



A BRIEF HISTORY OF BEIJING'S FOUR CATHOLIC CHURCHES



Translated from the Beijing Catholic News
by Donald MacInnis

NORTH CHURCH

North Church, which is presently located in Xi Shi Ku near the West Gate, was in former times the residence of the Cardinal Archbishop of Beijing. Its original location was on the west bank of Lake Can Chi Kou, almost diagonally opposite the present National Library. This site was given to the Jesuits by the Qing Dynasty Kangxi Emperor as a token of gratitude to Jean de Fontaney (1643-1710) and Claude de Visdelou (1665-1737) who had brought about his immediate recovery from a malaria attack through the use of western medicines. The missionaries soon completed the building of a church there, and the Emperor presented them with a pair of ceremonial scrolls to mark the occasion. The scrolls were entitled, "The True Origin of All Things", and the calligraphy was in the Emperor's own hand. (These scrolls are no longer extant; those displayed later were not the originals.) The church, which took four years to build, was dedicated on December 9, 1703, and given the name of "The Church of the Holy Saviour". It was 25 meters long,

11 meters wide, and 10 meters high; built entirely without pillars, it was of majestic design. In addition to the church, the Jesuits erected two smaller buildings, an astronomical observatory and a library as part of the complex.

In 1827, during the seventh year of his reign, the Dao Guang Emperor issued a decree confiscating North Church. The property was subsequently sold to a court official named Yu, who ordered the church to be torn down. Thus did this impressive edifice which had stood for over 135 years, quickly disappear from the local landscape. The government of the Xian Feng Emperor returned the property to the Catholic Church in 1860, and six years later a new church, wider and taller than the original, was erected on the same site. The second North Church was 50 meters in length and 21.3 meters in width.

When, in 1887, the imperial household extended the boundaries of the palace area, North Church fell within the confines of the Forbidden City. As a result, the church had to move to its present location at Xi Shi Ku. A new church, along with a bishop's residence, a seminary, and a nursery were all erected on the new location that same year. The new church was even larger than the previous one, measuring 80 by 21 meters and extending to a height of 22 meters. The bell tower was damaged by shell-fire during the Boxer Uprising in 1900, but it was later repaired and enlarged to its present size.

North Church became the cathedral church of the diocese after 1860, when it replaced South Church as the seat of the bishop. Joseph Mouly (1807-1868) was the first bishop to take up residence there. During the course of the next 100 years eight bishops and four auxiliary bishops lived in North Church, all of whom were non-Chinese. After the Second World War and the defeat of Japan, it became the home of Thomas Tian Gengxin, the first Chinese Cardinal, who was appointed Archbishop of Beijing in 1946.

SOUTH CHURCH

South Church is located in Xuan Wu Men on Shun Cheng Street. It is the oldest of all the Catholic churches in Beijing and has the longest history. Matteo Ricci built

a small chapel on this site in 1605 during the thirty-third year of the reign of the Wang Li Emperor (Ming dynasty). Small in scale, it was replaced by a larger building in 1610. This second church was simple and unimpressive, but it did mark the beginning of Christian missionary work in Beijing. It became known to the people as the "Hall of the Lord of Heaven". After East Church was built, South Church, on the opposite side of town was called West Church. When West Church was built at Xizhimen, then South Church got its present name.

In 1650 Adam Schall erected a large and commanding church structure on a piece of property given to him by the Imperial Court. At the time, he had been appointed director of the Imperial Bureau of Astronomy by the regent Dorgon. The length of the new church was 25.5 meters, and it was 14.5 meters wide. It was named the Church of the Immaculate Conception. The yard of the church was very broad and it housed a priests' residence, a conservatory, a storehouse for equipment as well as a library.

In 1690 Beijing became an episcopal diocese. Its first bishop was the Franciscan Bernardin della Chiesa, who designated South Church to be his cathedral church. Due to circumstances of the time, he never got to reside there himself, but in subsequent years it did become the official residence of the bishops who followed him. Unfortunately, in 1775 two earthquakes and a fire totally destroyed the church built by Schall, but the Qian Long Emperor donated 20,000 ounces of silver to have it rebuilt.

The last bishop to reside in South Church was Gaetan Pires-Pireira, who was also an official at the imperial court. The number of foreign missionaries continued to dwindle due to death or departures and by 1826, the Bishop was the only foreign resident left in Beijing. He continued on alone there for another 12 years, dying on November 2, 1838 at the age of 71. A bishop from the Eastern Orthodox church presided at his funeral, and he was buried in Zhilan.

In 1860 South Church reopened after being completely renovated, but the episcopal seat was moved to North Church. Having been reduced in rank, South Church became the headquarters of the society of St. Joseph, whose members ran

the Wan Sheng Hospital.

On June 14, 1900 South Church and its surrounding structures were burned to the ground. The main church was rebuilt in 1904, along with its adjacent buildings; this is South Church as we know it today. The great iron crucifix on the west wall of the present church is 3.8 meters in height and dates back over three hundred years. South Church once again became a bishop's seat when Bishop Yao Guangyu, became the first independently elected and consecrated bishop of the Beijing Diocese in 1959.

EAST CHURCH

East Church can be found on the east side of Ba Min Cao, just outside the Eastern Gate of Peace. It was originally established by Louis Buglio and Gabriel de Magalhaens, two Jesuit priests who began their missionary activity in Sichuan Province at the end of the Ming and the beginning of the Qing dynasties. Arrested in Sichuan, they were taken as prisoners to Beijing in the custody of Qing soldiers, where they were placed as servants in the household of an official named Su. Both men became well-known for their virtue and learning, and their modest behaviour. They preached the gospel to their fellow-servants working in the household, with the result that many were converted to a belief in Jesus and received baptism. Even some of the officials' wives were baptized. The priests were highly respected and were not treated as prisoners but were allowed to come and go freely.

The number of converts increased during the next few years, and the priests were given duties that took them outside the official palace. In time, they were able to purchase a building to serve as a chapel for their growing congregation. In the twelfth year of the Xun Zhi Emperor (1655), the Emperor gave them a courtyard, where they built a modest church and dedicated it to St. Joseph. This is the site on which the present East Church is located. It was the second church built in the city of Beijing and became known as the East Church when over a century later a church was built in Xuan Wu Men which became known as West Church (the present South Church).

In the earthquake of 1720 the church collapsed, but

it was rebuilt the following year. Among the treasured possessions of the church interior were original paintings done by the famous Jesuit artist Castiglione.

In the year 1807, during the twelfth year of the Jia Qing Emperor, the missionaries decided to move their more valuable books from their residence to a safer place. Fearing to draw unnecessary attention during the day, they worked by night. Through carelessness, someone knocked a burning oil lamp onto the bookcases, causing a fire that soon reduced the residence to ashes. The church however escaped with only minor damage. The two priests in charge of East Church at the time (their Chinese names were Fu Wengao and Li Gongzhen), wrote a formal report of the accident to the Emperor, humbly requesting punishment. The underlying hope was that the Emperor might contribute to the rebuilding of the church as did his predecessor the Qian Long Emperor when South Church met a similar fate. The request was refused; instead, Fathers Fu, Li and the other priests in residence were ordered to move to South Church, and the church property with all its buildings was confiscated. While the damage to the church itself was not serious, the building was ordered torn down and East Church disappeared for a time. From its original erection by Buglio to the year of its demolition, the church had existed for 159 years. By 1860 when all properties were returned to the Catholic church, all that remained of East Church was a gate with nothing but rubble inside. The site was cleaned up, and a set of low buildings erected to serve as a temporary chapel and quarters. Then in 1884, at the time of Bishop Louis Gabriel Delaplace (1820-1884), a large sum of money was raised to build a new church in the romanesque style. This church was far more stately and elegant in appearance than its two sister churches in the North and South. But after only ten years, it too burned to the ground on June 13, 1900. The present church was built to replace it in 1904.

WEST CHURCH

West Church, which is located on the south side of Xi Zhi Men Nei Street, was the last of the four major churches to be established in Beijing. It has a history dating back over 200 years. In the forty-fourth year of the Kangxi Emperor, Archbishop Carlo Tommaso Maillard de Tournon was

sent to China as a papal legate to further good relations with the Qing Emperor. Among the members of Tournon's delegation were a Father Pedrini and two other priests. They were later employed in minor capacities by the Kangxi Emperor. Pedrini was engaged to teach Western learning inside the royal court to one of the princes, who later became the Yung Zheng Emperor. In 1723 Pedrini purchased the present property at Xi Zhi Men and built several residences there, along with a church which he named Our Lady of Mount Carmel. Pedrini was a member of the Vincentian Society, and he offered both church and residences to priests from a variety of congregations who had come to do mission work in China.

When Pedrini died in December of 1746 at the age of 77, he was buried in the small West Church Catholic cemetery. The cemetery property in later years became the site for the headquarters for two orders of missionary nuns: the Daughters of St. Joseph and the Sisters of Charity of St. Vincent de Paul. In 1811 the imperial government ordered that only those with duties at the court were allowed to reside in Beijing city. Many missionaries moved out, and those that stayed were not free to leave their grounds under penalty of being deported. The four priests who were living at West Church at the time, left the church ground illegally and were subsequently deported to their homeland. The authorities then completely dismantled West Church, and so the church built 89 years before by Pedrini was demolished.

In 1860, after the church properties were returned, Bishop Joseph Martial Mouly rebuilt West Church, dedicating it in 1867. On June 14, 1900 the church and residence were again destroyed, this time by fire. Twelve years later, the church was once more rebuilt and re-dedicated under the name of Our Lady of Mount Carmel.



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1. North Church
2. South Church
3. East Church