

The Church in Fog City:

Notes on a Trip to Chongqing

by Anthony Lam

Translated by Peter Barry

There are many ways to address the city of Chongqing, the war-time capital of China. In the past it was called Yu Zhou because of its location at the junction of the Yu and Yangtze Rivers; it has been called Mountain City because it nestles in mountainous terrain; since on winter mornings you can hardly see your hand in front of your face because of the dense fog, it also is known as "Fog City".

Taking advantage of a winter vacation at the beginning of this year, Father Pierre Jeanne, Assistant-director of Holy Spirit Study Centre, and I went to Sichuan Province with the intention of traveling by boat down the Yangtze to visit the famous three-gorges that are located along this section of the river. We were to embark at Chongqing, which, according to present administrative districting, is the most populous city in the nation, and, of course, we did not pass up the opportunity to pay a visit to the Catholic Church. As it turned out, we spent a whole morning there.

We were informed that the church was located at No.1, Minsheng Lane, Minsheng Road, but our efforts to find on the map a Minsheng Lane proved fruitless. After many inquiries we were finally directed to Minsheng Road, and starting at the eastern end we began to walk along it looking into every alley and lane to see if we could find a church building. Luck was with us; it was not long before we came upon St. Joseph's Church. Actually, Minsheng Lane was the name given to the lane during the Cultural Revolution. Now the old name, St. Joseph's Lane, had been restored. St. Joseph's Church occupies a prominent place not only on the lane, but also in the neighborhood as well.



From right to left, Mr. Liang Zhizhao, Fr. Pierre Jeanne, Mr. Liu Dezhen, Bishop Liu Zhongyu (劉宗漁主教 the author and Fr. Liu Zhibo.

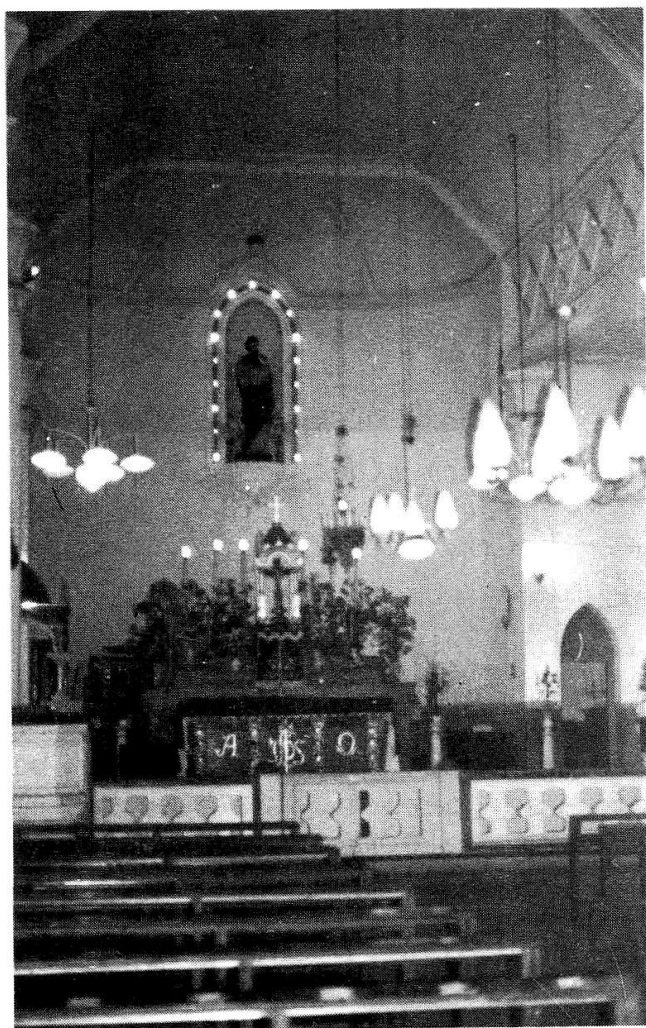
When we informed the people we met at the gate of the church that we wished to look around the building and to meet, if possible, the bishop, priests and some Catholics of the parish, we were immediately invited in and given a warm welcome by Mr. Liang Zhizhao (梁志超), Secretary of the Catholic Patriotic Association of Chongqing and Mr. Liu Deshen (劉德申), a lay Catholic. Mr. Liang told us that the bishop was attending a Government meeting, so he was afraid we would not be able to see him.

Mr. Liang then filled us in on the situation of the Chongqing diocese. At present there are about 40,000 Catholics in the diocese, 5,000 of whom live in the city itself. On Sunday, church services begin at 6 A.M. and run until 10 A.M.; three masses are offered and one sermon is given. About 800 Catholics attend mass on Sunday. There are also two daily masses, with about 200 Catholics in attendance. On the major feast days, of course, the church is more crowded: over 2,000 people attended Midnight Mass this past Christmas.

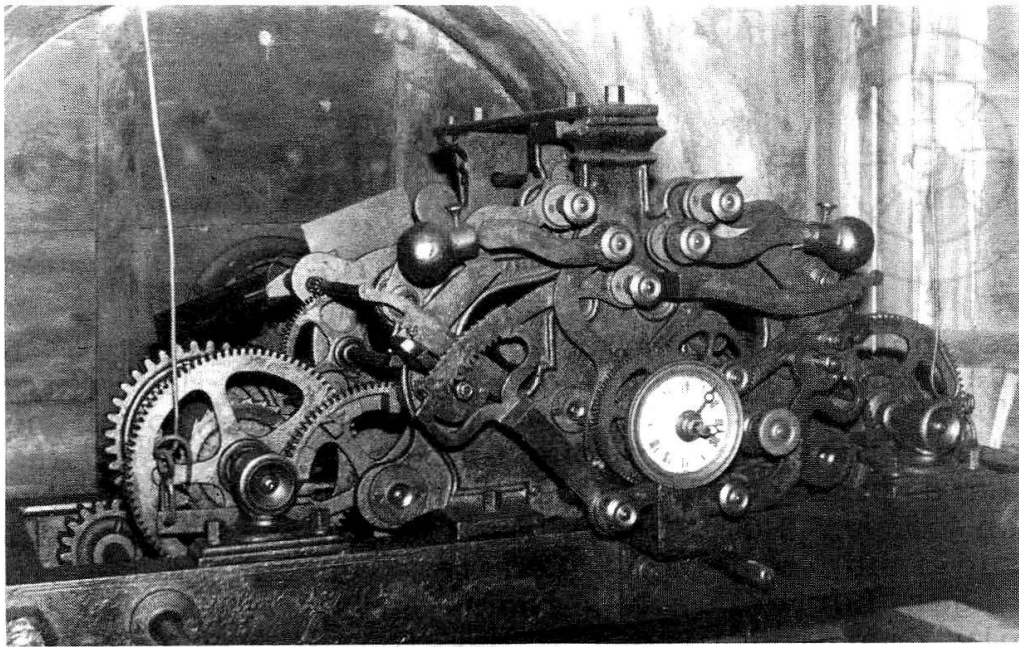
I happened to be carrying with me a complete set of TRIPOD for 1984, which I offered as a gift to the clergy and Catholics of St. Joseph's. As Mr. Liang and Mr. Liu were looking through issue #23, which features the newly re-opened seminaries in China, they suddenly burst into smiles as they came across a picture of a seminarian from their own diocese, now studying at the seminary in Chengdu.

Afterwards, Mr. Liang brought us to the church where we said a prayer and had a look around. Built in 1891, the building is quite large and imposing. The church has undergone many renovations in the past and the most recent one leaves the building looking very clean and bright. The bell tower was built in 1893 and is a distinctive landmark in the neighborhood. Eighty-year old Father Liu Zhibo (劉志栢) is responsible for the maintenance of the large clock in the bell tower - a form of ministry, incidentally, whose tradition dates back to the famous pioneer missionary Matteo Ricci.

On returning to the guest parlor after our tour of the church, whom should we meet but Father Liu Zhibo himself. Father Liu has a mass of white hair and a long flowing beard, and after eighty years is still quite spry, moving at the pace of a man half his age. Father Liu speaks fluent French, and was able to carry on an animated conversation with Father Jeanne in his native language.



The interior of the Church



The mechanism which runs the clock in the bell tower

Soon after this, Bishop Liu returned from his meeting. When he heard that there were visitors from Hong Kong, he came immediately to welcome us. At 69, Bishop Liu is the youngest priest in the Chongqing Diocese. According to the priests we met, the future hope of the diocese lies in the hands of the present crop of new seminarians. In 1983, the diocese sent five students to the Chengdu seminary and one to the national seminary in Beijing. Now seven more young men have expressed a desire to apply for entrance into the seminary. Churches have been re-opened in Nanchuan (南川), Fengdu (丰都), Dazu (大足), Yungchuan (永川), Hechuan (合川), and Rongchang (荣昌). The territory covered by the Chongqing diocese is quite extensive, comprising 21 counties and nine districts in southeastern Sichuan Province. Obviously, the pastoral work load will be quite heavy in the near future.

Since it was getting onto mid-day, we said goodbye to the bishop and his Catholics. Coming out the front gate of the church, we saw that the fog had finally lifted and the sun was shining. As we stood in the sunlight taking pictures of the church, we also prayed in our hearts, asking God to bless this Christian community, blanketed for many years by the fogs of political turmoil, with a future full of brightness.