

Hecheng New Village, Bearing Witness to Christ Through Love

Rosa Chung

Translated by Peter Barry, M.M.

Hecheng New Village in Heshan County, Guangdong province, is located about 30 kilometers west of Jiangmen city and 90 kilometers southwest of Guangzhou. It is a very small village consisting of approximately 40 families and a total population of 200.

The people, all Catholics, love to tell the story of how their ancestors, many years ago, crossed Crane mountain, from which the village gets its name, in order to find a better life on the other side and how over 100 years ago, two missionaries happened to pass through their village. Fascinated by the foreigners' appearance, and curious to find out something about them, the villagers offered them warm hospitality. The missionaries, for their part, took advantage of the situation to instruct the villagers in the Catholic faith. This chance meeting was the people's first contact with Christianity. Gradually, the faith spread throughout the whole village and everyone was converted including the village leader. From this time on the village leader has been the acknowledged head of the Christian community. The village head today is a 50 year old farmer.

In spite of China's turbulent religious history over the past 100 years, the Catholic faith in the village has remained intact. This is largely attributable to the fact that parents always encourage their children to marry Catholics. Some young men, of course, do go outside the village to marry and do marry non-Catholics girls, but even these, eager to become a part of the Christian community, soon ask for baptism.

In the entire Jiangmen Diocese, there are only 8 priests, including the bishop, to service 23 churches and mission centres. Hecheng has never had a resident priest. During these last years, Fr. Linus Wong, pastor of Jiangmen city parish who died in October 1992, handled all of Hecheng's church matters. Father Wong celebrated Mass in Hecheng around the time of the four major feasts of the church (Christmas, Easter, Pentecost and Mary's Assumption); at other times he visited the Catholics

in their homes.

Although Catholics in Hecheng New Village have no priest to serve them on a regular basis, they do have a lovely little chapel which was opened and blessed in 1988. Here, the people, who have set up a program of devotions for themselves, gather each day for morning and evening prayer. Every Sunday, they recite 15 decades of the rosary and the Catholic leader reads passages from the Scriptures. During Lent, they daily make the Stations of the Cross. The villagers have never had any systematic catechetical program. Most of what they know about their faith has been absorbed through the content of their prayers. For the people busy in the fields all day or out in the villages selling their produce, the evening gatherings in chapel provide a time for relaxation, for deepening social bonds and for sharing the news of the day.

Before he died, Fr. Wong had initiated a number of projects in view of enhancing their people's knowledge of the faith as well as for fostering their holistic development. To help young children receive the necessary foundation for entering primary school, he organized a pre-school. Classes, at first, were held in the chapel since he had no other space available. He also hired teachers from Taishan and other towns, experienced in nursery school education, to teach the pre-school classes. His aim, however, was to make the pre-school self-supporting. Today the teacher is herself from Hecheng. She works for pocket money only, and the villagers care for her daily needs.

Later, Father Wong, with the help of two groups of Catholics working together, was able to construct a 2 storey parish centre. A group of Catholics from Macao contributed money to buy the construction materials; and the Hecheng Catholics themselves with the help of a builder, designed the centre, selected the materials, did all the construction work, and the interior decorating. Each floor has three rooms. In the middle of the building, above the second storey are engraved the four words: "With Love and Service." The pre-school class, now located in the centre, occupies two rooms. A third room has been set aside for the elderly. Today, with so many younger people working outside the village, the elderly are left at home, often unattended. The centre now provides them with a place where they can meet and look after one another. At the same time, the presence of the young children gives the old people a

sense of usefulness since many of them help care for the children while the parents are away at work. Another room has been designated for the use of the teenagers. Since the teenagers seldom have the chance to visit a library, Father Wong especially arranged this "cultural room" for them and supplied it with books on general knowledge and religion.

After the completion of the centre, Sister Fang, who is over 60 years old, willingly accepted an assignment from the Jiangmen diocese to move from Xinhui to Hecheng. Today, with the pastoral emphasis on catechesis, Sr. Fang is responsible for the catechetical formation of the adults and the young people in the faith. She has no income whatsoever, but the Hecheng Catholics take care of her everyday needs. All this is done in the spirit of the early Church when everything was held in common.

Although Hecheng is a small parish, and the people have little money, they have a deep feeling of unity with and a sense of belonging to the whole diocese. Hecheng Catholics treasure every opportunity to participate in diocesan activities and can be seen at every big celebration: the opening of a new church, the ordination or anniversaries of the priests, the entrance into the convent or the taking of vows by the Sisters, or the first Mass of a new priest. With the help of the village leader who arranges the means of transportation all are able to participate.

The Hecheng villagers often attract outsiders to the faith. A woman from Xinhui, who was not a Catholic, and who used to visit her schoolmate's home in Hecheng, soon discovered that Hecheng was special. Unlike most villages, Hecheng was warm and friendly to outsiders. Furthermore, the people were close to each other. She decided to move there. Her friends tried in vain to dissuade her by pointing out all the advantages of a good job and comfortable life in the city. However, she did move. Later, she married a young man from the village, and was baptized into the church. Now, she has two children and is very happy. She is persuaded that living in this village is better than enjoying the material prosperity of the big city.

Following the death of Fr. Wong last October, a young priest, Fr. Paul Leung, has been appointed pastor in Jiangmen. He continues Father Wong's work for the faithful and devout Catholics of Hecheng whose love for God and one another makes them a wonderful model parish and effective witnesses to Christ in the world.