

Province of China 1959

My first visit to the various missions was mostly a get-acquainted visit. I had returned to the U.S.A. to get my clothing and to help solve the immediate problem of separating the United States into the two Provinces: the Esopus Province and the Poughkeepsie Province. The Provinces had been preparing for this move for quite some time already and it was agreed in the fall of 1958, after I returned from my first courtesy visit to the initial missions of the Institute, the various Provinces were to be assigned to me. I had stopped briefly in Hong Kong, Malaysia, and Singapore as well as in Manila and then to Sri Lanka.

Now on this visit we had the time for personal interviews with each Brother as well as assessment of the financial status of each house to become familiar with the needs and problems that would have to be faced and solved. It was impossible for me to visit anyone in China proper. First of all, there were just a few Brothers remaining in mainland China, and they were managing the best they could in the areas of Beijing and Shanghai. All of our schools had been taken by the government, as well as our winery at Chala. Brothers were looking abroad for some possible teaching jobs and were encouraged by our many alumni who had also left the country to settle once more in various cities or countries that welcomed our Chinese and foreign Marists. We received much help from our alumni. I could never think of visiting the few Chinese Brothers on the mainland, but I had not forgotten them. It wasn't until 1982 that I could find a safe method of visiting the few remaining Chinese Marists.

The China Province was started in 1891 when the first few missionaries came, mostly from France and with a few German and Spanish Marists as well. They started a good number of schools and from the beginning stressed the learning of the French language whereas other Marist missions stressed the English language. Our outstanding French school was known as Jeanne d'Arc and the English one was St. Francis Xavier. Most of the more well-off Chinese were eager to have their children trained in English or French schools. It was a plus for them to have all these outstanding foreigners here to teach and to operate schools for the Chinese.

We were soon getting candidates to become Marist Brothers. As we did in every country we went to, we tried our best to get qualified native teachers and helped those interested in joining the Marist congregation by organizing Juniorates and Novitiate training. Many of our graduates became alumni, teaching with us, and some of the more serious joined the congregation of the Marist Brothers.

These were good years of blessings and success, and we profited by them. The alumni were loyal and a tremendous help to us during the years of teaching, and also later during the period of persecution. The country became strongly communist, and that is when the trouble started. Many native Chinese were joining the foreign input and were slowly getting away from the communistic system. The result was an outbreak of trouble, and just fifteen years after the foundation of the Province a group of our Chinese candidates and Brothers were martyred in 1906 during the Boxer Rebellion.

We had a good number of schools by that time in various cities, and many Chinese were eager to learn the various languages that we were teaching in our schools. Besides English, there were also schools teaching German and some Spanish. As was mentioned above, our two schools with the best results were the St. Francis Xavier College for English and the St. Jeanne d'Arc for the French. Our French Brothers started the winery at Chala, which had exceptional success. As soon as the Chinese government began to take over some of our schools, they also planned to take over the successful winery. The Chinese families from the much earlier time of Saint Thomas coming there as a missionary had developed a very strong devotion to Mary, the Mother of the Lord, and they joined the churches and the various devotions and loyalty to the saints and especially to Mary, the Mother of the Lord. Our Brothers were involved with the Legion of Mary and were spreading devotion to Mary wherever they went.

But the communists were against devotion to Mary. That was why our Bro. Joche Albert was publicly martyred on April 21, 1951. He had prepared a fine group of young men and women who had joined the Legion of Mary. This irritated the Chinese government tremendously, and to make a lesson of their objection to the Catholics and this devotion to Mary, they assembled the twenty-four converted young people at a public square where they had

Bro. Joche Albert on his knees with hands tied behind him. They lined up the young people in front of him, and they wanted to show to the people what they thought of the Legion of Mary so they killed every one of the recent converts and then put a bullet through the head of Brother Albert. This was their warning. We are told that a nun in secular clothes had been obliged to attend that function, and after the people left and things were quiet she went to dip her handkerchief in the blood of Bro. Joche Albert as a relic of his martyrdom.

During this same period the Marist Brothers were doing their best to send all their young trainees out of the country to Hong Kong, Malaysia, and Singapore. Many of our young people came to Macao and to Hong Kong, and it was from Hong Kong that each year three or four of the young candidates were sent to Marist College to complete their studies. From the early 1950s and for the next fifteen years we had close to fifty-nine young Chinese who came to Marist College to complete their education. These were the Brothers who returned to Asia and were assigned to our schools there in Malaysia and Singapore as well as in Hong Kong. As many as possible who wanted to leave China were allowed to come to join our work outside of China proper.

If one visits our main house on Flower Road and in the living room of the Brothers one can see the framed annual photos of the Chinese Province on mainland China. One can see the hundreds of candidates, Juniors or Postulants, and all the Novices as well as all the professed Brothers united at the close of an annual retreat for a majestic photo of all the personnel of many of our schools. It was a glorious Province at one time and being chased out of China proper was the occasion for our spreading to other countries, and to many cities all over Asia.

It was on June 3, 1949, that we started our schools in Malaysia, in August 1949 that we also started in Singapore, and on the 20th, 1951, that we started our St. Francis Xavier College in Kowloon, Hong Kong. The young Chinese who came to Marist College would then go back after graduation to work in Singapore, Malaysia, or Hong Kong. The mission in Macao was started in 1958, and in 1960 a second St. Francis Xavier School was opened in Tseun Wan in the new territories area. In 1954 we purchased a house for the training of our candidates called Chanel House after St. Peter Chanel, the martyr of Futuna, who was killed on April 18, 1941. The Chanel House is now used as a residence for Brothers.

At one time we had a Juniorate in Hong Kong, and many left to start their own families. A number of them who moved to the west coast of Canada in Vancouver are now well-established and still keep in touch with me each year here in the U.S.A.

When the troubles started in China it opened a whole new Province of China outside the mainland, and our Marists spread all throughout Malaysia and Singapore. We also went to Taiwan, where we took over the teaching to help the Dominican Bishop. We built quite a school for mixed students and worked there for years. In fact, our first Chinese Provincial, Bro. Philip Wu, did a lot for our Marist School in Kaohsiung. He died there, and the school carried on with only one Brother. After his death, it was turned back to the Dominican Bishop of the Diocese.

The Champagnat roots were spreading all over Asia with several schools in Malaysia, a few in Singapore, and also a foundation later in Sibu, East Asia, where we are still serving a tremendous Chinese community that was started in 1960. Every place we have gone has meant a lot of very serious and difficult work for the founding Brothers, but it has also meant service to the needy and has been a source of vocations.

That has been especially true in Malaysia, Hong Kong, and Singapore. In each place we can recall the memory very often of a one-man project with a lot of hard work and financial help from our alumni to produce the schools we needed. In Singapore we had a Catholic high school and then the Marist Stella Project, which was the pride of the zeal and hard work of Brother Chanel. I cannot omit the mention here of Brother Alphonse and his outstanding kindergarten in Singapore, which is a model for others to follow and which the good Brother, over ninety, was still following closely and helping out whenever he could. We have had dedicated men in Ipoh, PJ, and Malacca, with in some cases even the pastor of the area becoming an affiliate member of the Marist Brothers and sending us a regular flow of vocations, many of which are still active in the Province today.

The work is about the same everywhere, but with varying aspects at times that make a place unique by its characteristics and contributions to the work of the Church. We have dedicated Marists in every foundation who have given their lives to provide for others what the Lord has shared with them, and to come to the rescue of the needy. It is wholesome to have natives of a country become the Superior of a Province, such as we have witnessed in the Chinese Province.

I wish to end this long background on the Province of China by paying a special tribute to a uniquely gifted Brother who, besides being a teacher, was also an artist. After one of my many journeys to Asia, I returned to the Generalate to give my report and to rest up a bit. It was in the early days when we had started in Rome and needed to have a better copy of the Marist seal of our Institute, for the old one was getting shoddy and could not last or be used much longer. I was able to tell the General Council that we had the right person for that kind of artistic work in the Province of China. He was retired and living in Singapore at the time. On my next visit I brought him an old copy of our Marist seal and asked him to please reproduce it as faithfully as he could. He produced an exact copy of what we wanted. Brother Victor was indeed an example of the Founder's request for his Marist Brothers to always "do good quietly." Brother Victor, the Chinese missionary, is buried in Singapore where he culminated his dedication to Christ. When next you see our seal, please remember Brother Victor.

I want to put in a word also about the exceptional alumni who have come to us from the Chinese Province. They suffered with us through the difficult years and were most loyal to their classmates and to their teachers. They also sought out their Marist alumni and, if needed, provided them a job. It was said once at a meeting that so many of our alumni have been given work by their alumni buddies that if one were to go into the Hong Kong Shanghai Bank and call out, "Alumni of SFX Shanghai or Jean D'Arc," they would appear from all over the bank and would all know one another. And this can be said of the same bank whether it is Hong Kong, Singapore, Malaysia, or Manila. Bro. Konrad Bower of Hong Kong can also vouch for this.