

(excerpts)

**Father JEAN-MARIE  
(Bernard)  
STRUYVEN  
1897-1959**

IMPRIMERIE  
COMMERCIALE ET ADMINISTRATIVE  
21-23, Rue Jean-Jaurès  
B R E S T  
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III  
**In China**

(1934-1953)

If you wish to visit the monastery of Notre Dame de Liesse in the province of Hopei, you have to travel by train three hundred kilometres south of Peeking. This takes between nine and ten hours. The closest town to the monastery is Cheng Ting Tu and the station where you alight is outside the town walls. Cheng Ting Tu has a population of fifty to seventy thousand . Like many other cities in China, walls were built as a protection against bandits. The gates of the city close at night and open again at six in the morning.

A missionary arriving here would feel quite comfortable for the town is a hub for a number of Catholic organisations. There is a fine Cathedral and a Bishop's Palace, and marble was liberally used in their construction. Also, there is a minor Seminary and the Mother House of a Congregation of Chinese nuns belonging to the order of Saint Josephine. Two orphanages are run by Nuns of the Holy Childhood, there is a centre for girls operated by the Sisters of Charity within the town. Another for boys is outside the walls. There are other organisations typical of the Christian apostolate as well. Two thousand people are involved in these undertakings forming a small town within the larger one.

At a distance of four kilometres along the railway tracks the ground rises slightly. In front of you is a large grove of trees and within it, extensive buildings nestle. The river divides to the east and west forming an island The river is called the river plain by the Chinese, because during the rainy season ,the river can expand to a width of three kilometres. When the water recedes, it leaves behind a large floodplain. Ditches carry the water to this land rendering it fertile and ready for cultivation. An eighteen arched bridge spans the larger arm of the river.

This spread of land is contained within walls. Facing you as you enter, is a Chinese style porch. Two large bronze plaques indicate the nature of the establishment: one sign carries the inscription, Notre Dame de Liesse, the other written in Chinese indicates that it is a Catholic Trappist Monastery, Religion of the Lord of the

Sky, Monastery of Spiritual Joy .The estate is an extensive one, a hundred and twenty hectares in size. Walls enclose twenty of them. A long avenue leads past most of the buildings. The style of the architecture is Chinese. The novitiate is the newest and is a two storey structure All the others are single level buildings. The church has not yet been built. Even the lesser buildings are well constructed. Everything has an air of neatness and care.

The nearby fields provide a good yield of wheat, cotton, and peanuts. A vineyard is grazing ground for a herd of twenty cows.. The region abounds in orchards, especially apple orchards.

The monastery is a sister foundation of the first Cistercian foundation in China, Notre Dame de Consolation at Yank Kia Ping is still just a Priory with thirty members in the community. Eighteen brothers are Chinese converts. The choir of twelve consist of two Chinese priests, five are French and three are Belgian. All are under the rule of a European prior. Close by is a village called Pentou Chang (Saint Bernard in translation) The inhabitants, all one hundred and fifty souls, are Christian.

This is where Father J.M Struyven arrived after a forty day sea voyage followed by a number of days on terra firma.' How happy I was to return to my cherished solitude again', he wrote in his first letter,' main roads are not the place for a monk. (16 of January 1935)

Because it was winter, he was soon dressed in Chinese clothes: long cotton pants, lined with brushed wool from arms to ankles and bound there with ties. Over this a white gown and a padded cotton vest . 'In this attire. you can beat the cold .'he writes.

## Acclimatisation and a Baffling Language

The first task of the missionary in China is to become used to the culture. This is generally acknowledged to be difficult. For months Father had applied himself to learning Chinese which is

a confusing language. 'I worked seven hours a day,' he said in his first letter,' at the end of the month I knew five hundred characters.'(16<sup>th</sup> January 1935) He tried to explain to his family that Chinese was a language without grammar and that .people expressed themselves in single syllables. Each word had a different meaning depending on the tone curve used. For the European the cadence and sounds were almost impossible to learn.

In order to be of use to the community and the Christians in the area, he needed to be able to express himself in this baffling language. He soon felt ready to make his first attempt. He described this in an account of great discretion 'I was paired up with a professor of science who had taught at a seminary. His place in the hierarchy was between an ordinary Christian and a priest. He was called Master Mong. Every time I made a real mess in Chinese I came to tell Master Mong in order to increase his enthusiasm for my progress.' Master we have lost face, what are people going to say about you.? They will say that it is not worth working too hard to make something out of this European although we know that the Master is educated he is not able to teach Chinese to a European etc.' .( In China people have a strong sense of shame even in the case of a joke.) The good man was nettled. After that he never spoke about my work in Chinese without using the royal 'we' as country priests do in Europe. A curate would say: 'Tomorrow at one o'clock we will baptise Jeanette's son, 'or, 'We will hear confessions from four o'clock onwards.'

'Now, in June when I announced to Master Wong that I intended to present myself to the public, the good man became very frightened. "Impossible," he said, " the priest does not know enough Chinese" I remarked that one tiny grain of wheat is enough if we add a heavy load of nerve. This arithmetic did not please him. He went in search of the Prior. Having found him he said: "This priest must have a written text of his sermon in his hand. If he remains at this stage of slight acquaintance with Chinese, he will never get anywhere." In order to end the discussion, I asked him:' Who was it that said go and teach all nations Did He say it to the one who is ordaining or to the young candidate?' He had to

admit that these words were spoken to the candidate. So I said to him, ' You see to your affairs and I will tend to mine.'

' Luckily, at the end of June Master Mong went on holiday. This is when I began to preach. Thanks to the grace of God, I was understood by the Christians from my very first sermon. For those who know the difficulties of speaking Chinese, it was pronounced a success. Master Mong did not mention it but I hastened to congratulate him saying that the success of students is the glory of the teacher. Needless to say, Chinese requires a great deal of work. If I did not have a written sermon in my hand it was because I had to learn my sermons by heart, word for word. The good Christians who hear me think that I understand Chinese. They come to tell me stories which I hardly understand. I reply jokingly 'ha ha', then with a smile, I leave.(' August 1935)

Nevertheless, this approach was dangerous and it was not long before the priests noticed the fact. It happened that while preaching to the Community on the feast of the Assumption, I lapsed into heresy. I spoke of the Mother of the Holy Spirit. I wanted to say our human mother-, cheng chen, instead I said cheng chen, which means the mother of the Holy Spirit. In Chinese 'chen' pronounced one way has one meaning and a different meaning when the pronunciation is changed.. It was a matter of pronunciation Mistakes like this could lead to the appearance of heresy. The novice who aspires to Chinese eloquence would be well advised .not to be presumptuous.

'What a language!' he exclaimed at the end of a year.' Six months ago I began preaching with great confidence. I thought I was understood, but I came to realise this was not the case. For although one can be understood without all the nuances and accents, the sounds are very painful to Chinese ears. Now I am moving forward; there is no going back. Obviously I have made progress and my efforts are worthwhile and crowned with success.

' Last night I was repeating my sermon to Master Mong, He smiled radiantly and said with conviction:" That is passable. But I can assure

you that if we were not working for the Good God, we would have sent you packing long ago.?' (6<sup>th</sup> January 1936)

## Chinese bread (mantow) and Chopsticks

It is not only language which presents difficulties. For the foreigner, the food is different as well. In the north of the country, the Chinese eat millet But in the south they eat rice with vegetables, fish and occasionally pork. They are unaccustomed to cheese; dairy products, wine and leavened bread, and do not care for them, Father Struyven was determined to adopt the Chinese diet according to the Cistercian rule. ' The most noticeable feature of Chinese cuisine was its stodginess. The heavier food was, the better it was considered to be. Tofu was part of the diet. At first it seemed strange but after a while it was accepted as normal.' Father made great efforts to digest Chinese bread. This was how it was made: ' The recipe is quite simple. Dough is shaped into balls, about the size of an orange. No yeast is used . The balls are steamed and served warm. They taste simply of bran but they do fill the stomach. After two of these you feel full and have a heavy stomach. Sometimes potassium is added to help it rise, but I prefer the bread without this addition since it tastes like soap.'

At the year's end he wrote adding as a postscript: ' Very soon I shall be eating with chopsticks instead of the vulgar fork and spoon. It is not easy, as a novice remarked to me but easier than learning the language. I had no difficulty believing him.'

## Walking Fountains

'Last but not least, there is the difference in climate. It does not vary. No storms, no clouds and no rain except at the sixth moon. there is hardly any wind, though when it blows it is always from the Gobi desert to the north bringing yellow dust which hides the sun. We light the lamps even during the day. This does not happen

very often. Winters are cold and very dry. However, at the time of the sixth moon, in June and July, the weather is terrible. The wind blows from the sea and the humidity is high and everything is covered in mould. From June onwards, the temperature is about thirty degrees, sometimes even forty or fifty in the shade making it necessary to change clothes five times a day. All this is no laughing matter. In 1933 five religious at Liesse died of heat stroke, three of them in a dramatic fashion. 'Father Struyven confirms the fact. 'Talking of dog days, from two in the morning a person becomes a walking fountain. Still, the good thing is that there is plenty of water. After huge downpours the rivers even flood the monastery grounds.'

### A Full Agenda

There is a new area of monastic life that becomes Father Struyven's responsibility. He had to try hard to become assimilated because from the very beginning heavy duties were assigned to him. Sometimes he gave a glimpse of these in his letters 'On Sunday last week, I gave a sermon to the laity; Monday, a conference to the novices. On Wednesday, I gave a sermon to the community, this morning a sermon to the laity, then I taught a class of theology in Latin, with commentary in Chinese. Ten sermons in Chinese in one week.[6th January 1936]

From his very first year in China, he was in charge of Chinese converts. He writes: 'There are a dozen or so converts some only recently baptised.' He enjoyed this ministry. 'There are beautiful souls among them who are simple and open to grace. Each day I am improved by my contact with the novices The effect of grace on them is so clear. I could tell you touching facts about our precious Chinese religious.'

In July 1936 Father Struyven was given the title of Master of Novices. He looked around him and saw that the Chinese were poor, very poor. They worked a fifteen hour day for forty centimes a day, and Sunday was not a day of rest.' The people here are honest. You should see how respectful they are to their parents, and how they respect authority. They have a sense of decency and the women wear modest clothing. At the

same time there are some inhuman customs embedded here. For instance, at the birth of a child a question is asked: Is it a rose or a misfortune? If the answer is a rose that is to say, a boy there is rejoicing, for the family line is assured and the honouring of the ancestors will continue. The parents also know that they will be cared for in their old age. If the baby is a girl, it is a misfortune for the girl brings nothing to the parents. Her future has to be settled soon as possible by a matchmaker and her dowry will hardly cover the cost of her upbringing. We can see mountains from our monastery where there are very few girls. Considered useless beings, they are killed at birth.'

From a religious point of view, ordinary life here is imbued with primitive paganism. Father writes: 'Recently I visited a village close by, I passed five pagodas with idols in them. There are countless superstitions and the houses are full of evidence of them. The idea of a good God is not clear to these people. They know enough to be saved, but too little to love Him. A Belgian bishop of Mongolia I met in Shanghai told me that the Chinese people are the most beautiful pagans on earth.'(Easter 1935)

Like all the Catholic missionaries in China, Father Struyven felt called to the great task of contributing to the expansion of the Church in that country by the formation of Chinese priest and nuns. China is an immense country, with more than six hundred million souls. Among them are only two million five hundred thousand Catholics. Unfortunately the number of conversions grew slowly, at the rate of fifty thousand per year. All the more reason to redouble our efforts. In a letter describing the difficulties he ends by saying, 'All these things count for nothing if our sufferings will gain souls.'(16 January 1935)

### Master of Novices

His duty, as Master of Novices, brought him great joy but filled him with confusion. 'These novices are fine' he notes, 'they have the makings of good religious. They are intelligent, gifted in Latin, and all of them have good voices which

adds much to ceremonies. But alas, they deserve a good master. The responsibility of being their Master is a crushing one. It brings out all my inadequacies and defects. I am not up to the high demands of the post. It takes a soul on fire to inflame these young souls. The hope of our order in China is to train zealous and well instructed priests. Alas, I am all there is. I am worth so little...'

In the new residence, he also taught theology, and though always living the life of a Cistercian monk he led a busy life.

## The Miserable life of Peasants

Father Struyven was concerned with the welfare of the local population. The peasants were wretchedly poor and the war made their plight worse. The abbey was constantly witness to this. He writes: 'Sometimes the novices and I take the vegetable waste to the gatehouse. There are always fifty men there, as well as young men and urchins. As soon as our wagon arrives there is a strong surge forwards to grab a cabbage leaf or a carrot core. Poor people!' This is the way it was all over China. Despite the infinite pains that the peasant brings to his work, he knows nothing but misery. More than a third of the population do not eat enough to satisfy hunger even in a normal year. In time of shortages, hundreds of thousands of lives are lost.' (17<sup>th</sup> of April, in a letter written to Professor Van der Voeren of the university of Louvain.)

'The countryside was overpopulated. In certain regions, there were six hundred peasants per square kilometre. Also the land was intensely cultivated. Farmers make sure that they does not waste the smallest corner of land. The yield is not bad for this locality- fifteen hundred kilos of wheat per hectare – but it must be said that the yield does not match the amount of effort required. One thing is certain, agriculture remains very primitive in China where modern techniques are ignored. This is why the reward is so scant for the Chinese peasant despite all his efforts to scratch a living from the earth. '

Even the cultivation of monastery land is deficient in this respect. Father Bernard being a

practical realist noted this at once.. In fact, after fifty years of effort the abbey only produced a third of what it needed. The fields would have yielded more if they had been prepared differently.

Right from the start, Father Bernard was struck by the relative splendour of the monastery compared with the dwellings of the Chinese. Travelling from Peking to Yan Kia Ping , he wrote later, ' The number of brick houses with windows could be counted on the fingers of one hand; whereas what the monks build seems to be built for eternity, One might say that it was in their blood to work in this way. At N. D. de Liesse, even the outbuildings are of solid materials with window panes and are built to last, Truly, they are the most handsome edifices around. Because the countryside was so poor in contrast, this caused even more jealousy.'

From this observation, Father Bernard drew this practical conclusion: 'In my opinion, the best reason for a contemplative monastery to be accepted in a country which is profoundly pagan is by undertaking social action. The misery of the Chinese peasant is due to the primitive farming methods they use. How can those Trappists who are agronomists remain indifferent to such a situation? Our best safeguard is to turn each monastery into a model farm where scientific methods are employed.' These reflections give the clue to many of his attitudes. They reveal the inspiration for the projects that he undertook where ever he was.

## Agriculture Awakened

Father Bernard had already made similar observations at Liesse. These had produced an unexpected reaction within himself; he felt the awakening of the agricultural engineer he was trained to be though he had never made use of the training.

Let us retrace our steps to show the reason for the change. In a letter to his beloved family written on the 12<sup>th</sup> of April 1936 Bernard made a suggestion. 'I have just held a baby at the baptismal font. Baby Cadum, large and fat, with

chubby arms and a radiant face. He is called Cadu-lec. His older brother is a strapping fellow called Ca- du- lac. His mother is Madame Aucun and was born in Louvain. His grandfather is none other than the wonderful rector of Louvain.' This was an enigma. After a moment of mystery, he offered a clue. Cadulac means the Agricultural Centre of the University of Louvain in the Congo. This organisation was a subsidiary of the Association of Catholic Universities Aid to the Missions.(A.U.C.A.M.) The name of the baby was altered slightly to Cadulac and was not in the Congo but in China where it was now functioning.

Yes, Father Bernard unveils the grand idea that he had in mind to interest the University of Louvain in the battle against poverty in China. He foresees the sponsors he would call upon, but it seemed to him that the newborn should have uncles as well if not in America, at least in Europe.. He thought of his brother Alphonse. From that time onwards there was an exchange of letters between the two brothers who were pioneers of agricultural improvements in China. Father wished to become a pioneer in the transformation of agriculture in China He wanted to experiment with carefully chosen seed from Europe in a systematic fashion. He asked his brother to begin by several hundred grams of clover alfalfa and lucern grass. The year before, he had asked for wheat. These types of grain did not exist in China. The trials were to be carried out on a hundred square meters and fifty metres square to see how great the yield would be.

Alphonse sent him packages regularly which could have meant the beginning of social renewal of the Chinese peasant. 'They undergo such misery.' Father Bernard repeats with convincing insistence, 'Whatever happens, these experiments have to be taken seriously. I will carry out systematic trials on everything: spring barley, cotton, rice, corn, etc. Everything interests me. We have to succeed for the Glory of God. Only we have to ask ourselves if such projects are on solid ground There are other difficulties which present themselves namely, differences of climate and soil. '

Undoubtedly if he measured the effect of his

intervention, he would have to admit that it remained slight. 'Contemplative that I am, I am always limited to an experimental role in China. But missionaries, by establishing agricultural cooperatives, might begin the mass conversion of this great people' (12<sup>th</sup> April 1936)

From the month of May in 1936, the monastery of Liesse received regular visitations from the abbot of the abbey of N.D of Consolation who was their superior, and also another abbot who was the papal delegate for the Far East. According to the rule, this type of visit consisted of a general inspection followed by decisions which could mean changes. Among the consequences of this visit was the advice that external activities should be discontinued so that there would be no distraction from the main goal which was to place Liesse on a solid supernatural base. This was the report written by the abbot.

In short, as Father Bernard announced to his dear ones:' they have clipped the wings of the infant Cadulec.' His disappointment did not dampen his good spirits for he found an immediate solution. The special correspondence was forbidden but not the agricultural trials which could continue. Father was committed to his cause and described the results of the first trials which he began in 1935 with wheat from Brittany.

At N.D. of Consolation, his concern for social services and his competence in agronomy would reveal themselves again. The scale of his trials was greater. He constantly looked for ways to improve wheat. Varieties from the Midi in France and the north of Italy were totally successful. In addition, he experimented with soya beans and he was interested in corn. American cotton was a successful crop too. Then he had an idea. To introduce rice growing to dry regions. It was known that a certain variety of rice did not need paddy fields, but it was rarely grown in China, at least in the region where he was. He tried to promote this crop, though he had to be prudent with these innovations. Yang Kia Ping was on the same latitude as Naples but the winters were harsh, with temperatures dipping to minus twenty.

By becoming a promoter of modern methods, he

did not believe that he deviated from his spiritual mission. His reasoning was the same as that of missionaries of all time and in all parts of the world, who felt called to spread the faith in pagan lands. At Liesse, Father Bernard had recorded some similar observations provoking a surprising reaction deep in his being. ' In order that missionaries reach the masses, they have to attend to the peoples material welfare. The misery in China is an obstacle to the conversion of souls. Empty stomachs do not have ears.'(17th of April 1938)

## Notre Dame de Consolation

After Father Struyven had spent two years in treasured isolation at Notre Dame de Liesse, the abbot of the abbey of Notre Dame de Consolation at Yang Kia Ping summoned him to become Master of Novices to assure a continuity in standards.( Liesse was a dependent priory.)

Father has left us an account of this uncomfortable journey. To travel between Peking and N.D de Constantinople took three days and was a distance of two or three hundred kilometres by mule path. This was the shortest way..Father took the northerly one which was not much less.

N.D de Consolation was founded in 1883. It stood in the middle of a dry desolate region, eight hundred metres above the Great Wall. The centre seemed to be an oasis in the middle of green orchards.

Abbé Dom Louis Brun was French. He was a retired infantry captain from the First Great War.. At one time he was treasurer for the society for Foreign Missions in China. He held this position for many years, dealing with finances rather than caring for souls, He moved from one state to another; then he became a Cistercian. Since then he could not bear to concern himself with temporal matters and for the last sixteen years he had fulfilled the duties of abbot. He loved the Chinese and he was loved by them. In an imposing complex of buildings, N.D. de C .sheltered a large community of one hundred

and fifty people, one hundred of them were monks. There were fewer Chinese priests than their European brother priests. As for the administration of the abbey, the abbot was most demanding; increasing the number of compulsory prayers and self sacrifices made and imposing restrictions in the refectory so that the amount of food for monks was the same as that available to the underfed peasants around them.

## Banditry and Calm.

An air of superficial tranquillity reigned at N.D de Consolation and at N.D. De Liesse while the community devoted itself to works of peace. However, there was a growing anxiety for China was not really at peace. Father Bernard had barely been back at N.D. de Consolation for three months when Japan began the conquest of China on the seventh of July in 1937. At the abbey, these events were barely noticed, though from time to time a Japanese military car was seen in the neighbourhood, or a Japanese plane passed overhead. That was all.

The danger from bandits was more immediate. In certain regions China had always been infested by bands of violent bandits made up of roaming vagabonds or demobilised soldiers. These people wandered across the country in groups as large as several thousand, though groups as large five or six thousand and even more were common too. They pillaged and raided the villages and small towns where they could count on finding well stocked shops. Their intentions were variable. If these men were bad tempered or if they met resistance, the population could expect horrible massacres in retaliation.

During his stay in Liesse, Father Struyven had already alerted his correspondents to the fact that these were normal risks of life in China.: ' Sometimes these bandits can be dangerous. In the last ten years fifty missionaries have been massacred, and ten of them were Belgians.' Carefully calculating the risk, he confronted the situation with his own philosophy. Listen to what he says.: ' Do not let it upset you. Either you fall into their hands, or you don't. If you are spared or not, or they kill you or not, whatever happens do not fuss. If they do murder you, then there is

nothing more to be done. In all events do not be disturbed." The serenity fortified him with brilliant logic.

In view of the dangers of the situation, the monks were inspired with fatalistic wisdom. but even so, they took measures to protect themselves. The monastery was built on high ground and was surrounded with solid walls like the churches and convents of the Middle Ages perched on a mountain in the Pyrenees or in Italy.' Our situation in China is similar to that of the Middle Ages in Europe.' (20 October 1937). A defence system was put in place at the monastery. Father spoke of this in a pleasantly humorous way when he wrote to Sister Lucienne: 'If you saw a superb American gun and fifty cartridges in my quarters at the novitiate, you might say to yourself, here is a Master of Novices who is quite wild. Do not worry. The gun is not to shoot unruly novices.' (15<sup>th</sup> of January) 1938 He often made quips like this. 'Thanks to helping hands we are sheltered here. Recently I was appointed general of a brigade, (a modest squad really.) I received a brand new flame thrower. However the Generalissimo cautioned me not to use it unless there was no way out.' (27<sup>th</sup> 1937.)

The fact of the matter is that the situation was very serious. It would be safe to say that war was now awake and the Japanese had conquered the regions closest to the railway lines. The monastery was left alone since it was in the mountains away from major centres. But refugees from a fair distance came seeking protection. (2<sup>nd</sup> of October). 'A little later we learned of the capture of a bishop and eight missionaries. Then there was no further news about them. According to a Monseigneur in Peking, they were probably massacred. Meanwhile, not far from Yang- Kia-Ping, ten European Marist brothers, who were captured three months ago by bandits, were released. The bandits treated them with great respect.' (27<sup>th</sup> November 1937)

Bernard, with his unruffled air, reassured his family and friends with a circular letter. 'The days flow by quite happily in peace. There is just enough activity outside the monastery devoted to the good God, and enough meditation to prevent anxiety' Willingly he returned to his underlying

principle to cultivate serenity and preparedness.

On the subject of the panthers which were killed on the property, He says: 'In my opinion, a missionary is better off dying from the bite of a panther, or reduced to ashes by assassins or hit by a bullet in an encounter with bandits, rather than dying in his bed after long months of treatment with warm poultices'. (15<sup>th</sup> January 1938)

These reflections are perfectly in keeping with his thinking. A few lines further on he writes.'

Bandits abound here. The regional market is thirty kilometres away . It is a base for a troop of one thousand bandits armed with machine guns and rifles.. They occupied the town a month ago and are holding the region to ransom. Many religious have handguns by their bedside. I am in charge with the defence of a section sixty metres long. We might have to exchange fire, but at the moment the monastery seems impregnable.'

### The Massacre at C'heng-Ting-Fu

The proof that the situation was very serious was provided by information that a massacre had taken place at C'heng Ting Fu on the 9<sup>th</sup> of October, practically on the doorstep of N.D de Liesse, during the assault on the town by the Japanese. One evening the Bishop, Mgr Schraven, five priests and three laymen, all of them European ,were surprised by a band of marauding soldiers in the Bishop's palace . They were herded into a lorry and driven to some waste land a kilometre away, where they were attacked with knives before being burned. A Trappist priest who had sought refuge at the bishop's residence perished with the others. He was Father Bernard's Father Confessor. Nothing occurred at the monastery. For lack of space we cannot describe the details of these hideous killings. Father Bernard concludes his narrative. 'You can see that if I had been at Liesse, or if the doors were not locked, you might have received an envelope containing a few fragments of bone, all that was left of my miserable body. Such is life '. ( 15<sup>th</sup> of January 1938)

These events tested the confidence of the



community of Yang- Kia -Ping who knew it was as vulnerable as others were. 'All is peaceful here' says Father Bernard. 'with an alert from time to time when the presence of bandits is noted twenty kilometres away. We load the guns at once and assemble the cartridges. So far we have not needed the weapons. 'Our situation brings both advantages and disadvantages. There is no legal authority for fifty kilometres around, and so no taxes to pay. It is easy to take an independent position but at the same time we cannot expect any help. Each group is responsible for its own defence. We have confidence in the cleverness of our generals- I am one of them- but most of all we put our trust in the Blessed Virgin for the number of bandits grows from day to day and when they have razed a village to the ground, there is nothing else to be done but for the villagers to become bandits themselves. To prevent their own starvation, they steal and consume the grain of neighbouring villages. You can see that with this kind of behaviour we are not close to being free.' (21<sup>st</sup> February 1938) No matter what the future holds, there is no more talk of sending Father Bernard back to Liesse.

### Do not Worry

'Even in war, there can be options. At Easter 1938, rumour had it that the Japanese were withdrawing. They might be leaving faster than they came was the common thought. This meant that the battle front was closing in on us. Still, there was no need to be anxious. No one is bothered here, for we are used to ongoing disturbances.'

Thus community life moved on as it always did, barely ever jolted out of tranquillity but continuing to move away from the world and choosing abandonment to God. A letter from Father Bernard to Sister Laura was written in those uncertain times. For him, theological arguments and his own experiences showed clearly that contemplative life was superior to the active life: 'A contemplative soul is worth a thousand pious souls.' More over, he congratulated himself on finding himself at N.D.

de Consolation because it was the right setting for the kind of life he had chosen. ' My two years at Liesse were not nearly as suitable for my kind of life. For one thing it was a newer establishment, and then there were the Chinese studies etc. etc. Consolation is a very different place for me. In such serious matters as these, the stakes are high. It is not right to be content with less than a perfect fit'.(Easter 1938) They continued to live in a state of physical insecurity, but a new factor soon entered their lives. It was the presence of the communists. Father writes: ' Guerrillas now occupy the countryside around Yang-Kia- Ping. The Communist Army, now known as the Eighth Army, is gradually assimilating the guerrillas into their ranks, and in 1938, they installed a communist civil administration. Till now, the monastery was between two fires: from time to time, the Japanese made incursions into the surrounding country and the Communists scattered before the onslaught. allowing the Japanese to burn the villages and harvests of the poor peasants.

A number of incidents occurred which involved the Abbey. The Monastery doors were opened to a band of two hundred Communists without incident. Subsequently some of the Chinese religious were tortured in the hope that they would reveal a cache of arms.

After five days, the Communists retreated, taking all the weapons and ammunition with them. The monastery fortress was disarmed without a blow being exchanged.. 'Nevertheless less,' says Father, ' the Communists used less force during the war than they did when they gained total control. They did not want to complicate the situation by antagonising the people.'

The pendulum swung back and forth for seven years between 1938 and 1945. Amongst the hardships was the irregularity of the mail. It was nonexistent for months and many letters went astray. Father's family in France and Belgium were worried by the lack of news from him and he felt cut off. Occasionally there was an avalanche of mail which brought some relief to them. Father was astonished that the family was so fearful. His letters always followed a pattern, they breathed an air of quiet confidence .In a letter dated the 27<sup>th</sup> of November, he writes: ' This

is my tenth Advent as a Trappist. It seems like yesterday that I entered the novitiate. It was my fortieth birthday two weeks ago and I am greying at the temples, I am ageing. Thirty years have gone by since Papa died, and twenty years since Mother's death. Time does go by so quickly. And soon we will be in eternity. Dear all, let us go forward with stout hearts, and may we meet soon in eternity.'

Meanwhile, the monastery of N.D. De Liesse seemed to benefit from the relative peace produced by Japanese control in the region, whereas conditions at the noviciate in Yang- Kia-Ping grew worse. Communications were difficult and the threat of conscription for the young monks into the red army was real. As the uncertainty continued, the insecurity weighed heavily upon them all. Father thought it wise to send some of the novices to N.D. De Liesse. He approached the authorities of the abbey for permission to do so. The decision was made in painful circumstances as the abbot was stricken with a lung infection on Wednesday of Holy Week, but by Easter Sunday he had recovered sufficiently to show a glimmer of consciousness .

Thus forty of the young novices were evacuated to Liesse. from N.D. de Consolation . This is how Father ends his letter.: 'I left Yang-Kia-Ping for good in July of 1940 in order to draw up the statement of change. The monastery would now become a priory a self governing body( sui juris)!' All this would end in six months.

## The Storm Breaks

Father Bernard was happy to return to monastic life which meant so much to him. Alas, new difficulties were waiting for him. In September 1939 war was declared in Europe . Soon it would engulf the world. Japan hurried to take the side of the Axis powers of Berlin and Rome, and life was made difficult for citizens of countries belonging to the other side. For security reasons, the Japanese detained them .It was on the feast of St. Joseph, that is the nineteenth of March, that the Japanese began collecting foreigners together in one place. Father was arrested on the 21<sup>st</sup> of March 1943 and sent to the concentration camp

in Wei-shien., three hundred miles southwest of Peking in the province of Shan-tung.

The camp was established three kilometres from the town on the site of a large Protestant Mission built by the Americans. It consisted of a hospital and a school . Eighteen hundred enemy nationals were assembled there: English, Americans, Canadians, Dutch, Belgians but no French, because their nation had already come to terms with the Axis Powers.

Among them were four hundred missionaries, both nuns and priests, and seven Bishops. Father Bernard had the good fortune to meet up with a classmate of his who had attended the Institute of Saint Marie. They became fast friends again. Carlo von Melckebeke who was now a missionary bishop recalled this meeting in an article: he wrote later. ' In the midst of a group of priests, I picked out a large man with a stoop. He was smiling and had a twinkle in his eyes He was in Chinese attire and had a colonial style hat (a topi or pith helmet perhaps?) Hello there Bernard! Hello there Carlo! came the reply.'(November 1948)

Camp discipline was quite good. The Japanese maintained external security and the inmates organised internal discipline. Different areas of community living were identified, such as discipline, recreation, culture, and religion. A leader was selected for each. The appointment was for a six month term.

Father Bernard managed the repair shop. As an engineer he was able to turn his hand to many things: he was smithy, welder and mechanic. His co- worker was an Anglican bishop, a jovial man who handled woodworking projects. Together they worked in a small building along the outer wall of the camp.

In an article Msgr van Mecklebeke writes: ' Father Bernard in Chinese pants and an old jacket was master of the forge. He used it to transform tin cans into saucepans and kettles in a matter of days. He repaired taps in the shower house and mended spades for gardeners. Other friends of his in Weihsien spoke of his gentleness, his goodness and his kindness. He

tried to reconcile the Cistercian life of prayer with the ordinary life of a prisoner. The early rising was particularly difficult to achieve without disturbing others. He was a large man and the meagre diet was a test for him. However, his friends found ways of supplementing his diet. The lack of food did not prevent him from expending energy. For instance, one day he broke the anvil. From that time on he was known as Father Steel-hammer.'

The Catholic priests showed great sympathy for their fellow inmates. They looked for ways to serve the community. They sifted through rubbish dumps and found articles which might be useful. They also proved to be adroit black marketeers in the trade that was carried on over the wall with the Chinese peasants. Their intention was to obtain necessary items for the most needy; that is for the sick, for mothers, and for children. All the time they were in the camp, morale was high and good humour prevailed. This part of their detention did not last long

### In Peking

Due to the intervention of the apostolic delegate, Mgr Zanin, the priests and nuns were transferred from Wei-shien to Peking in mid August. They were interned but this time in a Catholic establishment, the house of studies run by the Franciscan Fathers of Fang-Tsi-Tang. Conditions were better than Wei-shien and the internees were permitted to leave the premises on their 'word of honour' if there was a serious reason to do so. This is how Father Bernard was able to go to the Jesuit House of Chabanel to lead a retreat. The listeners remember that Father spoke for an hour with an overflowing heart.

This was the state of things until the end of the world war. During the enforced idleness Father searched for ways to be useful. The contacts that he made allowed him to turn to agriculture once again.. He started a Catholic agricultural association making sure it was on a solid footing. The initiative was successful and twelve bishops were actively involved in it.

Then came the collapse of Japan followed by its capitulation on the fifteenth of August. Usually a

pass from the military was necessary to leave the city, but Father Bernard did not wait. He returned to N.D. de Liesse.

### Liesse

Alas! The liberation did not mean the end of difficulties for monasteries in China. Worse was yet to come for them. The end of the Japanese occupation was the beginning of open warfare between the Nationalists and the Communists.

1946 was a normal year at Liesse. On the 31<sup>st</sup> of August Father wrote to his family: 'All is calm in China ( though that is a relative term in China.) The Nationalists hold the communication routes and the large centres, and the Communists control the rest. ' Some bad news came to him from Europe. His sister Mary Rose also known as Sister Laura had returned to God on the 19<sup>th</sup> of July. Father was deeply moved 'It was a death without pomp and ceremony as she wished it to be' he wrote,' She led a profoundly spiritual life and was ready for the next life.'

Monastic life continued on its course. From the end of 1940 the monks from N.D. De Consolation had reintegrated following a visit from the abbot. Father had charge of the convert-novices and his interest in agriculture remained lively. Again he asked for shipments of wheat seed. Meanwhile the Chinese economy was very troubled and inflation was at 1/1500 . The Chinese clergy were in a miserable state. They were worried about stipends for Masses.

### Communists at N.D. de Consolation

1947 was the turning point in the history of the Cistercian foundations in China. By that time, the Communists had consolidated their power in the region. In order to rid China of Catholic organisations, they began to turn the people against Catholic enterprises by making a case against them, in a parody of popular process. Now this behaviour is common, but then it was

the first time such attitudes were displayed.

From April, the inhabitants of fifteen villages in the vicinity of the abbey were summoned to attend frequent meetings. The communist organisers looked for ways to turn them against the monks. On the 7<sup>th</sup> of July there began a time of public denunciation. A crowd of three thousand people invaded the monastery, looting and pillaging everywhere, from top to bottom. The buildings were put under the guard of the local militia and the monks were held in detention. About the 22<sup>nd</sup> of July the last public accusation took place in the Chapel under the direction of communist leader Ly-T'oei-Che, a veritable maniac, consumed with hatred against the Catholic religion. It was a scene reminiscent of the Passion of Christ, including the shouts of the crowd demanding the death of the accused. The leaders of the Community were put in chains and treated as criminals. The rest of the community were taken to another part of the building. Each person was interrogated separately with extreme harshness. This continued throughout the days that followed.

### Destruction - A Death March

When these events were reported, emotions were high in Peking and in Nanking. General Fu- Tao- Yi , the National General sent troops to the relief of the Trappist monastery. The army was only thirty kilometres away for they were stationed along the railway which linked Peking to Mongolia. The first wave of Nationalists arrived about the fifteenth of August. At this time Ly-T'oei- Chi had ordered the evacuation of the prisoners and they were led away. Three brothers who were converts and were elderly, died soon afterwards.

Meanwhile, the nationalists withdrew and Ly-T'oei-Che took advantage of the fact to bring his prisoners back to the abbey. About the 28<sup>th</sup> of August, the Nationalists made another sally and the monastery was evacuated for a second time. It was at this point that unmitigated disaster struck. The monastery was burned to the ground. It was not altogether clear who the arsonists were. For a long time it was thought to be the work of the

Communists, but according to reports by people of the region received sometime later, it seemed that the nationalists were responsible. Father Bernard leaned towards the second theory.

Whatever did happen, the abbey was totally destroyed. Again, the communist in command led his prisoners away to a base fifty kilometres away, to Mon-Kia-Schwana. It was a veritable death march. They were in a weakened state and exhausted by the deprivations they had suffered. In addition, on each stage of the journey over the mountains, the interrogators used torture. Fathers and brothers fell along the way. The journey took fifteen days.

Towards the end of September the communists began to lay off one of the two sections who worked under Ly-T'oei-Che because of shortages of food and other things. Thirty five religious, all minors or converts were set free- except for one ill priest- but not before being forced to denounce vehemently the imperialism and the reactionary spirit of their French Superiors who had returned to Europe. They were warned they would be followed and they were forbidden to gather at the Cathedral in Peking or to form part of a community on pain of death. They were free but not safe and five of them died from exhaustion on their journey home. All were not freed. Among the twenty four religious, there were thirteen priests. On these hapless victims, Ly-T'oei - Che and his sadists let loose with a brutality without equal. Only a third of them survived. And on the 28<sup>th</sup> of January, six religious were executed after a peoples mock trial near Yan- Kia- Ping.

The martyrdom of N.D. De Consolation was thus complete: thirty three Religious died including the Superior, the Prior, the assistant Prior and eleven other priests. Four priests out of eighteen survived the dreadful torture. An uneasy peace reigned afterwards. This followed a general order given by the Central Committee in January 1948. The persecution of Christians slowed down until 1950. We have described the horrific testing undergone by the community of Yang-Kia Ping in some detail because they were related to the activities of Father Bernard. Of course he was not a victim, nor a witness to it, but they do explain his activities after his stay in China.

## In Szechwan

We left Father Bernard at the Priory of N.D de Liesse. Meanwhile during the summer of 1947, the civil war spread great insecurity to a large part of China. The monastery of N.D de Consolation had already been destroyed so what would happen to the one at Liesse? Ordinary precautions were not sufficient for this dangerous situation.

Father Bernard recommended that the whole community be transferred somewhere far away in the interior, out of range of the bloody upheaval created by the civil war, a place such as Szechwan in the west of China. He was quick to put his plan into action. After telegrams and a trip or two by plane, thanks to a local bishop there., Father obtained possession of an estate close to Chengtou. He made all the necessary arrangements for the re-establishment of the community in very simple conditions.(A colourful story is told about the trip. Father travelled by litter. (The litter bearers came to a river where the litter broke under Father's weight!))

'Of course, we have to improvise, the monastery is made of planks of bamboo without nails or windows. However, since the climate is semi-tropical we do not have to deal with frost in the winter.' They grew rice tea and cane sugar on forty eight hectares of good land given to them by the bishop. Thus their basic needs were met.

Father was happy to have achieved his goal. 'I felt the guiding hand of Providence each step of the way. The Cistercian order is saved in China.' In September he was in Peking awaiting the arrival of a crowd of Cistercians by air. The announcement in Europe was that forty religious had boarded a ship on the blue waters of the Yang-Tse-Kiang. They had left Shanghai on the 8<sup>th</sup> of October and would arrive on the 25<sup>th</sup>. 'Everything was ready to receive them.'

## A community of survivors in Peking

At the end of October 1949 the first survivors from N.D de Consolation arrived in Peking. They were welcomed by the prior of the American Benedictines. A month later, the Cistercian community had grown to twenty. How much more would it grow? It was at this point that Father Bernard was caught up in the consequences of the events in Yang- Kia -Ping. We will let him tell how all this unfolded. in his general report. 'Reverend Father Paulus Lee, Prior of N.D. De Liesse: stayed on in Peking for several months after the other religious had left, to see to the evacuation of a herd of cows belonging to the monastery and a cotton crop valued at eighty thousand pounds So the Prior was there when the first survivors arrived from N.D. de Consolation and was concerned about their future. He wrote to me in Szechuan asking me to find a refuge for these poor religious and to prepare it for them. I had already been in Szechuan for three months.

It was towards the end of the month, on my return from a reconnaissance mission that I received a telegram from Mgr. Riber, Apostolic Vicar to China. It read, 'Return at once to Peking'. Although I had just walked thirty five kilometres, I set out immediately. I ran a distance of seventeen kilometres to Chengtu, the capital of Szechuan. (This is an important province with fifty million inhabitants.) I booked a seat on a plane for the next day. On the 27<sup>th</sup> of November, I landed in Peking after eight hours of flight having travelled twenty five hundred kilometres. Once there, I learned the reason for the telegram. The Apostolic Delegate wished to reinvigorate this monastery which had been so sorely tried. He gave me the responsibility of regrouping the community much reduced in size around the nucleus, now gathering in Peking. To ensure that the project was viable, he gave some financial aid in the form of a dairy, located within the walls of the city. It had belonged to the family of General Horvath who was a member of the inner circle around the Czar, Nicholas II. These Russians were perpetual migrants and had fled to the United States before the advancing communist

tide.

'The dairy consisted of one hundred milking cows and two buildings in disrepair, a kilometre from each other. The whole area was not more than a hectare. Two days after I arrived, the deed of sale was signed and the next day I assumed the running of this enterprise.

'The political situation became more and more sombre. Peking was a weak island of resistance encircled by Red guerrillas for twenty kilometres around. In Manchuria, the clouds were also gathering indicating that a storm was on its way.

'The community was a skeleton of its former self. Priests were not free. Quite the opposite, the list of deaths grew longer by the day. Never did I lose the confidence in God that He who had given me responsibilities would also give me the means to bring the undertakings to a successful conclusion. At the end of December, the religious moved into the farm which was now their monastery. This took great courage. The community spirit began to revive, but many questions remained unanswered. The poverty of the priests made itself felt.

'Fortunately most professors had not lost their lives, so that as soon as I was able to procure books and manuals I began to teach philosophy and theology. This was in the middle of December. Towards the end of January 1848, I was confirmed in my position as temporary superior. I was privileged to receive the solemn profession of vows of Father Bernard Wang, who was the future superior, and to guide him towards the Major Orders. Before the end of the year three priests were ordained, and the return of the prisoners brought the number of priests to nine. The monastery was saved.'

### Trappist Monastery or Dairy?

'The running of a dairy is not a straightforward business and the Trappists who took it on were only moderately successful, for good will does not make up for lack of experience. It was thanks to the help of the Catholic Welfare Committee that we were able to live during those first few

months. In view of the uncertain future, we sensed the need to put the business onto a solid base. From 9 to 5 each day, I became a business man. The farms produced absolutely nothing, not even a blade of grass, so we had to buy everything, while inflation rose three hundred percent a month. At the same time, we had to sell milk at a profitable price.. In 1948 we added a cheese making operation.

Everything was done by hand, from the rennet to the ripening in vats, to the presses and the preparation of the cellars where the cheese fermented. As the Trappist cheese became better known among the members of the European community, the business turned a profit.

'The first Sunday after Easter, Low Sunday, was the fourth of April. We had a visitation from two delegates of the General Chapter: the Reverend Fathers Dom. Bernard Morvan Abbot of N.D. De Phare in Japan and Dom. Joseph Mathuis, Abbott of Bricquebec. Their first impression was that we had a good dairy but a poor Trappist monastery. In fact, this dairy/monastery hardly resembles a monastic house of contemplation. Office is not said in common and we only had two breviaries( These are essential for following the official prayers of the Church, the Liturgy of the Hours.) We were obliged to take turns reciting these prayers beginning at two in the morning.

'As the result of their impressions, our visitors leaned towards suppressing the community of N>D>de Consolation and fusing it with N.D. De Liesse, but through the intervention of the Nuncio, Father Bernard had received instructions to keep going at all costs.' The religious were united in their wish to maintain their own monasteries and the visitors withdrew their project. Monastic life in the monastery returned to normal with the arrival of breviaries. In June the daily recitation of the Divine office was resumed after an interruption of eleven months. This return to monastic prayer restored the novitiate. The number of novices increased so that the chapel of twelve by six metres could hardly hold them all on Sundays.'

## Flight once more?

Meanwhile, the situation was anything but stable. In August 1948 the military situation was weighted against the nationalists. They faced defeat. The Communists on the other hand, were dangerously close to Peking and according to predictions, this large city would soon fall.

Once again a crucial problem presented itself to the Cistercian community who had already been so roughly treated: should we flee again from persecution or not? The religious had suffered so much that for them there was no doubt what we should do. The Superiors, on the other hand, were under the obligation to consider the interests of the whole Church and this had to be taken into account in the decisions they made. 'I felt strongly that I had a serious duty to use my powers against the wishes of the community, in particular in matters of life and death. Before God, I felt we should remain in Peking. Supernatural life is a life of faith which is transmitted by witness, and what is a greater witness than blood itself? If God does not demand the supreme proof of love, at least by our presence in a moment of danger we can still witness to Christ.

When the bishops of China asked Pope Pius XII for direction, he said: 'Be my witnesses. 'Indeed the great majority of missionaries, Chinese priests and communities of religious did not flinch in the face of danger. I was sorry for the religious. Some had not joined us in our refuge. Others would not be freed from prison until the following November. Their imagination was haunted by the atrocities they had undergone. To ask them to face communism again was asking them for heroism. I could not impose this on them. From the month of August, I warned them of the imminence and the certainty that the communists would certainly enter Peking, and that the community and I would remain here. I knew that my decision would be hard for them so I gave them the freedom to escape and provided them with provisions and money. I told them that if they left it was due to fear. Their duty, as hard as it appeared to be, was to stay in the Chinese church of which they were members. At first the

majority stayed. Some of them asked to go to N.D. de Liesse. From telegrams, we found out that local conditions there were not reassuring. In view of the sense of insecurity they preferred to stay with their brothers. '

It seemed a good thing to relay the actual words of Father Bernard to convey the anguish of conscience when human pity and brotherly love have to compete with an strong sense of responsibility towards the Church.

During the next September the nuncio went to Peking. He approved of Father Bernard's attitude. Right to the end, the nuncio supported the canonical position taken.

## The Capture of Peking

The Reds were coming closer and closer. The monastery took the precaution of letting the salaried staff go. From that moment, the religious had to take charge of the milking each morning, whatever the weather, be it rain or wind. The town was divided into ten sections. Delivery rounds were made by bicycle with seventy to one hundred bottles of milk which slowed down the pace of travel. It could take up to two or three hours depending on the distance from the dairy.

' After the visit of the Provincial in April, he advised that the religious habit had to be worn. But now the habits are no longer worn. I had such crushing responsibilities for the monastery and the religious in it. I was ready to concede all things on the social level so that we might stay in the community.'

By November everything worsened again. After having conquered Manchuria, the troops of Lin Pao advanced at a force march pace on Peking. It was obvious that the siege would begin soon. Food became scarce. The Foreign consuls urged their nationals to leave at once. 'At the beginning of December I took advantage of the last evacuation and went to Tientsin for thirty six hours in order to save a part of the inheritance of the community. Alas, it was impossible to return and I remained stranded at the port for a month and a half during the siege.' During this time the community of forty or fifty members were

directed by the prior, Father Benoit Joseph.. Events moved so fast and with such a rhythm that they created a panic in Peking. The religious sold a part of the livestock in exchange for reservations on a plane to take them to Yunnan fu in Southern China. It was already too late, and the plane was grounded.

'I was able to go to the head of the queue for a plane ticket, and was able to rejoin the community on the first of February. The Communist army made its triumphal entry into the ancient city. The following Sunday, I arranged that a motet was sung in greeting and the prosperity of the new government saying without any further commentary that the apostles prayed and made others pray for Nero. From this time, I held my peace about politics in public. Since the distinction between actual and legal governments no longer exist and all governments is established and maintained by force.'

### On the Alert

Peking remained under military control in a state of uneasy peace until the first of October 1949 when a so called people's government came into being.

The international situation worsened in 1950 when the United Nations undertook to resist the aggression in Korea. This had an effect on the administration of the monastery/dairy.' At first I directed affairs myself believing that we could count on the protection of the Embassies. In fact, things took a turn for the worse in the Far East and my very presence in the monastery became more of a danger than a help.. I trained a successor for myself and waited for the right time to leave my post. Disturbing incidents began to occur. There was an attempt to bring legal action against me over the sale of pork from the dairy. This was instigated by the manager of a farm and woven with satanic malice. The evidence given before the tribunal gave me some breathing space, but a signal had been given.'

In December 1950 in a campaign of the press, an offensive was mounted against the Church. The theme was a demand for triple independence: for

an autonomous Chinese Church in its finances, administration and the propagation of the faith. The Communists, with Chou En Lai in the lead, began to put pressure on Catholics. Although the three fold demands could be acceptable to some Catholic consciences, a number of diocesan leaders took a wait and see approach.

As for the foreign missionaries, they were branded as nationalists. As far as Chou-En Lai was concerned, the menace of expulsion was a mere formality. A new law was passed requiring the registration of all associations. It was not hard to foresee what charges could be brought against Father Bernard.

'By February of 1951, I was sure that this law would affect our dairy/monastery so I decided to leave immediately. As I was Superior and the Father Delegate, I accepted my own resignation. This judicial anomaly saved me from prison and saved the community from a forced dispersal. The monks were on retreat at the time, so at the end of the closing sermon, I announced my resignation, and nominated Father Bernard Wang as my successor. I brought together the board of the dairy who were in agreement with the policies of the Chapter. In democratic fashion, they voted unanimously in favour of releasing me from the administration and further to invite me to leave the dairy in a short while, replacing me with Father Bernard Wang. Armed with this document, I went to the police who approved wholeheartedly of the action of the monks, and allowed me to retreat to the Jesuit House. The same document was presented to the department of land registry. It outlined a change of title to the property. The official praised the monks."It is a glory to you and for China to cast aside a European"' By the end of March, the monks registered the dairy/ monastery arriving at the triple independence demanded by the authorities..

'My role was over but there were some difficulties. This was resolved with the presentation of a famous play. I was the first superior to resign and I gained the reputation of not being a true imperialist.'



## Accusations unleashed

'It proved to be a short delay. At the beginning of April, the government broke off negotiations on the issue of triple independence. From that time we could expect the worst. And the public accusations began. Personally, I was doubly vulnerable, both as a past religious superior and also as the ex-director of the dairy. An old postulant who had left the order ten years before, was given the task of attacking me on the religious level. In a tearful voice he spoke of the atrocities in the Trappist monastery. He said: that there were days when they were not allowed to eat. 'Sometimes we were still hungry after we had eaten. We had to beg for food. Other times we lay stretched out at the door of the refectory and were trampled under foot by those who came out. 'Old Christians understood that he was describing fast days. They recognised that some menus promoted humility in a religious community. Pagans and neophyte Christians were truly scandalised by our barbarism.

'In my function as a business man, I was accused of trafficking in foreign currency. According to Radio-Peking, I had passed vast sums of money over to the United States so much so that I had no need to work. Certain accusers came to see me secretly to tell of the enormous pressure they were under to speak against me. The police were on my tail. They examined what I ate and would suddenly burst into my room when I was in bed. I was forced to make voluntary confessions. In fact, one day I had to make two confessions.'

A short time later, the communists approached the Papal nuncio with a petition circulated by certain highly placed Catholics requesting his expulsion..Some of the clergy were hesitant and were not sure how they should act. Father Bernard felt that he needed to use such powers as he still had to still the consciences of the Trappists.

'Although I myself was not in the best of position, I could not afford to hesitate for even a moment. For is it not the duty of a superior to instruct others in the truth when he is in charge of souls? Is this not even more important in times of

trouble when the conscience is so easily distorted? Early the next day, I went to the dairy/ monastery and announced forcefully that with the full weight of authority from the Order, any religious who dared to cooperate in anyway with the expulsion of the nuncio would be excommunicated.

The situation of the religious institutions became more and more critical.' Arrests seemed to be imminent. In the circumstances, I advised the Father Superior to let the novices go in order to keep the novitiate open. The two novitiates had an enrolment of twenty five. These were all sent home in May.'

## European Imperialists

The net tightened around me. It worked by way of increasing the number of spontaneous confessions and public accusations: but one piece of the puzzle was still missing; I was the Superior. For my past influence to be neutralised, it was necessary that my subordinates denounce or accuse me. The Communists put pressure on the monks all through April and May. At the end of May, the commissioner of the 3<sup>rd</sup> district in Peking came in person to the dairy/ monastery to extract accusations. 'Father Theophanus was the speaker for the community. This was the dialogue between him and the commissar: 'You have to accuse this European.'

'There are good and bad Europeans. Our European is a good and decent man.'

'No, he is an Imperialist '

'But Chou-En-Lai himself acknowledged that there were Europeans who were not Imperialists.'(This was a allusion to a discussion on the 17<sup>th</sup> of January.)

'We are not talking about that. Chou-En-Lai does not know what he is talking about. All Europeans are Imperialists. You have to accuse him!'

At this point Father Theophanus drew himself up and stood tall. He was proud of his position as a priest of the Lord saying, 'Kill us if you wish but we will never accuse our Superior'. The commissar was furious. He spat out dire threats. Then he calmed down and said: " Your brain has not been washed enough. Here are some books

for your re-education programme. I shall return." Father Theophanus led him out politely with courteous words of farewell.

The monks had time to pull themselves together. No one gave way. When the commissioner returned, the reply was forthright and unanimous. It was a most formal refusal. Tired of the battle, the commissar left.

'While this was going on, I advised Rev. Father Benoit and Father Theophanus to voice some mild accusations against me during my time as Superior. For example, that the food was inadequate, or that they had worked too hard or had too little sleep. The two priests hotly opposed the idea. 'We would lose face.' said Father Benoit. (Face is understood as the natural conscience of man. To lose face is to lose human dignity.)' It is the cult of face which makes the oriental so attractive, especially when refined by a Christian sense. This is the best thing about China, and in this case produced the inspired response of Father Benoit. He did not hesitate to face death rather than betray a friend with his words. For him, this was saving face. His moral resistance was very courageous. We could only hope that the Communists would release their grip.'

## The Climate of Obsession

'During the months of June and July the Church in China endured agonising suffering felt most of all in Peking. The press reached paroxysmal heights of violent rhetoric. Inferences of imperialism and reactionary behaviour were not enough. The papers, launched new accusations of espionage, sabotage, and even odious accusations of murder, the murder of thousands of children was levelled against our poor monks. Father Benoit and I were warned that our arrest was imminent. Because the community was now dispersed into small groups, we were able to rid ourselves of all possessions.

'The police enquired with those working at the dairy of their connections with the imperialists. When the monks met me in public, we did not acknowledge each other. If they had to

accompany us into town to shop, they maintained a respectable distance behind me to avoid being labelled beagles belonging to a stranger. However, in private they made up for this behaviour by even greater kindness and marks of affection. Some wonderful friendships between priests and laity were cemented in those difficult times.

'Little by little the police succeeded in curtailing my activities almost completely. The smallest action was labelled as sabotage. Several times the police said to me: "You no longer have a job. Why are you still in China if not to sabotage enterprises undertaken by the government of the people?" Any resistance to this pressure could make life difficult for the entire indigenous community. So on the advice of respected councillors, I signed a document on the twenty first of July announcing my voluntary departure.' Father Bernard disposed of his belongings and left Tientsin at the end of August. The atmosphere had become suffocating. The communists really knew how to create an obsessive climate.

'The Rosary, especially the joyful and glorious mysteries were a great consolation. Some days I found it impossible to meditate on the sorrowful mysteries because I was so crushed by my own anguish. It was hard to sleep during the torrid nights of summer in Peking when the imagination took flights of fancy. Ordinary ways of calming the imagination were not helpful. We knew that reality was far worse than the imagined. What was hardest to bear were the endless interrogations and the heightened risk of compromising other people. Only thoughts of faith were reassuring: 'Do not fear the interrogators. You will be inspired with the right answer when you need it.' In fact my mind was always clear and my memory was amazingly good so that I never came up short. Expecting the worst, it was important not to be beaten down. And since the only apostolate left to us was good humour, never had the missionaries in Peking been so joyful as during those tragic days.

'We organised an outing on the twenty fourth of July to the summer palace. It was the old residence of the Emperor. There were seven or

eight of us, all major criminals in the eyes of the Reds. The one who should have had the heaviest conscience was Father Van Coillie of the Scheut order. He was understood to have distributed six hundred thousand books and tracts on religion in a year. All were considered reactionary by the government, and the delivery of a single tract was punishable by death. He was also the Director of the Legion of Mary for the Archdiocese.

'As we were setting out, one of our group remarked that the sky was overcast and perhaps we delay our outing until the next day. 'Tomorrow!' said Father van Coillie with a negative gesture. Yes, we were still free that day and we needed to make the most of it. All day long we enjoyed ourselves like students on holiday; swimming in the Imperial lakes, racing in canoes, and running along picturesque paths led by Father Le Brun.

## The Storm Breaks

The next day the storm broke. Twenty four priests, half of them Chinese, were arrested with a large number of other foreigners. It was a large scale raid, long in the making. More than three thousand police in jeeps radiated across the city to bring in their unfortunate prisoners in handcuffs and trucks loaded with loot. The prisons were filled to overflowing so the larger missionary residences were used to house prisoners. All night long the coming and going continued.

' More than half the European missionaries were behind bars. I was arrested twice in two days, and finally released because I was no longer on the 'wanted' list. A short time afterwards, the smear campaign in the press began to subside then was dropped altogether. I was able to act freely again though this was the reason for my first expulsion from the Jesuit Residence by the communists.'

'In the bishopric, the diocesan priests were brainwashed. In each parish, the police established a committee of reform made up of the dregs of the Christian community. The main churches of the town were issued a bright red

banner and flags and portraits of the great leaders.. On Sundays , the sermon ended with a couplet in honour of Stalin and President Mao-Tse-Tung. A list of names of those in favour of expelling the nuncio was published. It contained only eight thousand signatures out of the twenty five thousand Christians in Peking. What should we make of this disproportion?'

## 'The Trappist Monastery Survives and Expulsion from China

'The accusations against me were pigeonholed. At the same time the pressure on the community was eased. From the first day of January 1952, registration was no longer required and police surveillance was lifted.

During the campaign against corrupt administrators the community received a favourable report. As well it received first prize for hygiene in the whole city. The monks installed a disinfectant screen at their entrance which discouraged unwelcome visitors. At last the monastery was recognised as an exemplary communist cooperative where each person worked at the job they were capable of doing and received what they needed. The property was a real collective. No distinction was made between owners and workers, oppressors and oppressed. As a result., the religious were not required to belong to a union or pay union dues. The monastery was exempt from taxation but required to include the three independences of a communist organisation.

'From that time, Catholics frequented the many chapels throughout the city to fulfil their religious duties. It was noticeable that embassy personnel no longer took part in services at St Michael's Cathedral which was the official parish church of the legations. I fulfilled the functions of consular chaplain at their request.

'After my expulsion from the Jesuit Residence, I became an almoner at a small hospital. It was part of a government organisation. The Chief of the Medical Staff warned me that I would be

expelled before long. The only alternative was to find a place to live in a pagan household.. But the police took the initiative in February 1953. They expelled me from China. I objected saying that I was responsible for a ninety year old missionary. There and then they decided that he should leave with me. I had two weeks to prepare myself and my companion for departure.

About this time, Father had discussions with Msgr. Li- Chan-Sue, the Vicar General and Administrator of the Diocese. 'I asked him to define patriotism in the Communist sense. He replied that negative patriotism offered no active opposition to the regime whereas positive patriotism meant collaboration with the authorities. There were different degrees of collaboration: Outward manifestation of support was one, defining and following a just law instead of a religious law, and lastly to enrol voluntarily in a programme of re-education. I made objections to the last two.'

'In the midst of so much upheaval in a society, it is not appropriate for the Church to be concerned with politics if it means approving of a regime which persecutes its own citizenry. As for re-education, it is downright dangerous since it leaves the re-educated defenceless against the dictates of the Party.' The Vicar General replied that each person had to decide where to draw the line.

'Before leaving Peking, I paid one last visit to the community at N.D. de Consolation. The community of forty were all professed priests including thirteen Chinese priests. Two were permanent lay brothers.

'I boarded a ship at the port of Tientsin in March, with a heart full of sorrow. I was leaving China where I had spent the middle years of my life, leaving behind me friends to whom I was bound with bonds stronger than death. Dom Benoit stayed with me right up to the entrance of the Customs House where we said goodbye. The formalities were few for my ninety year old companion and myself but the Russians who were catching the same boat were searched in a heartbreaking way.

'As I left the Custom House I was behind a steel curtain of barbed wire manned by a sentry with a gun in hand. Despite the rain, Dom Benoit waited there for me. Once again I thanked him as my soul was plunged into sadness.'

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