

BOOK REVIEW

History of Catholic Religious Orders and Missionary Congregations in Hong Kong, Volume One Historical Materials, Volume Two Research Papers

Reviewed by Peter J. Barry, MM

The two-volume work, *History of Catholic Religious Orders and Missionary Congregations in Hong Kong*, published by the Centre for Catholic Studies, the Chinese University of Hong Kong in the Fall of 2009, presents the history of 17 Orders and Congregations in Hong Kong. The Sisters Orders covered in the history are the Canossian, Columban, ICM, Maryknoll, St. Paul de Chartres, and the Daughters of St. Paul, whereas the male congregations include CICM (Scheut), MEP, PIME, SVD, De La Salle Brothers, Dominicans, Franciscans, Jesuits, Maryknoll Fathers and Brothers, Salesians of Don Bosco, and the Trappists. The research papers (Volume Two of the History) were presented at a two-day conference on "The History of Catholic Religious Orders and Missionary Congregations in Hong Kong," held at United College, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, on December 13-14, 2007, and hosted by the Centre for Catholic Studies.

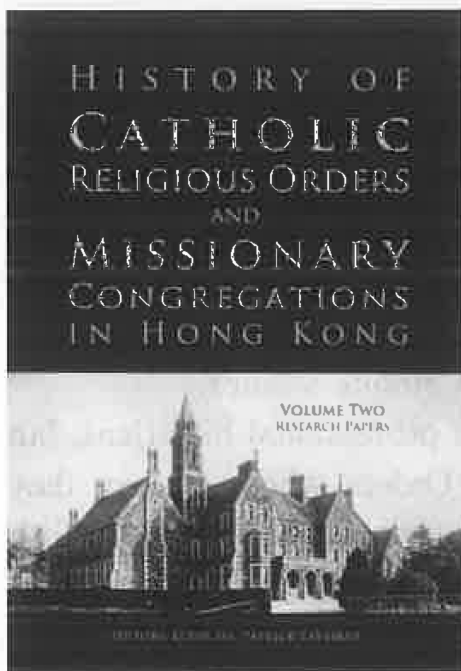
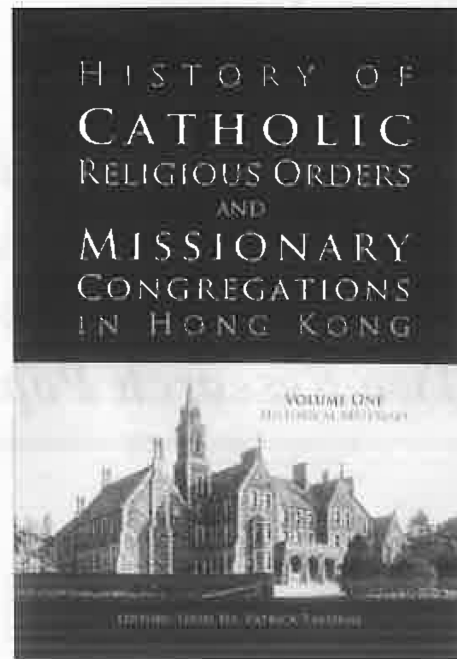
The authors of the papers are not professional historians, but rather are members of the religious Orders whose history they describe. They are also, for the most part, not native English speakers. So, the reader should not be put off by the odd turn of phrase, or unusual grammatical construction. The reader can be

assured that the histories of the congregations are ably transmitted. Fathers Louis Ha and Patrick Taveirne, CICM, of the staff of the Centre for Catholic Studies, were the hardworking editors of the two-volume collection.

The two-volume *History* is valuable because it tells about the early days of the Catholic Church in Hong Kong. It tells of the difficulties faced, and the successes achieved. For instance, from having no institutions in the beginning, the Catholic Church is now responsible for educating more than 25% of Hong Kong's school children in their 275 schools.

What struck this reviewer in reading the histories of the congregations was the spirit of helpfulness displayed by early arrivals to Hong Kong to those who came later. This spirit was especially exemplified by two prominent figures in the history of the Catholic Church in Hong Kong: Father Leon Robert, MEP (better known as Pere Robert) and Bishop Lorenzo Bianchi, PIME, the last foreign bishop, who, in 1969, handed the reins of the Hong Kong Diocese over to its first Chinese bishop, Bishop Francis Hsu Chen-Ping.

The Paris Foreign Mission Society (MEP) was one of the first congregations to arrive in Hong Kong. Their procurator in Far East, Fr. Napoleon Libois, moved from Macao to Hong Kong in 1847. The MEP was founded in 1658. It



celebrated the 350th anniversary of its founding in 2008. Their missions, for the most part were in China, Korea, and Southeast Asia. While not taking up direct pastoral work in Hong Kong, they set up a procuratorship in the city to raise funds for the support of their missions in the countries mentioned above. They also hosted missionaries passing through Hong Kong on their way to those countries.

The most famous MEP procurator in Hong Kong was the fifth one, Father Leon Robert, or Pere Robert, as he was commonly called, who held the position of MEP Procurator General in Hong Kong from 1903 to 1926. He was known as an astute businessman. (Vol. Two, pp. 55-61)

Pere Robert served on the board of directors of such companies as the *South China Morning Post* newspaper, Dairy Farm, Humphreys Estate and Finance Company and Hong Kong Land. He also purchased a lot of shares in the Hong Kong and Shanghai Banking Corporation (HSBC), and invested in real estate. The money earned was all used to support MEP missionary works. For instance, in 1912, the MEP were in charge of 34 missions, which contained 1,394 missionaries, 889 local priests, about 1,500,000 Catholics. They also ran 50 seminaries, with a student population of 2,443 seminarians.

The Procure House on Battery Path (today's Court of Final Appeal), the cornerstone of which was laid in 1917, was always open to welcome, not only MEP missionaries, but missionaries of other congregations passing through Hong Kong. The records for 1921, for instance, show that, in addition to the 220 MEP missionaries, 28 Jesuits, 22 Lazarists, 21 Scheut Fathers (CICM), 13 Little Brothers of Mary, 10 Franciscans, 6 Maryknoll Fathers and Brothers, 12 Chinese priests and 5 seminarians stayed for some time at the house. Pere Robert helped many a missionary Order or congregation to find a missionary district in China or Hong Kong in which to work.

Perhaps the most famous case showing Pere Robert's generosity in helping other communities get started in their work

was the purchase in 1914 of the old Jardine Matheson factory in Causeway Bay for the Sisters of St. Paul de Chartres. The factory was converted into what is today St. Paul's Hospital. Eventually a convent, a school and an orphanage were built on the property. The hospital was completed in 1917, but could not open until 1918, because of difficulties in obtaining equipment during World War I.

Another example of the spirit of helping other missionary congregations get started in their work was Bishop Lorenzo Bianchi, PIME (Bishop of Hong Kong 1952-1968). PIME, the Pontifical Foreign Missions Institute, arrived in Hong Kong from Italy in 1858. They were the first congregation to take up missionary or pastoral work in Hong Kong. In fact, Rome assigned PIME to be in charge of the Catholic Church in Hong Kong, and in their 110 years of supervision over the diocese, they provided 5 bishops to it. The fifth and final PIME bishop was Bishop Bianchi. In 2008, PIME celebrated 150 years of missionary work in Hong Kong, and Catholics from all walks of life praised them for the wonderful contribution they made to building up the local Church in Hong Kong. This year, the Canossian Sisters, who came to Hong Kong in 1860 at the invitation of the PIME Fathers, celebrated 150 years of missionary work (mostly in education) in the diocese.

Bishop Bianchi welcomed many new congregations to Hong Kong, after they were expelled from mainland China in 1949. Regarding this, in 1958, he wrote: "Very few mission dioceses can show the impressive number of over 30 religious orders and congregations, to the extent that, among outsiders, more than a few have trouble guessing which congregation has been entrusted with the care of this diocese. Yet, we can affirm with confidence that this attitude of ours is not just the result of a spirit of hospitality and Christian charity, but is especially due to our awareness of our apostolic duty. We feel that we are a 'Catholic Church' before being members of a particular institute." (Vol. Two, p. 254)

In the spirit of Vatican Council II, Bishop Bianchi requested that the Holy See appoint a Chinese priest as auxiliary bishop. In July 1967, Rome appointed Fr. Francis Hsu Chen-Ping as auxiliary

bishop. Bishop Bianchi then resigned in December 1968, and returned to Italy in April 1969, turning the direction of the Hong Diocese over to its first Chinese bishop, Francis Hsu.

The spirit of generosity and cooperation among members of different religious congregations, as exemplified by Pere Robert and Bishop Bianchi, continues among the 70 diocesan priests and 240 Order priests (16 congregations), 60 Brothers (10 congregations) and 500 Sisters (28 congregations) today. The present two-volume work is “must” reading for anyone interested in the history of the Catholic Church in Hong Kong. In it, the reader will discover where the spirit of cooperation among religious Orders and missionary congregations came from!