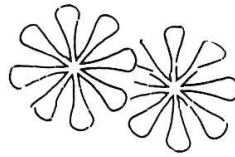


# A Pleasant Surprise in Fushun

Elmer Wurth

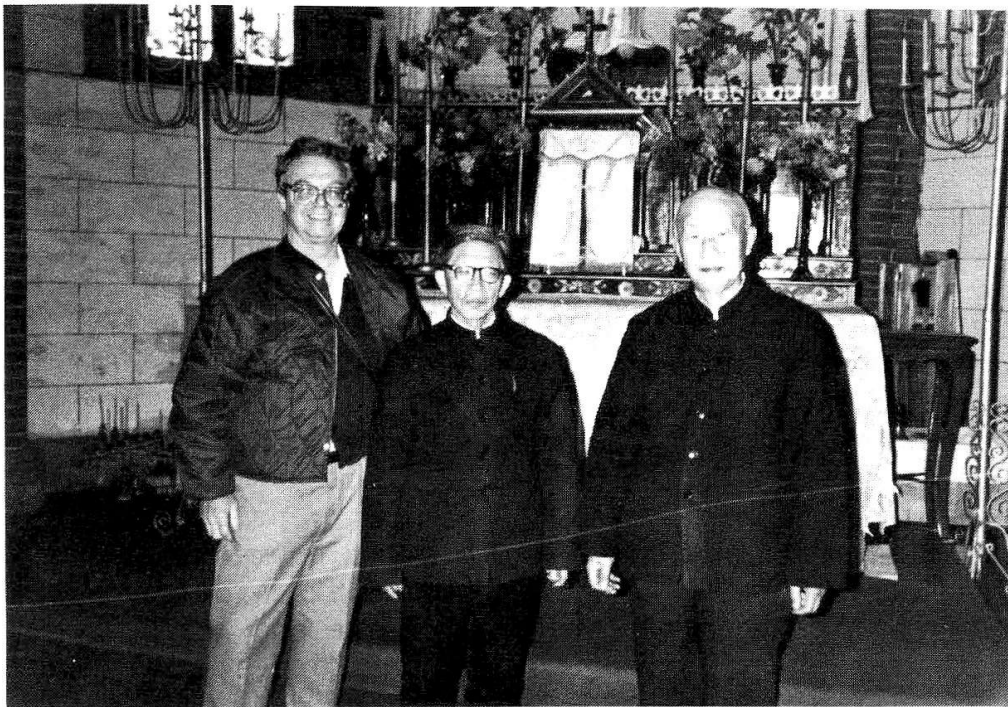


It's quite natural that China, a land of one billion people and constantly shifting political, economic and religious realities, should offer visitors many surprises. After several previous visits to China, I should have been ready for nearly anything, but I wasn't really ready for the surprise that awaited us at the gates of St. Joseph's church in Fushun, Northeast China.

In preparation for the Bicentennial of Catholicism in Korea, Fr. Gerard Hammond, M.M., Vicar-General of the Diocese of Cheungju, Korea, and I went to Beijing to search for records of Lee Seung Hoon, the first Korean to be baptised a Christian. He had taken instructions while with his father who was on duty with the Korean embassy in Beijing. When Seung Hoon returned to Korea in 1784, he personally instructed and baptized several thousand people before the first missionary priest was sent from Beijing to minister to this new lay Christian community. Seung Hoon was martyred the following year. We also looked for records of any written communication between the Church in China and the Church in Korea, which at that time was a part of the Beijing Diocese. We then took pictures of the city gates through which the Korean delegations for centuries had entered Beijing to pay tribute to the emperor. We also wanted to discuss the possibility and feasibility of the Korean Church's offering some public recognition to the Church in China for sending personnel and other assistance to them in those early and difficult days. Fr. James Zhu, the first Chinese priest to be sent to Korea, died a martyr in 1795 and, along with Lee Seung Hoon, is on the list of Christians being proposed to Rome for beatification. Were there any extant records about him? Would a few of Fr. Zhu's descendants, along with representatives of the Beijing churches where the earliest baptisms of

Koreans took place, honor the Korean church by making a pilgrimage to Korea at the close of the Bicentennial celebrations? In short, to prepare for the celebrations in honor of their new saints, canonized on May 6, 1984 in Seoul by Pope John Paul II, and to get background information about those who will hopefully receive a similar honor in the future, we were asked by the Korean Bishops' Commission to find out something about the roots of the Korean church in China. (Fr. Zhu, Lee Seung Hoon and other early martyrs in Korea were not included in the list of names for recent cononization because of the difficulty in obtaining documents about their heroic lives and deaths. Our trip was part of this search for more accurate information.

After our research and discussions in Beijing, we visited Shenyang, Fushun, Jilin, Changchun and Harbin. But it was the surprise that awaited us in Fushun that I now wish to share with you in this brief travel account.



*Inside Assumption Church, Jilin.  
From left to right :  
E. Wurth, Bishop Lin,  
Fr. Li.*

We informed the tourist representatives at the Hubian Binguang in Fushun that we were Christians interested in the development of religion in China. Would it be possible to visit any churches, Buddhist temples or Moslem mosques? When we told them further that we were priests, they informed us that the government had recently given the Catholic Church property back to the believers, but that since there were now so few who believed, it had not yet been decided whether or not the church would be

reopened for worship. Could we just see the buildings then? We thought we'd take a few pictures and be on our way. As it turned out, we found much more than church buildings.

St. Joseph's, the former Cathedral for the Diocese of Fushun, was now a part of the Jilin Diocese after church territorial boundaries were changed along the lines of civil divisions. The Diocese was formerly under the jurisdiction of Bishop Raymond A. Lane, one of our fellow-Maryknollers. After the missionaries were asked by the Japanese government to leave in the 1940's, Maryknoll had almost no news of the church of Fushun for these forty years.



*Outside St. Joseph's  
Church in Fushun*

*Back Row left to  
right :  
J. Hammond, Fr. Qin,  
E. Wurth, Fr. Zhao.  
Front Row :  
Five sisters*

As we entered the church grounds, we were met by Fr. Pius Qin who invited us into the rectory above the church. To our great surprise, Fathers Paul Cui and Peter Zhao were there to greet us. Then twelve elderly women filed in and Fr. Qin introduced them as the remaining members of the Sisters' Community.

We spent several pleasant hours talking about the Maryknoll priests and Sisters they had known. Several albums were brought out and the Sisters happily pointed out pictures of themselves as novices or young Sisters with the Maryknollers of forty to nearly sixty years ago. They wanted to know about all of them and so we brought each other up to date on happenings in Fushun, other parts of China and Maryknollers around the

world, many of whom have died during the intervening years. They said that they had been through very difficult times, but that they hoped things would now improve. Their reception for us the first Maryknollers they had seen in nearly forty years, was genuine and warm.

Among the many topics covered during our most enjoyable visit was an account of how the first Maryknollers had come to Fushun in 1926. After a few years of work, there were two Chinese churches and one Japanese church in the city, and more than twenty in the area that was formerly the Fushun diocese. The only two to be reopened so far are St. Joseph's and another church in Dairen. They told us the very moving story of how they regained their church and reopened it for worship. Representatives of the government and the Catholic Patriotic Association had asked Fr. Cui in 1979 if the Catholics wanted the church back. When he indicated that they certainly would be happy to start again to worship as a Christian community, he was informed that if there were still twenty believers, the government would return the church to be refurbished for religious use. Fr. Cui, the pastor, said that they had been out of contact with their believers for so long that he was not sure if there were that many. Through a survey it was quickly learned that there were many more. From the rent money they received for the past twenty years for the former bishop's house and diocesan offices, the church was repaired and beautifully redecorated. More than two hundred of the faithful attended the first Mass, celebrated on Christmas of 1980. As news spread that the church was reopened, the number of Sunday worshippers steadily increased. Now more than two thousand worship in the renovated church each weekend. Of these believers, nearly one-fourth are young people. This would indicate that they were instructed and baptized by their families during the years that the church was closed. Fr. Zhao joined Frs. Cui and Qin only last year after his ordination at the age of 54.

When I asked if there were any young people interested in becoming priests and nuns to work with them, Fr. Qin said that there was a great interest in religious vocations, especially to the Sisterhood. There are already five young women in Fushun who want to enter the convent and many more in the countryside. There are also several young men who have indicated that they intend to become priests, but they are not yet qualified to enter the seminary in Shenyang. The whole atmosphere of the Fushun Christian community gave the impression that after experiencing what must have seemed like a death, the people were ready and eager to celebrate the Easter Resurrection mystery. We were happy for all of them and for the privilege of sharing in their joy.