

Happy New Year!

Archbishop Michael J. Sheehan, *People of God*, January 2014

In the Archdiocese of Santa Fe, we are all pretty familiar with the traditions of the Hispanic cultures and the Native American cultures throughout the year. However, I wanted to spend some time talking about a Vietnamese culture tradition which I have been involved with over several years – and that is the Vietnamese New Year.

This year, I will be celebrating the Vietnamese New Year's Mass at Our Lady of La Vang in Albuquerque on Sunday, January 26 starting with the 8:30 a.m. procession. If you have never attended a Vietnamese Catholic Mass, you are missing a beautiful, prayerful and faith-filled experience. The choir is exquisite, the reverence very visible and the participation by the people is all encompassing.

Tết, or Vietnamese New Year, is the most important celebration of Vietnamese culture. The word is a shortened form of Tết Nguyên Đán, which is Sino-Vietnamese for "Feast of the First Morning of the First Day". Vietnamese people usually return to their families during Tết. Some return to worship at the family altar or visit the graves of their ancestors in their homeland. They also clean the graves of their family as a sign of respect. Although Tết is a national holiday among all Vietnamese, each region and religion has its own customs.

Vietnamese families usually have a family altar, to show respect to their ancestors. During Tết, the altar is thoroughly cleaned and new offerings are placed there. This includes a tray of five different fruits on the altar called Mâm Ngũ Quả (literally, five fruits type). In the days leading up to Tết, each family cooks special holiday foods such as Bánh chưng (rectangular to represent Earth) and bánh dầy (circular to represent Sky) are symbolically connected with Tết and are essential in any Tết celebration. It is tightly packed sticky rice with meat or bean fillings wrapped in leaves. Mứt which are dried candied fruits, are rarely eaten at any time besides Tết. This is all enjoyed in a meal following the Mass.

Children receive a red envelope containing money from their elders. This tradition is incorporated at the end of our Mass when I distribute red envelopes to the children (provided by the parish). Since the Vietnamese believe that the first visitor a family receives in the year determines their fortune for the entire year, people never enter any house on the first day without being invited first. The act of being the first person to enter a house is one of the most important rituals during Tết. According to Vietnamese tradition, if good things come to the family on the first day of the lunar New Year, the entire following year will also be full of blessings. Usually, a person of good temper, morality and success will be the lucky sign for the host family and be invited first into the house.

During subsequent days, people visit relatives and friends. Traditionally but not strictly, the second day of Tết is usually reserved for friends, while the third day is for teachers, who command respect in Vietnam. Prosperous families can pay for dragon dancers to perform at their house. There are also public performances for everyone to watch. This too is incorporated at the celebration at Our Lady of La Vang in that the procession prior to the Mass is led by dragons. The dragons dance in front of the parish leadership to the front of the church through two lines of people. At the end of the dragon dance, firecrackers (a lot of firecrackers) are set off prior to people entering the church for Mass.

A great tradition for a wonderful culture! So - "chúc mừng năm mới" (Happy New Year) and "cung chúc tân xuân" (gracious wishes of the new spring)!