

Refugees need sponsors

by Peter Dubec

A 76,000-acre army base, Fort Chaffee, became Arkansas' eighth largest city when the first Vietnamese refugees arrived during May. Since then, however, more refugees have entered the camp than left it, and many of the immigrants may spend their first American Christmas in an Army barracks.

Chuck Roth, director of the Catholic Council for Social Concern in the Des Moines Diocese, and 70 resettlement directors from other dioceses visited Fort Chaffee in late July. Roth met some of the immigrants as well as officials from the United States Catholic Conference (USCC) in the camp.

Fort Chaffee has accommodated about 35,000 refugees since May, Roth said, and approximately 15,000 have been released to sponsors. Nearly 1800 persons are leaving weekly, but 2000 new refugees arrive each week from Guam where 15,000 Vietnamese still await flights to the United States. Most of the refugees are processed or sponsored by a voluntary agency like USCC, he explained.

Family unity and loyalty

The average Vietnamese family is large (at least eight or more members), Roth said. Grandparents, brothers and sisters of the parents are considered part of the family. Cousins are treated like brothers or sisters in an American family unit.

For example, Roth described the family of Nguyen Van Bac. At 19, Bac supports an 18-year-old wife, an infant daughter, his father and mother, a younger brother and sister and an 11-year-old nephew whose mother (one of Bac's sisters) could not get out of Vietnam.

Although officials have focused on the resettlement of families, many individuals need sponsors. At least 17⁰ unaccompanied

children between 10 and 16 years old are living at Fort Chaffee, Roth said. Children under 14 can be adopted, and children over 14 are available for foster care.

English classes are offered to every refugee over age six; the oldest student is 82 years old. Most of the Vietnamese can read and comprehend English but cannot speak it.

Four Vietnamese chaplains serve the 10,000 Catholic refugees. Masses are scheduled each morning and evening, and 200 children have been prepared for their First Communion.

Culture shock

Despite the refugees' courtesy and good spirits, most of them face a difficult adjustment in the United States. "There is humiliation and shame over their defeat in the war," Roth explained. "They ask themselves, 'Why did we lose?'"

"Also, America is a strange land for them," he continued, "and Fort Chaffee offers security. There is no American hostility at the camp, and for most of them it will be the last Vietnamese community they will ever have.

"Still, most refugees are anxious to leave the camp and get settled. They are eager to regain their personal independence."

More sponsors are needed, and parishes are asked to aid the families until the refugees are self-supporting. "This means supplying housing, furnishings, utilities, food, clothing and assistance in obtaining work," Roth said.

"We have 23,000 neighbors in a double sense: they are not in a foreign country, but here in the United States. They are in dire need, refugees from a Communist takeover. To fulfill our responsibility we must see Christ in their place," Roth concluded.