



Heart's Home USA

Spread compassion

Volunteers' Letters
Erika – Bangkok, Thailand



Erika's Sponsors Letter # 2 – May 2011

Sawatdi Kaa Thii Krung Thep! (Hello from Bangkok)

I hope this letter finds you all well, and not fleeing from floods on the Mississippi, seeking refuge from tornadoes, or digging out of your savings to pay for gas. Over here in Krung Thep (Bangkok, in Thai), it has been unseasonably wet and 'cold' (I am learning that 'cold' is completely relative!) for the hot season, and we are now entering into the true rainy season, and I am entering into a new season of mission as I become adjusted to this life.

My days are setting into somewhat of a routine (although the plenitude of Thai holidays, celebrating Easter, hosting visitors, and preparing for the end of Laure's 18 month mission mix things up a bit). To give you an idea of the life here, I will share with you a 'normal' weekday in our community.

5:40 am Wake Up! Leave the house at 6 AM.

6:30 am Mass at Sacred Heart Convent in Thai

7:30 am Breakfast on the street or at 7-11 on the way to Language School

10:30/11 am Arrive home. Study, laundry, prepare lunch, stop at the market

12:30 pm Lunch

1:30-2:30 pm Rest (Exhaustion comes hand in hand with excessive heat, pollution, and no A-C!)

2:30 pm Rosary & Divine Mercy Chaplet (with the children)

3:30-6:00 pm Visit friends in the neighborhood-stay to open the house for the children to play (We take turns and go out 2 by 2).

6:00 pm Holy Hour in Adoration

7:00 pm Vespers

7:30 pm Supper

9:00 pm Night Prayer

9:30 pm Prepare for the next day/Laundry, read, write letters, go to BED!

Saturday morning is reserved for cleaning the house, while Sunday is for Sunday mass. Otherwise the afternoons are the same as during the week. I was asked to serve the community as the accountant, so I spend my Saturday morning managing community money and bringing the sheets and towels to be washed (we wash all our clothes by hand at home). I am happy to do this—I know I need to learn the simple accounting and it is good to be aware of the pocket money throughout the week, plus folding sheets and towels is probably my favorite part of household chores!

Community

We have had a full house here in *Jet Sip Rai*, our section of the neighborhood in *Klong Toey*. Until April, there were 4 here in the house. Now, we are 6 (and for one month, we were 7). *Thuy*, from Vietnam, is 43 and has been in Heart's Home for more than 15 years as a consecrated lay member. She speaks only Vietnamese and Thai—what I understand so far is that she loves animals, having raised everything from fish to crocodiles! In Vietnam, she even lived in a tree house for a while... Some crazy stories that are really motivating me in my study of Thai!



From right to left: Marie, Josephine, Katie, Fr. Daniel, Thuy, me, Laure and Eva as long as you say the word with a French accent. Lastly, *Eva*, who arrived the same day as me, is from Argentina and is 24. Her mission is 20 months, so she will stay a tiny bit longer than I will. She is gaining confidence in her English and I completely admire how she and Thuy will communicate as if there were no language barrier at all!

Laure, 21, is from France (near Lourdes), and is ending her 18 month mission June 2. She speaks excellent Thai and is training me as the accountant, as it has been her responsibility for the past year. She is forcing me (with kindness) to practice my French! *Katie* is 26 and one year into her 18 month mission. She is from Chicago and it is lovely to have a fellow American who understands idioms like “seeing a glass half full or half empty” and things like buying in bulk and eating breakfast for dinner. *Marie* is also from France, age 23. Having arrived 6 months ago for her 2 year mission, we will be on mission together from here on out. She is our new responsible of the community and understands “American” quite well—

Our community language is English, with some translating into Thai for Thuy. I am translating less and less for Eva as her English improves. *Josephine*, age 19 is from Switzerland, on mission in India, but spent the month of April with our community as she had to re-apply for her visa to continue in India. Next week arrives Bernard and Kate, both on mission in India. Kate comes to re-apply for her visa, and Bernard, a permanent member of Heart’s Home, will visit to our community for a couple days.

Easter

We spent Easter trying to celebrate in our native languages. Holy Thursday and Good Friday, Katie and I were able to attend Mass in English. Saturday, we went with Eva to the Easter Vigil in Spanish, and Sunday we all went together to the Easter Mass in Vietnamese. It was the first time I had been a mass in Vietnamese. Mass was packed—with a line for confession that went half way through mass— and surprising me the most: only a couple people in the entire church had white hair! Thuy explained that the Catholic Church there is in fact very young, growing, and exists underground. Mass in Vietnamese is beautiful: almost entirely SING. The choir was beautiful but more than that, the entire congregation joined in with their full voices. It is wonderful to experience the universality of the Universal church. Despite not knowing the responses in Spanish, French, or Vietnamese, I can follow the same Mass. I can find the same readings from Scripture and follow along in my Bible. We ended our Easter Sunday celebration at the home of a French family, with a “gouter” (French for ‘snack’, or light meal) and some games.

Heart of God

One story I would like to share about the children. They come to our house every day around 3:00, when we pray the Rosary together, and they often come to join us. The children, as most Thais, are Buddhist. They are accustomed to visiting temples, praying and lighting incense, and to proper etiquette in the presence of prayer—well, they are familiar with it, but as children do, they often have difficulty being still or quiet! They often offer intentions before each mystery of the Rosary and they know the prayers better than I do (I’m still learning them in Thai!).

Our door is open most of the time we are there. So children will walk in and greet us, and play or pray, find us to talk to, or to show off a kitten they found or to ask to color a picture. It varies with the day and the child. One of my first weeks here, I was alone in the chapel praying Adoration. I was the only downstairs and May, about 8 years old, entered the chapel. She knows it's a holy place, and that I was praying. I had with me a drawing of the Holy Family I had sketched from an icon on the wall. I was planning on coloring it with the colored pencils, but was journaling at the time May entered. I saw she wanted to stay but also that she had her eyes on the colored pencils. I know the children are not allowed to play in the chapel, and I had no desire to confuse May, but I also thought she would be interested in coloring. So I offered her the colored pencils and my drawing of the Holy Family, motioning to the icon on the wall so she knew she could color. She happily did so, and I was so struck by the beauty of this child coloring a picture—with no real idea of who it is. She even added flowers, and titled "Father", "Mother", and "Child" to St. Joseph, Mary, and Jesus.



May with her drawing

What I find most beautiful in this is contemplating how God works. I am here as a presence of Love, trying to be a good 'conduit' as I like to call it, for Christ to work through me. Those around me know very little or nothing about Jesus. As Christians, as far as I know, we are called to share the Gospel in honesty, allowing the truth to be clearly laid out and doing nothing to take away the freedom of another to choose. Being here in a transparent way to love is just that. I share Christ by living as He asked, and I am open to being rejected or accepted. As I think of the beauty of that moment with May, I think of how much God loves her! How powerful are her prayers she offers for her Dad who committed suicide last year, and her prayers for all the children who have no Dad!

Life Lessons

Life here is teaching me lessons we all must learn at some point. For me, it is a lesson of doing the small things, simple things, with great love. Cleaning the fan blades or corners of the floor on my hands and knees, doing the accounting and being conscious of spending throughout the week... I am learning what 1 Corinthians really means by "Love bears all things, hopes all things, endures all things." Enduring the stench of the pollution, trash, dirty klongs (canals run through our streets), and fecal matter on the street from the roaming dogs and cats. Biting my tongue to keep from saying something I will later regret to my community, waking up early to leave on time out of respect to the community, and eating simple food that includes rice twice a day. I am learning how to welcome the children and our friends as they come through the door at the last moment when I just want to rest and cool down. Visiting our friends, I am learning to smile, listen, and be present sitting on the floor with strangers speaking Thai, when mentally I really want to check out. This is what it means to build the friendship, and to have a friendship myself with our friends that I will then pass on. I am here to be present—a calling to go beyond what I want in the moment, to love.

This came together for me about two weeks ago on the way home from our Monday community meeting and Mass. Marie, Katie, and I were making our way home by the train tracks (the freight train passes through here about 5 feet distance on each side from the homes on each side) so we could pray Adoration at 6, according to our schedule. We were walking through the way we always do on the very narrow soi (street)—it is about 3 or 4 feet wide. We encountered a woman sobbing. We stopped and offered to walk home with her. She took us to a house I normally would think was abandoned, where there were also two men and another woman, the girlfriend of one of the men. The house in fact was quite livable, with the TV going in the background. The first woman disappeared behind a wall, but we understood she is alone, her husband having died years before. The two men were brothers,

one named Peng. Peng was on his way to work, the night shift as a security guard. The other brother was on the wooden floor, and I could see the gangrene on his leg. The girls translated later for me that he explained he also has AIDS from years of doing drugs. Katie and Marie spoke with them for a short time before we headed home.



Our street, and one of its many cats!

more beautiful to me, is that I share this with you. I share my humanity with you. This purpose and love that I find and learn every day here in Thailand, is the same heart of mission that you perhaps see in your daily life where you are.

This encounter struck me in two ways. One, as I looked at my watch knowing we had been headed to pray Adoration in our chapel at home, I recognized Christ in front of me in these faces. It makes me happy to recognize my own response in this way! Secondly, I have passed people on the street in all over the world—even at home in the States—wanting to do something. I didn't understand why the simplicity of being here with Heart's Home. There are dozens of NGOs and associations just here in Thailand that do wonderful things. I see it even in my neighborhood of Jet Sip Rai. So at first, my mission to be seemed stupid! This was part of my initial struggle. But as I stood there between the tracks and shacks looking at Christ in front of my eyes, I recognized my mission. Who takes the time to stop to speak with a crying woman? Who walks her home, and spends time getting to know the people there? Who spends time, not on the project or meeting, but being a presence of love and friendship? I do.

In reality, this is the call of each person. Not just a missionary overseas in a slum. But the call of a mother, of a father, of a sister or brother in a family. I am learning what it means to be true to nature, to be obedient to the heart with which I am created—

whether here in Thailand, or returning to life in the States. What is

Almost two months into my mission, I can say it is passing quickly and slowly at the same time. My biggest adjustment? The simplicity of my mission. Fr. Thierry, our founder, has written that this mission is simple—like kindergarten. Simple does not mean easy— yes, a five year old can struggle learning simple lessons, but an adult looks at kindergarten with a different perspective. My first few weeks made me feel truly like an adult in kindergarten: “Is this it?” This life which I am to live is full of prayers, language school, community life, and visiting friends? It was easy to comprehend mentally sight unseen, from USA. But the first two weeks I thought —“What am I doing here?”

I spent time waiting to understand why God wouldn't send me right back home. I recalled the peace I had about coming. The easy step was coming here, but the hard part is staying. I recently wrote in my blog about this adjustment. I am living the mission life of my dreams, but in front of me are unexpected struggles! However, I know that the best is yet to come. These struggles will reap great joys: the small joys now, will become great joys later! I am beginning to experience the love and joy that in the end will probably keep me from wanting to return home 16 months from now.

Please feel free to write emails or letters! I love getting mail, and I really enjoy hearing from people back home. It's a reminder that this mission is bigger than myself. I have been writing and posting more pictures on my blog if you are interested in looking at it from time to time. Know that you are in my prayers each day, and I am so thankful for your presence in this mission!



With our friends at church during Songkran

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