



*CHRISTIAN MISSIONERS TO CHINA
IMPERIALISTS or CHINA-LOVERS?*

by Elmer P. Wirth, M.M.

I think every Christian missionary who has left his family and loved ones (And what missionary would not agree that God's promise of a hundred-fold reward in this life is shown by the fact that his friends at home are more numerous and the mutual

affection deeper than it would ever have been had he not said "Yes" to the Lord's call to go forth to a foreign country?) feels uncomfortable and personally involved in the Lord's experience of rejection when we hear talks and read documents condemning the imperialist sins of ourselves or fellow-missioners who labored in China. I won't even quote them as a basis for my comments because everyone interested in China has heard or read them many times, and it is painful to review them again.

Even if we grant that individual mistakes and errors in judgment were made, it seems both un-christian and unreasonable to conclude from this that these people's motives were evil. It only shows them to be human and therefore imperfect. If some made mistakes or did wrong, it is christian to hate the wrong, but love and forgive the wrong-doer.

Most recently I have been interviewing our Maryknollers who served in China before Liberation. These interviews will be used in preparing a history of our work in China (1918-1950). Every man with whom I have spoken still has a deep love for China and the people with whom he worked. Personal stories abound about Christians weeping as the missioners were led away. "Who will care for our old and sick people? Who will teach us about God, bless our children and comfort us at the time of death?" Soldiers came secretly to bring them small gifts in prison as a token of gratitude for favors received. Others apologized for having to carry out government orders, assuring them that it was a question of politics, e.g. that President Truman had intensified the war in Asia by bombing Japan and opposing North Korea, but that as soon as the political atmosphere improved, they'd be welcomed back with open arms. Soldiers and even Party members who had been Christians came during the night for the sacraments. All of these China-lovers have tried to adjust to working in other areas of the world, probably eighty percent with overseas Chinese in some capacity because of their language ability and their undying love for their people of adoption. This hardly indicates imperialism and anti-Chinese feelings. Most of these men,

having been uprooted from their first love for the China Mainland, were willing to go anywhere in the world so long as they could continue to live with, love and serve Chinese. As the Pope pointed out in his landmark message of love for the Chinese while visiting the Philippines, it is a great tribute to China that her Christian citizens have been noteworthy for their integration into and contributions to christian communities all over the world. But these same men have personal scars resulting from the traumatic experience of being condemned for crimes against the people for whom they had publicly professed a willingness to live and die by their religious vows and overseas assignment in mission. Those now working in Hong Kong and Taiwan live with an added tension. They have adjusted to a new mission of service, often learning a new Chinese language, but what will happen to them if Hong Kong and Taiwan are reclaimed by the Mainland? Will they again be forced by the government to abandon their people, not because they are Christians, but because they are foreigners and the Chinese church demands independence? Will they have to seek out still other Chinese somewhere in the world and begin again? Will they have to go through another painful separation from the people for the love of whom they have sacrificed home, family, their native land and all else? It was probably more difficult to leave behind their adopted people because of a government order than it was to leave behind their own people because of what they interpreted as a call from the Lord to go forth to share the Gospel.

When not only your personal feelings of love for China are questioned, but testimony from many others who have worked there goes contrary to what is being said by authorities in China today about the motives of past missionaries, you want to cry out to anyone who will listen. If this is all we can do, if what is asked of us foreign Christians today by China, is to show our understanding, concern and love, then this is the best that can be done when conditions of history prevent us from actualizing our love through personal service. But let it be said clearly that the many former China missionaries I

have spoken with still show a deep, abiding and contagious love for China. Their former experience of being told, sometimes forcefully expelled physically, that despite their own convictions and personal motives for coming to China, they were really counter-revolutionary imperialists who were out to alienate the Chinese from their patriotism, has left them cautious of the present changes of the government's religious policy in China. They even counsel those of us who have not shared their experiences to be sure there is a firm basis and proof of policy changes before we speak too optimistically about the future for true religious freedom in China. Their experiences make open dialogue with us tense and difficult.

Perhaps none of our Maryknoll missionaries expressed this dedication to China as clearly and profoundly as an earlier missionary whose biography I have just read. Let me quote a few passages from it as it reinforces what I feel personally as a missionary to the Chinese of Taiwan and Hong Kong, and what many others without a dissenting voice have assured me are their sentiments also. The Catholic Church has assured us that these are the correct sentiments to have by declaring Fr. Joseph Freinademetz "Blessed," i.e. it has put its seal of approval on the holiness of his life and encouraged others to follow his inspiring example.

Fr. Joseph Freinademetz left his home in the beautiful Swiss Alps because he felt called to go forth in God's name to share the good news of the Gospel. He wrote of his leave-taking in these words:

"I will not try to describe for you the farewell scenes in my parental home. Each of you can imagine them for yourselves. One should never forget that the missionary, too, is like other men. He, too, has a sensitive heart within his breast. His thoughts and feelings are thoroughly human. He sees a good father, a dearly-loved mother, eight brothers and sisters - all suffering and in tears...But enough of that! I asked my father for his blessing and imparted my priestly

blessing to the whole family. At the altar we sealed our sacred bond. Then I left my beloved Abtei, perhaps never to see it again.¹

"I tell you honestly: not for 3000 kingdoms would I have been able to make the sacrifice of leaving homeland and friends in order to go forth forever into a new world. Only the love of Jesus and of immortal souls could bring me to do so."²

What did he think of his adopted people?

"I love my Chinese. I know the people, their language and their land as well as I do my own homeland. And if it should please God, I would like to work here for 70 years. I would offer my life a thousand times for them and in their midst I desire to be buried...I am almost more Chinese than Badian. I have no other wish than that these old bones may rest here among my yellow-skinned children of the Middle Kingdom...Even in heaven I shall remain a Chinese...A true Chinese missionary must love the Chinese."³

Later on he wrote to friends back home:

"I must confess that during my 23 year sojourn in China I have lost none of my love and admiration for the Chinese people. As a pagan people they are and remain ideal. It would be difficult, indeed, to find another nation that has so many meritorious characteristics. I love China and the Chinese. Among them I want to die and be buried."⁴

His wish was granted. Without ever having returned to his beloved homeland in 29 years, he died and was buried in China. On his deathbed he said in his farewell letters to friends and fellow-missioners in China that they should take good care of their beloved people because..."After all, we have come to serve them."⁵

Christians and fellow-missioners were sincere and profuse in their admiration and praise of Fr. Freinademetz. His own

superior, Bishop Henninghaus, wrote: "His most outstanding trait of character was a kind affable goodness. He had what every missionary is so much in need of - a kindness and a friendliness that never grows weary and that charms all hearts, an inexhaustible patience, noble, self-forgetful love. He was always equable."⁶ Cardinal Thomas Tien added: "All the Christians considered him to be a living saint. He is like Kungdse (Confucius), they said. Everything about him is good and perfect. He was always friendly, modest, humble. He spoke Chinese well. Whoever came into contact with him was deeply impressed and somehow drew comfort from his very presence..."⁷

In a word, Fr. Freinademetz was simply living out what the Church asks of all her missionaries in her Decree on the Missions, Ad Gentes, of Vatican II: "The missionary must be ready to stand by his vocation for a lifetime, and to renounce himself and all those whom he thus far considered as his own, and instead to become 'all things to all men.' "⁸

NOTES

1. Joseph Freinademetz, South Tyrol's Outstanding Missionary to the Far East, by Jakob Reuter, 1975. p. 12
2. Ibid., p. 15
3. Ibid., p. 41
4. Ibid., p. 41 and 42
5. Ibid., p. 69
6. Ibid., p. 53
7. Ibid., p. 76
8. Ad Gentes IV 24 and I Cor. 9,22

