

Book Review

The Laughter and the Weeping An Old China Hand Remembers

by Luke O'Reilly, SSC

Dublin, The Columba Press, 1991

Reviewed by Peter Barry, M.M.

In *The Laughter and the Weeping*, Columban Father Luke O'Reilly provides an anecdotal account of the experiences of the clergy and Catholics in the diocese of Nancheng, Jiangxi Province, during the years immediately before and after the Communist takeover of China in 1949. Ordained in 1940, Father O'Reilly arrived in Shanghai in November 1946 with 17 other Columban missionaries after a six-week boat trip from Liverpool. O'Reilly was one of 6 Columbans assigned to the Nancheng mission.

Father O'Reilly's first impression of Nancheng was one of devastation for it had been put to the torch by the invading Japanese army in 1942. The Catholic compound there, which had been turned over to the Columbans by the French Vincentians, their fellow missionaries in Jiangxi Province, housed the cathedral, a hospital, an orphanage, an old folks home, a seminary with nearly 40 young men, and a primary school with a few hundred students.

The newcomers were immediately assigned to parishes as curates. They were to study Chinese privately with a teacher. O'Reilly claims that despite his teacher's noble efforts he was not a very good language student. August 1948 finds O'Reilly assigned as pastor of Kiutu (Jiudu), a town 10 miles north of Nancheng. He is in Kiutu when Communist forces arrive in the area in May 1949.

Father O'Reilly relates the build up of momentum of persecution towards the church, from pressure on individuals, especially the youth, to give up their faith, to the all out campaign in July 1950 to set up the Catholic patriotic movement in his parish. O'Reilly himself had prepared for the assault on his faith by meditating on the Books of Ezekiel and Revelation.

Accused of being an anti-revolutionary and of being against land reform and the Catholic patriotic movement, O'Reilly was expelled from Kiutu after Christmas 1950 and sent to Nancheng, where he was put under house arrest at the cathedral. He was soon joined by other priests, who like himself had been expelled from their parishes and were awaiting trial. In Nancheng together, the priests exchanged their experiences and gave one another mutual support.

While in Nancheng, Father O'Reilly heard of the heroic faith of the Catholics of his own parish, Kiutu. It seems that when Land Reform was being carried out in their area, the Catholics were told that they would not get any land unless they renounced their faith. A written formula of apostasy was even presented to them to sign. However, only six households signed the document out of the 150 families in the parish. Since later in 1951 the people of the area were all supplied with ration cards, the 144 families who refused to give up their faith did not suffer deprivation anyway.

One incident which demonstrated the determination of the priests and Catholics to reject the patriotic movement was the Mass in the cathedral on Christmas Day 1951. Bishop Cleary had heard rumors that a representative of the patriotic Catholics would try to seize the pulpit at some time during the Mass. Sure enough, after the bishop finished reading the Gospel, the spokesman went to the pulpit and in a loud voice said he was going to address the people on the Anti-Imperialist Patriotic Church. The Catholics for their part began reciting the rosary at the top of their voices urged on by Father O'Reilly and another Columban walking up and down each of the side aisles. The scene must have been both chaotic and humorous. This time the patriotic Catholics left in huff. But on the feast of the Epiphany 1952 they returned and set up an office in the church, from which they tried to recruit members.

So Bishop Cleary asked one of the Chinese priests, Father James Yang, to preach a sermon on the Sunday following the Epiphany on the dangers of joining the new movement, exhorting the Catholics to refuse to sign up. The authorities were so disgusted with the lack of cooperation from the priests that they decided to put them on trial. The trial took place on February 8, 1952 in the assembly hall of the middle school of Nancheng. Father O'Reilly relates the scene where the priests were falsely

accused by some progressive Catholics, who as participants in the patriotic movement were refused the sacraments by the priests. Found guilty of crimes against the State, the foreign missionaries were expelled from China, while the Chinese priests were sentenced to prison.

However, the foreign priests were not expelled right away. Bishop Cleary, Father O'Reilly and another Columban remained in Nancheng for the rest of 1952. They used the time to train the seminarians. In fact, they ordained one young man to the priesthood on August 6, 1952. Father O'Reilly also notes that the feast of the Assumption saw a record attendance of Catholics at the cathedral. The Catholics never knew if it would be the last time they could worship together with their priests.

Finally, a second trial for the bishop was held on December 14, 1952. He was ordered to leave China the next day. The only two priests left behind in Nancheng now were Fathers Luke and Seamus O'Reilly. Our author, Father Luke, reported that the crowds attending the Masses on Christmas Day 1952 were especially large. He rejoiced to see about 80 Catholics from his old parish of Kiutu in attendance. It was the last time he would ever see most of them again. For he and Father Seamus were expelled from China in early 1953. They left Nancheng on January 15, proceeding first to Nanchang, then to Changsha in Hunan Province, down to Canton, and from there over the border to Hong Kong where they were reunited with Bishop Cleary at the Maryknoll House in Stanley.

By way of epilogue, Father O'Reilly gives us the news from Nancheng after the church was able to open up again there during the 1980's. While most of the Chinese priests have died, Fathers Thomas Yu and Peter Hsieh, the two surviving ones, still serve the Catholics of the diocese. O'Reilly rejoices that the church is still alive and that the faith is spreading.

Although anecdotal, and written at first for the internal consumption of the Columbans only, *The Laughter and the Weeping* records a period of history which should be preserved. For it is a moving story of the heroic witness of the Chinese clergy and Catholics during a period of great trial for their faith. It is a microcosm of what took place in all of the 139 dioceses and ecclesiastical jurisdictions existing in China in 1949. The book is worth reading by all who are concerned about the Catholic Church in China.