

THE MONGOLIAN TERRITORY AND THE CHRISTIAN ENCOUNTER (Part III)

by Leo Van Den Berg

Note: Due to an unforeseen absence from Hong Kong, the author was unable to finish this third and final segment of his article until now. The first and second portions can be found in vol. 4 and 5.

Introduction

At the turn of the century, the Boxer Rebellion confronted the missionary movement throughout Imperial China, including the Mongolian Territory. This Rebellion played havoc with the Church, which was still in its pioneering stage. After it was put down, missionary policy geared itself towards reconstruction and the task of rebuilding the scattered Christian communities into a more profound consolidation.

This work of reconstruction occupied the Church for the greater part of the opening decades of this century. However, by the early 1920's, the focus of the apostolate shifted more towards the indigenous character of the local Churches. This happened not only in the more remote region of Mongolia, but also throughout China in general. In 1922, a Regional Major Seminary was founded at Datong (大同) in Shanxi (山西), the first of its kind in mainland China. It provided the Church with an excellent facility for the formation of the local clergy. At the same time, local vocations to religious life were encouraged and channelled into the various religious communities of men and women then working in the Territory.

Another example of this shift in policy took place in the pastoral setting where genuine participation and co-responsibility slowly became a reality. Heavy stress was placed on the training and the formation of the laity, especially through a Catholic School system and also educational and

formative programmes in local parishes. Such a policy proved its effectiveness when during the internment of foreign missionaries by the Japanese Occupation Forces in 1943, the local Church in the Mongolian Territory showed all the signs of assuming full responsibility for its own stewardship.

The period from 1900 to 1920

The great turmoil of the year 1900, brought about by the Boxer Rebellion, has been the theme of many writings. Basically, it was an outburst of anti-foreign feeling that swept through large parts of Imperial China like a ravaging storm. Perhaps because their obvious presence made them so easily identifiable, the missionaries and their Chinese fellow-Christians became the chief targets.

Native hostility towards Christianity in China remains a complex and complicated issue. However explained, this hostility had been growing for many years, and when the pent-up rage finally erupted into violence, many innocent victims on both sides were sacrificed.

It cannot be stated often enough that the missionaries were by and large well-intentioned people, dedicated to the spiritual and temporal well-being of the communities in which they lived and worked. In Mongolia, as elsewhere, they saw their basic purpose as evangelical, to bring the Good News to the remotest parts of the world. Along with this spiritual motive, they worked also for the temporal well-being of the people. Through medical, educational and social programmes, they tried to improve the lot of the people, especially the poor. Nothing in the human condition was alien to them.

However, the missionaries were inclined to turn a blind eye to the human weaknesses of their converts, an attitude seldom extended to include the non-Christian community. This habit of favoritism, especially when it involved protecting individual Christians from the legal judgment of local courts, naturally caused resentment among the local people.

The questions that must be raised concerning the missionaries of the past period are the same questions we must put to missionaries of every age, including our own. How profound was their understanding of the ancient culture, including the beliefs, customs, and rituals of traditional China? Was theirs an authentic respect for the innate Chineseness of the people with whom they shared their lives? And if having both knowledge and respect, how far were they able and willing to open themselves to grasp God's salvific activity in the framework of that culture? The split

between the 'Christian' world and the "Non-Christian' world was very wide at that time.

It became almost an instinctive reaction on the part of missionaries, carrying with them, as they did, the religious perspectives prevalent in their own countries at that time, to place distance between their own values and the traditional values that unobtrusively had ruled and regulated Chinese life in every particular for countless centuries. The fierce opposition with which Chinese society responded in the Boxer Movement was, therefore, understandable.

Unfortunately another element clouded even more the picture of Christianity in Imperial China. In the background there was always the military presence of the Foreign Powers, ready - sometimes even eager - to be used at any time to defend the missionary Church. It was of little concern that this kind of backing was even used against the expressed wishes of some missionaries.

For our present purpose it is relatively unimportant what finally occasioned the outbreak of violence, the manipulation of officials, the scheming of vested political interests or whatever. What resulted in the final collision of these forces was terror and havoc throughout the Empire. In the Mongolian Territory, several thousand Christians were massacred, including one bishop - Msgr. Ferdinand Hamer (韓忒理主教) and eleven priests. Villages were razed, mission stations destroyed and the Christians were scattered. Setbacks to missionary work were many and serious. When peace was finally restored, the Foreign Powers forced the Imperial Government to pay indemnities. The Mission Churches were "reimbursed" for their losses. This payment of indemnities became another source of division within the communities.

In retrospect it is difficult to judge the wisdom of the Churches' decision to accept reimbursement. Certainly there had been historical precedents for such action, and some kind of compensation seemed to be required by social justice, however, whether the Churches - calling themselves God's instruments of Salvation - should have accepted the indemnities, forced upon China from outside and therefore seen as part of China's humiliation, is still not yet an easy question to answer.

After all these events, mission policy in the Mongolian Territory addressed itself to reconstruction. The pioneering Church worked to re-strengthen the local communities, rebuilding on the foundations of the past. The number of Christians began to increase, mission stations multiplied, new religious congregations were established, native clergy

On a visit to China in September 1980, the author (right rear) met Bishop Wang Xueming (front centre) and some priests of the recently reopened church in Huhehot, capital of Inner Mongolia.



doubled in number and everywhere there was a deepening of Christian life. Much attention was given to the training of catechists. These men and women became the "arms" of the Church reaching into the outlying areas. The CICM Fathers, recognizing the value of a Christian education from experience in their own countries, set about the establishment of a Catholic school system with long range goals. A Teacher's College was started in the flourishing mission of Nanhaoqian (南壕塹), present day Shangyi (尚義). This College was perhaps the first of its kind in the Mongolian Territory, which now had become part of the newborn Republic of China. The College provided a constant flow of good teachers to the expanding school system. Plans for the establishment of more educational institutes were laid, even the idea of a Catholic University was beginning to take shape, albeit in embryonic form.

However, the outbreak of World War I in Europe brought to a halt plans for further expansion. Financial resources practically dried up and fresh manpower, especially from Europe, became unobtainable. In the Mongolian Territory, 'self-reliance' became the watchword for survival, and during this most difficult time, the faith of the Christians carved its own path.

Looking back over this period, it must be said that the Gospel

Message brought a spiritual liberation to many people in this remote region of North China. The emphasis was on the spiritual. However, the Church, realizing its redemptive mission to the whole of man, did work to build up a more stable life for the economically weak and poor as well. Although needed structural change did not take place as a result of the Church's efforts, nevertheless some changes for the better were seen in the physical conditions of the people.

The work of the Church met with encouraging success among the increasing number of Chinese migrants, who had immigrated from outside provinces into the Mongolian Territory. The impact of the Church among the indigenous Mongol population, however, turned out to be successful only in certain places. The center of the Mongolian mission activity was Poro Balgason (城川) in the Ningxia Vicariate (寧夏). After many years of hard labour, this community grew from humble beginnings to number over 1200 Mongol Catholics. Three Mongol priests trace their Christian origin to this community.

The period from 1920 to 1950

After World War I, the mission fields under the care of the CICM Fathers were divided. The Province of Gansu (甘肅省) together with the territory of Ili (伊犁) in Xinjiang (新疆) - then known as an independent mission - were placed under the charge of other Catholic missionary societies. All the available manpower of the CICM Fathers became concentrated in Mongolia proper, and also in the newly acquired mission of Datong (大同), Shanxi (山西).

It was here in Datong that the First Regional Major Seminary in mainland China was established. Seminarians were drawn from the surrounding Vicariates, and a new faculty was selected. Direct responsibility was in the hands of Father Constant Daems (湯神父), the former Prefect Apostolic of Southern Gansu. The board of directors was made up of the Mongolian Territory's Apostolic Vicars. Here basic formation and training of seminarians was carried out, preparing them for their future stewardship roles in the local Churches throughout Mongolia.

It is important to remember that the Seminary at Datong was organized according to the strict directives of the Congregation of the Propaganda Fidei in Rome. It was the heyday of Canon Law, and all the rules and regulations governing seminary life and lifestyle were spelled out to the last detail. A major objective of this six year-long formation was to inculcate a strong sense of loyalty to the hierarchical aspect of the Church. Such an education often appeared exclusive and intransigent in

emphasis. This exaggerated form of loyalty could cause deep conflicts within people who had a strong tradition of self-awareness and their own rigid patterns of life based on a deep loyalty to their own culture and to their own people. Some local priests and foreign missionaries warned of the dangers of such an unbalanced approach.

To discuss the weaknesses of the past from the vantage point of the present may seem like cheap criticism, but such is not the intention. Nor do we wish to single out the Datong Seminary, for the same views and attitudes predominated throughout the whole Church during the historical period under discussion. The universality of the Church, that catholicity which is one of its marks, was frequently interpreted in terms of absolute uniformity. This same pressure to conform made it difficult to remain open to diverse cultures, to different value systems and to the need for local Churches to define their cultural identity. In fact these issues were hardly raised at all.

One wishes that there could have been a genuine openness to the variety and diversity in man, his cultures and value systems, even values that seem alien to those of traditional Western Christianity. Would not this have been a sign of a sincere searching for an authentic Incarnation of the Good News within the Family of Man? With the Second Vatican Council came an openness of spirit, a rediscovered flexibility, a genuine willingness to adapt differences, and along with these a rejection of any attitudes of superiority and condescension in the work of evangelization. Strict Christian formation caused a separation between Christians and non-Christians in Mongolia. It should be immediately added, however, that the innate pragmatic attitude of the Chinese people safeguarded them from total isolation. Traditional Chinese culture had its own perennial resources to deal with scattered invasions from the outside.

The general spirit and form of seminary formation at Datong was mirrored in the ordinary parish life of the Christians in the Mongolian Territory. A mission policy that focused on developing and deepening the spiritual life followed the same strict approach in the Christian communities. A glance at religious services held on an ordinary Sunday in an average parish might serve as an illustration.

The Christians gathered in the early morning for a lengthy Morning Prayer Service, to be followed by on-going study of Christian doctrine. The latter was modeled on the traditional Chinese style of learning, an explanation by the priest or catechist, and stress on memorization of the catechism. During the Eucharistic Celebration - the Mass was still in Latin - both prayers and songs were well adapted to the Chinese

culture, so that it is correct to state that despite the language barrier, there was real participation. As a matter of fact even today in the re-opened Churches in China they still stick to this tradition. The Mass as such was followed by a lengthy prayer of Thanksgiving. Often the Stations of the Cross concluded the morning service. The Christians would gather again in the afternoon to chant the Rosary, to listen to a long sermon on some important part of Catholic doctrine, and then to bring the Sunday services to a close there was Adoration of the Most Blessed Sacrament and evening prayers.

The above was common practice in many parish churches and mission stations of the Mongolian Territory, and most likely in many other parts of China. A heavy stress was placed on personal sanctification as the essential obligation of Christian life. In Chinese society the community always took priority over the individual, and the proper function of individual action was derived from the community and expressed as one element of the community as a whole. Great stress was placed on conformity to community traditions and values. Could not the above mentioned emphasis on strictly personal sanctification easily lead to a disdain for the world and for so-called mundane matters? In other words, a spirituality which is not firmly rooted in this world, is only fragmentary, and not aimed at the salvation of the whole man. Such a spirituality is unable to address itself readily to the social implications of the Church's doctrine and an involvement leading to serious and efficient efforts for structural change in society.

In the 2000 year history of Christianity, we Christians have to discover again and again new insights into God's calling of mankind. A careful balance must be maintained, not overstressing one to the exclusion of the other, in the unending search for authentic liberation and salvation for all God's people. In this post-Vatican era, not only have theological perspectives broadened, but also pastoral practices with new approaches have been introduced. These include an increasing sensitivity and willingness to listen to all the needs of mankind on every level, and also to support the need for structural change.

This marks another phase in the developing history of evangelization. However, each phase is necessarily time-bound and events have to be seen and judged in the context of the time in which they occurred. To use the present to pass judgement on the past is not the proper use of history, which is a selective record of past experience that offers insights into present realities and future possibilities.

For this reason, when we observe what was accomplished in the

Mongolian Territory from 1860 to 1949, the steady growth of the Christian communities there, we can have nothing but the highest admiration for the people involved. The times were far from easy. Natural calamities, floods, famines, the eternal threat of bandits, the constant danger during the war-lord period, the Sino-Japanese War, and then the Civil War, made life extremely precarious. Fear and insecurity were rampant. And during those troubled years, the Church with its message of salvation became for many a beacon of hope in the darkest of times.

When in 1943, the foreign missionaries were interned by the Japanese Occupation Forces, the situation looked very bleak. The local Church was urged to take full responsibility for its own stewardship. Local priests, religious and laity fulfilled all expectations. Certain territories had already been transferred to the care of the local Church in the early 1930's. Now the remaining Vicariates became their sole responsibility. During these difficult years, not only did the local Christian community survive but even expanded. Certainly this was a great accomplishment, doubtless blessed by the grace of Heaven.

In 1945, when World War II ended, the foreign missionaries who had been interned expected to return to their former missions. They were eager and open to share in the continuing work of the local Church. The majority of the missionaries were able to reach their destination, but only after much difficulty.

At the same time, the Eighth Route Army of the People's Republic swept over the grasslands and broad plains of Mongolia on its way to northeastern China. The young soldiers, deeply convinced of the mission of liberation to their fellow countrymen, tolerated no obstacles which might lay in their path. Christianity, so identified in their minds with the West and its history of oppression in China, was seen as one of those obstacles. Furthermore, the world-wide split between Christianity and Marxism was deep and sharp indeed. No dialogue was possible. The well-known Marxist catchphrase: 'Religion is the opium of the people' had only reinforced the intransigence of both sides and the gap looked unbridgeable.

During the first years of the People's Republic the exodus of foreign missionaries began. The consequences are well known. If suffering and a deep sense of loss were to be the lot of the exiled, it was also shared by their fellow Christians who remained behind. The world they had lived in, and lived for, had come to an end. By the mid-fifties it looked as if the whole missionary enterprise, a hundred years of labour, was to be erased. However, the words of Christ remain: "Faith is like a mustard seed..."

At the time of the exodus of the foreign missionaries from the Mongolian Territory, there were approximately 250,000 Christians and 250 local priests. In terms of numbers the apostolic enterprise may be labeled a success, especially when contrasted with statistics from other parts of China. Statistics, however, present only part of the reality. Much more important is the authentic presence and the witness of faith as a living and dynamic reality.

As for the Church, striving for an authentic inculturation of the Gospel in spite of its heavy Western tradition, it may have to discover that the kind of faith which will prevail, is a faith called Hope.

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