

Sarawak

We opened our Sacred Heart School for Chinese students in Sibü, Sarawak, on January 5, 1960. Two Marian College graduates were pioneers: Bro. Paul Raphael and Bro. Jules Andre. Of course, Brother Provincial had been along previously to prepare the way and make all the arrangements. Sibü is the second-largest city in Sarawak, which is situated north of the island of Borneo and southeast of Singapore. Sibü had a population of some 15,000, of which 3,500 are Catholics. At first, we had to live in the parish house, but presently the Brothers enjoy their own house on the outskirts of the city. There are three Brothers teaching in this school.

When the government was asked about permanent visas for our men, it was happy to grant them. It asked us to provide a teacher for its Teacher Training College, and we provided a Brother for the public T.T.C. Incredible as it may seem, the Brother teaches chemistry, physics, psychology, school management, and speech. Any pinch-hitters? The Chinese of the area are very well-organized and under the influence of Mr. Lau Nai Yong have been successful and effective in their drive for the new school and a residence for the Brothers. The first unit of this multi-unit program is well under way. The school will have two classrooms, a chapel, a residence, an auditorium, and a boarding unit. I took part in the dinner to spark the drive. His Excellency Bishop Vos and the other Marianhill Fathers of the area appreciate the help that the Brothers brought them.

After the visit, I went by speedboat with a group to visit the territory and the longhouses of the Land Dayaks and the Sea Dayaks who form one third of the population of Sarawak. They are former headhunters, tribes that have been quite legendary in Borneo. This was quite an experience—Brothers in white cassocks with a group of laymen zipping along in two speedboats up the winding rivers for an official visit to the tribe, which worked for one of the laymen. When we reached our destination, the first challenge was to climb the steep slippery log that led to the log house. When I was trying to do this while wearing Western-style shoes and a white cassock, it became easy for me to see why bare feet and minimal clothes (G-string) provide the most practical wardrobe to wear. Two little Dayaks eagerly held my hand, one in front and one behind to keep me from falling off the log as we climbed to the reception committee. Straw mats had been spread on the floor and even two improvised chairs arranged for the Distinguished Fathers!

The natives greeted us grinning broadly and then squatted on the floor. Men, women, and children everywhere were chattering and all were excited. This was an event! They were going to entertain us.

From out of nowhere came the homemade instruments, and the eerie sounds and incantations began with the gyrations that were to accompany them. Naked children stood awed by us and managed grins. The adults would go in and out of their huts and sport earrings to match their bright gold teeth, having not much else on them to sport. After the show, we presented them with our gift (five Malayan dollars), gave some sweets to the children, and left for home, happy that these headhunters had changed hobbies along the way and were now collecting gold teeth.

One U.S. Brother from the Province of PKC is helping out the Province of China starting this September. Should he write a book, will he call it A Yank at Sarawak or a Yank in Sibü?

Malaya is much quieter politically, at least for the time being. We have five schools there and a little Juniorate as of a few months ago. Malacca and Ipoh are the two schools that furnish us with most vocations, as there are more Catholics in these places. Our own school is Catholic H.S. in Petaling Jaya. At that time we were presently building a new science block, and a faculty residence was next. This school is a tribute to the foresight of Brother Provincial who, a few years back, started the building after working very hard to get the land. It was a desolate area that the government was willing to grant us. Today, it is all built up everywhere and one of the most thriving towns on the outskirts of Kuala Lumpur. Some few miles from this school is the property we bought for the Juniorate. At present there is only an old shack on the grounds; but, Nazareth-like, it is the lodging of Brother Director and eight Juniors. “We lack everything,” he recently wrote. “The only things that are plentiful are the ants, mosquitoes, and rats, but fortunately the boys are all young and willing and able to accept the challenge: A true testing ground this is!”

Port Dickson is where we have a summerhouse by the sea. It is used during vacation periods by both the Brothers and the trainees. It is secluded, beautiful, and comfortable. It was grand to get a dip in the Indian Ocean on a hot day in July! North of the Federation we have two schools: Bukit Mertajem and Balik Pulau, both with small communities. The first is overcrowded with pupils and the Brothers have a pitifully uncomfortable residence. The other is isolated in the mountains with not too much future as far as school population goes.

Everywhere in the Province, as in every other Province of the Institute, by the way, the problems are the same: lack of men and money! It is normal; it is wholesome. It keeps us relying on God and is a challenge to our confidence in Mary. The Chinese, as displaced persons, have done wonders to rebuild a Province that ten years ago was three times its present size. Much sacrifice has gone into the build-up. On August 15 in the early 1950s, two Postulants in the U.S. became Novices: one was a Chinese Novice in Ceylon, who took his first vows and is now at Marist College in Poughkeepsie; and the second was the Brother who made Perpetual Profession in Hong Kong on that day as well. Small numbers, but a good start! The saddest note of all in the Province at the time was that in almost three years there had been no word from the fifty-four Chinese Brothers still behind the bamboo curtain. All they could do was to pray for them.