

The China Mission

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The China Mission is one of the oldest missions and one of the newest. It reaches back to the century in which St. Vincent died. It was in 1699 that our first two confreres, Frs. Appiani and Mullener arrived in China. Since then the China Mission has had a special place in the heart of the Little Company and has captured the imagination of generations of our confreres. The China Mission evokes images of missionaries who were pioneers, martyrs, bishops, confessors, scholars, visionaries, seminary professors and pastors _ but, above all, priests and brothers who fell in love with the peasants of the countryside and the ordinary folk of the towns and cities and broke the Bread of Life in their midst in season and out. Even when events forced the confreres to leave China, many left their hearts behind them.

The China Mission, at the same time, is also one of the newest missions. The last words of the "Letter to the Confreres" written by the General Assembly of 1992 were a challenge "... to go to the ends of the earth, even all the way to China." These words turned out to be prophetic, when Fr. Maloney visited China in 1993 and 1994. The sufferings, perseverance, joy and radiant faith of the priests, sisters and Catholics of China touched his heart and, through his letters, the hearts of very many. The joy of the sisters and priests at being visited by Vincent's successor, after decades of feeling themselves to have been orphaned, brought tears to many eyes.¹ Stories of new confessors and martyrs, women and men of immense and unassuming faith, met with joy, tears, admiration and renewed missionary zeal. China was open again, or at least, opening, and the Superior General called for volunteers.

The China Mission, as a new international mission, has the distinctive characteristic of already being part of a province, the Province of China. In fact, the mission had never died, but rather continued in two streams, the one in China, the other on Taiwan. The mission was carried on in China by the Chinese confreres who remained, after the missionaries were expelled. How many there were and what their history was is in many instances not known. To the best of our knowledge the majority of the 192 Vincentian Chinese priests and brothers in 1942 (the last available statistics) remained in China after the establishment of the Peoples' Republic of China on October 1, 1949. Their stories of daily love for the people, pastoral devotion in the face of adversity, and fidelity to the Lord and his Church during times of hostility and persecution are for the most part not documented, but the fragmentary stories that have been handed down give the sense of loyalty to the faith and unassuming heroism. Archbishop Joseph Chow of Nanchang may be the most notable of these heroes. He

¹ It was only in the early 80's that Sister Emma Lee, D.C. re-established contact with them. Eventually, contact was re-established with ninety sisters and fourteen confreres.

spent twenty-two years in prison and under house arrest before his death in 1972, after he refused the Communist Party's offer to make him the Chinese "pope."

The other stream flowed into the church on Taiwan. After being expelled from China in 1949-1952, Chinese, Dutch and American confreres continued the China Mission on Taiwan. In the early years the confreres believed it was only a matter of time before they would be back in the Mainland. As this hope disappeared, the energies of the confreres went into the pastoral care of the young communities they had founded when they arrived.²

It is in this historical context that the China Province welcomed nine new confreres to the China Mission in the past five years. These confreres are all ordained. They have come from nine provinces: Indonesia, the Philippines, Ireland, the Eastern Province USA, the Western Province USA, Poland, the Netherlands, the Congo, and India. Three more confreres are joining the mission this year (1998-1999) from the Eastern Province USA and Indonesia. The Province of Indonesia in its Provincial Assembly two years ago made a formal commitment to partnership in the China Mission, and four of the confreres mentioned are from Indonesia. The new confreres have been warmly welcomed by the Dutch, Chinese, Hungarian and American confreres of the province, who are indeed grateful for the new life we share together and for the hope we share for the future. The New International Missions have given new life to the Province of China and our mission on Taiwan and in China.

This new phase of the China Mission is taking place in circumstances vastly different from our previous history. Today the Chinese government under the control of the Communist Party proclaims freedom of religion, but understands this as freedom under government control and supervision. Its outright hostility to religion decades ago has been changed into tolerance. In its eyes the Church has gone from being an enemy of the people to a servant of socialism, so it expects and intends. It rejects Vatican claims to authority over the Church in China, particularly in the appointment of bishops. In recent years Catholics have been permitted to pray publicly for the Pope and even to acknowledge him as spiritual head of the Church without, however, any jurisdiction in China. Membership in international religious communities is not allowed. Foreigners are also not allowed to be missionaries in China, except for a few specially invited and approved professors in seminaries. In spite of these restrictions and the sufferings of the Church and the people, the Catholic population has grown from 3,500,000 in 1949 to perhaps 10,000,000 today, and has a vigor all its own.

From a Church point of view the most dramatic changes concern who is in charge. In 1949 the Church in China was for the most part in the hands of missionary

² Arriving in 1952, the confreres participated in the joint effort to provide basic necessities for the many refugees from the Communist victory on the mainland. From 1952 to 1965 there were 250,000 people baptized on the island, and the confreres spent their days and evenings catechizing and baptizing new converts, when they were not distributing food and medicines. With only 10,000 Catholics on the island in 1945 and more than a quarter of a million in 1965, this, it can be said, was the most significant period in the establishment of today's Catholic Church throughout the island. The confreres built at least thirty churches and opened as many parishes and parochial communities.

congregations. Today, however, the Church is entirely in the hands of Chinese bishops, priests, sisters and lay people.

Gradually seminaries have been opened, beginning in 1982, and Church properties are being restored to the churches. To give just a few examples, we have been able to visit five or six of the more than 12 seminaries now open in China, where there are more than 1200 seminarians and already 1000 ordinations. In Tangshan the bishop has rebuilt his cathedral and thirty-four other churches, since the devastating earthquake there in 1976. Also, the bishop of Tianjin has built a new seminary for twenty-five seminarians next to the historic Wang Hai Lou Church and he has founded a diocesan community of sisters in the spirit of St. Vincent. There are 34 young women there and their happiness at being sisters has left a lasting impression on all who have visited them.

This new situation presents a profound challenge to all who wish to proclaim the Gospel among the Chinese people. It is turning out to be a great, though unexpected, grace for us. We are called to see the situation with new eyes and a new heart.

Many ask when will China be open? It is clearly not open to previous forms of missionary work. But China is open and opening up more all the time. We have no problem going to China frequently, but we usually go as tourists, or retired professors, or we go for specific purposes, like teaching English or French or studying Chinese. We are discovering a new role for ourselves in China. We are focusing on RELATIONSHIPS, A MINISTRY OF PRESENCE, HUMILITY and personal CONVERSION.

Like the first Jesuit missionaries to China, who focused much of their energies on making friends, we are also discovering the primacy of *relationships* in Chinese life. Developing friendships, of course, is one of the five Confucian pillars of Chinese culture. We are trying to know the people and be known by them at a personal level. Little by little mutual trust and knowledge of what is important to one another is developing.

Presence to young people through daily contact in the English or French classroom has turned out to be an unexpected and wonderful experience. We cannot preach the Gospel in words, only through our lives, but those who have taught in China testify that it happens. The students wonder about the meaning of the teachers' care for them and interest in them and want to know the source of their dedication in a situation with few material rewards.

We are also called to be *humble and patient*. There are so many things we would like to do and think ourselves capable of doing in and for the Church and we are not allowed. This humility and patience opens us up to new dimensions of the Chinese world. Without patience nothing is possible in China, which is no easy lesson to learn. It leads to a *conversion* in our outlook and our way of being among the people. It also changes our way of experiencing our priesthood.

In this situation, what are our short- and long-term goals and objectives? Our short- term goals and objectives are to learn Chinese well, to become incorporated into the Province of China, to begin to feel at home in the Chinese world, to understand the culture and to develop a missionary and pastoral vision for the China Mission.

When new confreres come they live in community at the Perboyre Mission Center in Taipei. Knowing one another and forming a community of faith and friendship is a primary goal. It has been the Lord's blessing that the confreres in the house, each from a different country, have become a close-knit community. This community meets with the other confreres in the area at least once a week and on different occasions with all the confreres in the province. The relationship between the older and younger confreres has been open and warm. The newcomers study Chinese full time for two years. In the third year they either go to Beijing or Wuhan or some other city in China to continue studying Chinese or begin pastoral work on Taiwan. In the past two years a new mission among the aboriginal peoples of the East coast has begun in collaboration with the Bethlehem Fathers and Brothers and close to the Daughters of Charity. Two confreres have established our presence there and have been warmly received, while another young confrere has become pastor in Kaohsiung. In both cases they are close to the people and progressing in their Mandarin. The confreres have been making every effort to speak and understand Chinese in ordinary situations and to celebrate the Eucharist and preach in Chinese. Learning Chinese is a lifelong process, so the program aims at giving each confrere a strong foundation upon which to build.

Besides fluency in Chinese, each confrere needs to be experienced or trained in a particular area of competence, so that we will be able to respond effectively when the opportunities come. Since formation is of special importance, two young Chinese confreres have undertaken studies in liturgy at the Anselmo in Rome and Biblical Theology at the Catholic Theological Union in Chicago. Other confreres are now identifying areas in which they can become knowledgeable and skilled. Areas of special need and interest are formation, prayer, the spiritual journey, pastoral theology, organizational development and Asian Studies. It is also part of the vision that these studies can be done in an inculturated context. In this area we are just now finding our way.

There is a Mainland Committee which is concerned with information, understanding, planning and initiatives on the Mainland. In this committee serious efforts are made to gradually develop a missionary strategy based on the realities of China as we come to know them. The committee coordinates the efforts of all the confreres in the province in relationship to the mainland. The committee also publishes "China Sparks" which is a newsletter written to inform the English speaking provinces of the Vincentians and Daughters of Charity about developments in China, both on the level of international news and on the level of personal experience.

The province also sponsors "Vincentian Outreach" in conjunction with the Daughters of Charity. Through "Vincentian Outreach" confreres, Daughters and lay

people that we know are made aware of the opportunity to teach English or French at the university level in China for a year. Last year there were four teachers in China and this year there are twelve from the Vincentian Family. Those who have gone as teachers have had a wonderful experience, not always easy humanly speaking, but profoundly rewarding and for some people transforming. Teaching English is not a pretext for doing something else. Teaching English is actually about teaching the students. Through classroom contacts relationships develop and the values of two worlds begin to be shared and mutually exchanged. The teachers learn a great deal about themselves as they are learning about the Chinese students. Incidentally, for any who might be interested, it is not necessary for teachers to speak Chinese.

What are our long-term goals? We know that our future in China depends on preparation now. The axiom that the future belongs to those who are prepared is especially true for China. We do not know what ultimately will be our opportunities, but we are preparing for the following: our own inculturation, formation and rural missions.

Our own inculturation means we have to receive the gift of China before we can give our own gifts. This is particularly true of the Church. We must first receive the gifts of faith and love, patience and perseverance which blossomed in the midst of deep suffering and decades of persecution. We need also to receive the gift of forgiveness and lack of resentment which seems to be a remarkable fruit of those years in the lives of the people who suffered most.

Almost everyone who has contact with China says the greatest need is formation. In China there are young priests and old priests, between whom there is a thirty-five year age gap. This is an immense challenge for priestly formation and for leadership training in the immediate future.

A particular area of acute need is the development of structures to support and strengthen young priests who are often given large responsibilities immediately after ordination and find themselves living alone, without experience or proper guidance. One young priest we know is responsible for half a county in which there are twenty-five small Catholic centers or villages and two larger ones with 600 and 1000 respectively. His situation is not untypical. Though we may not be able to help immediately, we need to acquire the formational strategy and the necessary training to help when the time comes.

There are also some opportunities to develop scholarship programs abroad for the formation and education of seminarians and young priests and sisters. On the whole, the challenge remains great for the foreseeable future.

It has been said that China was never more open to the Gospel than it is today. Many agree that there is a widespread search for meaning going on in the personal lives of many in China. There is disenchantment with the ancient and modern world views available to the people. There is a hunger for the Gospel or for gospel values,

which has been demonstrated by the appeal the Gospel has to many university students. In the last ten years there is also a scholarly interest in Christian theology. These scholars, who are sometimes referred to as "cultural Christians," because their interest is more cultural than religious (more about values and meaning than about a relationship with God), are, nevertheless, very real and serious. In many ways it is the lay people who are best situated to respond to this hunger. This calls for a formation all its own. Can we prepare ourselves for these challenges?

Finally, we are asking ourselves do popular missions have any relationship to the 850,000,000 farmers and villagers in China, many of whom have been left behind by the economic progress of the coastal provinces? Our initial efforts in this area, starting in Taiwan, have found that the task is beyond us and our personnel resources at present. The most dramatic challenge is to find a way to do popular missions in a missionary way as first evangelization, among people where Catholics are less than one percent of the population. It calls for a radical recasting of popular missions, though many of the necessary elements seem to be present in the worldwide Congregation's renewal of these missions.

It is only two years since St. John Gabriel Perboyre was canonized. It is under his patronage that this new phase of the China Mission is taking place. It is our prayer that his love for the Chinese people and his love for the Gospel will be our guide and inspiration in our journey of faith with the Chinese people.