

## *Book Review*

### **Havoc in Hunan, The Sisters of Charity in Western Hunan 1924-1951**

**By Sister Mary Carita Pendergast, S.C.,**  
Sister of Charity of St. Elizabeth, College of Saint Elizabeth Press,  
Inc., Morristown, New Jersey, 1991, 251 pp., paper.  
**Reviewed by Sr. Betty Ann Maheu, M.M.**

In the spring of 1989, Sister Mary Carita Pendergast, S.C. returned to Hunan to renew old friendships. It had been thirty-eight years since she had been forced to leave China where she had served as a missionary for eighteen years.

*Havoc in Hunan* is the twenty-seven year history of the Sisters of Charity in Western Hunan in Central China. It is a story of joys and sorrows, of sufferings and of pain, of successes and seeming failure. It is a story of selfless love and of extraordinary heroism of women caught in a tragedy of history, playing roles they had never intended.

On March 25, 1924, the superior of the Sisters of Charity received a letter from Fr. Stanislaus Grennan, New Jersey Provincial of the Passionists, requesting Sisters for the Fathers' China mission. Five Sisters were chosen from among volunteers. They set sail from San Francisco on the S.S. President Wilson on September 30, 1924; they arrived in Shanghai on October 21, and finally reached, Shenchoufu, (now Yuanling) their intended destination, on July 12, 1925. The long voyage had not been uneventful. They had been initiated into the perils and discomforts of travel; they had experienced long delays, and had been attacked by bandits and lost most of their possessions.

As the years passed and the workload increased, new Sisters were assigned to the China mission. Between 1933 and 1947, 12 American Sisters arrived in Central China. Meanwhile young Chinese women had also joined their ranks. The Sisters' work included teaching girls in elementary and high school, caring for the sick in hospitals and dispensaries, and finding and bringing up orphans and abandoned children, often ill and handicapped. By 1951, four of the native Americans had laid down their lives in their mission country as had two of the young Chinese women who had joined them. Some Sisters

had died martyrs of the sick, stricken with typhus or cholera, while others died of illness caused by overwork and zeal. A third Chinese Sister, not permitted to leave the country with the American Sisters in 1951, died in a Communist prison camp in 1981.



Author, Sr. Carita Pendergast visited by China bishops' delegation, New Jersey, 1986. In photo, Bishop Dong, of Wuhan, China and President of the Sisters of Charity.

*Havoc in Hunan* chronicles some of China's most tragic years: the Communist uprising from 1927-34, and the eight-year Sino-Japanese War during which the Communists in the north were building up strength and strategy for a second Communist uprising in 1947 under Mao Zedong. The events of these harrowing years and their effects on the work of the Sisters and on their Passionist co-workers are told graphically, entertainingly, often with a delightful humor and always without melodrama. No one could or wanted to interpret the handwriting on the wall in 1946 as new mission works flourished. By 1951, however, evicted from their convents, obstructed on all sides from carrying out their work in the hospital, dispensary, in schools and catechumenates, in their orphanage, dragged before magistrates, threatened and falsely accused of various crimes,

their funds frozen and personally drained physically and psychologically, the American Sisters were left without choice. They applied for a permit to leave China and the works for which they had laboured so zealously for the Kingdom of God.

The story of the Sisters of Charity in China is obviously an eye witness account, told by a superb and colorful storyteller who is also a careful researcher, and who knows how to give attention to significant data and details. It is also the work of one still very young in spirit who vividly remembers what it is like to walk the rustic paths of China's countryside, who loves its teeming millions, particularly its poor and deprived, and who appreciates Chinese culture and language.

*Havoc in Hunan* achieves its aim: it tells its story well.

