

THE WONDERFUL YI MINORITY CATHOLICS

translated by Norman Walling, S.J.

A New Church for Lefung Village

August 15, 1994, the Feast of Our Lady's Assumption, was a great day for the Catholics of Lefung Village, located in the Kunming Diocese in Yunnan Province. After months of hard work, they were ready to open their new church dedicated to the Sacred Heart and built with their own hands. A joyous crowd of some two thousand local Catholics, representatives from neighboring villages, and government officials were on hand to celebrate and to admire the new structure with its twenty meter high bell tower easily seen throughout the whole of the countryside.

The church, which is by far the largest in Kunming, capable of accommodating 2000 people, can in no way be considered an architectural marvel. What is marvelous about this church is that came it to be built at all.

Lefung Catholics Work a Miracle

At one time, Lefung Village had a church but like many others it was almost completely destroyed during the Cultural Revolution. After the Third Plenum of the Eleventh Central Committee, the Lefung Catholics made some important repairs and re-opened their church for worship. However the church building was very old. Its pillars had rotted, the roof tiles kept falling off and it was obvious that the entire building was structurally very weak. Early in 1990, the community decided to collect funds for badly needed major repairs. It was, however, impossible to start the work since the funds collected were insufficient.

In 1993, it was obvious that repairs on the church could no longer be put off. After Christmas the elders and main

少數民族村的臨時天主堂。

A temporary church for the minority people.



leaders of the village met to set up a committee. They decided to undertake whatever major repairs their monies would allow. All the village Catholics set to work planning and gathering materials. The work actually began in the late spring of 1994.

The original plan was to make only major repairs, but once the work began the Lefung Catholics impetuously demolished the whole building. Without the slightest hesitation they said: "Rather than just repair the old building it would be far better to completely demolish it and start from scratch! If our funds are insufficient then let us do as much as we can and leave the rest to God. God will help us build a larger and better church." They really meant what they said. They immediately offered their own personal labor and whatever financial help they could. These people were very poor farmers of the Bai Yi minority. They were like the poor widow whom Jesus highly praised. They gave everything, even though they were in dire need themselves. Some could only give a few dollars, while others were able to give a little more. Some managed to contribute a few hundred dollars but only two or three were able to make a gift of a thousand dollars. All the contributions together amounted to just about enough to buy the simple building materials.

The entire Lefung village of 600 people, not counting the young children and a few old people who could not



work, offered to labor personally to build their church. A standing labor committee of some 30 persons was organized to oversee the construction. Whenever there was need for additional workers, the committee only had to give a signal and everybody eagerly came forward to help. At times the entire village was mobilized. Old and young, men and women all worked together to prepare the materials. When it came time to pour cement for the bell tower or the large floor of the church, people worked in tandem toting loads suspended on a pole between them; others carried loads suspended from a pole balanced on their shoulders. Still others carried the large loads on their backs. All brought the materials to the areas where they were needed. It was truly inspiring to see so many people working so hard with such wonderful enthusiasm.

洒紅口村的聖詠
團。

The girls' choir in
Xihongkou
Village.

All this labor was completely voluntary. Even the meals were not provided. Members of the labor team, though they worked a full day, received only a half-day's wage which came to only six yuan. This was true for the first period of construction, but because funds ran out, they later worked entirely free of charge. Although there was no money to pay anyone and the work during the last stages of construction became very exhausting and went on into the late hours of the night, everyone kept up the momentum in effort and enthusiasm until the work was successfully concluded.

Wonder of Wonders

There are other interesting details to this story. Lacking the necessary funds, the labor team could not hire regular contractors. They had to rely on their own efforts. Among the Lefung Catholics there were no trained contractors, no architects, no trained foremen nor construction workers. A few villagers did have the limited experience of having built some simple peasant houses. They had never, however, undertaken work requiring highly qualified skills. They had only a rough outline of a church building, but they boldly went ahead designing and building the church, relying solely upon God's help and any innate skills found among the villagers.

A construction project of this kind generally requires a

large outlay of machines and tools. The Lefung labor team had nothing but an old rock crusher borrowed from God knows where. They had no hoists so they rigged up a temporary scaffolding of wooden planks and carried each item up piece by piece. Since they had no cement mixer, they made do with shovels mixing the cement on the ground.

The villagers, who had begun work on the church in the spring, had originally planned to open the church for Christmas. The work, however, was proceeding so quickly that the four walls of the church were completed by Easter and they were ready to raise the roof supports. Everybody decided to move the original date of completion from Christmas to August 15, the Feast of the Assumption of Our Lady. To do this they worked longer hours, even going on night shifts. In nothing short of an extraordinary feat, they completed their whole church project within six months.

After the work was completed, some construction experts maintained that if the villagers had employed regular contractors, paid full wages and purchased all the materials, and not even the best of them, the total cost would have come to around 200,000 to 250,000 yuan. Furthermore, the work would never have been completed in such a short period of time. The Lefung villagers actually spent only 74,272.45 yuan. Of course, some of the construction materials were taken from the surrounding environment (wood, sand

and gravel, etc.); and most of the workers were volunteers who did not receive wages. Careful calculation and strict budgeting helped to avoid waste and to minimize expenses.

There was another extraordinary happening in the process of building this church. People were constantly moving in and around the construction site and no one wore safety helmets or gloves; some even went about barefoot. To work on the upper parts of the structure on the wood scaffolding, the workers used ropes or wires. They had no safety devices to protect them from falls. Furthermore, many small children were constantly running around the work site and playing beneath the scaffolding. Everybody was worried about safety, but the construction was completed without the slightest injury. The villagers saw God's special protection in this.

A group of people outside of Lefung, who are knowledgeable in construction work, wondered just how solidly constructed the Lefung church building really was. They made three visits to the village to assess the work. They were aware that no one in Lefung village had any basic engineering skills, or building experience, that they had no blueprints and that they depended solely on good will and hard work. The Lefung villagers assured them that they had used only good materials, but the visitors were not completely convinced. The first time they checked on the work was



送君千里終需一
別。

A sentimental
farewell.

after the completion of the four walls. They reported, “We were glad to see that the two meter high stone wall and the brick wall built right on top of it not only were firmly cemented together, but all sides were even and carefully lined up. The second time we went was when they were raising the roof trusses. The pillars were very straight without leaning to either side; each tenon cut just to shape without the slightest crack. After the work was completed, we made an overall inspection of the building and found that all elements on all surface levels were firm and even, without



少數民族教友。

Catholics from an
ethnic minority.

distortion and perfectly matched. We could find no structural defects either on the inside or the outside.”

The windows and decorations of the church cannot in any way be considered a work of art. The church, built so quickly and with so few available resources and skilled workers, isn't elegant but it has a simple beauty of its own which expresses the honest and unaffected nature of the Yi people. The very fact that these people who were not professional construction workers but only simple farmers would even undertake and succeed in building such a structure, in so short a time, is really a wonder of wonders!