

Viet Catholics' \$70,000 for bushfire victims

By SHARYN MARCHANT

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'AUSTRALIANS ALL': Fr Toan Nguyen with chaplaincy staff presents the cheque to Julie McDonald from the St Vincent de Paul Society ... "overwhelmed by the great outpouring of support". Photo: Kerry Myers

A cheque for more than \$70,000 for the Victorian bushfire appeal was presented to Vinnies on February 23, after an outpouring of generosity from members of the Vietnamese Catholic community who feel indebted for the assistance they have received from Australia.

"We've been so indebted to the Australian community and I think they are supporting this because Australia was so generous with them when they first arrived here," said Vietnamese chaplain and assistant priest at Cabramatta, Fr Liam Duong.

He said although "it would take a lifetime to pay back the generosity we've been shown", Vietnamese families across Sydney are determined to help those affected by the devastating Black Saturday fires.

"I don't think we can ever pay back anything, but this is our way of expressing our support and that our thoughts and prayers are with them," Fr Liam said.

"This generation, we are Australian, and this was a call on all Australians to help."

Fr Toan Nguyen, head of the Vietnamese chaplaincy, who presented the cheque for \$70,467 to Vinnies representative Julie McDonald, said: "We just want to show that we are part of the community, part of society, and part of the Catholic Church.

"We are always grateful to the Australian community, because we are all boat people, and now we feel we should give something back.

"When many of us arrived, the St Vincent de Paul Society helped us get established and we are still grateful for their compassion, for making us part of the community, and we wanted to give this money to them."

The money was raised in just two weekends, with the first call for donations at various Masses bringing in \$60,000, followed by an additional \$10,000 last weekend.

Fr Toan, who heads the Vietnamese Catholic Pastoral Centre at Revesby, said community members make valuable contributions to parishes across Sydney.

"We in the Vietnamese community enrich the Church culturally and spiritually by our presence here," he said.

Barbara Ryan, NSW state president of Vinnies, said the society was overwhelmed by the generous donation.

"The St Vincent de Paul Society is overwhelmed by the great outpouring of support from the Vietnamese Catholic community to help those whose lives have been turned upside down because of the devastating bushfires that have ravaged Victoria," she said.

"The Vietnamese community has always been extremely generous and supportive of all the Society's good works but this gift of \$70,000 dollars is a testament to the great sense of community and togetherness that abounds within the Vietnamese community."

She said although several Victorian towns have been destroyed by the blazes, these donations will have long-term benefits in restoring communities.

"With more than 200 dead and 1800 homeless, our friends in Victoria have a long road ahead. The generosity of the Vietnamese community will ensure that the Society will be there for the long haul, helping people rebuild their homes and lives."

Since 1985, the Vietnamese Catholic community has given more than \$1,115,000 to various human rights and disaster appeals both here and overseas, including \$16,000 to NSW bushfire victims in 2002 and \$23,000 for those affected by the Canberra bushfires of 2003.