

Strengthening body and spirit

[Zoey DiMauro | Arlington Catholic Herald](#) - 6/15/16



Victor Franco leads members of his tai chi class at Sacred Heart of Jesus Church in Winchester.

Meditation in motion

Victor Franco stood at the front of the classroom, leading tai chi at Sacred Heart of Jesus Church in Winchester. "We move like fish in water," he told the 15 participants, his manner reminiscent of Mr. Miyagi from "The Karate Kid." Calming Eastern music played in the background as he led his class through poses, such as "white crane spreads wings" and "ride the tiger."

Franco discovered tai chi at the age of 40, and studied it for four years under Master Jou Tsung Hwa. "He almost adopted me," said Franco.

After returning from the Vietnam War, Franco found tai chi restored his emotional and mental stability. Now, the retired bluegrass musician hopes to pass on the many health benefits of tai chi to others, especially retirees, whose health often deteriorates in a less-than-active lifestyle, he said.

Peggy Gibson's almost two years in the class has increased her energy level and greatly helped lessen her arthritis, she said. After visiting the doctor in December, she found that her bone density had increased 6 percent. "The key is to practice every day at home," she said.

Interspersed between the lunging and stretching, Franco teaches the students about the tai chi philosophy through a Catholic lens. "I work very closely with the Bible because the Bible is the Word, so if anything we do conflicts with that, I question it," he said.

More often than not, Franco finds Christian virtues like patience, concentration and commitment within the Chinese martial art. "The trouble I think people get into is many people look inside and recognize the power, but they call it 'Source,' " he said.

"His name is not Source. His name is Jesus," he said. God will protect those who know His name, said Franco, quoting Psalm 91:14, a prayer he recites each time the 70-year-old hops on his motorbike.

Fien Garnes remembers her mother practicing tai chi when Garnes was a little girl living in Indonesia. When she and her husband, Richard, retired, they wanted to do something for themselves, and decided to join the class. Tai chi has helped heal Garnes' tennis elbow and increased her strength and balance.

"You know why I like it?" she said. "Because it's at the church," her spiritual home since 1979.