

Holy Things, Holy People

Exploring Catholic history in the Northwest through treasures from the past

PART 31: STOLE MADE BY HMONG WOMEN

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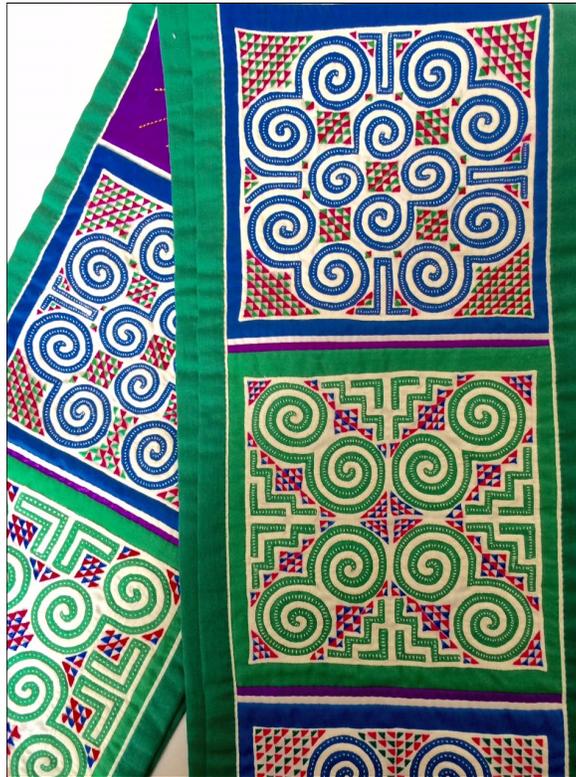
Pope Francis made headlines last week when he called upon the religious communities and parishes of Europe to receive a family of refugees from Syria. Pope Francis was not asking for something new: taking in refugees has been something the Church has done again and again, especially in the last century, and especially in coastal dioceses like Seattle.

In the early 1980s, the largely Italian parish of Our Lady of Mount Virgin in south Seattle unexpectedly found itself called to serve a wave of refugees from Laos, a land-locked Asian neighbor of Vietnam, China, Thailand, and Cambodia. The people were brought to Seattle and provided with the basics through resettlement grants from the United States Catholic Bishops. Without a single priest or catechist able to speak the language of the people, the local Church found itself willing, yet utterly unequipped to meet the needs of the newcomers.

Only with time, and with many stumbles along the way, was the Church able to respond effectively. Sister Michele MacMillan OP tirelessly served the community through their first months and years, learning the language, getting to know the families, and advocating tirelessly on their behalf with the Archbishop, the parish leadership, and many local agencies. Sister Michele knew that the Church needed to do more than provide for the prayer lives of the people: the Church needed to get involved, helping youth get through school, helping adults learn the language and acquire needed job skills, and helping the whole community hang on to their Catholic faith in a radically different environment.

Walking with the entrenched parish community was an equally daunting task. Patience frequently wore thin in the face of the overwhelming need of the newcomers and the strain those needs put on existing resources. And there was so much to learn. Many Seattleites could not find Laos on a map, let alone navigate the complexities of the culture, with its distinct ethnic communities—Lao, Khmu, and Hmong. There were times of coming together and times of near breakdown. “Why is it that Catholic missionaries in our villages could find us on foot, but Seattle priests cannot?” representatives of the Laotian community demanded at a parish council meeting. “Why do Presbyterians, Mormons, and Lutherans find us but Catholics do not?” The gift of a handmade stole and chasuble in 1984 expressed the appreciation of the community for Archbishop Hunthausen’s support, as well as their desire for a deeper bond with the local Church.

The experience of the Laotian refugees at Our Lady of Mount Virgin Parish parallels the experience of many immigrant groups who have come to the Northwest over the years. This local Church



This stole was made by refugee women from Laos for Archbishop Raymond Hunthausen in 1984. It incorporates traditional Hmong designs along with Christian emblems and reflects the incredible embroidery skill of the Hmong women. *Archives of St. James Cathedral.*

has never been homogeneous: it has always been made up of many peoples, a faithful reflection of the universal Church. Again and again, we have welcomed—or learned to welcome—new waves of migrants and refugees from all over the world. The Archdiocesan Archives contain several boxes of resettlement records, evidence of the active role of the local Church in receiving thousands of refugees from Germany, Italy, Hungary, China, Cuba, Vietnam, Thailand, Korea, and Laos.

The boxes of forms and letters, reaching back nearly 80 years, give a glimpse of the individual stories of these people fleeing political repression or violence in search of a better life. In 1950, a refugee from Communist China who managed a golf course with 500 employees and spoke three languages fluently, modestly noted that he hoped to get a job in some capacity in a restaurant or club. On the form of a Hungarian refugee an aid worker jotted down notes from an in-person interview: “He had only three years’ schooling. Honest, simple man. Somewhat stubborn.”

Many of the cases went through without much difficulty. Relatives in Seattle, or parishioners willing to host a family, served as sponsors, and the Archdiocese worked with a variety of resettlement organizations to cover travel expenses and get the people to Seattle. But other cases proved more complex, and there are some bulky packets of correspondence, where we see priests and Church agencies working with (sometimes against!) bureaucracies both national and international to get a particular individual to the Northwest. One Italian was denied resettlement status because he was making too much money. Another was refused because he had actually been born outside of Italy and thus had to reapply as a “displaced person.” In the case of a young Vietnamese woman held in a refugee camp in the Philippines, the correspondence includes letters from Archbishop Thomas Murphy to Cardinal Sin of Manila on her behalf. Every story is different, and the care of the Church did not stop with the arrival of the refugees in Seattle. One file includes a “while you were out” phone message from a Cuban refugee who had just landed: “would like some job leads, in case you happen to hear of something.”

Responding to the current migration crisis, Father James Martin SJ urged, “think not of a faceless mass of people, but of many beautiful individuals”—individuals like Emma, Clemente, Gyorgy, Pu, Eduardo, Kham Saeng, Thu Oanh, all of whom found a welcome here through the active compassion of the people of the Archdiocese of Seattle.

—Corinna Laughlin, *Pastoral Assistant for Liturgy*