

EDITORIAL

In June 2004, at the International Conference on the “Boxer Movement and Christianity in China,” at Chinese University, Hong Kong Professor Jean-Paul Wiest related the story of a massacre, which took place in the little Christian village of Xiaohancun in Hebei Province in June 1900. A Boxer surnamed Zhang led a band of his comrades to attack Xiaohancun. Zhang had studied martial arts under a Catholic named Wang from this very village. Master Wang and many of the men folk were away from the village when the attack took place. During the attack, Master Wang’s son, his wife and their children were killed.

Two years later, in 1902, Father Vincent Lebbe was present at an extraordinary event. One evening when the remaining Catholics and their parish priest had gathered for evening prayers, Zhang, the Boxer, suddenly appeared among them, and asked for forgiveness from Wang, his martial arts master, for causing the death of his son and the son’s family. Wang struggled with himself over whether he should seek revenge or heed Christ’s command, to forgive his enemy. At last, before the assembled Catholics, Wang embraced the former Boxer, and forgave him. A few months later, Zhang was baptized and old Wang was his godfather. Thus Wang accepted the murderer of his natural son as his spiritual son, in a generous display of Christian forgiveness.

Later a Christian playwright named Gheon, moved by Father Lebbe’s account, made it into a morality play. This play was very popular among the French people in the 1920’s and 30’s.

It seems to me that this lesson in reconciliation is very applicable everywhere in our world today.

The International Conference on the “Boxer Movement and Christianity in China” where scholars of all beliefs and persuasions participated amicably in the discussions was also an attempt at understanding and reconciliation. In this issue of Tripod, we reproduce some of the addresses given at the conference (conference papers will be published later).

The period around 1900 was full of turmoil. Patriotic Chinese felt that their country was being “carved up like a melon” by the Western Powers. Each foreign country was seeking its own “sphere of influence.” After the unequal treaty ending the Second Opium War in 1860, foreign missionaries were granted permission to dwell in the interior of China. The protection of the Church by foreign powers gave the ordinary Chinese the impression that Catholicism and imperialism were linked.

At the time there were serious natural disasters. The Yellow River overflowed its banks in 1898, ruining much farmland. The result was a famine in 1899. The foreign invaders were blamed, because their church buildings had destroyed the “feng shui.” These events produced a climate ripe for the rise of the Boxer Movement.

The Church, however, was trying to make changes. Pope Leo XIII, the working man’s Pope because of his encyclical *Rerum Novararum*, in 1886 tried to get around the foreign Protectorate by assigning an apostolic delegate to China. But “with tears in his eyes,” he was forced to withdraw his proposal due to foreign opposition. Pope Leo called this failure “the greatest pain of my pontificate.” After the Boxer Uprising, as Cardinal Shan pointed out, there were prophets in the Church. Father Vincent Lebbe, in 1915-16, stood with the Chinese people, and opposed French expansion in Tianjin. In 1919, Pope Benedict XV’s encyclical *Maximum Illud*, called for the promotion of Chinese priests to the episcopacy. In 1922, Celso Costantini was assigned to China as apostolic delegate. In 1924, Costantini convened the Shanghai Synod to implement the decrees of *Maximum Illud*. In 1926, the first six Chinese bishops were consecrated in Rome. In 1946, the Chinese hierarchy was set up, and the first Cardinal, Tian Gengxin, was named. Was it a case of too little, too late?

Both Cardinal Shan and Bishop Joseph Zen refer to Pope John Paul II’s message at the 2001 symposium commemorating the Fourth centenary of the arrival of Matteo Ricci in Beijing. In his message the Holy Father apologizes for the mistakes committed by the Church’s missionaries in China in the past.

As we read the materials from the June conference in this issue, may the image of Mr. Wang and Mr. Zhang embracing at the prayer service in Xiaohancun in 1902 remain in our minds, and hopefully influence our actions. (PJB)