

The Institution of Virgins

Tripod Staff

Bibiana lived in the village of Erbadan that was entirely Catholic. In 1900, when she was 17 years old, the Boxers raided her village. Her mother tried to flee, but with her bound feet she was not swift enough. Bibiana heard her mother confess her faith and watched her die by the Boxer's sword. Bibiana could never forget this incident. She loved her mother and thought of her as a saint.

Bibiana joins the “chuciati”

As a result, Bibiana decided to join the “chuciati,” or the Institution of Virgins, and dedicate her life to the service of the Church. Throughout her life, Bibiana took care of orphans, the elderly, and the sick. She taught catechism, directed a school for girls, settled arguments, acted as matchmaker for marriages, and helped keep the parish records straight as well as the sacristy orderly, and the altar linens clean. Like her mother, Bibiana was a pillar of the faith!

There is very little in the history of the Church in China about the Institution of Virgins, about the women who, between the 17th and 20th centuries, played such a vital role in the growth of the Catholic Church in China.

Most of the history of Catholic missions focuses on famous men, missionaries who left their native lands hoping to bring light and peace “to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death.” Famous converts are usually men. Who can forget Xu Guangqi, the great scholar and convert, and all the benefits his

conversion brought to the Church or Lu Bohang, the friend of the poor, or Ma Xiangbo, the great patriot and educator? But were there not also some true apostles among Chinese women worthy of remembrance?

Women apostles in China

In searching through the history of the Church in China, from the 17th to the 20th centuries, we uncover the names of a few women distinguished for their service to the Church. The most prominent among them are Candida Xu, the granddaughter of Xu Guangqi, Petronilla Tieng, Bibiana, mentioned above, whose family name was not mentioned, and the martyr, Agatha Lin. History records the names of three members of the Institution of Virgins who were martyred for their faith: Yi (Lucy) Meizhen from Sichuan, executed in Guizhou, and Fan (Rose) Hui and Fu (Marie) Guilin from Hebei massacred by the Boxers. With the exception of Candida, all of these were “chuchiati,” members of the Institution of Virgins.

The Virgin Petronilla

A Spanish Dominican missionary named Gonzalez has left us a record of the conversion and the life of Petronilla Tieng.

Petronilla was born into a rich pagan family in Xiapu in Southeast Fu'an. As a little girl she was a devout Buddhist, but at the age of 11, influenced by a Spanish Dominican missionary and some Christian acquaintances, she was baptized along with her mother. At 18 Petronilla consecrated her virginity to Christ. After experiencing a great deal of anguish and distress because her father had given her in marriage to a young man who did not want to lose his prize, Petronilla escaped to Fu'an where she is revered as the founder of Christianity in Xiapu and the first Dominican Tertiary. She is still revered as a saint in Fujian Province.

The Virgin Agatha Lin

Another historian has left us an account of the life and martyrdom of Agatha Lin (Lin Zhao). Agatha was born in 1817 in

the village of Machang, Guizhou Province. Her parents were devout Catholics. Her father was imprisoned for three years for his faith.

The priest of the area, Father Matthew Liu, aware of Agatha's unusual devotion and talents invited her to instruct the girls of the region.

When she was 25, Agatha made her vows following the rules set down for the members of the Institution of Virgins. In 1854, Bishop Paul Perny sent her to Maokou to evangelize the Miao women.

Agatha arrested and beheaded

In 1858, a magistrate from Guiyang arrived in Maokou. Suspicious of Agatha's activity among the Miao, he had her arrested. The judge demanded to know why a Han was living with the Miao and why she was not married. He decided that this unusual and "immoral" behavior could only result from her belonging to a subversive sect. She was condemned to death and subsequently beheaded. Pius X beatified Agatha Lin in 1909, and John Paul II canonized her on October 1, 2000.

The Institution of Virgins

We know very little of the other virgins and virgin martyrs. We do know, however, that they constitute the first form of consecrated life in China, that they were generous and eager to serve the Church, and especially numerous in Fujian, Sichuan, Huguang and Guizhou.

In the early 18th century, the Dominican fathers in Fujian Province, set down certain conditions to safeguard young women who wanted to dedicate their lives to God.

The rule of life excluded all external apostolic work. It demanded that the consecrated Virgin live a solitary life within her family home, that she be given to prayer, be obedient and perform manual labor in all simplicity and detachment. The Virgins could be apostles only within the bosom of their own families.

The women begin to take an active role in the Church

Finally, in the last decades of the 18th century, the Virgins were called to leave their reclusive life. They began to take an active role in the doctrinal instruction of Christian women and girls. The great promoter of this life form was the French missionary, Jean Martin Moye, whom Pius XII beatified in 1954.

Father Moye immediately sensed that the Chinese women were more faithful to their religion and more devout than the men, but their instruction was very scanty. Most of them, in fact, were illiterate. They only knew how to recite their prayers by heart.

Baptisms of babies

Father Moye saw tremendous potential in the Christian Virgins and decided to confide mission work to them outside their own homes. Some were to teach in small schools he set up for girls, and others were to baptize babies in danger of death. He attached great importance to this ministry. Since famines and epidemics were frequent in China, the infant and child mortality rates were high. The Virgins baptized many babies, but unfortunately, many of them died immediately after baptism.

According to reliable accounts, a Virgin who worked in Chongqing baptized 2000 babies—all of whom died. The fact that these babies would have died with or without baptism did not convince the people. They began to react badly. “Baptism kills children,” concluded the pagans.

Obviously, more prudence and pastoral directives were needed to regulate this work. The feverish activity of Father Moye’s “baptizers” had a bad effect on the Virgins’ other apostolic projects. In his zeal, Father Moye dreamed of establishing a more structured organization with its own proper spirituality. He was exceptionally keen on making Virgins out of his catechists and the young women who taught in the schools. He was also very demanding in spiritual matters. He sought to put prayer within the reach of the least educated and the poorest. He composed meditations to be inserted between the Hail Marys of the rosary in view of getting his charges to imitate the Blessed Virgin Mary.

Some of the prayers were to be recited with arms extended in the form of a cross.

The Bishop intervenes

Bishop Pottier, vicar apostolic of Sichuan, began to worry about the excesses in these devotional exercises. "After the multiplication of baptisms," he said, "we have the multiplication of prayers."

Both Bishop Pottier and his future coadjutor, Bishop St. Martin, were opposed to the Institution of the Virgins as it was taking shape. They saw some real problems. The Virgins were too young, living far from their families, near children who were in need of instruction. They were exposed to diverse dangers, subject to the calumnies of the pagans. At times they directed the prayer of meetings where men were also in attendance. Taking into account the local mentality, and the strict segregation of the sexes, these activities could only create scandal.

Bishop Pottier aware of what was at stake wrote to Rome. On April 29, 1784, however, an "Instruction" from Propaganda Fide gave a decisive response. The girls' schools under the direction of the Virgins had been approved.

Clarifying the role of the Virgins

The "instruction" did, however, clarify a few points:

- the Virgins were not to preach or act as readers in the Christian assemblies;
- they could not make vows until they were 25;
- their parents had to assure their livelihood;
- they could not take over the education of girls until they were at least 30 years of age;
- they could only instruct others within their own family homes, or in a house designated by the priest.

In a pastoral letter dated September 1, 1793, Bishop St. Martin added a few details for the instruction of women catechumens. The Virgins:

- had to be at least 40 years old;

- have sufficient knowledge of doctrine;
 - use an informal method of teaching;
 - forbidden to teach men except those in danger of death.
- These rules remained operative for more than a century.

Institution of Virgins comes to an end

By 1920 the Virgins were an aging group with few recruits. When the religious communities of women began to arrive in China, many among the clergy thought the Virgins were redundant. But the fact remained that most religious communities could not completely take on the work done by the Virgins. The life and rule of the women religious did not permit them to go to isolated villages and spend time with the women, away from their convents, without the benefit of the sacraments.

In 1983 someone asked Bishop Boisguerin, the former Bishop of Yibin, about the role of the Virgins in Sichuan. This was his reply, "When I arrived in the missions in 1928, they (the



Today, the few elderly Virgins still alive live together in a special home in Yangjiang in Jiangman Diocese. Most of them are blind.

Virgins) were still there and the foremost teachers of the faith. During the 150 years that they lived in their families, these Virgins formed generations of Christians. In 1932, someone wanted to "institutionalize them" in order to make religious out of them. This may have been unfortunate from the point of view of the apostolate. Religious life demands strict regulations, and places limits on the work. In my opinion, the two types of life could have coexisted to the great benefit of the work. During the ten years of my life in the district, I had the Chinese Virgins in my catechetical schools. They had a good doctrinal formation and a boundless devotion to the Church. Since they did not live in community, they were always available. They exercised a tremendous role in the evangelization of Sichuan."

Today, here and there in China, one can find a small group of Virgins, all elderly and many of them blind. They live together near the church and are often cared for by young churchwomen. Their contribution to the growth of the Church in China is not widely known, but it is surely remembered in heaven.

References

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