

Our Parish Life

by Shen Shiwei

Translated by Michael Sloboda, M.M.

Yangjingbin Church, the church of St. Joseph, located at #36 South Sichuan Road in Shanghai City, has a 130 year history. In 1847, Bp. Louis-Marie de Besi acquired a piece of land, which at the time, was outside the city limits. There he built a small chapel. In 1858, a foreign priest with the name of Du Rolan became the first resident pastor. There were only 272 Catholics at the time: 92 foreign and 180 Chinese.

Around 1860, during the Taiping Rebellion, many Catholics, hoping to stay alive, left the Nanjing area and came to Shanghai. The small chapel no longer sufficed. As a result, the first large church was built to accommodate the influx of Catholics. The opening Mass was celebrated on June 29, 1861, and the church was dedicated to St. Joseph. Having lived next to the church for 58 years, I have seen with my own eyes how often, in the course of history, hostile forces have lashed against it.

Confiscated by the government and badly damaged during the Cultural Revolution, the Yangjingbin church, despite its long history, suffered much the same fate as other churches in China. In 1981, the government returned the property to the church. After badly needed repairs, the church was reopened on Christmas Eve of the same year. The reality of being able once again to attend Mass in their church moved many people to shed tears of joy. After more extensive repairs the church has now been restored to its former elegance.

Inside the church, at the front, is a large crucifix, with statues of Mary and Joseph on either side. The altar has been remodeled in accordance with the liturgical reforms. The pastor himself painstakingly designed and painted the Stations of the Cross in oil. Outside the main door there are reliefs of the four evangelists. The north and south circular windows have been renewed in stained glass depicting the Sacred Hearts of Jesus and Mary. The many foreign Catholics and non-Catholics who come to visit the church all express their amazement and delight at the quality of the church's art and architecture.

The pastor, Fr. Jiang Minsheng, is over 70. He cares for two other churches: Sacred Heart in Zhangjialou, Pudong, and St. Joseph's in Qichangzhan. While both of these churches are small, they have a history of over 300 years.

The parish of St. Joseph's in Yangjingbin counts some 3000 Catholics. There is a Catholic Representatives Council which holds a major meeting once every four years to discuss church affairs and to elect the members of the parish administrative committee as well as the head and standing committee members of the Catholic Patriotic Association. Although the pastor is always the head of the parish administrative committee, the assistant, or the head of the C.P.A., is always a lay person. The heads of these two organizations jointly chair a monthly business meeting. The priest makes the decisions regarding spiritual and church matters; the C.P.A. manages contact with the wider society, e.g., purchasing, rental of buses, supervision of repair work, planning activities, etc..

Every Sunday, the parish holds a doctrine class for students and a catechumenate for adults. Presently, St Joseph's boasts more than 40 acolytes. Every Sunday also more than 40 Catholics (more than 60 on the four principal feasts of the year) provide the singing at Mass. The women have organized a choir. Although the members are rather elderly, and few of them are literate, they chant at Mass daily and spend a half hour after Mass with senior Catholics who instruct them in prayer and doctrine. During the past two years, to promote the liturgical reforms, the readers at Sunday Mass use Shanghaiese to proclaim the Scriptures. Twelve of the altar servers have organized a Bible reading and sharing group, which is led by the pastor. This activity is designed to help Catholics better appreciate the Word of God, and obtain the spiritual benefits that come from reading and praying the Scriptures.

"There are many people in our parish," Fr. Jiang said at a parish meeting, "who do things not to be known and admired but simply for the love of God and the good of the parish..."

Parishioners engage in many good works: some come to church at dawn to clean; others visit the sick and ask the priest to bring them the sacraments; still others care for the elderly who are frail or ill or help the handicapped. Volunteers decorate the church, arrange the flowers, put up the Christmas crib; others prefer to teach religion to children, or teach hymns; still

others teach chant, edit and print hymnals.

There are many other parish activities: a pilgrimage to She-shan every May, for about 1200 Catholics and requiring 33 vehicles large and small; every autumn, a pilgrimage to various churches; prayers for the elderly on Seniors' Day (the ninth day of the ninth lunar month); outings in the countryside for the youth to help them appreciate God's work in the beauties of nature, etc..

The Holy Spirit seems present in St. Joseph's Parish as church activities help renew the church's life. Since the priests are old now, and administering the sacraments has become taxing for them, the laity feel bound to take on their share of responsibilities. I myself have received so many blessings from the Lord that I want to work for the church. During the past four years I have promoted the use of Chinese hymns; written or edited short commentaries on the Mass, posting these on the door of the church for the faithful and tried to foster a team spirit at St. Joseph's which is increasing day by day. Much work remains to be done. The development of the Chinese church requires a blending of the Gospel spirit with Chinese culture and the indigenization of rites. For the Chinese this is a long term responsibility requiring the collaboration of our friends at home and abroad who share the same faith, the same baptism and sacraments.

Sanban: A Village Rich in Vocations

Translated by Michael Sloboda, M.M.

A Catholic from Nanning, the capital of Guangxi, wrote the following account to commemorate the fortieth anniversary of the death of Fr. Huang Hewu (1870-1953), the first native priest of Guangxi whose life has had a great impact on vocations in his home village.

The first Catholic church in Guangxi province was established in Sanban (Three Planks) Village in Guixian County. Although the Catholics in the village are scattered among the various clans: the Jiang's, Li's, Wu's and Huang's, the Catho-

lics are most numerous among the Huang's. Because every year, at Chinese New Year, the three characters for "Follow the Divinity" are posted on the top beam of the archway leading into the village, it is also known as "Follow the Divinity Village".

The Huang's are Hakkas whose ancestors came from Meixian, Guangdong province, to Guangxi province over a century ago. The original Huang family of nine today consists of some 20 families and more than 200 people.

Their forefather was a learned and talented leader, well versed in astrology and geography. One day, when a catechist came to the village, Mr. Huang, confident that his own religious beliefs were superior, challenged him to a debate. They argued for three days and two nights, and in the end, Mr. Huang had to admit the catechist's belief were far superior. He and his family were all converted to the Catholic faith. He embraced his new found religion wholeheartedly. Because of their religion, Mr. Huang and his family were subjected to prejudice and slander from the people of Guiping. To avoid dissension, the family moved to Guixian county.

Not long after the family's conversion, a young man from the clan, Thomas Huang Hewu, felt called to become a priest. He went to the Latin School in Nanning, then to Malaysia to study philosophy and theology in Penang. He was highly intelligent and quickly completed his studies. But since he came from a new Catholic family, the bishop, rector and priests were concerned that his faith might not be strong enough. They recommended that he work for three years before being accepted for ordination. He persevered in his vocation and was ordained the first native priest of Guangxi. After ordination, Fr. Huang held the post of professor at the Nanning Latin School and of rector of the Guiping preparatory seminary. He also did mission work in Guiping, Guixian and Wuxuan counties. In 1948 he returned to Nanning and, in 1952, he was entrusted with the administration of the Archdiocese of Nanning. He died on May 15, 1953 at the age of 83.

Fr. Huang's life was totally dedicated to God and people. Just before his death, he made a final request of his kinsmen: that in each generation, someone from his clan would become a priest, preach the Gospel with total dedication and love the church the Lord Jesus himself established.

During the 1980's, the government formulated a new religious

policy which, once again, made religious life possible in China, and which allowed for some major seminaries to be reopened. A niece, who is an 80 year old Sister from the Diocese of Nanning, and whose vocation Fr. Huang had himself fostered, has just moved to Guilin, where there is a shortage of Sisters. She is now responsible for the formation of postulants. In 1983 a grandnephew of Fr. Huang, Huang Qingcai, passed the entrance exam for the South-Central seminary located in Wuchang, where he did his studies in philosophy and theology. He was ordained in 1988 and currently works in Guangxi Province. In 1985 another grandnephew, Huang Bingcai, also passed the exam for the same seminary. Ordained in 1991, he now serves in the Stone Church cathedral in Guangzhou. In 1985 two other members of the same clan also entered Wuchang seminary. Ordained in 1991, they are both in Guangdong. One is pastor of the church in Yangjiang, and the other serves in Shunde. In addition, another grandnephew, Huang Zhongshang, is now a first theologian in Wuchang. He is deeply appreciative for his vocation and is studying diligently hoping to be ordained early so that he might give himself completely to the work of the Church. Many are convinced that these vocations are the result of Fr. Huang's intercession in heaven as well as the people's love for their faith and their church.

The 200 Huang's living today in Sanban Village belong to the seventh generation of Huang's, all of whom are good and fervent Catholics even though no catechist has visited the village since Liberation. Every day, morning and night, the Catholics of the village, including the children, gather in the small chapel to recite their prayers. No one goes about the day's tasks until after morning prayers. During special times, such as the busiest seasons of the farmers' year, they pray at home upon arising, but still gather in church at night after they have eaten. Every Sunday they say the Rosary together in church. Sometimes a priest comes for Mass. On the four great feasts days, children and the elderly spend the day in the village, while the others travel 18 km. to go to the church in the county seat for Mass, returning at night.

The Catholics of Sanban love their faith and are proud of their four young priests who serve the church selflessly. Fr. Huang's dying wish is being realized in the rich harvest of vocations from this tiny village of Sanban in Guangxi province.