

Spiritual Shangrila – The Catholic Church Among the Tibetans of Yunnan Province

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The Tibetan area in Yunnan Province occupies the northwest corner of the province. It includes the three counties in today's Diqing Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture and certain parts of the Nujiang Lisuzu Autonomous Prefecture. In 1846, Rome gave our country's Tibetan areas to the care of the Paris Foreign Mission Society. The following year a Fr. Charles Reuno came from Sichuan Province to Batang. Later, a Fr. Jean Charles Fage joined him, and the two missionaries opened their first station in a place called Buomuge on the east bank of the Nujiang River.

In 1860, the Beijing Treaty was signed between China and France. This treaty not only ratified the Tianjin Treaty, but it also gave access to the interior of China to foreign missionaries. The missionaries could freely preach the Gospel, and recover previous confiscated church properties. The Paris Foreign Mission Society then assigned seven missionaries to preach the Gospel in Tibet. On September 1, 1861, the local officials in Tibet sent a memorial to Emperor Xianfeng asking him not to allow the French missionaries to enter Tibet because not only was the Qing (though they feared the foreign powers) government itself against it, but the lamas and the ordinary Buddhist believers might stir up trouble if the foreign missionaries were allowed to live in Tibet. Thus the missionaries were forced to return to Batang and Dajielu (today's Kangding) in Sichuan Province. Fr. Gouelle etc. traveled south of the Jinshajiang River and entered Yunnan Province. They planned to establish a Tibetan mission there as a base for the eventual evangelization of Tibet itself.

In 1861, Fr. Jules-Eienne Dubernard and a companion began preaching in Ciku village of Deqin County. Six Catholic families from Kangding moved there to live and to influence the other villagers around them. The missionaries also opened a primary school, which local village children could attend free of charge. They also gave assistance to the poor local farmers. In this way, the missionaries were able to attract some believers.

In those days in China the Tibetans lived in a feudal agricultural system. The Catholic missionaries, by helping the farmers, were attacking the feudal social structure. This caused the Tibetan nobility and the lamas to lead attacks against the missionaries, their churches and their Christians. The author recounts several of these which took place over the latter half of the 19th century: in 1865 in the Bengka Valley, in 1873 in Batang (the first Batang Missionary Case), and even after the turn of the century in 1904, when the 2nd Batang Missionary case took place.

Finally, in the days of the Republic (from 1911 on), a certain amount of peace and stability came to the area. Officials encouraged the people of different races and religions to live in harmony with one another. The period of peace allowed the parishes in the three counties of northwest Yunnan to develop and flourish. The Paris Foreign Mission Society priests asked Rome to send them help. So, beginning in 1930 about 15 missionaries from the Swiss Society of St. Bernard were sent to serve in the "Tibetan Mission." In the 1920s, the Tibetan Mission had 3,541 Catholics. Of these 1,544 resided in Yunnan Province, attending 10 churches. The three biggest parishes were: Deqin with 300 Catholics, Weixi with 600 Catholics, and Gongshan with about 500 Catholics. The Catholics belong to the Zang, Nu and Naxi ethnic minorities. In 1950, the three counties of Deqin, Weixi and Gongshan had 15 churches.

After 1950, the foreign missionaries were expelled from China. There were very few local priests. Many political campaigns took place. But now religious life has been restored. The Catholics gather in church to read the Bible and to pray. Once in a while a local priest will come to celebrate Mass. Since the 1980s, Catholic

religious activities have been restored to a greater degree than was the case in 1950. The author describes a Mass he attended at the Xiaoweixi Church on August 15, 1990. Fr. Shi Guangrong led the more than 20 Catholics in reading the Bible and praying. The author could notice that religious faith was a matter of the heart. Throughout the 30 years of the political campaigns, the parents passed on the faith to their children through their behavior. Now new converts are entering the Church, and young men are going to seminaries in Beijing, Xi'an and Chengdu to study theology, and to offer themselves up in service to the Church.

The author adds a short biography of Fr. Shi Guangrong. Shi Guangrong was born in 1926 in Xiaoweixi Village of Weixi County in Yunnan Province (today's Weixi Lisuzu Autonomous County). From 1945-1949, he studied at the Weixi Minor Seminary and Kunming's St. Joseph Minor Seminary. After that, he went home to Xiaoweixi. Then on August 15, 1987, he was ordained a priest in Shanghai. In 1997, he was a delegate to the 2nd Catholic Representatives Assembly of Yunnan Province and was elected vice-chairman of both the Catholic Patriotic Association and the Church Affairs Committee of Yunnan Province. He died on March 13, 2002 in Deqin, at the age of 74. Fr. Shi Guangrong was a member of the Naxi ethnic minority. He worked in Xiaoweixi, Badong, Cizhong, Ciku and all the churches in the three county area.

In 2005, there were over 4,000 Catholics in Diqing and Nujiang Prefectures. They were concentrated in the three counties of Gongshan, Weixi and Deqin. After the year 2000, church affairs in these counties came under the jurisdiction of the Dali Diocese. Young priests, who have graduated from the Beijing and Chengdu seminaries, go to administer the sacraments on the big feasts. They celebrate the liturgy according to the changes promulgated by the Second Vatican Council. They celebrate the Mass and preach sermons in Putonghua.

In addition to their spiritual lives, the economic situation of the people in the area is also changing for the better. The former poor peasants are now enriched by the dollars brought in by tourists, who come to view the beautiful scenery of this "Shangrila."