

Book Review

Against All Odds, Sisters of Providence Mission in China, 1920-1990.

By Ann Colette Wolf, S.P.

Sisters of Providence, United Graphics, Terre Haute, Indiana, 1990, 399 pp. paper .

Reviewed by Miriam Xavier Mug, M.M.

The Sisters of Providence of St. Mary-of-the-Woods, in order to commemorate the 150th anniversary of the foundation of their Congregation in the United States and the 70th year of mission among the Chinese, requested Sister Ann Colette Wolf to write an account of that mission presence. The Sisters of Providence were the first congregation of American women religious to take up mission in China.

The book is divided into three major sections: Part I recounts the beginnings of the foundation in China in 1920 until 1929. Part II deals with a period troubled and torn by civil strife, foreign wars and the victory of Communist forces. Part III gives the account of the Sisters' work in Taiwan where they went in 1948.

In 1920 Bishop Tacconi, PIME, invited the Sisters of Providence to work in Kaifeng, Henan Province. The bishop thought that to build up the local church, work with women and education were particularly important. The Sisters accepted the invitation and on 24 November, 1920, six Sisters, under the leadership of Sister Marie Gratia Luking, arrived in Kaifeng and opened a school for girls. Education has remained a major thrust of the Sisters over the years.

The foundation of the mission was fraught with difficulties. The conditions under which the Sisters lived and worked reflected Kaifeng's poverty. The Bishop's presentation of what the Sisters could expect in work and living situations was far from the reality. The Bishop did not adhere to the agreement between himself and the Sisters of Providence with respect to work, support, living, etc. He was not an educator and his interference in school matters created problems. There was dissension among the Sisters over work and internal matters. The Sisters

also met with personal tragedy. Sister Marie Elise Renauld contracted smallpox and died only five months after their arrival in Kaifeng. Civil war in China forced the Sisters to leave Kaifeng in 1926 and take refuge in Peking, Tientsin and Korea before returning to Kaifeng in 1929.

In the second phase, the Sisters' continue to develop their work in Kaifeng. Ching I school was opened and very successful, but problems arising from the manipulations of a teacher helped Sister Marie Gratia realize the need for a Chinese Sister as principal. Sister Agnes Joan Li was selected. She returned to Kaifeng from the Motherhouse to take up the position.

From the beginning Sister Marie Gratia realized that, as Westerners, they would never completely understand the Chinese mind and psychology. From early on they dreamed of forming a Chinese religious community to work with them. After returning to Kaifeng in 1929, they further considered their plan and submitted a proposal to the bishop and their General Superior. This Chinese Sisterhood was to have specific ties to the Sisters of Providence in the United States. The plan was approved and the Providence Sister Catechists received formal approval from Rome in 1932. It had always been Sister Marie Gratia's hope that the group would attain full autonomy as a religious congregation. The approval of the Providence Sister Catechists as a distinct religious congregation was granted in 1962 in Taiwan.

The second period also held much sorrow. The Sisters were surrounded with civil unrest, banditry, and finally, the Sino-Japanese War which brought horror to their area. With the outbreak of war between Japan and the United States, the American members of the group were placed under house arrest, later interned in Weihsien and then transferred to Peking (Beijing) where they remained until the end of the war. Sisters Agnes Joan Li, Bernadette Ma and the Sister Catechists continued to live and work in Kaifeng.

After the surrender of the Japanese, the Sisters returned to Kaifeng. Again tragedy struck. Sister Elizabeth Cecile Haribson, returning to Kaifeng from America, was killed in a plane crash near Tientsin. Sister Theodata Haggerty and Sister Theo Hsu, a Providence Sister Catechist, died from carbon monoxide while in hospital. In 1948 when it became evident that the Communist armies would gain control of the district, the Sisters

went to Shanghai. There they learned that Sisters were badly needed in Taiwan. Since, the Sisters had command of the Chinese language and were equipped for ministry there, arrangements were made for them to go to Taiwan in 1948.

The third period of the Sisters of Providence's work with the Chinese has been a period of expansion, growth and change. Providence School, which opened in a store front building, later expanded into Providence English College. This college was turned over to the diocese. In 1973, the college was upgraded to university level. Providence University has an enrollment of over 5000 students. While education has remained a priority, the Sisters have branched out into other areas: hostel work, counseling students, prison classes and visitation, and work with handicapped.

Chapter XII of the book is entitled *The Foundress*. It deals mostly with Sister Marie Gratia's final days in Taiwan. Unfortunately, it does not consider the profundity of her personality, her insight and understanding of the need for in depth cultural study in the spread of the Kingdom. She was unquestionably a woman of great intuition and vision. Sister Marie Gratia in her advanced understanding of mission anticipated points that would be enunciated by Paul VI in *Evangelii Nuntiandi* and *Populorum Progressio*. This understanding was not often found in missionaries of her day. This more than likely contributed to the misunderstandings between her, her Sisters, the bishop and her General Superiors.

The author is to be commended for her extensive study of her Congregation's contribution to mission. The indexing, however, is hard to follow and the "sources consulted" do not include as many current Chinese studies as one would hope for.

The final statement of the Congregation's 33rd General Chapter said:

From France to America to China, the call to mission is basic to our history. As the center of world population shifts to Asia, the call to continue our mission with the Chinese takes on renewed importance.

It is reassuring that mission to the Chinese remains paramount to the Sisters of Providence. With the increased interest in mission historiography the work should prove of value not only to her own community but to all interested in the development and history of Catholic mission with the Chinese.