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Feature



Feb 1, 2025 | By Marissa Nichols

The Seed that Has Become a Tree

The San Jose Chinese Catholic Community Turns 40

"To celebrate the 40th anniversary is to celebrate the seed that has become a tree," Joseph Ku affirmed at the commemoration of the 40-year milestone achieved by the San Jose Chinese Catholic Mission (SJCCM). The day's events also recognized the recent merger of the Mandarin and Cantonese groups that now make up the community. A founding member himself, Joseph Ku clearly remembers the summer of 1983. He recalled, "We went to Bishop Pierre Dumaine's office, hoping he would agree to our establishing a Chinese Catholic group." They found a home at Saint Clare Parish in Santa Clara. Later, Bishop Patrick McGrath elevated the community to mission status in 2013.

The Effect of the Merger Within the Personal Parish

Father Carlos Olivera is an Argentinian priest, fluent in Mandarin, who has served the community since 2008. According to Father Olivera, the expanding community has only more growth to look forward to. "Given the large Chinese population worldwide, we can expect our population to keep increasing." The parish itself is what is known as a "personal parish," as Father explained: "Chinese Catholics from everywhere come to St. Clare, which has generously allowed us to worship in its church for 40 years." Clement Wong is one such parishioner who lives in Dublin but drives to Santa Clara for Mass. He shared, "I serve in my local parish too, but there is just something about this Chinese community that draws us like a magnet."

Wong likens worshipping at SJCCM to a homecoming. "Think about the moment when you are home and finally have a familiar meal. It is that feeling of being home. The SJCCM provides that home with fellow Chinese sisters and brothers who share the same faith." Today the community has Mass in Mandarin, Cantonese, and in English because the children of the founders are now raising their own families. Parishioner Joanne Chao reflected on this. "It is humbling to recognize that I am now considered an 'elder' and it is weird that the kids of the kids I grew up with here are calling me 'teacher Joanne.'...I grew up within the walls of this church and went to weekly CM [catechetical ministry] where I served at the altar and played piano. We also performed Christmas shows on the same parish hall stage next door."

Testimonies like Clement's and Joanne's corroborate Joseph Ku's observations about the next generation. "Now that they have grown up, their young families have taken the baton and are continuing the mission." Father Olivera spoke positively about the changes he has witnessed over time. "As a priest, I have been with this community for almost 15 years. I know almost all the families and their stories. The 40th anniversary celebration was the joy of so many good fruits." He credits the merger with strengthening the larger community.

Committed to Evangelizing the Greater Chinese Community in Silicon Valley

The joining of the Mandarin and Cantonese groups reflects Greater Bay Area demographic shifts and trends within the Church, where alliances between ethnic groups and parishes are structurally vital to accommodating the Church's mission. For Joseph Ku, this means more opportunities for local evangelization. "The Cantonese community joining us symbolizes a new beginning of bringing the Good News of Christ and the Church to other Chinese living in Santa Clara County." Father Olivera explained that the key to reaching the Bay Area Chinese population is language. "Chinese people deeply cherish their own culture, and even many American-born Chinese strive to preserve their heritage. For this reason, it is crucial for them to have a church where they can find Chinese signage, Chinese prayer books in the pews, and a website available in both Chinese and English." These elements assure prospective parishioners that they can continue their faith traditions within the community.

Current Multigenerational Needs

As SJCCM continues to grow, it also faces new challenges. Father Olivera explained, "Right now we only have two part-time administrative assistants." But his words also carry a message of hope and confidence in the community's resilience. He looks forward to the diocesan pastoral plan considering the needs of growing groups like the SJCCM and working to support its growth in its commitment to structural renewal. Parish members remain hopeful for the future, reassured by the providence of the Holy Spirit at work in their community from the start.

The Hand of the Holy Spirit

"Despite all the challenges we have faced, we still have strong confidence in God as we recall those 40 years under His care," declared Joseph Ku in his 40th anniversary speech. Joseph Ku grew up Catholic in Taiwan and came to the US in 1977 to pursue a graduate degree. He remembers how in 1981 he moved down to Silicon Valley to work and raise a family and that for him, this meant maintaining his Catholic faith. "Early on I was inspired by the late Fr. Ed Malatesta and the late Fr. James Thornton. They loved Chinese culture and Chinese people and encouraged us to form our community." Joseph Ku recalled that the Chinese Mission began with just ten families, and he credits Providence with its growth.

Another instance of the hand of the Holy Spirit may be seen in how the community acquired its current pastor. Father Olivera was providentially appointed after a chance meeting with current Saint Clare pastor Monsignor Cilia while visiting Rome in 2008. The timing could not have been more perfect: Monsignor Cilia was searching for a successor for Father Matthew Koo, the previous chaplain of the SJCCM, who had just retired. Prior to their meeting, Father Olivera was formerly part of a religious order who sent him to Taiwan for 12 years.

The Seed has Become a Tree

It is easy to recognize how the metaphor of the seed becoming a tree is aptly applied to the Chinese community. It began with the faith of those who met with Bishop Dumaine in the summer of 1983 and continues today. As Joanne Chao observed, "I attend the Sunday English Mass, and pews are full of young families and babies. The mustard seed has indeed grown!" SJCCM, in other words, is where the next generation is already learning, praying, and creating fellowship with other Chinese Catholics while seeking with hope to evangelize all local Chinese. Clement Wong linked this to the Eucharistic celebration. "As we share in the Eucharist, the real presence of Jesus, let us seek to help further the mission of this combined community as well as supporting our mission together with the diocese and our Mother Church."



Joseph Ku, a retiree, has worked at the Hewlett Packard Lab and semiconductor companies in Silicon Valley. He volunteers in the San Jose Chinese Catholic Community in various capacities and with the American Cancer Society. He enjoys leading bible study, cooking, and playing with his grandchildren.

Fr. Carlos Olivera is an Argentinian priest who ministered in Taiwan for 12 years and came to serve the Chinese Community of this Diocese in 2008. He is in residence at St. Joseph Cupertino.

Clement Wong is currently the chairperson of the finance team of the Cantonese community during this transition time.

Joanne Chao is an organizational change manager at Intuit. She has been a youth catechist at SJCCM for over ten years and is also active at her local parish, St. Simon's. She enjoys listening to different podcasts and experimenting with new recipes and eagerly anticipates the adventures of empty nesting next year.

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