

The Shepherd's Café Celebrates 5 Years of Tending the Flock in the Metroplex

Come share the excitement April 28 at Mary Immaculate Church in Farmers Branch!

One Saturday a month, once the sun has gone down on Farmers Branch, The Shepherd's Café opens its doors for business at Mary Immaculate Catholic Church. It's not selling the electronic phones or mp3 players that are so popular these days. What it offers is far more interactive than any video game or web application. Young adults, youth and young families line both sides of the church, waiting for their turn to be served. The product? Grace, healing and forgiveness.



Café begins with Adoration - always keeping Christ at the center of everything (Mary Immaculate 2012)

That's when the café is fortunate enough to have two priests hearing Confession during Holy Hour. The line reforms when the party moves next door to the live entertainment portion of the night, where the Sacrament of Reconciliation is offered again during the rest of the evening, pending the grateful presence of a priest or two.

"There's just a hunger to be fed spiritually," said Debbie Russell, who has been one of The Shepherd's Café's staff members since the café debut on April 28, 2007.

Debbie, a third order Dominican and St. Luke's parishioner, currently serves as sacristan during Adoration. She's been witness to the highs and lows during the five years of the café's existence and has a theory on what makes it such a special place to be on a Saturday night.

"Although the café, entertainment, people and fellowship were beautiful to see, I was really drawn to the Holy Hour," Debbie said. "For me, that time present with our Lord at the beginning of the night seems to hold it together. It's the center of everything, and everything good that comes from the café revolves around that sense that Jesus is present with us in a real way."

This month's café will be one that people won't want to miss, as The Shepherd's Café celebrates its 5th anniversary on Saturday, April 28 from 7:00-10:30 p.m. with the usual Adoration of our Lord in the main church, then surprise musical guests across the courtyard in the Parish Hall, which thanks to the generosity of Mary Immaculate, has been enhanced with a new sound system and stage lighting.

Finding a Niche

The café wasn't always so blessed with such support.

"In the beginning, it was challenging finding a parish that would open its doors to us, since the café was new. It was the same way with finding musicians who would come and perform, too," said Yong Oh, The Shepherd's Café Founder.

One of Yong's main supporters was fellow Catholic Matt Gill, who was Founder of the thriving ministry Remnant Apostolate at the time. Matt has since moved to New Mexico and is the Founder of LinktoLiturgy.com, a ministry devoted to providing fast, free and faithful resources for Catholics to evangelize in the new era.

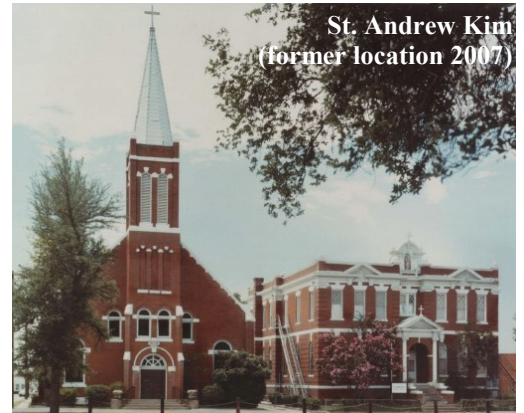


Joe Keating, Dennis Kang, Matt Gill
(St. Andrew Kim 2007)

Back in 2007, Matt recruited several members of Remnant to be the first staff for The Shepherd's Café debut. He even furnished the music, sound system and other artists who performed that night.

“Our whole thing was to create Catholic culture, and that was what The Shepherd's Café was about,” Matt explained about his enthusiasm to support the café as much as he could. “Also, I knew if Yong was going to do something, she was going to do it right.”

The first café was held at St. Andrew Kim Korean Catholic Church, where Yong served as a volunteer high school youth minister, and was deemed a success. Soon after, however, St. Andrew Kim moved to a new location due to its growing community.



A new host home would be hard to come by. Yong would have to make a decision before the year ended.

Westward Move

After not finding any open doors in the Diocese of Dallas, Yong received a gracious invitation from Fr. Jim Gigliotti, T.O.R. at St. Maria Goretti in Arlington to use their brand new parish hall. So, the café made the move to the Diocese of Ft. Worth in January 2008.

Despite having a new host home, there were still kinks to iron out.

“Not having a location that had a full sound system for our live performers was really a challenge,” Yong explained. “We had to scramble for microphones, a mixer, stands, and speakers here and there or borrow from people. Sometimes it wasn't even the same people.”

Another challenge was that there was no permanent storage for the café's supplies, which meant all the coffee, tea, coffee urns, lamps used for stage lights, coffee condiments, pastry platters, napkins, cups, signage, blenders, pitchers, igloos, microphone stands and other various supplies filled half of Yong's one bedroom apartment for two years.

“Trying to fit everything in my car and using every possible space to haul these things to and from the café was like playing a live Tetris video game,” Yong remembers. “It would take me five trips to go up and five to come down in the morning, and when I got home after being on my feet all day, I would have to make the five trips up and down again”



St. Maria Goretti had perks other than the brand new hall. A new friendship soon developed between members of the Immaculata Fraternity of the Secular Franciscan group and The Shepherd's Café staff. On numerous occasions, they arrived early with the staff to help set up tables and chairs, prepare the church for Adoration, as well as stayed until the end to help pack up, clean, and lock up the hall. Some of the members would still be frequent faces among the café crowd when it moved to Mary Immaculate later.

The café's first live broadcast on Guadalupe Radio Network, being entertained by the house band and receiving a special visit from Ft. Worth Bishop Kevin Vann made for many fond memories from the café's time at St. Maria Goretti.

Rough Waters

Even though the café was attracting a regular crowd every month with pastries and coffee, providing exposure to local Catholic artists and offering Confession to café attendees, Yong began losing hope that the ministry would survive past 2009.

“We were always in the red,” Yong said. “Supply expenses alone are \$200-\$300 a month. As we grew, our expenses grew as well. On average, we were lucky if we got \$300 for the night. I’d been funding the ministry for the most part, so it was taking a toll.”

That spring of 2009, Yong decided she would continue the ministry until the end of the year, and if something didn’t happen to change before then, she would make the difficult decision to end The Shepherd’s Café.



Music in Adoration led by Fr. Louis, Br. John-Mary, Br. Francesco and The Shepherd’s Café’s choir (Mary Immaculate 2010)

It just so happened that a new round of Franciscan Friars of the Renewal, who had been supportive of the café since its debut, were assigned to Sacred Heart of Jesus Friary in Ft. Worth. One of them was Br. John-Mary Johannssen, CFR.

“Bro. John-Mary saw that I was struggling with where the ministry was. He didn’t even know me, but he encouraged me to keep going, to persevere because it was something good we were doing. He reminded me to look at the fruits that were coming from the ministry, not just the obstacles that needed to be overcome.” Yong said. “Then a month later, Fr. Louis Leonelli, CFR came, and he was 100 percent in support of this ministry. He was so encouraging and helped streamline some of

our efforts which lessened our struggles as well as helped remove some of our obstacles. I knew then that it was something that God wanted me to continue. So, to give up was like me telling God, ‘no.’”

Catching Fire

A new turn in the café’s evolution came in the form of Mary Immaculate Pastor Fr. Michael Forge in the fall of 2009, when he offered Yong the opportunity to come back to the Diocese of Dallas.

“It was a complete surprise. It wasn’t something I was seeking out.” Yong explained. “I took it as another confirmation that God wanted this ministry to continue.” After meeting with Fr. Michael and visiting Mary Immaculate, Yong knew the Lord had opened another door. The café once again packed up and made the move to Farmers Branch in January 2010 and has been settled there since then.

“It was amazing. When I stopped trying to do ‘everything’ and began placing God first by getting out the way, God had more room to work with the café. Doors began opening up!” Yong said.

Fr. Michael was initially skeptical because the ministry was not that well known, but he had faith in Yong’s vision and saw the benefits that could come from having The Shepherd’s Café as a fixture of Mary Immaculate. “There is a real need for this type of young adult fellowship in our Diocese,” Fr. Michael said.

A new sound system, larger facilities, stage lights and a permanent storage cabinet have helped the café boom since the move. The crowds have reached 100 to 300, while still retaining the charm of a coffee house setting and attracted established and up and coming musicians to perform a variety of styles, including salsa, beat boxing, rock and contemporary Christian music.

“Somewhere along the way, it just caught fire,” Yong enthused.



And that fire continues to spread as young adults converge to Mary Immaculate.

“DFW is very spread out,” Matt Gill said. “You have all these young adults going to different parishes. It’s good to have a hub where you see some of the same people every month.”

Matt stressed the importance of building community and developing relationships, and now that the café is more centralized, The Shepherd’s Café has a better capacity to be a vehicle to that goal.

Five Years and Counting...

The café comes full circle this month when Jason Spoolstra, an original Remnant member and performer from the café’s 2007 debut, will be the MC for the special celebration. Jason has played with fellow former Remnant members in the band The Other Foot in 2009 at St. Maria Goretti. Jason is also a co-writer for Matt Gill’s LinktoLiturgy.com evangelization material.

Yong is hoping for a large crowd for the Saturday, April 28 exciting event. With spring blooming in Texas, The Shepherd’s Café staff member Debbie sees a bloom and changing of season with the café as well.

“It’s like it’s in the air. You want to be a part of it,” Debbie said. “It keeps growing and getting stronger.”

Branching Out

From the beginning, The Shepherd’s Café’s three missions have always been to create Catholic culture, promote vocations and support social justice efforts within the Church. It’s just that some of those goals have been developed and achieved at different paces.

Religious regularly attend to answer questions from the young adults and enjoy the pastries, coffee and live entertainment. There is also a special table stocked with information on religious communities and orders around the country.

“We are really blessed to have them present so that laity can witness the joy of priesthood and religious life being lived out. Hopefully, we’re planting seeds that have yet to bloom,” Yong said.

As part of the social justice mission, in 2010 Yong established Mission Coffee as a sub-ministry of The Shepherd’s Café to raise funds for the impoverished coffee farmers in Honduras and Nicaragua by buying their coffee for the café and selling it, so that part of the proceeds go to the farmers. Yong has made several trips to Central America. This summer, some of the café staff will embark on the first Shepherd’s Café mission trip to Honduras and Nicaragua.

“I’m in awe with what the Lord has done over the years. He has been so good and faithful to this ministry. There’s a lot coming up in 2012,” Yong said. “I feel like big things are just starting to happen. I can’t wait to see where we’ll be in another five years, God’s will be done!”



Fr. Maximilliano
(Honduras 2011)