

CENLI, A MODEL CATHOLIC VILLAGE

translated by Norman Walling, S.J.

A Debt Hard to Pay

Cenli, a poor village in the mountain areas of South East Guangxi, has no arable land and no water sources. What struck me when I first came to this village several years ago was the dilapidated houses with their front doors wide open, the few scrawny trees here and there between the houses and the gray yellow dust which covered everything. The furnishings inside the houses were all the same and consisted of nothing except an old plank bed with a rice straw mattress and one or two short, decrepit stools. The fine dust, constantly blown about by the wind, covered everything both inside and outside the houses. When it rained, everything became mired in a sea of mud. There were children everywhere in Cenli village. The little ones, shirtless and barefoot, roamed along the parched soil, or muddy paths

leading an emaciated cow or two on a tether.

I stopped to talk to a little boy slowly leading his lean cow along a path that to me seemed to lead nowhere. “How old are you?” I asked him and “ Why aren’t you in school?”

“I’m 10 years old,” he replied, “I can’t go to school because my daddy doesn’t have any money to send me to school.”

I couldn’t believe he was 10 years old. I thought he might be five or six at most and mentioned this to old Father Meng who was accompanying me.

“The children in this village are smaller than average,” he replied casually.

I had been so busy trying to understand what I saw around me that I had not noticed it was time for lunch.

可否替我們拍張照？

Would you take a photograph for us ?



Suddenly, I realized that families were vying with each other to have us come to their house to eat. Old Fr. Meng always accepted such invitations. In every house, everything was exactly the same. In the middle of the room on a short, dilapidated stool there was a large enamel pot filled with rice gruel. Both adults and children stood around the pot, holding their bowls. Suddenly, we heard the voice of the father of this household who was coming in for his noon meal. “Mary!” we heard him say, “How is it that you’re not here to welcome your daddy?” A bare bottomed little girl holding a large bowl in her hands teetered over to her father. He embraced her, smothered her with kisses wiping away all the particles of rice on her face.

All of a sudden he noticed the guests,

“Oh! Fr. Meng, Welcome! How nice of you to come and to bring a guest.” He immediately put his small daughter down and came over to greet us. He then said to his sons, “John, Matthew—where’s Paul? How come you are just standing around eating? Have you greeted Fr. Meng and our guest?” Three sunburned barefoot boys kept on eating with bowed heads.

In amazement I asked: “You have four children? How is this possible? I thought the government only allowed one child per family in China. Does the government know you have these four children?”

“For John, the oldest,” he answered with an apologetic smile “I didn’t have to pay a fine; however, I was fined for all the others.”

“Was the fine very heavy?” I asked.

“For one child over the limit, it is more than a thousand dollars. For all three the fine came to around 5000 RMB, but I haven’t paid it yet.”

Somewhat hesitantly I asked: “Aren’t you worried?”

“I don’t have any money at all, so how can I pay anything! I told them to wait until my children grow up and earn money. Then they can pay the fine.” He seemed to think he had provided the authorities with a wonderful solution.

A Village that Nurtures Priestly Vocations

One of the elders of the village explained to me, “For about 30 years, between 1950 to 1980, the country was in religious and political turmoil. The policy on religious freedom had become inoperative. Many priests and Catholic laity were arrested and sent to labor camps for their faith; churches were torn down, and religious missionaries were expelled from the country and religious activities were proscribed everywhere. The church in Cenli was completely destroyed during the Great Leap Forward Campaign of 1958 and its property disposed of. When the policy of religious freedom was finally reinstated at the Third Plenum of the Eleventh

Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party, the Catholics wanted to practice their faith openly once again. Left without a church and no money, we set up a simple prayer room in one of the homes where we regularly gathered for worship.” The old man continued, “Thanks to God’s grace we have, in all these years, remained fervent and dedicated Catholics, but we still had no church. We saw all the other villages rebuilding their churches. Why even those villages without Catholics were doing so!” he exclaimed in amazement. “Why is Cenli village the only one that cannot build its own church? We were very troubled about this. We even had three priests living in our village: Old Fr. Meng and two young priests from our very own village who were recently ordained. After much discussion we Catholics were determined to rebuild our church.”

To do this the Cenli Catholics set up a five member committee to make up the plans for the church and to solicit contributions from the community for a church fund. They also asked Catholics in nearby villages to help. Within a short time they had collected more than 80,000 RMB. One of the committee members said, “We talked the matter over with the parish priest and the whole community several times. We decided to build the new church of red brick with reinforced concrete in its original location. We held the ground breaking ceremonies on April 8, 1993. For a time,

half way through the project, we had to stop for lack of funds, but finally toward the end of July 1994, with God's grace and the support of the entire community the Cenli Catholic Church was formally opened."

A source of special pride for the Cenli Christians is that several priests have come from their village. One of the elders told me, "Our first priest from Cenli was old Fr. Meng known to everybody. In 1920, he entered the Guicheng Seminary and two years later he went to Nanning to study Latin. In 1929 he went to Penang in Malaya (now Malaysia) to study philosophy and theology and returned in 1936 to be ordained. He worked in Bingyang, Wuming, and Shangsi. He was arrested in 1951, imprisoned and sent to labor camp for his religion. In 1970 he was released and returned home to earn his living working in a production brigade. He collected manure by day and took care of the Catholics by night.

In the eighties Fr. Meng was allowed to return to pastoral work. He worked very hard covering the districts of Bingyang, Wusuan, Liuzhou, and Guigang all alone. He set up churches in those areas and encouraged vocations to the seminary and convent, insuring that there would be successors to his work.

Fr. Meng Jiade, who graduated from the Seminary in Kunming, Yunnan in 1944, was Cenli's second priest. After

ordination he served in the church at Jenepai, opened a school to promote education in the area and won the deep respect of the Christian community. He was also arrested for his faith in the early fifties and died in prison not long afterwards. Cenli's third priest, Fr. Meng Shanhe, is now working in Guilin. Under old Fr. Meng's careful tutelage he entered the Zhongnan Seminary (in Wuhan) in 1983 and was ordained in 1988. Fr. Meng Weikang, now working in Guangzhou, is Cenli's fourth priestly vocation.

Catholics Spread the Gospel

The Church in Cenli has a rather long history. During the reign of the Qing Guangxu emperor, Fr. Meng's grandfather, Meng Zuhan, was a teacher in Cenli's primary school and often had to go to the county seat on official business. On one such occasion he met a French missionary who impressed him very much. Shortly afterwards he and his whole family were converted. He loved to share his faith and soon many of the villagers followed him into the Church.

One old Catholic recalled, "The French missionary really loved the villagers of Cenli and often came to the village to visit them. He used the main hall of Meng Zuhan's house as a temporary chapel where he would say Mass for them. In 1920, the number of Catholics became too numerous to fit into this hall so the community decided to build a church.



你見過這類天主
堂嗎？
Have you ever
seen a Church
like this？

The son of Ming Zuhan, Fr. Meng's father, became Cenli church's first catechist.

Several Chinese priests worked in Cenli from 1925 to 1935. There was Fr. Gan Chunyi who died shortly after becoming pastor of Dongjin Shixia village; Fr. Jiang Weixian who was called to serve in the Pingbei Seminary and Fr. Jian who also died after only a few years of pastoral service.

After 1935 the priests of the Paris Foreign Missionary Society were placed in charge of Cenli. They initiated several construction projects and worked hard at evangelizing the people. Sisters later also came to Cenli to help. There were more than 500 Catholics in Cenli before the Communists came into power in 1949.

The Catholics of Cenli today follow in the footsteps of their predecessors: they are fervent, dedicated and always eager to share their faith, and to welcome and give hospitality to the stranger who comes to their village.