

The 350th Anniversary of the Founding of the Paris Foreign Mission Society (MEP)

Jean Charbonnier, MEP

On Sunday, June 8, 2008, The Paris Foreign Mission Society celebrated the 350th anniversary of its founding with a solemn Mass in the Cathedral of Notre-Dame of Paris. Cardinal Andre Vingt-trois presided at the Mass, and Cardinals Diaz, Prefect of the Congregation of the Evangelization of Peoples, Joseph Zen of Hong Kong and Jean-Baptiste Man of Vietnam concelebrated. 25 bishops from Asia, 25 bishops from France, and several hundred priests also concelebrated the Mass.

The MEP is an "Institute of Apostolic Life" composed of priests who dedicate their whole life to work for the development of local Catholic churches, mainly in Asia. They started with a "Séminaire des Missions Etrangères." The word "Paris" was added when other societies of the same type were created in Europe and America.

The MEP date their founding from the year 1658, when Pope Alexander VII appointed François Pallu and Peter Lambert de la Motte, the two main founders of MEP, as "apostolic vicars" (bishops sent by the pope for a particular mission). They left for the Far East with a few companions in the following years. They first settled in Siam (Thailand), in Tonkin and Cochinchina (north and south Vietnam). Pallu was the first to reach China in 1684. He died a few months later in Fujian Province.

The priests and lay founders of the institute had three main objectives:

To spread the Gospel to the ends of the world, and not leave this important work just to the care of the traditional large religious

Orders alone.

To help the new Congregation of Propaganda, founded in Rome in 1622, to take direct charge of evangelization on the missions, and to take control of this work away from the "patronage" of the secular powers of Spain and Portugal.

To fulfill the ideals of the Portuguese Jesuit Alexander de Rhodes, who had done missionary work in Vietnam, and who advocated the need to appoint local priests and bishops in Asia if the Church was to survive and develop.

Before they left Europe, the Congregation of Propaganda had issued clear "instructions" to the apostolic vicars to create a local clergy as numerous and as well trained as possible, to adapt to local customs while avoiding involvement in political affairs and to refer to Rome all important issues, especially matters concerning the appointment of bishops.

Training Asian ministers

Pallu strongly supported the nomination of Gregory Luo Wenzao, a Dominican Chinese priest, as the first Chinese bishop. Meanwhile his companions founded a seminary in Ayutthya, near Bangkok. That seminary trained many priests from Southeast Asia, and later from China. One of the better-known graduates was Andrew Lee, who became the outstanding apostle of Sichuan Province in 18th century. Due to persecutions, the seminary had to move to Malaya where it became what is now the Penang General College. Over 1000 priests and 70 bishops had graduated from this College, when it celebrated its 300th anniversary in 1964.

Besides opening seminaries in various parts of Asia, the French missionaries also nurtured female vocations to the consecrated life. They understood the need for women to be apostles to women in the context of the local traditions, which were opposed to the mixing together of male and female converts. As early as 1667, the missionaries in Siam founded the congregation of "the Lovers of the Cross," and later spread it to Vietnam. In 18th century China, the French missionaries regularized the institution of

female catechumens. At a time when priests were very few, and often repressed by civil authorities, the missionaries gave much attention also to the formation of catechists and community leaders. They would instruct people in the faith, ensure that converts lived in a Christian manner and conduct prayer services on Sundays. Later, the Holy See beatified, and even canonized a number of catechists and virgins, who died for the faith.

Pastoral care

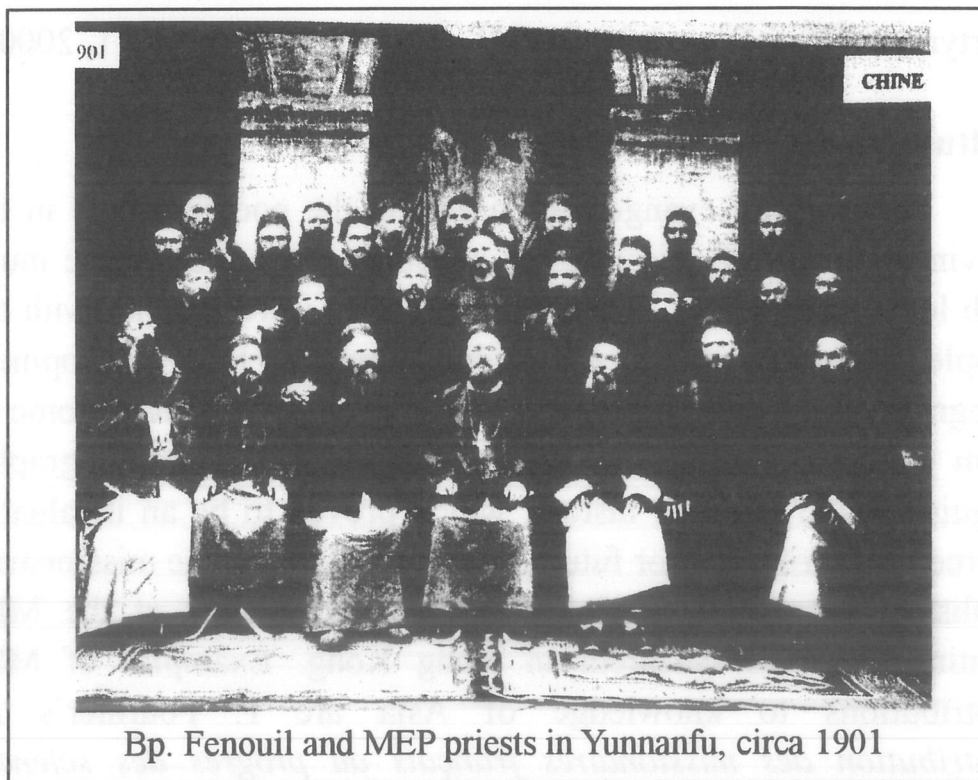
With the purpose of forming pastors and being close to the local people in their own local environment, the French missionaries paid particular attention to catechetical instruction, the proper administration of the sacraments and moral conduct inspired by the Gospels. From the early years of their presence in Asia, they held Church synods with the local converts. At the first synod, which took place in Siam in 1664, Pallu issued his famous set of directives for the missionaries. In 1803, Bishop Dufresse convened the synod of Sichuan, in Chongqingzhou, which 15 priests attended. It produced basic guidelines for pastoral ministry in China. At that time, the use of Latin was imposed on the Catholic liturgy. Earlier the missionaries sought special permission from Rome to use Chinese. Moreover, Pope Paul V had already in 1615 granted permission for the use of Chinese in the Mass and in the administration of the sacraments. However, in spite of repeated demands, Rome finally decided that Chinese priests should learn Latin. By doing so, they would have access to theological sources and would not feel inferior to their Western colleagues. This rule was in effect until 1965, when the Second Vatican Council permitted the use of local languages in the Mass and in other liturgical rites. While the official liturgy continued to be conducted in Latin, the missionaries produced a large number of books of prayer and spirituality in the Asian languages. In dealing with the "Chinese rites", however, the MEP missionaries departed from the tolerant attitude of the Jesuits. Along with the Dominican and Franciscan missionaries, who, like the MEP, preached the Gospel

among the farmers of the southern provinces, they observed a type of ancestor worship mixed up with the cult of local deities. So, they also condemned the practice as superstitious. Msgr. Maigrot de Crissey issued a mandate prohibiting the practice of the Chinese rites for his Catholics in the Fujian diocese. Rome later extended the interdict to the whole of China and to countries also influenced by Chinese culture, such as Korea and Vietnam.

Pioneers in many Asian lands

While their spiritual and pastoral enterprises were well established in the 17th and 18th centuries, the MEP fathers were few in number and almost disappeared at the time of the French Revolution. After the Napoleonic era, however, they benefited from a new passion for mission in romantic and colonial France. Martyrdom in Asian lands inspired generous young men to join the MEP. Catholics in France also learned to support the missions financially. The MEP priest, Chaumont, exiled in England during the Revolution, learned from the Anabaptist Christians that small donations from the faithful could gradually produce large amounts of money.

This idea led to the foundation, in 1822, of an organisation in Lyon, called the Society for the Propagation of the Faith. Its bulletin, the *Annals*, promoted the foreign missions, and appealed for support, both financially and spiritually. Vocations to mission in Asia steadily increased for the MEP missionaries: 50 in 1830, 185 in 1850, 343 in 1870. In 1910, the MEP missionaries in Asia approached 1400 in number. As the MEP priests grew in number, the Congregation of Propaganda Fide in Rome entrusted them with more and more missions: Japan and Korea in 1831, Manchuria in 1838, Malaysia, as separated from Siam, in 1841, Tibet in 1846, South China (Guangdong, Guangxi and Hainan) in 1848, Burma in 1855, Laos, as separated from Siam, in 1899. In the meantime, they retained the care of their earlier missions in South India and in the Southwestern provinces of China (Sichuan, Guizhou, Yunnan).



Bp. Fenouil and MEP priests in Yunnanfu, circa 1901

The intervention of colonial powers in the Far-East affected mission growth in a rather ambiguous way. The French protectorate in China protected the apostolate of the MEP and other missionary societies from harm, but it aroused hostility among a large part of the population. Saint Auguste Chapdelaine suffered martyrdom in Guangxi in 1856, and Saint J.P. Néel was beheaded in Guizhou in 1862. In 1900, the Boxer revolutionaries destroyed many missions. They killed Mgr. Laurent Guillon, Bishop of Moukden (Shenyang) in his cathedral. He fulfilled the words of Our Lord: "The good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep". In the MEP motherhouse in Paris there is a "Salle des martyrs," where the relics of those who died for the faith are displayed. One of these martyrs, Saint Theophane Vénard, was a source of inspiration to St Theresa of the Infant Jesus, the young Carmelite Sister, who later became the patron saint of the missions. In 1984, Pope John Paul II canonized three bishops and seven priests of the Paris Foreign Mission Society in Seoul, together with ninety-four Korean martyrs. Again in Rome in 1988, the Holy Father canonized two bishops and eight MEP priests. One bishop and two MEP priests were among the 120

martyrs of China Pope John Paul II canonized on October 1, 2000.

Cultural exchanges

Focusing on evangelization among the poorer people in the provinces, the MEP missionaries generally did not associate much with local intellectuals. However, since they were familiar with the people in remote areas, they contributed much to local development in agriculture, public works and medical care. Moreover, some of them collected a wealth of data in botany, geology, ethnography, linguistics and regional history, which proved to be an invaluable source of information for future historians of Asia. The missionaries published grammars, dictionaries and other works at the MEP printing Press of Nazareth in Hong Kong. Examples of MEP contributions to knowledge of Asia are P. Fournier's *La contribution des missionnaires français au progrès des sciences naturelles au XIXe siècle* (Paris, 1932), P.E. Favre's "Malay grammar", L.Gibert's *Dictionnaire historique et géographique de la Mandchourie* (1040 pp.), and Father Lamasse's books on sinology.

The great transformation of the mid-20th century

From the end of World War One onwards, with the growth of nationalism in Asia, some MEP superiors realized that a wind of change was blowing throughout Asia. They supported the movement to have Asian bishops take charge of Asian dioceses. Mgr. De Guébriant, whom Pope Benedict XV appointed apostolic visitor to China in 1919, together with the Lazarist Father Vincent Lebbe, relayed the urgency of appointing local Chinese bishops to Rome. Finally, in 1926, Pope Pius XI ordained six Chinese bishops in Rome. Today, under local Asian bishops, some 150 MEP missionaries, generally elderly, still offer their pastoral help, often as assistants to local parish priests. After the establishment of Communist regimes in China, Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos, MEP missionaries had to withdraw from these countries. Some went to new missions in Taiwan (Hualien), Indonesia, Mauritius,

Madagascar and New Caledonia. Others make good use of their knowledge of Asian languages to serve Asian migrants back in France and other in countries. Some MEP missionaries have recently gone back to Cambodia. Despite the lack of priestly vocations in France, a few young men are still joining the MEP society. Their urge to spread the Gospel is enriched with a better understanding of the values contained in the Asian cultural and religious tradition.

In their 350-year history, the Paris Foreign Mission Society has spawned several similar missionary societies, i.e. of being diocesan priests working on the foreign missions. Examples of these are the Pontifical Institute for Foreign Missions of Milan (PIME), the Catholic Foreign Mission Society of America (Maryknoll), and the Catholic foreign mission societies of several developing nations. So, several son and daughter missionary institutes of the MEP still carry on their missionary spirit.

