

# THE CATHOLIC CHURCH IN YUNNAN PROVINCE



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translated by Peter Barry

In China's Yunnan Province, the majority of its 23,000,000 people belong to national minority groups. This was also true of the 60,000 Catholics living there prior to the civil war. Most Catholic members were of the Miao, Yi and Bai peoples. In comparison, Han Chinese Catholics were relatively few. Catholics for the most part lived in the southern part of the province, with many clustered along the Nujiang river among the Tibetans. Today Yunnan Province is divided into three ecclesiastical districts: the dioceses of Kunming, Zhaotong and Dali. In all three territories, the work of restoration and the reopening of churches continues as throughout the rest of China.

## Kunming Diocese

It was in the 1930's that French missionaries from the neighbouring province of Sichuan introduced the Catholic faith to Yunnan. At first, they settled in the Zhaotong area, but soon expanded to Kunming, where they erected churches, schools and hospitals. Thus Kunming can boast of a history of catholicism dating back to over half a century. The main church in Kunming is situated on Beijing Road. It was built in 1936 and dedicated to St. Theresa of Lisieux. Its large delicately carved wooden statue of the popular saint was destroyed during the Cultural Revolution, at which time the church itself had been turned into a government warehouse. In 1981, the government returned the church to the catholic community, and after some renovation work, it opened its doors again in the same year.

The present pastor of St. Theresa's is Father Gu Chaolin, a native of Yunnan and also a member of the Miao minority. Father Gu entered the seminary during his middle-school years and was ordained a priest in 1949. He was the last priest to be ordained for the Kunming diocese.



Father Gu

Also assisting Father Gu in his pastoral activities in the parish, is Father Wang Yong, a Salesian priest who is now in his 70's. Father Wang was arrested shortly after the end of the civil war and was eventually sentenced to a work-camp in the south, an area known for its blistering heat during most of the year. He laboured there for over 17 years, planting and harvesting bananas, pineapples and sugar cane. He was finally released from prison in 1979, after spending a total of 28 years in detention. Father Wang is much loved and respected by the Catholics of Kunming. Because of his facility in foreign languages, he has been hired by the government to work in the local library. He is also a member of the Yunnan historical research committee and is presently at work translating Italian medical manuals into the Chinese language. Whatever time he has left over, Father Wang gives to the parish. Among his pastoral responsibilities, he teaches theology in the small, preparatory seminary attached to the church. The diocese now has one seminarian studying in the National Seminary in Beijing, another in the Regional Seminary in Chengdu, and five more being prepared by Father Wang in Kunming.

The diocese has four other ordained clergy. Among them is Bishop Kong Lingzhong, of course, who is 83, and his vicar-general, Sun Hepin, who is 78. There are two other priests, Fathers He Dezong and Zhang Wenchang, who are now in their late 70's and live in retirement with their relatives.

### **Zhaotong Diocese**

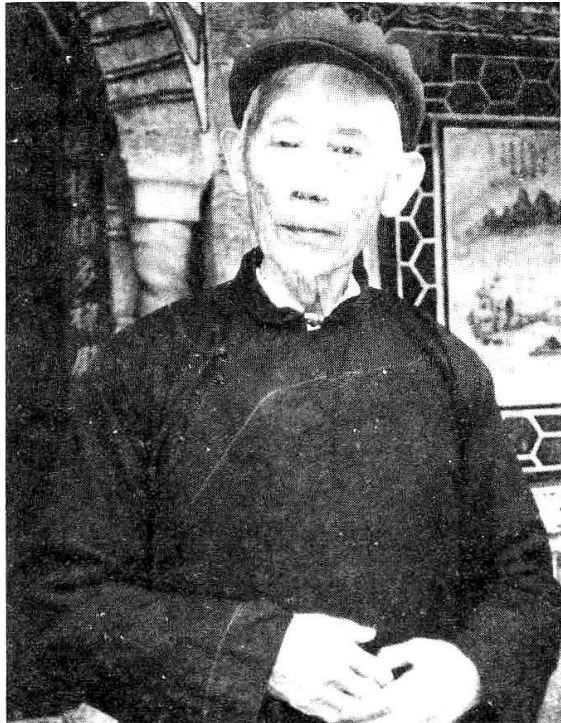
The Zhaotong diocese is located in the northeast part of Yunnan. It has about 30,000 Catholics. As a group, the Catholic community here is noted not only for its fervour but also for its strong spirit of

unity. When Bishop Duan Yinming of Sichuan province consecrated Father Chen Mushun as bishop in Chongqing on March 28th of this year, the response of the Zhaotong Catholics was one of enthusiasm and prayerful thanksgiving to God. Bishop Chen is 83 years old and the only resident priest in the whole diocese. Catholics rejoiced because now they had their own bishop and , their prayers had been answered by the choice of Father Chen, who long has had their deepest respect and affection.

Zhaotong's future hope is vested in three seminarians now being prepared for ordination in the Regional Seminary at Chengdu, and also in another, younger seminarian studying at the local preparatory seminary at Kunming. It is hoped that these young men will soon help to remedy the situation caused by an acute lack of ordained clergy.

### Dali Diocese

The Dali diocese is located in the northwest corner of Yunnan. During the early 1950's there were over 5,000 Catholics. Here, mostly centered around the 50 churches within the diocesan boundaries. During the Cultural Revolution, the churches were closed and the buildings converted into factories or warehouses. The main church in Dali itself re-opened in 1983. Its pastor, Father Liu Hancheng who is in his 80's,



Father Liu

is the sole resident priest in Dali. During the Cultural Revolution many Catholics drifted away from the church. Father Liu's great wish is to go in search of each and everyone of them and lead them back to the fold. However, this good shepherd's spirit is hampered by his advanced age. But he still has hopes that the two young men from Dali now studying at the Sichuan Regional Seminary, and who will be ordained next year, will soon be able to share with him is pastoral burden.

Sister Huang Dezhen, who lives a spartan existence in a village near the Dali church, is at this time the only religious Sister in all of Yunnan. She is a member of the Congregation of St. Paul of Chartres and is now 84 year's old. Everyday she makes a tour of the nearby villages, visiting Catholics to

pray and study the Bible with them. (Father John Cioppa gives a detailed account of his visits to Father Liu Hanchen and Sister Huang Dezhen in his article "The Presence of the Spirit in China" which appears in this issue of TRIPOD.)

Father Tao Wenhong is a priest who lives and works in Wenshan County in the southeast corner of Yunnan, near the Vietnam border. The Wenshan Catholic Church has only recently been re-opened and the number of its Catholics is roughly estimated to be about 2,000.

Another priest, Father Shi Guangrong, who at 65 is comparatively young, was ordained last year at Sheshan Seminary in Shanghai. He is now working at the Diqing Catholic Church in the Tibetan autonomous region of Yunnan. Father Shi had been a seminarian before the Communist government came to power, and persevered in his vocational ideal even after his seminary was closed down. More than 30 years later, he has finally reached his goal. In an interview, Father Shi said, "The Tibetan Catholics had not seen a priest for over 30 years. For all that time they waited for me to return to this area, to offer Mass for them and administer the sacraments." While Father Shi himself is a Han Chinese, he had for many years worked as a catechist among the Tibetan people. He speaks their language and is well versed in their customs and special needs. For this reason, Father Shi chose to return after his ordination to live and work among the Tibetan people, who have so endeared themselves to him.

Vocations among the Tibetan Christian communities of Diqing are quite plentiful. According to recent reports, 30 young men and 39 young women have expressed the desire to enter religious life. Unfortunately, due to the low standard of education in the area, its economic problems, and the narrow confines of the Diqing church property, which does not allow for space to train and educate the young, these potential vocations are left without the necessary means to achieve their goals. It is estimated that there are about 80,000 Catholics in the Diqing area. In the past seven months Father Shi has baptized 880 catechumens and administered Confirmation to about 2,000 Catholics.

The Catholic Church in Mile County has yet to be re-opened. The two priests who serve this parish, Fathers Bi Fangji and Wang Feiyue, are both over 70. They make frequent trips to the villages to visit the Catholics, offering Mass in their homes and administering the sacraments.

## The Kunming Preparatory Seminary

In September 1986, the preparatory seminary opened in Kunming. At present it has 6 resident seminarians between the ages of 18 to 20. Most of them are members of the Miao national minority. The educational level of the seminarians is rather low. They have received only basic elementary schooling. They are all, however, from fervent Catholic families, deeply rooted in the faith, and highly disposed to learn.

A special characteristic of the Kunming preparatory seminary is that it combines theory with practice. Much attention is given to practical experience. After one year of study, the seminarians are sent to the countryside to serve as apprentice catechists. In addition to teaching doctrine, they also lead the Catholics in community prayer and other devotional exercises. Their places at the Seminary are then taken by six more young men who, in turn will be sent for one year of pastoral training to the countryside. The returning seminarians resume their classes in Kunming. After some years of this kind of formation, and if the seminarians still have the desire to pursue a religious vocation, the seminary authorities will send them to the Sichuan Regional Seminary in Chengdu or to the National Seminary in Beijing where they will continue on their journey towards eventual ordination.

Present conditions at the Kunming preparatory seminary are quite primitive. Life there is quite austere. The seminary does not even have complete edition of the Bible, not to mention the lack of other theological reference materials. The rector is Bishop Kong Lingzong, with Fathers Gu Chaolin and Wang Yong serving as theological instructors.

As yet there is no novitiate for the training of religious sisters in Yunnan Province. Those young women aspiring to embrace a religious life are sent to convents in other provinces. Three young women of the Miao National minority are now being trained at the convent in Luzhou in Guangxi Province.

In closing this brief review of the Church in Yunnan province, I would like to express my own personal admiration for the Catholic community there. It has undergone so much and yet still retains such strong hope as it confronts its future. This not only shows forth an extraordinary underlying Christian vitality, but it also gives evidence of the kind of tenacious faith on which its future will be firmly built.