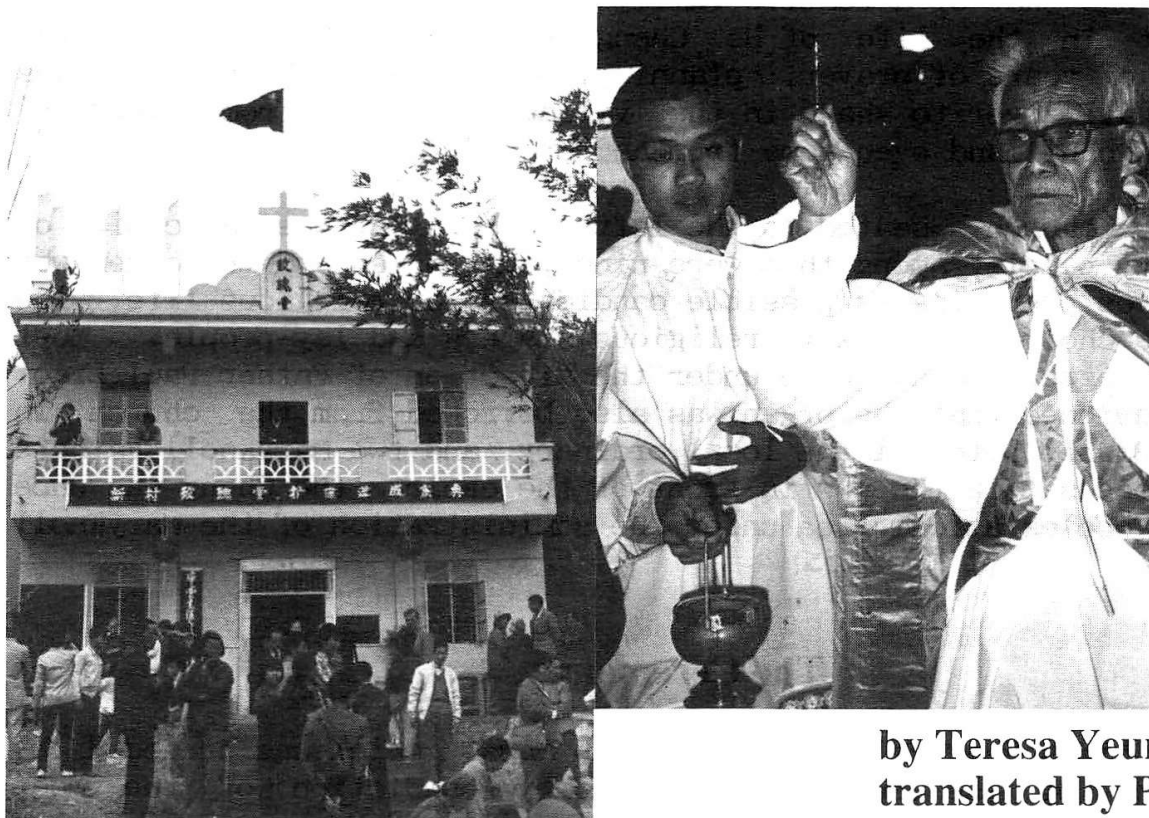


HE CHENG NEW VILLAGE IN GUANGDONG PROVINCE CELEBRATES THE OPENING OF ROSARY CHURCH



by Teresa Yeung
translated by Peter Barry

"...a church without worshippers would be just another empty building. Our village, however, has many fervent Catholics who longed for a place to worship God. God saw our need and gave us this church. Our village has many children whose parents must work and cannot take care of them during the day. All agree that we need a nursery. But do not worry. Only seek to carry out your duties as Christians and put your trust in God, who will provide in His own time and manner. Our village has many students who are conscientious and love their studies, but they must travel long distances each day at great inconvenience to attend classes, for our village has no school. This, too, should not be a cause of worry. Be faithful Christians, trust in God and He will answer our prayers..." These words are from Father Linus Wang's homily delivered to his congregation at the opening ceremony of He Cheng New Village's Rosary Church on January 1st of this year.

An Overflow Crowd

Even before the ceremony began, there were no seats to be found. Latecomers filled the main aisle, spilling over into the side aisles until there was not even room for one more worshipper to squeeze in. The villagers were decked out in their best clothes and there was a hum of excitement in the air as all waited for the ceremony to begin. The atmosphere was that of a festive family gathering, and indeed it was a major event in the life of He Cheng Village. The day was the culmination of years of prayer, planning, effort and labour. Catholics came from all over to share in the villagers' joy...from Jiangmen, Guangzhou, Xinhui, and even some from as far away as Hong Kong.

In the church, seated to the left of the altar was a choir of nearly twenty people. Among them were nine young women and three men who are themselves preparing as possible candidates for religious life. The rest of the choir members were religious sisters and lay-people. Most were from Jiangmen and all were under the direction of Father Paul Liao. It was mentioned that the organ was also borrowed from the church in Jiangmen. Bishop Peter Li the local ordinary, and two Maryknoll Fathers from Hong Kong sat in the pew in front of the choir. (He Cheng was once part of the ecclesiastical area under the administration of the Maryknoll Society.)

The Ceremony

Father Linus Wang celebrated the High Mass, which was preceded by the Blessing of the Church and followed by Benediction of the Most Blessed Sacrament. Fathers Ma Sihun of Zhaoqing and Ye Yaomin of Foshan helped in the distribution of Holy Communion. The ceremony was conducted in the Latin language from beginning to end, with the celebrant having his back to the people for most of time. This pre-Vatican II liturgy was for many of the younger visitors from Hong Kong rather difficult to follow. Fortunately for them, they were able to join in some of the vernacular hymns: the entrance hymn was the familiar "I am a Christian", at the Offertory the choir sang the Chinese version of "Christus Vincit", and Mass ended with the ever popular "Praise be to God". After the ceremony all were invited to a tea party, featuring cakes made by the villagers themselves. Among the guests were representatives of the United Front and Religious Affairs Bureau. There was more than enough candy and local fruits to satisfy everyone. Bishop Li and two government representatives also addressed the crowd.

A Centre for Christian Activity

Rosary Church is situated on a small hill in the middle of the village itself. It is surrounded by the homes of Christians. The facade of the Church bears little difference from the other village houses. It is a two-storey structure with a new addition of one floor adjoining it. The church interior, however, is quite large, with a total area of 2,000 square feet. Both the main and the adjoining structures have traditional Chinese slanting roofs. The upper storey of the main building is rather small, consisting of one room, which serves as the priest's residence. In the church itself, there is a large curtain which separates the sanctuary area from the main body. This normally remains drawn except during religious services, thus permitting the main area to be used as an activity centre for the community. In a traditional country village like He Cheng, this is considered to be quite a modern innovation.

A Catholic Village

Most of the village is Catholic. According to a local story, one day over 100 years ago two missionaries were passing through the village and were invited to spend the night with one of its families. The family immediately became believers. Later the gospel spread to the other villagers until almost all became Christians. The villagers were very fervent in their love of God and strictly adhered to the commandments of the Church, even to the extent of not inter-marrying with non-Catholics. In this way they have been able to preserve their faith as a community down to the present day.

Food has always played a special role in Chinese culture. No occasion is celebrated without a meal. Father Wang spoke of how the whole village mobilized itself days in advance to prepare the post-ceremony dinner. Much activity and enthusiasm went into the preparation of each and every detail. Here we see some of the villagers acting as waiters, carrying food and wine to serve their guests, relatives and friends. When describing the scene, the words of the Psalmist comes readily to mind: "Behold, how good and pleasant it is when brothers dwell together in unity."