

“HIS MISSION is OUR MISSION”

A REFLECTION IN PARAGUAY

My name is Viet Quoc Hoang. I'm also known as “Padre Juan” or “Padre Juancito” to the people who I currently minister. I was born in Vietnam and moved to Wisconsin as a child. I professed perpetual vows as a Divine Word Missionary in 2017 and was ordained to the priesthood in 2018. Currently I'm serving my first assignment in Paraguay.

Paraguay is known as the heart of South America. Our province in Paraguay is divided into five districts: Itapúa Sur; Itapúa Norte; Alto Parana; Canindeju; and Asuncion. Our district, Itapúa Sur, includes various parishes, a primary and secondary

school called San Roque Gonzalez and the central retirement house for our SVD confreres. I have been lucky enough to have the opportunity to serve in all three parishes that our Divine Word congregation is responsible for in the Diocese of Encarnacion.





Looking back at my journey as a Divine Word Missionary in Paraguay over the last few years, I've learned to be open to the needs of the Paraguayan province and to be creative in the ways I minister to the people that I'm called to serve. I've learned to be thankful for all the grace-filled moments that I've received in the mission. For example, when the province of Paraguay confirmed my appointment as district superior in 2020. I was a bit nervous when I heard the news of my appointment because I'm the youngest member in our district. I was reflecting on how our team could be effective in leadership for the next three-year-term. It reminded me to always respond positively to the needs of our province.

In 2018, when I arrived in Paraguay, the province assigned me as an associate parish priest. The main purpose was so I could learn the culture and pastoral work. I accepted this assignment with an open mind. It was challenging when Covid-19 hit Paraguay. The world stopped. Activities, economics, political life, travel, entertainment events and sports stopped. Public religious life also stopped. The Bible message in Matthew 25 inspired me to look at creative ways to minister to the people. How do we, as Divine Word Missionaries, respond to the needs of the people we are called to serve. Matthew 25 gives us a central and repetitive message: take care of the humble, the hungry and thirsty, the poor, the sick, abandoned and discriminated against. But why? Because in our daily lives, we often pass by these people or our gaze prefers not to come across such a scenario, because it bothers us and demands a response. Thus, it is not Jesus who prevents us from entering the Kingdom, but our practice of not welcoming the other, the blindness that prevents us from recognizing the face of Christ in the little ones.

Today more than ever we must try to help ourselves to live and act in the way of Jesus, because the justice of the Kingdom is not achieved by observing norms and prescriptions, but by welcoming those in need. Rather, let us seek to share what we have, seeking justice and the common good. That is why during the pandemic, I started a ministry called "olla popular" where we offered hot meals

for families with kids and elderly three times per week. The number of families that needed help grew each day. By the time I received my transfer assignment at the end of the year, we were preparing 2,000 plates of hot food each week.

In 2021, the province once again assigned me to another parish. This time they sent me to San Pedro Apostol where I have been serving as the pastor in the countryside of San Pedro del Parana. The parish has a population of 42,000 and 86 mission chapels. Some chapels have Mass once a month, while others have Mass every two months.



Mrs. Maria Trinidad

I was overwhelmed at first, but I also received many grace-filled moments. For instance, there is an 88-year-old woman named Mrs. Maria Trinidad who has always faithfully participated in the Masses in her community of San Blas. One day in May, during the moment of the first reading, she said "Padre Juan voy a leer" (Fr. John, I will read). There was silence in the chapel. I looked at her and thought to myself "can she still read? Is it possible without her glasses?" She then asked me for the reading, and I indicated to her where to start. I was worried because the first reading was a little bit longer than usual. I sat down and couldn't help but to be doubtful. She began the reading with a voice so clear and crisp just like the spring water. Every pronunciation was perfect. I felt like I was in an orchestra, and everything went smoothly.

Mrs. Maria finished the reading and just like the Bible says in Luke 4:20, "Then He rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. While the eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fixed on him." All the eyes in the chapel of San Blas were fixed on Mrs. Maria Trinidad with admiration. As for me, Mrs. Maria had left me astonished, all my doubts vanished and I once again believed firmly what Matthew 19:26 says, "With God, all things are possible." From that experience, Mrs. Maria taught me not to judge a book by its cover. I need to get to know the people who I am called to serve on a personal level. I must be willing to give each of them an opportunity because each of them have gifts and talents. We can collaborate in the mission.