Book Review

Life, Death and Memory: Three Passionists in Hunan, China, and the Shaping of an American Mission Perspective in the 1920's

By Robert Edward Carbonneau, C.P.,
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On April 24, 1929, three young Passionist priests: Walter Coveyou, Godfrey Holbein, and Clement Seybold, were detained by armed men near Shenzhou in western Hunan and promptly shot dead. As the first U.S. Catholic missioners to die violently in China, their deaths were headline news back home. Catholics called them martyrs; the Chinese government was embarrassed, and the U.S. State Department ordered an investigation. While a local bandit leader was the prime suspect, reports of his execution by the local government were contradicted by observers on the scene, and to this day no one knows definitely if the motive was robbery, kidnapping for ransom, or if the priests were targeted as part of a political conspiracy.

In his thesis, Fr. Carbonneau examines the family background and religious formation of his fellow Passionists, the assignment of two of them (Holbein and Seybold) in 1924 to their Congregation's new mission in western Hunan, and the themes (including martyrdom) stressed during their departure ceremonies across the U.S. While Seybold quickly learned the ropes, Holbein had a painful time and never adjusted to the political and religious situation in China during the Warlord Era and the Northern Expedition, yet he stayed at his post. A missioner today would ask for a new assignment rather than wait and pray for martyrdom, or else be sent home by his superiors for rest and therapy. Carbonneau's work shows how missionaries then understood their commitment, and how mission methods were improving with experience in such areas as medical training (a non-controversial skill) and in issuing guidelines on when to evacuate from the rural mission compound to the safety of the big city (argued at length after the 1927 anti-foreign crisis).

On the home front, mission literature such as the series "With the Passionists in China" in *Sign* magazine conveyed the story to U.S. Catholics. The China mission figured in the articles Coveyou wrote, and in his preaching and fundraising in the Midwest. He "bridged the distance" (p. 142) between U.S. Catholics and the missioners whom they supported with prayers and donations. Coveyou was finally granted his wish of being assigned to China, and arrived there less than 7 months before his death.

Readers who are looking for hagiography will be disappointed. The three priests were not miracle workers, they transformed neither the Chinese nor the U.S. church by their ministry; their murders can be described simply (p. 228), without the drama of being berated out of hatred for the faith, ordered to choose either apostasy or death, tortured, and finally dying after uttering memorable last words. Afterwards no one reported a miracle worked in response to praying to them for a particular intention. Neither then nor now has an effort been made to submit the cause of their canonization to Rome. In 1929 their confreres concluded that the three were not martyrs in the technical sense, although they certainly died in the line of duty, faithful to their vocation. In 1991 Carbonneau was not out "to examine or verify martyrdom or sainthood" but rather to focus on the "life, death, and memory" of the three (p. 412).

Yet they were described in the press at the time as martyrs, and are so described by a generation of Catholics now passing into history. Their murders tell us more about the Church in the United States than about the situation in China. The United States was new to sending missioners abroad. Until 1908, Propaganda Fide still listed the U.S.A. as mission territory, and foreign-born religious, along with the Catholic immigrants they came to serve, were prominent features in many dioceses early in this century (a situation which is repeating itself in the 1990's). The first group of Maryknollers left for China in 1918, and the U.S. Passionists sent their first men across the Pacific in 1921. Catholics and Protestants both saw danger as part of mission, and the United States press, secular and religious, reported missioners being robbed by bandits or dying of tropical diseases, "but it was always European priests or Sisters who had been killed", until the front page stories of April 27 and 28, 1929, when "shock of the deaths and faith of the people made

martyrdom real" (p. 373) What had been preached about for decades in the United States, what had been part of the history of the European Church for almost nineteen centuries, since Nero and the burning of Rome, finally came to pass:

> People had given money. They had prayed. But everyone knew, if China was ever going to be Catholic, martyrdom was necessary. The Catholics of the United States had heard those words uttered at every departure ceremony. With the deaths in April 1929 the supreme sacrifice had been made. The United States now possessed a mature Catholic foreign mission culture.

Yet in the 1980s, martyrdom for the faith, or violent death amid a situation of injustice, is a theme of the Church in many nations. Carbonneau's reflections (pp. 381-385, 411-417) are worth expanding, more interesting (to me at least) than his exhaustive quotes from letters written by the three priests, and interviews with their surviving relatives and confreres.

Those who believe that missionaries worked hand-in-glove with their home governments may have to reconsider after reading this thesis. The Passionists displayed "a greater allegiance to the Holy See than to the United States government" (p. 402). While not a cause of tension during routine times, this difference in priorities became conspicuous during a crisis, when the United States wanted its nationals to withdraw to safety and the Vatican valued missionaries staying at their posts to be with their people. Historically, missionaries and mission congregations are quite complex, almost as complex as the regional differences within China, and Carbonneau argues against simplistic interpretations of events.

Carbonneau has researched his sources well. Written sources in English and Chinese, and oral tradition in English, more than suffice for his purpose. He draws upon earlier Passionist writers, sometimes differing in their interpretation of events, and checked 13 Catholic archives in the United States and Rome for prime sources. His Bibliographic Essay on Sources (pp.418-430) proves that "there is ample opportunity for study of the Catholic missionary effort to China by examining the records of individual congregations, biographies, or thematic issues" (p. 430), and probably ample material to research missions in other parts of the world also. His suggestions (pp. 402-411) on areas worth further research: the "evolving diplomacy of

the Vatican" (p. 404) towards China during the final decades of extraterritoriality, which was viewed with mixed feelings by other nations and by China; United States diplomacy in China; the mixed allegiance of U.S. missionaries who received directives from Rome and the State Department; and first-hand observations on the impact of bandits and revolutionaries on the local scene. "Missionary sources might be some of the only documentation remaining" (p. 408) concerning the local scene, one suspects not only on local alliances in Hunan but on many other issues from all parts of China. How much written material produced in Republican China was destroyed during World War II, the civil war, and during the political campaigns after 1949? Whoever shifts through religious archives in the United States and Europe may find buried treasure, and Carbonneau gives the historian a map of where to dig.

If Carbonneau plans to publish *Life, Death and Memory* as a book, a chronology, an index, and a more detailed map of Hunan would be helpful to the reader.