

THE MONGOLIAN TERRITORY AND THE CHRISTIAN ENCOUNTER (PART I.)

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THE MONGOL EMPIRE IN THE 13TH CENTURY A.D.

INTRODUCTION

The first traces of Christianity in Mongolia - the vast territory beyond the Chinese Wall - are due to the apostolic work of Nestorian missionaries. Even after their missionary work had been suppressed in Tang China around 841 - 845, their little Christian communities lingered on in the Mongolian territory.

By the time the Mongolian tribes unified themselves under the leadership of the Khans, the Mongolian supreme leaders, there were different contacts with the West. Not only Nestorian missionaries with ties to their Persian world, but also Roman Catholic missionaries from the Western world came to visit them. The first place of contact was Karakorum. But when the Mongol Yuan Dynasty had come to power in the Chinese Empire, the missionaries even reached and settled in Khanbalic i.e. the city of the Great Khan. The well known Franciscan friar, John de Montecorvino, became the first archbishop and worked quite successfully in the newly established capital of the ruling Yuan Dynasty, which later became Beijing.

Despite their successful attempts, Christianity faded away with the Yuan Dynasty, and the reasons for this might be due to their limited access to foreign (i.e. Mongolian) circles and almost no contact with the Chinese community as such. Although they were tolerated to do their apostolic work, the Yuan Dynasty never accepted Christianity as its official religion or gave it undivided support. And as a final reason, we have to take in account that the ruling period of the Yuan Dynasty was rather short. When in 1368 the Chinese Ming Dynasty overthrew the Mongols, Christianity was wiped out, even more completely than it had after the fall of the Tang Dynasty. At the same time, commercial and cultural intercourse with Western Europe was, although newsworthy, very slight. The Chinese were scarcely aware of the existence of such a region, and the ideas both societies entertained about each other were hazy in the extreme. They were different worlds with totally different cultural realms and communications were too scarce to become a solid and sufficient network.

With the revival of Christian Missionary Work centered around Matteo Ricci and the group around him, the stress of missionary effort concentrated on the great centres like Beijing, Nanjing and Shanghai. The apostolic strategy of the Jesuit missionaries directed their appeal to the scholars of the well known centres.

This group of famous Jesuits like Ricci, Schall, Verbiest and others had positions as courtiers with high official ranks in the entourage of the last Ming and early Qing emperors. At that time, other missionary attempts were undertaken by either Dominican or Franciscan friars in coastal and inland China. However Mongolia was far beyond their reach. Most of these last group of missionaries reached China either from Macao or from the Philippines. Furthermore, their apostolic strategy focused on the masses instead of the method of the first groups of Jesuits.

When the great confrontation took place between the Imperial China and the Christian Missions, the future of Christianity looked very bleak. Christianity became an offence against the State and the imperial edict tolerated missionaries only in Beijing, Macao and later in Canton. Christian families went into hiding or were sent into exile to far away places such as the newly won territories of Xinjiang and Mongolia. (This happened at the beginning of the XVIIIth century).

A group of refugees found a hideaway in a village named Xiwanze, in the hidden valleys, north of the city of Kalgan. Sometimes Chinese priests had an opportunity to visit them, first the Jesuits, but later the Lazarist fathers. These Chinese priests, sometimes disguised as hawkers, visited these Christians scattered along the Great Wall, where they enjoyed comparative tranquillity denied elsewhere in the Empire to priests and faithful alike.

Steadily but slowly their number increased and the little hamlet Xiwanze had its first church around 1750. From the 1830's the Chinese and French Lazarists used this same village as a residence and it even became the centre of the Beijing diocese. Mongolia at that time (1838) had around 2,000 Christians and formed together with Manchuria a part of the Beijing

diocese.

In 1840 Mongolia was established as Mission Vicariate under the leadership of Msgr. Mouly CM., who in 1846 also became the Apostolic Administrator of Beijing. From that time a coadjutor Bishop Msgr. Deguin CM. had to take care of the Mongolian Vicariate.

But within two decades, a newly found Mission Society would arrive on the Chinese Mission field to share the apostolic work with the five existing mission Institutes i.e. Franciscans, Jesuits, Dominicans, Lazarist and the Foreign Missions of Paris.

NEW MISSION SOCIETY IN MONGOLIA

This new mission Institute, founded by the Belgian priest Theofiel Verbist and recruiting members either from the Belgian or Dutch diocesan clergy, had its headquarters in the small suburb of Brussels, named Scheut (Belgium). Hence the name "Scheut Fathers" although they officially are known as CICM Fathers. The official name of the Society is "Congregatio Immaculati Cordis Mariae".

A limited group of four missionaries under the leadership of founder Verbist left for the unknown world of China. After long and tiresome negotiations the Mongolian Vicariate was entrusted to them.

In December 1865 they arrived in the central mission station of Xiwanze from where they could spread their apostolic efforts over a territory stretching from the Yellow Sea in the East to the distant province of Xinjiang in the West. This same Mongolia was bounded by Siberia in the North while the Great Wall formed the southern line of demarcation. It was an area roughly 2,500 miles in length and 700 miles in breadth, including the sandy deserts of Gobi and Ordos, (i.e. an area nearly as large as China proper and also equal to one-third of Europe or half the area of the United States.) The population was estimated at 12 million, while the official letter from Rome in which Mongolia was trusted to this new CICM society mentioned a number of 7,000 christians.

The climate was rough; 40 degrees C. below zero was not ex-

ceptional in winter time, while the intense summer heat could rise to above 30 degrees C.. As a matter of fact while riding a camel or horse - the usual means of transport - in winter time, the rider had to protect himself against the northern winds howling in over the plateau and for that reason he had to wear an extra 20 to 25 pounds of clothing. This also suggests how easily many people fell victim yearly to the cold and the other miseries or calamities.

The Mongols themselves - nomads as they were - moved from place to place, searching with their cattle for grass and water, while Chinese peasants gradually encroached on the southern part of the plateau.

Besides the four foreign missionaries there was a group of six or seven priests, and these ten men were responsible for the immense territory.

The courageous father Theofiel Verbist - already in his forties - tried to consolidate the situation after the transfer of the Vincentian Fathers. Yearly reinforcements were coming in from Europe, while the Fathers in Xiwanze continued the seminary training, and in that way they could provide the small and very scattered Christian communities either with visiting or sometimes with resident priests.

By that time, the founder Verbist had quite suddenly passed away, but his task was eventually taken over by Msgr. Bax, who became Apostolic Vicar in 1874. At the request of expelled Christians in faraway Xinjiang, CICM took responsibility for the province of Gansu, including this Xinjiang territory. The number of priests - Chinese and foreign - was not more than thirty. The year was 1878.

In the Mongolian territory proper, certain districts were taking shape, so that by 1883/1884 this gigantic Mongolian Vicariate was divided into three dioceses: Central Mongolia (Xiwanze), Eastern Mongolia and Southwestern Mongolia.

The number of Christians in these three ecclesiastical regions might have been around 18,000 and the number of Chinese priests reached a dozen.

SOME CONCLUSIONS:

In this period of twenty odd years, the new mission society CICM and established credibility in this immense Mongolian territory. Furthermore, there was conviction that these beginnings, after years of consolidation, could become a real focus for the surrounding villages and the people living there.

Especially in the newly erected Vicariate of Southwest Mongolia, the church had laid down the first lines for a social apostolate by irrigating land and building canals so that soil which was originally barren, could now be turned into a fertile living place for new communities.

On this and other developments, we hope to come back in the next article.

