

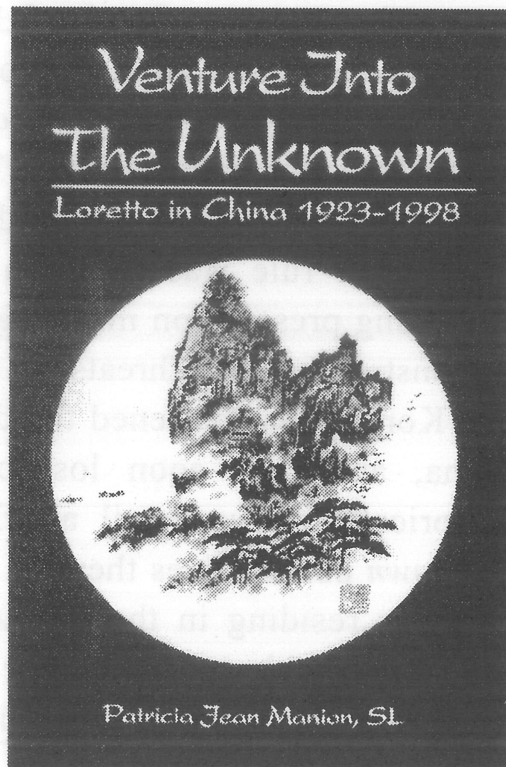
BOOK REVIEW

Venture into the Unknown: Loretto in China 1923-1998

Reviewed by Michael J. Sloboda, MM

Patricia Jean Manion, S.L., Independent Publishing Company, St. Louis, Missouri, 2006. ISBN 1-893937-21-6.

After a long journey from the U.S.A., six Sisters of Loretto arrived in Hanyang, Hubei (湖北漢陽), on October 19, 1923. Hanyang is now part of the metropolis of Wuhan (武漢), but it was a separate city in the days before there was a bridge across the Yangtze River (Changjiang 長江). A ferry ride was also the only way to cross a secondary river to another part of the metropolis. Travel by ferry, foot, rickshaw or sedan chair was time-consuming. In the days before telephones, letters and an occasional telegram were the only contacts with the outside world, and even those were disrupted in times of civil unrest and war. *Venture into the Unknown* describes how isolated and



low-tech life was even for a literate minority. The Sisters faced ancient problems, such as rats and disease. Tuberculosis claimed the life of one Chinese postulant. Electric lights and refrigeration were post-World War II marvels.

Besides the chapter headings, the author sprinkles bold-faced chronological notes in dozens of places throughout the book. These keep the reader in touch with of the historical drama unfolding in greater China at the time. Without access to mass media and instant communications, the Sisters in Hanyang were like “frogs in the bottom of a well,” to quote an old Chinese saying. The Sisters who staffed a school in Shanghai had better access to national news, but for everyone in the interior of China during those turbulent years, seeing the forest for the trees was a challenge.

The Yangtze flood of 1931 caused 250,000 deaths by drowning, disease and starvation just in the Wuhan Valley. Civil strife and foreign invasion were always accompanied by hunger, as the Japanese invasion of 1937-1945 illustrated to an extreme degree. Hyperinflation during the final two years (1948-1949) of Republican rule was an extra hardship. The new regime put increasing pressure on missionaries. There had been anti-foreign demonstrations and threats in 1927, but this was more intense. The Korean War hastened the departure of all missionaries from China, and they soon lost contact with Chinese Catholics. Historical surveys detail all these facts, but *Venture into the Unknown* personalizes them in the lives of a few foreign women religious residing in the interior of China. The Loretto Sisters were never able to send large numbers to China, so the book reads like the story of a resilient family fallen on hard times. They, their Columban priest fellow missionaries, and local Catholics struggled against all odds, and yet they managed to work, to educate, evangelize and endure in spite of everything.

People who have survived years of disruption, the deaths of family members and friends, physical displacement, and loss of meaning, often speak a “chaos narrative,” just one disaster

after another. The Sisters, other missionaries, and local converts kept sane during the worst battering by viewing their troubles as part of God's mysterious plan. God was in charge of the details as well as of the overall situation. Father, later Bishop, Edward Galvin, SSC, constantly linked their setbacks to the sufferings of Christ. The last non-Chinese Sisters of Loretto were sent out of the Mainland by October 1952, and that would seem to be the discouraging end of the story.

However, the Epilogue is touching. In November 1955, Sister Isobel Huang was reportedly executed. But in 1977, she was found alive in Wuhan. In 1995, she was able to visit the Motherhouse in Kentucky where she had studied as a young woman. She went to her eternal reward in 1998 at the age of 86, a Sister of Loretto to the end.

There are at least three other books in the genre of portrayals of English-speaking missionaries in the 20th century China. *The Keys of the Kingdom* (1941) by A.J. Cronin is set a little earlier, but life in the interior of China at that time changed little from decade to decade. Made into a hit movie in 1944, *Keys of the Kingdom*, though fictional, is the sympathetic story of mission work among poor people in the Chinese countryside. Its portrayal of Catholics and Protestants as friends was surprisingly ecumenical for its era. Two other books, *Calvary in China* (1953) and *Four Years in a Red Hell* (1956) focus on the sufferings endured in detention of Fathers Robert Greene and Harold Rigney. The titles summarize the stories. Yes, the missionaries and their congregations suffered greatly. These last two books are long out of print, but they are a part of Church history. *Venture into the Unknown* differs in that it is the story of women religious. The Sisters spoke of the psychological pressure and house searches before their forced departure. Yet there is only one sentence in the Epilogue which can be misconstrued as a complaint. It simply says that Sister Isobel spent an unknown number of years in a labor camp. Perhaps Sister Isobel simply did not want to talk about those years, or

perhaps she forgave her adversaries, and put the past behind her.

There are only a few mistakes: every non-Italian wants to put an n after the Co in Costantini; Chairman Mao was born in December 1893, so he was 33, not 26, in 1927 (p. 48), and Bohemia is now part of the Czech Republic, not Bosnia (p. 122). If the book were to be reprinted, then an index of names would be a helpful addition.

Venture into the Unknown is the story of a valiant group of women religious from the U.S.A., who against all odds, bore witness to the Gospel in war torn, early 20th century China. It should be read by all those interested in the history of the Catholic missions in that country.

Errata

Tripod No. 148, Spring 2008, "Cardinal Celso Costantini and the Chinese Catholic Church," by Francis Chong, CDD.

Page 50, second new paragraph, sentence beginning on line 7 should read:

"In order to avoid having any connection with the foreign powers, he did **NOT** put the office of the Apostolic Delegation in the Legation Quarter."