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Msgr. Ham to senior status; plans 10-week trip to Vietnam

By Jennifer Willems

OTTAWA -- For 32 of his 43 years as a priest, Msgr. Jerome Ham has called LaSalle County home and "just about everyone here knows me now." On June 15 he will take the many kindnesses of the people he has served and the hugs and smiles of the children with him as he begins a new phase of his ministry.

Msgr. Ham, pastor of St. Francis of Assisi Parish here since 2009, has been granted senior priest status by Bishop Daniel R. Jenky, CSC. Eventually he plans to move to Villa Park, where a Vietnamese pastor and friend has offered him a room in the rectory.

His first order of business, however, is to return to Vietnam to see to the needs of retired priests there.

"The priests work without a salary. They have to do it by themselves," Msgr. Ham told The Catholic Post.

"I have 10 priests in my former diocese who are retiring. I told the bishop I will come home," he said. "I have a little pension here and will share it with them."

He expects to leave on July 3 and be gone for about 10 weeks. Before he leaves, Msgr. Ham will be honored at a farewell party on Sunday, June 12, in the parish center at St. Francis of Assisi Church, 820 Sanger. It will start at noon and run until 2 p.m.

Everyone is welcome, he said.

STILL WORK TO DO

Providing assistance to the retired priests of the Diocese of Hue is the first of two projects Msgr. Ham has planned for his trip home. "For the second project, I want to ask people to help me cook soup for people in the hospital -- chicken soup, to take to the gate of the hospital for the patients and their families," he explained. "People will bring their own bowls."

Msgr. Ham said he didn't know if the government would allow him to provide this simple service for people, but his family has assured him that he would be able to do it.

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One of eight children born to Que and Dang T. (Bui) Nguyen, Msgr. Ham has four brothers and three sisters. His oldest and youngest sisters still live in Vietnam, while the rest of his siblings are in the United States.

He received encouragement from everyone -- his parents, the pastor of his home parish and the religious women who served there -- to consider a vocation to the priesthood. He entered the seminary when he was 14.

Msgr. Ham studied for the priesthood in his home diocese, but his class was moved temporarily to Danang and they completed their preparation there. He was ordained on June 13, 1968.

He taught high school for four years and then served as a military chaplain in South Vietnam for three years. Assigned to the front line, he became friends with an officer who looked out for him.

"Sometimes he said, 'Father, you have to stay in the bunker. I don't know what's going to happen tonight,'" Msgr. Ham recalled.

By 1975 the communists were gaining ground and Msgr. Ham knew it was time to leave. He came to the United States, going first to South Dakota for three years and then to central Illinois at the invitation of another Vietnamese priest who was a student at the University of Illinois in Urbana-Champaign.

Bishop Edward O'Rourke accepted him for service in the Diocese of Peoria on July 1, 1978, and Msgr. Ham received permission to minister here permanently on April 20, 1981.

He became an American citizen in 1982.

ENJOYS SERVING PEOPLE

Msgr. Ham was the parochial vicar at Sacred Heart in Moline (1978) and St. Joseph's in Marseilles (1979), and was named pastor at St. Mary's in Ottawa in 1982. He would move to Streator in 1994 and remain there for the next 11 years, serving as pastor or administrator of St. Anthony's, St. Casimir's and St. Stephen's at various times.

Msgr. Ham was named a prelate of honor with the title of monsignor in 2000 and a diocesan consultor in 2001.

He was sent to St. Francis of Assisi in Ottawa in 2009.

"I enjoy being with the people and enjoy serving the people -- saying Mass with them, visiting them in the hospital," Msgr. Ham, 71, told The Post. "I like being with the children. That's my favorite."

Now he has the joy of baptizing the babies of the children he baptized and whose marriages he witnessed.

"My motto is 'Holy, happy and healthy.' I'm always happy and very positive," said the priest. "I try not to let anyone control my life. People can point a finger at me, but I keep smiling. I won't let anyone destroy my life."

For support, Msgr. Ham turns to Psalm 23 and remembers, "The Lord is my shepherd." The Magnificat also provides comfort as he recalls, "The Lord is mighty."



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"That is very, very dear to me. I am nothing, but everything I have is because of (God)," he said. "I'm here because of God, not me."

And he has found that the people are good.

"Everywhere I've served, I've told them that -- they're so good," Msgr. Ham said. "They've been so good to me. I'm blessed. I'm so lucky."