

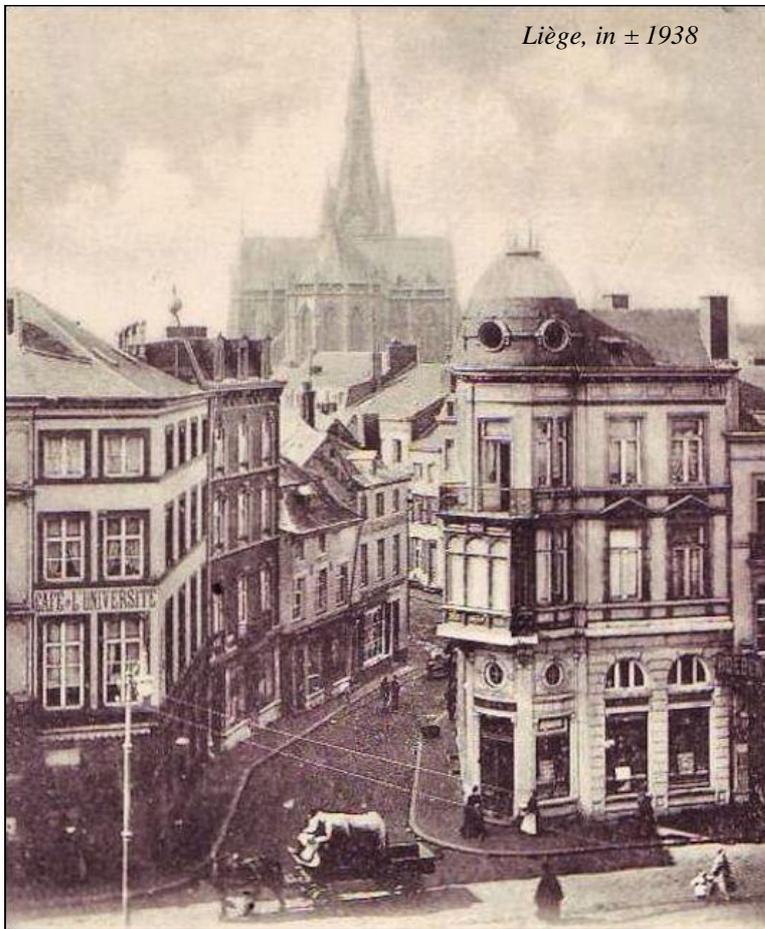
FIRST STEPS AS A MISSIONARY

Translated by Gay Talbot-Stratford

Farewell to my country

China! A missionary. And I was only 23 years old.. It was towards the end of November in 1938, that my parents welcomed forty cousins, who gathered in our house to say goodbye to me, a son of the family, and now a young missionary.

Of course it was to say goodbye . What else could one expect in those troubled times? China was so far away... To strike out 'en route ' to the Celestial Empire when there were no airlines, meant taking a train or a boat. The train took twelve days on the famous Trans Siberian railway, by way of Moscow and Vladivostok. Relations with the USSR were hardly cordial, more-



over; we were on the eve of a grave conflict. The only other way was by boat, so this is the route I took. I booked a passage on a transatlantic liner called the Felix Roussel a ship of the Messagerie Maritime line. It would take me from Marseille to Shanghai- if all went well.

I left Belgium on the 28th of November, on my way to Rome, where I had to make contact with mission authorities before I embarked in Marseille. When I arrived in the Holy City, I learned that the boat would be ten days late raising anchor. My father advised me, by

phone, to stay in Italy rather than to return to Belgium. Goodbyes were too wrenching... For my part, I did not feel the sorrow of separation until I left Guillemin station in the middle of the night, and hugged and embraced my brothers, sisters, and friends, for the last time. Understandably, it was an emotional time and I had a feeling of panic. My Superior Abbe Boland accompanied me to Namur, to ease my loneliness...

Once in Rome, I rented a room in the Hotel Minerva, on the square of the same name. Opposite the hotel was a graceful obelisk, perched on the back of a young elephant.(The Romans nicknamed it Il Pucino, or the young chick). The hotel is a hundred years old, one of the oldest in Rome. It remains a witness to past traditions, full of charm and faded elegance. There, one met tourists of the old style. (O blessed time!) and also pilgrims, some of whom were grand persons; like the secret Chamberlain to the Pope, with his cape and sword, (Yes indeed!) who renders yearly service to the Vatican, as does my Superior, Abbé Boland.

Family Ties

Here I am , alone in this great city. I have cut my ties with my family. In the glow of departure for the missions, and the conceit of youth, we profess that it is neither necessary or good, to return to one's country. We choose to be Chinese with the Chinese, for the rest of our lives. Surely Father Lebbe showed us how? He , who left for China in 1927 and died there in 1940, without ever seeing Europe again. And yet! Only a few hours after the separation, I dared not think of those I had left, especially my mother. I dreaded to think of the emotion and pain my departure had caused.. I had to look forward. But what about them? What about my mother and father? How would they survive this break in the family circle? Even though my twin brother, who looked like me, was still at home, and remained a faithful son, the fact remained that between my mother and me, we had important exchanges and confidences; the kind that a son shares with his mother, when he is preparing for the priesthood.

My mother's health was deteriorating. A short while before I left, she fell several times in the street without any apparent cause. One of her legs just gave way. Alas! It signalled the onset of paralysis which would increase. During the last years of her life, she was confined to a wheelchair, For a long time, she wrote to me regularly- and I received these letters so gladly! Later when I was cut off from all news during my imprisonment, I buried my sorrow within my heart, to the point, that I did not dare to confide in anyone at all. Even years after her death I still dreaded allowing my emotions to show through.

My father hid his emotions under a light heartedness

which expressed itself in song each morning, as he moved from room to room waking up his tribe..He did not want to appear soft especially in front of his sons. Conventional wisdom required this. He gave my mother the privilege of sharing confidences with her sons; he reserved the right to be a little more tender-hearted with the girls. He seldom wrote letters; although he did warn me about the delay of the Felix Roussel. He was right to advise me to take advantage of the extra time by visiting Southern Italy and Florence.

My mother had slipped a heart shaped piece of marzipan into one of my suitcases. It was a touching reminder of the close relationship between my family and me. Each day I broke off a piece. Although I was on the second floor of the hotel, the Roman ants were able to track down the subtle aroma of sugar and almonds. I tried changing the hiding places for this attractive delicacy, but it was a lost cause. The hotel staff, noticing my manoeuvres, joined in the game. They attempted to neutralise the assaults of the invasive and brazen hymenoptera, by using an insecticide; all in vain. Finally, I discovered the solution to my problem. I attached the tempting packet to the end of a long piece of string, and hung it in the wardrobe.

Italian Sightseeing

A friend of mine a Benedictine priest, was living in Rome. André de Girardon was studying theology at the college of Saint Bonaventure on the Aventine. My first call was on him. I asked him to draw me up a plan of places to see outside Rome. I trusted him since he was lucky enough to be an expert in such things. He was most enthusiastic as he advised to make my way southwards. Below Naples, I was to turn northwards again, and take a cab along the superb coastline from Amalfi to Sorrento.

Despite the coolness at night, December is a pleasant month to be in Campagna; the light is almost transparent and soft. By this time, I had reached Sorrento.

I was overwhelmed by the rich beauty of the country side, but I still took full advantage of the opportunities that were before me. Just a few hundred yards, across the Gulf of Naples, a dream, almost a mirage, loomed up. It was Capri, the sublime, the wonderful. Capri, beloved of the gods, the Greeks, and the Roman philosophers; and, happily at that time, not well known to the masses.

I climbed up in the steps of the Phoenicians, to the villa of San Michele. Here, at the beginning of the century, Axel Munthe, a Swedish doctor had created a veritable paradise with his own hands with statuary and rare flowers. It was also a stopping place and a sanctuary for thousands of birds...

There was a family boarding house in the highlands, run by nuns. I stayed there for two nights. This gave me the chance to witness a sunrise on the summit of Monte Solaro and to visit what was left of the sumptu-



ous palace of Emperor Tiberius at Anacapri.

On my return to Rome, I spent time with members of the Society for the Propagation of the Faith, (now known as the Dissemination of the Faith). Cardinal Constantini was the Prefect of the Society. He was the retired Apostolic Delegate to China. He received me cordially. As head of the Work of Saint Peter the Apostle, he was responsible for seminaries in mission countries; he questioned me at length and showed great interest in the work I would be doing in China. He gave me his blessing, and a contribution for the Missions.. As I left, he gave me the Italian salute (that is, the stylised embrace of the Latin races). I remained unresponsive, being unused to this type of effusiveness between men! I have to admit that I was suspicious-wrongly so- of strange tendencies in otherwise honest men.

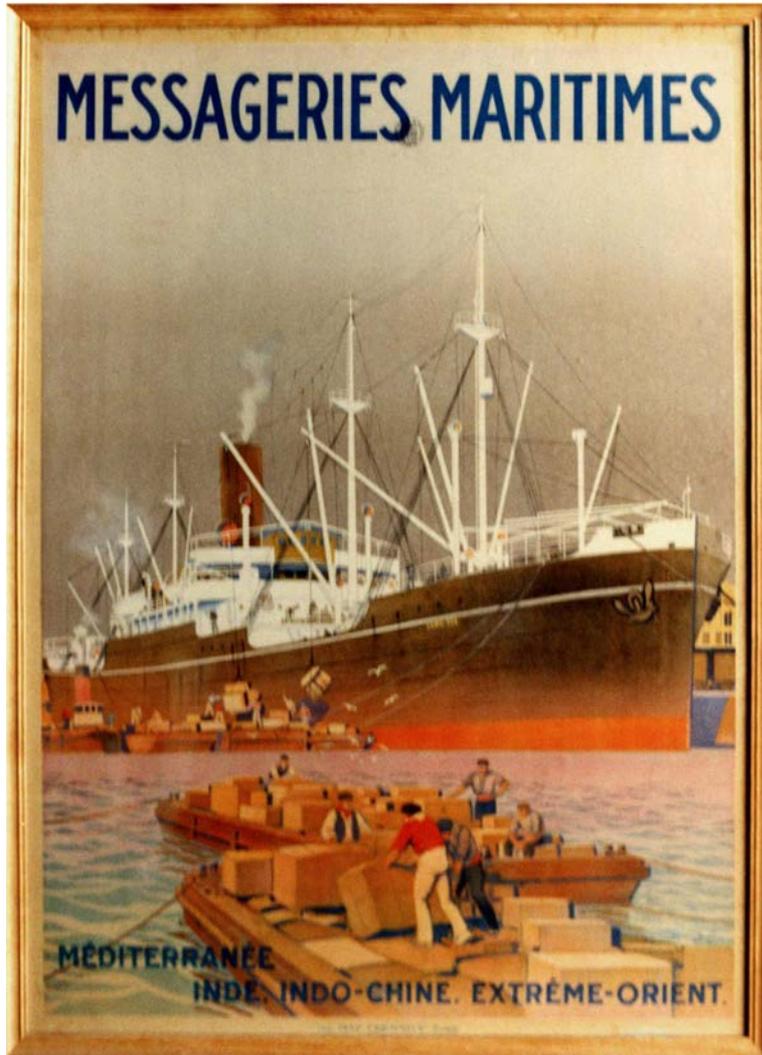
As I was in a hurry to go to Marseille and board the Felix Roussel. I stopped only briefly in Florence and remember a cold unwelcoming hotel. Many years later, I had the joy of discovering all the splendours of Florence, in a more leisurely way. The city is so endearing.

The Voyage

At last I board the ship in the port of Marseille. We are leaving. For me, the novelty of everything was part of the attraction, but a month of life on a steamship is not without its surprises. Apart from the usual stops at Port Said, Djibouti, Colombo, Singapore, and Hong Kong, there were unexpected stops, like the one at Bizerte in Tunisia, where we were anchored for three days while a screw which was damaged during our departure, was repaired. This enforced stop allowed a group of us to visit Carthage, colonial Tunis, and the White Fathers' Mission.

We travelled second class with priests from the Society for Foreign Missions in Paris. who were returning to Manchuria. My cabin mate was a seasoned missionary with whom I got on well .Alas, his vice was

brushing up against the walls in the narrow streets. There, I made a courtesy call on the Belgian consul, who was from the same part of the country as my father.



chain smoking. It upset me each morning. I looked for different ways to deal with this.. Fortunately I was able to install myself in an unoccupied first class cabin with the argument that I required privacy for my pastoral work among the passengers. I think it was from Colombo that life on board became easier.

Singapore appeared well cared for and very 'British,' with beautiful gardens, and wide boulevards lined with palm trees. In Saigon, I visited a young cousin of our friends the Doats. He worked for the bank of Indochina. He welcomed me warmly and taught me secrets of French hospitality as practised in the colonial life of the times. It was he who told me about the ingenuity of the 'boys', who passed tableware and china from one house to another when a household was entertaining.

Hong Kong brought me the first smells of the Orient. In the Chinese part of town, there was the atmosphere of a Flemish country fair , with an Oriental flavour! The smells of frying and oil, garlic and peppers ,were mixed with Oriental spices. Blazes of colour, shop signs, multicoloured flags fluttering everywhere,

China at Last

It was about the middle of January 1939 that we sailed in to Shanghai. My confrere, Robert Willichs, had arrived a few months before, and was serving in the diocese of Haimen. Robert was to be my guide. He was proud of the experiences he had already had and liked to say: "This is the way it should be done!"

He was waiting for me at the house of the Scheut Fathers Mission where both of us would be staying. .During the years that followed, I often had the opportunity to experience the warm hospitality of that house, and was never disappointed .

Both of us were guests at the home of Francine and Hippolyte Meus, M.Meus worked for Ucometal in Shanghai. Charles Meus, also one of my confreres, was Hippolyte's brother. How good it was to be in a family atmosphere after two months of travel ! In our anxiety to adapt to Chinese customs and life, we did not dare admit to this feeling. However, with the passing of years, I can now tell these friends how much I appreciate their hospitality and their brotherly concern for us.

Our first Chinese invitation was to dinner with an important industrialist. He was a married man, a father as well as a grandfather, with a large family. They all lived together in a large house with different courtyards. This man was the brother of Monseigneur Tsu, Bishop of Haimen.

This was my first Chinese banquet so we ate in the Chinese style. To my surprise, only men were present. The excellent lady of the house, Madame Tsu, and her daughters in law, did not appear until dessert was served. Such was the custom of the times.

The next day, Robert put me in touch with the real China, the world of workers and peasants. The Portuguese captain of a tugboat took us to Hoang Pu. We traversed the estuary of the river to the peninsula where there were deposits of alluvium.. At the harbour of the 'Cows Drinking Trough', we had to leave the boat, and cross to the shore, on the backs- of men- so that the soutanes of the foreigners would not become muddied. This was a new experience. For the first time in my life, the wheelbarrow was my means of travel. The wheel was set high so you sat on one side of the vehicle, and the baggage provided the counterbalance, on the other side. This means of transportation allowed the 'coolies' to walk on footpaths and small narrow bridges which crisscrossed the irrigation canals There was a grinding sound from the

wheel: "Do not worry Father," I was told, "That noise is a sign that it is working well."

Haimen was the most important town of the area. There, I spent a few days visiting the mission, gleaning and gathering impressions from my Belgian and Chinese confreres. After that, I had to return to Shanghai by boat. It was two or three days before I reached Tientsin, the largest port in the north.

A Hard Apprenticeship

It was the end of January 1939. The boat moved slowly through the rivers which water Tientsin. On the banks, children in fancy clothes can be seen running about: little girls in red dresses, and boys in trousers with padded red shirts

It was dusk. Already the sound of firecrackers was echoing in anticipation of the celebrations for the New Year. The occupying Japanese authorities had given permission for this cacophony of sound.

The de Scheut Fathers were on hand to meet the young missionary. My confrere, Paul Gilson, had alerted them to my imminent arrival; so, in an admirable show of missionary hospitality, they all came down to the landing. After forty five days of travel, it was good to find oneself together with brothers. We exchanged news about Mongolia, Peking and Belgium. But the night was noisy with the sound of Chinese firecrackers, so it was impossible to sleep!

I had to go to Peking without delay, since the courses in Chinese had begun a week before. They were given at a language school run by American Protestant missionaries. I had to make up for lost time. I began to assimilate the language. It was a slow process but I studied for five or six hours each day.

I shopped in the streets and down the narrow lanes of the eastern part of the city on foot, or by rickshaw.

In the provincial house of Shinhua, much of the talk was about Father Lebbe, especially when we were joined by Raymond de Jaegher. The latter was a story teller without parallel; he had such a good memory for names and places.

One day, in the spring of 1940, I took a chance and wrote to Father Lebbe telling him that I would soon be leaving for Shansi, and asking him for advice. He replied on half a piece of paper encouraging me to be patient and to sink deeply into Chinese soil and culture. He quoted me a Chinese proverb: "Pu ch'eng-kung, chiu ch'engjen."

'Even if you do not succeed, still live or die honourably.'

My Bishop Monseigneur P T'cheng decided that I should not stay in Peking forever, so I arranged to leave the big city after the second trimester, and made my way to Hungtung in Shansi. We were in the middle of the Chinese/ Japanese war. Before I left, I obtained

a missionary pass, printed in Japanese, through a Japanese Catholic. For in the north, the Japanese had taken over all means of communication.

It took me three months to make a trip which normally takes three days. The reason might have been that I was not used to travelling in China, or, that I was not ready to listen to those older and wiser than I. A Chinese proverb discourages travellers from beginning a journey in the first month of the lunar year- approximately in February- because it is cold; nor in July, when it is soaking wet. I should have realised the truth of the saying.

The rain and storms had washed away the railway in several places, forcing me to stay in Ting-Hsien, Shih Kia Chuang, Yutse and Chieh Sio; three days here, and four days there.. It was an excellent school for learning both the virtue of patience, and the living of the missionary life.

In each of the towns along the way, there was a mission house. The understanding was that their hospitality was open to all.

Just before the 15th of August, I arrived at my destination, Hungtung Shansi. The mission house in town was empty. At the direction of Monseigneur Tch'eng, everyone had withdrawn into the mountains, about 30kms away, and that is where I found them. I was led there by a member of the laity who was a leader of the Christian community. Monseigneur quickly put me at my ease, and introduced me to my Chinese confreres. I was appointed his secretary, and was to continue my studies of Chinese with Father Yang.

Refugees in Han- Lo -Yen

Several days ago I settled(!) into the presbytery in Han-Lo-Men. This was a small Christian village clutching to the edge of steep bluffs. It was not made of stone, but of Chinese loess, a fine dust. To the stranger, it resembled a giant's ladder.

Old Suen, the Christian leader of Suen-Chia-Yuan (a village which belonged to the Suen family), brought me here in his sturdy wagon without springs which made for a bumpy ride. The wheels were made of wood encircled with iron rims. Without any difficulty at all, Old Suen loaded the three steamer trunks and two suitcases on to the wagon. These contained all my worldly possessions, consisting mostly of books and a few clothes. Before I left the big city, Peking, I had bought medicines, and some material which was suitable for making liturgical vestments.

The Church, was clearly visible from across the valley. It was built by Dutch Franciscans towards the end of the last century. On the right of the Church, were several wings which were now occupied by the Bishop since the town was overrun by the Japanese. The Bishop had a narrow escape, and took refuge in this

village, twenty kilometres away, where the mission owned property.

The Presbytery in Han -Lo -Men was on a terrace which jutted out half way up the mountain. To the left and right of the heavy entrance door to the compound, were several house; there were other buildings in the compound too. These faced north. I occupied a building on the right of the entrance, while Father Chang and a senior seminarian lived on the left.

My dwelling had two rooms with a single door opening onto the courtyard. A study measuring four by three metres, led into a bedroom, which was three by two metres. The windows were made of thin strips of wood, covered by heavy paper. There was no electricity, no running water, or heat. The floor was made of cement flagstones which I covered with straw mats in the winter. The furniture consisted of a square table which served as a desk, a sideboard, and two roughly made chairs, which were more Franciscan than Chinese, in style. In the adjoining room there was a wooden bed-without springs- and a paraffin lamp on a glass stand. The reservoir which contained the wick was made of pale blue glass. These lamps were sold all over China. They were produced by a multinational company, A.P.C. The company sold square cans of paraffin, which each held four gallons. These cans were then used as water containers, or as a means of measuring grain.

My cases were emptied and placed along the walls. When they were covered with spreads, they became a makeshift sofa for the visitors I hoped to have in the future. On the window sill, I put the books I consulted most often.

To the east, in an adjacent courtyard, there were several small houses. These were single storey buildings. where the domestic staff lived. These included the cook, the groom and other servants. Above, there was another terrace, where the seminarians were housed. Fifty boys attended school there. These were secondary school students, taught by priests and lay Chinese, with a greater or lesser degree of success.

There we were, sixty people, brought together as refugees. We had abandoned the usual city housing to place ourselves under the aegis of the Japanese, and were forced to live in poverty, in the mountains.

Our young seminarians lived in caves. This was quite a common form of housing in Shansi. It was simple to hollow out spaces in the mountain walls of loess. These peaked caves could be as large as ten to fifteen metres, with a door and window. Theses man made caves provided cheap lodging. The peasants often dug them, because the temperature within was pleasant in the summer, and milder in the winter. These shelters were able to withstand the inclemency and ravages of the weather so well, that they became a model of con-

struction, where ever there were high winds. The same shape was used, but an exterior ladder allowed access to a flat roof., where laundry could be hung , grain or fruit spread to be dried, or, the surface became a space for storage.

Adaption to Gentler Ways

Slowly, I adapt to this new way of life. Monseigneur Tch'eng is very good to me. With gentleness he prepares me for my role as his secretary. At great length he explains the customs and the traditions of the Christians in the region. He speaks and writes excellent Latin, which is the language of communication with Rome. If I can not make myself understood in Chinese, I resort to Latin. Monseigneur is un beatable.

Monseigneur is a diabetic and requires small meals frequently. In between times, the cook brings him bowls of hot milk with lightly toasted bread.

Study fills my days .Msgr. Tch'eng has asked Father Yang to continue my education in Chinese, so he comes in everyday for an hour of writing, reading and conversation. After this, I work for two or three hours more, practising writing and memorising vocabulary.

I join the seminarians for a chat, or for some exercise, during their recreation. We play a lot of volleyball. I am becoming a good striker and catcher because I am taller than most of them. They have a good laugh at the mistakes I make when speaking Chinese.

The seminarians have shorn heads for easy care and hygienic reasons, but they greatly admire my groomed hair with a side parting. I feel that I should adopt the Chinese hair style since I wear the same clothes as they do. One afternoon, I asked one of them, who was a barber, to come to my lodging with his hair clippers. It did not take him long to make me look like a prisoner, much to the surprise and obvious approval of the seminarians and my confreres. I was now more like them

Before the midday meal, the priests gathered in the Church for fifteen minutes of prayer and adoration, ending with six Our Fathers and six Hail Marys with arms extended in the form of a Cross. This was a Franciscan tradition which had been adopted in the diocese for generations.

The heat was exhausting in summer .The siesta was a necessity which I accepted with some reluctance. The days were long and quieter, allowing the servants to visit the priests. Each of those assigned to me came to visit me in turn . They liked to take stock of what was on my table or sideboard. They were fascinated by things strange to them like a camera, a pair of sunglasses, a strop for sharpening razors. This led to questions and answers. Then they wanted to know about my family, my past, my studies, and how it had come to pass that I had travelled so far, to this forsaken cor-

ner of the mountains.

I tramped through the hills in the area, although I was warned not to leave the guide's side, because it was dangerous to do so. Once or twice a week, I joined the seminarians for a walk along paths through the mountains which were unknown to me. There were no roads, only trails of hardened earth. There is little rainfall so grass is rare, and vegetation sparse. Here and there, in the middle of tufts of grass, stood a stunted pine tree or a zizyphus tree, with lozenge shaped fruit, the colour of mahogany. This delicacy brought happiness to children during the winter months. The jujubes are very sweet and when sun dried, they are a pleasant addition to the plain diet of the mountain people.

First Steps as an Apostle

During the troubled times of the Japanese occupation, we did not travel unless there was good reason to do so. Although, to maintain the sacramental life of Christians, they needed to have a visit from a priest from time to time. We listened to their requests for a

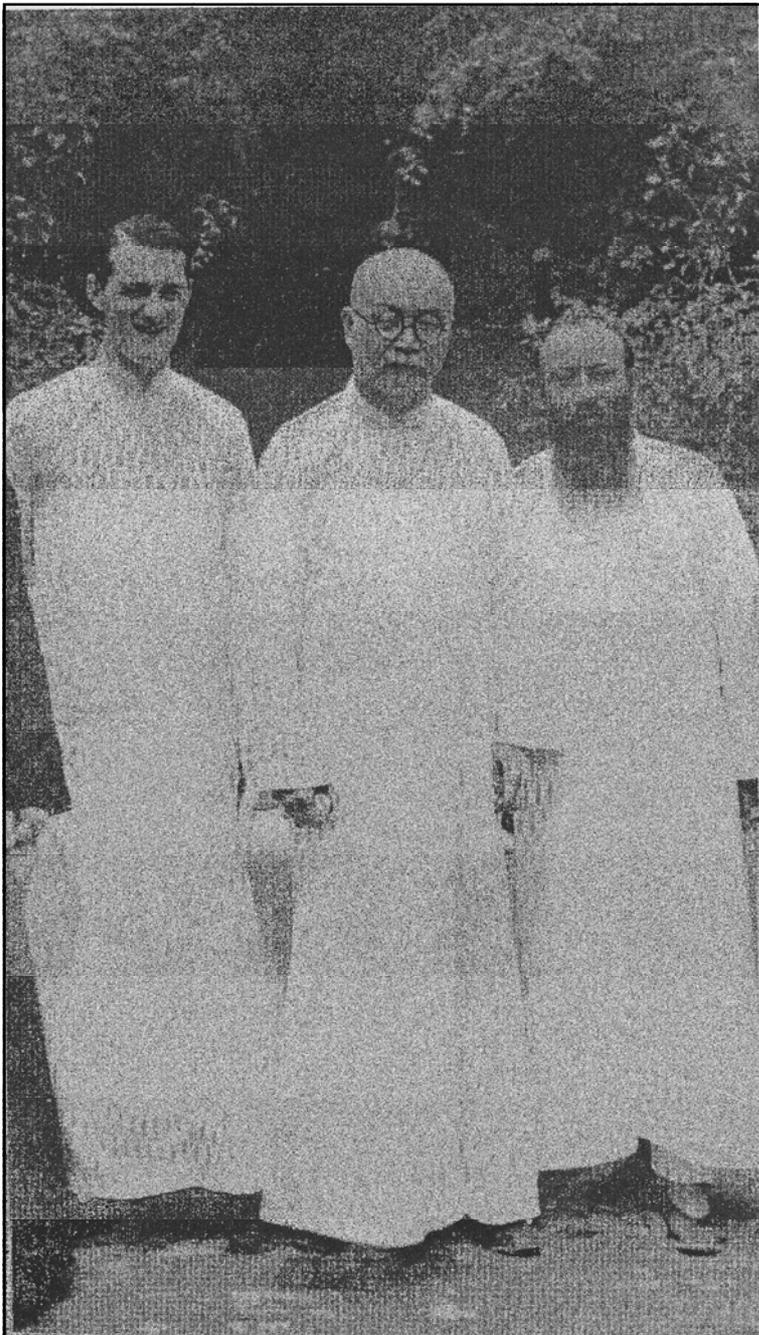
Mass on the feast day of a patron saint, or on a holy day of obligation. Attendance at Mass on those days, even if it was a weekday, was mandatory, and so we had to take their request seriously.

On this subject, allow me to trace the meaning in Chinese characters. The expression 'going to say Mass' became 'Song Mi Sa.' Even before I learned to write Chinese characters, my ear for Latin led me to believe 'Misa' meant the Mass. Song meant to give or to accompany some one. Then I understood 'Song Mi Sa' meant, given the Mass. Here my curiosity forced me to return to the dictionary to learn the true meaning of the sounds. Lo and behold, I discovered 'Mi' meant, to fill, and 'Sa', to distribute. To fulfill the duties of a Christian, or better still, to fill oneself with heavenly graces, after having received them from the priest, and then to share them with others... See the richness of the meaning and meditate on it.

The priest does not celebrate Mass alone in a Christian community. He is always invited to do so. A community of the faithful sends him a messenger inviting him to come. Often the man is accompanied by a mule to get there. In this mountainous country, this is usually a mule or donkey. The animal has to carry Father's luggage, including his bedding, and all that is needed for the altar. It was rare for Christians to have chasubles, chalices, and patens. These had to be brought, as well as the hosts and wine. All this sounds simple to us today, but remember that the hosts were made on a kitchen table, with a special press called the host press and the sacramental wine came from a single village in the centre of the province, where the Italian Capuchins had transplanted grape stocks from Europe.

The problem of candles was not easy to resolve. According to the rubric, they had to be made of beeswax; paraffin ones would not do, and there must be two of them. We had some catechists who had a primitive way of pouring the wax into a mould. The wax was melted gently over low heat, then using a small ladle, the wax was poured over the length over a cotton mesh of the desired length. These were then hung over rope or a horizontal bar to cool slowly. One by one the candles were passed through the pot of wax, becoming larger and larger with each passage, until they were the right size.

The travelling priest had to add catechisms, prayer books, rosaries, and holy pictures, to his baggage. These items were much sought after by the Christians and the catechumens. The rosaries were made by Christians, but the books and holy pictures came from the Jesuit Press in Shanghai. This printed matter could be obtained by post provided one was patient, for it was sent in a round about way, passing in and out from free China to occupied China.



Once everything was assembled and packed onto the mount, we set off uphill and down. There were no paved roads, just unmapped paths without signposts. The only one who knew where he was going, was the messenger and guide who had come to fetch the priest. Later on, I became more familiar with the roadways, and I went by bicycle with my catechist.

That afternoon in mid October, I set out with an enthusiastic heart but an anxious spirit, asking myself if I would be able to pass on the message of the Gospel in my sermon during Mass. It was the high point of the Celebration. The Mass was still in Latin, during which the Christians sang the Ordinary, (i.e. the unchanging part of the Mass) at the top of their voices.

Often the place where it was held was a small chapel. The children stood before the altar, the men on the right and the women on the left. The nursing mothers were right at the back of the chapel so that they could nurse their babies if they cried. Often, the sound of the crying babies was drowned out by the chanting of the Christians. There were no benches or kneelers, so the more resourceful members of the congregation brought cushions or a piece of cloth to make kneeling less difficult.

To celebrate the most important feasts, Christians from the area liked to get together bringing musical instruments with them. These were stringed instruments and pipes, and different types of gongs which they played with great enthusiasm and skill to provide rhythm for prayer. The outstanding moment was the Consecration. As soon as the acolyte (i.e. the altar boy), gave the signal of three taps with wooden blocks, the gongs sounded, and the priest on the altar had some difficulty concentrating on the moving words of the Consecration.

After Mass, a reception was held to honour their priestly visitor who was seated on an upright chair in the middle of a hall. One after the other the Christian families filed past in front of him. Often they were led by grandparents. Children attending the Catholic school walked before the catechist, if they did not attend the school, they came with their families. The priest then said a few words of encouragement to each of them, and followed that with a blessing, when the members of the family fell on their knees.

After this, those in charge of the parish came forward to greet the priest. The leader of the community, the secretary and the treasurer were elected annually. These were the people who paid the catechists, who watched over the increase of the faithful and the good order of the Christian community. They visited the catechumens (those preparing for baptism) and the sick. They led prayers during the week. All this was shared with the priest. Together with them, he organised a 'mission.'

This was the name given to a time set aside each year. It varied in length. Christian families would take turns to look after the priest. In the winter, when days were shorter, the priest only needed two meals a day. This gave him the time to receive the individual members of the community. First of all the children, led by the catechist who had reviewed the catechism lessons. The priest questioned the children and explained doctrine to them. In the days that followed, it was the turn of the adolescents who had to show that they knew their catechism. The priest always allowed some time to reply to their questions and to help them solve their problems.

Mass was celebrated at the beginning of the day and the rules of fasting from midnight were still observed by all; that was before the Second Vatican Council relaxed the rules of fasting.

After lunch, the priest visited families so that he had a better understanding of their lives. Many Christians lived in caves, others in single storeyed houses, usually consisting of three rooms: a living room, with a stable or a granary on the right, and a communal bedroom on the left.

The Liber Animarum, or the registry of the Christian community had to be dusted off. Note was taken of births, baptisms, deaths and new members received into the Church etc. It was an arduous task, particularly for a foreigner, to record carefully in Chinese characters, the name and identity of each one since the registry was part the parish records.

Finally, in the afternoon, the parishioners return to make their annual confession, and before nightfall, night prayers are recited.

But for the priest, the day is not over. He has his second meal of the day, and receives visitors, most of whom are men. They remain standing while listening to the shrewder members of the group who asks questions to which the priest replies as well as he can. Sometimes, it is the mother of a family who dares to lift the curtain of the door, or a nun who wishes to talk to the priest about details relating to the sacristy or a newcomer to be welcomed.

There will be no Fireworks

One by one, the last few days of the thirteenth lunar period were passing by. Winter seemed ready to suspend its deep freezes, and to join in the rejoicing of people. After the harsh weather, the earth which had been dry and cold, was warming gradually and the crevasses which gave the land the look of a leprous face, were disappearing. The new moon would soon rise; for the third time of its appearance, this saddened country was at war!

I reminded myself of other times when the festivities reserved for welcoming the new year were more

agreeable. This was before I became familiar with these mountains, and before calamity passed across our Mission, turning it into a kind of no man's land. Nowhere more than in China, was daily living so hum drum; nowhere was tomorrow so much like today. But suddenly, people came to a crossroad; to a change of ways of living which had to be well and truly celebrated.

For two weeks, each house was transformed: no more poverty, no more misery, no more hard and tiring labour... To achieve this, half the yearly income would be spent. Each person brought out their best clothes, most of them new, and while the husbands wore dark colours, the wife could give free rein to her coquetry! Dresses of embroidered silk in vibrant colours, matching pants and tops, and satin slippers which did not torture her poor little feet. Different hairstyles, earrings and enamelled silver bracelets. In these days when the country is suffering, who will remind us how grand the past was?

There were brick houses with attractive roofs and many porticos; these were family homes with well ordered courtyards. Simple caves were the usual dwellings of the poor and the peasant. Why did you have to give up your red streamers, and your signs of welcome in big black letters and your cut out drawings, your pierced paper patterns which could easily have served as models for my efforts when I was a child, why are these things no longer there?

But to you, the youngest of you who do not know about the sorrows which convulse your country, at least you have worn the red clothes of happiness, and have worn the hats with bells on them which cover the ears so well, and protect you from the strong winds as you set off the firecrackers in celebration of the new year! But no! You do not have pockets full of those festive crackers anymore!

But why this stripping away, this abandonment of the happiest traditions of childhood?

And you, you beautiful young people, who loved to get together during those hours when you were free from care. Boys with boys, and girls with girls. Why is your conversation so serious? Why are your country walks and your strolls in town suddenly diverted into other channels?

Well yes! The war did rob you of everything: your wealth, your national records, your brave brothers and your playful joy. Nevertheless, we have to pass on from one year to another, we should rejoice in this new year with which the 'spirit who inhabits the heavens' bestows on you. This is how those excellent pagans so close to you. in the little village of Ha-Lou have addressed our God in their temple,, And yet, if this great war has robbed you of so much; if your

youngsters no longer let off firecrackers, you are left with what is best, what is most lovely, and what is most precious which your efforts over several millennia have produced; that is to say, your spirit, and the family virtues you have. The revolution did come and immediate changes were to be seen. The wave of red brushed away justice- and it was the Maid of Lourdes who protected you- today a hideous monster is tearing up your best lands, but this is only temporary... it has not been able to take away your family traditions!

And that is why, on this New Year's morning- you remember don't you - that the sun warmed us so gently! In your faces, I saw the real joy of celebrating important days. And the same thought led you to sing your gratitude to God- and led you when you went in groups to greet the most senior members of different families and clans in your village. With radiant faces you went in single file along the mountain paths, to bring to neighbours and relatives the message of happiness, as you spoke once again of hope. What great sounds you let forth that day!

Real joy was in the beaming smile you had when, after Mass, your children bowed before you, an act that they had practised secretly. It was in the smile you wore when you exchanged repeated dignified bows on the side of the road, with those who, like you, were pilgrims of the new year.

Unlike the foreign devil who was watching you, there was no port wine and biscuits to sample at each door, but the tchiaotzes were just as good, you can be sure of that!

You young ones were not going to receive an expensive new year gift from your grandfather or your old uncle, but the nuts, the tasty pears and the smallest amount of money; those bills which were so scarce, were enough to make you happy.

And as for you, young girls, now at the age when you blush and run away giggling when a boy approaches you, did it not make you happy enough to sport that hat, that hairstyle, or that jacket in the latest style?

And tell me, all of you people of Tien Pai shang, Kan tso Lin, Tsang Tchia Yuan and other islets of Christianity, why the day after the moon changed you made so many attempts to reach this forgotten corner of the mountains; why you all came together in a group before you offered your good wishes; why you added the fruit of your land and the work of your hands, and finally why, when you could, you brought one of your young, in whom you hoped, and who would ensure that your name continues in the future, why would you bring him along such unsafe roads?

Why? If not because you wished to give legitimacy to those who organised your Catholicism. To the Apostolic Prefect, who had taken refuge in this little village, and who led a life like your own, to him you offered

your filial obedience in the faith. Why? If not because this act of submission rose out of your confidence, and all your faith in the traditions of the Church. This is such a forceful argument that you place before your pagan brothers.

A final question, Why? Because during these sad dark days, you sensed that the traditional past of your pagan country has become one with that other traditional past, with which Christ has enriched you. This is your gift to His Church.

(It seemed right to leave the tenses as they were written. G.S.)