

Love Your Neighbor As Yourself

My name is Truong Minh Nhien, and I'm a Divine Word Missionary Priest serving in Ecuador. I am originally from Vietnam.

I started my studies at Divine Word College in Epworth in 2006 and continued my formation with the Society of the Divine Word after that.

On May 25, 2013, I was ordained at Techny Towers in Chicago.

Ministering To Venezuelan Immigrants

Here in Ecuador, the year 2020 started with sadness and confusion as a result of the suffering and loss of human life caused by COVID-19. Many faithful people were fearful at that time, causing pastoral activities in the parish to wane. There was also an order in place that made churches close for a period of time and curfews were implemented at all religious and social activities.

I received a call from my superior asking if I would accept a mission serving at a new parish in Huaquillas, a district that borders Peru at the southern end of the Ecuadorian coast near the Pacific Ocean. There are approximately 47,706 residents in this diverse community that is made up primarily of black, mixed-race (mestizo), and indigenous people. This frontier mission is quite an adventure for a missionary like me!



On January 28, 2021, Bishop Ángel Sánchez installed me as the pastor of the María Madre de la Iglesia parish, which belongs to the Diocese of Machala in the province of El Oro. In 2018, the Montfort Missionaries celebrated the 25th anniversary of the founding of the parish. They continued to serve here until I arrived as the new pastor from the Society of the Divine Word in January 2021. Very early in my new mission, I observed the emerging migratory transit of the Venezuelan population in Huaquillas. This group was essentially paralyzed due to the closure of the border and the militarization by the Peruvian government. Venezuelan immigrants whose migratory plan was to move to Chile and Peru found themselves unable to continue their migratory journey for various reasons. So they settled in border cities, such as Huaquillas, searching for food, shelter and healthcare, especially those in the most vulnerable populations. As a result, there's a need to provide emergency humanitarian assistance to homeless immigrants and make their immigration journey safer and more dignified.

On May 5, 2021, I presented a project to provide care and services to immigrants in transit on the southern border in Huaquillas, Ecuador. As soon as the Society of the Divine Word approved the concept, we got to work. We installed a kitchen, built another floor for more space, added a wall with new paint and set up more tents for a waiting area where we could receive incoming immigrants. We prepared tables, chairs, shelves, pots, pans, a refrigerator and a freezer. We changed the water pump, installed a security camera system and prepared the items necessary for a community kitchen. We also formed two teams of volunteers to serve the kitchen. Each team has 10 volunteers: four cooks, two waiters, two who go out

in the community to invite the immigrants to the kitchen and two who clean.

In our soup kitchen, we provide hot dishes and basic services so the immigrants can recover from their lack of main meals, rest a bit and continue with their transit. In the morning, the volunteers come to the soup kitchen at 8 a.m. to clean, set up tables and prepare food to cook and serve. At 9 a.m., two volunteers meet the immigrants on the streets or in the parks to get to know them and to invite them to come to our kitchen. The cooks start preparing hot dishes, such as rice, chicken, meat, noodles or salad. The immigrants arrive and sit in front of the door to listen to a welcome message and a thought for the day. Tickets are then presented in order to sit at the table to be served with a hot plate and a cup of coffee. At this time, we also approach the table to talk with them. If they need to see a psychologist, volunteers from the Jesuit Refugee Service are there to accompany them. While they eat, volunteers prepare clothes that are donated by the faithful of the parish and offer them to the immigrants when they are finished. In addition, children are given diapers. Before the immigrants leave, our volunteers give them a cheeseburger and bottle of water that serves as a travel kit for the next part of their journey. Serving our Venezuelan immigrants in Huaquillas is a new mission in the Diocese of Machala, and also a pioneering SVD mission in Ecuador.

This ministry gives us the opportunity to love and serve our brothers and sisters. We are all very willing to serve as a team with great enthusiasm and joy. We all serve with love and charity, giving testimonies of God's love to others. It also gives us the feeling that we are not only listening to the Word of God, but that we are putting it into practice, "Love your neighbor as yourself." Our simple joy is to see the immigrants who often show their appreciation for our services and enjoy the hot meal, since they miss that comfort so much while they're in transit. They are especially satisfied when they get the opportunity to take a cold shower.

Perhaps our biggest concern is that we can help them by providing food to fill their empty stomachs, we can offer them a space to talk about their suffering and we can listen to their psychological or spiritual problems, but that's not always enough. Many immigrants arrive with health problems that we cannot afford to help them with because the medications and doctor visits are expensive. We considered trying to organize a voluntary medical team who could check their physical health and try to cure problems like headaches or pains in their legs and feet from walking for days and nights. We also encountered drug addicts who may need a recovery center. For now, we simply give thanks for the services that we can offer to these immigrants seeking safety for their families and do our best to provide for them with the means that we have.

