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In Chinatown, a Church Speaks in Several Languages, but With One Strong Voice



Damon Winter/The New York Times

A man from Fujian Province prepared for confession at Transfiguration Church in Chinatown. Two of the church's Christmas Eve Masses were geared to Chinese immigrants.

By [JENNIFER 8. LEE](#)

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At the church, pots of red and white poinsettias were carefully arranged for midnight Mass. With the funeral service for an 82-year-old Irish-American parishioner completed in the morning, the Italian-American priest spent part of his afternoon on Monday reviewing his homily, to be delivered in Cantonese and English. A sign announcing a Christmas Eve vigil for Fujianese immigrants was taped to the window.

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Damon Winter/The New York Times

Sister Emmanuel Shen posting a notice at Transfiguration Church, which celebrates Masses in three languages.

The preparations to celebrate Christmas at the two-century-old Church of the Transfiguration in Chinatown, like the history of the church itself, were multilayered, reflecting the nimble adaptation of a church once dominated by Irish and Italian immigrants that now claims the largest Chinese Roman Catholic congregation in the United States.

The English-language Mass, scheduled in part for the Italian-Americans, was said early, at 6 p.m., because those parishioners are now old enough that their children have long since grown up and moved away to Long Island or

Staten Island. They do not like to stay out too late.

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The Mass in Cantonese, which still prevails on the stretch of Mott Street where the church stands, was said at 8 p.m. And at 9:30 p.m., immigrants from the southern Chinese province of Fujian, holding Catholic prayer books printed secretly in China away from the watchful eyes of the government, gathered for their vigil to await the midnight Mass, to be said in Mandarin and English.

The vigil reflects the tradition of their worship back in China, where they would often gather, furtively and without priests, in parishioners' homes. Catholicism in Communist China has historically been split between the state-sanctioned organization and the [Vatican](#)-based church.

With practices passed down from the Dominican order of Catholic missionaries, who achieved significant influence in Fujian in the 17th century, the Fujianese style of worship is more isolated from the changes wrought by the Second Vatican Council in the early 1960s.

Even as many Catholic churches and schools in other parts of the city have been shuttered in recent years because of dwindling membership, Transfiguration Church has continued to evolve and flourish. The church baptizes more than three dozen adults, almost all Chinese, each Easter. It celebrates Masses in three languages, drawing 800 to 900 people each Sunday. Its school's kindergarten class has a waiting list 150 names long.

"We're bursting at the seams here," said the Rev. Raymond Nobiletti, a Brooklyn-born Italian-American who worked in Hong Kong for 15 years and speaks fluent Cantonese. When he first joined Transfiguration in 1991, at the request of Cardinal John J. O'Connor, Cantonese was enough to accommodate the Chinese parishioners. Since then, he has been joined by the Rev. Joseph Lin, a priest originally from Fujian Province, who can take confession in four languages.

For the midnight Mass, Father Lin recruited two extra priests to hear the confessions of long lines of Fujianese Catholics, whose worship includes making the sacrament regularly.

"Now we like to teach them not to do it so often, because it is a burden for us," Father Lin said.

Located just down the street from the once-infamous Five Points, now reduced by development to only three and a half points, Transfiguration Church was built in 1801 with the same stone that was used to build St. Paul's Church on Broadway. It was used by Dutch Lutherans; as Manhattan became less Dutch and more English, it evolved to serve an Episcopal congregation. The Roman Catholic Church bought the building in 1853 to serve a parish created by a Cuban exile, the Rev. Félix Varela, who directed his services to poor Irish immigrants.

As the Irish assimilated, the pews came to be filled by Italians instead. "The real steppingstone came when the Chinese came, because the church could have died," said Father Nobiletti. The Irish and Italian immigrants came from a Catholic heritage; many of the Chinese did not. "We had to move and get out and get them."

So the church worked on services for immigrants, including English language classes, and expanded offerings for families with young children. Like many other religious institutions, the church has continued to serve as a bridge between government and immigrants. When the Golden Venture ran aground in Queens in 1993, bringing nearly 300 desperate Chinese immigrants to the shore, the Police Department asked the church if it had any Fujianese speakers.

And the earlier generations of Chinese immigrants, mostly Cantonese, have themselves begun to assimilate, moving out of Chinatown into the suburbs. Wing Fong, 54, was married at Transfiguration and his three children were baptized there. Though he now lives in Cream Ridge, N.J., he brought his family back to the church on Monday for the 6 p.m. Mass. "You have a constant flow of incoming and leaving," said Mr. Fong, observing

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the changes in the church.

At the 6 p.m. Mass, Father Nobiletti recited the names of Jesus' ancestors, including Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and David. Looking out onto the congregation, he said, "We are all part of this genealogy."

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