

2020 Daily Scholarship Essay

Awardee Madison Mok, graduate of Oaks Christian High School, will attend Williams College in Massachusetts, fall of 2020

St. Mary Magdalen Chapel

As a Saint Mary Magdalen School alumni and frequent altar server, the chapel on Ventura Boulevard has great significance to me. It is a place of worship for many, hosting daily mass; it is where I spent the majority of my childhood, gazing at beautiful stained-glass windows from creaky wooden pews. Not only does the chapel on the hill hold meaning in the present, its rich history goes back more than a century.

On July 1, 1913, the foundation was laid for the Saint Mary Magdalen chapel. A box of the Camarillo family's history and objects of memorable worth were placed inside the cornerstone. The chapel was built in 1914, with Juan Camarillo Jr. providing the land and resources necessary for the construction. The Camarillo family consisted of California landowners, which were native born to California and descended from Spanish-speaking communities. When Juan traveled to Mexico City to visit the birthplace of his father, he was inspired by a mission-style chapel. Juan commissioned architect Albert C. Martin, who designed the Ventura County courthouse shortly before the St. Mary's chapel. The style of the chapel correlates to the Spanish Colonial Revival in architecture, which consisted of stucco over brick exterior, plaster interior, asymmetrical design, half round arches, and tile roofs. The layout was also inspired by the Santa Barbara mission, where it consists of a fountain, east wing, and family crypt. Juan wanted to build a more permanent structure to replace the wooden, one room chapel the family had used. He wanted to honor their parents, father Don Juan Camarillo and mother Martina Hernandez. His oldest sister Magdalena was also honored, hence the saint name Mary Magdalen.

One notable feature of the chapel is the ornate stained-glass windows, depicting scenes from the life of Christ. These windows were ordered from glass-blower F.X. Zattler, when Juan visited Munich, Germany in 1913. However, the windows were lost due to World War 1, and many attempts to find them ended in failure. The Camarillos thought it was very likely that the windows were on a ship that had been sunk due to the war. Finally, at the war's end, letters from a German official reached the family, claiming that several packages were found in Munich with Juan's name on them. The windows were delivered slowly and did not arrive until 1919. Until then, the chapel used heavy paper-white windows instead. The furnishing of the chapel was also generously attended to by Juan. The walls and altar were constructed of white marble, while the doors, floor and pews were made of oak. Three statue busts of The Sacred Heart, the Blessed Mother, and St. Mary Magdalen reside near the main altar. Several Camarillo family members are buried in the white marble crypt underneath the chapel, including Adolfo, his wife, sisters, parents, and brother

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Juan.

The chapel was the dominant feature of the town along Ventura Boulevard. The bell tower overlooked the town and chimed three times a day to call the people to mass. A priest from Oxnard would have to travel to Camarillo to serve in each session. In 1914, the chapel was dedicated by the Bishop in a grand ceremony attended by most townspeople. Juan Camarillo Jr. died in 1936, leaving the chapel in the possession of the Order of the Friars Minor, a religious order in the Catholic Church. This group then gave it to the Los Angeles Diocese in 1940 to use as a parish church.

With the donation of several acres of land by Carmen Camarillo in 1958, priests, nuns, and seminarians could reside and study near the chapel. As the years passed, the city's population grew mostly due to agricultural work, the Naval Air facility at Point Mugu, and the construction of the Ventura Freeway. The chapel was becoming too crowded and could not serve everyone, even with extra masses. Parishioners were then allowed to attend mass elsewhere, at St. John's seminary, also within the land Juan donated to the Los Angeles Diocese. A newer, larger St. Mary Magdalen church was also constructed in the 1970s to serve the increasing population of the town.

The St. Mary Magdalen Chapel is a prominent landmark of the Pleasant Valley area. Thousands of people drive by its towering presence every day, as townspeople and school children visit the chapel to receive communion in this historic site. Further restorations are underway to preserve it, but not much will change. The chapel on the hill will continue to serve an important role in local church life, and will continue to serve as a stunning time capsule of Camarillo and its foundation.