

Myanmar pilgrims reach for the heights in Lent



Pilgrims take part in a Way of the Cross at the foot of the mountain

When Thomas Nyi Soe treks up a mountain in heat 40 degree Celsius (104 degrees F) reflecting on Jesus' passion, he really feels as though he's on the journey with Jesus to Calvary.

Nyi Soe is one of the 2,000 pilgrims who recently participated in a trek up a popular mountaintop shrine for a Mass in the run-up to Easter. The 185-meter climb up Cross Mountain in east-central Myanmar helps Catholic pilgrims reflect on Jesus' passion.

Nyi Soe, 38, has joined the Cross Mountain Celebration every year since 2007, and he says the Cross Mountain Celebration is the best place to do penance during Lent.

Bishop Justin Saw Min Thide of Hpa-an diocese concelebrated the Mass there with 20 priests on March 15.

"Catholics need to do penance during Lent, not just for show but with inner conversion. To achieve it, we need prayers, charitable works and fasting," Bishop Min Thide told the pilgrims.

As part of Lenten practices, Nyi Soe stops drinking and chewing betel. Over the year, he also saved cash to go toward the school uniforms and books for eight of the children of rubber workers near the mountain.

"The donations amount may be not much but as a true penance for our sins, I am helping the poor children as a charitable work of Lenten season," said Nyi Soe, a security guard at a government school in Yangon.

Usually held on the Friday before Palm Sunday, this year the annual celebration was held one week early.

Fourteen wooden crosses dot the mountain trail leading to a 12-meter concrete cross and an altar.

Pilgrimages to religious sites on mountains, particularly to Buddhist temples and stupas, is a tradition in Myanmar. Fr Victor Nyan Myint, was inspired by the many pagodas on mountains. He and villagers cleared the land and began the work in 1979.

The shrine, near Theinseik parish's 80-hectare rubber plantation, was finished in 1982.

"I let the people know that there are Christians in this area by putting the cross on the mountaintop," Fr Nyan Myint told ucanews.com.

Thomas Toe - UCA