



Bishop Luo Wenzao

by Anthony Lam



A Bright Star in the History of the Catholic Church in China

Three hundred years ago this year, in 1685, a young Franciscan bishop, Mgr. Bernardino della Chiesa, arrived in Guangzhou after covering the many thousands of miles between Rome and China. Delegated by a brief of His Holiness Pope Innocent XI, della Chiesa's mission was to find an aged Chinese priest, Luo Wenzao, and when he should do so, regardless of time or place, ordain Luo as a bishop. At that time, Luo Wenzao was the first, and also the only, Chinese priest. He then became the first Chinese bishop at the consecration ceremony which took place in Guangzhou on April 8, 1685. Many missionaries, including Franciscans, Dominicans, and Jesuits, attended the ceremony. Eleven years previously, another Pope, Clement X, had already nominated Luo Wenzao as vicar apostolic of Nanjing.

It took eleven years from the first appointment until the actual ordination. No less dramatic a story is Father Luo's personal history. Luo Wenzao was born into a devout Buddhist family in Fu An County, Fujian Province between the years 1611 and 1615 (the exact date escapes us). He was baptized a Catholic by Father Antonio de Sancta Maria, OFM in 1633. Luo joined the Dominican Order in the Philippines in 1650 and was given the name Lopez there. In 1654, during a period of 33 days from May 29 to June 30, Luo Wenzao received tonsure, the four minor orders, subdiaconate and diaconate. On July 4, 1654, Luo was ordained as the first Chinese priest.

In 1664, Yang Guangxian, a Qing government official, stirred up a persecution against the Catholic faith. All the foreign missionaries in China were detained, and by the following year, were confined to Guangzhou. No missionary activity was allowed. So during the following years, Father Luo alone took up the responsibility for the pastoral care of the faithful, as well as carrying out missionary activity. In this effort he travelled through the 11 provinces of Guangdong, Fujian, Jiangxi, Zhejiang, Jiangsu, Anhui, Hunan, Hubei, Shandong, Shanxi and Sichuan. He not only encouraged timid Catholics to stand firm in the face of persecution, but he also baptized 2,500 new converts. Father Luo's accomplishments gained him the respect of all the missionary orders throughout the Far East. Bishops from other regions, such as Macao, Vietnam and the Philippines, recommended him to the Holy Father as a possible candidate for the episcopacy. Thus in January, 1674 Pope Clement X appointed Luo Wenzao bishop of Nanjing and vicar of the five provinces of Hunan, Hubei, Shandong, Shanxi and Shaanxi, as well as of Korea.

Upon hearing the news of his appointment, Father Luo's first response was to consider himself unworthy, and he tried to avoid it. Later convinced that he should accept the post, Luo however met opposition from an unexpected quarter. Father P. Antonio Calderon, provincial superior of the Dominican Order in Manila, disapproved of Luo's appointment for the following reasons:

1. The letters of appointment by the two Popes had not yet officially arrived in Manila.

2. Luo did not have sufficient qualifications in philosophy and theology to handle the task.

3. Luo supported the Jesuit view on the Chinese Rites.

4. Since foreign missionaries enjoyed the support and protection of the governments of their native countries, only they should be named bishops. The time was not yet ripe for a Chinese priest to be appointed a bishop in China.



The first two points appear to be nothing more than obstructionism. However, the latter two points showed that Luo was an outstanding person of his time. His timely insights about indigenization were justified over the years.

After reviewing this period of Chinese Catholic Church history some thoughts come to mind. First, in the late 17th century, in spite of there being only one Chinese priest, at least two Popes displayed a strong inclination to make him a bishop. The Popes showed their good will and sincerity in establishing local church leadership in China by raising Luo Wenzao to the episcopacy.

Secondly, Luo Wenzao saw the need for training many more Chinese priests. At the same time he saw that Latin was oftentimes an insurmountable hurdle to the ordination of local priests. Once Luo appealed to the Holy See for exemption from learning Latin for twelve Catholic intellectuals who had all the qualifications for priesthood except ability in this foreign language. Had Luo's appeal been successful, the Catholic Church in China might now be in a totally different situation. During his lifetime Luo Wenzao regretablely ordained only three Chinese priests. These were Wu Yushan, one of the six great painters of the early Qing period, Wan Qiyuan and Liu Yunde, all Jesuits. Luo's viewpoint regarding Latin should help the church consider if there are any other impediments to priestly ordination which could easily be dispensed with today.



Thirdly, politics and warfare should not interrupt missionary activity. In the second half of the 17th century, Fujian Province was the main battlefield between the army of the Qing government and the forces of the Ming loyalist general Zheng Chenggong. However, Father Luo was able to pass freely through Fujian and along the south China coast. He even travelled twice to Taiwan while the war was going on. Zheng's Ming administration acknowledged Luo's priestly identity and the Qing authorities did him no harm because

he was Chinese. Thus political and military affairs did not halt pastoral work. Actually, religious activity should not be related in any way to politics or military affairs, nor need they be. However, throughout history we see many examples of missionary work coming to a halt because of religion's artificial links to political factors.

Luo Wenzao's ordination as bishop is an unique chapter in the history of the Catholic Church in China. The Chinese church had to wait over 200 years, until 1926, before any more Chinese bishops were consecrated. Nevertheless, Luo Wenzao's life and priestly work in late 17th century China were a sign of greater things to come in the Chinese Catholic Church. In the history of indigenization in the Chinese church, Luo Wenzao is our star glimmering in the early dawn.



Correction:

The title of the article by William Dockery in Tripod, #25, p.98, "Christian Missions in 18th Century China: Book Review" should be corrected to read "Christian Missions in 19th Century China: Book Review". Apologies to the author and readers.