



ALUMNA GUIDES STUDENTS ON FAMILIAR PATH

Sr. Anna Trang Mai, IHM recently became the first religious sister to graduate from Divine Word College and return as a member of the seminary's staff. During the spring semester, she served as a formation and spiritual director. Her job was to encourage students to develop their personal prayer as a means of growing in their relationships with God. Luckily for the DWC students, Sr. Anna's personal and professional experiences make her uniquely qualified, since she recently walked the same path.

Early life

Born and raised in Vietnam, Sr. Anna entered the Immaculate Heart of Mary congregation when she started high school. In 2008, she professed perpetual vows. Sr. Anna worked for several years first as a vice-principle and later as a principle at IHM Kindergarten schools. She was passionate about her work with the young students and their families. The job was fulfilling and she felt sure of herself in the role. Then came a request she didn't expect. Her superior asked her to move to the United States and enroll at Divine Word College in Epworth, Iowa to learn English.

She didn't feel confident enough to accept at first. Sr. Anna says she didn't have a natural ability for languages and didn't have any interest in learning English. Still, her superior persisted. If she agreed, it would mean making a six-year commitment to an education in America without any home visits. "It's like being dropped in the biggest, deepest ocean in the world and not knowing how to swim," she recalls thinking at the time. She prayed about it and consulted a monsignor whom she trusted. He urged her to

go and told her that God would be with her on the journey. Convinced but still hesitant, she recalls her hand shaking as she signed the paperwork to enroll at DWC.

Travel

Before leaving for the United States, Sr. Anna spent 30 minutes learning how to introduce herself in English. Having never flown before, she arrived at the airport with another religious sister who was also flying to the United States. Dressed in their habits, they each wore a small sign that said, "No English. Need help."

They nearly missed their flight from Vietnam to Hong Kong because they didn't know where to go. By the time their second flight from Hong Kong to Los Angeles arrived at its destination, airport officials were aware that two women were arriving without any English skills. Sr. Anna and her travel companion were met by a woman sent by the airport staff to translate and help the sisters fill out necessary paperwork. Sr. Anna recalls the woman chastising her for coming to America without any knowledge of the English

language and telling the sisters they brought shame to all of Vietnam for their ignorance. She was disheartened by the encounter, but knew they had to keep going. Once they arrived in Chicago, Fr. Thang Hoang, SVD, now the rector at DWC, picked them up. Pulling into Epworth for the first time, Sr. Anna said she felt confused by the sights and smells of the rural farming community. Her whole life, she imagined the United States as bustling metropolitan cities with high-rise buildings. The images in front of her challenged everything she thought she knew.

New Home

In no time, home sickness settled in and Sr. Anna says she felt isolated. She couldn't communicate with the people around her. She avoided the dining room because the people at the tables always wanted to strike up a conversation.

During her first day of ESL classes, Sr. Anna listened in confusion as the instructor spoke in English. She sat in her seat with tears streaming silently down her face. When class was dismissed, the instructor approached her and embraced her warmly. She suspects that the instructor asked why she was crying, but she couldn't understand the words. However, the meaning of the hug was clear.

In the coming years, she prayed and studied with faith. She hung a paper on her bedroom wall with words from the Gospel of John 15:15 that often helped lift her spirits and reminded her to trust God, "without me, you can do nothing."

Despite a difficult start, Sr. Anna continued with her studies and finished the ESL program in two years. Then she entered the undergraduate program and in 2015, she graduated with a B.A. in Intercultural Studies and a minor in Theology and Religious Studies.

Life after DWC

After leaving DWC, Sr. Anna moved to Chicago where she earned her master's degree in Spirituality and Spiritual Direction from Loyola University in 2017. Upon graduation, she went to Vietnam for seven months to be with her congregation and visit family. Then she went back to Chicago where she studied religious formation at the Catholic Theological Union.

When her studies were complete in 2019, she went back to Vietnam again. This time she worked in her congregation's novitiate program and later in a parish where she was learning about various ministries when her congregation received a request from Divine Word College. Her alma mater needed a spiritual director and formator.

Fr. John Szukalski, SVD, Vice President for Academic Affairs, says Sr. Anna came to mind when he was considering who may be able to fill the position.

"The solid academic and religious formation at DWC prepares graduates like Sr. Anna to serve as leaders in the Church worldwide as missionary disciples," he said. "In Sr. Anna's case, her studies and formation at DWC built on her personal qualities as a person of prayer, spiritual discernment, and joyful community presence." Sr. Anna trusted God's plan for her and left Vietnam for the United States once again.

Home again

DWC is a place where Sr. Anna grew up in many ways so returning to the college felt like home. Each day during the spring semester, she woke up motivated to guide her formation group of 11 sisters who were each in temporary vows. She often asked herself, what did I need in this situation as a student?

"I really have a special passion for the religious sisters because I feel like I can help them become more mature, free and confident women," Sr. Anna said. Fr. John said Sr. Anna's personal journey helps her relate to students.

"Her initial struggles with English and U.S. culture and ultimate intercultural competence lend her credibility and effectiveness as a spiritual director and formation director," he said.

Throughout her education, Sr. Anna was blessed with the generosity and support of various people and religious congregations. The Society of the Divine Word and DWC benefactors helped make her time at the college possible. After graduation, the Sisters of Charity of the Blessed Virgin Mary in Dubuque, the Grey Nuns of the Sacred Heart Philadelphia and the New Melleray Abbey in Peosta, Iowa all supported Sr. Anna as she completed her graduate studies. She also learned from each order's charism and spirituality. "I appreciate the benefactors who support this program for religious sisters," she said. "I hope that more religious sisters continue to come here."

Her work at DWC provides Sr. Anna with more experience in spiritual direction, formation and teaching in a professional environment. It's also an opportunity to continue refining her English skills. This fall, she'll begin teaching theology. The instructors who were her teachers just a few years ago are now her colleagues. Sr. Anna said they've welcomed her back with the same warmth she experienced on her first day of ESL classes. She's come to realize that if you trust in God and do your best, all things are possible.

"Our God is a surprising God," she said. "My returning here was a surprise. We never know His way."