

Personality Profile

Lei Ming-yuan: Apostle to the Chinese 1877-1940

by Betty Ann Maheu, M.M.

"I am going to go to China and be a martyr," the 11 year boy exclaimed. "I will join the Vincentians and like Blessed Jean Gabriel Perboyre I will become a martyr." In many ways, Lei Ming-yuan, better known in the West as Vincent Lebbe, did achieve the desire of his youth. The future missionary to China was born on August 19, 1877, in Ghent, Belgium. He was a serious youth who was inspired by the stories of missionary martyrs. When he was 18, he joined the Vincentian Seminary in Paris, his heart set on going to the Far East and devoting his life to the Chinese.

The first Vincentians, or Lazarists, a name taken from the place of their foundation at St. Lazare in Paris, were sent to China by Propaganda Fide in 1699. When the Society of Jesus



Father Lebbe joins the Chinese in the war against the Japanese.

was suppressed by Clement XIV on August 16, 1773, the Jesuits in Peking had to be replaced. An offer made to Les Mission Etrangères de Paris was promptly declined. The Lazarists reluctantly accepted the territory. By acceding to the request the Vincentians gained a strong foothold in China. Their acceptance was confirmed by a Roman decree on December 7, 1783 and approved by King Louis XVI at Versailles, on January 25, 1784.¹

Vincent's hopes of going to China were dashed when, during the course of his studies in Paris, he became ill. Whatever his sickness may have been, it precluded his being sent to the missions. Instead his superiors decided to send him to Rome to study theology.

The Boxer Rebellion of 1900 devastated the Catholic Church in China. It has been estimated that at least 18,000 Catholics, including five bishops, 40 priests and a large number of women religious were massacred in the process. Shortly after this incident, Bishop Pierre Marie Alphonse Favier, a Vincentian and bishop of the Apostolic Vicariate of Peking from 1889 to 1905, came to Rome to report to the Vatican on the tragic incident. The bishop's talk to the Vincentian theology students once again fired young Vincent with the desire to go to China. He begged the bishop to let him accompany him back to the Far East. On February 10, 1901, full of zeal and enthusiasm, Vincent left for China. The turn his life was about to take was immediately evident. He studied the Chinese language assiduously; he devoured the classics; he adopted Chinese dress and immersed himself into the culture, a phenomenon fairly rare in those days. In 1902 several months after his arrival, Bishop Stanislaus-François Jarlin, Vincentian, appointed Vincent pastor of Takowtun in Hopei. A faithful son of St. Vincent de Paul, Vincent Lebbe was remarkable for his kindness to the poor and needy. He soon won the hearts of the Chinese who recognized his love for them and their culture. He was relentless in urging Western missionaries to love the Chinese and in denouncing what he interpreted as their patronizing behaviour towards them. He was thoroughly convinced that in order to prosper the Church in China had to become truly Chinese. He was merci-

less in reminding the Westerners that as long as the foreigners remained in control, the Church in China would never prosper. To become Chinese the Church had to be in the hands of Chinese leadership. He insisted that the Church's policy should be "China to the Chinese and the Chinese to Christ."² Needless to say, Lebbe's enthusiasm for the Chinese and all things Chinese, as well as his strong convictions, were neither calculated to endear him to the members of his own community, nor to many other missionaries eager to carve out ecclesiastical territories for themselves and their country of origin. His attitude towards the Chinese was long overdue and many pitfalls might have been avoided had missionaries heeded his words and example.

In 1909 Vincent Lebbe whose Chinese name, Lei Mingyuan, means "thunder in the distance," embarked on a series of projects. He launched the lay apostolate in Tianjin and established an association for the propagation of the faith. The first congress of the association was held in 1911 at the Church of Our Lady of Victory with 60 delegates representing 300 active members.³ Also in 1911 he opened the first public lecture hall in Tianjin to inform people about the Catholic faith. His venture was so successful that he opened up several such halls throughout the city and attracted large groups of non-Catholics as well as Catholics. He is credited for having begun the Catholic lecture movement in China. The lecture project was successful largely because it was linked to the Catholic Action movement in Tianjin, and the Catholic newspaper, *Yi Shih-pao* (*The Social Welfare*), which Fr. Lebbe launched on October 10, 1916, the anniversary of the Republican Revolution. The *Yi Shih-pao* was the first Catholic newspaper in China. Within three months the daily had the largest circulation of any newspaper in North China. The popularity of his paper was due to the accuracy of the news and its independent outlook.⁴ It was also extremely nationalistic and anti-Japanese.⁵ Things were going well until 1916 when Bishop Paul Dumond, Vincentian, and vicar-apostolic of Tchely Maritime, wanted land on which to build a new diocesan curia. He found land in the strategic area of Laoxikai not leased by the French and so outside the French concession. The Chinese government and the people were indignant. The French consul, for his part, tried to profit from the Laoxikai lands affair. Aware that the Church of St. Louis was in the quarter under dispute, he tried to make the

territory a part of the French concession. The Catholic press protested and attacked the French for wanting to extend their land concession. The whole incident aroused ill feelings against the missionaries. Furthermore, signs of nationalism, manifested in anti-foreign and anti-Christian sentiments, could be observed throughout the whole of China. Father Lebbe, largely responsible for the adverse publicity against the French, was severely reprimanded by his superiors. They forbade him from speaking on the matter and ordered him to leave Tianjin. He was missioned 1500 kilometers south to the diocese of Ningbo.⁶

It would be unfair to give the impression that all missionaries in China were against the indigenization of the Chinese Church. By the turn of the century some were beginning to realize that, if the Church in China were ever to be viable and vibrant, it had, like other local churches to become self-reliant.

One of Father Lebbe's supporters was his friend, Anthony Cotta, a fellow Vincentian and veteran missionary from Madagascar and China. Father Cotta's love of the Chinese and his desire to see the Chinese clergy promoted to their rightful place in the Chinese Church equaled that of Fr. Lebbe. Like Lebbe he was also instrumental in bringing the matter to Rome's attention. Anthony Cotta's stand and role in favor of the Chinese won him no popularity with the Vincentians. He was expelled from China by the members of his own religious Community.⁷

Vincent Lebbe also found a sympathetic ear in Msgr. de Guébriant of the Paris Foreign Mission Society, vicar-apostolic of Canton who, in 1919, was appointed as visitor for all the missions of China. He listened attentively to Lebbe's complaints and aspirations. Both shared a common concern: the promotion of the Chinese clergy.⁸ Urged on by de Guébriant, Lebbe returned to Europe to work for this worthy cause. Much of the



Father Lebbe adopts Chinese attire.

credit for the publication of *Maximum illud* is due to Vincent Lebbe and Anthony Cotta and those who held the same concern as they did.

Benedict XV's Apostolic Letter, *Maximum illud* of November 30, 1919, aimed at putting the leadership of the Church into native hands. It called for a better spiritual and intellectual formation of the native clergy thus stopping missionaries from providing "a raw and unfinished preparation of the native clergy in view of keeping them in subordinate positions." The Letter dealt a blow to that common practice and helped end the "colonization" of the local churches in mission territories.⁹

To enable Rome to put its words into practice Lebbe contacted Cardinal Van Rossum to make some suggestions for the possible appointments of priests and bishops in China. In Rome, he was taken seriously. With much of his life's mission accomplished he set upon another venture in favour of the Chinese. He organized the welcome of Chinese students in Belgium and France under the aegis of the F.F.C. (The Federation of Franco-Chinese Students). The rector of Peking University, Cai Yuanpei, himself educated in Paris, supported the study movement. The aim of the F.F.C. was to train men to be both technicians and cadres within the worker movement. Aware of the anti-clerical stance of the Communists, Fr. Lebbe observed the students closely. Within the group he could detect some independent thinkers, not influenced by Communism to any great extent. Some, in fact, were very open to the Catholic Church. With these, and the help of a young brilliant student, Bernard Liu, Lebbe formed a friendship association of "free" students. Several students were eventually baptized.

His work for the Chinese continued. In 1923 he founded the Catholic Association for Chinese Youth in Paris and published a Chinese weekly newspaper which once each month included a French supplement.

The year 1922 signaled the end of the French Protectorate over the China missions. When Bishop Celso Costantini, named apostolic delegate by Pius XI, arrived in China, he gave a clear signal that things would be different. He appointed as his secretary, Philippe Zhao, a priest friend of Father Lebbe and gave his blessing to the *Catholic Chinese Daily* newspaper. Changes were quickly effected. In 1923 two priests were named prefects

apostolic and superiors of missions. When, in Shanghai in May 1924, Costantini presided over the first National Council of the Roman Catholic Church in China, two Chinese prefects took their place as equals among the group for the first time. But the greatest signal that the Church in China was fully recognized as an equal among the local churches was the episcopal ordination of six Chinese bishops on October 28, 1926 in St. Peter's in Rome. This was the first ordination of a Chinese priest to the episcopacy since Gregory Luo Wenzao was ordained the first Chinese bishop by Bernadine della Chiesa, vicar apostolic of Beijing, in 1685. There was great cause for jubilation as the Pope welcomed his new brothers to the episcopacy.

Among the six newly ordained bishops was Melchior Su Dezhen, a Vincentian, named bishop of Lixian in Hebei Province. Aware of the important part Vincent Lebbe had played in his appointment to the episcopacy, Bishop Melchior invited Vincent to come to his new diocese. And so, in 1927, Vincent Lebbe, the "thunder in the distance", returned to China.

In 1928 he founded two religious orders, one for men: the Little Brothers of St. John the Baptist; the other for women: the Little Sisters of St. Thérèse of the Child Jesus.

By 1928 Chiang Kai-shek had waged the Northern campaign and set up the National government in Nanjing. Meanwhile the Communists were also gaining strength. They now had over 40,000 Party members. The Japanese were also on the March; they invaded Manchuria in 1931 and bombed the Great Wall in 1937. During the war with the Japanese, Father Lebbe organized teams of stretcher bearers, made up mostly of his Little Brothers, whom he dispatched into the mountains of Shanxi to care for the wounded. For his humanitarian work, Chiang Kai-Shek raised him to the rank of an officer. The Communists took note of this and in early 1940, Lebbe and six Brother workers were arrested by the Eighth Communist Army. Lebbe was reproached for his links with the Guomindang and subjected to a program of re-education--all to no avail. He was released in April but he was very ill. He died in Chongqing in the home of a Chinese friend on the feast of St. John the Baptist, June 24, 1940. He was sixty-three years old.¹⁰

Chinese pilgrims today reverently make their way up the mountain of Geleshan to pray silently at Father Lebbe's grave and to remember a man who to his dying day, loved them both

wisely and well.

Footnotes

1. *Catholic Encyclopedia*, (The Encyclopedia Press, Inc., New York, 1913), pp.675-676.
2. Jean Charbonnier, *Histoires des Chrétiens de Chine Memoire Chrétienne*, (Desclée, Co-édition Desclée/Bégédis, Paris, 1992), p.411.
3. *Ibid*, p. 286.
4. Jean-Paul Wiest, *Maryknoll in China*, (M.E. Sharpe, Inc., Armonk, N.Y., 1988), p.75.
5. Kenneth Scott, *A History of Christian Missions in China*, (Latourette, London, 1929), p. 733.
6. Charbonnier, *op. cit.*, p. 287.
7. Wiest, *op. cit.*, p. 205.
8. Scott, *op. cit.*, p. 728.
9. Charbonnier, *op.cit.*, p. 290.
10. *Hong Kong Sunday Examiner*, August 20, 1993, p. 2.



A catechist in Tianjin today instructs young people in the faith.