

MISSION TO KIENNING-FU

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Part I

IN 1918, the Sacred Congregation of the Propagation of the Faith assigned to the American Dominicans of Saint Joseph's Province their first mission field, embracing the northern section of Fukien Province, China. The newly-assigned territory was co-terminous with that of the civil prefecture of Kienning-fu (now known as Kienow) with its six sub-prefectures.

The Province of Fukien, slightly larger than Pennsylvania, is in the southeast of the great Chinese land-mass, on the coast directly opposite Formosa. Foochow, its capital, and Amoy, to the south, are fine ports, and had long served as gateways for foreign penetration into this part of China. The interior, however, is crossed by a rugged mountain range, running generally parallel to the coast. Particularly in the northern section entrusted to our Fathers, the ruggedness of the terrain, unserved (at first) by railroad or auto highway, made travel and communications extremely difficult. The Min river, which flowed down from the high wooded slopes past Kienning-fu and Foochow, was the only avenue of approach to the new mission. On departing from its waters, one had recourse to pack animals or went by foot.

Our prefecture was about 3,000 square miles in area, with a population of over a million. It had hundreds of small villages

and hamlets with few large cities. In this respect it hardly differed from the rest of Fukien. The people were of the poorer class, many of them barely able to make a living. Their customs and living standards had changed but little since the fifteenth century. Fukien had been fortunate, however, in averting the terrible famines which scourged other parts of China at this time. Agriculture, in fact, was quite prosperous in the province, though industry and commerce were woefully undeveloped. Tea and timber were the principal export commodities from the hills of the north, while downstream the fisheries, paper manufacture and shipbuilding flourished to some extent.

The people of the district were given over to pagan beliefs and superstitions. It was commonly said that they were "born Taoists, lived according to the moral code of Confucius and died with a prayer to Buddha on their lips." Of China's two million Catholics, some thirty thousand lived in the Vicariate Apostolic of Foochow. In the districts staffed by St. Joseph's Province there were then only nine hundred, with close to two thousand catechumens.

Among these Catholics were numbered one of the most interesting groups in China, the so-called "river population." These lived on the edge of the Min river in and around Foochow. In their boats of all sizes, which were packed row upon row, thousands of Chinese ground out their daily existence. They competed for any type of boating job. How everyone was able to make a living, frugal though it may have been, intrigued most foreigners. Some of the men were fishermen, while a majority sought employment on shore. Their boats, which served as their homes, were at the mercy of the elements. A very high percentage of these people had embraced the Catholic faith. They were staunch defenders of their religion and were not afraid to advertise the fact that they were Roman Catholics. Religious pictures, badges, crucifixes and the like were prominently displayed on their craft, and, as they sailed up and down on the river, one would hear them at evenfall singing Chinese hymns and loudly chanting the Rosary.

THE PAST — MISSIONS AND MARTYRS

Speaking of these Chinese Catholics already to be found in the Fukien area, we are reminded that our American Fathers were not the first to bring the faith to these shores. The Spanish Dominicans of Holy Rosary Province had arrived in Fukien about

1633 from their base in the Philippine Islands. Their work was centered along the northern seacoast of Fukien. However, they did not limit their apostolic endeavors to this one province, but penetrated into the bordering provinces of Chekiang and Kiangsi. That their labors had borne fruit is shown by families Catholic for generations and even centuries, in spite of persecution. Indeed, the Spanish Friars had reaped the fruit of martyrdom. Blessed Peter Sanz and his four companions, slain at Samsan in 1747, were beatified by Leo XIII.

When, during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the Holy See began to define mission territories and create vicariates apostolic, the Spanish Fathers were given charge of the whole province of Fukien, with the vicariates of Amoy and Fukien. Holy Rosary Province continued the evangelization of Fukien and neighboring Formosa single-handed until, in 1915, the southwest section of Fukien was broken off and assigned to the German Dominicans. The newcomers founded and staffed the mission at Ting-chou.

Then in 1918 a second split was made in the Vicariate of Foochow, when the northern section was assigned to Saint Joseph's Province. The American mission, like that of their German brethren, was to remain under the ecclesiastical jurisdiction of the Spanish Vicar Apostolic, Bishop Francis Aguirre of Holy Rosary Province.

CHALLENGE TO THE YANKEE FRIARS

Thus the American Sons of Dominic were called to their first foreign mission field. Just ten years previously, their own land had officially emerged from mission status, and exactly one hundred years before, in 1818, their own infant province of Dominicans was establishing its second humble priory, Saint Joseph's, near Somerset, Ohio. Now Saint Joseph's Province was flourishing, the Church in America had grown strong and the American Friars were being called to do a man's work in China.

The challenge confronting them there was not unlike that which Bishop Fenwick and his brethren faced in those early days in Ohio and Kentucky. If the frontier in America had disappeared, Fukien was a new frontier looming up before them.

The land itself challenged them from the first. A handful of Friars were to bring the Faith to over a million Chinese, scattered in village and remote mountain hamlet over three thousand square miles of territory. The terrain was mountainous and

there were then no modern roads; the river was the key to all transportation. One went as far as he could by *sampan*, often through treacherous rapids or across shallows where the boat had to be dragged by coolies on the shore. To attain the more remote missions, one had to leave the river valley and try his luck on the rugged passes and trails of the mountain range. Here the Fathers had to go by foot, though on longer journeys they might take advantage of a primitive "sedan-chair" borne by coolies across the tortuous mountain trails. Nor did danger stop at mere topography. The wooded hills were not without the menace of tigers, bears, wildcats, and other wild beasts; and the hills of Fukien offered shelter to hundreds of bandits and highway-men.

The very newness of the venture was another great difficulty. It was not only the newness of the missionaries themselves but also the newness of the mission-field, for the stations taken over from the Spaniards had been in operation for less than thirty years. In fact, the missions in northwest Fukien had been inactive for several hundred years, so the American effort was almost like the inception of a new foundation. There was, one might say, no established tradition of Catholicism in these parts. Add to this the need to learn a new and difficult language, to accustom themselves to new ways of life, even to strange Chinese foodstuffs, and we see something of the difficulty that was to face our neophyte missionaries.

But the factor that was to offer the most serious obstacle to the Kienning-fu mission, that was to thwart and hamper this apostolic venture at every step, and eventually bring about its downfall, was the political one. If we prescind from the question of supernatural and purely spiritual development, as historians indeed are constrained to do, it will not be an exaggeration to say that the whole brief history of the Kienning-fu mission is colored, shaped and determined step by step, by the tragedy and turmoil of Twentieth-century Chinese politics.

THE SETTING

To fully understand the somber setting of this drama, we must look back at least to the mid-nineteenth century. At that time the proud empire of the Manchus was being confronted, not only with missionary penetration from the West, but with the whole force of commercial and military intrusion by the European powers. Outclassed and humiliated by the technological

superiority of the foreigners, the Chinese were forced to make concessions, from which, indeed, the missionaries derived no little benefit. But hatred and resentment rankled in the breast of the Chinese nation. The Government, under the leadership of the Dowager Empress, pursued a policy of reaction and obscurantism. In 1900, the brief but terrible outbreak of the Boxer Rebellion showed not only bitterness toward outsiders but the confusion and unrest that gnawed away at the very innards of pagan China. More patriotic Chinese saw that China's only hope lay in fighting the West with its own weapons—by adopting the progressive, democratic ways of the Europeans they hoped to throw off that European yoke.

Leadership of this movement was assumed by Sun-yat-Sen, and success was achieved in 1912 by the proclamation of the Chinese Republic. Regrettably, however, this did not spell the end of China's difficulties, for "warlords" in the outlying Provinces had capitalized on the unrest to achieve independent power in their own localities. Thus, from the earliest years of the Republic, China's history became a matter of the Central Government's trying to re-establish its authority throughout the old empire. This was the main goal of the pro-government party, the Kuomintang, and of its army, led eventually by Chiang kai-Shek. Without a doubt, the Kuomintang was the only agency capable of restoring to China the peace and security needed for the success of the missions. But the aim of the Nationalist movement, besides national unification, was to counteract and uproot foreign influence in China and this meant an underlying hostility to the missions.

More ominous yet, during the course of the Twenties, the Kuomintang found itself drawn into a very close alliance with Bolshevik Russia. The aid and comfort thus given to the Chinese Communist elements led to the tragic course of events which brought about not only the expulsion of the Kuomintang from the Chinese mainland, but more to our point, the present crucifixion of Chinese Catholicism and the practical extinction of the American Dominican missionary venture in the province of Fukien.

But this is to get ahead of our story, and to reveal in advance its tragic *denouement*. For the present, our story, if set against this sombre background, is one of youthful hope and enthusiasm, of the first concrete beginning made by the American Friars in China.

FROM THE START — 1923

The Provincial of St. Joseph's Province, the Very Reverend Raymond Meagher, made a survey of the new mission territory during the latter part of 1922. On his return to the States, Father Provincial assigned two young friars to the field. As superior went Very Reverend Paul Curran, O.P., who had served previously in Zanesville and New York. His companion was to be Brother James Murphy, O.P., who in the years to come was to prove himself invaluable, not only as a zealous servant of God, but as the architect and construction foreman of the beautiful houses of worship destined to rise in the new mission. The proto-missionaries sailed from San Francisco on August 22, 1923 and arrived in Kienning-fu on the 7th of December. There they took up residence at Holy Rosary Mission with the Spanish Dominicans then in charge.

In the following year, six more American missionaries went to join the two pioneers. The group, which departed from Seattle on August 28, included Fathers B. C. Werner, James G. O'Donnell, John R. Grace, Thomas H. Sullivan, John F. McCadden and Brother Jordan Warnock. Not long after their arrival in China, Father Werner was sent to St. Joseph's in Kienyang and Father Grace to St. Raymond's in Chungan. Both of these stations had been founded and maintained by the missionaries of Holy Rosary Province. In November, 1924, the mission's first procuration house was set up in the provincial capital, Foochow, with Father James O'Donnell as procurator and Brother Jordan as his assistant. But the growing mission staff was soon depleted by the return to America of Father McCadden, who had been stricken by a very critical illness.

Thus by the end of 1924, there were five American priests and two laybrothers at work in the mission of Kienning-fu, with the continued assistance of the three Spanish Fathers who were already staffing the existing stations. Already, the excitement of departure and voyage far behind, they were deeply plunged into the typical work of the foreign missionary. Their ordinary residence was the mission station, a walled compound enclosing the Church, the small house of the Fathers and later on at least a school and quarters for Chinese lay help. In this center, the missionary conducted his main apostolate: administration of the sacraments and instruction of his Christian flock, overseeing the education of their children, and simply making himself available to all, Christian and pagan alike, an unfailing reservoir of coun-



sel, sympathy, and Christlike charity. Meanwhile, he had to learn the Chinese language, study and, in large measure, adopt native customs, foods, and dress, and, of course, maintain that life of prayer and deep faith which is the dynamo supplying force to every true missionary. Nor was this the end of his task; he had often to make long journeys over the rugged mountains of Fukien, to visit his scattered flock, to look after a sick-brother-priest, even to go to confession. Some of the missionaries recall walking thirty or forty miles in a day on such errands. For the eight young Friars from America, such a life was a challenge indeed.

But even as they rose to the challenge, with the willing zeal of new Dominics, there were some who remained pessimistic. A Spanish priest, Father Rodriguez, who conversed with Father Meagher on his visitation of 1926, held out little hope of China's rapid conversion. He pointed out that converts in the past had too often approached the Church with confused, half-pagan ideas of the meaning of Christian doctrine, or sadder still, with unworthy, purely temporal motives. The latter was the problem of the "rice Christians," who say that association with the religion of the Westerners might bring them economic rewards and powerful European protection. It was a clear-cut problem, to be answered by outright refusal, but the missionary must exercise exquisite tact. By doing so, he might occasionally salvage a conversion, but more often than not the pagans would go away dissatisfied.

The doctrinal or intellectual question was more involved. In fact, it was but an aspect of the much-controverted matter of the "Chinese rites." In the seventeenth century, the Holy See had become aware that the mode in which the Catholic religion was then being presented in China (a method associated with the great name of the Jesuit Matteo Ricci), left room for ambiguity and even for the retention of pagan concepts and practices. So the Pope insisted on a more rigidly accurate use of Chinese theological terms and also on rejection of certain practices closely bound up with the patriotic and family life of the Empire, but infused with overtones of superstition. Stringent conditions were laid down for catechumens, so as to avoid all misunderstanding in this matter:

- 1) The prospective convert must know his Faith; must fully understand everything connected with the Church and her belief.

- 2) He must be free from every vestige of superstition. Not only must he desist from public worship in the temples, but he must give up the ancestral tablets which held the place of honor in every Chinese home.
- 3) Freedom from public vices such as opium-eating, drunkenness, or public immorality. Nor was it sufficient to give up the use of opium; the convert was not permitted to make his livelihood by cultivating or selling the dangerous narcotic.

Understandably, the high standard of perfection imposed by these rules kept many from joining the Church. As Father Rodriguez observed to the Provincial, the idea of a single missionary making eight hundred converts in two years was utterly ridiculous. If he could count that number (excluding Baptisms *in articulo mortis*) for the entire nineteen years of his labors in China, the Spanish priest humbly acknowledged, he would feel that God had indeed blessed his work! The prohibition of ancestral tablets was perhaps the greatest stumbling block. Westerners found it hard to understand Chinese tenacity on this point. The Orientals claimed they did not adore the tablets as we adore God, but offered a lesser sort of veneration. To them, it was an act of filial piety, a matter of common decency. But the Church saw in them symbols of superstition which must be wiped out if the Chinese were to be sincerely converted. Addiction to vice, also kept many otherwise well-disposed persons in the ranks of the catechumens; it might often be twenty-five or thirty years before they could be permitted to receive Baptism.

Thus, the work of conversions was slow. But if slow, it was sure; the caution of the Dominicans has been rewarded. Just as in earlier persecutions, so now under the Communists, the unshakable devotion of the Chinese Catholics to their Faith testified to the wisdom of this policy. The personal experience of our priests and the "grapevine" intelligence received since their expulsion both confirm this fact. The sacrifices demanded of those who joined the Church did but prepare their souls for greater: for the sacrifice of martyrdom.

REINFORCEMENTS — AND REVOLUTION

Although there were already some signs of unrest, Father Meagher judged during his visitation of 1926 that the danger had been exaggerated in the press and so, on returning to the United States, he deemed it opportune to send out reinforcements. The group which left for Fukien in November, of that year included Fathers Harry A. Burke, O.P., Robert E. Brennan, O.P., Fred-

erick A. Gordon, O.P., John M. Barrett, O.P., and William F. Cassidy, O.P.

But the newcomers were not destined to reach the scene of their labors at once. The swift and unforeseen spread of the Communist difficulties into Fukien Province forced them to halt at Hongkong, where, as a matter of fact, they had to remain until the middle of 1927. Meanwhile, their brethren in the interior were beginning to experience a number of serious setbacks at the hands of the "bandits." Father Werner at Kienyang was the first to suffer. On arriving at his home after a circuit through the other stations, he found the place occupied by raiders, who had looted rectory and chapel. Soon, Kienning-fu also was overrun. At the Procuration in Foochow, the American missionaries were being subjected to even worse molestations. Eventually, the United States consul ordered the Fathers to retire from the city and the province. Having obtained permission from Father Provincial, they obeyed this prudent advice and withdrew to Hongkong.

As an example of the violence and vandalism being perpetrated against the Catholic missionaries in Fukien, we may cite the vivid account written by Father Brennan in a letter published in the *Torch* of March 1927. It describes the outrages against the Spanish Dominican Sisters in Foochow:

"Yesterday, the Holy Childhood Orphanage, so well and so nobly served by the good Spanish Dominican Sisters, was the scene of outrageous (I should almost say sacrilegious) violence by the students and barbarian soldiery. About eleven-thirty in the morning, four or five brazen-faced young students came to the Orphanage with the express intention of inspecting the buildings and the work of the Sisters. Mother Superior, who met them at the door, quite naturally asked them on whose authority they undertook such a commission. One of the students forthwith produced a card indicating his membership in the Student's Union (a Communist organization), and replied that it was in the name and by the authority of this association that he made his inspection. After thoroughly looking over the Orphanage, the students left, whereupon a Chinese doctor appeared to examine the children. He reported everything as satisfactory.

"... Absolutely no pretext could be found for taking over the orphanage. Then without the slightest warning, hundreds of students came rushing down the road to the Orphanage, clamoring and howling to get inside. At 4:00 armed police arrived and, shortly after, about 15 soldiers came and took up a position within the gates of the orphanage. By this time the students began a mad march thru the buildings. At 6:00 everything was in an uproar. A mob had gathered outside the doors of the orphanage. Students and soldiers were passing in and out

crying out against the Fathers and Sisters, 'Kill them! Kill them!' The people joined in the procession and soon everything was completely looted. Windows and doors were smashed and whatever these brutal ruffians found that was of the slightest value they pilfered.

"When the Sisters finally abandoned hope of saving anything or of remaining, they fled into the streets by a side door and made their way across to Nantai Island, coming first to the American Dominican house. There they rested for a while and, then in the company of some of our Fathers, they went to a house of a non-Catholic lady where they found shelter and suitable conveniences. Later, the students crossed the street from the Orphanage to the house of the Vicar-Provincial, knocking down the doors and just as completely rifling this building as they had the Orphanage. It was necessary for the Fathers there to flee for their lives. Both the Fathers (of Holy Rosary Province) and the Sisters are now on Nantai Island while the Orphanage and the residence of the Vicar Provincial are in the hands of the students. The poor Bishop's heart is broken, for the work of years lies in ruins."

Thus the early months of 1927 were a time of anguish for all the missions; the Protestants, too, suffered many setbacks and seizures of property at the same time. Nor did the poor natives of Fukien, caught between the two opposing factions, escape the hardships of war. It should, in fact, be remembered that the Nationalist Army brought in its train almost as many hardships as the Communist guerrillas. Engaged as they were in an armed struggle to unite the country on a nationalist basis, they were hardly more disposed to respect the rights of foreigners than the Communist "bandits." It was they, for example, who commandeered the newly-completed Catholic school at Kienning-fu before it had even been opened for its intended purpose.

Father Curran, who returned to America at this time with several fellow missionaries, offered the following commentary on the turbulent situation they had just experienced in China:

"The foreigner may have perpetrated wrongs, the Chinese may have suffered injustice; but the despised foreigner did do some good, and for this good the Chinese, or more specifically, the present revolutionary movement, should have been more tempered and more disciplined in their actions towards the foreigner and foreign possessions. Had she done so, the sympathy, help, and support of the world would have gone out to China; but blinded by what she considered a quick cut to emancipation, she cast aside the means that could have brought her peace and stability, and accepted the most destructive doctrine with which any government can find itself involved. I refer to Communism, as exemplified, enforced, and practiced to a certain extent by the Bolsheviks. It is useless to deny that Russian influence is at work in China, and it is sad to consider that the Chinese in their mad desire

for complete emancipation from all foreigners and foreign influence should reach out to the only nation on the face of the earth today which is not in a position to help even itself, and to ask war-torn communist Russia for assistance. It cannot be possible that the keen statesmen and leaders in the revolutionary movement in China fail to see the ultimate expectation of Russia. These statements, more or less broad but founded on fact, are worthy of close study."

(*Torch*, May 1927)

In the light of 1949, can it not be said that Father Curran's words of 1927 were strikingly prophetic. Just as striking, it is recalled, was the outcry stirred up by his article among the already-vocal Communist groups in this country.

RETURN TO THE STATIONS — 1927

Towards the fall of 1927, a measure of peace had returned to Fukien and the American Friars could once again take up their apostolate. Activities were resumed according to plans adopted before the Revolution. Not only were the stations at Kienning-fu, Kienyang, and Chungan reoccupied, but a new mission was opened up in an outlying section to the west of Kienyang and Chungan, with its center at St. Vincent Ferrer's Mission, Huang Keng. However, since most of the Christian people of the section lived in the region called T'ung Ma Kuan at Kua-ten, a temporary residence was established there in the village of San Kan. The mountain valley where San Kan lies is one of the most picturesque spots in northern Fukien, if not in all China. How appropriate, then, that in this valley, on December 28, 1928, construction was begun on a graceful stone church under the title of Our Lady of the Valley.

In Kienning-fu itself, one of the great hopes of the mission was realized when the school, which had been taken over by the Nationalist soldiers shortly after its completion, was given back and opened for educational purposes. It was named the Curry School, in honor of Msgr. Curry and his parishioners of Holy Name Church, New York City, the donors. The school was taken in charge by Father Robert E. Brennan and was organized as a primary school, working towards secondary, along the lines of China's modern educational system. Unfortunately, poor health soon forced Father Brennan's return to the United States.

Thus at the end of 1927, the missions were again operating on an expanded basis. The missionaries were assigned as follows: at Chungan, Father F. A. Gordon; at Kienyang, Father B. C.

Werner; at the new mission in San Kan (Kuatén), Father W. F. Cassidy; at Kienning-fu, Father A. P. Curran, Vicar Provincial, Father J. M. Barrett, Brother James Murphy, and Father Brennan, in charge of the school; and at the Procuration House, Foochow, Father H. A. Burke, acting Procurator, and his assistant, Brother Jordan Warnock.

In the spirit of this somewhat quieter atmosphere, Bishop Aguirre, Vicar Apostolic of Foochow, directed that October devotions be held wherever possible in his territory. The good shepherd, fully realizing that Catholicism could be doomed in China if another revolution broke out, urged the faithful to make peace in China their intention for the month. The exhortations of this devout bishop must indeed have been very powerful before the throne of Almighty God, for peace did come and gave the mission a brief breathing spell.

(To be continued.)

"Then suddenly, as a ray of sunlight passes through a window without breaking the glass, so Christ, the Sun of Justice, as the Spouse from His Bridal Chamber, passed through the Gate of the Virgin's womb, leaving it intact. The Virgin received the Savior into her own hands, kneeling with the greatest veneration and reverence, adoring Him and saying: 'O Lord, Thou hast come to earth from heaven for the salvation of mankind.'"

—ST. VINCENT FERRER
A Christmas Sermon

"On Christmas night when at Bethlehem God-made-man lay in stable straw, God's angel said to the startled shepherd-folk: 'Fear not. Lo! I bring you tidings of great joy that shall be to all the people.'

"It was as if he said what he was bidden to say: 'He Who has come to you has been sent to you. He has been sent, not to take, but to give. For your life, He will give His life. And as you count and know such sheep in your little flock, so too the gifts He gives will be given as much to each as to all, for He is thine if Thou art His.'"

—VINCENT McNABB, O.P.
Some Mysteries of Jesus Christ