

Reflections from Fr. Simon Hoang, SVD

1. When you were assigned to be Pastor at SHC in 2012, what was your impression of the Church community here?

I would like to give a brief history of my time in the Memphis Diocese and at SHC.

After priestly ordination on May 26, 2007, I was assigned to SHC for my first mission. I arrived in Memphis in July 2007 and began my ministry as Associate Pastor of SHC. After 6 months working with Fr. Joseph Vu, SVD, I was transferred to Ascension Catholic Church in Raleigh, TN. I was Associate Pastor there for three years, 2007-2011. Then I went to Bolivia for language English culture for one year, 2011-12. I came back to Memphis and was assigned as Pastor of SHC from July 2012 to June 2021.

The fire incident on May 8, 2021, burned the whole sacristy, flower room and the side chapel, and caused great damage to the whole interior church. I was then asked to extend my time at SHC to assist the church with its restoration initiative. In January 2022, I left Memphis to embrace my new assignment at Divine Word College. All together, I spent 15 years of missionary service in the Diocese of Memphis, 10 years of which were at SHC.

SHC is a multicultural community of faith: Spanish, Vietnamese and English, and all in-between and betwixt. I believe that God has brought them together on this corner of Midtown Memphis, to show the world that intercultural worship and multicultural ministry is possible and necessary. It is a sign of the reign of God here on earth. That was the impression I had about SHC, and it has become the core of my missionary work.

2. What were the challenges and blessings you encountered as Pastor during those years?

Challenges were many and presented themselves at different times, in different shapes and forms, and in different intensities. We could not tackle and overcome these challenges without recognizing the blessings that were imbedded in them, that often resulted from them.

First, the vision of a multicultural community—“*one heart, many faces*”—has been most challenging and rewarding as well. How do we bring people from different walks of life, different languages and cultures, to worship, to share the space of worship, to work together, and to cultivate the spirit of unity in diversity, to nurture the spirit of mutual respect and love? How do we cross the boundaries of differences to find the commonality among the culturally-diverse communities—that we profess the same faith, share the same table of the Eucharist, and participate in the same mission of Jesus?

These collective challenges were often overwhelming, and at times seemed impossible to overcome. There were a lot of misunderstandings about others’ religiosity, cultural values and religious devotions, bias and prejudices against others’ cultural background, generalization about others’ cultural practices and religious beliefs, and racism often ran deep in the hearts and minds of many, often surfacing in their behaviors.

Successes and blessings came about when parishioners came together to celebrate Easter, Christmas, and many other annual parish feast days, in which we were singing and dancing, sharing the cultural food, spending time with each other, sharing the same concerns for our children and our parish, using the word “we” more often than “I” —“my culture” —“my faith vs. yours,” etc.

Blessings came when we saw parishioners reach out to one another in time of difficulty, times of death of loved ones, when someone was injured because of work, or sick, and especially during the pandemic. Blessings came when we saw our children taking catechism classes together, playing together, having summer fun time together, etc. Blessings came when we saw parishioners working on various parish improvement and maintenance projects, such as rectory projects, parking lot projects, the new priests' house project, classrooms projects, the annual church cleaning, etc.

Second, the challenge came from the culture we live in: the division in the nation, different political affiliations, especially during the time of national elections, and different feelings and opinions on vaccination during the pandemic. These divisions ran through and among family members, co-workers, and friends as well as parishioners.

Blessings were often found among these divisions that created different opinions and feelings. We had opportunities to address and to bring the light of the Gospel into the midst. For instance, among the parishioners with Asian background, disagreement often means people perceive the person with the different idea to be an adversary, an opponent. Thus, building cooperation and collaboration between persons who have disagreements becomes a great challenge. Diversity can enrich our life when we are open to the gifts of one other, regardless of the differences we may have.

Third, generational gaps among our parishioners is another great challenge but also an inordinate blessing. This generational gap is not merely between a population of the same culture and religious upbringing. It involved the generations of young and old parishioners from different cultural and religious upbringing. For instance, a Hispanic family is a unit of parishioners who have feet two different cultures: Latino and North American cultures. These cultural values often clashed with each other. A Vietnamese family unit is a combination of at least three generations: grandparents, parents and children. Grandparents are often very pious in their religious devotions, while the parents are not so. For better or for worse, the parents tend toward more American values and ways of life. The children are completely Americanized in most aspects. The children in these families live between and betwixt these two or more cultures.

Being Pastor in this cultural setting enhanced my sensibility toward the diversity and the blessings that each generation brought. It has enriched my theological knowledge of God, of the church, and of the mission. The Eucharist then became the center of unity, closing the generational gaps among our parishioners. I understand more that *“the Eucharist is the source and summit of Christian life.”*

3. What is the mission for our SHC here in Memphis that God is calling us to do?

We are living in a time when social, religious and political divisions seem to be very visible: the cultural of individualism is on the rise, intolerance toward immigrants and people of color seems to be at its peak, and cross-cultural living and worship is undesirable. SHC multicultural community can be the sign of God's reign here in this corner of Memphis and for the Memphis diocese. SHC is a multicultural community of faith – *“one heart many faces”*.

4. Were there great milestones you experienced in this journey? What were they?

There were many great milestones that I experienced; I would like to mention a few.

First, the unification of the Vietnamese community was a great blessing that the Lord had granted to us. Soon after I became pastor of SHC, the process of unification of the Vietnamese began. The Holy Spirit in her wisdom and kindness prepared a way for us. My three years as Associate Pastor of Ascension Church brought me closer to the Vietnamese Fatima Community from Blessed Sacrament Church. So, when I returned to Memphis and became Pastor of SHC, unifying the Vietnamese community was my priority. With the help of Bishop Terry Steib, SVD, Bishop of Memphis, Fr. Kazimierz Abrahamczyk, SVD, the Southern District superior, and Fr. Edward Fisher, Pastor of Blessed Sacrament, we were able to go through a six-month preparation process of open dialogue and intensive prayer.

The Sunday (I forgot the day) when the two communities first came together was a bitter-sweet moment for all of us. Emotions were high. The process of forgiveness and healing had already begun; however, a few families were not able to come back at that time. It took them a few weeks and months following that uniting day. Certainly, we were together physically, but on many different levels, we were still apart. It took us at least another 2 or 3 years until people of both sides truly came to worship together. As a result, I was not able to form a Vietnamese Council until 3 years after I became Pastor.

Second, the unification of the Sunday Catechism program was another milestone of SHC. Children are more tolerant of cultural differences. When we put them together, they enjoyed each other with few problems. The point we reflected on was that, if we were to build a multicultural community, it must start with our children. Thus, with the help of Jose Magaña, DRE, and the Parish Council, we began the multicultural catechist program. We formed classes that mixed our children: Vietnamese, English and Spanish, using English as the main language, with a few exceptions for children who did not yet speak English. It was considered successful for 7 years, until the diocese took back the catechist house (Dozier House). Then came the pandemic. We did not have enough rooms for all classes to meet at the same time. It was a difficult decision to separate our children again to accommodate the lack of space situation. We were disheartened!

Blessings came along with the Catechist program. The sharing of classrooms by the three language groups, the multicultural catechist program for the young parishioners, the adult groups and their mission endeavor were beautiful to see. It was mutually beneficial to students as well as catechists. Our catechists and assistant catechists enjoyed having both Vietnamese and Spanish students and visa-versa. There were conflicts, but people learned to deal with the challenges, and became more open to struggle together, and to grow in faith together.

5. What might the people of God have experienced?

In my humble opinion, many SHC parishioners may have grown positively in love with the multicultural community. First, they are more open to diversity and are at ease with people from different cultures and languages. Second, they learn to see each other as brothers and sisters in Christ, regardless of differences in cultural background and religious devotions. Third, they seem to enjoy the gifts of each other and often pay attention to the needs of others, especially to the less fortunate in our community, and are more aware of the struggles of immigrants among their midst. Fourth, they developed great love for their church. They are very proud of their church and generously contribute to its maintenance cost.

SHC parishioners may be benefitting from and experiencing the missionary spirit of the Divine Word Missionaries. They seem to be able to distinguish the differences between diocesan clergy and missionary priests. They seem to be more in tune with the missionary world which is beyond

their local church. They participate whole-heartedly when there is need to assist victims of natural disasters or the poor in other countries. They also reach out to do ministry with the Missionary Sisters of Charity and Catholic Charities of West Tennessee.

SHC parishioners have proudly proclaimed how they value their multicultural community. They not only enjoy the cultural diversity along with their own unique cultural heritage, but often present it to the diocesan events whenever they have chances to do so. The men's and women's groups often participate in other parish events. The Youth Groups share their talents, such as the Lion Dance, traditional dance, folk dances, etc. with other parishes around the diocese.