THE SPIRITUAL LEGACY OF BISHOP JAMES E. WALSH OF MARYKNOLL

by Jean-Paul Wiest

On July 10, 1970, a frail, old Westerner walked slowly across the border from the People's Republic of China into the British colony of Hong Kong. He was the last Catholic missioner released from China, after twelve years of detention in Shanghai.

Within a few days, the man's picture and name -- Bishop James E. Walsh of Maryknoll -- were on the front page of most major newspapers in Europe and America. Suddenly he was raised from almost total oblivion to the ranks of heroes and legendary figures.

His Life

The story of James E. Walsh has, indeed, all the makings of a best selling biography. From his youth, Walsh had a part in pioneering events. At the age of twenty-one, he became one of the first six students to enroll in Maryknoll, a new group founded for the express purpose of being the overseas missionary wing of the U.S. Roman Catholic church. Six years later, he was among the first four Maryknollers to leave for the missions. He had been in South China barely one year when he was chosen to become the leader of this pioneering venture. He soon was responsible for a territory mission one and one-half times the size of his native Maryland. In 1927, at the age of thirty-six, he became Maryknoll's first bishop.

During his early years in South China, Walsh's life was filled with thrilling experiences: he was captured by bandits and caught in the bloody conflicts of local wars. He suffered from the debilitating effects of the hot and humid climate with its accompanying evils of floods and typhoons, rotting molds, white ants, and countless biting insects.

In 1936, after eighteen years in China, he was called to an even more demanding worldwide responsibility. He became the first superior general of Maryknoll. He succeeded Bishop James A. Walsh, the founder of Maryknoll, who had just passed away. Upon completion of his ten-year term, James E. Walsh returned to China, again to assume a unique position. He was appointed executive secretary of the Catholic Central

Bureau, an agency newly founded to coordinate the Catholic Church's missionary efforts throughout China.

In 1958, Walsh was arrested by the Chinese authorities who alleged he had committed crimes of "espionage and conspiracy." Two years later, he was sentenced to twenty years in prison. He was set free before the expiration of his sentence, at the age of seventy-nine. He then came back to New York where he shunned publicity as much as he could. He spent the last eleven years of his life in Ossining, N.Y., satisfied to live in the Maryknoll seminary where his missionary career had begun.

Clarity of Purpose

At the age of 19, Walsh began to give some serious consideration to becoming a priest. Yet he could not bring himself to send his application to the local seminary because diocesan work did not appeal to him. Two years later, however, when by chance he came across a copy of the Maryknoll magazine -- then called The Field Afar -- he suddenly found his calling: "As soon as I read the title -- American Catholic Foreign Mission Seminary -- I felt , at once, that this was what I had been waiting for."1

In April 1912, he revealed his missionary vocation to Fr. James A. Walsh, the superior of Maryknoll:

> I made up my mind about a month ago. It does appeal to me more than working in this country...I have not a shadow of a doubt but that is my vocation and I intend to see it through.2

From then on, he single-mindedly devoted his life to the fulfillment of what he referred to as "the extension of God's Kingdom in the hearts of men."3 To achieve this goal, he felt that a missioner should be a well-rounded person, fit physically, mentally and spiritually:

> We are called upon to labor, especially among pagans. Physically it demands... the tough trimness of a body hardened in service. Mentally, it requires... the inquiring type, willing to learn from others; the generous type that looks for no return; the sympathetic mind that forgets self in appreciation of the stranger's viewpoint. Spiritually, the missioner requires every virtue in one form or another; but hope and a persevering willingness to spend and be spent as His messenger, must occupy a very prominent place.4

The Call to Sainthood

Among the great missioners of the past, St. Paul, St. Francis Xavier and Theophane Venard were James E. Walsh's most cherished role models because, in his view, they had dedicated themselves to the pursuit of only one task, the expansion of God's kingdom.

> If we cannot have the virtues of [these] saints, we can have their principles. If we cannot run the way with their giant footsteps, we can at least direct our own humble steps along the same correct path. The spirit can be right, even if the performance is limited.5

For Bishop Walsh, it became clear that the true path to the full realization of his missionary vocation was sainthood. In his essay, "Description of a Missioner," written in 1936, he presents to all Maryknollers some of his innermost reflections on the subject: a Maryknoller should be not merely an average missioner, but a good one; and being a good one, means becoming a saint.

> When the average [missioner] once wakes up to the startling fact that he...lacks abysmally the brains and the character needed for his work,...he is forced to seek and find the one adequate means open to him. It is his only hope. When God fashioned him into the weak and stupid creature he is, and then sent him out as a child to do a man's work, He thereby sentenced him to sanctity. And so instead of trying to imitate the saint, it would be better for him to concentrate on the less complex process of being one. For him it is at once the easiest and the only way. And, incidentally, it is doubtless the reason why missioners abound, while the good missioner is almost as rare as the saint whose vocation his own closely resembles.6

Service to the Poor

The rural corner of South China where Walsh landed just before Christmas 1918 was in a pitiful state. The local economy had been severely weakened by endemic feuds, a protracted civil war and widespread banditry. Poverty could be seen everywhere. Because of lack of sanitation and medical care, most children had worms, and adults suffered from malaria. Epidemics such as cholera and bubonic plague erupted almost as erratically as Chinese firecrackers. Adding to this already miserable situation, was the sight of countless lepers squatting in shanties built among tombs on the outskirts of towns and villages.

Walsh, who had come to China to preach the gospel and gather people into the Catholic church, almost immediately identified as his special calling the lessening of the miseries among Chinese peasants. Years later, reflecting on his vocation, he wrote in poetic terms how a meeting with a barefooted farmer boy had started his "romance" with the poor and this"predilection" for them:

> I have never scratched the surface of love before as I felt the fiery surge that came to me now..."I choose you" sang in my heart as I looked at my awkward farmer boy, perfect picture of the under-

privileged soul. "I choose you, and with you, the countless millions of God's children like you; men overworked and overlooked; men forgotten and despised; souls impoverished and unendowed. I choose you, and I dedicate myself to you, and I ask no other privilege but to devote the energy of my soul to such as you. For in this sudden revelation shines the incarnation of my life ideal..." I am proud to be a missioner, with a vocation that has anointed me to preach the Gospel to the poor.7

It was as if the neediest owned Walsh. For them he opened orphanages, dispensaries, schools, a small hospital, and even started a leper colony. His emphasis on corporal works of mercy fit very well the mission strategy prevalent in the Catholic church prior to Vatican II. The works of mercy were considered as door openers to catch the attention of non-Christians and bring them to the fold of the church. In the Mission Manual, which he wrote for his mission of Kongmoon, Walsh described this technique in detail:

> [The missioner] who converts pagans in any number knows that the way to do so is to find some human need that is pressed upon them and when found, to proceed to find some way to relieve it...From the very beginning [however] he must take care to see that its true source is realized, which, after all, is not himself as an individual, but the divine church that sent him out.8

Yet, to reduce the bishop's emphasis on corporal works of mercy to a simple strategy to make converts, would be misleading. Walsh's approach was founded on the belief that service and the exercise of charity were the essence of Christianity and that they exerted a magnetic attraction on non-believers to investigate the motivating forces behind such works. Like most missioners of his time, he set out to save the souls of the millions of Chinese. His goal, however, became embedded into a historical and human setting of war and peace, good harvests and cataclysms, life and death. This contextualization and personalization of his purpose made Walsh realize that the Chinese were not just souls to save for the life hereafter; they were also people who deserved a better existence in this world. Undoubtedly this is why he entitled the story of his "romance" with the poor as, "Souls are People."9

Personal Adjustment

The personal adjustment of missioners to the Chinese surroundings played a major role in the way the Chinese people perceived the church. Maryknollers in China encountered a diversity of challenges. The physical surroundings were not favorable: the climate did not suit North Americans, the means of transportation were slow and unreliable. Socio-political unrest interferred with long-range plans for evangelization.

The difficulty of the Chinese language with its varieties of dialects prevented missioners from communicating effectively with the Chinese people. China's cultural heritage and complex philosophical-religious underpinnings permeated Chinese life, from the most important decisions to the simplest daily tasks. Books on Chinese culture, philosophy and religious beliefs did increase the missioners' knowledge and appreciation of China, but study could not make the missioners become Chinese.

In 1937, Walsh provided Maryknollers with the first detailed analysis of the problem of adjusting to China. His study, called "Personal Plan of the Missioner," was far from being a theoretical essay on acculturation, but was based on eighteen years of personal effort toward an ever-deeper insertion into the Chinese milieu. He was able to synthesize the story of his own quest for adjustment in terms which transcend time and place. His view remains a challenge for any missioner today:

> As a fish out of water, so the missioner must regain an environment in which he can function normally...The problem is one of adjustment, and an adjustment implies a change somewhere, somehow...China will not change; at least, not immediately and completely as a mere matter of accommodation to the missioner and in order to make him feel at home...Therefore it is the man, the missioner, I myself and no other, who must do violence to myself in order to change and to conform to what I find in my new country, rather than to expect that country with its 400 million people to conform itself to me.10

"Good will, intelligent effort" and, most of all, "patience" were necessary to pursue the lengthy process of adjustment. Together, these qualities served to shape and define the proper tools for a successful adjustment: familiarity with the language, and knowledge of Chinese customs and the philosophy that underlay them. Walsh pointed out several pitfalls which were often "hard on nerves and cruel to vanity" and could abort the metamorphosis. First, there was the problem of filling a life which had been stripped of its usual activities:

> [The missioner] is a stranger in a strange land suddenly bereft of any power to see, to understand, to judge, to act... He can by conscious effort replace his lost activities by other equally pleasant and profitable ones, until he finds himself living a perfectly full and normal life in his new surroundings...Or, on the other hand, he can drift along aimlessly and allow his life to be filled up gradually with the triviality that creeps in to compensate for the loss of normal activities.11

Another danger was to assume an attitude of contemptuous superiority toward a puzzling culture and unfamiliar people:

> Experience shows that with the average man, not to know a custom is

usually to belittle its force, if not even to regard it with some contempt...Likewise in dealing with the people, the less he knows about them, the less esteem he will have for them because his inability to know his surroundings creates in him the impression that he is merely sojourning in an outlandish place among outlandish people where nothing matters.12

The third danger, and the greatest of all, according to Walsh, was to become satisfied with a limited understanding of China.

> With a little study [the missioner] will pick up a modicum of language...He observes the doings around him in a general and rather vague way, notes a few of the more important customs, remarks some of the striking peculiarities. He sees a little, hears a little, reads a little, reflects a little. But only a little. He misses half of what goes on around him and he often misunderstands the other half...He is still a foreigner in China.13

In another writing to the Maryknoll seminarians, Walsh described a combination of charity, sacrifice, intelligence, and the spirit of poverty, as the spiritual elements to achieve a successful adjustment:

> The man of little charity will not be willing to make the required changes. The man of no sacrifice will not be able to make them. The man of faulty intelligence will not see the need of making them. The man of no esteem for the virtue of poverty will lack one of the strongest incentives to make them.14

The Chinese Church

For Bishop Walsh, adjustment was not just something personal. If Christianity was to survive in China, it had to develop Chinese roots and be placed into Chinese hands. As early as 1923, Walsh suggested that the Maryknoll Sisters begin training Chinese Sisters: "Our great present need is catechists and for that work it would appear to me that a native sisterhood of catechists such as they have in Canton would prove more practical."15 Eight years later, the idea finally matured with the opening of a novitiate for native Sisters in his mission of Kongmoon.

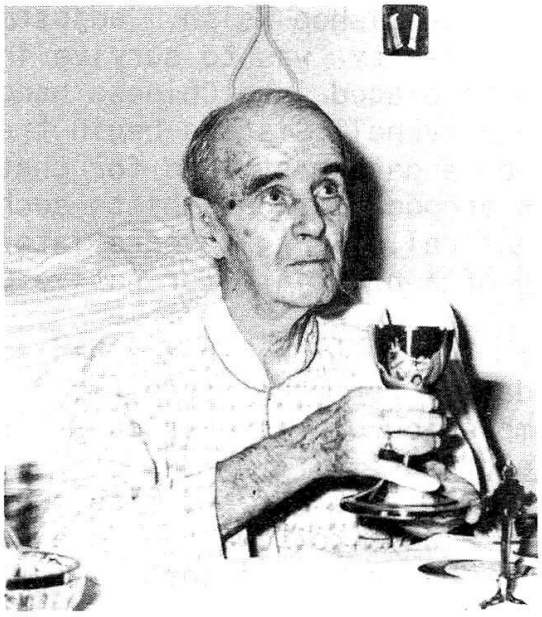
In 1923, Walsh and his fellow Maryknollers started to recruit candidates for the priesthood. Four years later, to celebrate the completion of his mission's minor seminary building, he wrote in the The Field Afar:

> The work [of the missioners] would be incomplete if the church were always to remain a foreign institution in the eyes of the native... The native priest is the best person to show that the church is as much at home in China as it is in Europe and America.16

In his effort to make the Catholic doctrine understandable to the ordinary Chinese person, Walsh strived to alleviate shortcomings in written presentations. For example, the nationwide Chinese catechism was written in vernacular Mandarin, the official daily language of China. Everybody with a few years of schooling could read and understand it. However, for the several millions of poorly educated Chinese who did not speak Mandarin, the sentence structure and the words of the catechism pronounced in their dialect were often odd or even imcomprehensible. In Kongmoon, Walsh was well aware of the problem for the Cantonese-speaking people who used sentence patterns different from those found in modern Mandarin. He therefore concentrated his efforts on adapting a simplified version of the official catechism to the colloquial Cantonese spoken widely in his mission. In 1937, he published a catechism in Cantonese that exemplified his dedication to the disadvantaged and less educated.

To root the Catholic church in China required not only that missioners and their message become as Chinese as possible, but also that religious buildings take on a Chinese appearance. In 1923, when Walsh embarked on a long range construction program in Kongmoon, he had already been urged by the papal delegate Archbp. Costantini, to contribute to the development of a native Christian art and architecture. Walsh did not have any difficulty considering the delegate's instructions to be "a command" because he felt exactly the same way. He wished to build chapels where the common people would feel at ease to pray. He also did not want his chapels, visible symbols of the Catholic church, to be considered as a sign of provocation by the non-Christians. He planned, therefore, to construct them in a style as Chinese as possible.17

Even the cathedral he built in Kongmoon was given low lines and a Chinese exterior, which blended with the surroundings. It was acclaimed as one of the more successful adaptations of Chinese temple architecture to church buildings. The entrance was placed on the short axis of the building so that, on approaching, one saw the sweep of the roof, rather than a built-up facade. Again, Walsh successfully stayed away from the pompous and pretentious, and did not impose what Chinese considered "foreign importation." He built places of worship that the common Chinese easily recognized as theirs.



In dealing with the delicate question of ancestor worship, Walsh also showed leniency and understanding towards Chinese ways. Although, prior to 1929, Confucian ceremonies were still officially considered superstitious by the Catholic church, the bishop liberally used his discretionary powers as head of a mission territory to rule that, most of the time, no superstitions were involved. For instance, when presented with the case of a man who had been refused baptism several times because he used to carry "superstitious" offerings to the grave of his parents at their request, Walsh exclaimed, "The man is not performing a superstition. He is performing his filial duty!" Then, he ordered the pastor to proceed immediately with the baptism.18 Walsh acted in this way not only because of his understanding of Chinese culture, but because he felt the man had been wronged by the church and measures should be taken to correct the injustice.

The Gift of Oneself

During his ten-year tenure as superior general of Maryknoll, Walsh's commitment to train accomplished foreign missioners led him to write a treatise on the preparation for the mission apostolate and the development of a spiritual life adapted to the missions. Maryknoll Spiritual Directory, published in 1947, expanded his previous "Description of a Missioner." He presented the twenty virtues and qualities he considered most essential to a good missioner: accessibility, adaptability, affability, charity, confidence, courage, hardness, humility, initiative, frankness, loyalty, manliness, objectivity, patience, perserverance, prudence, responsibility, restraint, sacrifice, and zeal. By way of introduction, he wrote:

> Maryknoll students are preparing to be missioners, and there is nothing more important in that preparation than a good beginning in the virtues essential to a successful mission work. The seminary is not simply a house of prayer and study; it is also a laboratory where soul-strengthening and mind-sharpening activities are utilized for the formation of the missionary character.19

By this time, several Maryknollers had already died violent deaths. The murder of Fr. Gerard Donovan by Manchurian bandits in 1938 gave Maryknoll its first missionary-martyr. Walsh stressed that preparation for this ultimate charity was part of Maryknoll's legacy:

> "Go the whole way" and "Give all for Christ" are the two little slogans the founders of Maryknoll were fond of emphasizing. They knew that down through the ages the apostolate of Christ had always demanded this sacrificial charity. So they made it part of their teaching.... In short, they knew that Maryknoll would have martyrs, and because neither they nor anybody else knew who the martyrs

would be, they thought that all with the same vocation ought to equip themselves in the same degree.20

When Bp. Walsh returned to China in 1948 as executive secretary of the Catholic Central Bureau, he was ready to make the gift of his life for the fulfillment of his missionary vocation. In June 1951, the Shanghai Military Control Council suspended the activities of the Bureau and gradually began arresting its staff members. Walsh, however, was not apprehended, and chose to remain in the city. For the next seven years, he occupied himself with writing articles describing the methods of famous missioners. He also spent much time helping foreigners and Chinese who wanted to leave China for Hong Kong. He used his good rapport with the British consulate to assist in securing the necessary exit permits and visas. To his Chinese friends who could not leave the country, he gave whatever money he had, and most of his monthly ration tickets, so they could afford more food and medicine for themselves and their children. Soon they had nicknamed him St. Vincent de Paul.

Walsh, himself, could have left China at any time, and it seems the Communists wished he would do so. Instead, he became a strong advocate of the position that missioners should remain at their posts even if it meant imprisonment and death. His thesis, based on the idea that the good shepherd remains with his flock, was set forth very forcefully in the June/July 1951 issue of the China Missionary Bulletin:

> I think it is the plain duty of all Catholic missionaries, priests, Brothers and Sisters to remain where they are until prevented from doing so by physical force. If internment should intervene in the case of some, or even death, it should simply be regarded as a normal risk that is inherent in our state of life, as a necessity concomitant to our responsibilities, and as a small price to pay for carrying out our duty.21

When Maryknoll's General Council expressed concern for the bishop's safety and suggested that he apply for an exit permit, Walsh, who by then was over sixty years old, replied that unless Maryknoll ordered him to leave, he would not give up his commitment to the Chinese people. Then, with a touch of temper, he added, "To put up with a little inconvenience at my age is nothing. Besides, I am a little sick and tired of being pushed around on account of my religion."22

After his arrest in October 1958, Walsh underwent repeated questioning at any hour of the day or night for a period of a year and a half. The Communists tried to get him to admit he was a spy. Although they never used physical torture, Walsh recalled this was the most difficult period of his imprisonment because of the mental pressure and

the harsh living accommodations.23 In 1960, when he received a sentence of twenty years of imprisonment, Walsh had little hope of leaving China alive. He knew that the martyrdom he had long wished for, would be that of a slow rendering of his life through the endless monotony of prison.

An unexpected pardon in 1970, brought him to Hong Kong. At his first press conference as a free man, the bishop, who had already given his whole life to the Chinese people, could not bring himself to say anything negative about his captors. He had forgiven them a long time ago and could find only love in his heart.

> I have no bitterness towards those who tried to condemn me. I just could never feel angry with any Chinese. I felt that way almost from the day I first set foot in China in 1918 and it has just grown stronger with the years, even during my imprisonment. I love the Chinese people.24

The Power of Prayer

After his release, Bishop Walsh came back to live at Maryknoll headquarters in the United States, but his lifestyle did not change much. The man that the Christian press around the world now called a "living martyr," shunned publicity and maintained a simple, daily schedule similar to the one he had followed in jail: prayer had become the center around which revolved all other activities.

During his last eleven years at Maryknoll center, Walsh had some powerful words on the role of prayer in his life since being in prison. To a Benedictine friend he wrote:

> My great support during twelve years of imprisonment was the Rosary. I had no religious books and could not obtain any, so it was impossible for me to celebrate Mass or recite the Breviary... [The Rosary] is a way to continue your ministry. You can pray for all those troubled people of yours instead of just worrying about them all day long... Its fifteen mysteries provided a clear and complete review of the great central truths of religion and the great crucial events in the history of God's dealing with His universe. Its recitation almost automatically imparted remembrance, gratitude, consolation and hope...In short, it was my never failing lifeline all through my prison years.25

From 1958 through 1970, prayer was most likely what saved the bishop from depression and insanity. It also kept him linked with the outside world and certain of the support of his friends. In 1973, he confided to a group of Sisters:

> I knew you were praying for me during those years [I was in jail].

I feel that I was being helped by your prayers, by the prayers of my friends, and, I hope, my own. Prayer is so powerful. I am a living example of what prayer can do.26

CONCLUSION

Bishop James E. Walsh's image of the successful missioner was that of a person who "has ceased to be an American and has become Chinese"27 The bishop never relented from pursuing that goal. By making China the center of his life and activities, and by focusing especially on those he considered the neediest of all, he underwent a gradual transformation, which brought him ever closer to that goal. The deep, abiding commitment of Maryknoll today to serve the poor and the oppressed is, therefore, not a recent development; it is rooted in the personal experience of James E. Walsh and other Maryknoll pioneers who went to China.

Bishop Walsh's years of imprisonment were a long, purifying test of his adjustment and total dedication to the Chinese people. His writings on the necessity of adjustment, the power of prayer, the place of suffering in a missioner's life -- all so well exemplified in his own life -- continue to permeate the Maryknoll Society.

In 1971, Walsh proudly told a group of departing Maryknollers that his fifty-six years as a missioner had all been worthwhile. He encouraged them to start joyfully and confidently on the same road:

> Go the whole way for God. Do not turn back. Do not be discouraged by a little difficulty. Nor by big difficulties either. You will have problems to solve, hardships to beat, sometimes, but that is part of our vocation. Progress requires effort. And, sometimes, it involves pain. "Unless the grain of wheat falling into the ground die, itself, remaineth alone. But if it die, it bringeth forth much fruit." Remember that. And when things look difficult just keep on keeping on.28

These very practical words of advice, based on his own experience, perhaps best summarize Bishop Walsh's spiritual legacy.

When he died at the age of 90, tributes to him were again spoken and printed throughout the world. He was described as "a gentle and courageous missioner," "a pioneer member of the Maryknoll community," "a suffering servant of the Lord Jesus." Most of all, however, he was hailed as "a missioner for all seasons" and "a saint for our times."29 These eulogies were not mere polite formulas to mark the passing of a missioner catapulted onto the screen of contemporary history by an unusual combination of circumstances; these words were pronounced in recognition of a true "spiritual father " -- as the Chinese expression

for priest says so accurately. More than the unusual life of Bishop James E. Walsh, it is his missionary spirituality -- very traditional and yet very modern -- that is worth remembering.

NOTES

1. Maryknoll Fathers Archives (MFA), "Some Account of My Vocation," 1912.
2. MFA, Letters of James E. Walsh to Fr. James A. Walsh, April 28, 1912.
3. MFA, Address for the Maryknoll Departure Ceremony of 1929.
4. James E. Walsh, Maryknoll Spiritual Directory (Maryknoll, NY: Field Afar Press, 1947) pp. 144-45.
5. MFA, Christmas Letter to Maryknollers, 1942.
6. James E. Walsh, Mission Manual of the Vicariate of Kongmoon (Hong Kong: Nazareth Press, 1937), "Description of a Missioner," p. 195.
7. Maryknoll-The Field Afar, September 1939, pp. 138-39.
8. Mission Manual..., pp. 96 and 110.
9. Maryknoll-The Field Afar, September 1939, p. 138. This touching story -- since retitled "Shine on Farmer Boy" -- has become a treasured part of Maryknoll's heritage.
10. Mission Manual..., p. 146.
11. Ibid., p.147.
12. Ibid., pp. 148-149.
13. Ibid., pp. 149-150.
14. Maryknoll Spiritual Directory, p.65.
15. Maryknoll Sisters Archives, Letter of Sr. Mary Paul McKenna, July 9, 1923.
16. The Field Afar, June 1927, p. 152.
17. "Letter of the Apostolic Delegate to China Addressed to the Very Rev. James E. Walsh and Edward J. Galvin, April 23, 1923", The Ecclesiastical Review, September 1923, pp. 288-93. MFA, Letter of Msgr. James E. Walsh to Fr. James A. Walsh, June 8, 1925.
18. Maryknoll China History Project, Interview of Fr. Edward Mueth, p.48.
19. Maryknoll Spiritual Directory, p. 55.
20. Ibid., pp. 72-73.
21. China Missionary Bulletin, June/July 1951, pp. 491-92. See also October 1948, pp. 581-86.
22. Quoted in "Biography," A Missioner for All Seasons (New York: Maryknoll Publications, 1981).
23. James E. Walsh, Zeal for Your House (Huntington, IN,: Our Sunday Visitor, 1976), pp. 172, 177.
24. Ibid, p. 169.
25. Ibid., pp. 209 and 211.
26. Ibid., p. 233.
27. Mission Manual, p. 173.
28. Zeal for Your House, p. 214.
29. See some of these tributes in A Missioner for All Seasons.