

## ***Book Review: Christian Monks on Chinese Soil, A History of Monastic Missions to China by Matteo Nicolini-Zani***

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**M**atteo Nicolini-Zani has written a well-researched, comprehensive study of the efforts of six monastic congregations who established foundations of their Orders in China. The six are Syro-Oriental Monasticism during the Tang Dynasty (followed by its aftermath in the Yuan Dynasty), the Carmelites, the Trappists, the Benedictines, and the two congregations founded by Fr. Vincent Lebbe, the Little Brothers of John the Baptist and the Little Sisters of Therese of the Child Jesus.

The main problem faced by all the monastic Orders was the tension between the life of prayer and contemplation in the monastery and the felt need to carry out active missionary work in the neighborhood around the monastery. Each foundation faced the question: how much time should the monks and nuns spend on each activity?

St. Therese of Lisieux gave great impetus to the missionary aspect of the monastic life through her writings. In fact, she made the connection between the Carmelite vocation and being an apostle. So much so that she was later named "Patroness of the Missions." Therese wrote: "A Carmelite who is not an apostle would abandon the essence of her vocation and would cease to be a daughter of the seraphic Saint Theresa (of Avila)" (p.60). Therese herself volunteered to go to the Carmel in Hanoi, but it never happened. By 1940, 44 Carmels had been established in mission lands (p. 61). The Sisters were to pray for the missionaries from their Carmels in their mission territories.

One example is the five French Carmelites who departed from Marseilles for Shanghai on December 19, 1868. Their purpose was

“to obtain the salvation of China through their prayers, their penances and their humble hidden life.” They arrived in Shanghai on February 3, 1869. A Carmel was erected for them in Tushanwan in the Xujiahui district of Shanghai, and dedicated on December 8, 1874. Sixteen nuns moved in: seven French and nine Chinese (p.64). On September 8, 1955, Communist soldiers occupied the Shanghai Carmel (p. 74). The Chinese Carmelite Sisters wrote a heartrending letter to the foreign Sisters asking them to leave China. The foreign Sisters left on December 26, 1955. Eighteen Chinese Sisters remained behind in Shanghai (p.75). Dr. Wu Ching-Hsiung, a famous Chinese judge, who later served as Chinese ambassador to the Vatican under the Nationalist government, credits St. Therese of the Child Jesus for his conversion to Catholicism in Chongqing after he had read her autobiography, *Story of a Soul* (p. 89).

As a footnote to the disbanding of the Shanghai Carmel, Nicolini-Zani quotes the beautiful testimony of Sr. Therese Eliede l’Enfant-Jesus (Zhou Shuying, 1909-1999), who had entered the Carmel in Shanghai in 1933. She made her first vows in 1935 and her final vows in 1944. In 1958, she was sentenced to labor camp in Anhui Province. She was released from the camp in 1987, but chose to remain in the area of the camp instead of returning to Shanghai. She was a great support to the Christian community in that area. She said that if she had the chance, she would love to return to Carmel, but “I have always carried Carmel in my heart” (pp. 107-108).

Father Vincent Lebbe founded the Chinese monastery of the Little Brothers of St. John the Baptist on December 16, 1928. It was to be made up of only Chinese candidates. So Fr. Lebbe has been called “the father of Chinese monasticism.” The monastery was established in a suburb of Anguo. Fr. Lebbe also made the innovation of putting the psalms to music, like Gregorian chant, only in a Chinese style. So, he has also been called “the father of the Chinese liturgy.” The monks were to be real monks, “but with apostolic works added.” The convent of the Little Sisters of Therese of the Child Jesus was built near the monastery of the Little Brothers, and was blessed on October 3, 1929, St. Therese’s feast day (in 1969 Pope Paul VI moved the feast day to October 1). The spirituality of the community was based on the Beatitudes of the

Sermon on the Mount, and on the three pillars, which Fr. Lebbe had put in place for the Little Brothers: “total sacrifice, true love, and constant joy.”

The Benedictines of St. Ottilien in Germany, a group with a distinctive missionary outlook arrived in China from Korea in the 1920s. The purpose for which their community was founded was “*pro missionibus exteris*.” They settled in southern Manchuria, or more specifically in Yanji in today’s Jilin Province. In carrying out their apostolate, their practice was to stay at a parish, away from the monastery, for a period of a month to six weeks. They then would return to the monastery for a 3-4 day period to experience community life again, with the recitation of the office in common, and for spiritual and physical renewal.

The Trappists came to China in 1883. Five monks from Europe arrived that year in Yangjiaping. (“the flat lands belonging to the Yang family”), about 150 kilometers northwest of Peking. They had much communication with their neighbors. In addition to following their monastic rule, they held Mass and catechism classes for the neighboring families. In the first three decades of the 20th century, the monastery made steady progress. In the early 1940s there were between 110 and 120 monks. However, terrible trials for the monks began to take place in 1937, due to the war with Japan. Japanese and Chinese Communist soldiers frequently visited the monastery, and made nuisances of themselves.

After the Second World War, in 1947, the Communists succeeded in turning the local peasantry against the monks, and they began to seize the produce of the monastery’s land. In July 1947 revolutionary troops repeatedly looted the monastery, and set it on fire. The monks were subjected to repeated interrogations, public trials and torture. Previously friendly peasants made false accusations. The only person who defended the monks was Mary Zhang. She publicly denied the crimes of which the monks were accused. She was cruelly beaten and imprisoned while she lay dying. Then the monks were forced to undergo a “death march,” which had no destination. They were forced to walk along a winding mountainous path, with their hands tied behind their backs. They suffered brutal beatings along the way. The monks saw their confreres die one after another. Six monks were executed outright.

Altogether 33 monks died on this long march, which took place between August 1947 and April 1948. The survivors were imprisoned or sent to work camps.

By November 1948, 41 imprisoned monks had been released, and were able to make their way to Peking. Some came from other monasteries, besides Yangjiaping. They stayed at first with the Benedictines, but due to the crowded quarters, they moved to a cheese factory, which had been purchased from a Russian émigré. Community life was gradually re-established. But in 1954, the government confiscated the factory-monastery. The 15 monks living there were again arrested and imprisoned. Thirty lay brothers could continue living at the cheese factory, working under party supervisors. However, there has been no news about these brothers since 1957. It is thought that they were sent back to their original homes.

Matteo Nicolini-Zani's moving account of the joys and sorrows experienced by the six monastic communities, which since the late 1880s tried to establish foundations in China is not only a historically well researched work, but the story is told with great compassion and love. This is because Nicolini-Zani is a monk himself of the ecumenical Bose community in Italy. *Christian Monks On Chinese Soil* is well worth reading by all those interested in the history of the Catholic Church in China. The book can be purchased from the Liturgical Press, Collegeville, Minnesota, USA, for US\$ 40.00.