



The Divine Word Missionaries

THE CATHOLIC DIOCESE OF MEMPHIS IS BLESSED TO HAVE MANY DIFFERENT RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES WHO SERVE PEOPLE IN THE AREA THROUGH THEIR VARIOUS CHARISMS AND MINISTRIES. OVER THE NEXT TWO YEARS, THIS COLUMN WILL DIVE INTO THE RELIGIOUS PRIESTS, BROTHERS, SISTERS AND LAY PEOPLE WHO SERVE IN OUR DIOCESE.

The Society of the Divine Word (SVD) is a religious community that goes to the places where the Gospel is not yet fully proclaimed throughout the world. The sons of St. Arnold Janssen are the solid and reliable laborers in the vineyard of the Lord that Jesus Himself asked for, working to sow new fields and reap the harvest of discipleship. The Divine Word Missionaries, as they are widely known, are one of the largest missionary communities in the Roman Catholic Church today, composed of more than 6,000 missionary priests and brothers working in 70 countries, preaching the Gospel and administering the sacraments to Catholics from birth to death.

In the Diocese of Memphis, the Society of the Divine Word oversees three parishes: Sacred Heart Catholic Church on Jefferson Avenue, St. Joseph Catholic Church in South Memphis and, most recently, St. Augustine Catholic Church just south of Midtown Memphis. But its history also runs through the Cathedral in Memphis, as Bishop Emeritus J. Terry Steib, SVD, our fourth bishop, brought the charisms found in being both a Religious and a Divine Word Missionary to his role as our Shepherd, spending his ministry focused on bringing home the lost sheep and restoring the accessibility of education throughout the Diocese.

Founded by St. Arnold Janssen in 1875, the Society of the Divine Word seems to have been born into the same conditions that has fostered its work in the life of the Church. Father Arnold was a Diocesan priest in Munster when the world of the Catholic Church in Germany began to collapse around

him. A fierce conflict between the ascendent Prussian state and the Holy See flared up during this stormy era of civil unrest, revolution and political upheaval, which would later be called *Kulturkampf*.

This bitter conflict swept through Europe and witnessed the birth pangs of the modern country of Germany. Amid this period of unrest, which saw the expulsion of religious communities and the closing of seminaries and apostolates, Father Arnold boldly purchased the land for the St. Michael the Archangel Mission House in Steyl, the Netherlands, as a seminary and school to form men for priestly service in the missions.

In 1879, the first missionaries went forward, including St. Joseph Freinademetz, who was canonized not only for his heroic work as a missionary, but also because he suffered and died of typhus with his people when he could have fled, as well as John Baptist Anzer, the first Bishop of the

German Catholic Mission in China. Others soon followed, including Fathers Henle and Nies, who were murdered in 1897 while laboring out in the mission field.

All around the world, the story is repeated. In places that others have forgotten or never cared to hear about, the Divine Word Missionaries are there working with the downtrodden and proclaiming in their midst Christ crucified and risen.

They are also organizing schools, working for justice and advocating for the lost. This includes our own country, as the Divine Word Missionaries found work in the Deep South.

For 118 years, they have ministered in predominantly African-American parishes. They founded the first seminary

community at St. Augustine.

We see the best elements of the charism of the Divine Word – a focus on the Bible, solidarity with those that have been looking for justice and the chance at a better life, a focus on education and, finally and most importantly, the mercy and love of Christ Jesus.

I hope in some special way I was able to communicate the deep regard I have for the Missionaries of the Divine Word and the important work they are committed to, not only here in our Diocese but also throughout the world. If you want to know more, I encourage you to drop by Sacred Heart to talk to Father Brandon Nguyen, or visit with our newest SVD priests – Father Thinh Ngo at Sacred Heart or Father Stephan Brown at St. Augustine.

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for African-American men in Greenville, Mississippi, which was moved two years later to Bay St. Louis, Mississippi. The Divine Word Missionary founders saw a need for SVD priests of African-American descent to minister to African Americans living in the Deep South.

Here in Memphis, the priests of the Society of the Divine Word will minister to anyone who walks across the threshold of their parishes. In addition, the SVDs in Memphis work with our large and vibrant Vietnamese community at Sacred Heart, the Latino community at St. Joseph and the African-American

Father Brown was appointed pastor of St. Augustine by Bishop David P. Talley last month. If you ever happen to get a few minutes alone with Bishop Emeritus Steib, ask him about the work his brothers are doing. I’m sure he would be glad to oblige. †



MORRIS BUTCHER

is a convert to Catholicism and serves as Master of Ceremonies for St. Peter Catholic Church in Memphis.

THE CATHOLIC DIOCESE OF MEMPHIS IS BLESSED WITH TWO NEW PRIESTS FROM THE SOCIETY OF THE DIVINE WORD (SVD), THE LARGEST CATHOLIC ORDER OF PRIESTS AND BROTHERS WHO SERVE AS CATHOLIC MISSIONARIES AROUND THE WORLD PROCLAIMING “THE KINGDOM OF GOD’S LOVE” TO OTHERS. THERE ARE APPROXIMATELY 6,000 SVD PRIESTS WHO SERVE IN MORE THAN 75 COUNTRIES.

Five SVD priests reside in the Catholic Diocese of Memphis – including Bishop Emeritus J. Terry Steib, who served as the Diocese’s fourth bishop for 23 years from 1993 to 2016; Father Brandon Nguyen, pastor of Sacred Heart Catholic Church in Memphis; Father Tony Romo-Romo, pastor of St. Joseph Catholic Church in South Memphis; newly installed Father Thinh Ngo, parochial vicar of Sacred Heart Catholic Church; and Father Stephan Brown, pastor of St. Augustine Catholic Church in Memphis.



FATHER STEPHAN BROWN, SVD

The Reverend Stephan Brown, SVD was appointed pastor of St. Augustine Catholic Church in Memphis at the beginning of July. He was born in Cleveland, Ohio, and attended Divine Word College in Epworth, Iowa, which is the only Roman Catholic seminary college in the U.S. dedicated to preparing students for Catholic missionary service. After his ordination in 1993, he spent several years in the missionary field. He speaks several languages, including Spanish and Portuguese. He comes to the Catholic Diocese of Memphis from St. Petersburg, Fla., where he was pastor of St. Joseph Catholic Church. He is a member of the National Black Catholic Clergy Caucus.



FATHER THINH NGO, SVD

The Reverend Thinh Ngo, SVD serves as parochial vicar at Sacred Heart Catholic Church in Memphis, and was appointed to the position at the beginning of July. He was born and raised in Southern California. The youngest of five children, he attended seminary at Divine Word College in Epworth, Iowa. He received his master’s degree in divinity from Chicago Theological Union in 2020 and, while there, performed missionary work and apostolic ministry in Chile through an overseas training program. He was ordained to the priesthood in 2020. He served as vocations director for the order until his appointment to the Catholic Diocese of Memphis.