

# The happy Redemptorist brother

---

 catholicnews.sg/index.php

Bernard Michael Heaney, who will be 80 this December, recently celebrated 60 years as a Redemptorist Brother. He came to Singapore in 1954, became a citizen in 1959 and has been serving here since.

By Joyce Gan

SOME WOULD SAY that Bernard Michael Heaney's encounter with the Redemptorists that eventually led him to join the order was accidental; others might say it was made in heaven. Whichever was the trigger, there are many people who are pleased that he saw, stayed and served. These would include his fraternity, and the thousands of Singaporeans whom he has served and touched since 1954 - Catholics and non-Catholics who attended services at Novena Church and all those people in need whom he visited regularly in homes and hospices - and, not least, himself.

"I feel very happy and full of gratitude to God who's given me 60 years," he beams. "I feel very fulfilled in my vocation as a Redemptorist. I have no regrets at all."

The journey to the Redemptorist order may be said to have begun for Bernard when his parents despatched him from his London home to Australia, when he was a little more than 10 years old, to escape the war in Europe.

At the Christian Brothers' boarding school in Perth where he studied and stayed during the World War II years, Bernard came in touch with the Redemptorists only on one occasion - when they asked for volunteers to help look after some guests at a retreat held in the monastery. But that first impression was good and it remained.


"I was inspired by how they worked - a happy and committed people, filled with love and kindness," he remembers. Bernard confided his interest in the order at a retreat some time later and the spiritual director gave him information on the life of St. Gerard Majella, a Redemptorist brother who served as sacristan, gardener, porter, infirmarian and tailor, and as a counsellor to communities of religious women.

After some years reflecting on his calling, Bernard was convinced that God wanted him to be a Redemptorist, but not to the priesthood. He joined them at age 18 in 1945 in Perth.

"I was simply inspired and trained to follow in the footsteps of St. Gerard, who has been my star and model for over 60 years, for his marvellous works. The Novice Master [had also] reminded us that we were all Redemptorists - with different ministries. We were taught that one could be involved in a variety of works.

"In short, I was happy to be who God called me to be." There are challenges to being a Redemptorist though.

(continued on page 2)

 *Right, Brother Bernard Michael Heaney (standing) celebrates his Diamond Jubilee as a Redemptorist Brother on Jul 2 at the Novena Church with his Redemptorist community, relatives from Long Beach, California, and London, and almost 500 guests including Archbishop Nicholas Chia.*

*In his homily, Redemptorist Father Paul Pang said that "60 years of selfless, generous service to Jesus and his people as a Redemptorist brother is a superhuman achievement".*

*"I am sure that 'Barney' (as Brother Bernard is called by his colleagues) is convinced that it is not by his human effort, not by a stoic stiff upper lip resolution that brought him to this day," commented Father Pang. "It is his faith in the plentiful love of Jesus and his Mother Mary that has sustained him to stay on course."*

Brother Bernard used to find community life the most challenging aspect of religious life because "one has to put up with all kinds of characters". But he has learnt that aside from maintaining a sense of humour and "a British stiff upper lip", it is most important to adopt "a faithful participation in the Eucharist and prayer life daily".

Another challenge he grappled with was the vow of obedience. "Because at times you are told to carry out certain tasks which are difficult to follow, or deep down you know is not the right thing to do," he explains.

"Nonetheless, free will is one of the most precious gifts God gives to each of us and one which I gave up for the love of God," he says to explain how he understands obedience - a surrender of his own will.

"Those are my secrets for surviving so long in religious life," he says. "Not many make it to 60 years!" he beams.

(continued on page 3)

During his years at the Novena Church, Brother Bernard mostly plays a supervisory role in administration of the day to day running of staff duties. He is also active with the Agape and Sowers, of which he was spiritual director for 30 years before he retired four years ago. Even so, he has not stopped working with any of these groups.

"I like social work... being involved in the lives of others. I fully enjoy that," he remarks. The Sowers is a 37- year-old group of volunteers which visits hospices and homes of people who are aged or who are physically and mentally handicapped.

Brother Bernard enjoys this weekly activity. "Every Sunday we go out to visit homes," he says. "We visit eight different homes and we've been doing this for the last 30 years." Then he becomes a bit reflective on realizing that he is not getting any younger, and is thankful to God for the good health that enables him to do this work.

As for work with Agape, which has for 40 years helped to maintain the Novena Church and to prepare the annual procession and Christmas celebrations, Brother Bernard, who is very devoted to Our Lady of Perpetual Help, says. "All these years I've worked at the church and the shrine for the annual procession. I never miss a session!"

Despite his semi-retired status, Brother Bernard begins his days with meditation and prayer. When will he really retire?

"There is no fixed time for retirement in religious life," he says. "In my case, only God will let me know in his time."