

Chinese New Year and the Fresno Connection



February 18th is the beginning of the Year of the Pig, a succulent and delicious year, one hopes. As the worldwide Chinese celebration bemuses and enthralls all of us with its color, ceremony and fun, the Sisters of the Holy Family look back fondly on their ministry among the Chinese people of Fresno, a ministry that began only a few years after their 1927 arrival in the beautiful San Joaquin Valley.

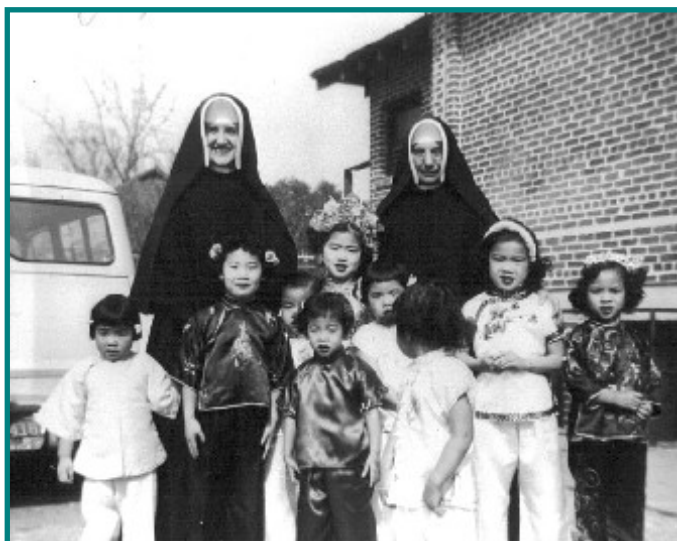
The Valley, so rich in soil and produce, criss-crossed by a network of train tracks, saw the first Chinese arrive in the late 1800s as laborers for the railroad or for the digging of the countless irrigation canals and harvesting of crops on the Central Valley's farms. They stayed, brought their families when they could, and began planting vegetable gardens of their own. Laying west of the Southern Pacific railroad tracks, the parish of St. Alphonsus, staffed by the Redemptorist fathers, covered work among the Chinese of Fresno from 1908 onward. However, it was not until the depression years of 1933-34 that missionary activity among the Asians began in earnest. It began, as most great works do, because of the suffering and need of the people.

Many aged individuals and poverty stricken families among the Chinese were in great need at that time. The Chinese Six Companies and business people met to discuss what could be done and Mrs. Allen Mar, baptized as a child in San Francisco's Chinatown, offered to speak to Father James Dowling, the Director of the Catholic Charities Office of the Diocese of Monterey-Fresno. She



The Sisters conducting singing during religion class.

did so and Father, visiting Chinatown twice a week with food, blankets and clothing for the people, then turned to Bishop Philip G. Scher, asking to establish a mission for the Chinese. There was no money to be had, but there was a telephone in his house. The Bishop picked it up and called the Sisters of the Holy Family. The Sisters' enthusiastic response and \$25 to rent a storefront in which to house the Center was the beginning of a wonderful ministry that flourished. The church of [St. Genevieve in Fresno](#), built with the help of the Extension Society, carries on the work of that first mission and that of the Sisters who served there until the 1970s. The following are the words of Thomas Young, one of those growing up in the gentle embrace of St. Genevieve's parish.



"I remembered the late Sister Stephanie (Sister Sephanie Gerrie) and the Sisters who worked with her at St. Genevieve's Church in the 1950s and early 60s. Looking back, I can recall the sisters introducing the word of God to young gifted children. The children, who were nearly always of Chinese descent, were considered gifted in the Sisters' eyes because

[Sr. Stephanie](#), right and [Sr. Josepha](#), left with some of the children from St. Genevieve's in the 1950's

they were beheld as just a few of God's many gifts for the Sisters to look after in this world. Because of this visualization, the Sisters undertook the task with great zeal. Not once did I ever hear them or see them complain about their tedious and low-paying work. Instead, each and every new boy or girl who happened to enter their doors were welcomed with joy, much like parents rejoicing at a newborn baby into the family. During their stay at St. Genevieve's Church, the Sisters of the Holy Family sought out mainly those children who had working parents that were unable to devote their entire time to their children. In addition to these children, they also took in those who were deprived of companionship, toys and most of all, the word of God. ...Thus, because of the work of the late Sister Stephanie and her fellow Sisters at St. Genevieve's, a sturdy foundation was set in place for the young people under their guidance. Consequently, many of these same young people were able to lead future rich lives; lives that were not necessarily rich in gold, but rich in the teaching, wisdom and spirit of the Sisters and that of our Lord. Thank you, Sisters of the Holy Family, for your unselfish years of service to the community of St. Genevieve's Church."

Because she was there for so many years, Sister Josepha (Sister Josepha Baumann) also has wonderful memories of her time at St. Genevieve's among the smallest of the Chinese community, and their parents. At Chinese New Year, Sister Josepha, in honor of the feast and her years of delight among the people, presents everyone she meets during the week of festivities with red "lucky envelopes." Each contains at least one bright penny symbolizing the rich blessings she wishes for everyone at the New Year.

And so, to everyone who reads the story above, the Sisters of the Holy Family wish a hearty "Gung Hay Fat Choy!" May the joy and excitement of the Chinese celebration invest your own observance beginning the Year of the Pig with fun and many blessings for you and all of God's children everywhere.

SHF ministry with the Chinese: Photo Album



The Kinder-band rings in the New Year in style at the store-front center



Celebrations Abound



**First Communion
and Confirmation**



**The Easter
Parade**

**and Christmas
tableau**

