

# *The Life of Fr. Leonard Marron, MM, among the Bunun People in Taiwan*

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*Excerpts from Father Marron's Writings, collected and  
commented on by Peter Barry, MM*

Father Leonard Marron (everyone called him Lenny) was born in Lynn, Massachusetts, USA on June 22, 1929. Another sibling, an older brother, Bernard, had been born in 1927. Though separated by many miles, the two brothers remained close to one another for the rest of their lives.

In September 1946, Lenny entered Maryknoll upon graduation from St. Mary's High School in Lynn the previous June. After 11 years in the "seminary system," Father Lenny was ordained a priest on June 8, 1957, and assigned to Taiwan. After one year of language school, where he studied the Taiwanese dialect of Chinese, Father Lenny was assigned to Gato (*Koe Khe* in Taiwanese), an area where members of the Bunun (one of several ethnic minority mountain tribes in Taiwan) lived. He would remain among these people for the rest of his missionary life, a period of 58 years.

After his retirement as pastor of the area, in favor of a native priest in the 1990s, Father Marron continued to live among the Bunun people. It was during this time that he wrote an autobiography (published in 2006), meticulously recording all his experiences as a missionary among the Bunun people. Since this issue of *Tripod* is dedicated to the topic of the evangelization of ethnic minorities, we thought it useful to cite excerpts from Father Marron's biographical diary, which dealt with this topic. The name of the book is *Call and Command, A Memoir*. If the language of the book seems somewhat informal, that's because, as a fellow Taiwan Maryknoller commented: "Lenny wrote, the same way as he spoke."

We start on page 62 of Father Marron's 188-page book.

“In 1970, I planned the retirement of the catechists in preparation for local leadership and lay ministries. Vatican II had put great emphasis on the Role of the Laity in Evangelization. From my youth, I was convinced every baptized Christian must be a missionary.

Eventually I was down to three Bunun paid catechists, two men Akilla and Alang, and a woman, Homiko. Maryknoll was having trouble paying all the catechists and so they asked me to cut one. Rather than cause hard feelings, I asked all three to retire in one year, but to still continue evangelizing in their own areas, and help with the summer doctrine course, which was a two to four week live-in at the main station Tamaru for all the school children. Both men had fields, which had lain fallow while they worked full time for the church, and the woman was married to a Bunun school teacher with a regular income.

In preparation for the retirement of the catechists, I was forced to increase my efforts with translation projects...Fr. Al Fedders (in charge of the Taiwanese language school in Taichung) and his language teachers did most, if not all, of the translations into Taiwanese, while the mountain missionaries had to do it themselves, for whichever ethnic group they were working with....After five years of preparation and twelve years of work, Homiko's husband Simi and I finally completed a translation of the New Testament into the Bunun language for this central area (1976). I did all the typing, several times, and all the proof reading, several times, with Simi... To print anything, you also had to include the Chinese, which made a lot more work for me, in lay out, etc. This made for a very large volume by the time I got it from the printer. There were no computers in those days.... (However) from 1976 on we were able to train more lay readers in the Bunun language.”

We pause here on page 64 to note the tremendous work Father Marron performed by translating the new Testament into the Bunun language. He opened the minds of the Bunun people to the Word of God. Previously they had received the Good News of salvation only

by word of mouth, but now for the first time, they could read it in their own language. It was truly a moment of joy for these poor mountain people, and helped immensely to increase their faith. Marron's work was truly monumental and was a great contribution to deepening knowledge of the Word of God among the Bunun people.

From p. 66 of Fr. Marron's book, he continues in his own words: "In April 1976, we started a two year leadership course, Sr. Lilly Tan, FMM was loaned to us from Hong Kong for two years to act as director of the course. This training of Lay Preachers helped the parish immensely, and more importantly, got other people interested in trying to implement the directives of Vatican II concerning the role of the Laity in the church. At present there are programs in five of the seven dioceses in Taiwan involving laity and their commitment to the work of evangelization. These efforts, although taking different directions, were a direct spin-off of the original efforts here in Tamaru (Tili)."

We now jump over to page 73:

"For a couple of years I had been thinking about a native priest taking over both the parish in Lona, which I was again covering, and another native priest taking over the Tamaru mission. My former altar boy Talidho was a curate in Nantou, and his classmate Wallis Nomin was serving as an assistant at the cathedral. Talidho was a Bunun and Wallis was an Atayal. They had been ordained four years. Both stations were ready for a native priest, and it would be stupid at that point in history to assign another foreigner to either place. Besides Maryknoll was no longer getting many vocations, and few had yet to be assigned to Taiwan."

"By this time we had a new bishop in Taichung, Bishop Joseph Wang, born in Shanghai and ordained in Spain after many years of study. I went to see the Bishop in 1987, and asked him to give a day on his calendar. I would drive him to Tamaru and Lona, and have a lot of time to discuss the future of the mountain work. He agreed."

“On the day I took him for a tour of the two parishes I asked about the possibility of assigning the two native mountain priests as my replacements. He responded that they had been ordained for only four years. I responded: ‘Bishop, I was assigned to the mountains one year after my ordination, even though I did not know much Taiwanese, and then made pastor of the entire county we were touring in, with only ten weeks study of Mandarin under my belt. I was young, and did not know much about the Chinese or Bunun culture, and yet God took care of things, and here we are thirty years later.’”

“Fr. Talidho was appointed Pastor of Lona around December 1987, and Fr. Wallis Nomin was installed as pastor of Tamaru around June of 1988. I continued finishing up the work on the Malavi and Isigan churches, and left Tamaru around the end of the year to spend the first Christmas in years with my brother Barney back in Massachusetts. I had been assigned to the States for three years to work in the Development Department, giving talks in churches and schools on Mission.”

After his three-year term in Maryknoll’s Development Department, Father Marron returned to Taiwan on February 14, 1992. Since his parishes had been turned over to native clergy and to the “lay preachers” that he had trained, Father Marron acted upon an idea that he had had for a long time: he would build a “hermitage” about 1,000 feet above the river in the Tamaru valley, in a quiet place with a beautiful view of the valley below. Here he could continue to help out as needed in the Bunun apostolate. The house was finished in mid-September 1993 for a total cost of US \$8,500. From 1994 to 2005, Fr. Marron opened an “Aborigine Activity/Cultural Center” in Taichung City, the nearest big city from the Bunun mountain area, where the mountain youth often went to look for work. The purpose of the center was to serve the young workers and try to keep them close to the church. The center had to close in 2005, after about ten years of service, due to prohibitive costs of rent and salaries (pp. 98-101).

From 1994 to 1999, Father Marron also developed language course books. In 1997, he published *Speak Bunun*, a study aid in the languages (Bunun, English and Mandarin). In May 1999, the projects committee at Maryknoll, New York granted Father Marron a subsidy of US \$22,500 to publish his *Bunun/English; English Bunun; Chinese /Bunun Dictionary*, with 10,000 entries. The dictionary came out that very year.

In April, before the publication of his dictionary, Father Marron had the chance to visit his cousins in Ireland. He had been in Rome seeking funds to publish his dictionary. In his *Memoir*, he describes that visit: "I had time to visit my mother's home in the mountains of County Kerry. The Cronin house was still standing unchanged for the past hundred plus years, only that a corrugated roof had replaced the thatch one. It was about fifteen feet long and ten feet wide, with one window, dirt floor still, and the hearth irons still in place. There was still a ladder that went up to the loft under the roof (no windows). That was where the eight kids had slept. It was as poor, if not poorer, than any aborigine house I had ever slept in. All of a sudden it hit me! That was why I loved the Aborigine people so much. I was one of them myself!" (pp. 107-8)

Next in his *Memoir* Father Marron describes the terrible earthquake that struck Taiwan at 1:53 AM, early on Tuesday morning, September 21, 1999. At 7.6 on the Richter scale, it was the strongest and worst earthquake in Taiwan's recorded history. 2,400 people were killed throughout Taiwan and about 20,000 injured. Over 100,000 persons were left homeless. Papers reported later that there were over 10,000 aftershocks. On Sunday, September 26, an outright earthquake struck again, this time measured at 6.8 on the Richter scale. Father Marron was staying at his "hermitage" when these earthquakes struck. He walked down the mountain as best he could amidst all the landslides and fallen trees, all the while encouraging the people to pray for the dead and injured, and to thank God for their own survival. He was happy to see how the people came together and mutually helped one another out during the catastrophe. He credited this spirit to their Christian faith, either Presbyterian or Catholic (pp. 108-115).

The poor mountain people were to suffer again on July 29/30, 2002, when a severe typhoon and disastrous flooding struck the

mountain area of Nantou County. Fifty-eight people were killed in that county. Fr. Marron wrote: "Eighteen reinforced concrete bridges in the county collapsed or were washed away completely. The rains and landslides were the severest I had ever seen in forty-nine years in Taiwan. Electric power was out for about three weeks since so many utility poles had been destroyed....For months we were still counting and looking for the remains of our dead...When I saw the village of Sin Hsiang, just below Lona, I couldn't believe my eyes. It was just about completely wiped out and was strewn with mammoth boulders.... Thirty-three people were killed there, and only two bodies were ever recovered (pp. 120-1)."

Father Leonard Marron stayed with his beloved Bunun people through thick and thin, administering not only to their spiritual needs, but to their material ones as well. He had provided the Bunun people with the Word of God in their own language, and his missionary successors with language learning materials and a Bunun dictionary. And he had trained local lay preachers to lead the community. One is reminded of the marriage vows, where the partners promise to one another "in sickness and in health, until death do us part." Death came for Father Marron on December 15, 2015. According to Bunun custom, he was buried the next day in his mountain parish in Taiwan, among the people he had given nearly 60 years of his life to.

What had kept Father Marron going? In his *Memoir* he had asked that question of himself. "What keeps me going? Basically I am just very happy doing what I am doing, and the words of Jesus give me great support and encouragement, 'I am with you always, even to the end of the world.'" (p. 133)

Maryknollers around the world expressed sorrow at Father Lenny Marron's passing, and at the same time, praised his work and his contribution to mission. Perhaps the best one appeared in Maryknoll headquarters' own obituary of Father Marron. It quoted the late Maryknoll Bishop of Taichung, Taiwan, Bishop William Kupfer, who wrote of Father Marron: "In my own missionary experience, I know of few contributions to the growth of the local church which can equal the contribution Father Marron has made."