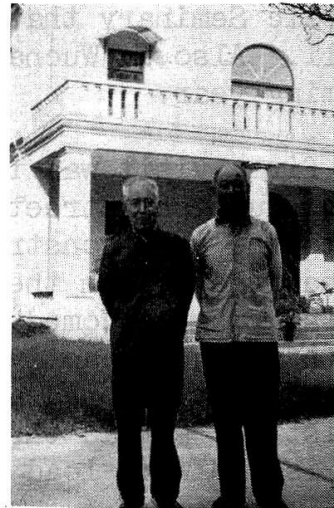


# THE CHURCHES OF WUHAN:

## leaves from a traveler's notebook

by Duxing  
translated by Peter Barry



*On the left, Fr. Liu Muhui, the assistant pastor of the Catholic Church in Wuhan.*

While touring through China this summer, I found myself, more by chance than design, in the tri-city area of Wuhan. My first inclination was to take a quick look around before continuing my journey. But since I had time to spare, I decided, instead, to pay a visit to some of the local Church organizations. It was an opportunity to initiate a personal relationship with Wuhan Christians that I hoped would continue even after my return to Hong Kong.

Wuhan is made up of the three cities of Hankou, Hanyang and Wuchang. Not only is Wuhan the provincial capital of Hubei, but also, because of its favorable geographical location, it is the economic and communications centre of the Province. Wuhan is at that point where the Han Shui flows into the Ching Jiang, and one can journey by boat all the way to Chongqing in the west or eastward to Shanghai and the East China Sea. Such a journey takes one through some of Central China's main riverports: Shashi, Yichang, Wushan, Xuanyang and Fendu when traveling west; and Jiujiang, Anqing, Nanjing and Jinjiang when traveling east. Wuhan is also the half-way point on the Beijing-Guangdong railroad line. With such accessibility by land and water, it is easy to understand why Wuhan is a major hub for traffic and commerce in the Central Plains.

Perhaps owing to its importance as a communications centre, religious activities have been, to a certain extent, allowed to resume in Wuhan during the past few years. Hankou has one Protestant and one Catholic Church now opened to the public for worship. In Wuchang, there

is a Catholic Seminary that will receive its first class of seminarians in the Fall. Also in Wuchang, another Protestant Church plans to open in the coming year.

My first visit was to the Protestant Rong Guang Church, which can be found on Huangshi Street in Hankou. The Church building is most pleasing to the eye, constructed as it is from dark, red bricks that glisten when they catch the rays of the setting sun. Here I met Pastor Xiong Keming, who welcomed me warmly. Pastor Xiong is 73 years old, in good health and quite active. He is Pastor-in-Charge (altogether there are six pastors stationed at the Church) of a flock that numbers about 3,000 Christians spread throughout the Wuhan area. You can well imagine how heavy is the work load of these ministers, all of whom are advanced in years.

Pastor Xiong informed me that during the Cultural Revolution, the Church was used as a printing factory, but now the property has been returned by the government. Presently, there are two worship services here each Sunday, while Christians in the countryside continue the practice of meeting in each other's homes. The Pastors of Rong Guang are frequently invited to preside at the services held in these 'house churches'.

With the reopening of the Church, the number of Christian believers is on the increase, and several young people have expressed a desire to get more involved in pastoral work. Last year, two of them were sent to Nanjing's Union Theological College for further training, and this year five more have already passed the entrance examinations for the new term. One of them is a young girl. Upon graduation, these young people will return to Wuhan to enter the pastoral ministry. They will go a long way in lightening the workload of the present pastors.

While I was at the Church, I also met a woman whose family name is Hu. She is about 60 years old and one of several lay catechists assisting the pastors in their work. Her particular responsibility was to see to the organization of the day to day religious activity of the parish.

After leaving Pastor Xiong, I again took to the streets, this time in search of the local Catholic Church. I finally found it on Shanghai Road. (Among Catholic residents of the neighborhood, it is known as the "Shanghai Road Catholic Church".) Upon entering the main gate, you find two buildings, the first is the Diocesan Centre which

houses the offices and living quarters of the Bishop (this being the Cathedral Parish of the Wuhan Diocese); the second, to the left of the Centre, is the Cathedral Church itself. Erected first in 1876, it has been renovated many times since. Built of plain grey stone, it appears old and even severe in its simplicity, but it exudes a certain peacefulness and tranquility, despite the fact that the surrounding district is one of the city's noisiest and busiest. Father Liu Muhui met me at the gate and after explaining that he was the Assistant Parish Priest, (the Parish Priest Father Ma Jun being away on business) he led me into the Cathedral to pray. He then took me on a tour of the buildings. He politely asked if I would like to meet the Bishop, Bishop Dong Guangqing, but I excused myself, due to the limited time. Bishop Dong was among the first group of Chinese Bishops elected and consecrated by the local Church itself. April of this year marked the 25th Anniversary of his consecration.

Father Liu said that each morning the Eucharist is celebrated in the Cathedral. Attendance varies from between one and two hundred Christians. On Sundays, the average attendance at the three Masses is about 700. There is also a Cathedral choir that leads the singing. Then Father Liu told me about the new seminary at Mount Hua Yuan in Wuchang. It is a Regional Seminary for South China, training candidates for the priesthood not only for the Diocese of Wuhan but also for the Provinces of Hubei, Hunan, Guangdong, Guangxi and Hunan. Classes open this Fall. The Wuhan Diocese has recommended 18 young men for enrollment, but at the time of our conversation it had not yet been determined how many of them would be accepted. There is also a church attached to the Mount Hua Yuan Seminary for the convenience of the Catholics living there.

In talking with Father Liu, I learned that he is originally from Hebei, and also that he is 66 years old. It came as no surprise that he showed so much concern about the Seminary. He emphasized the need for a lengthy period of training, at least five or six years, to insure a solid foundation for the future priests of the Wuhan Diocese. In the meantime, Father Liu continues to lead a very active life, shouldering many responsibilities and putting a great amount of vitality into his work.

Now that I have returned to Hong Kong, I feel that I made the right choice in breaking my tour to spend some time with Christians who live out their commitment in quite different circumstances than my own. The brief encounter has given me much food for thought.