

In Memory of Audrey Donnithorne (1922-2020), Friend of China and of the Church in China

Peter Barry

Born in 1922, in Sichuan Province, China, to a British Anglican missionary couple, Audrey became a Catholic in her youth. After studies in economics at Oxford and London, Audrey taught economics at the Australian National University. In 1985, after her retirement from teaching, Audrey moved to Hong Kong, where she became an honorary member of the prestigious Centre for Asian Studies at the University of Hong Kong. She passed away on June 9, 2020 at Adventist Hospital in Hong Kong, at 97 years of age.

At the University of Hong Kong, Audrey guided students in the writing of their graduate dissertations. Because she was born in China, Audrey had a life-long interest in the economic development of China, especially after Deng Xiaoping assumed power, and inaugurated his “Open Door” policy. Deng Xiaoping came to power at the famous Third Plenum of the 11th Central Committee in December 1978. He changed the Chinese Communist Party’s party line from “class struggle” to the “Four Modernizations.” Leader Deng became famous for the line

he is supposed to have said during his “southern tour” of 1992, “To get rich is glorious.” Audrey, economist that she was, was fascinated by this change of policy. How could a presumed avowed believer in Marxism make such an equally avowed capitalistic exclamation of praise for the market economy, Audrey wondered? Nonetheless, Audrey supported the economic development of China, if it brought about a better standard of living for the ordinary citizens of the country, who had suffered through innumerable economic disasters, such as famines, throughout their history.

Besides the policy of openness to a market economy in China, Deng Xiaoping also inaugurated a policy of freedom of religion, allowing Buddhist temples, Muslim mosques and Christian churches around the country to open up again. Fervent Catholic that she was, Audrey of course, got involved in the building or re-building of many Catholic churches, especially those located in her birthplace of Sichuan Province. The Catholic Church of China was just getting back on its feet, after being closed for about thirty years, from the anti-Rightist campaign of the late 1950s, through the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) to the release of many bishops, priests and Sisters from labor camps in the late 1970s. The released bishops, priests and Sisters were able to return to their dioceses and parishes, and take up missionary and pastoral work again.

Audrey realized that with the churches being closed for so many years, the Catholics may have forgotten the contents

of their faith. So, borrowing the method of the early Ming Dynasty Jesuits, like Matteo Ricci and Michael Ruggieri, she decided that publishing books about the faith and distributing them among the Catholics would help to renew their faith. She had a catechism used to instruct catechumens in the faith re-printed in simplified Chinese characters, and printed in a factory in Shenzhen to save money. She had thousands of copies of this catechism, as well as other catechetical material printed, and distributed to newly re-organized Catholic communities in China. If Audrey heard that someone from Hong Kong was going to China (it didn't matter where), they would get a call from Audrey asking them to carry her catechetical material to perceived needy parishes. Priests, Sisters and catechists in China could then use the printed word to explain the Catholic faith to believer and non-believer alike.

Audrey was also a prolific fundraiser. She raised money to re-build or renovate churches, after their 30-year period of closure. This was never more evident than after the Sichuan earthquake of May 12, 2008, which measured 7.9 on the Richter Scale. This was, after all, an area close to Audrey's heart. In fact the quake took place not too far from her birthplace. During that tragic event, 87,000 people died, including 5,335 school children, and 370,000 more people were injured. Thousands more lost their homes. Then Audrey's fund-raising efforts went into "overdrive." She collected money, first of all, to feed the hungry and to shelter the homeless. After that she turned to accepting donations

to rebuild destroyed churches. No one knows the total amount of money Audrey collected, but it must have been an extraordinary amount. For because of it, the Holy Father bestowed the “Pro Ecclesia et Pontifice” medal upon Audrey, and she was invited to become a Dame in the exclusive Catholic organization, the Knights of Malta.

There is no denying that Audrey had a special love for the Catholic Church of Sichuan. She visited Sichuan as much as she could, and looked upon such trips as a “home-coming.” She knew all the bishops, such as Bishop Duan Yinming of Wanxian, Luo Duxi of Leshan, Chen Shizhong of Yibin and Chen Gong’ao of Nanchong. She looked upon the young priests and Sisters of Sichuan as her own children. She contributed to their formation in the Chengdu Seminary and the Sisters convent in Leshan, both of which institutions Audrey helped build. Audrey will not be forgotten, but rather will long be lovingly remembered, by these “children” of hers in her beloved Sichuan Province.

Audrey died on June 9, 2020 in Adventist Hospital in Hong Kong aged 97 years. She has definitely heard these words of Our Lord: “Come you blessed of my Father, take possession of the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me to eat, thirsty, and you gave me to drink, sick and in prison, and you visited me.” And Audrey will have asked Our Lord: “Lord, when did I see you hungry, and feed you; when did

I see you thirsty and give a drink; when were you sick or in prison, and I visited you?” And the Lord will respond: “As long as you did it to one of these brothers or sisters of mine, you did it to me.”

At her funeral at St. Joseph’s Church on Garden Road, on the morning of June 26, 2020, Audrey received a send-off befitting a generous benefactor to both Church and people of China. Two Cardinals were among the 14 priests who concelebrated the Mass. Cardinal John Tong, Apostolic Administrator of the Catholic Diocese of Hong Kong, was the main celebrant, and Cardinal Joseph Zen, Emeritus Bishop of the diocese, gave the homily. Cardinal Tong, in his introduction, said that Audrey helped all Catholics, no matter if they adhered to the official or unofficial communities. Cardinal Zen, in his homily, praised Audrey as a brave woman, “who did what she could to improve the lives of others, and those ‘others’ were the Chinese people.” About 60 friends from all walks of life in Hong Kong society (dutifully separated because of the coronavirus) also attended the funeral Mass.

Audrey, thank you for a life well lived in charity for others. Keep asking God Our Father in your heavenly home to bestow His blessings on the Church of Sichuan and indeed upon the whole Church and people of China. May you rest in peace!