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A Nativity made of environmentally friendly materials is pictured near the Redemptorist monastery in Hue on Dec. 17. (Joachim Pham)

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Thua Thien Hue, Vietnam — December 23, 2024

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Agnes Huynh Thi Nghiem, a 77-year-old widow who lives on her own, cheerfully sings Christmas carols as she admires a Nativity scene resting on the table in her modest home.

The crèche depicts the infant Jesus lying on a bed of straw, while nearby cattle help warm him on a cold night. There's a thatch house surrounded by Christmas trees and stars, along with grass, a cactus pot and a bamboo fence. Two nearby lanterns brighten the scene in celebration of the season.

The Christmas decorations, all created with environmentally friendly materials, bring warmth and cheer to her home.

"It reminds us of the Lord's teaching to live in harmony with our surroundings and cherish all living things," Nghiem said.



Ignatius Cao Tuan Duc, second from right, and other volunteers give a Nativity scene and lanterns to Agnes Huynh Thi Nghiem, second from left, on Dec. 10. (Joachim Pham)

In the past, her late husband, who died 12 years ago from a stroke triggered by an unexpected cold spell, always decorated their home at Christmas with Nativity scenes and lanterns. This year is the first she's celebrated with environmentally conscious decorations.

Her environmental Christmas crèche is part of a growing trend among Catholic parishes in Vietnam, as a way to echo teachings of Pope Francis' 2015 encyclical, "*Laudato Si'*", on Care for Our Common Home." In that papal teaching document, Francis encouraged all people to respond to the serious plights facing the world's ecosystems, including by avoiding consumerism and waste — elements increasingly connected to the Christmas season the world over.

## **Crèches from storm debris**

For Nghiem, the Nativity scene reflects her concerns over the increasing environmental issues in her area, citing unusual floods and droughts. Such events in Vietnam and around the world have worsened due to human-caused climate change.

Nghiem was given the decorations this Advent by a group of 10 volunteers from Thach Binh Parish in Thua Thien Hue province's Quang Dien district in central Vietnam.

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Ignatius Cao Tuan Duc, 40, a member of the group, said they made 200 Nativity scenes and 400 lanterns using bamboo, branches, straw and old foam, and distributed them free of charge to local people, regardless of religion.

The group collected most materials from storm debris, fields and local donations, while they purchased plaster statues of Jesus, Mary, Joseph and the cattle, along with colored paper and electric bulbs.

"Our goal is to remind people that it's time to build a cleaner, healthier environment by reducing waste," Duc said.

Jesus, he said, was born into a pure and natural environment, but human greed, selfishness and disregard for nature are now polluting it and impacting the climate.

"We cannot worship God while damaging the environment," he said.



Catechism students sell crèches made of used items for charities on Dec. 19 at Bac Ha Church in Ho Chi Minh City. (Joachim Pham)

Duc urged people to treat the environment as a friend, saying "If we destroy it, we will face destruction in return."

Duc, who owns a wooden craft business, recalled how a priest had rescued his ailing mother during the [catastrophic floods](#) in 1999. As a member of the Thach Binh parish rescue team, Duc has seen the devastating impact of annual storms and floods on the region. Weather-related disasters have destroyed homes and crops, uprooted countless trees and swept away people's possessions.

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Vietnam's agriculture and rural development ministry [reported](#) that in 2024 the Southeast Asian country endured nine storms and one tropical depression, resulting in heavy rainfall, widespread flooding, waterlogging, flash floods and landslides.

Hurricane Yagi, which struck in September, was the worst storm to reach land in 70 years.

Total economic losses from weather-related disasters in 2024 were estimated at over 84.9 trillion dong (\$3.3 billion), or more than nine times higher than in 2023.



A woman wades through flood water in Quang Dien district in Thua Thien Hue province on Nov 27. (Joachim Pham)

## **Gifts of environmental awareness**

In crafting environmentally conscious Christmas crèches, the Thach Binh parish group modeled them after rural cottages and decorated the scenes with foam-made Christmas trees, grass and bonsai. They are designed in various sizes to suit local homes but still small enough to be transported by motorbike.

Donors have provided 38 million dong (\$1,500) to fund the project. The group began their work on the Feast of Christ the King (Nov. 24) and finished distributing the gifts by the third Sunday of Advent.

In 2021, they started by making lanterns for 30 local impoverished Catholic families. With support from benefactors, they gradually expanded their efforts to include both lanterns and Nativity scenes for the community, helping many families who could

not afford Christmas decorations.

"Many people see these special Christmas gifts as symbols of peace and a commitment to a clean, green environment," said Duc, a father of three.



Volunteers hang a lantern in a house of a non-Catholic family in Quang Dien district in Thua Thien Hue province in Vietnam on Dec. 15. (Joachim Pham)

At his own home, he also created a large Nativity scene with the theme "Christmas for Environmental Protection" in a nearby flood-soaked field. It depicts a harmonious setting of humans, animals and nature thriving together, reflecting his message that caring for nature is essential for future generations.

Many people have shown interest in his Nativity scene, taking photos and sharing them with their friends.

## **Living simply amidst nature**

Nguyen Thi Khanh, a 29-year-old Buddhist from Hue, was among those inspired by the parish group's environmentally friendly decorations. A stuffed animal maker, she crafted angels from cotton and fabric scraps and shared them with Catholic sisters and friends. She also created a Nativity scene at her home using foam and cotton.

"I wanted to contribute in some way to raising public awareness about environmental protection," she told EarthBeat.

"It's wonderful to give gifts to others to share the joy of Christmas and promote environmental awareness, because Christmas is for everyone, regardless of their background," she said.



People visit a Nativity made of hay, thatch, bamboo, pieces of wood, cotton, bonsais, and other used items on Dec. 19 in the compound of Dong Tien Church in Ho Chi Minh City. (Joachim Pham)



Tay Thanh Church in Quang Dien district of Thua Thien Hue province is decorated with an open-air crèche, lanterns and colorful electric lamps on Dec. 17. (Joachim Pham)





A crèche made of grass, wood, bonsais and other used items in front of Bac Thanh Church in Nha Trang, central Vietnam on Dec. 20. (Joachim Pham)



Tourists visit a big crèche outside the Christ the King Cathedral in Nha Trang, central Vietnam on Dec. 20. (Joachim Pham)

Khanh said that while Christmas is not a public holiday in the communist-ruled country, people nonetheless flock to the streets and visit churches on Christmas Eve to celebrate. Catholics decorate their homes with plastic Christmas trees, Nativity scenes, lanterns, stars and other festive ornaments.

Our Lady of Perpetual Help Parish, based in Hue and run by the Redemptorists, is another parish creating Nativity scenes from recycled materials: fallen bamboo, palm trees from storms, used cement paper bags and cardboard.

This year, they erected a large Nativity scene in front of the church and smaller ones around the monastery. The scenes are decorated with bonsai pots to enhance their natural beauty.

"We emphasize that Jesus was born amidst nature and humble people. We should follow his example and live simply to protect the Earth," said Redemptorist Br. Michael Nguyen Van Hieu.

Our Lady of Perpetual Hope too began in 2021 creating Nativity scenes using recycled materials and eco-friendly materials. Like other parishes, they drew inspiration from Francis and *Laudato Si'*.

"We must avoid the culture of consumerism and throwaway, which only harm the environment," Hieu said.

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## **Sustainable and life-saving gifts**

Catholics across Vietnam are increasingly focusing on environmental protection, especially in helping vulnerable communities adapt to climate change.

Jacob Pham Huu Thinh, head of the Assumption sub-parish in Ha Tinh province, shared that since 2022 it has replaced traditional Christmas parties for its 350 members with a savings fund and a project to improve a flood-prone road leading to the church.

He said the 300-meter-long road, completed on Dec. 7, "serves as a reminder of the importance of protecting the environment and working together to adapt to climate change."

In Quang Nam province, residents [have been suffering](#) from severe droughts and extreme heat in summer. Many families live in cramped homes of 40 square meters. Some large families rely on a single fan due to the inability to afford additional cooling devices like air conditioners.

"We distributed 25 electric fans and 40 sun-protective clothes on Dec. 22 to help them cope with the extreme weather," said Lucia Bui Thi Ninh, head of the Our Lady of the Visitation Association. Its members and benefactors contributed 19 million dong (\$746) to fund the Christmas gifts.

In Hue, Caritas Vietnam has organized workshops on climate change, *Laudato Si'* and environmental protection in various parishes. They encourage waste reduction,

recycling and sustainable practices. Caritas has also set up bins in parishes to promote waste sorting and cleanliness.

Lucia Nguyen Thi Vân, a Caritas staff member, said these efforts highlight a growing movement in Vietnam where people, regardless of religion, are coming together to celebrate Christmas with an emphasis on caring for the environment.

"The Nativity scenes, lanterns and other gifts serve as symbols of peace and environmental commitment, fostering a spirit of unity and care for creation during the festive season," she said.