

A Triple Celebration for a Beloved Chinese Bishop

by Peter Barry, M.M.

Bishop Matthias Duan Yinming, the last surviving bishop in China appointed by Pope Pius XII, observed three anniversaries in his home diocese of Wanxian in Sichuan Province on October 18, 1997. The several thousand strong Catholic community of the cathedral parish, due to be submerged in a few years in the Three Gorges Dam project, celebrated Bishop Duan's 60th anniversary of ordination to the priesthood, the 48th anniversary of his consecration as bishop (on that very day - Oct. 18) and his 90th birthday all at the same time.

Born near the Sichuan city of Daxian in 1908, Bishop Duan was sent as a seminarian to study at Propaganda

College in Rome. He was ordained a priest in 1937, and appointed bishop of the Wanxian Diocese by Pope Pius XII in 1949.

Bishop Duan came out of the hospital, where he was being treated for heart problems and diabetes, in order to take part in the recent celebrations. Despite his weak physical condition, Bishop Duan's mind is still very alert. A young priest on each side supported the bishop as he walked up the main aisle of the church for the anniversary Mass. Flanked by Bishops Huang Woze, 95, and Chen Shizhong, 80, of the Sichuan dioceses of Nanchong and Yibin respectively, Bishop Duan sat on his episcopal



Bishop Duan left the hospital in order to take part in the celebrations.

throne in the sanctuary throughout the Mass.

The main celebrant of the Mass was the auxiliary bishop of Wanxian, Xu Zhixuan, 81. In his homily Bishop Xu praised Bishop Duan as a great leader in the Catholic Church of China and as an example of what a good shepherd over his flock should be. He said that he was dearly loved by all his Christians, and that anyone who aspires to leadership in the church would do well to follow Bishop Duan's example. Finally, Bishop Xu asked for prayers for Bishop Duan's health, and that God may grant him many more years of faithful service to his

Diocese, as well as about 30 other old and young priests from throughout Sichuan Province. Father Tang Yuanjin, vicar-general of the Chengdu Diocese, was present, as was Father Deng Mu, pastor of the cathedral parish in Changsha, Hunan Province. Father Deng presented Bishop Duan with a large memorial plaque on behalf of Bishop Qu Tianxi and the Catholics of Changsha.

At the government sponsored meeting held at the Wanzhou Hotel after the Mass, speakers all pointed out how Bishop Duan not only loved his church, but loved society at large as well. In the early 1980's, when Bishop

Duan became aware that Wanxian lacked adequate medical facilities, he was able to solicit funds from Italy to build a hospital in the city. In his speech, Bishop Duan thanked all those who arranged the celebration



Bishop Duan enjoys visit with relatives at the celebration.

beloved Catholics of Wanxian.

Concelebrants at the Mass, attended by over 1,000 Catholics, included the seven young priests (all ordained in the early 1990's) and one middle-aged priest of the Wanxian

for him and all those who attended. Thinking of the future generation, he urged the young priests and Sisters to develop a deep spiritual life through prayer and meditation, so that they might follow Jesus in a spirit of sacri-

fice and of service to the people.

The anniversary banquet in the Wanzhou Hotel was a sumptuous affair, with many people, both ecclesiastical and secular, coming over to Bishop Duan's table to drink a toast to his good health. Smiling broadly and completely enjoying himself, Bishop Duan politely returned the toast by touching his lips to a cup which did not require refilling.

After a short rest, the guests from outside of Wanxian boarded a bus to visit the new church consecrated in May 1997, in the village of Longbao, located about 20 kilometers in the hills outside of Wanxian. There are about 3,000 Catholics living within the confines of this parish, and some of the Catholics from Wanxian will move to this area when their own city is submerged. From Longbao, the visitors visited a new bridge recently constructed high above the Yangtze River. The view from the middle of the bridge was breath-taking.

The Wanxian church was packed again the next day, Mission Sunday, as many Catholics who could not attend the ceremonies the previous day, streamed in to offer Bishop

Duan congratulations on his triple anniversaries. The Catholics have the custom of being present at church all morning on Sunday, and this Sunday was no exception. They arrived for the first Mass at 6 AM, and then stayed for prayer and listened to an hour's doctrine preached by catechists. They then completed their Sunday worship by attending the sung high Mass at 10 AM. There was standing room only at this Mass celebrated by the pastor of the cathedral, young Father Dong.

After the 10 AM Mass, the Wanxian Catholics, as well as the visitors from outside who celebrated Bishop Duan's anniversaries, began to make their goodbyes and to return to their own homes. All were in agreement that the celebrations for Bishop Duan were a wonderful and well-deserved tribute to a Chinese bishop who has given his whole life in service to his church and to his country. Mission Sunday was a fitting finale to the celebrations of one who was and is a true missionary of Jesus Christ to his own people. May all the young priests and Sisters of China follow Bishop Duan's shining example!



Young priests enjoy the banquet at the celebration.