



Gift of Life: Breathing Life into Our Community in the Event of Death

By Phensy Vatsana

Imagine entering a house full of people, with loud chatter and laughter filling every space, and a feast ready to be enjoyed. You might wonder, what celebration is this? If this a Lao household, you have stumbled upon a treat. In fact, there is a celebration of someone's life, but not in the usual ways you would associate with the passing of a loved one. In the Lao culture, when death occurs, the community rises to the occasion in so many ways. In addition, our Catholic identity becomes the well of hope and peace we draw from.

Since most of us, if not all, left Laos unwillingly due to governmental changes that caused a shift in our country's promise of safety and security, we relish in moments where we can commune and relive interactions similar to those in our village. Though we have assimilated well to the American way of life, the one thing that is our backbone, is the sense of community we share. For us, this community is most visible in celebrations of life through the birth of a healthy child, wedding, and death.

Word of mouth blares like a trumpet, summoning all to be present; people hear, sense a need, and come to help without strings attached. At the house of the deceased, a make-shift altar is present, along with a picture of the loved one, and our Mother Mary who provides comfort in moments of mourning. Visitors bring food, words of comfort, and their unyielding support through monetary help if possible. People are ready to spend the night, cook for guests, and provide around the clock company so that the burden of loss is bearable. Light-hearted stories about the deceased are shared. Laughter replaces tears if only for the time being.



The spirit of the Lao people is rooted in gratitude and that is seen in the ancestral veneration we practice. We understand that we are tied to our past, present, and future through our kinship. So, when death occurs, the community thrives. Instead of being somber, and shutting ourselves in grief, we come together in unity by paying respects to our lost loved one by reflecting on this unbreakable link.

Peace and hope are restored during three days of prayer before the funeral. As Lao Catholics, these three days are modeled after the Triduum and serve as a foundation of strength for those weakened by the absence of their loved one. Our Lao prayers are chanted, becoming music for the broken hearted. We are comforted with words of hope of eternal life in Jesus Christ. Just like Jesus rose on the third day, the deceased returns to God on the third day.

At the funeral Mass, gifts to the Church are presented by bringing a money tree, incense, fruits, and flowers. These items are all donated to the church in remembrance of the deceased. After the final burial, we return to the home of the deceased once more. This time, we feel lighter, more uplifted, hopeful, and at peace. All wash our hands before entering, symbolizing that we have lifted our sorrows up to God and that our worries are no more.



In the event of death, the Lao community is full of life and energy. We gather together without reservations. The many sacrifices of time is as natural as breathing. We do not think twice about being there for our community. It is during dark moments like this that we truly shine as a unified community. Better yet, we are able to glorify God by serving our community during challenging moments like death. By staying true to our traditions, the Lao community is strengthened through Christ, in Christ, and with Christ.