

Reflections from Fr. Raymond Asagdem, SVD

1. What years (period of time) did you serve at SHC? What was your impression of the Church/community?

I served as an associate priest of Sacred Heart Church from September 2018 until March 2020, which is approximately one and half years. I was received warmly by the three different language and cultural groups in the community. Even though the greater part of my sacramental and priestly ministry was dedicated to the Hispanic and small English community, I was not left out of the Vietnamese community's activities. It was gratifying for me to see that, at the core, the three communities were very open and accommodating to one another. Even though language was barrier it did not prevent the three communities from working together for the common goal *that we may all be one* (John 17:21) and *come to the knowledge of our God* (1Tim. 2:4). Fr. Simon, the pastor, and myself constantly emphasized the importance of building an intercultural community because His incarnation was intercultural; i.e., the openness and willingness for different cultures to engage one another. The Mission Sunday celebration was always an expression of our community's diversity and richness.

2. What challenges and blessings did you encounter with your ministry here?

I think it is not an understatement to say that every day of my one and half years at SHC was a blessing. The three language communities accepted me, even though culturally and ethnically, I am different. Despite that difference, we worked and collaborated in many things.

The greatest blessing, I think, was Fr. Simon. We worked together as a team and he coached me in many things. That gave me a profound peace, joy and energy for my ministry. I never woke up from bed, thinking, "*Why am I in SHC?*"

Another blessing was working with the Hispanics. They are people who are simple and down to earth, and that aligned very well with my own personality. The only big challenge was our inability to organize the Hispanic youth like the Vietnamese Eucharistic Youth Association. We made a couple of attempts but it never worked out for some good reasons. The biggest was finding a suitable time to gather, taking into consideration that many of our parishioners lived far away from the church.

3. What do you think of the mission that our SHC is called to do?

I have no doubt that the SVD mission at SHC is very important. First, SHC is the only Church in Memphis Diocese that is serving the Vietnamese Catholics. SHC is not rich economically but rich in many other ways. SHC community's presence in the midst of homelessness and poverty alone is a powerful witness that God is present among his people, no matter what. When I was there, I always had eggs and bread ready to make a sandwich for anyone who came around hungry and wanting food. And indeed every single day, I had someone who came around asking for food or money. I remember during winter, any time I went down to close the gate in the night, someone would come, "*Please Fr. — I feel cold today. Could you give me \$5 to go to the homeless shelter?*" The days I had, I gave; and if I didn't have, I simply said I was sorry. And that is ok.

Our mission is vital in the Memphis Diocese.