

# GLEANINGS FROM THE HISTORY OF THE MILAN MISSION SOCIETY IN CHINA



by Angelo Lazzarotto

A century ago, in the summer of 1888, an Italian missionary bishop was traveling alone on a small boat moving slowly over an immensely flooded area close to the southern bank of the Yellow River. The fabled river, had once again overflowed its banks bringing desolation to some of the most densely populated districts of China, and Bishop Volonteri was attempting to bring some comfort and material help to the few Catholic and non-Christian families he could find.(1)

The Gospel message had been brought to Henan province in the 17th century by the Jesuits. The work of evangelization continued there without interruption despite incredible difficulties. Lazarist missionaries had been in Henan for over a century when Simeon Volonteri with a small group of Italian priests assumed responsibility for the territory in 1869. They belonged to a missionary society which had only recently come upon the Chinese scene. The Milan Foreign Missions Society (later called P.I.M.E.: Pontificio Istituto Missioni Estere) was established in 1850 by the Bishop of Lombardy. One of their first assignments had been to the British enclave of Hong Kong (1858), where they have been working ever since. It was in fact in Hong Kong that Volonteri himself began his personal apostolate to the Chinese people.

In the 20 years following Volonteri's arrival in Henan, new missionaries came to join him, but quite a few of them had died, some at a very young age. Their method of evangelization in that rural area was traditional and simple: moving among the small Catholic communities, visiting them one by one, instructing the believers, making new contacts, and witnessing to the Gospel through works of mercy, giving particular attention to sick or abandoned infants and to the aged. They also established some basic structures to form local leaders and to assist the less fortunate, especially orphans. Soon Bishop Volonteri realized it was hardly possible to reach the whole province entrusted to his care from Kinkiakang, the Catholic Centre built near the southern city of Nanyang. In 1884, he proposed that the territory be divided and a new Vicariate be established in the area north of the Yellow River, stretching the limited personnel.(2)

The steady growth of the Church in Henan was marked by other divisions of the original Nanyang Vicariate Apostolic. By 1946, when new ecclesiastical structures were established throughout the whole of China, the original Vicariate had been divided into 9 dioceses. Some 69 P.I.M.E. missionaries were still working in 3 of them (Kaifeng, Nanyang and Wheiwei) along with 33 Chinese priests. P.I.M.E. missionaries were also working in the diocese of Hanzhong, Shaanxi, again in a rural and underdeveloped area.

The Milan Missionary Society, like the Paris Foreign Mission Society and other groups formed in the last century in various countries, is not a religious congregation in the juridical sense; it is an institute of diocesan priests who dedicate themselves exclusively to missionary work. As such, they do not recruit candidates from their mission areas, but encourage local vocations to enter diocesan seminaries. In this way they seek to promote the formation of a strong local clergy, with the clear aim of transferring to them the leadership responsibility for indigenous Christian communities as soon as possible. This had also been a primary concern of Bishop Volonteri and his confreres down through the years. By 1870 Volonteri had already established Kinkiakang seminary and considered it as the most important institution in his diocese. In 1932, a new regional seminary was opened in a Chinese style building just outside Kaifeng city to accommodate seminarians from the entire province of Henan. It was staffed by P.I.M.E. priests.

Father Paolo Manna, a charismatic figure who as superior general visited P.I.M.E. missionaries in China in 1927, was fond of saying that the true aim of mission work was to "destroy itself"; he meant that

foreign missionaries had to work to make it possible for new Christian communities to become self-sufficient. When visiting Henan, Manna was happy to realize that this portion of the vast Nanyang Vicariate had already reached this point of development as an independent mission, and he entrusted it to the care of the local clergy. The first apostolic delegate to China, Archbishop C. Costantini, later commented in his memoirs that such an event proved beyond doubt that foreign missionary structures originally established by foreign missionaries could be indigenized in a relatively brief period.(3) The erection of the Chumatien prefecture under the leadership of Monsignor Peter Wang could have taken place even sooner than 1933 had not another Chinese prelate Mons. Anthony Ma declined the offer to assume leadership.



Among the many pastoral problems connected with missionary work, and one particularly distressing for Bishop Volonteri was the rapid spread of opium addiction. After the Canton incident of 1839 and the Unequal Treaties that were imposed on the Manchu empire by various Western military powers, it soon became obvious that opium growing and trading was now more attractive than ever. As a consequence, more and more people in China, from all walks of life, were becoming addicted to the poisonous drug. Volonteri and his missionaries were alarmed by the misery opium addiction was bringing to individuals and families. Having failed in his efforts to add the problem to the agenda of the 2nd Regional Synod of Hankow in May of 1887, Volonteri refused to give up. In October of the same year, he wrote a detailed report to the Holy See, begging the Pope to support the Chinese authorities in their fight against the opium trade. When he received no reply, he wrote again and was informed that the question was under study. Finally, at the end of 1891, the Holy Office issued an Instruction that strongly forbade the growth, trade and use of opium to all Christians.(4) The statement articulated the Church's position on the opium trade in China, and it was later confirmed by the First Plenary Council of Shanghai in 1924.

This brings us to touch on a delicate but unavoidable subject whenever the history of Christian missionary work in China is discussed; namely, its entanglement with the political and economic interests of

the Western nations, who had during the last century imposed their military influence on the Chinese empire. The problem of missionary involvement with imperialist policies was complicated by the objective need to enforce a greater degree of religious freedom in a country where Christianity had been banned by Imperial Edict in 1717. Public opinion in the West sided with the Western powers, claiming they were justified in enforcing the right for Christian preachers to teach and spread their faith. Most people did not seem to be overly concerned by why these powers, while secular and often anti-church at home, were anxious to pose as the protectors and guarantors of "religious freedom" in China.

There is no denying the fact that some missionaries, both Catholic and Protestant, found it convenient to lean on the "protection" offered by these Western powers, and that some took advantage of the "privileges" granted to them by Chinese authorities who acted under pressure imposed by the colonialists. On the other hand, historical research does not support the easy generalizations which far too often ignore the facts. The unholy alliance of religion and politics did cause many patriotic-minded intellectuals in China to turn against the Christian religion as it was preached in such a context. And many serious difficulties between the Christian churches and the Chinese government can be traced to this source. Such a negative atmosphere helped to nurture popular hatred, which exploded in the Boxer incident of 1900 against foreigners in general and Christian churches in particular. However, it is also true that the large majority of foreign missionaries had nothing to do with politics and were dedicated solely to the spiritual cause of spreading the Gospel. While most of them never moved a finger to foster the interests of Western powers, they were indeed willing to lay down their lives to bear witness to their faith and under severe conditions to continue to administer to the Christians they served. Among the P.I.M.E. priests, one died a violent death in Hanzhong in 1900, and seven others lost their lives in tragic circumstances in the years 1940-1942 when they refused to abandon their communities in the face of the Japanese invasion.(5)

As for the "protection" policy of Western powers, quite a number of missionaries from the beginning saw clearly the danger coming from a confusion of roles, and were not about ready to accept the imperialists posing as defenders of Christianity. Bishop Volonteri in Nanyang and his colleague Bishop Scarella in Wheiwhei were among these. Right from the start of his work in Henan, Volonteri had very good reason to doubt the effectiveness of the French protectorate in furthering missionary aims. In a report sent to Propaganda Fide in 1881, he suggested to the Pope that he should work to establish a direct link with the imperial court

in Beijing. The proposal appeared more than justified after the relations between China and France had again deteriorated during the Tonkin War of 1883-84, which brought the two powers into direct military confrontation.

In 1885 Abbe F. Giulianelli left Rome for Beijing as a personal envoy of Pope Leo XIII to the imperial court with an official message in which the Pope expressing his respect and esteem for Emperor Koang Su, recommended Catholic missionaries and their work to his benevolent care. According to more than one historian, Abbe Giulianelli's mission had the effect of moving the Tsong Li Yamen (Ministry of Foreign Affairs) and Prime Minister Li Hong Tchang to consider abolishing the right of protection which France had then extended to include all Catholic missions in China. At the beginning of 1886, Li Hong Tchang took the initiative in proposing to the Holy See the exchange of diplomatic representatives. Pope Leo gladly accepted the proposal and appointed as head of the new diplomatic mission Archbishop A. Agliardi; but the opposition of the French government, blackmailing the Church at home, was so violent that the plan had to be shelved.(7)

In the meantime, taking advantage of strained relations with France the government of Italy tried to impose its own "protection" on Italian missionaries working in China, and Germany followed suit. Bishops Volonteri and Scarella, supported by Propaganda Fide, did not hesitate to reject such offers. Volonteri, insisting on the establishment of direct links between Rome and Beijing, wrote to Propaganda Fide in 1895: "It has always been my conviction that an apostolic nuntio is preferable to protection by the French legation; this has always been my principle,



and I still consider it valid". New efforts in 1898 (this time for an apostolic delegate) again failed.(8) In 1914, French opposition once more blocked the efforts of the Foreign Minister of China, Lou Tseng-Tsiang, who, incidently, was a Catholic, to establish diplomatic relations with the Holy See. Even Archbishop C. Costantini's appointment as apostolic delegate by Pope Pius XI in 1922 met with widespread opposition from various quarters. The Vicar Apostolic in Kaifeng, Bishop J. Tacconi, a P.I.M.E.

missionary, wrote to Monsignor Costantini on that occasion: "Your effort will at least help the Chinese government to understand that the Holy See is trying to rid itself of the protection of the great powers, to walk its own independent way, and break free from their exploitation for political gains..."(9)

A separate chapter could be written about the 130 year history of the work of the P.I.M.E. missionaries in the British colony of Hong Kong. The Catholic Church began there as a very small and uninfluential minority. The respect the Church in Hong Kong enjoys today for its many contributions to the community-at-large, especially in the educational and social service fields, can be attributed to the outstanding efforts of both its clergy and laity down through the years. Most noteworthy has been the leadership of its bishops, beginning with T. Raimondi and continuing down to the last Italian Bishop L. Bianchi, who insisted on and finally obtained in 1968 permission to retire in order to put the diocese in the hands of its first Chinese Bishop, Francis P.C. Hsu.

#### Notes

- (1) For a biography of Bishop S. Volonteri (1831-1904), see: A. LOZZA, Il Pacifico Stratega, Milano 1956, pp. 317.
- (2) A. LOZZA, Op. Cit. p. 118 ss.
- (3) C. COSTANTINI, Con i Missionari in Cina (1922-1933), Roma (1946), vol. I, p. 371.
- (4) A. LOZZA, Op. Cit., pp. 141-154.
- (5) L. BALCONI, Vita del Beato A. Crescitelli (1863-1900), Martire in Cina, Milano 1950, pp. 238; A. LOZZA, Sangue Fecondo, Bologna 1981 (4th ed.), pp. 259.
- (6) H. CORDIER, Historire des Relations de la Chine avec les Puissance Occidentales (1860-1900), Paris 1902, vol. II, p. 597 ss.
- (7) E. SODERINI, Il Pontificato di Leone XIII, (Milano) 1933, vol. II, p. 360.
- (8) A. LOZZA, Op. Cit., pp. 135-140.
- (9) C. COSTANTINI, Op. Cit., vol. II p. 84 s.