

Father Joseph Zhang remembers his mother telling him when he was quite small, “Today is Ash Wednesday and we have to fast.”

When he asked her what “to fast” meant, she told him there would be no meals in the house that day.

“We were so poor there wasn’t ever much food in the house, but I wanted to know why this particular day,” he said. His mother told him “If you fast, you will go to heaven when you die.”

This sounded like such a great idea to the little boy that he went out, found his best friend and said they should fast together so that they would go to heaven together. When his mother overheard, she was horrified. She told him to be quiet. He wasn’t allowed to tell anyone he was fasting.

He couldn’t tell anyone he was Catholic. This was China in about 1984 and the church was not “open.”

Today, Father Zhang is 36 years old and stationed at St. Anne and St. Patrick Church in

Fiskdale, Mass., half a world away from the home of his youth. One of his parishioners at St. Anne and St. Patrick is Darleen Farland, a religion teacher at Cathedral High School. Farland invited Father Zhang to come to Cathedral on March 4 because she thought his visit would be a “nice complement to our Lunar New Year celebration,” she said, “It also provided an opportunity for our Chinese international students to ask questions about and explore our Catholic faith traditions.”

Father Zhang gave two talks. The first one on religion and Catholicism had an audience evenly divided between Chinese and American students. Father Zhang spoke twice on every point, once in English and then again in Chinese.

The second talk, given to Farland’s junior religion class, was personal, about his life and his road to the priesthood. The class began with several Chinese students and Father Zhang saying the Our Father in Chinese, one line at a time, and pausing so the rest of the class could repeat it.



After the prayer, he told the students that when he was in high school, he studied very hard and he ranked fifth out of the 2,000 students in his school. And then he failed his final examinations.

In China you get one chance, he explained. He said he didn’t know what to do with his life, so he locked himself in his house for two months.

At the end of two months, he said, “It entered my mind that I wanted to be a priest.” By now Catholics were allowed to worship more openly, so he wrote to the bishop and in two weeks he had a three-line response: “It’s good to have a dream. Bring your mother and father. Come and see.”

So he went. It was the first time he had ridden a bus, he noted. It was a long trip and he said he was motion sick the whole way. He was so sick, in fact, that he resolved he was “never, ever leaving that place” and, on Sept. 1, 1995, at age 15, he entered the seminary.

Father Zhang was ordained a priest for the diocese of Yanzhou at age 25 and sent to the south of China as a teacher. After only half a year, he was elected superior. Additionally, he was put in charge of four parishes, for which he formed a youth group, conducted a music group and taught religious education classes. This lasted until he became extremely ill from exhaustion, ended up in the hospital and took a year to recover.

During his recovery, a priest told him that he really should go to the Philippines to learn English. Father Zhang said he didn’t think this was a good idea, but after being given a full scholarship, he went to the Philippines.

Stepping off the plane, Father Zhang said he could only say three things in English: “I don’t know,” “I’m sorry,” and “thank you.” For a while, and beginning with the immigration officer, he had to decide which of these phrases would best answer the questions he thought he was being asked.

While he was in the Philippines, Father Zhang met an Assumptionist priest and felt drawn to their spirituality. Eventually he was released from his vows as a diocesan priest and took vows as an Assumptionist.

It was becoming an Assumptionist that brought Father Zhang to Fiskdale. When his superior first asked him if he would like to come to the U.S., he said “No, not at all. Life is too fast there.” His superior sent him on a three-week visit anyway.

Father Zhang spent the first week at Assumption College in Worcester, combatting jet lag and 13 time zones, sleeping during the day and being awake at night. Then he went on to St. Anne and St. Patrick Parish in Fiskdale for the rest of his visit.

When he returned to the Philippines, his superior asked him “Do you want to go back?” and Father Zhang said no: “I don’t understand anything they are talking about.”

In May 2013, shortly after that conversation, Father Joseph Zhang found himself on a two-year mission trip back to Fiskdale, at St. Anne and St. Patrick’s.

He said his joy here in Massachusetts is in visiting the sick and the elderly. He told the students that it is hard to speak clear English so that the older people can understand him, but he is drawn to them and loves taking care of them, bringing them Communion, hearing their confessions and anointing them.



He told the students that now he loves his life here very much, so much so that two months ago when his provincial superior asked him if he would go to Canada or France to learn French, Father Zhang replied, “I am not going to learn another language in all my life.” His superior told him it was all right. He could stay in Fiskdale for another three years.

Father Zhang told the students that he gives thanks to God all the time for having this journey with him. “To believe in God is so important,” he said. “To walk with him means to give up something, but then to pick up something. For example, to share Jesus’ love with someone.”

Students responded with enthusiasm to Father Zhang’s presentation.

“I thought his journey in life was incredible,” said Cole Foster. Justin Le said he was amazed at hearing the story of Father Zhang’s silent retreat and how “he had to go three days without talking or eating.”

Anne Daly said it was “interesting to see how he grew up and how his Catholic faith developed.” Omar Habboub and John Leonard used almost identical language in saying that he was “a great guy with great stories.”

Theresa Henle, after hearing Father Joseph’s stories, said, “I admire his ability to find joy in everything he does.”

Story and photos by Elizabeth Newman, alumni director at Cathedral High School
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