 96% Buddhist, 4% Muslim, 1% Christian and only 0.05% Catholic. Almost everything has to be bought from Catholic supply stores in the Philippines, Europe, or the U.S.A., which means costly shipping charges in addition to the price of the merchandise bought.

As you might expect, Holy Redeemer church and the Redemptorist rectory are a haven for street people begging for food and money - money especially, if they are refugees. The Redemptorists have hired some of these street people and found employment for others to work for a minimum wage. However, when the Thai economy fell apart in 1997, they were left completely without work, without money, without homes and without documents. These unfortunate people are at the rectory door everyday without any let-up.

An active St. Vincent de Paul Society is on hand on Sundays with food, clothing and other assistance. There is also a group of women, the long standing Ladies Mission Aid Society, that has helped the Redemptorist missions in the northeast region of Thailand where money is always in short supply for the needy poor, the hardworking farmers, and other unfortunate persons. These women provide remarkable help for those who come to Holy Redeemer in the teeming city of Bangkok.

A group quite different from those providing for the poor, but providing a powerful spiritual ambiance to the parish as it gathers to pray, is a charismatic group made up of parishioners from many lands. An especially large contingent among them comes from the Philippines. These are natural musicians and singers whose vitality and spirituality fill the church, drawing the entire congregation into participating in their prayerful songs. It must be added that the Thai people also love to sing in their own beautiful way that proves inspiring for anyone who hears them. It is a joy to experience the liturgy and music at Holy Redeemer.

In 1972, Father Jack Boucher, a Redemptorist at Holy Redeemer now deceased, saw a special need among the people who came to Holy Redeemer. Acquainted with Alcoholics Anonymous in the United States, he began a chapter of Alcoholics Anonymous in Bangkok where there was none. Today, Holy Redeemer is one of two venues in the city where the members of AA can meet. And meetings they have - at least one a day and sometimes two a day. This ministry in far off Bangkok has touched thousands providing them with new lives and hope.

A vital and almost miraculous outreach program from Holy Redeemer is the ministry to the poor living in the slums of Bangkok. Not far from the parish, Father Joe Meier and others have established more than 33 kindergarten schools right in the middle of the slums. In these schools, the children receive a basic education. They are given a uniform to wear, which they could never afford, a few meals that they desperately need and loads of affirmation and Christian love they never knew. It is called the Human Development Center.

The center reaches out and touches thousands of street children who at the age of seven know more about life than most American adults. A home for children and adults afflicted with AIDS provides them with medical care generated by sympathy, but most of all by Christ's mercy and love for the poor and the little ones. In all these out-reach ministries, the people assisted are not Catholic nor Christian, but Buddhist. The Redemptorists, however, see them first of all as God's children, making them their brothers and sisters.

It is always difficult to give the names of individual Redemptorists who staff Holy Redeemer in Bangkok, because changes in Redemptorist personnel are frequent. Father Charlie Cotant, from Detroit, MI, and Father Bob Martin, from Wichita, KS, are exceptions. They have been serving at Holy Redeemer for countless years. During all their years, however, they had the help of their Thai confreres. At present, the rector of the Redemptorist community at Holy Redeemer is Father James Thanu. With him are Fathers Andrew Prasert, Matthew Vrasak, and Joseph Meier.

Like all Redemptorist priests and brothers, they would admit that without the back-up people who help them in countless ways, they could not accomplish so much at Holy Redeemer. Among these are the Sisters of the Infant Jesus, who have taught in our parish school almost from the beginning. Then there are those whom we tend to take for granted. I mean the cooks, housekeepers, laundry people, and secretaries in the parish office. Among these who serve us in ways we easily overlook, there is an outstanding layman who has been the handyman - the "mister fix-it" - for everything from a broken window to a hole in the roof. His know-how serves not only the Redemptorists but the parishioners also. His name is Khun Thongdee. Many shall look for him in Heaven. The Redemptorists have been serving God's people in Thailand, called the Land of Smiles, for 50 years. During that time, they have been assisted by countless persons in Thailand and from all parts of the world, persons who admired their work, supported them and have become co-ministers - or Co-Redemptorists - with them. The Redemptorists are grateful to them all and continue to rely on their prayerful generosity ever mindful to give all the praise and glory to God for what they and the Redemptorists have done together.