

It's 'two for tea' at St. Alphonsus' school office

By Beth Donze
Clarion Herald

Every couple of weeks, Redemptorist Father Chung Cong Tran, the pastor of St. Alphonsus Parish in New Orleans, randomly shows up at the office of Mercy Sister Monica Ellerbusch with a thermos of freshly brewed, hot tea.

Time slows down and blood pressures lower as Father Chung pours the fragrant liquid into small, bowl-like cups to provide Sister Monica – the longtime principal of St. Alphonsus Elementary School – with a relaxing tea break inside her orchid-filled office.

Expertly brewed by Father Chung with a mix of loose, organic ingredients, the beverage is so full of flavor there is no need for sweeteners such as sugar or honey.

"The tea is very calming and relaxing, and it does make you center on the present moment. Somehow, all the other concerns I might have go away," said Sister Monica, sipping Father Chung's berry-scented tea during one of their spontaneous get-togethers last month.

"It's a real gift that Father doesn't tell me he's coming, because it shows me how to live in the present moment," Sister Monica said. "We don't



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Redemptorist Father Chung Cong Tran, who was assigned as pastor of St. Alphonsus Parish in New Orleans last summer, occasionally surprises his counterpart at St. Alphonsus Elementary School – Mercy Sister Monica Ellerbusch – with tea parties. The priest said more people should adopt tea breaks as times of stillness and quiet conversation in the midst of the hectic work day. Sister Monica said she has become a fan of this practice.

plan it. We don't say, 'Tomorrow at 10 o'clock,' or 'Let's look at our schedules to see when we have time.' He just shows up, and I push everything aside."

Quality ingredients key

Father Chung, a native of Vietnam who came to the United States in his early teens, grew up in southern California and Seattle. He initiated the surprise tea parties last August, a few weeks after being assigned to St. Alphonsus Parish and its home church of St. Mary's Assumption.

"With all the craziness going on in our world, we forget to make time for these small, little precious moments," Father Chung said. "For many of us in ministry, we're so busy and (our work) is so sporadic. Anything can go down that day, the unexpected. So, saying, 'Let's take a moment and just enjoy that moment,' can be a very prayerful and sacred moment."

Father Chung makes his teas with organic ingredients sent to him by his relatives. Their care packages include the "star

trio" used in most of his teas: fresh ginseng root from Wisconsin; and two "super fruits" grown in California – dried jujube dates and goji berries.

After soaking a loose blend of these ingredients in piping-hot water for 90 minutes, Father Chung strains the tea and transfers it into an insulated thermos for the short walk to Sister Monica's Constance Street office.

The benefits of drinking tea include everything from reducing anxiety and joint inflammation, to improving cognitive ability and gut health.

"It's rich in antioxidants and it gives you a lot of energy," said Father Chung, who likes to make a green tea of citrus, ginger and immune-boosting mushrooms for Sister Monica during the winter cold season.

"This clears your congestion really quickly," he said.

Sister Monica said she also

has been sleeping better since drinking Father Chung's tea, pointing out that commercially produced, bagged varieties contain not only preservatives, but caffeine. Father Chung gives her "little care packages" of ingredients – along with the recipe – so she can brew her own at home.

"I always drink it at night before I go to bed," Sister Monica said.

Relationships fostered

But tea's greatest benefit, according to Father Chung, is its ability to put "a big reset" into the work day. The beverage is a revered "sign of welcome" in his native Vietnam whenever visitors – both expected and unexpected – show up at someone's home.

"The whole thing about drinking tea is spending time with each other – having

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conversation and appreciating that down time together," Father Chung said.

"When we (in church-related vocations) are preaching and teaching the next generation about the importance of relationships – and we ourselves aren't (building) relationships with one another – we are preaching the Gospel without practicing it," he added. "People see, 'They don't make time for each other.' So, we have to lead by example, and we can do that over a cup of tea!"

A sacred pause

Even Father Chung's handleless ceramic tea cups, hand-made in Japan, are designed to encourage tea drinkers to slow down and focus on the person or scene in front of them.

"It's just a small cup and a small amount at a time, so you're taking small sips and truly enjoying it," he said. "You're not taking a big cup and chucking it down. You're not just trying to get through the day."

After the tea party is over, "there's just this peacefulness that lingers," Sister Monica said. "Even though the day might get hectic as it goes along, I find that I'm more peaceful inside and I can deal with situations better, because I've had that time to be mindful of God's presence and be in his presence."

Sister Monica, who is in her 40th year as St. Alphonsus' principal, said Father Chung's visits attest to the joyful collaboration between the Redemptorists and the Sisters of Mercy, who have been ministering together in New Orleans since 1869. She said the benefits of community-building tea breaks were also known to Mother Catherine McAuley, the Irish-born foundress of the Sisters of Mercy. As Mother Catherine lay dying, she told the sisters: "Be sure you have a comfortable cup of tea (to serve visitors) when I am gone."

"We pause for a blessing – a blessing from each other and also a blessing from God," Sister Monica said of teatime with Father Chung. "One thing I've noticed is that we don't really concentrate on the concerns or problems of our ministry during this time; we will if we need to, but for the most part, we just enjoy each other's company and we're in the mo-



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ment. It's a sacred time and it's a holy time. When we're together – talking and laughing and joking – sometimes you can feel the presence of God hovering over us."

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Small tea cups encourage small sips, less gulping and frequent refills, said Redemptorist Father Chung Cong Tran, whose Vietnamese heritage honors the benefits of hot tea.



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