

SACRED HEART CHURCH | A JOURNEY OF FAITH

By José de Jesús Magaña

My name is José de Jesús Magaña and I was a parishioner at Sacred Heart from 2008 until 2021. During all those years, the faith community in this parish was a great blessing from God and a great support for my family and our faith life. In this document I will try to portray some highlights of my journey in this welcoming, faithful, and multicultural parish.

GOD'S CALL | AN INVITATION TO SERVE

When my family and I arrived in Memphis as immigrants from Mexico, we would go to Spanish Mass at a different parish each week. We kept this “parish hopping” habit for some years until in 2008 we decided to register at Sacred Heart Church. At that time, we were invited by a welcoming and committed leader, Mrs. Doris Palacios, to serve in Mass. After some insistence and persistence by Mrs. Palacios, my parents answered God’s call to serve, and we all started being more involved in the liturgy. My father became a lector; my mother, an extraordinary communion minister; and my siblings and I, acolytes.

YOUNG ADULT GROUP | AN ENCOUNTER WITH THE RISEN JESUS

After serving for a few months during Mass, we met many great friends that led us closer to Christ with their words and examples. Fr. Dominic was the Associate Pastor at the time, and he worked closely with the Hispanic community. Inspired by the Holy Spirit, he saw the need of forming a young adult group that would also help to welcome people to the Church as ushers. My brother and I were young adults at the time, and he invited us to be part of this new parish ministry. Being an introvert, I was not thrilled with the idea of being part of a new group; nevertheless, this would be the greatest blessing yet for me. I met other young adults that were hungry, like me, for truth and true love. We would meet twice a month and hear a talk from a priest, a religious sister, or a lay person that challenged us to experience the love of God in our lives and live out the Gospel as true disciples.

Early in 2010, some of my new friends decided to attend a weekend retreat. That decision would change the course of our entire group from then on. That Sunday, as I went to the closing Mass for the retreat, I could see the faces of my friends glowing with a joy and peace that I needed but had never experienced. They urged me to sign up for the next retreat and thanks to their encouragement, three months later, I was that “face-glowing” renewed person coming out of a three-day retreat. That weekend marked a crucial point in my faith journey, for I had had a personal encounter with Jesus and had experienced God’s merciful love firsthand.

CATECHESIS | CALLED TO SHARE GOD'S LOVE

The weeks following the retreat are what I describe as a “honey-moon” stage. I started reading more about the richness and beauty of Catholicism and sharing with my friends the things I read. The more I learned, the more I fell in love with Christ and His Church. A great desire to serve the Lord arose in me. After some discernment, I became a catechist and started teaching a First Communion class on Sunday mornings. At that time, Mrs. Suzanne Martin was the Director of Religious Education, and she told me of the many faith formation courses offered in the diocese. As I started attending these courses, my faith became stronger, and I met many wise and holy men and women of God who showed and reminded me that grace was real, and that holiness was a gift offered to everyone. I also tried to share the things I learned with my

four students as they prepared to receive Jesus for the first time in the Eucharist. It was a great blessing for me to transmit the faith to these children and I was filled with gratitude to God and to them for teaching me how to live out better the Gospel. At the end of that catechetical year, Mrs. Suzanne informed us that she was going to leave, so we would need to find a person to fill her position.

DIRECTOR OF RELIGIOUS EDUCATION | TENDING GOD'S BELOVED

With no experience, but great disposition, I started working as a Director of Religious Education in September 2012. That same year Fr. Simon had been assigned as Pastor at Sacred Heart. During the following years, we experienced great blessings and a few challenges in our religious education program. One of the greatest blessings was the increase of enrollment. That year, we had almost 150 children and teens enrolled in sacramental preparation classes. Another great blessing was that we had many willing and dedicated volunteers in the ministry of catechesis. We were also greatly blessed to have the Missionaries of Charity among us. They would always teach two classes in our program. Moreover, some of my friends from the young adult group also became catechists or assistants that year.

For the first few months of the catechetical year, Mrs. Suzanne stayed at Sacred Heart training me and giving me crucial advice on what to do in specific situations. Being a director was a great responsibility and a lot of work; however, God taught me to trust Him more and to depend less in my own abilities. He showed me once and again (sometimes the hard way) that He was the one in charge and that I needed to let go of control and put my faith in Him only. For instance, some years as I looked at the lists of students and catechists, I became anxious because there were not enough catechists to teach the classes. However, every time God would call and bring people to serve as catechists and even as assistants to help our catechists. The assistants were mostly former Confirmandi who had already been confirmed and wanted to serve the Church and keep learning about the Catholic faith.

During this time, I experienced the Church truly as "catholic". I was now working with Fr. Simon and the whole community. I was taken out of my comfort zone as I met and collaborated with my brothers and sisters who attended Mass in a different language. I also formed new connections with DREs in other parishes as we shared ideas and worked together to organize retreats and improve curricula. Another great blessing we had during these years was having great and holy associate pastors working alongside the Hispanic community. We will be forever indebted and thankful to God for Fr. Walter Miller; Fr. Pio Estepa, SVD.; Fr. Raymond Asagdem, SVD.; and Fr. Esteban Miguel, SVD. Each one of them helped build our community spiritually with their unique gifts and talents.

The increase in enrollment continued year after year: Every year we would have almost 200 children and teens. Therefore, our greatest blessings also brought with it a challenge: not enough space. Sometimes it was difficult to accommodate all the children in the rooms and we had to use every space available (including the flower room) as improvised classrooms. This situation was not ideal since various parish groups also needed to have a space to meet, and sometimes conflict arose between different groups. Nevertheless, this situation also made us aware of the needs of others and helped us to learn how to communicate better and work together as a faith community to solve problems. At the end, this situation was a blessing in disguise since it brought many learning opportunities for our spiritual and communal growth.

DOZIER HOUSE | A GREAT SHORT BLESSING

In God's divine providence, we obtained permission from the Diocese to use Dozier House as we begun our second catechetical year. That was a great blessing for us since now we had nine new classrooms available for our program. Many parishioners came together to paint, clean, and repair the classrooms and have them ready on time before the first day of classes. We had an issue solved, but new concerns also arose. First, the building was situated across the street which meant that students and catechists had to cross Jefferson Avenue to access their classrooms. Second, the AC was not enough to keep all the classrooms cool during the hot weeks of summer. Third, during the spring we would discover every week new nests of wasps that loved this building and made it their home. Although we struggled to maintain a proper and adequate study place, we were grateful for this space. We came up with solutions and kept walking abreast as a community of faith to make sure the environment was safe for our children, to facilitate and foster their learning.

With this extra space we solved the classrooms issue and focused on improving our program. We adopted the "Chosen" program from Ascension Press for our Confirmation classes and the "Finding God" bilingual program from Loyola Press for our First Communion classes. However, in 2017 we were informed that Dozier House was no longer going to be available to us. That was a major strike for our program since we depended very much on that building. However, this experience helped us to trust once again in God and accept the situation. We decided to divide the classes into two groups to meet at different times and share the available space. This situation brought again some complications, but with the help of God we were able to come through.

PANDEMIC & FIRE | TRUST IN GOD'S PROVIDENCE

As we started the 2018-2019 year, we did not imagine what was going to come at the end of that catechetical period. In March 2019, COVID-19 struck with full force in the United States, and all major cities shut down. During this time of sudden social confusion and chaos, all our face-to-face interactions ended abruptly. It took some time for everyone to make sense of the situation. Many programs were interrupted, postponed, or cancelled; and our catechetical program was not an exception. After almost a month of being confined to our houses, we decided to continue our faith formation program online. This would prove to bring a new challenge: some of our parishioners either did not have access to a reliable internet connection or were not familiar with this means of virtual interaction. Many people fell sick and, unfortunately, a few did not recover. However, despite this disconcerting situation, we were able to return to Mass and celebrate the Christian Initiation Sacraments later that year.

At the end of 2019 we were able to return to face-to-face classes and start the new catechetical year with some restrictions and precautions. We decided to further divide the program into four groups. Each group of students would meet at a different time on a different week every two weeks. During the week that students did not meet in class, they would work at home on the material that their catechist assigned them. We continued doing this until the end of that catechetical period that concluded with the reception of First Holy Communions and Confirmation in May-June 2020.

By this time, we already knew that there were going to be some changes at our parish during the summer. First, Father Simon, who had finished his period with the Diocese of Memphis, would go to teach at the Divine Word Seminary in Iowa. Second, Fr. Esteban, who had served

for over a year at Sacred Heart would be transferred to a parish in New Jersey. Third, Fr. Brandon would come from New Jersey to be the new pastor at Sacred heart Church. And fourth, I would no longer be the DRE at Sacred Heart since I would be serving at the Saint Andrew School of Evangelization (EESA) at Ascension Church.

This period was a time of transition and renewal for the Church as the community prepared to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the parish in September 2022. However, there was yet another blow at store for Sacred Heart: a fire that consumed the sacristy and made the Vietnamese and Spanish Masses be temporarily relocated to Blessed Sacrament Church. Providentially, the fire did not touch the sanctuary and did not damage the structure of the Church building. Nevertheless, the news of the church closing for a long period of time deeply saddened all parishioners. Fr. Simon was granted permission to remain for more time in Memphis to assist Fr. Brandon. Maria Le was given the position as the new Director of Religious Education.

The catechetical program was held at Blessed Sacrament last catechetical year with the leadership of Fr. Brandon and Maria Le. As for me, I am now fully involved in the Saint Andrew School of Evangelization (EESA) at Ascension Church working in God's vineyard. I hope and pray that the faith community of Sacred Heart continues to be a faithful and Christ-centered parish that keeps striving for unity, welcoming God's children with open arms and open hearts.