

From the Neal Catholic Community-TDCJ
Inmates Honor Retiring Priest
By Ricardo Cisneros

On August 20, twenty five inmates in a small chapel at the Neal Unit waited for the arrival of their old-time guest. The elderly gray-haired man patiently arrived, and he slowly entered the quiet chapel to a surprise standing ovation. "You all must know I'm leaving, that's why so many of you showed up," teased the expected visitor, with the clever humility that had come to characterize him as the charming priest—Father John Hickey.

The Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA) class held a "Thank you" celebration in honor of the retiring Catholic priest. Fr. John was well received by the Catholic community as Deacon Jessie Guerrero led him to the center of the celebration with Chaplain's Houska and Harper joining the group. Chaplain Houska, in a sentimental moment, presented Fr. John with a plaque honoring his loyalty and service. Tears rolled down the Chaplain's face as he expressed his loving appreciation for the man he had come to know simply as, "Father." Everyone looked on as the two old friends laughed and reminisced, exchanging stories and unspoken good-byes.

Toilet paper was quickly passed around as teary eyes filled the room. Then, one-by-one, the inmates stood up to share a parting thought and thank the aged priest who, over the years, had been their confessor; their teacher; their priest; and their brother in Christ. The inmates shared personal memories and stories of inspiration and love, flavored with Fr. John's witty personality as the room vacillated between sadness and laughter.

In the end, the beautiful song "Adios Amigo te Vas-Good-bye My Friend," sealed the event, and Fr. John gave the group his final blessing. He would appear again the following day to celebrate Holy Mass for the last time at the Neal Unit, before retiring down south. Fr. John served the Amarillo area for fourteen years as pastor of St. Theresa's at Panhandle, Holy Family in Nazareth, St. Martin in Amarillo and, for the past five and a half years, he supplemented his busy schedule by volunteering at RCIA classes and celebrating Holy Mass weekly at both Neal and Clements Unit.

The love of Jesus Christ led Fr. John to Prison Ministry, where he touched many souls, and the love of Christ continues to guide him wherever he goes. An old Navy seaman and retired school teacher, John Hickey is now a retired priest. As we bid a-dieu to this wonderful priest, we part with our Lord's consoling words, "well done, good and faithful servant!" (Matthew 25:21) ---- Well done, Fr. John!

09, 07, 09

Published in The ECHO
Texas Prison News