

Vietnamese New Year at Holy Martyrs of Vietnam Church

By Thu H. Bui

The festival which best characterizes Vietnamese culture is Vietnamese New Year or Tết. Holidays and festivals are long time traditions that are engrained in the culture of a country. The Vietnamese immigrants in the U.S. continue to keep and practice these traditions each year. Although everyone celebrates the Western New Year since the arrival of the French in Vietnam in 19th century, Tết was maintained because of its two thousand years of history.

Tết comes on the first day of the first month of the Lunar New Year. The Moon completes its orbit around the Earth in approximately 27.3 days. A solar year is the length of time that the Sun takes to return to the same position in the cycle of seasons, as seen from Earth. A lunar year is based on 12 cycles of the moon phase, or 12 lunar months. Because a lunar month is less than 30 days, there are years with 13 lunar months.

The Vietnamese people name each year according to two cycles, using the terrestrial signs and the celestial signs. There are 12 terrestrial signs represented by the 12 animals: the first month is the Rat (Tý), second month: Buffalo (Sửu), third month: Tiger (Dần), fourth month: Cat (Mão); fifth month: Dragon (Thìn), sixth month: Snake (Tỵ), seventh month: Horse (Ngọ), eighth month: Goat (Mùi), ninth month: Monkey (Thân), tenth month: Rooster (Dậu), eleventh month: Dog (Tuất), and twelfth month: Pig (Hợi).

There are ten celestial signs which are grouped in pairs to match the five planets: Kim (Venus), Mộc (Jupiter), Thủy (Mercury), Hỏa (Mars), and Thổ (Earth). These ten celestial signs became the prefixes of the years named after the animals: Giáp and Ất are under the Venus sign; Bính and Đinh are under Jupiter; Mậu and Kỷ are under Mercury; Canh and Tân are under Mars; and finally Nhâm and Quý are under Earth. This year is Tân Mão, with the sign of the Cat and the planet Mars. Last year is Canh Dần, with the sign of the Tiger and the planet Mars, next year is Nhâm Thìn, with the sign of the Dragon and the planet Earth. Each year carries its own meanings and promises and hopes.

Instead of a century or 100 year cycle, the lunar calendar has a 60 year cycle, because the common multiplier of 12 and 10 is 60. Every 60 years we have the same year with the same celestial sign and terrestrial sign. 2011 is Tân Mão, and 2061 is again another Tân Mão. Vietnamese New Year occurs somewhere in the last ten days of January or the first twenty days of February, nearly halfway between winter solstice and spring equinox.

At Holy Martyrs of Vietnam, since the establishment of the parish in 1979, we observe Tết with a Tết Fair for three days according to the tradition. However, it is difficult to enjoy Tết when it falls in the middle of a work day, when kids must be in school and parents must go to work. We had to organize Tết Fair about two weeks before Lunar New Year. This year our fair is organized on Saturday, January 22 and Sunday, January 23, from 9:00 am to 9:00 pm. We had to it cut short by one day, by eliminating Friday due to schools and work.

This is the time to share traditional food such as Bánh Trung (Square Rice Cake), Bánh

Dầy (Round Rice Cake), Mứt (dried fruits), and other condiments. The children received good luck money (Tiền lì xì) from the parents and grandparents in red envelopes. There are lion dances and lots of fire crackers and entertainments. Children participated in various games organized by the Eucharistic Youth Society in upper floor classrooms.

The various organizations in the parish set up booth to sell Vietnamese cakes, candies, cookies, drinks, flowers and all kinds of Vietnamese food: Phở (noodle soup), Chả Giò (egg rolls), Bánh Cuốn (rice pan cakes), etc.... There are lotto games, and entertainment programs such as traditional dances, and new wave dances, fashion shows and Karaoke singing. The receipts from the sales are split 70/30 between the parish and the organizations. Therefore, members of each organization spent many days to prepare food and other good for sale to raise money. This year there are 14 booths set up in the fellowship hall. A new stage was ordered for the shows. For two years while the church was undergoing construction, there was no Tết Fair in 2009 and 2010. Last year, the new vestibule and classrooms were blessed by Bishop Paul S. Loverde on June 20, 2010.

People come to the fair to stock up on Vietnamese food for their families for two to three weeks. Frozen Bánh Trung could last a whole year. When thawed, fried Bánh Trung is a popular dish for any meals during the day. This year, two new activities were organized: the ping pong tournament and the singing competition. About 20 players from 8 to 84 years of age participated in the ping pong tournament. Three tennis tables were set up in the church lobby for the 6 hour tournament on Saturday, January. 22. The final matches were organized in the Great Hall in the afternoon for everyone to watch. 9 trophies and gifts were given out to the winners of first, second and third places in four age group categories. On Sunday, a singing competition was organized with a dozen singers participated. Cash awards donated by the various church organizations were offered to the three winners. The fair ended at 7:00 pm on Sunday, and the clean-up work was completed at 9:00 pm. Everyone seemed happy with the food, the games, the various tournaments and competitions. People also had an opportunity to meet and socialize while sharing food at the same table.

On New Year Day, people pick a scroll hanging on branches of a tree in the church to meditate on and to pray for the whole year. These scrolls are color paper printed with a sentence from the Gospel. They are supposed to be good signs and encouragement for good decisions to make for the New Year.