Small parish with ‘big heart’ turns 100

Onetime beacon of Italian community, Our Lady of Mount Virgin also shines for Laotian, Chinese Catholics

SEATTLE
BY TERRY MCGUIRE

In his 1991 history of the parish, Jesuit Father Jack Morris wrote of how Our Lady of Mount Virgin Church became “the very heart of the Italian Community in Seattle” when the parish was established in the second decade of the 1900s:

“It shone like a beacon for all the Italians, including those who had dropped out from the faith,” Father Morris wrote.

Today, in the second decade of another century, the iconic hillside church in Southeast Seattle’s Mount Baker district remains a beacon to immigrants, this time to Catholics from Laos, China, Hong Kong and Taiwan.

Hymns and homilies at the three Sunday Masses are delivered in English, Chinese or Laotian, in dialects from Cantonese and Mandarin to Hmong, Kmhmu and Lao. And while Father Clarence Jones celebrates all the liturgies in English, he recites responses such as the sign of the cross and “body of Christ” in the appropriate language.

“The strength of the parish really is in the cultural diversity,” said Father Jones, parochial vicar since 2005. “We’ve learned from Vatican II of the importance of being able to worship in your own language and in your own cultural style and tradition, so that’s what they’re doing [here],” he said.

He added that Deacon Josa Pao Yang of the Laotian community and Deacon Joseph Yuen of the Chinese community are “a big help to me. We take turns with the homily.”

The parish of approximately 200 households is celebrating its centennial on Sunday, Aug. 14.

One parish, three communities

Having three distinct groups — Anglo, Laotian and Chinese — in such a small parish can be challenging, Father Jones said. While it’s important to preserve their cultures, it’s also important “to get these three different communities to think of themselves as a parish,” he said. Community Masses at Christmas and Easter bring the different groups together, and representatives from the various communities serve on the parish council.

Still, concepts such as stewardship have been a challenge in communities where it’s not culturally ingrained, said Charlene Collora, the parish’s pastoral coordinator.

Collora, who has been on the parish staff for 20 years, agrees that Mount Virgin’s diversity is its biggest strength. She looks forward to seeing the church’s recently completed retaining wall covered with tiles as part of an anniversary-year fundraiser. The tiles will bear the names of parish families old and new, “reflecting the whole diversity of this parish,” she said.

Carmela Faccone, a lifelong parishioner of Italian descent, has witnessed the changing face of the parish firsthand, and she’s fine with it. Diversity “is nice, because we learn from each other,” she said. The parish is “totally different” from before, “but it’s good. Change is good.”

One constant over the decades has been the presence of the Jesuits. All but four of Our Lady of Mount Virgin’s 19 parish leaders have been Jesuit priests. As Father Morris wrote in his history: “Always missionaries, the Jesuits came first to serve the Indians, never realizing that they would soon be shepherds of Italian National Parishes (no boundaries) up and down the West Coast.”

Prosperity and decline

Jesuit Father DeRop was the founding pastor. He celebrated the first Mass for the local Italian community in the old St. Boniface Church on Sept. 10, 1911, according to Father Morris’ history. But it was his successor, Jesuit Father Lodovico Caramello, who is remembered today. Arriving in late 1913 at age 44, he was pastor up to his death 35 years later. Handsome, confident and totally committed to his parishioners, he was credited with molding diverse groups of Italian immigrants from various parts of Italy into a unified parish community.

Lifelong parishioner Faccone was a student in the parish school when Father Caramello would make his weekly visits to teach Italian to students in the upper grades, regardless of their ethnicity. He was a “very personable, very outgoing” man, she said last week. “I can remember his laugh: He’d laugh, and you just had to laugh with him,” even if you couldn’t understand him at times.

Notable parishioners over the years include two-term Washington Gov. Albert Rosellini, who was married in the parish and raised his family there. Our Lady of Mount Virgin has produced several women religious and at least one priest: Jesuit Father Carmine Sacco, pastor of St. Rita of Cascia Parish in Tacoma.

According to a history by former pastor Jesuit Father Pasquale Spoletini, the parish was named after the shrine of Montevergine (short for Mary ever virgin) on a mountain top outside of Naples, Italy.

The Seattle parish and its Italian namesake have both survived earthquakes that damaged their churches. And they’ve experienced periods of prosperity and decline. In its first two years, Our Lady of Mount Virgin had 199 baptisms, according to Father Morris’ history — a number equal to the parish households today.

In 1940 and again in the 1990s, parish families were displaced by construction of the Mount Baker tunnel, the last leg of Interstate 90, which lies adjacent to the church. The closure of the parish school in 1978 was another setback. Founded in 1911 by the Ursuline Sisters, it was closed in 2001.

The familiar statue inside the church includes this angel-holding-candle statue. There are four such angel-laden light fixtures above the altar. One fell and was badly damaged in the 2001 Nisqually earthquake, but was rebuilt by a parishioner.

The parish received a new population in the early 1980s when refugees

PARISH PROFILE

Our Lady of Mount Virgin Parish, Seattle

Founded: 1911
Households: 200
Address: 2800 S. Massachusetts St.
Phone: 206-324-8521

PASTORS:

Father DeRop, SJ, 1911
Father Lodovico Caramello, SJ, 1913
Father Arthur Wharton, SJ, 1948
Father Gerald Evoy, SJ, 1949
Father Louis Geis, SJ, 1956
Father Arthur Wharton, SJ, 1958
Father John Felice, SJ, 1959
Father Charles Regier, SJ, 1960
Father Harold Free, SJ, 1968
Father John Hanses, SJ, 1971
Father Michael Walsh, SJ, 1973
Father John Morse, SJ, 1979
Father Jerry McCloskey, 1980
Father Thomas O’Callaghan, 1982
Father John Morris, SJ, 1990
Father Pasquale Spoletini, SJ, 1993*
Father Roger Blanchette, SJ, 2002*
Father James Elliott, 2004*
Father Clarence Jones, 2005* (*parochial vicar)
PARISH PROFILE: Doors ‘always open’ to needs

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from the CIA’s so-called “Secret War” in Laos began arriving in Seattle. Deacon Yang, a Hmong refugee who fled the communist regime in 1975, was later appointed by Archbishop Raymond G. Hunthausen to work full time with the community, which now numbers about 76 families, some of whom come from as far away as Olympia and Mount Vernon to attend Mass.

“Each community really benefits the whole community at Mount Virgin,” Deacon Yang said last week.

When the refugees arrived in Seattle they settled in the Mount Baker Apartments about a half-mile from the church. The Tacoma Dominicans responded to their many needs, with Sister Michele MacMillan leading the ministry.

The Chinese Catholic Community was formally established in 1982 with the appointment of Msgr. John Chi as chaplain. Known for its emphasis on evangelization, the community numbers approximately 100 people today, Deacon Yuen said.

Seattle’s Native American community also has ties to the hillside church. It celebrated weekly Mass there until the new Chief Seattle Club opened several years ago in downtown Seattle. It continues to celebrate weddings, funerals and baptisms at the church.

Jesuit Father Patrick Twohy, chaplain to the Native Americans and also a parochial vicar at the parish, considers Our Lady of Mount “a very humble parish with a very big heart.”

Its “doors are always open, and money isn’t the big consideration,” Father Twohy said. “[Instead] it’s: ‘If you have a need, we’ll try to make it work for you.’”

Father Clarence Jones, with Deacon Joua Pao Yang, celebrates the Sunday 9:30 a.m. Mass with songs and readings in Laotian.

Deacon Joseph Yuen stands at the pulpit during a Chinese New Year Mass last year.

A parish baseball team, circa 1964. Our Lady of Mount Virgin teams dominated in boys’ and girls’ baseball for years. Recalls lifelong parishioner Joe Faccone, who both played on and coached some of the teams: “That was a big sport for us because of the notoriety of the Italian ballplayers at the time [Joe] DiMaggio and [Phil] Rizzuto and [Frankie] Crosetti and all those guys, and it kind of rubbed off on us.”