

MARYKNOLL'S CHANGING CONCEPTS OF MISSION



A Missioner lends a helping hand

by William M. Boteler, M.M.

I am happy to have this opportunity to reflect on Maryknoll's changing concepts of mission in light of our past and present relationship with China.

When I joined Maryknoll, China had already been closed to foreign missionary groups. Yet I was deeply aware of the strong Chinese influence on our roots and traditions. Maryknoll, like many other missionary societies of that era, was founded for evangelization with the specific efforts of mission in China. From the very beginning Maryknoll's founders, Bishop James Anthony Walsh and Father Thomas F. Price, had the intention of putting Maryknoll's mission roots down in China. Even before our permanent headquarters and major seminary at Ossining, New York were constructed, our first men and women missionaries were already working in China. It seemed only natural, then, that they should choose a Chinese architectural motif for the new buildings.

My years of theological study at Maryknoll coincided with the height of the "Cultural Revolution" in China, but we received little news about it. Rather, our China news centered on books written by Maryknollers and others about their past experiences there. I remember reading Stone on the King's Highway, wherein Bishop Francis X. Ford spoke eloquently of his desire to be just a stepping-stone on which the

Chinese might walk on their journey to discovering Christ. Ford was willing to suffer anything to help toward establishing God's Kingdom among the Chinese whom he loved dearly. His sentiments about the Chinese also echoed those of two other members of that first group of four Maryknollers who went to China in 1918.

Bishop James E. Walsh, surely one of our greatest missionaries and writers, captured his own warm sentiments so well with his portrait of a Chinese youth in Shine on, Farmer Boy, a youth who exemplified for him all the poor and neglected, yet admired and treasured, people of the world. When Bishop James E. Walsh was released from a Shanghai prison after serving 12 of his 20-year sentence for "spying", it was quite easy for him to live in quiet, prayerful retirement at Maryknoll, largely because reporters soon despaired in their efforts to get him to criticize the Chinese for the treatment he had received. He said simply, "I have come to love the Chinese deeply, and the fact that a few of them were not so pleasant to me cannot take away from my love for all of them." He understood and lived the words which he once wrote, "To be a missionary is to go where you are not wanted, but needed, and to stay until you are wanted, but not needed." These words summed up quite well what most of us seminarians accepted as the task awaiting us in our future work.

Father Thomas F. Price, one of our co-founders and another member of that initial Maryknoll group, whose time among the Chinese was cut to less than one year because of his illness and his death, had already reached the point where he could say, "The more I see of the Chinese people, the more I love them." This same deep love for the Chinese was evidenced when the "Old China Hands" would be invited back to the seminary to talk to us. While they spoke of their hardships under the new government and of their desire to return to China, seldom if ever, do I remember them indicating anything but love and admiration for the Chinese people in their words to us.

Others have said that Bishop Ford was way ahead of his time in his mission approaches, such as in his sending the Maryknoll Sisters of his diocese out to live in the countryside among the people, in his giving the properties left behind by European missionaries to the poor, in his development of Chinese leadership in the local church. As soon as a Maryknoller had established a mission and had it running, Bishop Ford would turn it over to a Chinese pastor and assign the Maryknoller to a new area to begin again. But despite all his efforts to do as much as he could in what he considered to be the Chinese way, his 34 years in China ended by being tried as a spy, paraded through the streets to die alone in a Guangzhou prison. These were the types of men our early China

missioners were. We can only admire them and strive to emulate their great and generous spirit.

They did much to shape our thinking about China. The French martyr, Blessed Theophane Venard, soon to be raised to the rank of sainthood, who was beheaded for the faith in Indochina, became a special patron of Maryknoll, and our second Seminary was named "The Venard" in his honor. St. Francis Xavier, who became copatron of all Catholic missions and died on Shangchuan Island trying to reach the China mainland, was also our special patron to whom we all prayed for the courage to suffer death if necessary for our faith. Our founders often spoke of martyrdom as the ideal and crown of missionary zeal to which we should all aspire. This was the prevailing atmosphere of our seminary days.



*A Missionary School in Kongmoon
in 1930*

We wondered when we'd ever be allowed to go to China to continue the work these great men and women had begun. The theology which saw all these unbaptized, unreached multitudes as unsaved had not yet left us completely. What could we do but pray for them and for the day to return to China?

I learned that Maryknollers had actually helped to run orphanages and leprosaria, parishes and clinics where abandoned babies were cared for, babies which I as a child had been encouraged to "ransom" by contributing pennies to the Holy Childhood "pagan baby banks". I also learned at that time that Bishop James E. Walsh was still in a Shanghai prison and that many other missionaries had either died or been expelled.

So, although I had never worked in China, my own mission area being Bolivia, I have been always keenly aware of and interested in China. I read what I could about the "New China", and by the time the country began to open itself to foreigners again I had become the Superior General of Maryknoll. When I was invited to China in 1985, I jumped at the opportunity. While there I had the good fortune of being among the first small group of foreigners, and the first superior of a missionary society, to visit with Bishop Ignatius Gong Pinmei in Shanghai after his release from prison. He and Bishop James E. Walsh had shared a close and

special friendship. While in China I was also invited to speak with the students at Sheshan Seminary and spoke to them about Maryknoll's former work in China.

After witnessing the remarkable and rapid changes taking place in China, I returned home to reflect on what approaches Maryknoll could take in the future to relate to this people who had played such a large role in our history. I realized more clearly how much our "Old China Hands" were missionaries of their times, times which placed great emphasis on direct religious conversion and feeding, clothing, and caring for as many of the teeming multitudes as their limited resources allowed. They shared the prevailing theological view of that day, seeing their own evangelization efforts as a race against time. They were so occupied in practical tasks that they had little time to reflect more deeply on the developing political situation that was soon to overwhelm them. They had little interest in the larger economic issues that were the root causes of poverty, illness and illiteracy which they sought to alleviate. Their time was totally taken up with the spiritual and corporal works of mercy.

Many probably knew little of the circumstances of history that made their presence in China possible. They thought little of the fact that they had not been invited to come by the Chinese government or by a local Chinese Church, and that their continuing presence was the result of the Unequal Treaties of a hundred years before which forced China to open its doors to receive Christian missionaries. Maryknoll was part of



A makeshift chapel in Fushun, 1938

that great influx of Catholic missionaries into China whose numbers mushroomed from 945 in 1900 to 11,142 in 1949, and who were under the protection of the political arm of their sending countries. The simple fact of the matter was that the missionaries often were there because their countries' armies had preceded them, protected their presence there by threats of force, and even used them to forward their imperialistic aims.

recent changes that were taking place in China and my own changing concepts of mission. I knew that when I asked Chinese bishops there

I brought with me to China, then, a clearer historical perspective, an awareness of the

what Maryknoll could do to help them, the response would necessarily be very different from those of the past. Yet I couldn't help but think about the years of personal sacrifice and dedicated service of our "Old China Hands", and it was in their spirit that I went seeking to discover how Maryknoll might be able to be of some help to the emerging Church in China. I knew that because of historical circumstances any help would have to come as a response to their own specific requests. It would be they who would have to establish the priorities and for us to explore with them practical ways in which we realistically might be able to respond.

I saw in all of this an important shift in our mission emphasis and understanding. I felt this was the right approach for Maryknoll to be taking not only with China but in all our mission efforts. The documents of Vatican II, especially "Lumen Gentium", "Gaudium et Spes" and "Evangelii Nuntiandi", which give new concepts of Church, draw our attention to how God is at work in all cultures and religions, and emphasize the importance of each local Church's autonomy, collegiality and mutuality in mission. I realized that Maryknoll, too, must make changes in its relationship with local churches. The missionary today assumes a much more humble and serving role, moving away from establishing and directing local churches towards seeking ways and means to respond to their requests for help. We want to be of as much assistance as possible, working according to locally established priorities and on their terms. We assume some leadership roles when called upon to do so, but shun those of authority for decision-making and financing. We see our role as serving and assisting the localization task of a particular Church, insuring that this task might be completed as quickly as possible.

For this reason we respect the Chinese Church's right to be self-directing, self-propagating and self-supporting within the communion of the Universal Church. We see local leadership not only as a right but also as a duty and an ideal for every local church. Most missionaries today do not request be allowed to evangelize in China at this time but rather await requests for cooperation or assistance and attempt to respond to them. We see China as coming within God's one economy of salvation for all. We believe that God has continued to implement His plan of salvation during the recent past without direct assistance from outsiders, that God was still at work when churches were closed and religious leaders imprisoned. We believe that Buddhists, Moslems and others also play a part in God's universal plan for the salvation of His people. We believe that Christ is the unique manifestation of God and has changed history. His teaching is meant to unify all peoples. No

other great prophet or religious leader has claimed to have come so that all nations and peoples might be one. Only Christ can bring about unity among all peoples. He teaches us not to oppose other religions, but to love and respect them.

We know the world needs a sense of the dignity of every human person which Christ gave us when He became one of us. Hence, we go in mission not so much to plant the Church or bring the faith, but rather to discover a faith and a goodness that are already there, emphasizing all that is good in the culture, social systems and peoples among whom we live and work. We avoid confrontation with other religions and try to live in such a way that it is our lives which attract. We reflect on the values of the people and their social and religious systems, comparing them with Christian values. We are aware that unless we teach and live something better, Christianity will have no appeal.

Christians today are moving away from seeing Catholicism as an exclusive religion, anxious to protect and enlarge spheres of power and influence, and are moving towards a people of faith in service to all - not seeking to defend a Church that Christ established, but becoming more a type of Church which Christ intended. And so we speak more of the revelation of God and what must be our response rather than of institutions and laws. We are ready to admit that the Church does not have all the answers, but rather it is seaching with all religions and peoples for the answers to today's problems. We want to help people develop their human potential, to become fully alive. We know from experience that people do not see hospitals, schools and relief lines as religion, but that true religion must be an experience of God, a welcoming of God into the temple of one's heart. We recognize that Jesus' authority came from His person, His witness and His teaching. He said to Peter: "Confirm your brethren in the truth." And so we emphasize an issue-oriented theology rather than rigid dogmas and laws. We see the true Church as many communities of people, sharing and learning from each other's experiences and not imposing their experience on each other. We tend more to study the practice of people's faith and then formulate theories from this practice, rather than the reverse. We look at the world as a global village made up of all groups, including different religions, which are closely dependent upon each other. We know that just as China imported Buddhism from India and made it Chinese, so Christianity must allow all that is good in Chinese society to mold it and make it Chinese in order for it to become acceptable.

With all this in mind, what should be our attitude? We have undertaken and just completed a history of Maryknoll in China. We hope it

will encourage all our members to reflect on our past and learn from our mistakes and successes so that we will be better missionaries wherever we work in the future. Hopefully our China Liaison and Research group will assist us in furthering more and fruitful exchanges between the Chinese church and outside churches. In 1986 we welcomed a delegation of church leaders from Chinese colleges and seminaries visiting their counterparts at a number of major U.S. Catholic universities and seminaries. We support the Hong Kong Diocesan Holy Spirit Study Centre in facilitating and increasing exchanges with churches in the U.S., Europe and other parts of Asia. We have encouraged professional educators to respond to China's requests for teaching personnel so that they can experience first hand the realities of present day China and share their knowledge with friends in China. A small number of our Hong Kong missionaries have set up a "China Interest Group" to learn more about China, to assist those going to China, and to establish some guidelines for responding to requests from China. This group consists of former China missionaries, teachers in China, and those with a special interest in China.

Learning from our China experience and realizing that mission today must include more than full-time, open-ended service by clerics and religious, we have also tried for the past ten years to integrate professional lay people into our service teams. The number of these new associate members joining our ranks each year now surpasses the number of those newly called to priesthood or to the religious life. These trained and dedicated people greatly expand the possibilities by which we can bear witness to Christ and be of service to peoples.

We are hopeful that proceeding in this way, China will recognize our sincerity; and having looked at our former missionary activity in China as well-intentioned but rooted in its times, we can then proceed with greater confidence in working for the good of all the Chinese people. For we want, above all, to be faithful to Christ, faithful to mission, and faithful to the Chinese people who have become so much a part of our Maryknoll identity.



The Mission Compound team, Wuchow, 1920