

3

Special Interview

Msgr. Frans Schraven and His Companions

The Martyrdom of Seven Vincentians in China and Their Process of Beatification

Vincent Hermans

Secretary of the Msgr. Schraven Foundation The Netherlands



In Church history, China is also known for its many martyrs. Vincentians and Daughters of Charity are reminded of Saints John Gabriel Perboyre (1840) and Francis Regis Clet (1820), and of the Daughters of Charity who, in the city of Tientsin, were brutally murdered in 1870, accused of killing orphans and of making medicines from their eyes and hearts.

In the year 2000, 120 martyrs were canonized in Rome. However, not all martyrs are either canonized or beatified. In this article, I would like to put in the spotlight seven Vincentian martyrs, one Trappist, and one lay person, who, in 1937, were murdered in China: Msgr. Frans Schraven and his companions.

Why this special attention for them? In 2005, a little book appeared in China in which their deaths are remembered.

In the year of the 150th anniversary of the autonomy of the Chengtingfu Diocese (nowadays Zhengding) and the 25th year of his ordination as bishop, the underground bishop Msgr. Julius Jia, successor of Msgr. Schraven, ordered some research to document the passion and martyrdom of Msgr. Schraven and his companions and to make it known to the world. "It is a glorious page in the

history of our church, and an example for us shepherds ... Because we have received the Cross of our Faith from our ancestors, we have the responsibility to proclaim it, to keep it alive, and to pass it on to those who come after us.” In it, we read what knowledge people in Zhengding have of documentation and living memories about the martyrdom of Msgr. Schraven, the 8th Bishop of Zhengding, and his companions. It is a call to acknowledge the martyrs; without a trace of doubt, the motivations of the murder have been made known.

What happened?

In July 1937, China and Japan are at war. The Japanese move southward along the railway line. The Chinese dig trenches. Japanese planes make reconnaissance flights. Along the railway line, lays the Trappist monastery. The superior thinks that the city is safer because of it. The sick monks go there first. On 7 October, the city gates are closed for good because of the expected Japanese attack. The other Trappists can no longer come. That same day, the Japanese begin the attack. Heavy firing follows. The high old city walls (ten meters high) are bombed. At the residence of Msgr. Schraven, 3000 girls, women, children, and old people have sought refuge with the Daughters of Charity. Later, 814 shell hits are counted. Several buildings are partly destroyed and three people are killed instantly. On 8 October, the bombing continues. Again, many people flee to the residence, especially women. They now number 5000-10,000. All rooms and corridors are filled completely with people, packed like sardines in a tin box. The women’s section of the mission looks like a security zone.

On Saturday, 9 October, all is quiet. The Chinese army has left the city and the Japanese move in. A new flood of refugees, including non-Christians, climbs over the walls and the roofs into the residence and takes shelter around the cathedral. The Japanese high command surrenders the city for eight days to the discretion of the Japanese army: robbery, ransacking, destruction, rape, and murder of all men, because they could be soldiers dressed as civilians. It is the reward for their actions.

All day soldiers enter over the walls, the roofs, and through the gates to plunder the mission and to steal the possessions of the refugees. Japanese officers come to inspect and have notices posted everywhere with a prohibition, but without effect. In the afternoon, Japanese officers and appointed Chinese city officials come to inspect the whole mission and they behave correctly.

The abduction

At about 5 o'clock in the evening, a gang of about ten persons forces the gatekeeper to open the main gate to the residence for them. They want to go to the sisters of Saint Joseph and seem to be looking for European women. The French superior, Charny, and the French bursar, Bertrand, are warned, but, on the way there, they are imprisoned in the gatehouse by a few Japanese soldiers. At 7 o'clock, Msgr. Schraven and all the priests, brothers, and guests gather in the refectory for dinner. The gang forces its way into the refectory. Everybody must stand up and remain motionless. They handcuffed Msgr. Schraven and blindfolded him. The Slovak former navy officer, Biskupic, wants to protect the bishop, but is immediately caught. Then follow the other six European missionaries. The Chinese priests watch what happens as if paralyzed. They remain untouched. With a rope around the neck and between the legs, the prisoners are taken outside. The kidnappers ask where the European women can be found. Four men with a Chinese priest at gunpoint go to the gate of the Daughters of Charity and knock with quite a racket. The courageous sister at the gate refuses to open the gate even when threatened. Then the nine European prisoners are taken outside the mission where a truck is waiting for them. That same evening the Japanese army, according to custom, burns the bodies of all the killed Japanese soldiers not far from the centuries old Buddhist pagoda.

After the disappearance

The Japanese prevent, in every possible way, anyone who wants to let the world know what has happened. The Mission is in shock,

the sisters are terrified that they too will be taken. The care for the thousands of women keeps them going. Brave people warn others at their own risk in very dangerous circumstances and a few of them manage to reach Beijing. Two weeks later the disappearance has become world news. After a month, a one-eyed Chinese orphan finds the cap of Father Ceska. Other personal belongings are found in three places. Little by little, it has become clear to everybody what happened after the disappearance. Msgr. Schraven and his companions had been taken to the old pagoda and locked up there. At about 11 pm, they are taken outside. Hands and feet are bound with metal wire. Eventually, they are all doused with petroleum and set on fire. Msgr. is the last one. He cried out: "Mon Dieu, mon Dieu!"

At that point, the Japanese authorities can no longer plead ignorance and an investigation commission is put in place. The Japanese commander, Yokoyama, acknowledges that the responsibility for these murders rests with the Japanese army. However, he makes the French Vincentian, Father Chanet, who had come to Chengtingfu after the disappearance, promise to be slow in reporting the news and not to blame the Japanese army. Then the negotiations start about preventing such incidents, about compensation and apologies.

On 22 November, a memorial service is held on the local level at the request of Commander Yokoyama, in the presence of the Japanese high command. The cathedral is decorated with Japanese banners; a telegram of condolence from the commander-in-chief of the Japanese army is read out in Chinese. The huge number of people in the cathedral, both Christians and others, is surprised at this show of honour. The refugees come to express "their gratitude to the victims who had given their lives for them." A monument is paid and erected by the Japanese army as compensation for the massacre.

The negotiations reach an ever more political level, at which the relative interests of Japan, France, the Vatican, and Holland come into conflict. This leads to confused reporting in the press about who

are the culprits. The Japanese point to the Chinese. Japan wins the battle about the reporting. But this uncertainty hangs around, not so much in China as in Europe, more so because of the lack of clarity about the perpetrators, and, therefore, about the motive. For a long time the Trappists have tried their utmost to find out, little by little, what was “the course of events.” The decapitation of the vicariate, the fragmentation of the nationalities of the remaining Europeans, the Japanese censure (no mail with delicate questions in detail), the warlike situation in China with Japan, and, at the same time, their own civil war, lead to the loss of bits of information.

Also in Europe, war has begun. On both sides of the globe, everybody is trying to survive. For years, China is isolated, but the memorial monument for Msgr. Schraven and his companions, with a text in Latin and Chinese, survives the times in China in a wonderful way!

What was the motive?

The uncertainty about the culprits led to lots of speculation in European newspapers and magazines about the motives. We found 16 in lots of archives throughout Europe.

In the Dutch embassy in Beijing, a Swedish parson made a declaration. He said that on the day of the murder, Japanese soldiers asked for women at the mission. The answer they received was, “You can take what you want, but we will never hand over women.” The Austrian Brother Friederich wrote to Father Ceska’s brother that the Japanese, on seeing the memorial monument, said that if they had handed over 200 women, the Europeans would not have been murdered. In 1947, during the internment of European missionaries, a Chinese said that he was an interpreter in the Japanese army and witnessed the murder. They were murdered because Msgr. Schraven refused the request for women. He even said, “You can kill me if you want, but giving you what you want . . . that never!” The Japanese spoke threatening words and left in great anger.

Only in 2008, were we able to read a translation of the little Chinese book from 2005 about Msgr. Schraven, the predecessor of Msgr. Julius Jia. In China, there is no doubt about the motive. “The Japanese demanded 200 women to satisfy the lust of the soldiers. The bishop said categorically no. The Japanese army was irritated and committed this monstrous crime. Msgr. Schraven and his companion martyrs continued to protect the flock of sheep that had been entrusted to them. A good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep. In our hearts, they will always be remembered as good shepherds.”

In the Secret Archive of the Pope in Rome, a letter was found, written by the Japanese Commander Yokoyama. He writes to the Apostolic Delegate in Beijing after the massacre: ‘They became martyrs of their missionary zeal’ and also: ‘They are true witnesses of Christian charity’. This commander was a Catholic himself and must have known the significance of the word ‘martyr’. Most probably this is all he could say about the motive because of political reasons.

Beatification

In the little book of Msgr. Julius Jia, an appeal is made three times to have the martyrs beatified. His request to raise Schraven and his companions to beatification has awakened us. During our visit to China, they asked us, “Why has that not happened yet?” The present situation in China does not allow them to undertake such an initiative. Most of the information too is only to be found in Europe. In 2013, the preparation for this declaration of beatification was set in motion by the Province of the Dutch Vincentians. On behalf of the Chinese bishop Msgr. Julius Jia, the Dutch Bishop of Roermond opened the Diocesan Tribunal in March 2013 and closed it in January 2014. A file of 1860 pages has been sent to Rome.

Msgr. Schraven and companions, who were they?

“Msgr. Schraven and his companions are my example,” says Msgr. Jia. A motive not to give up. Who were those missionaries

who made such an impression, that they are a source of inspiration not to give up?

- 1) *Msgr. Frans Schraven*, 64, a Dutchman who joined the French Province of the Vincentians in Paris in 1894. After his ordination in 1899 and arrival in China, he was appointed to the Vicariate of Chengtingfu, which was entrusted to the international community of Vincentians, 260 km. south of Beijing. After 5 years of missionary work, he sadly had to take on office duties. Between 1908 and 1920, he was appointed to the procures in Shanghai, Tientsin, and again Shanghai. He returned to Chengtingfu. He was ordained bishop in April 1921 by his own cousin, Msgr. Frans Geurts, CM.
- 2) *Thomas Ceska*, 65, entered the Congregation in Graz, Austria and arrived in Chengtingfu a year ahead of Schraven. He was director of the mission, pastor of the region around Chengtingfu, substitute of the superior in the bishop's house.
- 3) *Lucien Charny*, 55, French, born in Melun, superior and pastor of the cathedral.
- 4) *Eugène Bertrand*, 32, French, born in Aurillac, procurator.
- 5) *Gerard Wouters*, 28, Dutch. Teacher of Greek, Latin, and music at the minor seminary, 5 km outside of Chengtingfu.
- 6) *Antoon Geerts*, 62, Dutch, lay brother. He belonged to the Vicariate of Yungpingfu/Lulong. Msgr. Schraven had asked him to paint the inside of the cathedral. The cathedral had just been finished.
- 7) *Ladislaus Prinz*, 28, Polish lay brother. He went to the Vicariate of Shuntefu, separated from the Vicariate of Msgr. Schraven and entrusted to the Polish Vincentians. Brother Prinz lived in Chengtingfu in order to learn the trade of wine grower.

- 8) *Emmanuel Robial*, 52, French, monk of the nearby Trappist monastery, Notre Dame de Liesse, for which Msgr. Schraven had donated land in 1925 and helped in preparing the foundation.
- 9) *Antoon Biskupic*, 51, Slovak layman. By trade, he was a mechanic and an organ repairman. Born in Bratislava, he had come to China as a non-commissioned officer of the Austrian fleet, which was defeated by the Japanese fleet. After that, he stayed to live in China.

What is the harvest of the blood of martyrs ?

After the murder of the European leadership the mission of Msgr. Schraven was rudderless. The plunder continued. There was nobody to whom a complaint could be addressed. The Japanese soldiers could have taken all the women they wanted. It was a wonder that this did not happen. Not one of the women was touched.

After the massacre in 1937 in Zhending a flood of conversions followed.

The deaths of these martyrs had been influential in the course of events in the war in China. Quite a large political row ensued between Japan and the countries of the victims. France demanded from Japan that no more westerners would be murdered. Japan took the necessary measures. General Tani, responsible for the bloodbath in Zhengding, is transferred with his troops to Nanjing, the then capital of China. The following December the Japanese troops conquered the capital Nanjing. Twenty westerners tried to protect the poor Chinese in an unrecognized safety zone against 200,000 soldiers who behaved like beasts. The Chinese guess the number of victims to be 300,000. The westerners often asked themselves: why do they not shoot us? The westerners saw the guns of soliders committing rape pointed at them, because they had bothered these soldiers. All members of the Japanese army had previously been strictly ordered not to kill westerners anymore.

The now deceased patriotic successor of Msgr. Schraven, Msgr. Jia, said in 2009 that the faithful pray at the tomb of the martyrs, at the memorial monument, and at the place where these martyrs had been murdered. The bishop spoke of plans of building a new cathedral in the city of Shijiazhuang. Included in that plan is a new monument in memory of the nine martyrs. In China the sisters are still saying that they had died for them, the women. The Chinese successor Msgr. Jia made the choice to take Msgr. Schraven as an example, when he adopted, against the official regulations, about one hundred handicapped female babies, even if that would lead to complications. It was his deep conviction that: 'We too ought to give our lives for our brothers and sisters'.

The example of the martyrs inspires people even now. 'Bishop Schraven is alive even after his death' is a remark recently heard from people. The example of these martyrs continues to give a deep impression also in our own time. The martyrs are praised for their standing choice to protect people in danger. They did it inspired by their belief, even if suffering or the loss of their own life was at risk. Witnesses in China emphasize their example during their own persecution: 'We were persecuted, but we did not lose our faith, because we received our faith from these martyrs. They encourage us to keep our faith and to hold on'.

People emphasize the fact that these martyrs stood up for women and guarded women from sexual abuse. The behavior of these martyrs was a great help for those women who came to the Daughters of Charity seeking protection. The life of these martyrs in Jesus Christ is manifested in their behavior and witness and becomes a signpost in our time. Their story has a healing outcome for people. These martyrs are an inspiration for all who often face despair with courage in the fight for the dignity of women and also stand up against criminal exploitation of asylum seekers and migrant workers. During their visit to the Vatican one of the Dutch bishops pleaded at the Congregation for the Saints in Rome to make Msgr. Schraven and companions 'patron saints' for people protecting women and girls against sexual abuse.

Someone from China says: ‘These martyrs will continue their mission after the beatification: these men are heroes and protectors of the Chinese people and are not imperialists and exploiters of the Chinese people, as the Chinese government still teaches us. These martyrs force China to revise its history of the Catholic Church in the past and may influence the contact between the Vatican and China in a positive way. Msgr. Schraven and companions were not killed by Chinese but Japanese soldiers. When China hears of this wonderful story, also non-Catholics will get to know Christ and will praise these martyrs. Their beatification will be an enormous impetus for the missionary activity in China’.

How the witness of these martyrs touches the heart of people is shown by activities in Europe and China.

In 2017 a Foundation was established with the aim of continuing the purpose for which Msgr. Schraven and his companions died; namely, the prevention of sexual abuse. The foundation has received a first request to enable the development of a course project to make women independent in China.

A second initiative in this field is the memorial chapel in the village of Broekhuizen vorst where Msgr. Schraven grew up. Victims of sexual abuse too need a place for their sorrow, anger, a place for complaint, consolation, and perhaps encouragement.

The Foundation has its own website in various languages. Every quarter, a newsletter appears. Several persons research archives in a number of countries. A comic book has been made about the life of Msgr. Schraven and his companions in China, and about the story of their deaths. It has appeared in various languages. Each year, on the day of their deaths, 9 October, a memorial activity is organized.

In this way, Bishop Schraven and his companions will live in memory in both Europe and China and are a source of inspiration for people nowadays.

For more information see: www.mgrschraven.nl