

## *Book Review*

### **Only a Beginning, The Passionists in China, 1921-1931**

by Caspar Caulfield, C.P.

Passionist Press, Union City, New Jersey, 07087, 1990, 296 pp. paper

Reviewed by Peter Barry

Caspar Caulfield chronicles the first ten years of the heroic efforts of the American Passionist Fathers to plant the Gospel in western Hunan Province, China. In so doing he has added a valuable chapter to the overall picture of China mission history, the writing of which is now being taken up by several of the missionary orders who labored there.

For the most part, Father Caulfield lets the missionaries tell their own story by citing their letters, diaries and writings (e.g., in Sign magazine), as found in the Passionist Archives in Union City, New Jersey. The author also does a superb job of describing the background of warlord period China which had such an impact on the lives and work of the first Passionist missionaries. The 6 Passionists making up the first band arrived in Shanghai in early January 1922 on their way to Hunan.

The author presents a "warts and all" story of the difficulties met by these American missionaries in 1920's western Hunan. Primary among these were the living and travel conditions of their mission. It was located in a mountainous region accessible only by riverboat or donkey trail. The Passionists set up their procure in Hankou. But then it was several days journey by boat across Dinghu Lake to Changde, and from there by boat again up the Yuan River to their mission. Like St. Paul, the missionaries were always "in periculis latronum," because their mission area was infested by robber bands, and later by neophyte guerilla groups. They frequently had to seek military escort from Nationalist related armies in the area.

There were also difficulties of an "ecclesiastical " nature. Misunderstandings arose with the Spanish Augustinians, part of whose mission territory the Passionists took over. The Passionist area became a separate prefecture in 1925 with Father Dominic Langenbach named as first prefect. Each order thought the other should be responsible for certain mission subsidies. Misunderstandings also arose within the Passionist Order itself. The perception of mission work on the part of

those in the "home office" was different from those "in the field." For instance, the novice master at home, who played a great role in recruiting young Passionists for the missions, was scandalized when he read that one of the missionaries was wearing a "white silk suit" instead of the long, black (and no doubt very warm) Passionist habit. The home-bound novice master also thought that the missionaries should set up a monastery and carry out traditional Passionist spiritual exercises, like chanting the Divine Office in choir. The missionaries soon convinced the novice master of the unfeasibility of doing this.

Another internal problem had to do with the personality of the first prefect. Not all the missionaries agreed with Father Dominic's policies, nor were his orders always carried out. For instance, in the Spring of 1927, at a time of rather intense guerilla activity in western Hunan, Father Dominic ordered the 31 missionaries in his care (including several American Sisters belonging to two Orders, the Sisters of Charity of Convent Station, NJ and the Sisters of St. Joseph of Baden, PA who arrived in West Hunan in 1925 and 1926 respectively) to leave their mission parishes for the comparatively safe areas of Shanghai or Guiyang. Most of the missionaries complied with Fr. Dominic's orders, but a few did not. These few remained behind in their missions, saying they did not want to desert their flocks in time of trouble. Friction with the local superior was exacerbated when "the stayers" forthrightly set down their reasons in a letter and mailed it to Apostolic Delegate Costantini in Beijing and to their provincial superior in New Jersey. A Visitor was soon sent from provincial headquarters to calm the troubled waters. The upshot was that Father Dominic was required to step down from the post of prefect. Father Cuthbert O'Gara replaced him in the Spring of 1930.

Father Dominic's concern to send the missionaries out of their territory in 1927 in order to avoid harm coming to them at the hands of bandits or revolutionaries was tragically proven to have had a basis in fact two years later. On April 24, 1929, three Passionists, Clement Seybold, Godfrey Holbein and Walter Coveyou were ambushed on the way back to their missions from their annual retreat by a group of 16 or 17 bandits. They were led two or three miles up into the hills and brutally shot by the leader of the bandit gang. The motive for the killing of the missionaries has never been completely ascertained.

Father Caulfield amasses a certain amount of evidence to theorize that the American missionaries were killed by communist partisans as a diversionary tactic to keep the Nationalist army occupied while the Communists launched a campaign to capture Wuhan, their real objective.

However, it seems to me that more investigation is needed to prove Father Caulfield's theory. The motive for the murders could simply have been anti-foreign or anti-Christian sentiment on the part of some local inhabitants. Father Caulfield quotes the letter of two Passionists written shortly after the crime which contains the testimony of the Christian boys who had accompanied the murdered priests. The boys were taken by the bandits to a temple called Chang Kuang Miao, where a monk served dinner to the bandits. A few hours later the boys were released after the bandits exacted a promise from them that they would no longer work for the "foreign devils." The bandits called the boys "slaves of the foreigners," and referred to the mission as "yang hang," or foreign enterprise. Whatever the motive for the crime, the murderers were never found nor were they ever brought to justice.

Father Caulfield ends his work on the first decade of the Passionists' missionary work in China with the nomination of Cuthbert O'Gara as prefect apostolic. The blood of the three murdered Passionists had watered the missionary seed, and it had borne fruit. During the first 10 years of the mission the Gospel was preached and new Christians entered the church. In 1930 the 11 parishes in the prefecture contained about 2,500 Catholics, and there were 1,250 catecumens. Besides the spiritual harvest, Only A Beginning tells of the material aid the Passionists gave to the people during the frequent famines which took place in western Hunan during the 1920's. The Passionist priests, as well as the Sisters of Charity and Sisters of St. Joseph, ran schools for the underprivileged children of the area. The Annual Report to the Sacred Congregation of Propaganda Fide in Rome for the year 1929-1930 also lists 12 dispensaries, 13 orphanages, and 5 homes for the elderly as having been established. Although "only a beginning," it was a beginning that showed a lot of promise.

Father Caulfield's book deserves to be read by all who are interested in the history of Catholic missions in China.