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# Unbreakable Spirit: A Memoir of Chinese Catholicism

Amanda C.R. Clark

Whitworth University, amandaclark@whitworth.edu

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Unbreakable Spirit:  
A Memoir of Chinese Catholicism

by  
Amanda C. R. Clark

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This work is dedicated to St. Francis of Assisi, whose powerful intercession on 4 October 2006, made this adventure, and this book, possible.

Lord, make me an instrument of your peace; where there is hatred, let me sow love; where there is injury, pardon; where there is doubt, faith; where there is despair, hope; where there is darkness, light; where there is sadness, joy; O divine Master, grant that I may not so much seek to be consoled, as to console; to be understood, as to understand; to be loved, as to love; for it is in giving that we receive, it is in pardoning that we are pardoned, and it is in dying that we are born to Eternal Life. Amen.

## Acknowledgements

Thank you foremost to my husband, who supported my writing this manuscript from its earliest manifestation through later drafts. Special heartfelt thanks to Dr. Eric Cunningham of Gonzaga University who provided many excellent thoughts and suggestions regarding revisions. Gratitude to Father Augustine DeNoble, who believed in and continuously supported through prayer the greater project behind this work. Appreciation to my parents who graciously endure our frequent trips abroad. And lastly, we are indebted to our dear friends in Beijing, though who I cannot list by name are worthy of endless praises for their help in making the following events a reality.

## Preface

My husband was flipping through a large book of black and white photographs. Each image showed the stark and desolate life of rural Chinese peasants; Catholic peasants in small, dingy all-Catholic villages. In padded coats, clutching rosaries with weathered hands, they knelt in front of ramshackle altars, heard Mass, and prayed. It was stunning photography of an unexpected subject: deeply committed, economically impoverished Chinese Catholics. He looked up at me from the book, eyes twinkling, and said, “We’re going to go to villages just like these.”

## Introduction

When my husband told me we would visit villages “just like those,” my heart sank a little. I’m not particularly fond of isolated villages in any country; I dislike standing out. And in China, even in urban areas, a blond woman and a balding white man with round spectacles always stand out. I could not imagine what our reception would be like in villages like the ones photographed in that book. What I also could not imagine, until afterward, was how profoundly moving an experience it would be. Over the course of four months in China’s rural, urban, and outback regions, the Catholic lives that I witnessed moved me deeply and haunt me still. It is for this reason, to share these remarkable stories, to save them from disappearing, and to honor a wondrous experience, that I write this book. As we later stood in one-such village, in a small house, our guide, a world-wizened priest, looked up at us wide-eyed with wonder and said, “Miracles are following you everywhere.”

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My husband, Anthony, is a professor and scholar of Chinese history. In 2008, we were in China from mid August to mid December accompanying a group of twenty-some university students on a semester-long study abroad program in China. In addition to assisting the American students and teaching

classes, Tony had plans to continue his research on Catholicism in China, an interest that had been growing for years, leading him to research in the Vatican Secret Archives and the Pope's Private Library in 2007, as well as other various archives in Rome, Paris, and Taipei. The time had come to visit some of the sites of those martyrdoms – the soil on which the story of Catholicism in China had actually occurred. We were leaving the realm of the theoretical and entering the solid domain of the real. History was about to come alive. And so we set off for our adventures in China in August, in the midst of the Olympics, without much of a definite plan beyond that of visiting a few famous churches in and around Beijing. It was an adventure that would, in the end, take us thousands of miles across China, into the dry land of the north, ascending the Himalayas in the southwest, from urban centers, to dusty villages. It was a journey driven by its own momentum; the more we experienced the faster and farther we fell into it.

\*

A brief introduction to the author seems apropos; I was encouraged by an early reader to show my cards, as they say, and reveal to you a bit about my conversion story; for as he insisted, the lens through which I view the world, and specifically Catholicism in China, is one of a convert. A staunch, irritated agnostic, I met my future husband, a devout Roman Catholic, in 1994. For years I remained unmoved, though intrigued by his sweet piety. We went on day trips to Benedictine monasteries, which always had a powerful calming effect on me. We wandered through Portland, Oregon's Marian Grotto, a parklike setting



tucked away within the urban density. It was there one day that we engaged in one of our usual, charged conversations; this time about religion. I tried to explain to him that religion must be like the many paths in the garden: even though they took different meandering courses, they all arrived at the same location. Truth was immutable, but our realization of it must be flexible. I was obstinate; the more I explained my position the less assured I became of it. And then, all of a sudden, I was crying, in public, and quickly found a bench to sit on. I found, much to my displeasure, that I was literally gasping for air and sobbing uncontrollably. This Catholic garden paradise had a profound and unsettling affect on me. After that day that I became intensely interested in better understanding the Catholic faith, a faith that Tony said he loved; and I was puzzled, how could you love a faith? A person, yes, but a faith? It was inconceivable to me.

Entering my fiancé's apartment one afternoon I was visually struck by a crucifix that hung on the wall opposite the entry door, where there had formerly been an innocuous Chinese picture. To my unbeliever eyes this crucifix (in reality only about 8 inches tall) looked to me huge, several feet tall in my mind's eye. It overpowered the living room, drawing all attention to itself, dominating and possessing the space. "How could anyone have fun in here now?" I thought. We quarreled. "What will people think?" I remember shouting, as if the majority of our friends would be offended by this image; certainly, I was. Our argument escalated, and as I became more enraged I likewise began to lose my usual sense

of logical composure. At my wits end I exclaimed, “You don’t understand; he’s not up there for me!” And at that confession I broke down completely, crying as I had in the garden, but this time with an abandon hitherto unknown to me. I loathed the feeling of exclusion that I faced each time I encountered a crucifix.

One afternoon the phone rang. A soft-spoken nun on the other end of the line told me that Tony thought I would appreciate a call and that I might be interested in taking some classes on Catholicism. Oh boy, I thought. I told her that was very nice, but that this just wasn’t the right time; I braced myself for the usual speech one expects from zealots. I was stunned when she responded with a simple statement, “Ok. We’re here if you’re ever interested” What? No pressure, no “you’re going to hell” (which I’d heard from other denominations), no guilt-trip, just a simple outstretched hand, there if I wanted it or not. I was impressed — who were these people that they were so comfortable, so confident in their religion that they didn’t need to thrust it on me? I pondered.

Years had passed at this point. I had begun attending some Masses with Tony, usually leaving before the dismissal. At best I was rather neutral about the experiences; then came Triduum, the end of Holy Week: Holy Thursday, Good Friday, and Holy Saturday. I had never experienced Triduum before. Arriving at that boxy campus Newman Center chapel, we hadn’t anticipated the large crowds. We sat in the very last row. It was Good Friday, and something remarkable happened that night. This wasn’t Mass as usual at all; instead the priests and others brought out a large crucifix, and then very slowly and

solemnly, without being told what to do, it seemed, people from each row in succession walked up to that cross and kissed it, one by one, each pouring out their affection and affiliation with that man whose image hung lifeless on the cross. In the back row of the church I was struck, almost literally by the reality of relationship. This wasn't religion as I understood it at all, this was a relationship with a man, a man whose image was before me, and everyone there, everyone but me was making a pledge to him that night. As the rows directly in front of me began to empty I cannot express what a powerful draw I felt to run forward and kiss that cross — I wanted to pledge myself to this man also — I wanted this relationship — but actually doing so was still untenable, I didn't know him. That night I vowed to myself secretly that in one year's time I would prepare myself and on the following Good Friday I too would kiss the cross.

One year later, in the early spring of the Jubilee Year, after months of RCIA classes, I knelt with many others in front of the Altar of Repose on the night of Holy Thursday, intoning lamentfully the words, "Stay with me, remain here with me," my heart breaking with the hope that he would stay and that this newfound love I had found wouldn't snuff out as worldly affection so often does, but burn ever brighter. I had fallen passionately in love with my faith.

\*



Beijing, Capital of China

It is important to remember that Catholicism in China is older than Catholicism in the United States. The first Franciscans arrived in the auspices of modern China in the 13th century, attempting to, and very nearly succeeding in the conversion of the Mongolian rulers of the then conquered Chinese mainland. It was during the period of the European Counter-Reformation when Catholicism re-entered China and stuck, beginning a period of faith unbroken to this day. The Jesuits, founded in 1540, were quick to arrive on Chinese soil making fast inroads and laying foundations that would withstand the centuries, vacillating imperial favor, folk uprisings, war, communism, and materialism.

Unlike Japan, which sadly witnessed a complete cessation of Catholic practice, only to be revived in recent years, Chinese Catholics clung virulently to their faith during times of both peace and turbulence. Many have observed that the Church in China since the 16th century is akin to the early Christian Church of Rome and surrounding regions — the more they are persecuted the more their faith seems to grow; as martyrdoms occur, the more the Church seems to flourish. As one Shanxi priest once confided to us after we asked why Shanxi was so heavily populated with fervent Catholics: Catholicism is strong in Shanxi because of, not in spite of, because of the many martyrdoms suffered on this soil. As Tertullian rather mystically once stated, “The blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church.”

\*

At the outset the adventure started slowly, as adventures often do. I had lived in Beijing in 1996 – it had been a challenging experience for a moderately pampered American. In 1996 there were few of the creature comforts that I was accustomed to; cultural and language gaps seemed insurmountable, people seemed deeply unhappy, economically depressed, and intellectually stifled. In 2008, Beijing was a different world. The Olympics were underway and everywhere there were smiling faces and eager helpers. We arrived on August 14<sup>th</sup> in China's capital city, capital since the Yuan dynasty (1271-1368), and now home to some sixteen million metro residents.

More than 350 years ago it was here that the Jesuits had finished completing the first Catholic church located in the precincts of Beijing. Today it was just more than 100 years since the devastatingly bloody battles of the Boxer Uprising, both an imperial and grass-roots movement that sought to repel Western colonial invasion. Governments, politics, and economics had changed the Beijing of 2008, which was bursting with fervor over Olympic events. And yet the Siberian winds that dusted the city with a fine yellow powder were the same that blew when Marco Polo had visited the capital some 700 years ago. It was a city simultaneously new and old, and while entrenched in its Chineseness, it was swathed in modern westernization. As we wandered the aisles of a store near our apartment a reluctant salesgirl approached us, dragging another unwilling-looking associate along with her. She attempted to initiate a conversation in English in order to help us. Tony immediately launched into

Chinese, explaining that we were looking to purchase an iron. The clerks were astounded and pointed us in the right direction. As we walked away they were laughing, and the one said to the other in amazement, “These days everyone speaks Chinese!”

Less than a week in Beijing and Sunday was rapidly approaching. Online we had read about a Latin Mass offered weekly in one of Beijing’s more popular Catholic churches – on our third day in the capital city, it seemed like the right place to start.

## The “Buddhist” Mass

In the early grey hours of dawn, we exited our apartment building and approached a taxi parked near our front gate. Looking sleepy he waived us off, shaking his head and saying no. We approached another taxi and explained again where we wished to go. This cabbie claimed he had no knowledge of the church’s existence. Tony gave him precise coordinates and street names, but the cabbie wouldn’t budge; he refused our request. We approached a third taxi and the driver responded exuberantly saying he knew of the church and also how to say Amen. “Yes!” he exclaimed, “I know all about Amen!” As he skidded around the corner and zoomed toward our destination we braced ourselves without seatbelts in the backseat, saying prayers of thanksgiving when we finally reached our destination. As our driver sped through town he also gesticulated wildly while lecturing us on what he knew of Christianity. We were sorry that we hadn’t simply requested to visit a famous nearby monument instead and then merely walked to our intended destination. While it is not unusual for a Beijing cab driver to refuse passengers for any number of reasons, such as not wanting drive to a certain part of town where a return fare might be unlikely, or simply to nap, we couldn’t help but wonder if it was because we were going to a Catholic church that the other drivers had refused us.

Nantang, or South Cathedral, is also known as the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception, or Xuanwumen Tianzhujiatong. This church sits on the



foundations of the oldest Catholic church in Beijing, established in 1605 by Jesuit priest Matteo Ricci, S.J. (1552-1610). Today a statue of Ricci stands in the front courtyard, where the incoming faithful often bow solemnly before it prior to proceeding toward the church and a grotto devoted to the Blessed Virgin. In the interior courtyard are two imperial steles presented to the seventeenth-century Jesuits by the Chinese emperor. Despite imperial favor, the church building suffered an ongoing unfortunate fate, with severe damage by fire in the eighteenth century, bruising during the nineteenth-century Opium Wars, finally being razed to the ground in 1900 during the heat of the Boxer Uprising. The church building so beloved today was rebuilt in a Baroque revival style in 1904, its exterior today swathed in colorful banners and lanterns.

In China the Extraordinary Rite, or Latin Mass, is unlike anything I had experienced elsewhere in the world. When the Mass began being offered in China by native clergy centuries ago, tones, hymns, and prayers were set to music that was already familiar and close to the hearts of the Chinese – Buddhist chant. The result is a unique experience: the Mass you see is similar to those performed *ad orientem* worldwide, but the Mass you hear is entirely different. Numerous small, aging ladies, vastly outnumbering the men, sit on painted wooden pews that are essentially just simple plank-like constructions, their shopping bags looped over the pews in front of them. Holding small tattered books with flexible blue covers they pray in low, droning chants. These traditional Chinese-language chants have an ancient sound. Once they are

intoned they are constant and pulsate rhythmically, each woman pausing to breath when necessary, hundreds of voices blending together in one, hour-long hymn. It is like riding on an ocean of sound.

At 6:30 am on Sunday morning the South Cathedral church in Beijing offered this Mass in Latin, *ad orientem*. What the priest was doing and what the faithful were doing were separate but connected experiences. The chanting never ceased, cycling through a series of prayers until the end of the Mass was reached, the concluding hymn always in praise of Mary. These chants were beyond my Chinese language ability, but occasionally I would pick out a “Ma-li-ya” from the words and recognize it as a punctuation of our Blessed Mother.

On the day we visited none of the older parishioners chatted with us. Absorbed in their routines they passed in and out of the church at will, changing seats when inspired to do so. Theirs was a Catholicism somehow foreign to me; not because of the Latin language or Chinese culture, but because, perhaps, of the age difference. Whereas young Chinese flock to the English-language Masses for a variety of reasons, elderly members are seen at all the Masses, but almost exclusively at the earlier morning Masses and ones like this, in the old Buddhist chant style. My husband recorded, in audio and video, one of these Latin Masses, and we expect that as these older priests and faithful pass away that this tradition will die with them. As historians we were humbled by the truly antique sound of this Mass, and we were intrigued to witness such an organic accommodation of Roman Catholicism. While the Rite was western, the sound and feel of the

experience was something uniquely Chinese. We hoped to preserve a bit of fleeting history, something that may likely be gone during the course of our lifetimes.

It's not uncommon to discover the occasional Latin Mass in China not because of a disinterest in the vernacular liturgy, nor necessarily only because of an attachment to the Extraordinary form of the Mass, but because when priests were ordered by the communist government not to speak the name the Holy Father during the Mass, thus proclaiming their allegiance to him, they realized that by retaining the use of ecclesial Latin as the language of the Mass, their proclamation of the Pope's name was undeniably less obvious than doing so in vernacular Chinese. Times, nevertheless, have largely changed, and most priests today offer Mass in Chinese, and likewise openly pray for the Pope during Mass. Others, priests have told us, merely "said his name in their hearts" during the worst eras of persecution. Over centuries of vacillating approval and disapproval of Catholicism, the Church in China has employed a variety of techniques to ensure survival. It continues to do so.

After this early-morning Latin Mass was a Chinese-language Mass, followed by an English-language Mass, popular among the younger, more hip, set. Each of these Masses was full-to-overflowing – a sight that was mind-boggling, as well as humbling. Groups of official welcoming ladies gathered in the church doorways wearing identical pink shirts, whispering and giggling as they fulfilled their duties. We visited the Catholic bookstore within the walled

church compound, where I saw scores of Blessed Pope John Paul II necklaces. I would find in months to come that John Paul II was, and is, particularly beloved in China, and his image can be found in many “patriotic” church bookstores.

Outside we loitered, reading placards regarding the church’s history and glancing at poster-boards full of pictures of parish events. One of the resident priests came to talk with us. Tony presented him with one of the many holy cards of Pope Benedict XVI that we brought with us to China. The priest received it graciously, and thanking us said something cryptic along the lines of, “We have lots of these. Those were the old days,” referring to the restriction placed on priests within China not to publicly acknowledge loyalty to the Holy Father in Rome, which could be seen as treason since the Pope was perceived by the Chinese government as an imperialist ruler. The bishop of South Cathedral, Joseph Li Shan, is openly recognized and approved of by both the Chinese Patriotic Catholic Association and the Holy See. Whether or not those were truly the “old days,” such open affiliation, and such spontaneous reactions were to prove common among the clergy we gave the Benedict holy cards to. I always expected them to blanch or wince upon presentation, but the reception of the image was always one of appreciation; sometimes among the faithful it incited spontaneous prayers of thanksgiving and kisses.

Something else happened during this trip to Beijing’s South Cathedral, a fairly innocuous event that occurred as we departed. While it may be trivial, it highlights something one encounters again and again in China, by both Catholic

and non-Catholic Chinese citizens. It demonstrates a spirit of the Chinese people, a spirit, amiable to Christianity, one of giving and self-sacrifice. As we left the church grounds a steady drizzle began. We attempted to hail a cab, but at busy intersections in China, especially when it is raining, it can be extraordinarily difficult to find an available taxi. We had our hearts set on visiting a famous tea district and wondered if we could simply walk there. A disinterested worker in a nearby magazine stand didn't know of the place. We approached a traffic policeman to ask where we were allowed to hail a cab and he pointed in the right direction, but no cab appeared. In typical Chinese fashion many onlookers offered their advice and opinions, but we weren't getting to our destination any faster. Soon a family appeared, saying in Chinese, "We saw you earlier in Mass. Can we help you?" and "It's always difficult to catch a cab here when it's raining." They knew of the tea street that we were looking for and they enthusiastically offered to help us hail a cab. The father of this family walked determinably into the center of this six-lane intersection to bravely wave down a taxi. Upon his unsuccessful return and after some discussion they concluded that we should cross the road and try the opposite side – an undertaking unto itself. The college-age daughter of this family escorted us across and waited with us patiently in the rain. Once the taxi was procured she argued with the driver over directions until she was satisfied that we would be treated properly.

As we pulled away from the rain-soaked curb this Chinese family stood in a group waiving goodbye enthusiastically with wide smiles until we turned the

corner and were out of sight. This kind of generosity is not uncommon in China and it warms and touches my heart even now. Some might say that this experience was only due to the fact that we were white foreigners, but I have been a foreigner in many countries and have seen many foreigners in my own native country, and this type of experience is one I have found almost exclusively in China.

## Ghosts of a Catholic Past

Tony had promised to lead the students on a tour of old Beijing, and so we head out to chart the course ahead of time. Old Beijing is famous for its hutong, the name given to the narrow, historic alleyway neighborhoods that snake their way through the old city. The district we were particularly interested in was also home to the old Fu Ren University and very near Prince Gong's Palace. From the main thoroughfare, a street full of shops selling electric guitars and other musical instruments, we entered the labyrinthine network of old alleyways. Finding a small tattered sign for the Alley of Blooming Flowers we turned off the main road and began our exploration through winding, narrow passages; overheated men strolled about in their undergarments.

We turned onto a road famous for its snack foods and decided to make an impromptu visit to the house of a famous Peking opera star of old, Mei Lanfang. In these serpentine alleys we soon lost our way. An older lady sat in the raised entry doorframe of her house. She looked at us and held up a plastic bag full of fried chickens feet that she was happily munching on. "Looking for snack foods?" she called to us in Chinese. "No," we called back, "Just Mei Lanfang's old house." "Ah, pity!" A lady squatting on a stool nearby said, "His house is closed on Mondays. You should come back!" "Yes you should!" Another woman chimed in. Surprisingly, in this vast city it wasn't uncommon to find people such

as these, ready to lend a hand and offer directions. Further down the road we made an unexpected, and happy, discovery.

Fu Ren Academy, as it was first called in 1913, was founded by eminent Chinese Catholic scholars and later renamed the Catholic University of Peking under the tutelage of American Benedictines. Struggling from an economic collapse America, the school was transferred into the hands of the German Society of the Divine Word, and after withstanding the Sino-Japanese War (1937-1945), it suffered most in 1952 under the communist suppression of Catholicism. In the 1960s, like much of the intellectual and cultural wealth of China, Fu Ren University moved and was reestablished on the island of Taiwan. Having visited the school when we lived in Taipei in 2001-2002, we could not help but want to visit the old university buildings in Beijing, now under state ownership. We read the placards at the front door and took some photos, but entrance to the building was restricted. Like so many monuments, what had once been Catholic had now taken on a secular existence.

Around the corner was the former palatial estate and garden of Prince Gong (1833-1898), quite possibly the inspiration for the famous Chinese novel, *Dream of the Red Chamber*. In imperial China these urban estates, with large gardens adjoining the primary home buildings, were often built by the wealthy. In these gardens, delicately decorated concubines sipping tea and fanning themselves while chatting would adorn the landscape while the lord of the house could indulge, from his scholar room overlooking the gardenscape, a fantasy life



of Taoist recluse far from the pressures of court life. Now a major tourist attraction, Gong Wang Fu is known to be one of the most large and lavish garden households in Beijing; the property was mortgaged in 1921, sold to Fu Ren and later served as an extension of their nearby campus. Here, within the recently renovated, awe-inspiring and sprawling garden, the original opera hall is located near rocky outcroppings and picturesque bodies of water. It was this opera hall that served as a chapel during the Fu Ren years, now restored and offering abbreviated opera performances to tour groups. Peeking through the locked doors at this elaborately ornate Chinese building, surrounded by classical courtyards, ponds, and pavilions, I tried to imagine Mass being said here. In this garden courtyard any trace of Catholicism – or communism – seemed long forgotten. But the ghosts of China’s past always linger.

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We left this garden paradise and walked along Qian Hai lake, crossing Silver Ingot Bridge, southeast toward the former colonial concession district. The old foreign Legation Quarter is just a stone’s throw east of the Forbidden City. This was where foreign powers, beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, had built monuments to imperial power just outside the Emperor’s residence. I blushed a bit thinking of how brazen they were to build such demonstrative buildings in the heart of China’s capital – it was an act that was sure to arouse ire, and it did. This was where in 1900 the anti-foreign Boxers would focus their attacks, determined to purge foreigners from Chinese soil – an act that I cannot

help but sympathize with in principle, yet recoil from for the events resulted in terrible slaughters. The Legation Quarter constructed its own “Great Wall” and became an exclusively foreign district. The legations emptied at the onset of the Sino-Japanese War and the vacated buildings transferred ownership to the then Chinese government, the Republic of China (ROC). These buildings now belong to a variety of Chinese owners, mostly government organizations, and many are protected as historic monuments. A few onlookers gave us curious glances, perhaps wondering what we wanted with these old buildings, buildings that seem to stand today as reminders of the West’s failed intentions of that time. I saw no other tourists along these streets and was happy to duck into the shady courtyard of a nearby Catholic church.

St. Michael’s Catholic church was built by and for French Belgians, and unlike many surrounding buildings is still open to the public. After being destroyed by the militant Boxers it was rebuilt in 1902 in a Gothic Revival style. During the Cultural Revolution of 1966 to 1976 St. Michael’s was used as a makeshift restaurant, as were many churches, since Catholicism, and religion in general, was essentially shutdown during that catastrophic decade. Today the church, with its courtyard Marian grotto and its delicate Gothic-inspired interior, has been lovingly restored. Inside this church, which now caters to a native Chinese population of Catholics, one feels miles away from China. But that, of course, was the point. It was built as an enclave within the larger legation district

enclave. What was once a foreign edifice of a foreign religion is now filled with Chinese Catholics who worship a religion now made their own.

It was here that I noticed that, like the South Cathedral, Chinese churches often seem to incorporate an external grotto in honor of the Virgin Mary, complete with statue and fountain. Here the faithful stand to pray, some with rosary beads, many simply pausing to bow in respect on their way in or out of the church building. Mary, it seems, is an ever-present and essential figure to the Chinese faithful. As I later learned, for many Catholics during the Cultural Revolution, when they had to bury Catholicism deep in their hearts, praying the rosary at home and with their family members was often the only way they could express and maintain their faith. For many, it was the closest thing to a Sacrament that they had. And so this devotion to Mary and the rosary remains one of the central elements of Chinese Catholicism.

It is one example of the many forms of piety demonstrated by Chinese Catholics that humbles me. In China you will find some of the slowest moving Communion lines anywhere. Why? Because many people receiving the body of Our Lord are profoundly experiencing that special moment. They aren't rushing the experience because it is a sacred one; it is a solemn and cherished occasion, one not easily taken for granted. As seen in other countries, some receive on the tongue and others in the hand, but what is unique to China is that many of those who receive on the hand take a moment to study the host lovingly before placing it in their mouths. I have never seen such tender and heart-felt reception of the

Eucharist. Of course, these are generalizations – there are always people, world-over, who do not fit this description. Furthermore, phases come and go, and it is possible that if you visit China you may have a very different experience – trends pass, good examples are replaced by bad, and then return again. I can only relate what I saw and how I interpreted it. The devotion I saw touched me deeply.

We sat for a long while in the cool interior of St. Michael's realizing how hot it had been outside and how tired we felt. Our stomachs began to growl and encouraged us to move on. Near St. Michael's is St. Joseph's triple domed church located on Wangfujing street, also known as Wangfujing Cathedral or Dongtang, East Church. Although locked during the daytime many Chinese tourists pause in front of this grand edifice and plaza, on a street lined with megamalls and foreign-brand stores, to have a photograph of him or herself, flashing a smile and a peace sign as the photo is taken before this grand edifice. I have heard that it is many a Beijing girl's dream to have a Western wedding in St. Joseph's, for it is regal both inside and out. Dongtang was first built by the Jesuits in 1653, by Lodovico Buglio, a prolific writer in Chinese of theology and translator of the Missale Romanum into classical Chinese in hopes of encouraging native Chinese clergy in their ability to offer the Mass. This is St. Joseph's small connection to the Rites Controversy, which began in the mid 1630s and continued its unfortunate path through the 18th century, like an avalanche of ecclesial infighting between orders that, regardless of which side

one is on, admittedly caused a terrible obstacle for Catholicism in imperial China.

After destruction in 1904 the church was rebuilt in a quasi-Romanesque style and has been recently restored. On any given Sunday St. Joseph's is packed. Unlike America, people in China fill the pews, shoulder to shoulder, with a very different concept of personal space. Because the interior is both so large and so frequently full, with standing room only, large television screens have been installed between the columns so that regardless of your position in the building you can see the altar during Mass.

In the summertime Beijing churches can become stiflingly hot. On one occasion we took two American students with us to the Mass and the college-aged girl who accompanied us nearly passed out from the heat. Sitting outside recovering on the granite steps she asked me about the Mass inside, the difference of its expression in China versus America, the crowdedness, among other things – going to Mass in a Chinese church is unlike anything you will experience in the West. On that particular day there was another unique experience.

The Mass included a special event – the church community was welcoming a new convert. Several parishioners spoke at the front of the church to offer testimonies regarding their own conversion experience. One woman recounted how, by becoming Catholic, she forsook any further promotion at her place of employment. By her Catholic Christian affiliation she accepted a glass

ceiling in China's communist society; she would likely never be promoted to higher ranks, she said. She had made a decision, a choice between her faith and her career, and its corresponding financial, worldly success. These were powerful testimonials, ones that reminded me how relatively easy it is to be Christian in America, and how much is at stake in China.

## The Heart of Peking

Each Sunday Tony and I attended a different Catholic church to get a lay of the land. We awoke to surprisingly blue skies one Sunday morning. At 8:30 am we began making our way to church by bus, arriving almost exactly on the minute at 10 am when Mass began.

Beitang, also known as North, or Xishiku, church is perhaps the most exceptional Catholic church in Beijing because of its history. This church has an entirely different ambiance compared to other churches in Beijing. Down a short street laden with the smells of delicious food wafting from pastry shops, Beitang is a distinctive community. It seems like the place where Beijing's Catholic movers and shakers can be found, a suspicion we later learned to be true. The music used at the Chinese-language Mass we attended was the same as that used in Taiwan, and so, already familiar with the music, I was able to sing along in Chinese. Like other Beijing churches the North Cathedral has a number of Masses on Sundays, each one full to overflowing. After Mass Tony approached one of the priests to ask about assistance in his research: he requested access to some of Beitang's historic documents, and expressed an interest merely in chatting with some of the priests. What we met was a chilly reception. We were not yet versed in a procedure that would become very familiar to us by the end of our travels that year.

The priest we had first approached turned out to be young and of fairly low ranking, so he introduced us to the head pastor of the church. Meeting with us in a little house with upturned roofs, two of these houses flank the façade and sit directly in front of it, we waited as he finished talking business with some parishioners. Perched on the edges of fake leather guest chairs in his office, and adjacent to his bedroom, we could not help but become aware of our environment. While the building and the furnishings were themselves ramshackle, tattered, with peeling paint on the walls and water stains on the ceiling, the whole arrangement of the room communicated great power. It was clear that this priest was something of a king in a very small kingdom. As we would also come to understand later, the most senior priest in these large Chinese churches, where there are several priests in residence, is usually the one also most closely connected with the government. When we spoke with this priest he kept us at a distance, making a few vague suggestions and promises, but we left feeling very uncertain that anything would come of the encounter. What we did learn however was that the collection of Beitang historical documents was now held at the Beijing National Library of China in a special collection only recently opened to the public, due in part, we were told, to the Olympics and the fervor of “opening up.”

As we passed through the exit gates of the church compound we were sad to see that the little bookstore was closed and we decided to return on a different day. At that moment the success of our entire trip seemed in question. We



seemed to have reached an insurmountable wall, a wall of secrecy that would be difficult to scale even without linguistic and cultural gaps.

To ease our feeling of temporary despondency we visited the Old Summer Palace, or Yuanmingyuan, which means Gardens of Perfect Brightness. This garden was lavishly designed and constructed throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The expansive grounds, some 860 acres, were designed for the Chinese emperors by the eighteenth-century Italian Jesuit, Giuseppe Castiglione, S.J. (1688–1766) and Michel Benoist, S.J. (1715-1774), a Frenchman who engineered the waterworks for the many garden fountains. Castiglione designed the landscapes as well as the buildings in a popular Chinese-inspired western style known as chinoiserie, buildings which then mingled among others of Chinese, Mongolian, and Tibetan style. During the concluding events of the Opium Wars (1839-1860 intermittently), foreign powers while retreating from China – which they had recently attempted to occupy – destroyed most of the Old Summer Palace gardens.

It seems ironic that foreign powers, specifically the French troops of 1860, would destroy something that foreigners themselves had constructed. The remnants of this once-grand garden park remain preserved as ruins, a living memento of wars fought and lost, humiliation, and ultimately a mark that the West – the Catholic west – that had been there, contributed, and left. Today it is preserved in a state of semi-ruin as a symbol of foreign aggression.

Walking through the park that chilly early-autumn day, so many thoughts rushed through my head. The symbolism seemed so rich, the commentary on Western imperialism so charged. But again, the Jesuit connection, the Catholic element of this park was distant, forgotten to all but us perhaps. While not an explicitly religious site it was nonetheless designed by a Jesuit living in the court of the emperor. Is there significance in that? Is there something intrinsically Catholic about this park? I was only beginning to see the complicated centuries-old relationship between China and the Catholic west. It seemed like every corner of Beijing held the memory of a Catholic past, and in some cases, present.

Returning home that day I was surprised (although I was becoming less so) to find an all-Christian bookstore on the second storey of a book mall within the dedicated “Book City” area of the Haidian district. I would have thought that such a brazen display of crosses and bibles would have been frowned upon in the not so distant past, but this store bustled with customers just like its neighbors did. Here we purchased some “traditional” Chinese scrolls where the usual poetic stanzas on paintings of birds and flowers were here instead various quotes from the New Testament. This was a Beijing I could not have imagined twelve years ago.

Each cab ride was a linguistic and cultural opportunity for Tony. In one case he started in his usual way asking the driver, “Are you from Beijing?” “Yes,” he said exuberantly, “I’m a real Beijinger.” “How much do work?” asked Tony.” “I drive twelve hours per day, seven days a week. No breaks.” There was

a pause, as this daunting information settled. “Have any kids?” Tony asks. Beaming with pride, “Yes,” he says, “a boy. He attends an English cram school. His English is really good.” He went on to expound on how important education was, and how he works such long hours to earn enough to pay for all this extra education. After this he lamented, “Beijing has changed too much,” he said, “too fast. So much has been lost, and we can’t get it back.” As Americans we can’t even begin to understand how much change has occurred in China over the past century, how much suffering they’ve endured and today how much pressure they feel to succeed.

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The Beijing West Church, Xitang, also known as Xizhimen Church, or Our Lady of Mount Carmel Catholic Church was nearer to the university district and therefore had a strong student attendance. West Church was originally built by Italian Lazarists – the first non-Jesuit church in Beijing – in 1723. After founder Teodorico Pedrini, C.M. (1671-1746) died, the church transferred to the hands of the Carmelite order and then to the Augustinian order, under whom, in 1811, the building was destroyed during an era of persecution. It was rebuilt in 1867 only to be destroyed again during the Boxer Uprising in 1900, as is remembered today on stone tablets laid into a wall in the foyer of the building, one in Latin, one in Chinese. In 1912 it was resurrected again in a medieval style with delicate rib vaulting. During our time in Beijing, the interior was undergoing a historically sensitive restoration and renovation. It was here also,

on our first visit, that we received gratis copies of the official, government-sanctioned bilingual New Testament prepared for foreign guests during the Olympics.

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It was early autumn when Tony experienced the first of several extreme illnesses. We don't know if this was some strain of Asian flu, but what he experienced was a three or four-day period of relentless vomiting and diarrhea unlike anything we had ever experienced in the United States. His fever stayed well over 101, usually lingering near 103 degrees Fahrenheit, making me nervous. Staying hydrated is perhaps the most critical element in this kind of illness, so we endeavored to do so. Within a few days he was feeling himself again – the strange illness left as quickly as it had arrived.

## Building Bridges, Founding Friendships

We gradually got to know people in Beijing's churches. We would stay around after the Mass and others would hang around as well, chatting with us, giving us ordinary gossip, and offering tours of the church grounds. Many church buildings were slowly eroding with age, the paint peeling, and the concrete discoloring. What I sensed intrinsically was that this lingering to chat with the locals was rather unwise, not so much for us, but for the kind Chinese parishioners with whom we would speak after Mass. While most people rushed out into the busy streets after Mass, our small group would loiter, talking for sometimes a quarter of an hour or more. Then we would emerge as a group from the church compound gates, out onto the sidewalk, say our final farewells and go our separate ways. At first I was unaware that at the entrance of each major church in Beijing there are several official state cameras aimed toward the church gate. The nearby security bureau observes the coming and going of each person who enters and leaves that gate. One Chinese priest-friend told us that once he was paying a visit to the bureau office to take care of some minor business, while there he was shocked to see his own church secretary walking out the church's front gates as shown on the police-station monitor. He was stunned, he told us, not realizing until that day that they were under constant surveillance.

In our case it must have been easy to identify those seen exiting the gates with us two foreign visitors, standing out as we do, an isolated group emerging

long after others had departed. Several of those new friends of ours were later visited by a government official, a representative of the security bureau, who warned them in sugar-coated tones that they should be careful, that they were seen associating with foreigners. “Just be careful,” they were told in vague and somewhat ominous tones. They relayed this to us in person, shortly after the event, shrugging their shoulders in an off-hand manner. They seemed undeterred. We were touched that they were determined to continue to nurture our blossoming friendship even under such pressures. We realized that they had much more to lose than we did; it was a sacrifice that did not go unnoticed.

Somewhat amazingly parishioners were willing and eager to share their thoughts, stories, and complaints with us about the Church and state relationships in China. For people being monitored and “warned” they seemed eager to talk with us, sometimes with extreme confidence. We also found that various people had widely varying perspectives on the current situation in China. Early on we discovered that any presuppositions we had about the “underground” versus “patriotic” churches in China, were not at all as they were purported to be in the United States. One elderly schoolteacher who we met had been part of the underground church for years, but also attended one of the sanctioned Beijing churches on Sundays as well, respected as a wise elder in both communities.

The more people we talked with the more we found this to be the case. The lines seemed very thin between the “patriotic” and the “underground,” though in the American media we had seen them portrayed as enemies at odds;

here in China at least in some regions, we found that the communities were fairly close, and in many cases, overlapping. We likewise found a more youthful Beijing priest who was willing to talk candidly with Tony, discretely in a local restaurant. This particular priest was fondly regarded by his parishioners and turned out to be both kind and helpful. He later provided us with some invaluable connections with priests in other parts of China.<sup>1</sup>

We felt that we were gradually being welcomed into a community – a community where foreigners were noticeably absent. Sometimes on Sunday we would see another foreign guest at a Chinese Mass – usually someone who had accidentally stumbled into the Chinese-language Mass, or a language student from a nearby university – but these individuals rarely returned the following week, and never seemed to interact or engage with the Chinese faithful. It seemed odd to me that this would be the case when the Chinese community was so welcoming and open to us. Speaking Chinese certainly assisted in making these connections, but I cannot help but wonder if these rapid and heartfelt relationships were aided by divine assistance.

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China has come a long way from the 1960s and 1970s when church buildings had been transformed into restaurants, as with St. Michael's, and

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<sup>1</sup> The reader may find, and perhaps be frustrated, that at times I must be vague in details relayed; I have often had to do this in an attempt to protect those we met, those who provided us with information or documents. I have furthermore had to limit my discussion of archives visited and documents obtained due to the sensitive nature of the topic.

pharmaceutical store-houses, as with West Church, to the 1980s and 1990s when public ceremonies of the Mass returned. Now at the beginning of the 21st century new details were under consideration: such as how best to offer the Mass, or how to be most reverent. The young show little fear in the face of government authorities and appear ready to move forward in their faith. In the minds of the young faithful I spoke with over the course of four months, the Pope is undoubtedly and unreservedly the leader of their Church, one whom they are unafraid to express their loyalty to.





Guizhou Province

## Southwest China: Guiyang and the Tibetan Himalayas

We traveled deep into southwest China, to Guiyang city, population 1.5 million and capital of Guizhou province. It's a more tropical climate, soggy and misty, with tall densely forested mountains surrounding the city. Guizhou remains one of the poorest provinces in China, with many residents earning an annual salary equivalent to \$3,500 U.S.D. We had been advised to stay in a posh, foreign-run hotel, only later to realize what vital information this was. As we gathered data, heard stories, met and talked with people we weren't sure the government authorities would want us talking to, we began to grow nervous that our computers or cameras might be confiscated, so each night before going to bed we uploaded all of our documents and photos and stored them digitally online, emailing them to friends back in the States to keep them safe for us. This access to the Internet and securing of our documents would not have been possible if we hadn't stayed in a seemingly opulent American hotel in Guiyang.

You're only able to turn on the lights in your room when you have inserted the door key into the primary light switch; I knew that the hotel staff was always aware of when we were in our room or when it was vacant. I was happy that our room came with a small safe where I could program our own code and store our equipment when we were not there and while we were sleeping. I was overcome by a kind of nervous awareness unlike anything I had experienced before. As we began to make contact with the locals and meet several less-than-

savory individuals, I was also glad that our hotel came with a slew of bellboys and greet-staff whose job was additionally to turn away non-guests.

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During the nineteenth century French missionaries from the Paris Foreign Missions Society, or Société des Missions Étrangères de Paris (M.E.P.), arrived in the humid city of Guiyang. Construction of St. Joseph Cathedral began in 1875. The cathedral suffered much during the Cultural Revolution when the top portion of the pagoda-like clock tower was destroyed. Church repairs began in the 1980s when churches were re-opened for worship, and the clock tower has since been returned to its original stately glory. The French are long since gone, but the church still stands proudly, recently renovated, inside a walled compound comprised of functionary buildings and residences.

We showed up unannounced and pestered some of the janitorial staff until they led us to a priest, who turned out to be the head pastor. He seemed extremely agitated by our presence. In his office he offered us tea and made small talk but I could sense that he was eager for our departure and was distractedly thinking about how to deal with our presence. Tony showed his official Vatican archives researcher cards, complete with Vatican emblems and seals and asked if it might be possible to make an appointment to see the bishop. “It might be possible” he said with a furrowed brow. We expressed interest in seeing the interior of the church; he warmly welcomed this suggestion and sent us on our way. I had come to expect the head pastor of Chinese parishes to have

such a reaction – they often seemed excessively nervous to talk with us, and more often than not they also turned out to be, within their church, the official representative of the Chinese Patriotic Catholic Association (CPCA), the overseeing body that observes church activities for the government.

The CPCA was formalized in 1957 by the Religious Affairs Bureau office of the Chinese government, acting as the government’s arm in monitoring and controlling the Catholic Church in China. It was the encyclical written by Pope Pius XII that decried the CPCA and deemed that those bishops who consecrated new bishops as selected by the CPCA, should be excommunicated. And yet China’s priestly orders remained valid, and clergy under such a lineage offer valid Masses – in some ways similar to the Eastern Orthodox. Here, however, while there is no formal schism, the universal Church in Rome seeks to regularize the situation and regain the fullness of the body of the Christ.

As we later learned, after speaking candidly with others in that community, the priest whose office we had been sitting in was indeed the CPCA representative-priest at the Guiyang cathedral. These priests are required to attend party meetings and receive training for their CPCA duties; underground Catholics call this “training” a form of brainwashing. I do not know whether they are originally selected for this function because they already displayed politically loyal leanings toward the government, or if government training and classes gradually alters their priesthood, transforming them into more politically minded men. Perhaps it is a little bit of both. I also do not want to say that these men are

“bad” priests, but I feel sorry for them as their spirits seem tortured. We have found it best to make light-hearted conversation with such priests and move on to lower-ranking, younger priests as quickly as possible. We must be careful who we confide in, and of whom we ask sensitive questions.

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We looked around the quiet church building, which had undergone some rather bizarre renovations, including gigantic statues that would have seemed better suited as large outdoor monuments rather than placed within the relatively small confines of the church interior. As Tony photographed the interior a shadow appeared at the door; a stinky and kindly looking young priest smiled at me sheepishly. I sprung up to say hello and then commented on the beauty of the building. He likewise praised its beauty and began to give me a small tour of some of the more interesting details of its architecture. Tony and he struck up a lively conversation and in no time had agreed to meet again tomorrow. This younger priest, Father L, assured Tony that he would help us in our endeavors and he indeed seemed genuinely interested. It remained unclear whether he was sent to meet us, or if he simply stumbled onto us amidst our photographing. We took numerous pictures and left feeling welcomed, which was a relief.

We determined that on the following day I should not accompany Tony on his adventure with this young assistant pastor. Sometimes the presence of two foreigners, especially a married couple, takes the edge off an international situation, it softens the environment and makes us seem more like a benign

couple of holiday-makers rather than researchers, but it also makes us more conspicuous. You can almost overlook one foreign man in China but you cannot miss a foreign couple. In this case, it seemed advisable to be less obvious.

Early the next morning we took a taxi to the cathedral. Prior to Mass Tony was rebuked by one of the many old ladies for crossing his legs in the church. While we were a little embarrassed it was encouraging to see how seriously she took her faith. Like early morning Mass world-over the pews were filled with older women, praying their rosaries in chorus before Mass began. It was a full house and I watched attentively as each person devoutly received Communion. Some people would pause momentarily, gazing at their Eucharistic King in the “throne” of their cupped hands before communicating. Others received on the tongue, but everyone was present in the moment.

After Mass, Father L, the young assistant pastor whom we had met the day before, took us to a nearby street stall for a simple breakfast of steamed buns and porridge. Tony and the young priest spoke quickly about the state of the Church in Guizhou province. Since they had already established a friendly rapport, there was no time to lose. At one point I excused myself to buy an umbrella at a nearby stall because a heavy southern rain had begun. I said my goodbyes to Tony and Father L and began what turned out to be a rather long and wet walk back to the hotel. In that strange city, where I had not yet seen even one other white foreigner, I was loathe to become victim to human trafficking and decided the hour-long walk back to the hotel was preferable to a risky ride alone

in a taxi. Tony says I have an uncanny sense of direction, and in this case it came in handy. Meanwhile, Tony and the young priest shared plainspoken conversations, covering even such sensitive topics as forced abortion in China. When asked about this subject the young priest's eyes welled with tears and he said simply that the lines at the confessionals are always very long in China, often lasting several hours per day.

My Chinese cell phone rang later that morning and Tony said, "I want to keep me updated. We're on our way to meet 'a bishop'." I knew by the way he said it that he must be going to meet an underground bishop – a rare opportunity. He was unable to talk long but promised to call back after the meeting. I wasn't really surprised that this young priest would have such close connections with an underground bishop; I had come to expect such things, and he seemed just the type to have a foot in both worlds.

Later Tony recounted the whole adventure to me. He and Father L first visited underground Bishop H, a man that Tony says radiated of holiness, punctuating his phrases regularly with the exclamation, "Thanks be to God!" Bishop H, a bishop who received his Episcopal mandate directly from Rome, not the Chinese government, told Tony his story. He had been imprisoned for years during the Cultural Revolution, undergoing tortures and beatings that left him crippled; to this day he is unable to stand upright. At first he had been apprehended by scores of the youthful Red Guards, who beat him and "struggled" against him. Then after being imprisoned, he was offered chances to

apostatize and be reintegrated into society. With each offer he refused. He was presented with money, women, and a high-paying career, among other worldly seductions. Bishop H held fast to his faith, never renouncing it even under the abuses that rained down upon him. He was required to attend re-education classes, which he said were a great burden for him. Through it all Bishop H today retains a joyful countenance, praising God. When Tony asked Bishop H if he was afraid to tell Tony these things, the bishop said, “I no longer fear.”

As they rose to go Bishop H gave Tony a rosary and many holy medals portraying a peace dove to distribute, which Tony then asked him to bless. When Tony requested his personal blessing he knelt to receive it, as did the young priest. Then the old underground bishop looked at this young patriotic priest and asked that he be given a blessing as well. Thus the old bishop blessed the young priest and then the young priest prayed a blessing over the head of the old bishop. So it often is in China, the underground and the patriotic, the old and the young are praying for each other, their lives intertwined. In this case underground Bishop H actually lived in the same compound with the current government-approved bishop, the two bishops eating their meals at the same table. Tony still recalls a feeling of marvel in the presence of Bishop H, one of the few people Tony has met that he feels may be a living saint.

About halfway through the day I received a hurried phone call from Tony. He was clearly in a crowded and loud environment, telling me that he and Father L were now on their way to the site of martyrdom. “I just wanted to let you



know,” he said, his voice trembling a bit. I wondered if at that moment he was just as worried as I was that he might not come back from such a venture. Before a hasty goodbye and good luck I asked him what all the noise was in the background, “Oh, those are the chickens,” he said, “We’re in a mini-bus leaving the city.” I wished him love and hung up, saying a prayer for his safety and a return to me, and also, success.

From Bishop H’s humble room the young priest and Tony piled into one of China’s notorious and rickety mini-buses. They rode out of the city on a journey that took about an hour. At an unmarked and improbable location the priest, who wore laypersons clothes, asked the driver to stop the van and let them out. This spot, he explained to Tony, is forbidden to visitors because it houses the burial mound of four nineteenth-century local Chinese Catholic martyrs. The previous year, he said, nearly 300 security bureau officials had come to the site to physically remove venerating pilgrims. Following this incident the government had made all visits to the site illegal. After visiting the burial mound, pausing to venerate it in the drizzling rain and without trouble, they continued their visit on foot to the little Qing dynasty (1644-1911) village of Qingyan where they visited the only Catholic church there.

Tony had offered the priest a donation for his trouble – perhaps it was a mistake to give cash; we probably should have offered a material gift of some sort, like a chalice or altar bells (which, though desired, are surprisingly rare in China). The result of his monetary gift was that the priests felt obligated to treat

Tony to a meal fitting their guest; the consequence was that they probably spent the entirety of the gift-money on that fancy meal, money that of course we had hoped would go to the needs of the parish. We were learning lessons. After Tony returned later that evening I half expected a mysterious knock at the door and leering plainclothes policemen; it was late into the night, after hours of talking, that we were finally able to fall asleep. In the morning I was relieved not to find a crowd of police at my door or waiting for us in the dining room. What we were doing seemed suddenly very important, and somewhat dangerous.

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The poverty of an urban city such as Guiyang, the most urban city in the province of Guizhou, was overwhelming. Finding restaurants proved difficult in a city essentially too poor to eat out on a regular basis. Long hours were spent typing up a travel-log of events that had happened thus far, and we sought to record every detail so that they would not be lost to memory or time. For every full day of experiences and interviews it took another long day of writing to record even a simple outline of the events that had transpired. From our high-up window in that palace of a hotel we looked down on the city's slums; resembling four and five-storey shanties, these apartment buildings seemed to lean on each other for support, with added rooftop shacks increasing their height.

Tony decided to visit the village of Qingyan and the tomb of the martyrs again, this time bringing me with him. We took a wild thirty-minute cab-ride to a strange transfer point, where we boarded a tiny mini-van that had a variety of

makeshift seats and fold-down benches inside. Squeezing ourselves in with urban peasants we were jolted along into the countryside for thirty minutes more. The van's shocks were worn-out; it was a rough ride. At a nondescript location Tony asked the driver to stop, which he did after a bit of persuasion. As the bus sped away from us I couldn't help but look at Tony with raised eyebrows.

We were at a most unlikely looking crossroads, where a few peasants had stopped what they were doing and were looking quizzically at us. Not inspiring great confidence Tony started scratching his chin and gesturing to himself in several directions. Finally he said to me, "This way!" and started walking hurriedly for the side of the road. Through the ditch we pushed our way into rows of cornfields, stalks that rose past our raised elbows. We climbed up the steep incline, using the corn stalks to help our way, pausing at one point while Tony discerned the correct direction. It seemed relatively improbable that we were going to find anything other than more cornfields, but I kept my mouth shut and hoped for the best. Once or twice Tony told me that we had to hurry since we were in a place forbidden even to the locals, let alone foreign tourists. Finally, a little to our left, we passed into a muddy opening and saw a stone bench. It dawned on me after a moment that this was an entirely Western-style granite bench, and that on its top surface was carved the symbol of a Greek cross, a bench that a priest could, of course, use as an altar. Looking up from this bench, and embedded in the side of the hill, was a stone monument, the kind you might

expect to see in a cemetery. There, carved inscriptions, both in Chinese characters and Latin, were painted red.

It was unbelievable to see this commemorative monument here in the middle of nowhere rural China. The names of the martyrs from nearby Qingyan village were inscribed on the stone along with the date. As we read their names I noticed what seemed to be a female name and I was struck by the personal nature of this tragedy; I was struck by the reality of martyrdom, how very real and human an experience it is, and how these markers can be found in the least expected places. At that moment I felt very close to the reality of what our adventure was all about. And then Tony reminded me that we must not linger, we must move on.

Back down on the muddy road we walked toward the little village of Qingyan. A modern-day Asian tourist trap, the Qing dynasty village is preserved almost perfectly as a time capsule of imperial architecture and civic planning. Roughly 600 years old and virtually unchanged, the old city walls surround this little town. We dined in a little courtyard where I inquired about the steamers I saw lining the streets – a local specialty they told us. Sweet and syrupy, we reveled in this much-appreciated moment of cozy hospitality. We wandered the rain-soaked streets of the village, passing though the old Taoist and Buddhist temples.

Tony led me through the maze-like street corridors, navigated around corn that lay drying in the road, to the open gate of the local Catholic church. The

small compound consisted of a recently built one-room church-house, the old church building, which was under renovation, the caretaker's residence, and a dilapidated guesthouse where visiting priests could stay. They did not have a priest in residence, so, the caretaker informed us, when the priest comes to the village one week per year it becomes a festival of sorts with confessions, marriages, and Masses. The rest of the year they gather in the chapel weekly to pray together.

The caretaker opened the newly built church for us so that we could offer a quick prayer inside and I slipped some cash into the red offering box. Though exceedingly spare inside, it was also quite new and very clean. The caretaker came to lock up after us and as she explained the situation of the church and the lack of priests, tears filled her eyes and she wiped them away forcefully. It was hard not to cry with her, so heavy the moment was with emotion. She took us next door to the old church where workers were remodeling the interior to serve as a parish hall. The ancient flavor of the old, dark building was still palpable even though only the old structure, columns, and window frames remained.

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We sat in her little house, in her parlor, which was open to the outdoors; her chickens were tirelessly walking in and out of the house. We knelt on the stone floor and prayed together; she recited a traditional Marian prayer common in her community. She showed us photographs of past events, visiting priests and the like, and we gave her a Pope Benedict XVI holy card. We talked with her

about her duties as the caretaker and she shared with us tales of loneliness, and informed us of her meager salary, consisting of something around forty-five cents U.S. per day. Her poverty was oppressive. When she went to the kitchen I quickly hid some cash in her bible, where her photographs were also stored, and although it wasn't very much money by western standards I hoped that it would be helpful to her. That little house was so terribly shabby, the memory of the dust and dreariness still lingers in my mind. Her life seemed so terribly tragic.

She held our hands and saw us to the church gate where she waved us goodbye and called for us to return. I have to admit that our spirits were very low when we left. To compound matters the bus we returned on dropped us off in an extremely poor and seedy part of the city. We tried in vain for more than half an hour to hail a taxi. Many cabs, their "available" lights illuminated, zoomed past us. There were moments where a feeling of panic and of being completely lost overwhelmed us. We had no idea where we were, we could not get our bearings, and people were not particularly friendly. Eventually, walking illegally into the road, a taxi driver – a woman – finally took pity on us and picked us up. As it turned out we were walking distance from our hotel, we just hadn't any idea where we were. That night, quite suddenly, Tony had a return of that horrible sickness.

He was frighteningly ill. His fever remained for hours at 103 degrees Fahrenheit. The diarrhea and vomiting every half hour continued for a full twenty-four hours. I nursed him with electrolyte drinks, sold in a nearby market,

but I was beginning to get nervous. Tony called the young local priest to apologize and said that he must postpone their meeting, but would attempt to visit him one last time to say goodbye. We stayed in and I rotated damp wash-clothes on his feverish head, his body vacillating between freezing and sweating all day long. A good-natured housekeeper was quite alarmed when she came in to tidy up and saw Tony so desperately ill. She returned with extra tissues and water bottles, boiled some fresh water for him, and then called the hotel manager to come have a look. Soon at our door appeared the hotel manager, a very kind-looking young professional. He looked at Tony and felt his head and told me in somewhat stern tones that it was best that we stay in the hotel rather than go to a hospital. Even the cadre hospital in town wasn't as clean as the modern hotel we were staying in.

The hotel manager offered to walk with me to a nearby pharmacy to procure some medicines – many medicines that are only available in the United States by prescription are over-the-counter in China. At the pharmacy he described the sickness to the employees and I was soon loaded down with boxes of pills, several of which I was slightly unclear on. Knowing that the medical facilities available did not meet Western standards worried me, although I was grateful that we were in such an excellent hotel. In the middle of the night, more than twenty-four hours after his battle had started he began to recover. Near midnight I ordered a “Hawaiian” pizza from room service – the best option from a bizarre smattering of options – and I encouraged him to eat a few bites. While

the episode may in writing seem very brief, it was, in lived-experience, quite frightening. That night I stayed awake just to make sure he kept breathing.

In the morning however he felt much better. We were able to go down to breakfast, and even across town to Mass at 7:30 am. The bishop gave a long and heartfelt homily and after the Mass we met with our young priest-friend again to discuss the state of the Church in Guizhou province. He showed us plans for a church building that needed to be built in a rural area, for which there were no funds, although the church plans had already been drawn up. They only needed about \$10,000 U.S. dollars to complete the entire project. We could tell that he was hopeful that we might know of some willing donors, or ourselves be willing to fund the project. Alas, it seemed like the request produced more complications than solutions – even if we knew of a donor, how could we produce the money without it being confiscated or compromised? We took the plans away with us and have them still. Perhaps someday we can help build that church in Zunyi.

After some waiting we were accompanied by our young priest friend to meet Bishop Xiao, the new, younger bishop. I knelt to kiss his ring – a ring given to him by the Vatican even though it was local Chinese authorities who had first encouraged his ordination. In our conversation he adamantly proclaimed his loyalty to, and approval by, the Vatican, and yet he is what would be called a “patriotic” bishop. As we sat in his office on white, overstuffed, faux leather chairs, he recounted many stories of growing up Catholic in China during the Cultural Revolution. He struck me as very young for a bishop, and also very



confident, “smooth-talking” was a term that came to mind at the time. I have simply come to expect that those in positions of power in China – like the West – are often politically minded and gifted in the verbal game of diplomacy, for better or worse. We were pleased and honored to have been offered this audience with the bishop and for the opportunity to speak so freely with him. Thus ended our time in Guiyuan – we were headed for even more outlying locations.

Half a day’s drive from Guiyang, the Huangguoshu Falls are a famous landmark in Guizhou province; a diocesan bishop had first included an image of this expansive waterfall in his coat of arms. Near the falls we sat in a grungy restaurant at an outdoor table waiting for our dinner when we noticed that on the walls inside were faded pictures of the Sacred Heart and another of Our Blessed Mother. I nudged Tony when the waitress approached and he asked her if the restaurant owners were Catholic. “Oh, yes,” she said, “we’re all Catholics,” and she proceeded without a blink with her serving. She seemed unsurprised that we too were Catholic. Finding such public displays of Catholic images was something I had never expected to find in Mainland China, but at the same time, sitting there beneath those old, faded and tattered images it somehow didn’t seem strange at all.

China today seems to have an abundance of beliefs and images displayed before the public eye – while nothing seems sacred nothing seems proscribed either. Anything goes. And yet, sitting there in that little restaurant, just a short bus ride from Guiyang city, I couldn’t help but reflect on Bishop H, crippled

from his tortures. I pondered the line where differences were drawn: one man was imprisoned and tortured for his faith, and here, on the streets of the town of Huangguoshu falls is an openly Catholic restaurant, apparently suffering no consequences for an overt display of their faith. Is it a change in the times? Where are the invisible boundaries that must not be crossed? At times I wondered if I was being manipulated by some larger government scheme – would I grow to discount the suffering of a few if I saw the success and ease of many? How much seen in the Beijing churches was allowed to exist simply for public display, how much was for show, for propagandistic purposes? These are questions without answers. And yet, one wonders, if Christianity keeps growing in China, at some point we might expect a cultural tipping point.

But for all of the hopeful feelings I had that night in the restaurant, tomorrow was indeed another day. I awoke to the sound of Tony killing a cockroach as it scurried across the floor, swatting it defiantly with his shoe. Our morning consisted of leading our group of American students, whom we had rejoined, on a tour of the famous falls landmark. Tony also wanted to visit the town's Catholic church, the spire of which we could see rising amidst other buildings. Judging the distance visually we determined that the church was too far away to walk to and be able to return in time to catch the bus departure. I would remain behind and handle the needs of the students while he visited the church via taxi. Unfortunately – and again we did not know if this fellow was simply a crooked cabbie, or anti-foreign, or anti-Catholic, or under orders – the

taxi driver took Tony on a wild ride. Tony told him to go the church, pointing to the spire as he gave instructions. The cabbie instead zoomed past it, despite Tony's helpless protestations, and to the far reaches of the city limits, where he stopped the car and insisted Tony take photos of the new city gate.

Tony was livid and somewhat fearful of this minor kidnapping. Returning to the city – the cab-fare rising steadily – Tony asked him to pull over, strategically near a police station that Tony had spotted. Tony exited the cab refusing to pay and loudly proclaimed this man's crimes in overcharging and deliberately not driving him to his destination. The police and various local passerby gathered to witness the scene. The cabbie received a verbal lashing from both the crowd and the policemen; Tony paid a reduced fare but never did get to visit the church. In fact he barely returned in time to catch our bus. When he did not appear at the scheduled time, and then more time began to pass, I grew increasingly worried.

I stalled as much as possible dragging my feet and fussing, but the bus engine was humming and the students had fully boarded when Tony ran toward the waiting bus. It was just another occasion of near-disaster on this Catholic adventure of ours. I also determined not to let him run these errands without me in the future – the chance of getting separated in vast China was something I did not want to experience. If we were going to get in trouble, I wanted it to be together.

Coming off the bus later that evening I was sad to watch a dozen or so impoverished children with mud-streaked faces, scramble on board to collect the empty plastic bottles that we had left stuffed in the seats. They would be able to sell these recyclable objects for money and literally fought each other to get at them. It was one of those days in China when I both felt badly for the Chinese people and angry with them all at the same time. So much poverty and injustice – so much “every man for himself.”

As we lined up in what were effectively cattle stalls in the train station I looked out sadly on those hoards of peasants crammed into the florescent-lit industrial train station. With dark hands they bowed under the weight of their heavy burlap sacks. In these crowded and smelly circumstances I am always torn between extreme pity and frustration at the living conditions, poverty, and illiteracy of the majority of China’s people, all while attempting desperately to keep track of my own belongings and maintain the security of my pockets and bags. There is so much understandable desperation – how can you fix this?

We literally ran to catch our train, just making it, and slept with our heads on our backpacks to keep them from wandering away in the night. In the dark of the train-car that evening, a Caucasian man in our party shared with us the story of having adopted a Chinese daughter into his American family of four. When his biological daughters asked why their parents had decided to adopt, he told them simply, “Because we have more room in our hearts.” There are many roadblocks to adoption in China – becoming stricter all the time – if a child does

not have the proper paperwork and documentation she may not be cleared for adoption. Because of this problem of paperwork, many orphaned and abandoned children are stuck in a holding pattern, unable to be adopted. They are restrained within an inhospitable system, trapped in facilities often termed in the west as “dying hospitals;” their futures are bleak. In the case of this man’s adopted daughter her story was told as follows.

A laborer, coming to work one morning at a local construction site found a baby girl abandoned at the building property. What a risk he took, with huge heart, not to walk past this baby girl – something that has happened for centuries in China. He picked her up and took her to the local authorities. By doing this simple humane act he effectively became the girl’s legal guardian and thus the proper paperwork could be generated. Our American friend was later able to videotape this man telling his story, so that some day this adopted daughter could watch for herself the story of where she came from, and hear it from the lips of the man who became her near-of-kin. After months of agonizing paperwork and bribes paid, our friend was given custody of this little girl, his new daughter. He described the sweet, heart-wrenching day when he had finally been given the official file folder about her, and while in the back of a cab being driven home in Beijing, he opened that file for the first time and pulled out the picture of his future daughter, whom he had never laid eyes on before, and wept.

Sometimes things seem so complicated in a country where the livelihood of the elderly is based, and has been for centuries, on the general financial

support by their children. Traditionally the child who would offer this financial support would have been the son or many sons. Today, while the small rich population can pay the legal penalties to have more than one child, and persons of minority groups (about 8 percent of the total population) are often allowed more than one child, the majority of Chinese, the less-than-wealthy Han population, are restricted to the firmly enforced one child policy. Following the old line of thought and custom, many desire to have a son. Thus many daughters die on the operating table or are abandoned, once born, to die or be rescued by someone such as a construction worker.

Abortion in over-populated China – forced by the authorities, or as the result of social pressure, or desired – is a serious problem, but one not easily solved. We talked with one of our Chinese priest-friends about this; he lamented that it does indeed happen that a Catholic women will be forced under law to undergo the abortion of her second child. For the Chinese priests compassion is critical – their flock is suffering. The Chinese Catholics face something we do not (yet) in America. They are required to follow Chinese law first and Catholic law second – it is a problem of faith versus nationalism. It may be tempting, in the West, to assert that every Catholic in China should simply follow God’s law, Church law, and suffer martyrdom down the last person if necessary to uphold this law – but what is it to actually live under these circumstances and to navigate these impossible situations as a cultural minority and often-perceived as a traitor to their culture, race, and country.

An American friend of mine, while attending an English Mass in Beijing, was stunned as the Chinese priest preached in his homily, “Remember, you are Chinese first and Catholic second!” Turning to her American friend sitting next to her she whispered in shock, “But that’s backwards!” These are frightful questions: where do loyalties lie? How is identity affected by affiliation? What is identity, and how far can you take something before you become something else? These are the questions facing Catholicism, and Christianity in general, in China today. At what point does Christianity become so particular to China that it ceases to be part of the larger Church, and become something separate? When does distinction become schism? Again, there are no easy answers in China; we must have patience, compassion, and perhaps most importantly, communication. They must fight the old saying: “One more Christian, one fewer Chinese.”

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Yunnan Province



In the early hours of morning our dingy train rattled into the station in Kunming city, population roughly seven million, in Yunnan province, deep within relatively isolated southwest China. It is a province rich in natural beauty; it has also been known for having been particularly rife with infighting between the Chinese underground and patriotic Catholic communities. Tony and I walked to the cathedral near our hotel in Kunming. Like many of the churches in China I saw pamphlets promoting the Pope's Year of Saint Paul. As seen elsewhere in China, here too where photos of the current Holy Father. For a diocese "in trouble" with the Vatican for having selected its own bishop, the cathedral struck us as portraying a surprisingly loyal outward appearance.

A small nun appeared in the empty church as we were looking around and praying. From Singapore originally, she sat with us for a long time at a rickety table near the back of the church. It turned out the bishop and priests were away that day, traveling on business. After a lengthy and interesting conversation with her, she invited us to her nearby apartment. As we walked we passed by the CPCA office, a barren room the door of which was flanked with signs designating it as such. "Look," she said, "it's empty. All that's here is a sign on the door." She was extremely hopeful about the Church in China, and despite the local troubles, she said, she saw improvement everywhere. One of the troubles she communicated was that in Yunnan province in particular the underground church had tremendous financial backing compared with the patriotic church; this had,

she suggested, created a unique culture of elitism that had further divided the two communities that were already at odds.

Sister S commented further on troubles receiving responses from Rome, stating that letters had not been answered, even when hand-delivered to cardinals at the Vatican. Her opinion was that blame could not be placed simply on one side or the other; she held a more optimistic view, that loyalties to Rome were strong and that damage was slowly being repaired. She also relayed to us that part of China's vocation crisis, particularly among nuns, was that people simply did not know what to expect or were misinformed about the religious life. "We've lost many postulants because of this," she said. On being asked how she personally fared within China's convoluted system she smiled and said, "Bloom where you are planted."

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Tibet

From Yunnan we moved further northwest toward the Himalayas. Our excursion into a Tibetan autonomous region had little to do with Catholicism per se, but even there, at the top of the world, we found remnants of a Catholic past. We had flown into the Chinese city of Zhongdian, recently renamed Shangri-La by the authorities, landing at an elevation of about 10,500 feet. Upon arrival Tony nose bled and I just averted passing out. As we drove along harrowing ridges, and as I peered down into those narrow valleys far below our bus, it struck me that this was not unlike looking down out of a plane window, except that we were physically on the ground. It was surreal, captivating, and at times terrifying. Taking a tour bus through the winding and treacherous mountains – our highest point was roughly 14,000 feet – we rested in the rough-and-tumble frontier town of Deqin before moving up and toward our final destination, a small remote Tibetan village deep in the heart of a land still virtually untouched by modern society.

Our roads gradually changed from pavement to packed dirt surfaces, from two lanes to one narrow lane. In the distance rose glacial peaks, winking occasionally through the clouds, far higher than it seemed any mountain should be. Far down in the deep ravines every bit of arable land was terraced and planted, dotted with tiny houses, usually in small village groupings of four or five dwellings. These ravines had been slowly carved away by the glacial

streams that trickle through them, tributaries into the larger milky brown rivers that rage toward still larger rivers.

Arriving in the Niu Tibetan village – a village comprised mainly of relatives and in-laws – boys with their yaks greeted us. Once we had dropped off our gear in an elaborately painted Tibetan courtyard dwelling, a local man asked us if we liked grapes and would we like to pick some for dinner? In this remote river valley, surrounded by rugged mountains, where loose rocks crumbled in cacophony night and day, on the edge of the river and alongside the riverbed were the terraces of a neatly organized vineyard. What a bizarre sight this was, a vineyard that could have been nestled in the French countryside here instead in the Himalayas. We asked the farmers about the grapes, which proved to be the main source of livelihood for the occupants of the village, and were bemused by the answer. French Catholic missionaries had come to the region more than one hundred years ago and brought with them winemaking technology. They planted the first grapes and taught the villagers how to harvest the grapes and make wine – which was at that time used primarily for the necessity of communion wine.

The French missionaries, and Catholicism in general, were long since gone – no one had any living memory of them – but the grapes remained. We were also told of a nearby village that remains almost entirely Catholic, its biggest ideological competitor being not Buddhism, but cravings for modern consumerism. Due to some recent rockslides, however, the roads to that village proved impassable. Here in the Niu village, even though the architectural

markings of our religion were far away, it was amazing and intriguing that a remnant of Catholicism was still sustained in this place. I thought about those French missionaries, many of whom had died of old age here, as I ate those grapes, the only remaining fruits of their labors.

## Beijing: Memories of a Jesuit Past

Back in Beijing Tony met with a local priest and a few parishioners for some discrete business-style lunches to discuss the Church in China. While obstacles abound, these faithful were full of hope. The priest impressed on us the need to pray – pray always – and remain faithful. When Tony asked him what sentiment he would like most to have relayed to the Holy Father, this priest said, “Tell him that we are praying for him.”

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We decided to make our first trip to Matteo Ricci’s tomb in Beijing. When the cab pulled over in front of an imposing walled compound bearing the title of Communist Party School, we felt a definite sense trepidation. Our taxi zoomed away and I had a glimmer of that panic I experience at times in China, of feeling somewhat stranded and at the mercy of strangers. There was no apparent guard at the gate and Tony strode boldly forward assuring me that this was the place. Through the entry hall of this institutional, green-painted building there was no one in sight. Was it truly possible that we would find here the resting place of the father of Christian missions in China?

The inner courtyard was promising, with trees and grass in a central park surrounded by a driveway, which was further surrounded by the buildings of the school, some new, some old. There in the center of this park-like area was an old Ming-style stone gate through which a path led to the walled and locked tomb of

Matteo Ricci. Someone had placed a small potted plant at the base of the stele. The lock on the gate irritated Tony, and I half-heartedly suggested he scale the wall. As we loitered and took pictures a man approached asking us if we would like to be let in. He returned forthwith, key-in-hand, and we paid him the entrance fee that he had suggested. He likewise gave us booklets describing the tomb and the “scientific legacy” that Ricci had brought with him. In these printed pamphlets there was no mention of Christian missionary activities; Ricci was fondly remembered in terms of his scientific offerings and advances in China.

Matteo Ricci, as historical documents confirm, was first and foremost a Jesuit missionary, preaching and evangelizing in China beginning in 1583 AD. Ricci was famous for his fluent acquisition of the Chinese language and was a notable scholar of the Confucian Classics, establishing his now-famous “Ricci Method” of cultural accommodation. He sought to convert China from the top-down, and thus ingratiated himself with the scholar-official class, hoping ultimately to convert the emperor, for if the Son of Heaven converted, then so too would the masses. Unfortunate for Ricci, however, the emperor never embraced Catholicism, and Ricci died – a hero for bringing knowledge of Western science to China – in 1610 and was buried in Beijing.

The gates now unlocked, we were left by ourselves to explore the tomb. The man who allowed us entry simply told us to let him know when we left so that he could secure the locks again. He departed and we began our exploration of the overgrown enclosure. The mosquitoes were fierce. Adjoining Ricci’s



walled tomb was another walled cemetery full of tall stone stelea. These Chinese-style monuments stood in somber rows. Some were broken, some inscriptions had been nearly worn away during the centuries, and everywhere were inscribed crosses and acronyms for various religious orders. Ivy crawled here and there, and there was a profound sense of quiet; the grass was long and lay over itself in large swathes on the ground.

I was delighted to find the monument to another famous Jesuit remembered here, that of Guiseppe Castiglione, Italian missionary and Chinese court painter who had died in 1766, likewise interred here in Beijing. In so many ways it was amazing that in China this Jesuit cemetery still remained, seemingly undisturbed. Later I discovered that all the stones had been knocked down during various uprisings, but following each catastrophe they had been re-placed. Unlike Italy, where tourists swarm over monuments, the Catholic sites in China lay in a quiet and sleepy solitude, waiting for visitors who seldom come. That day, as at many times during our journey, I felt profoundly that I was treading on ground seldom trod, and remembering people who gave so much of themselves yet are scarcely remembered.

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Several days after our Ricci tomb venture, one of my Chinese language teachers took us to the neighborhood where she grew up. China is changing, Beijing especially. Not far from Qianmen and Tiananmen Square, my teacher had grown up in a siheyuan, or courtyard home, inside an Old Beijing-style

hutong, or alley neighborhood. These hutong neighborhoods have been frequently in the Western news as of late as a symbol of the destruction of old China in order to make way for the new. Some of the Beijing churches we visited were originally located in these neighborhoods of narrow, tangled streets. Seeing the remaining hutong is an important way of understanding old China, the China as it was seen by the early missionaries.

As we approached my teacher's childhood home, we walked around a tall and imposing office building. This building, she told us, had replaced the immediate neighborhood where her home had once been. She told us that when her brother came back to visit after years away and saw the modern office building where his house should have been, he cried. She was so eager to show us this fleeting vision of old Beijing, and yet at the same time we could tell that the feeling of pain connected to this place was still raw for her. She took us through several alleys of the xia (bottom) section, which sat across from her old shang (top) section, which was now a towering glass building.

My teacher asked permission from a resident to bring us into one sad little courtyard, telling us that when she was a youth things were very much different, the houses were then still cherished and new-looking, even though they dated from the Qing dynasty. This neighborhood had housed many of Beijing's famous opera stars during her youth, and prior. She walked us over to a nearby hutong where we could see the character chai, or "demolish," written on every exposed

wall of each building. The entire neighborhood was slated for demolition, and by next year, she said, it would all be gone, history replaced by another skyscraper.

In the rubble of demolished houses we could often see a solitary tree, the tree that would have shaded the entire courtyard. We encountered some slow-to-move residents who shrugged and smoked their cigarettes, much more interested in the foreigners who wandered through their alleys rather than the reason of why we were there. In a beautifully restored siheyuan courtyard home a sleazy businessman chatted with us a bit, my teacher lamenting politely of the imminent destruction of the houses. After we had departed our teacher told us that this man was in fact the developer who had bought the old neighborhood in order to sell the land for development and make his millions. We all felt powerlessly frustrated.

Tony and I agreed: we liked the new Beijing with its up-to-date and easy-to-live-in environment, but we also appreciate the old buildings, the charm and history. It is an impossible situation, like two realities trying to occupy the same time and space. I am glad to have seen the unspoilt hutongs before they disappear, to have stood in those streets and marveled at the vernacular genius in the design of those neighborhoods. China is overflowing with seemingly impossible situations.

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Another brisk autumn day we paid a visit the Beijing Ancient Observatory. On the subway that afternoon my heart was touched. In this city

teaming with disinterested people, there are rare gems of experiences when someone surfaces from apparent anonymity and has a genuine human interaction with a stranger. I always have a sort of paralysis when I see a homeless or needy person, in the time it takes for me to determine that I should help them, all too often the opportunity has already passed. Such was the case on the subway on our way to the Observatory.

A mute girl was passing through the subway cars peddling her wares, which consisted of little charms, small dolls that clip onto phones or handbags. For most people in the car her presence did not even register, they either saw through her or pretended not to notice her. Seldom did anyone make eye contact. But one tall man, sharply dressed and attractive, seated with his leather briefcase in his lap waved her over. He passed her some cash and she handed him the small doll in a clear envelope, quickly moving on.

What struck me so powerfully was watching this man seated across from me as he examined his new purchase, delicately removing it from the plastic, and turning it over conscientiously in his hands, studying it like a connoisseur. He clipped it to his briefcase, and returned to his musings, a slight half-smile on his face. His tenderness, sincerity, and complete presence in the moment brought tears to my eyes. What a simple action, to buy this small doll at a meager price, to make not only a much-needed monetary transaction, but also a having a human interaction in a city so fraught with urban loneliness. In a country with a

relatively small Christian population – about four percent at the writing of this book – I have found China to be a people full of implicit Christianity.

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The Beijing Ancient Observatory is nestled in a portion of the old Ming dynasty (1368-1644) city wall. Even before the Jesuits arrived the observatory was used by astronomers who reported their observations to the emperor. Ferdinand Verbiest, S.J., was particularly skilled in this area of science, lauded by the Emperor Kangxi, and was made director of the observatory in the mid 1600s. Verbiest added to and rebuilt many of the large bronze astronomical instruments, several replicas of which can be visited at the Observatory today. It is open to tourists and has a calm, quiet, somewhat forgotten atmosphere. Like so many places in Beijing, Catholic history pops up around every corner in the form of a monument, but the religious dimension of this history lingers only in the shadows. Since many informational signs simply remember men like Father Verbiest as “Western scientists,” those who visit these sites today fail to realize the Catholic or “mission” element of their existence. It felt as if it had been centuries since European priests hurried along these passages. Indeed, it had been.

Even in the Forbidden City – the former imperial palace of China’s emperors since the Yuan dynasty – I see the ghosts of Jesuits past. Purchasing an extra ticket allows you passage into the dimly lit Hall of Clocks, where at intervals tourists gather to watch extravagantly large clocks animate and chime,

similarly enthralled as the original palace residents must have been centuries ago. These clocks were once tended to by generations of Jesuits who maintained them after the clocks had been offered as tributary gifts from Western powers to the Chinese court. Jesuit skill in such matters gave them entrée to the court and access to the emperor himself, whom they hoped would become a type of Chinese Constantine in creating inroads for Catholicism in China. Their goal however was never realized; all that seems to remain of their lofty mission are those rooms full of clocks, still ticking persistently, the remnants of their hopes laid out for public view in display cases.

At other times the “memory” is alive and well. Receiving a phone call from a Chinese acquaintance from church, we jumped into a cab to visit once-again Ricci’s tomb. Meeting us at the gate, Mr. T took us by the arm and walked with us, talking excitedly, into the school compound. Even though we had visited this site before, Mr. T was able to tell us many details we had not known, relaying oral histories that had been intently told to him by others instructed similarly – this is how the Catholic histories have been preserved and handed down through the centuries in China. There is an oral tradition that has been at times been the only way of preserving memory and history. We learned that at one time the Lazarists and the Marists had shared this property, living and working together; at one point there was also a seminary here.

As we approached the tomb we heard the distinct sounds of murmured prayers. As we rounded the corner we saw a small group of Chinese women

praying. Soon we were all introduced and they told us that they were Catholics who live in the area and go there frequently to pray. The middle-aged women in the group told us that she had grown up in this neighborhood, and offered to show us some of the treasures of Catholic history here. She walked with us over to the old compound wall, very old indeed, crumbling before our eyes, and nearly completely covered with shanty buildings and a discarded pool table. This was the only remaining part of the original wall, she said.

The old chapel was still immediately recognizable in its formulaic church design, but the place where the rose window would have been was now filled in with bricks and a large red communist star. Inside we asked to take pictures, but the women who were tending to the storeroom full of Marxist textbooks looked terrified at our request and asked us to leave without a picture. The chapel where Holy Mass was once said daily is now a large spacious storage room for books, and our small group of visitors lamented the change. But this was not by far the most tragic part of our tour of the grounds.

Mrs. W, whom we had just met, showed us an area on the grassy lawn, which, as tradition holds, was the location of a massacre of Catholics that had occurred during the Boxer Uprising of 1900. Here, she said, sorrowfully, Catholic orphan children had been buried alive, somewhere, now forgotten underneath all that manicured grass. Their identities would never be known and the very event itself, people feared, might be lost to human memory. We six stood there for a moment mourning that heartbreaking event when Chinese

nationals turned against one another in a war aimed primarily at foreign powers. So many lives were snuffed out, their memories carried on only the stories told by pious faithful. We could not linger long in this compound, but as we left our eyes were searching the buildings and looking for cues, for memories, for the faint outline of a cross, a symbol, or sign of its former life as a Catholic space.

Out on the streets we walked several blocks to a nearby area where we stopped in front an amazing piece of old Beijing. A little house-like tomb, perfectly French-looking as if it had been transplanted from Père Lachaise Cemetery in Paris. It was the tomb of a once-famous Chinese priest who had died in Beijing nearly 100 years ago. I do not believe we ever would have found this little gem without the guidance of these devout Chinese Catholics. Mr. T, our original guide departed, as did the others, and we stood to chat with Mrs. W for quite some time. She and Tony leaned in toward each other speaking in hushed and urgent voices, reaching out to tap each other's arms in a fashion so common among Chinese confidants. She revealed, after some pressing, that she was an "underground Catholic." She did not disclose where the Masses were held, or who celebrated them, nor did she profess any judgments toward the patriotic Catholic church.

It was our first encounter with an underground Catholic, though not our last. It seemed somehow fitting that it was underground Catholics that we found praying at the tomb of a foreign missionary, as they are still so connected to the "outside" Church – the Church of Rome – its foreign priests and foreign



allegiances. My impression was that these underground Catholics were more daring – daring enough to stand in a group before a locked tomb reciting audible prayers to the Blessed Virgin. Offering to pray for one another, but receiving no contact information from her, we went our separate ways.

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It was a rainy and dreary Sunday evening. Mass had ended and we were standing around in the rain under umbrellas in the courtyard of the church talking with some of the parishioners. I was chatting with a younger man who sported a fashionable hairdo and a navy blue velvet blazer, snug jeans, and polished, pointy shoes – what we might call in the west, a hipster. We were having a light-hearted chat, mostly in English about Mass and liturgy and being Roman Catholic in general, when he began talking about the “Reform of the Reform,” made popular by The New Liturgical Movement, Adoremus Bulletin, and the Holy Father, and how much he loved Latin. It was a conversation I could have been having in America with people his same age. I was stunned; never had I ever expected to hear the words “Reform of the Reform” in China, it had been something I guess I supposed only existed in the psyche of the West. Now I realized that the young world-round are amazingly similar; it is something I think is unique to their generation, perhaps largely due to the Internet. He talked further about his love for Gregorian chant, the traditional liturgy, and Mass said *ad orientem*– these weren’t “Chinese” issues, these were internal, international Catholic topics, ones I might have heard from a twenty-something back home.

This young man was also a member of the Chinese choir, which I had recently joined, murmuring as best I could through the beautiful Chinese hymns. I loved especially the Chinese-language Our Father and Sanctus, which followed their own unique tunes. This young man was excited to hear that I had experience in singing various parts of the Mass in Latin and thought I might offer an American interpretation of pacing and pronunciation. They had recently started singing the Credo in Latin, but found it a bit tricky due in part to its length. I was eager to assist.

I loved singing in the church choir, though I think they were simply indulging me, a favor I fear I could not offer much for in return. Each Sunday, after Mass had ended, much of the congregation remained to chant the old, nineteenth-century style Prayer's After Mass, which are composed in a way particular to China. These are primarily Marian prayers chanted in a rhythmic pattern following ancient Buddhist sutra chanting. The result is an interesting, extremely Eastern-sounding, series of prayers. Tony and I always stayed to hear these prayers though we ourselves could never master their rapid, colloquial pacing. Many of the young, we were told, have an aversion to these prayers, feeling that they are simply too "Buddhist" in flavor. Preferring Western music and prayers instead, English-language hymns are particularly popular among the young Chinese. At times I was concerned that this interest among the young took on an almost business-like quality, where English language Masses may simply be another way to gain access to English language opportunities so prized for

social and career success. But in practice I did see many young people learning and retaining the old-fashioned indigenous after-Mass prayers. And so new traditions crop up among sustained old traditions.

That night after the evening Mass we heard that the congregation had hired a tour bus to take interested parishioners to a Beijing cemetery the following day where the local bishop would be offering a Mass for the Holy Souls on All Souls Day. We were assured that there was room on the bus for us and decided that it was just too good of an opportunity to pass up. The next morning we arrived before we had intended to and with the extra time we explored the church property in the daylight, poking around behind the church and between the buildings. On one exterior wall we found faded red characters, Marxist slogans that had been painted on the church during the Cultural Revolution of the 1960s and 1970s. These characters were so faded that our young friends likewise could not decipher them, but as some older ladies passed by with their bicycles, we asked them. They remembered the old Maoist slogans by heart and told us what they meant, stanzas that sang the praise of Chinese communism. When we asked them why these faded characters were allowed to remain on the church exterior, they shrugged and told us that it was because it was part of their history, something that they should never forget.

They told us stories about when the church had reopened in the 1980s after the end of the Cultural Revolution. Catholics came crawling out of the woodwork, they said, when Masses were announced to resume again in the early

1980s. Police guards stood in the doorframes and when a Catholic approached they were asked to make the sign of the cross, a symbol of their Catholicism. If they refused or were unable, they were turned away. No “new” Catholics were allowed; at this time only old Catholics were permitted to partake in the liturgy. For those who did cross themselves their names were written down and recorded by representatives from the security bureau; at that time no one knew what would become of these lists, and people were nervous, for good reason, to be singled out as believers. Many had died during the Cultural Revolution, sent to labor camps – who was to say it wouldn’t happen again.

As a bishop in Guizhou told us, in those first few years when churches started opening again, you would suddenly see a neighbor who you had never known was Catholic sitting next to you in the pew. There was a Catholic community he never knew existed, all around him, throughout his childhood, and suddenly they were visible. The more I contemplated the risks taken by those Catholics who first came forward to attend government-sanctioned Masses in the early 1980s and those who still attend sanctioned Masses under the ever-present gaze of the surveillance cameras, I was humbled. In the United States these Catholics were painted as unfaithful to Rome, loyal to government-selected church leaders, cut-off, “patriotic,” and in schism. What I found were brave individuals fighting for their faith, and loyal to the Holy Father, willing to bring their religion into the open and flaunt it in front of the eyes of their government here in the capital city of China.

We asked one priest about saying the Holy Father's name in the canon of the Mass, and we were told that in his particular case, and also among the priests he knew, when they could not say it openly because of proscription, they said it in their hearts, but always, he insisted were they loyal to Rome. When Tony asked Chinese priests if they would like us to relay something to the Holy Father, I heard them say again and again, words such as, "We think of him; we pray for him; we are his children." We asked many faithful what they had done when the public celebration of the Mass was prohibited, and we heard repeatedly, "We prayed the rosary." Marian devotions in particular were and are the life-blood of the Catholic communities that went underground for more than a decade. Of course there are sad instances as well, instances of extremely poor catechism, where one wonders if the individual is really Catholic at all, and there are times when I met priests who seemed corrupt, excessively guarded and political. But these unfortunate cases were more the exception than the norm.

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More than thirty people from the parish rode on that fifty-seat bus northward into a Beijing suburb where the Catholic cemetery is located. Tony and I were the only two foreigners on the bus, and when we arrived we appeared to be the only two foreigners at the cemetery. The cemetery itself was much smaller than I had expected, and most Catholics in China are cremated due to space and land constraints in that country. There was a petite central building, painted white, the interior of which was crowded with bookshelf-like "tombs,"

housing the cremated remains of Catholic faithful. Surrounding the exterior of this building were burial plots marked by white stone crosses.

Each of the interior tombs was lovingly decorated, usually with photos of the deceased, faux flowers, various holy cards, and sometimes mementoes and other objects important to the memory of the person: prayer books, statues, rosary beads, to name a few. It was reminiscent of walking down aisles of glass-encased barrister bookshelves, except that each small shelf contained an ornate world in miniature in remembrance of a unique and precious soul. The day that we were there was a traditional Chinese day for Catholic family members come to tidy these tombs and to refresh or replace the ornaments. As we walked down the aisles, many glass doors were opened wide and family members stood before them, prayer books in hand, praying for the soul of the person whose remains lay therein. There was an atmosphere both solemn in memory, but also filled with the sounds of scuttle and activity. The building was full to overflowing.

Outside we gathered with hundreds, certainly, if not thousands of people. The crowd was civil and attentive as the long procession, which included the first nuns in full habits that I had seen in China, made its way toward the outdoor altar. The bishop of Beijing celebrated Mass under a purple canopy, reverently intoning prayers for the deceased. Assisting the bishop was our priest from our Beijing parish and we could not help beaming a bit with pride that he was selected to assist at this particular Mass. The crowd was very thick and extremely intent on the event happening all around them. People to my right remained

kneeling on the asphalt during the entire service. Their dedication was inspiring, something not uncommon among Chinese Catholics.

Tony and I, with our shiny white faces, stood a good deal taller than most of the surrounding people, so it is not surprising that others could easily pick us out of the crowd. To our surprise, in that city of some sixteen million people, Mrs. W, whom we had met just days prior at the Ricci tomb, was tapping our arms and saying hello to us. She and Tony exchanged previously forgotten contact information and chatted for a few minutes as she introduced him to some of the people she had come with. We were amazed and inspired that underground Catholics were attending a ceremony such as this, large and public, and overseen by the “patriotic” bishop of Beijing. It was yet another example, to our pleasant surprise, that the “two Churches” of China were actually existing together, literally praying together in common for a common Christian purpose. It has been said that Chinese Catholics are “one Church, two suffering communities,” and I was beginning to understand this.

After the Mass for the Holy Souls we walked with our Chinese friends, Mr. and Mrs. F, around the grounds and watched as families tidied the grass around the family plots and placed memorial wreaths against the large upright stone crosses. Family portraits were taken around particular gravestones, which occupied the center position in the portrait, the place of honor. From the outside we could see that the building had an upstairs, but when we attempted to ascend the stairs we were blocked by a polite but insistent attendant who informed us

that due to the poor structural integrity of the building they were not allowing the general public to go upstairs. As this was explained, a few people slipped by us and ascended the stairs.

Tony, with his undaunted curiosity to learn, pulled out his Vatican archives researcher card explaining that he was a Catholic scholar who would really like to see the second storey. Our Chinese friends call this the “magic card,” and certainly it opened more than a few doors for us. The second floor turned out to be fairly unexciting (but who could know that ahead of time), and the attendant gave us a tour of the space, pointing out things of interest. The primary attraction here was a large photograph of the former bishop of Beijing, surrounded by floral offerings and draped with a cloth in traditional Chinese memorial style. Several people were praying silently in front of this photograph. After looking down from above and again as we left I was struck by how many Catholics were present on this day at the cemetery. In Beijing, like any modern city, fellow believers so often go unnoticed; it is not until gatherings like this one that we are able to see how many there are, and how passionately they believe.





Tianjin

## Imprints of Colonialism in Tianjin

As the days passed and autumn turned colder, the yam-sellers and chestnut roasters appeared on street corners selling their toasty snacks. We knew that our time in China was nearly half over for this particular visit and we were eager to travel to other important sights, indeed, we were very behind in our planned ventures. We boarded a speed train for Tianjin, the location of the water sporting events during the 2008 Summer Olympics. This train was built especially for the Olympic event and carried us to the harbor city of Tianjin at a speed of 220 mph in just about 30 minutes.

As China grows smaller due to rapid transport, her history seems to expand as the visitor can see more of it faster, piecing together millennia of history into a puzzle that always seems to become a richer version of the China you knew before. Tianjin is an ancient location at the heart of the history of China, where the river meets the sea. In the Qing Dynasty Tianjin became home to many foreigners living in Western concession districts, who used the port as an access point to the rest of Mainland China. It was here that in 1856 Chinese soldiers boarded a ship flying the British flag in search of illegal opium, apprehended the men aboard, and consequently unleashed the violent conflicts known as the Opium Wars.

In the years that followed, Tianjin, and China as a whole, was forcibly opened to trade with the West, and self-contained foreign concessions overtook

the city; foreigners ruled and lived exclusively within these walls. Thus the city became a patchwork of architectural styles particular to their home countries: British, French, Japanese, German, Russian, Italian, and Belgian, to name a few. The following decades saw surges of aggression from both sides, with Chinese Boxers defending their homeland during the Boxer Uprising and the allied armies fighting for Western interests. In 1902 the city was returned to Chinese control; what remains today is a quasi-European-looking city entirely inhabited by Chinese nationals. While the buildings themselves are beautiful, the history, fear, and animosity upon which they were built are not so appealing. It was a strange sight and gave me a haunted feeling.

The air pollution in Tianjin made Beijing seem clean by comparison. It took more time than anticipated just to extricate ourselves from the train station, which was crawling with persistent tour guides and “private” cab drivers. Eventually we hired a legitimate taxi to take us to one of the primary Catholic churches that Tony wanted to visit. Every time I step into a cab in a city I am unfamiliar with a wave of panic washes over me as I wonder if all will be well. Since the city is foreign to us they could be taking us anywhere, charge us anything, or deliver us into the hands of criminals. But as usual we arrived safely at the church we wanted to visit.

Our secular tour books had praised this particular church for its history and beautiful architecture. Before the unfortunate Tianjin Massacre of 1870, which followed a series of epidemics that had killed large populations, tensions

between local Chinese and Western missionaries had risen to a fevered pitch. French nuns in charge of a Tianjin orphanage were rumored to have kidnapped, killed, or plucked out the eyes of local Chinese children. Angry locals rose against the foreign missionaries; French guards reportedly shot a Chinese magistrate, thus an angry Chinese mob mobbed local Catholic churches and institutions in revenge of actual and fictional crimes. The French consulate and French-built Wanghailou church were burned to the ground. In all, several dozen Chinese Catholic converts were martyred and twenty-one foreigners, including ten nuns and one priest, were killed. By way of social reparation after the incident, sixteen Chinese nationals were executed for the crimes; more lives were lost. The church was rebuilt only to suffer attack again during the Boxer Uprising around the turn of the century. Today we were visiting the site of these sad events, unsure of what we would find there.

Wanghailou, or Our Lady of Victory, church stands at a large intersection near Tianjin's Hai River. While majestic in a restrained medieval style, the grey stone façade is somewhat dour. Inland and down the block is a smaller building of similar style, and between them a gate with a door that we peered into. Inside we found the expected older ladies sitting on plastic stools – the kind who always seem to be found at any given church on a weekday – chatting and keeping themselves occupied. Our arrival aroused immediate attention. Tony produced his Vatican identification card and congenially asked if he could see a priest. Almost immediately a very young, gentle-looking Chinese man appeared, a

priest in lay clothing. After some simple introductions Tony asked if we could see the church and take some photographs. This request was graciously granted. First we looked inside a makeshift chapel that had been erected in the courtyard and we were informed that the main chapel and the entire church grounds were being renovated. I have seen enough of the world to know that church renovation can be either charmed or destructive, and I held my breath as we crossed the courtyard to the old church.

The church was devoid of pews and in a state of moderate disrepair; the paint was peeling, but both the structure and faded ornament were gorgeous. Old hymnals lay gathering dust and construction equipment stood waiting to be employed. It wasn't long before a group of professional-looking people entered, notebooks and cell-phones in hand. After a few minutes we were introduced to the group, who turned out to be a committee of government-appointed preservationists who were touring the church facility to determine the situation.

We felt that it was truly our great fortune that we met this receptive, and apparently well educated committee. Various committee members were intently interested in understanding the symbolism in, and traditions of, Catholic church interior design. Tony, with his seemingly endless knowledge of things church-related was able to explain the meaning of acronyms, such as IHS, seen on furniture and wall paintings, as well as elaborate on the overall design of the altar and sanctuary. One of the members of this committee expressed that it was their intention to as accurately as possible restore the church interior to its historical

glory in hopes of increasing tourism. In our experience in China we have found that restorations of this sort are generally very tastefully done, with an emphasis on the historical legacy of the building. If it is the idea of tourism that motivates these projects, then I must admit I am all for it, because the end result is priceless. The priest whom we had met stood by looking somewhat amused and after the committee had continued on their way; he and Tony chatted for a long while.

I felt very lucky to have seen this church at this particular moment in its history. I wondered about the fate of some of the ephemera that I saw lying around in the church and I used my penlight to peer into the dark corners and back rooms of the church. I tend to do this sort of “searching for clues” while Tony has people deep in conversation. I frequently drift away and explore, often coming back with interesting insights. I was glad that the interior was going to be refurbished as it was indeed in a state of disrepair. The granite floor was even chipped and broken at parts and I slipped a small stone into my pocket as a kind of building relic. So much history had passed over that floor, so many stories, so many lives lived and ended here.

Back in the courtyard we persuaded some of the older ladies to let us into the gift shop for a little impromptu shopping. These local bookshops tend to have gems specific to the local community: VCDs (similar to DVDs) of special Masses, locally printed prayer books and history books, or unique Catholic artwork. Tony found several books to purchase printed by local presses with

small publishing runs. It takes many miles of traveling to seek out these small bookshops, often fortuitously or generously opened for us; this alone has become a driving force behind many of our excursions. We handed the ladies who had so kindly opened the shop several copies of holy cards picturing Pope Benedict XVI, which we had brought from America – a donation from our Catholic bookstore back home. On the reverse was a prayer to the Holy Father in English, which we translated for them. One of these women, a portly, middle-aged woman, clutched the photo to her chest in appreciation, and posed, proudly holding the holy card, for a photograph with Tony. Everyone we have given these cards to seemed grateful and pleased to receive them, but we had predicted, wrongly, that images of the current Holy Father were unavailable in China. Certainly, in the many bookstores we visited John Paul II was more common, indeed he is beloved in the hearts of the Chinese faithful, but images of Benedict XVI were also frequently seen, on bulletin boards and as large-scale prints waiting to be framed.

Before we left Our Lady of Victory we visited the office of another priest located within the walls of the property. On the frame of this door we read the characters of the Chinese Patriotic Catholic Association (CPCA) (Zhongguo Tianzhujiào Aiguo Hui) and he was indeed the representative local priest for this association. Like the others we have met who hold this affiliation, he was reserved and somewhat emotionally distant. While not at all unfriendly, he seemed guarded, offering slight glimpses of what seemed to be irritation at our

presence. We did not stay long, only long enough to determine through gently posed questions that he did indeed represent the CPCA at the church. When we inquired about this specifically he said to us something along the lines of, “Well, it’s written on the door.” We didn’t know whether to interpret this as meaning that it was only written on the door and thus holds little meaning, or as if to imply that we should stop asking obvious questions. We didn’t press the matter.

In some cases these priests have been chosen to be the CPCA representative in that community; they attend classes and act as an intermediary with the government. If these priests are from the outset loyal and upright clergymen, then this relationship can be fortuitous for the church, but in some cases one wonders if weaker men are broken under the pressures, or were already partial to the “party line” before their appointment.

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From Our Lady of Victory we took a taxi to the current Tianjin Cathedral, known as Xikai Church. Its domed towers are reminiscent of Sacré-Cœur on Montmartre in Paris and it stands majestically at the terminus of a large pedestrian mall that serves as a trendy shopping area in the Heping District. It is the largest church in Tianjin, built by the French around 1913 in a Romanesque style with bold striped detailing on the façade. It was truly majestic on the exterior and the recently renovated interior was awash in French-style opulence. The beauty of this church would be astounding in any country. We sat for a very



long time in the pews with soft golden light streaming in through the tall stained-glass windows.

Many Chinese tourists visited while we were there. A young teenage couple came in and the girl, in a white-hooded sweatshirt, knelt for a considerable time while her boyfriend waited next to her in the pew. Several Chinese families came in, talking loudly and pointing at various features of the interior. What struck me was that while the parents often charged forward, seeing without internalizing, I saw several times the younger members of the family dropping back and hanging around, looking, searching intently at the interior of the church its details, statues, and art. What I surmised was an age gap, a culture gap between parents and children in China today, and while it might be fair to suggest that large portions of urban China are spiritually bankrupt, the young appear to be seeking something, what I would call a need for a spiritual center in their increasingly and overwhelmingly material lives.

This cathedral, so lovingly restored, awed me. Tony and I made note of the open-air confessionals which consisted of a simple Gothic-style arched board with a screen and cross, which, on hinges, could be swung out from the wall and placed between the penitent kneeling at the altar rail, and the priest, seated behind it. Seldom do we see such an exposed method for confession in the West, but in China this format was necessary, since early on foreign priests were accused of lascivious behavior with female penitents inside closed confessionals. Women in traditional Chinese culture would seldom, if ever, spend time with a

man who was not her husband in such an intimate, concealed setting. Even medical doctors might have only seen a woman's arm protruding through a screen, in order to take her pulses and make his diagnosis, all the while observed by various servants and attendants. The Western Catholic customs of private confession, baptism, and the application of anointing oils – all rife with physical proximity and contact – proved one of the larger challenges to early Catholic missionary efforts. Church hierarchy quickly learned to avoid situations so prone to rumor, as rumor often, as we have seen, could erupt in violence. Hence these small, hinged screens served in place of the traditional confessional booth, and while many have today been replaced, here we were able to see an example of what we had read about but seldom seen.

Outside, near the entry doors to the Cathedral was a small gift-cart with a lone, somewhat disinterested attendant. It was here that we saw for the first time a large stack of posters of Pope Benedict XVI. The gift-cart did not have much that was unique to offer us, but we were told that the sisters in the convent next door had a larger bookshop. Ah the many fruits of making casual conversation – we had no former knowledge of this shop or the convent, and we were delighted to be informed. The convent building seemed to me somewhat foreboding and the people coming and going seemed a little on the grumpy side; needless to say I did not feel particularly compelled to explore. But Tony, ever-focused on his goal, opened the front doors and walked into the entry-hall, where, to our immediate left was an entry into one of the larger Catholic bookstores I had seen

on this trip to China. In the front room were a variety of gift items, holy cards, and Christian-themed traditional Chinese-style paper-cuts mounted on scrolls; in the far room was a vast array of books, from bibles to prayer books, histories and foreign works in translation. Initially we were overwhelmed with the sheer number of volumes, wondering how we would ever look through them all and how we could transport them if we purchased very many. We had not anticipated finding anything like this.

We did in fact buy many books that day, which were packed into shopping bags, the tiny plastic handles of which dug into our fingers painfully that night before breaking off entirely, causing us to carry a heavy load of books clumsily in our arms back to the train station. The nuns who sold us the books were very sweet, unhurried and earnest. As we left the shop they locked the doors behind us, though we had not sensed that they were eager to close. We felt extremely fortunate in our findings that day, and yet exhausted and overwhelmed with the knowledge that Tianjin was just one of hundreds of cities rich with Catholic history – there were churches waiting to be seen, bookstores waiting to be visited, stories waiting to be heard, too many for a lifetime.

We wandered through the old foreign concessions, looking up at the European buildings that peered over the tops of walls. Many of these buildings that opened onto the streets were once foreign banks, and Tony went into nearly every one, taking pictures and marveling at the workmanship of those grand old structures. Deep within the former French concession we saw some tattered old

buildings with the character chai (demolish) written on the walls of some shanties. Beyond the abandoned rubble and foliage that filled what was once a courtyard we thought we could see what looked like an old Western-style church. The exterior walls of the church now served as one of the four walls for these shacks that clung to it like barnacles. We walked and at times climbed over the rubble surrounding this church in hopes of finding a way in – who knows what might be inside. While on the one hand glad that the building was secure we were a little sorry not to have gained entry.

At last we found a discarded chair that we set up in front of the main church double-doors, which though locked and chained, could be opened enough to slip a hand through the top. Standing on that rickety chair Tony held his camera up through the slit in the door and took some flash photos. Looking at the small screen on the back of our digital camera we could see the dusty interior of a forgotten old church. We couldn't help but feel downcast thinking of the Masses that had once been said there, the people who had once congregated there. Back on the street, however, our spirits were lifted as we happened upon and read a sign of public notice posted on the enclosing wall – the chai we had seen referred only to the squatters' shacks (already vacant) and the church was scheduled for renovation, deemed "historically important" by the government. Again, new China had surprised and pleased us. I could not help but reflect on the strange idea that somewhere in this city there had been children who had grown up in the shadow of that church in one of those little huts. How had the

building, the church they had shared a wall with, shaped their lives? What was it like to have lived there? Was all of Tianjin like this, growing up in the shadow of a symbol of Western power?

We returned to Xikai cathedral for one last look. The doors were locked and brilliant exterior lights had been turned on to illuminate the façade. We sat across the street in a coffee shop that overlooked the cathedral and waited for the right moment to return to the train station. From our window on the second storey we watched the massive triple-domed building shimmer in the smoggy night; at nearby tables were Arab exchange students studying and Chinese businessmen and women working late into the night. Departing this city I felt that while I enjoyed my time in Tianjin, it was not a place where I “fit”, and I could not help but wonder if this had something to do with its long, turbulent history with Western influences. While the city seemed architecturally familiar, I did not seem to belong there. I left thinking about those French missionaries, long since departed, whose life-blood was poured into the building of the cathedral; and I wondered about their dreams and hopes, and the glory they evidently foresaw for China, represented in stone by the majesty of that chandelier-bedecked church.

## Holding the Fortress: Beijing Missionaries, Past and Present

We met two students for lunch one day. Manuel was an extraordinarily tall American student of Cuban decent from a strong Catholic family. With him was a picture-perfect blond American girl, Susan, with Catholic family relations, who was now exploring the faith for herself. From the restaurant we took a long bus ride to Beijing's North church, or Beitang, where there had occurred a particularly fierce chapter of the Boxer Uprising of 1900. Located in the Xicheng District of Beijing, surrounded by winding alleyways, Beitang stands magnificently at the dead-end of a cross street. In 1887 French Jesuits had relocated the church property to its present location from a site located near Zhongnanhai where the original 1703 church had towered over the walls of the Forbidden City.

The bold, planar, white and grey marble façade is in a Gothic revival style somewhat reminiscent of Notre Dame de Paris. It was completed under the supervision of the designer, a French Lazarist, or Vincentian, missionary priest, Pierre-Marie-Alphonse Favier (1837-1905). This rotund man became bishop in 1897, not long before this church, its supporting buildings, and spacious grounds surrounded by walls, would come under attack during the Boxer Uprising.

The famous siege at Beitang occurred from June through August of 1900, when Boxers numbering nearly 10,000 unsuccessfully attacked the cathedral with hopes of breaching the walls. Inside the compound were Chinese orphans,

several hundred Europeans, and nearly 4,000 Chinese Catholics who untiringly resisted the attack, the opposition being led by Bishop Favier and a handful of European military men. Many, then and now, consider the successful defense of this vulnerable cathedral to have been a miracle, assisted by the intercession of Our Lady, to whom the faithful within implored unceasingly during the siege. Favier wrote an account of the event, a text that is still available, and inspiring, today.

Bishop Favier, having great foresight in May of 1900, stockpiled stores of food and weaponry on the cathedral grounds as refugees began to take shelter there. In June the attack commenced. Several hundred of the refugees died of disease, starvation, and gunfire or other explosives. It is said that on the final day of the attack, before they were liberated by Japanese troops, the faithful inside the cathedral had redoubled their prayers to the Virgin because their store of food had been entirely consumed and those several thousand persons who remained faced the reality of slow starvation, a decidedly painful death. It was on this day that fighting ceased and the people who had been in the cathedral, praying fervently while completely cut-off from the outside world, could now sing praises of thanksgiving. It is not hard to see how powerfully this story has shaped the culture of Catholic Beijing; Beitang today remains a particularly, if not primarily the vibrant Catholic church in Beijing. We discovered that it was likewise here that many underground Catholics attended Masses and intermingled with “patriotic” Catholics.

Today we took our two American friends to see the church and tell them stories of the siege, and then introduce them to some of the beauty of the architecture. In the transept arms of the church are two famous paintings of the Blessed Mother and Divine Infant. In the west transept is a particularly cherub-faced Virgin holding the infant Christ in what might be a reproduction of the original Ming dynasty painting. In the east transept is another painting, likely also to have been painted by a European missionary. This painting dates to the Qing dynasty and depicts a regal-looking Mother and Child in imperial yellow Chinese robes. Both paintings offer a delightful mix of Chinese features and Western style; the result is something unique to Chinese Catholicism.

We lingered a while under the eaves of the two small Chinese pavilions in front of the building. Here stand several large stone stelae inscribed with the history of the church. Later battered during the Cultural Revolution, one stele still lays broken and fragmented on its side partially nestled in the bushes. It was left where it fell, in memory of past events. From where I stood I could hear the two young Americans debating some issues of Catholic practice and belief and I wondered about their futures, wondered at the impression of the Church being made on them in China, and wondering at my own belief, suddenly feeling so foreign here in China, standing in front of this great monument, but unable to bring the past to life in my own mind. Even though I knew of Favier and the siege, I could not feel it as I stood here before this great edifice. It all just felt so far away at that moment.



Tony was able to persuade some of the older ladies lingering in the church to allow us to enter the convent that lies to the rear of the cathedral. Despite their initial show of resistance they eventually relented and agreed to show us, guiding us around the side of the building, behind the apse of the church, past the “do not enter” signs, and into a small gated courtyard of a somewhat dilapidated compound. Here we were left on our own and Tony began to pester and nudge some of the janitorial ladies hard at work until a nun was fetched. The Chinese nun who returned to us turned out to be the Mother Superior of the convent, who apologized saying that the other sisters were out working that day. She and Tony had a tender conversation standing in that courtyard until she suggested that we see the original Lady Chapel of the church, which, now partitioned off from the main church, serves as the nuns’ private chapel for daily Mass and prayer.

We entered through a small later-addition entry chamber that might have once been a window opening. That day they were having Adoration. Susan has told me that only now, years later, does she realize that they were having an Exposition of the Blessed Sacrament, but at the time she only knew that she felt overwhelmingly content in the chapel that afternoon. We all knelt and prayed alongside a few others within the warm and close atmosphere of that ornate rib-vaulted Gothic Revival chapel. In that quiet space I remember feeling a profound sense of peace and a certain sadness that we could not stay longer. It was a peacefulness that stayed with all four of us the rest of that day and can be seen written on our faces in the photos that we took of each other later that afternoon.

We four left by way of the gift-shop, where we purchased Chinese-style Nativity scene Christmas cards, among other things. Next door we visited Beihai park, passing respectfully by the Buddhist statues, watched water-calligraphers write on the pavement, and finally eating dinner at an authentic Indian restaurant in the university district. Once again I marveled at the international and religious diversity that has punctuated China's long history and wondered about its future. While the situation that day felt vibrant, and deadly warfare in the streets seemed confined to a distant past, it did not go unnoticed that the property that Beitang once held has been reduced drastically over the years. Even now the property holdings are diminishing, and down the street in front of the church a former church building now stands with a large red star displayed boldly on its façade.

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Several days later, Tony heard a rumor about Masses that were being offered at "the British Embassy." We grabbed our passports and forged through Beijing to a part of city that was new to us. Out of the subway Tony impressed me with his adept abilities in using our new Chinese atlas to find the embassy. We found the imposing pink edifice and spoke briefly with the guard, who waved us down to another guard. I didn't see anyone going in or out, and it certainly did not seem like a place to find a Mass. An official Chinese representative from within came out and listened to our query; "Oh yes," he said, "it's down the street," pointing and waving as he was speaking. He referenced a string of words that made little sense to us, but as we walked in the direction he

had pointed, we mumbled the same string of words he had used and new people likewise kept waiving us on in the same direction, so we knew it meant something. Nothing looked right; the streets were lined with towering, modern office towers, opulence displayed at every corner. Eventually we found the place we had been sent to and realized why the words we were speaking didn't mean anything to us, it was the Kerry Hotel in phonetic transliteration. I had heard of Masses being held in hotel conference rooms, so I wasn't too surprised, if anything I was relieved.

But as we stood in that shiny lobby and Tony spoke with the employees, I scanned the conference television monitors and soon began to dread that we were not in the right place at all. The concierge looked at us quizzically and tried to convince us that this was a hotel, not a church. We felt like idiots. Behind the hotel we visited the adjoining underground shopping mall and office tower, which looked even less promising than the hotel. So we went back to the hotel, where insistent Tony pressed a different concierge to entertain our query. "Oh yes," he said blithely, "go back to the office tower, it's there." We were uncertain, but obedient, tromping back to the vast entry hall of the office tower, where we hunted down a security guard. We saw tiny directional signs pointing to a British visa office and suddenly little success bells started sounding in our heads. The guard told us casually to take an elevator to the 21st floor. In the elevator we met a nice college-age kid who told us we were headed in the right direction, and right on time too, the doors had just opened.

I felt unnecessarily nervous as two tall foreign white men checked my passport, as if I were going to be bounced from Mass because I was American and not British – but of course that is exactly what would happen to you if you were a Chinese national and attempting to enter this office on a Sunday afternoon. We entered into what was normally an official, and somewhat sterile waiting room, with a long service counter, and rows upon rows of blue metal benches. Granted all the benches were all facing the same direction, but I had never been in a “church” like this before.

With a backdrop of glass teller windows displaying appropriate visa office protocol posters, an altar was arranged on a simple table. Slowly, colorful poster-boards showing pictures of recent community events and orphanage success-stories covered and displaced the visa-office materials. A little church had been created before my eyes. Behind us, through the upper-story window, we could see the crooked legs of the new CCTV tower. Was I in China? A parishioner pulled a full-sized keyboard from a large duffel bag and music booklets were passed out. Around me were people of all races, mixed families, large families, and finely dressed foreign diplomats. I wondered what kept these families from attending the Chinese Masses. Was it the language barrier, a cultural barrier, a class barrier? I felt a little funny, a little out of place – I felt foreign among foreigners. The Mass had a Western flavor, although the music reminded me the Filipino English-language Masses I had attended in Taiwan. For the most part it

seemed not unlike an average American Mass, except that the bell rung at consecration was in fact a Tibetan Buddhist hand bell.

After Mass we chatted in English with the three foreign priests, who were from various countries, and also with some of the faithful from France and America. We arranged to meet one of the priests the following Sunday to share some stories. The other French and American nationals we met were friendly and talkative, all appeared well paid and told us about which prestigious Western universities they hailed from. I felt like I was at a Fulbright gathering or at a party for exclusive expatriates. It was odd and Tony and I were both eager to escape to a hole-in-the-wall restaurant for some authentic Chinese food afterwards. Before we left, however, one of the Vincentian priests told us that several years back some of the fathers had attempted to visit the very martyrdom sights in Wuhan that we were hoping to set out for in the near future. In their case, he said, they had been stopped by the authorities and told to turn back. They never succeeded in seeing the martyrdom site of their confreres; he wished us better luck than they themselves had experienced, but we detected some skepticism in his eyes.

Since we were in the general area, we decided to visit Tiantan, the Temple of Heaven, once important ceremonial grounds for the Chinese emperor. On my Chinese language fold-out map I could see the markings for a nearby Catholic church, somewhat off the beaten path. It was indeed. We ended up wandering through a series of labyrinthine old alleyways, virtually untouched by modernity.

These alleyways were densely packed with neighborhood residents and vendors setting up a spontaneous roadside marketplace, which we wiggled our way through, many curious eyes watching us as we passed. Old ladies stood in doorways gossiping, men sold vegetables, and a steady stream of people filed in and out of the public restrooms. Houses in this type of old hutong neighborhood often do not have indoor plumbing for bathrooms. We attempted to ask directions a few times and were curtly waived off, not an uncommon occurrence in these types of neighborhoods, where dealing with foreigners is similar to be pestered by flies; wave them off and try to ignore them. A few friendly folks pointed us down the correct alley and I mused on how unchanged – and isolated – these alleys have been for hundreds of years. We were the interlopers there. But we were not the first foreigners – turning a corner we would see a steeple and a high fence with a closed green-painted metal gate.

It was Beijing's most southeasterly Catholic church, tucked deep within the hutong that had grown up around it. It was integrated into its dense context, and it was difficult to imagine that it had once been run by foreign priests; the whole experience of the place was so "Chinese." Tony hammered on the closed gate confidently until a little man came to let us in. Tony explained that he wanted to take photos, and asked permission politely. The man told us that would be fine, but his eyes betrayed his curiosity and not a little mistrust. The church had been built in 1910 and was just recently restored, not exactly to its original state, but lovingly and with a passionate devotion to Saint Thérèse of Lisieux, a

mural of whom loomed over the altar in a two-story painting surrounded by a robin-egg-blue sky, showering painted flowers down from her gargantuan height. It was quite a testimony to the community's demonstration of faith.

It was the smallest church building we had yet seen in Beijing and the caretaker told us it was entirely local, no foreigners attended at all. He also told us that the large, dilapidated buildings next door had once been part of the church property and had housed a school and convent, which had since been appropriated by the communist government. I wondered how much of the surrounding neighborhood alleyways had once been, or still were, inhabited by Catholic families. We were extremely curious about who the original founders of the church were, where they were from, and why, unlike every other church we had been to in Beijing, this church was not on a major thoroughfare, but tucked in a little neighborhood. These questions will have to remain unanswered until another, future trip.

On our way out of these dusty alleyways Tony spotted an old temple. Inside what used to be the main courtyard of the temple was now a tiny community of shanty lean-tos inhabited by various older residents. He inquired with one old lady about the temple and asked to see inside, but she impatiently waved him off. This is not a neighborhood for the foreign or the modern; it is a neighborhood apparently frozen in time, inhabited by an aging population, seeking, perhaps, to hold on to the past. We represented something less than welcome, and I could respect that. As we departed, Tony looked back a few times

and lamented, sighing that he could still see the curving temple rooftops popping up over the houses that had nearly consumed it. In Beijing the past is seen as architectural ephemera, disappearing before your eyes.

That night, despite realizing on the subway that we were amazingly tired, our timing was nearly perfect and we stopped at our parish to visit with our friends after Mass. By the next morning, Tony was sick again with that terrible, but by now not uncommon, illness that overtook him at rapid speed several times on this trip in China and left him turned inside-out for several days of expunging. I quarantined us, filled him full with electrolyte drinks, and set up a steady stream of movies. Once recovered a few days later, we walked to the neighborhood flea market, past the old planetarium and zoo, previously the imperial menagerie. Struck by the old colonial style architecture I wondered if foreign priests had once roamed here as well, assisting in the development of these grand edifices.

On a spur of the moment decision we decided to look for the Catholic publishing house listed as the publisher in many of the Catholic books we had been picking up at various bookstores. After a long bus ride we made several wrong turns on foot, following the wrong streets with confusion over an odd address system – it is difficult to tell what the numbers are on the other side of the street when there are six to eight lanes of traffic dividing you. Eventually we began to find buildings that seemed right. First we stumbled onto a heretofore unknown-to-us former French Catholic school. It was now an elite Communist



Party high school and Tony had a showdown with the guards. They were saying no, their hands up, even before we had even stopped walking toward them. His Chinese confident and comfortable, Tony argued with the guards to let him take a photograph of the school façade. They relented, with many grumblings and some aggressive body language, forbidding us to cross over into the courtyard; meanwhile a little posse of giggling high school students gathered to make friends with us, and one girl, wearing identical glasses to Tony's, immediately smiled and blushed. The students stood on one side of the line and we on the other, waving and saying "hi" to one-another. As he took his photos we could overhear the guards making commentary about how "These foreigners come to China and still all they care about is foreign stuff," like these old colonial buildings. Well, not exactly. We walked away chuckling and rolling our eyes, observing how much closer we felt to younger Chinese than some of their seniors who still bare the scars of being terrorized by themselves and others throughout the twentieth century.

On the scent now, we found the old publishing house, or, to be more precise, we located the correct address, but nothing looked like a publishing house, and, in fact, it turned out not to be there at all. The address ended up being the same location as the South Cathedral and an employee informed Tony that while this was the correct address, this is not where the physical publishing happens. The excursion proved successful though, as several eager employees turned on all the lights in the church nave allowing Tony to take a series of bright

interior photographs. From where I sat waiting in the pews I could see a group of loiterers eyeing him – in suspicion, curiosity, entertainment, displeasure – who knows.

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On Sunday West Church was alive with enthusiasm. Remodeling had commenced and it seemed that everyone had been infected with exuberant anticipation. Since our days in Beijing were starting to grow fewer we took numerous photos with our many Xitang friends. It was hard to believe we had only a few Sundays left with our Beijing church community, which had so rapidly become a little family to us – so many friends so quickly made and so soon to be no longer a part of our everyday life. Our reception into that community cast a warm glow on our hearts that will not be quickly forgotten.

That night I gave a little demonstration for the choir, singing the Salve Regina in Latin so that they could hear my interpretation of intonation. I was nervous and my warbling tones gave me away; I couldn't help blushing when they clapped. After Mass Tony offered a spontaneous lesson on Latin pronunciation as choir-members inundated him with questions regarding the hymns they had been practicing. The priest came out of the sacristy and joined in as well, everyone gathering around to listen and practice. All present seemed to enjoy the experience and once the excitement had died down and people began to disperse, we chatted with our friends about our upcoming trip to Taiyuan. We

had waited a long time to make our most important journeys in China and we were starting to feel a sense of urgency.

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By this time, Tony and I had accumulated a large quantity of books while we were in China. Many of them were on topics related to the church in China and they were beginning to fill up our apartment bookshelves. We had heard several reports about books being confiscated at the airport – not too mention that we had far too many to put in our luggage – and horror stories of items mailed from government post offices never reaching their destinations. Needless to say, we were concerned. Filling our rolling luggage with books, we hauled them onto busses and traveled to the nearest American international courier service office. Even they scrutinized our books, asking a few odd questions, but all-told helped us assemble and fill their special book boxes. At one point Tony cut his finger and there was great excitement from the staff in supplying him with tissues and bandages. It was not an inexpensive process, but the entirety of our books made it safely to America after three such trips to the courier office. It is funny to think that an “unnecessary” expense such as mailing books from an international courier service would be part of the experience of doing research on Christianity in China, but it was.



Hubei Province

## Patriotism and Paranoia in Wuhan

That Sunday we attended a morning Mass instead of our usual evening Mass and our good Chinese friends met us there. They handed us our train tickets and we thanked them and bid them farewell. We also met a deacon that morning and huddled up next to the wall heater in that massive and drafty old church to talk with him. The deacon gave us a blessing for a successful trip and we departed for the train station. We had hard-sleepers, in shared berths, on the bottom so that Tony could use the table. Thievery in trains continues to be rampant in China, so we used our backpacks as pillows – perhaps not the most comfortable arrangement, but it offered some peace of mind. In the morning we awoke approaching our station in Wuhan city, population more than seven million, in Hubei Province, east-central China.

We had come here to search for any bits of history we could find regarding two martyrs, both French Vincentian missionary priests, who had died here in the nineteenth century. François-Regis Clet, C.M. (1748-1820) had been preaching in China for nearly twenty years when anti-Christian persecutions intensified in 1811. Found guilty of promulgating heterodox teaching via deception, he was condemned to strangulation on a cross in 1820. Jean-Gabriel Perboyre, C.M. (1802-1840) had been executed in Wuhan in 1840 at the age of thirty-eight, and had been one of the first victims of anti-Christian violence during a contemporary local uprising. After trial and torture he was likewise

executed by strangulation on a cross, an image and series of events many Christians found reminiscent of Christ's Passion. The remains of both priests, which we had visited in 2007, are now housed at Saint-Lazare in Paris, under the same roof as the founder of their order, St. Vincent de Paul.

If nothing else, we had come to Wuhan to see what they saw, since many historic buildings still remained, and to remember two priests so very much forgotten and unknown to modern Catholic faithful. And, if nothing else, they would be remembered in the place where they spent their last days.

The train station at Wuhan seemed to activate all my beware impulses; I cannot say exactly why, but I was on my guard. Also, almost no one scares me more in China than cab drivers who may, or may not, be legitimately licensed. We went into a hamburger shop in the train station and ordered coffees to drink as we studied our maps. The last thing you want to hear in a strange place is the clerk telling you, "Drink your coffee inside; it's safer." But I was grateful for the recommendation. Travelers are really at the mercy of strangers and it is always a blessing when those strangers are helpful and watchful of your best interests. I have been helped countless times by people who gained nothing, in the world's eyes, by helping me.

At this point, I misguided us. Bad decisions are made and in hindsight we see them more clearly. But on this smoggy morning, the sun not quite peaking over the orange horizon, we emerged from the train station bombarded by crafty-looking taxi drivers, jingling, literally, their car keys in our faces. We buckled

our backpack straps around our waists and set off on foot in the general direction of the old concession district, the Bund. My hope was, at that point, that if we could get into the more metropolitan part of the city we would either find our hotel, or at least find professional-looking cab drivers. We were quickly out of the slum area that surrounded the train station, although we crossed a few large streets illegally when we realized that we were on the wrong side of the road, and, eventually, entered into a more urban setting. This was not Beijing, however, and western stores were few and far between.

After an hour of hard walking we were astonishingly tired and our lungs were burning from the smog, which was far worse than that in Beijing. Our nerves had worn thin before we even left the train station, and even though we knew we were close to our destination we were just simply out of pluck. I persuaded Tony to inquire about our hotel in a nearby American name-brand hotel. He was not wild about this plan, asking one hotel about how to find a competitor hotel, but in my experience these types of large corporate Western hotels are staffed with generally helpful staff who will steer you right. Also, the taxis found at such hotels are usually a safer bet. I had a sense however, that Wuhan as a city had an air of corruption unlike that which I had experienced in Beijing. We were somewhat leery of what our immediate future might bring.

Talking with the concierge was more challenging than we had expected because the hotel to which we were headed had an English name much different from its Chinese version, and since I had made the reservation online, all my

receipts were in English, not Chinese. The level of confusion among those offering us advice did not inspire confidence. Someone scribbled some Chinese characters on our hotel confirmation printout and one cab driver was resolute, assuring us that he did indeed know the hotel in question. In fact, he did. It was still early morning but we were exhausted, all our “adventure” energy wasted on just getting from the train station to the hotel. It turned out to be a lovely hotel, actually, overlooking the Yangzi River in the old Western concession neighborhood.

Our hotel was considered “the nicest” in town, decadent by local standards, but, like American courier services, we had a reason for this “luxury.” As we had learned in Guiyang, staying in seemingly-opulent hotels offers many benefits: the accommodations are clean, better in some cases than local hospitals; the bell-boys serve as bouncers, keeping out riffraff and plain-clothes policemen as well; and the Internet is not only helpful for research, but for sending our hard-won research materials back to the outside world in case our original documents, or equipment was stolen or confiscated. Not to mention that it is nice to have something relatively easy and familiar when everything else outside is a challenge.

Once in our room we debriefed and packed our valuables into the in-room safe. We stopped to ask the concierge about how to reach the old Russian Orthodox church that appeared to be nearby, as well as the Catholic church found in the old German concession. He warned us that although these buildings were



nearby, it was fuza, meaning “confused,” or “complicated.” We were a little perplexed but undaunted. As it turned out the area where the Orthodox church was located was amidst some sort of major civic development project, with entire streets torn up and buildings torn down in preparation for the installation of a six-lane road. The result was a hard-hat construction area that spanned an incalculable distance. It was seemingly impossible to get from one place to another.

Standing by the road construction we could see the onion domes in the distance but could not figure out how to get there. Finally some construction workers who were watching our debate yelled out to us, “Just walk through the construction site!” As an American, it never would of occurred to me to walk through the apparently dangerous and precarious construction site. Luckily, an older woman was on her way home from shopping and likewise needed to cross. She guided us past bulldozers and through the mud to the other side of this post-apocalyptic chaos with machines working around people carrying on with their daily life.

The old Orthodox church was locked. As we began to walk away an overly enthusiastic man came bounding out of the adjacent pub, cigarette dangling from his mouth and keys in his hand. “You wanna see it?” he asked us in Chinese. The Orthodox had departed – or had been evicted – long ago and the interior was mostly empty, except for a makeshift bedroom with television and cot in what was once the sanctuary. The man told us that the former church now

served as his bedroom and that the basement rented out as a disco. He seemed a little shifty, and I was not sorry to leave, afraid of being charged for admission. Walking away from that forlorn church, through all the rubble, I could not help but think that this city struck me as a hungry animal devouring itself in some sort of modernization frenzy. Everywhere I turned I seemed to be greeted by skyscrapers, bars, slums, and smog.

The older lady, our guide from earlier, waved to us as we walked by, and some construction workers kindly told us how to navigate toward the Catholic church. Thus far people in Wuhan seemed friendly, but I had yet to see another foreigner. A few block away, the Catholic church was easy to spot; it looked remarkably like the Gesu in Rome. There was a small coterie of old men loafing about in front of the church, just as they have for centuries in front of native religious temples, the typical place for old men to pass the day, perched on stools and spinning tales. One elderly gentleman showed us how to access the chapel, but when we asked to see a priest we were confounded by his answer, which translated to something like, “Not that one.” We weren’t sure what to make of that, was he being stubborn or warning us of something.

We photographed the church, which was, incidentally the diocese cathedral, although at the time we were there they were waiting for the appointment of a new bishop. China and the Vatican were at loggerheads over selecting this new bishop as each had their own opinions on who should fill the vacant seat.

The cathedral had a beautiful interior, and a man who was busy polishing the woodwork turned on the lights for us so that Tony could take pictures. Our curiosity about the church interior assuaged, we asked a little old cleaning lady if we could talk with a priest. She seemed perplexed, saying no, and so Tony pulled out his Vatican researcher's card; she ducked into a room, found another employee and handed us off to this other woman who then enthusiastically showed us to a large conference room, brought us tea, and disappeared. After what seemed a very long while we started to wonder if we should stay; just as we were contemplating escape we heard a hushed commotion in the hallway. A middle-aged priest in lay clothing came in and greeted us, all smiles.

Tony boldly informed him that we had traveled all this way to visit the site of where two French missionary priests had died in the nineteenth century. He listened to our query and excused himself returning with another, younger priest who spoke fluent French, thinking, perhaps, that we were French. Tony ceremoniously passed around his business cards. They both seemed exuberantly, excessively so, eager to help our cause. There was some discussion and the older priest volunteered to lend us his private car and chauffeur to take us to the only site he knew of, the location of an old church that, he said, was near where the executions had taken place. Lots of questions were popping into our heads: if they knew where the site was clearly enough to get "near" it, then couldn't they just take us to the site? And why did he want us to go to the old church-grounds if there was nothing there? Furthermore, and most alarmingly, why did this priest

with the unrelenting smile have his own car and his own driver? We suspected, suspicions later confirmed, that this older priest was also a diocese representative for the Chinese Patriotic Catholic Association, and was a known collaborator.

The driver, who was ordered to appear, skipped his lunch to come meet us. This is not a way to endear yourself to people, but it was entirely out of our hands at that point. Providence, guided us through, in this case, the hands of a Party-sponsored priest. We thanked everyone profusely as we slid into the back seat of this all black car with deeply tinted windows, not entirely sure what to expect. We crossed the Yangzi and drove for about a half an hour to a run-down apartment building at the end of a long alley. Here, the driver said, there used to be an old church.

Tony is not one to be easily placated when he is on the hunt. Almost immediately he spotted some older folks sitting around in the sun and walked toward them. He asked if they knew of, or had heard of, the old imperial execution ground that had once been in the area. "Oh yes," they all remembered it, or remembered hearing of it. Their overwhelming response caused even the chauffeur to appear both surprised and intrigued. Directions were given, fingers pointing in various directions, and we three set out on foot in search of what we were looking for. After searching for another half hour and asking many more elderly passersby, all of whom spontaneously shared stories of the execution ground with us, we were still unable to find it. We knew we were close, but we

kept reaching dead-ends, sometimes, literally. In one especially shabby neighborhood even the driver looked uncomfortable and suggested we retreat.

The one thing that nearly all our impromptu guides told us was that it was now behind, and overshadowed, by modern buildings. It was a lead, certainly, though not helpful enough. At this point however we could see that even the chauffeur was hooked. Back at the apartment building, while all the older people had disappeared, one nice lady was gently persuaded by Tony's persistent questions. She told us that she knew an old woman with a truly ancient memory who lived in a nearby neighborhood, who remembered everything-of-old about the area. "If she doesn't know where it was, then no one will," she said. The four of us got into the car and drove, via her directions, to a street not far away, where we stopped amidst a bustling, narrow, market-like alleyway. I was told to wait in the car while the three of them pushed through the crowds in search of this oracle.

They were gone for what seemed an extraordinary long time, and as I sat there, grateful that the windows were so darkly tinted that no pedestrian had yet noticed me, I was mildly concerned that in this particular neighborhood, in this mysterious city, my presence might draw a crowd, or worse. Later that day, Tony told me that the buildings he climbed through to get to that elderly woman's apartment were in a state of disrepair unlike anything he had seen in his time in China. It was a slum unlike any that we had ever entered, and one we would not have entered without a native guide. He himself wondered in fleeting moments if

this might not end badly. He also said that when they entered the room of this 89-year-old woman she seemed not at all surprised at his arrival, almost as if she had been expecting him. Sitting there, deep within non-foreigner-China, with her tiny bound feet, she told them precisely how to find the old Qing dynasty execution ground, just a few blocks away.

When the three-some returned to the car the air of excitement was palpable, yet we were all aware of the delicate nature of our endeavor. Here were two foreigners searching out the spot where other foreigners had been executed nearly two centuries before. Yes, the Qing was a different regime, yes it was a long time ago, but it was still a powerful symbolic event of division between cultures, cultures that we, and they, still represented.

We knew the execution ground had been near a large body of water and as we drove down the road the four of us were peering intently from the car windows. They were scrutinizing the urban landscape for all the markers the elderly woman had described to them, and we all noticed that beyond the buildings to our right there was indeed a large lake.

The driver slowed the car as we passed a tall, modern apartment building behind which we could just barely see what looked like a very old, overgrown hill covered with bushes and craggy trees. Our driver swung the car around, parked, and we four ventured forth. The driver and I hung back as Tony and our impromptu guide approached the building parking-lot attendant holed up in his glass booth. To our amazing luck the guard was an older man who had grown up

in his family home in this very neighborhood. He shared, exuberantly, his memory of this place and the history he had heard about it when he was growing up. He had been told that the execution ground had been at the base of the tiny nearby hill. He allowed us to pass beyond the gate and we walked through the open-air parking lot to an area just behind this white apartment building to where the pavement suddenly met the rise of this densely vegetated hill.

Time was of the essence, as lingering too long might bring unwanted attention. This hill certainly looked old, the trees appeared gnarled with age and craggy cave-like openings were covered with moss. Certainly there was no way to absolutely confirm that this was indeed the old Qing execution ground, precisely where our two Vincentian priests met their end, but there were many reasons to believe it so. We took photos, revered the place in our hearts, and I collected some soil – an activity that always elicited some degree of attention. We were amazed to have found it, whatever “it” was; we had clearly followed all leads to their logical end, and in my heart I was persuaded. Apparently our driver was persuaded as well. This man who had at first been so reserved and cool toward us had now shared with us an unexpected experience and was clearly moved.

We dropped our volunteer back at the original apartment building where we had opportunely met her, with thanks and goodbyes. Then we ate a late lunch with our driver at a restaurant near the cathedral. He had been with us now for more than three hours, far longer than any of us had originally anticipated and it

was clear over the course of the lunch that he had really warmed to us. In fact much of the usual dining ceremony was absent, we simply ate lunch together like old friends. After lunch Tony and I visited the church interior one more time, offering some silent thanksgivings. As we departed, however, we could distinctly hear the muffled sounds of an argument between two men from behind closed doors. Unable to hear exactly what was being said, we wondered if perhaps our driver was being scolded, perhaps for being gone too long, perhaps for being too accommodating to us, perhaps for allowing us to find the real spot instead of the original red herring he was ordered to drive us to. We will never know what happened behind that door, but my heart went out to him, for he seemed to be a good man and had been an indispensable part of our journey.

Back at our hotel overlooking the Yangze River we were incredibly tired. As always, I could not help but wonder if we might have some unexpected visitors to our room. It is hard to know if you have gone too far – invisible lines are difficult to navigate. Later that evening, Tony's cell phone rang, and a hurried conversation in Chinese ensued. When he hung up he looked at me with trepidation in his eyes. The young French-speaking priest had called, from a public telephone he said, because his personal phones were tapped, and he had asked with a sense of urgency if Tony would meet him across the street from our hotel, at one particular park entry gate in the park that follows the river. Tony asked me to go with him and we were, in all honesty, a little nervous. We left the hotel and walked along the long wall of the park looking for the designated



entrance. It was quite a bit farther than we expected, and although the park was still open and had a series of lampposts, there were many areas of the park that were shrouded in darkness. We waited. Suddenly we saw our priest-friend walking hastily toward us, and as we reached out our hands to welcome him he instead hurried us into the park.

As we entered the park we were only a few steps in before bumping into another of the priests we had met earlier that day at the cathedral, walking along with another man. Rapid, awkward hellos were exchanged and we quickly excused ourselves as being on a “sightseeing” excursion. Our French-speaking friend urged us off the main path and onto a secluded, unlit side path. He expressed his displeasure over this unexpected meeting with his superior. We were unsure what to make of this. Had he been followed? Was it indeed an accident? Was he now in serious trouble? Or was this simply all elaborately staged on our behalf – but why? To make us think what exactly? As usual, we tried simply to be alert, open our minds and accept, with our best academic skepticism, to be both subjective and objective, gleaning as much possible information from each moment, hearing with both our ears and our hearts.

As we followed the dim path through the darkened park the young priest shared many things with us and expressed an interest in talking with us again in more detail. He told us that he was under constant surveillance at the cathedral, he was suspect due to of his foreign education – his landline was tapped and his cell phone was tapped, even this meeting with us jeopardized him, he said. We

were sympathetic, although not entirely sure that we wanted to enter into this messy diocesan situation. He told us a bit about the trouble in appointing a new bishop, that Rome had made its selection but the local government rejected it. Rumors we had heard previously of dysfunction in Wuhan, Party loyalty and clerical communist ties, were rapidly being confirmed. We agreed that we would meet again on the following day. In a moment of brilliance I suggested that we meet for dinner – our treat – at a French restaurant I had spotted earlier that day on the Bund. There in that elaborately expensive foreign-fare restaurant we might be assured some privacy simply due to the off-putting cost of admission. We parted hastily and wondered what tomorrow might bring.

That night I blogged about the experiences of the day, leaving off the last bit, which occurred in the park. When I awoke the next morning I read an email message that my mother had sent me, “encrypted” with all kinds of clever misspellings, as she must have believed that we were under surveillance ourselves. She urged us to leave Wuhan immediately and return to the relative safety of Beijing. I could commiserate with her feelings, I myself felt that Tony and I stuck out like a sore thumb, constantly drawing attention to ourselves in a place not heavily populated, it seemed, with foreigners. But we were not about to break our appointment with the French-speaking Chinese priest. We too, nevertheless, were apprehensive. Over breakfast we discussed our plan and decided for a multitude of reasons to make today a sightseeing day and visit all the run-of-the-mill tourist spots. We figured this would be both educational and

interesting for us, while also providing us a type of cover, demonstrating that we were simply tourists visiting the sights, “just like” yesterday, visiting historic sights – no politics, no religion, nothing sensitive, just tourists on holiday.

A hotel bellboy hailed a cab for us, recording its official taxi number and handing us our copy of the receipt. It felt wonderful to be so taken care of. Our fears were not assuaged when only a block from our hotel our cab driver said he was having trouble with his tire and that he must transfer us to another taxi. This seemed very strange since we could not see or feel that anything was wrong with the car. Why this strange maneuvering? Nevertheless, in the middle of the busy road, we got into another taxi and arrived at our destination without further excitement.

In all honesty our nerves were on edge the entire way to the famous Yellow Crane Tower pagoda, which dates back to the third century. Rising high above the city like a multi-layered wedding cake it used to serve as a watchtower in this historically volatile area. It is the major attraction in the city, and something our dear martyred priests would certainly have seen for themselves. It was not until we fell in with large group of German tourists than I began to breathe easily and relax. We mingled with their group for some time before breaking out on our own, touring, and genuinely enjoying the park. Was it my imagination or was Tony taking an excessive number of photos of relatively uninteresting things? I thought he was overplaying his part, but was endeared that he was as jittery as I was.

Our pace slowed and our nerves steadied as we strolled through those white-walled gardens. We exited through the south gate and crossed the street to a museum and one-time headquarters of the republication party government which had begun its rule in 1911 and was ousted by the communists in 1949 during China's civil war. It seemed strange to see a monument that remembered a government that still exists in its refuge on the island of Taiwan. The tourists here, unlike those at the Yellow Crane Tower, were nearly all native Chinese, and each one of us had to sign our name as we entered the museum – a formality I have never encountered before in China. It made me wonder about the reasoning behind the sign-in since those who visit the museum are essentially visiting a remembrance of a former enemy headquarters to the modern Chinese communist state. Were they keeping track of the Chinese visitors? Wuhan seemed infected with a paranoia unseen in Beijing.

From here we hailed another taxi and directed our driver to an address we knew to be near the Catholic seminary in town. We got out of the cab nearly two blocks away from our destination in hopes of covering our tracks a bit, not knowing if such precautions were even necessary. The seminary was easy to identify, built in an old colonial-style with crosses still marking the buildings. The church was unlocked and we went in to photograph it and pray. It seemed a bit forlorn and ramshackle. Outside we walked around unannounced as if we knew the place. In fact we had been told to proceed to the back garden of the seminary, where we would find memorial tablets for the two French martyr-

saints. From the loggia of the seminary we could indeed see through the hallway into a rear garden, and we proceeded undaunted. Better to ask forgiveness than permission, and no one seemed to be manning the gate. Here in this lovingly tended back-garden, which was framed on three sides by the wings of the seminary building, stood, at the center, a floral fountain displaying a prominent statue of the Blessed Virgin. Near the rear corner of the garden stood two restored tombstones commemorating in Latin and Chinese our two Vincentians. Again, we took photos and knelt to pray, wondering how many people, if ever, had come to venerate these two holy men.

In the hallway Tony met a seminarian and asked him about the stelae monuments commemorating the two French priests in the courtyard, and the seminarian implied that not much thought was given to them, they were simply part of the garden and had been repaired after being returned from a location where they had been hidden for years.<sup>2</sup> On our way out another of the seminarians turned on the lights in the church so that we could better take photographs; our visit seemed to cause little, if any disturbance to the daily routine in that quiet seminary complex.

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<sup>2</sup> I recall that I heard a story of the monuments having been stored for many years in an older woman's home, or apartment, and that upon her death they were rediscovered. Unfortunately, Tony does not share this memory and I can find no written record of this dating from the time of our trip.

Later that evening we met our French-speaking friend and sat overlooking the Bund from an upper story enclosed balcony of a French restaurant. We encouraged him to order whatever food he missed most from his time in France, and while the prices were comparable to restaurant prices in the United States, he looked up from the menu and said solemnly, “This dinner will cost more money than I make in an entire month.” But the cost bought us the peace and privacy that we desired; we had the entire balcony of the restaurant to ourselves, eating that special meal under dim lighting. Inside that very un-Chinese-feeling restaurant our priest friend relaxed and shared stories with us for several hours. He was very pleased to hear of our having found the possible site of the Vincentian martyrdom, as well as having visited their memorial steles. We marked on his map where the possible location was, and so the information was passed on. In a place so very much cut-off from the outside we were like little ambassadors, sharing our stories with him and he with us, it was a bridge-building, friendship-building event so necessary to the Church in China. To have that connection with us for just one day, to share information with each other, to make that human connection that we all so very much need to banish modern isolation, was worth to him whatever he might potentially suffer from it; we were touched. We assured him of our prayers and we parted knowing we had a new friend in the world, one we hoped we would meet again in the future, but also knowing that we could not write to him nor attempt to stay in contact for fear that

would throw a cloud of suspicion over him. Someday I hoped our paths will cross again.

Later that night Tony and I talked and strolled through the active streets of Wuhan, so full of youthful shoppers, eager consumers under neon lights. I knew there was an Seattle-brand coffee shop nearby but was not quite sure where it was, so I stopped a friendly-looking woman and asked her in Chinese. Her response was that she had never drunk coffee in her life and had no idea. Almost immediately a young man approached us, said he had overheard our question and wanted to let us know that it just around the corner from where we were. Yet again I was struck by the generational and cultural gap in China today. The young people seem to have an apparently open-minded worldview, rather than a reserved one; they are unabashedly excited. They may be insatiable consumers, but unlike their parents they do not seem to perpetuate the idea that there are boundaries that divide us. In the coffee shop we had a lively and enjoyable conversation, regarding the design of a new shipment of merchandise, with the youthful barista and once again I was reminded of the different Chinas that can be found even within the limits of one city.

The following day was dedicated almost exclusively to recording all the data we had gathered during the past two days. It was a whirlwind trip, but in many ways more successful than we could have ever imagined. Sitting in the old train station that night (at the time of this publication there is a new station in use in Wuhan), we were astounded by how dangerous and dilapidated the station felt.

Feeling numb, we watched as the cleaning ladies pushed large piles of dirt with their wide bristled brooms across the floor. We sat clutching our bags next to an assortment of people, and noticed that many of those who awaited the speed train to Beijing looked comparatively chic and well dressed. A professional-looking young man sitting next to us in the waiting area provided tips on how to most efficiently board the train. We were the only non-Chinese we saw in the station.





Shanxi Province

## Taiyuan: The Blood of the Martyrs is the Seed of the Church

When our train arrived in Beijing early the next morning we knew we had only about sixteen hours before our evening train would leave Beijing for Taiyuan city in Shanxi province. We dashed home to our little Beijing apartment where we showered and washed our clothes, getting ready for our next adventure. We met two of our Chinese friends for dinner and tea before making our way to the train station. Our friends, Mr. & Mrs. F, were able to trade places with another couple so that they could sit with us. When the lights were turned off we lay on our hard-sleepers, but I slept fitfully and awoke in the morning feeling groggy. This was an overnight train and we arrived in Taiyuan in the early hours of dawn.<sup>3</sup>

Taiyuan was smoggy and piercingly cold when we arrived. Having just returned from Wuhan and the particular atmosphere of Catholicism there, I was shocked when I saw approaching us at the train station, and wending his way through the crowd, a Chinese priest wearing his clerics, the white-notched collar standing out strikingly. This was the first time I had seen the outward display of a priest wearing clerics in public. Fr. Z welcomed us with smiles and our spirits were lifted. It was thrilling to walk through that crowded city square with such an open display of faith; Father Z was fearless. He introduced us to the person whom he had hired to be our driver during the next several days – a middle-aged

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<sup>3</sup> Since this 2008 trip, there is now a three-hour speed train from Beijing to Taiyuan.

Catholic man who owned a small mini-van, the kind that used to be called “bread-loaf” cars because of their shape. It was a hard-used little van undoubtedly held together with love and prayers, evidenced by the rosary and glittering holy cards of the Blessed Virgin smiling at us and dangling from his rear-view mirror. I wanted to know then, but never found out, what this man normally did for a living that allowed him to take several consecutive days off to be our exclusive chauffeur.

We drove directly to our hotel, which I had, probably unwisely, reserved online. Our Chinese friends told us that in the future they would be more than happy to arrange the lodging for us in order to receive local prices instead of inflated foreigner prices. In fact, our room in this schmaltzy hotel was of average price by American standards but – and I do not know if the hotel did this in order to “impress its foreign guests” – we were put up in a ridiculously fancy room with a raised ceiling, looming flat-screen television, and separate dining area. Upon entering the room I was awash with embarrassment, fearful that this priest, whom we had just met, would be scandalized by the unintended opulence. I think he was, a little. I remember he walked over to the window where there was a life-size bamboo-grove reproduction, and said, “Well, spend it if you have it.” We pleaded that in fact we didn’t have it, but that this was normal by American prices and we didn’t know any better, and would be smarter next time, etcetera. I was sure we had started off on the wrong foot, but there was no time to worry

about impressions. We dropped our bags, locked up our computer, and boarded again the little silver van that would become like a second home to us.

Leaving the city we drove deep into the expansive and severe-looking countryside. In the already harsh climate of the approaching winter this landscape of Shanxi province is an ancient part of China, with wind-blown yellow earth, and, as I would discover at every meal, the capital for vinegar production. From my seat in the van I could see outside the window a rugged, dry terrain clouded in yellow dust. Dimly, through the haze I began to see an emerging structure, something I had never expected to see in China.

The outline of the building that we were approaching appeared to be, for all intents and purposes, that of a magnificent Baroque cathedral. When we stopped before its front doors and poured out of the van we could see that this impressive edifice was still under construction and being built painstakingly out of red brick. “How is this possible?” we mumbled to ourselves; how could something so lavish be under construction in what appeared to be the middle of nowhere, and where was the money coming from in a place of such apparent rural poverty? Our minds were simply overflowing with questions.

I was deeply impressed with the artistic command demonstrated in this ornate façade, decoration that was nearly exclusively executed by the skillful molding of local brick laid by knowledgeable and experienced laborers. Clearly the community of builders, likely local Catholic faithful, were pouring their hearts and souls into the construction of this western-style monument. The

juxtaposition between the flat, empty land and this imposing and regal structure was something palpable. Since we could not go inside we didn't stay long, and were soon whisked away to another nearby church named Saint Anthony's, followed by another, which we were told was more than one hundred years old and once belonged to Italian Franciscans. As we continued, we were somewhat perplexed at the density of so many churches in one rural valley – how many Catholics could there be?

Deeper we traveled, the memory urban city-life falling far away behind us. Our van took us onto narrower dirt roads until we reached a precipice where we could overlook the valley below. Through the haze from this hilltop I could see for miles, my view extending out flat toward the horizon. From this one point we counted six spires and domes from the surrounding churches that dotted the rural countryside in every direction – I could have been looking out at the European countryside. Tony and I blinked at Father Z in disbelief, asking in perplexity the question, “Are those all Catholic churches?” Saying yes he smiled a knowing smile, understanding our shock. “This,” he said, “is Shanxi.”

### Banquan Mountain

We began a long drive up a mountain road passing as we went large Stations of the Cross that were embedded in the roadside. At a few of these massive stones were Chinese pilgrims praying their way up this long winding

road on this bitterly cold and windy hill. At the top we parked near a spot known for a popular devotion to the Blessed Virgin, where there is a shrine and a church that was recently rebuilt after its destruction during the Cultural Revolution. Tony asked Father Z why this location had been chosen for the shrine. He explained that once, long ago, the Blessed Virgin had appeared in this area, saying that there would come a ten-year period of persecution during which she would comfort the faithful of this region. Father Z told us that many people profess to have been visited or comforted by the Blessed Virgin Mary during the “ten-year catastrophe” of the 1966-1976 Cultural Revolution – comfort that was certainly needed when the church on this hill, among others, was destroyed by Maoist radicals.

But there was another element to this story. In one of her later apparitions the Virgin exhorted the faithful to rebuild the church that had been destroyed. The nearby villagers had determined to rebuild the destroyed church in a more convenient location and assembled the building materials at the newly chosen site. When the work crew arrived in the morning all the building supplies were missing, everything was gone. Upon further inspection however the materials were located, mysteriously gathered together on the site of the remains of the old, razed church building. Accepting this as a message they rebuilt the church on its old foundation despite the difficulty in reaching the remote hillside location.

Tony asked Father Z what his interpretation of this was: had the Blessed Virgin really appeared to so many people? Father Z shrugged his shoulders and

said in his usual air of calm, “I saw her myself.” And so this shrine was erected here to remember the wish that was fulfilled, the comforts received, the promise of the Blessed Virgin confirmed.

Father Z roused the elderly caretaker from his uneventful daily routine, who then opened the church doors for us and began preparing the altar for Mass. Father Z disappeared into the sacristy and we gathered in the pews and prayed in preparation. The front church doors were open wide, letting sunlight into the unheated building. As I knelt to pray I noticed that several kittens had followed us into the church and were soon seeking out my praying hands for some attention. The altar was ornate – gaudy even – in typical Chinese style, and Father Z offered the Mass with great personal solemnity. Our little group was drawn close together in this Communion and we felt a closeness with Father in a way that can only happen through this event. After Mass, Father Z wanted us all to hike up to the very top of this hill where a large statue of Christ stood.

As we climbed up the trail the ground around the pine trees was speckled with dustings of snow. I had gone on ahead while the rest of our party walked a little more leisurely and, as it turned out, I was the first to reach the crest of the hill, turn the corner, and lay my eyes on that monumental gold statue of Jesus. Seeing this huge glittering statue, arms outstretched over the whole valley, I was overcome with emotion and tears immediately sprung from my eyes. I was a little embarrassed by this uncontrollable response and hastily wiped the tears away before my friends arrived. It is hard to explain why I had such an

involuntary reaction. This statue demonstrates such a labor of love, and can be seen for miles surrounding the site, a constant reminder of something far greater than the harsh, temporal world we live in.

It was also somewhat unbelievable to see something like this in communist China; it was something I would never have believed if I had not seen it first-hand. I felt humbled by the persevering spirit and bold faith of a people who had been persecuted and suffered so much during the past one hundred years. While I have the ability to travel to the great Christian monuments of the world and had visited Rome and other foundations of the early Church, I felt that these people, even so entirely cut off from the outside world, had something to teach me about faith.

We came down off the mountain to find that the church care-taker's wife had prepared a home-style and much-welcomed meal for us, comprised of thick-sliced Shanxi noodles in boiling water, accompanied by sour pickled vegetables. One condiment was a vegetable spiced to taste like meat and bore the apropos name "poor man's meat." We traveled down the hill to another nearby church in the valley where we met a priest and chatted over steaming cups of instant coffee. In each church we had visited stood one or two large grandfather clocks, a tradition we asked about, and though no one could give us a definitive answer to why they were there, other than it had always been so, we wondered if this adornment to the chapel interiors was a remnant of early European missionaries who often brought clocks with them as tributary gifts.



As the sun was setting, raking orange light across these dry valleys, we entered a series of neighboring villages, each with its own church building. Father Z told us that he oversaw each of these churches. We arrived at his rectory, adjacent to the main church. He gave us a quick tour of the church building, the office – which included a small row of computers that were available for general community use – and the residence, which he offered for us to stay in during a future visit. It was an extremely modest compound, conditions that would probably be described as “third-world” by most Americans. We peered into a crowded room where one hundred or so villagers of all ages were praying the Stations of the Cross together, which, Father Z told us, they do each Friday followed by Holy Mass. I could not help but recognize that church activities in such a remote, rural location, likely offered the primary source of recreation for this financially poor village.

As we approached the church basement we could hear the muffled sounds of strong voices chanting. After the parishioners had finished their prayers Father Z asked Tony if he would say a few words in Chinese to the congregation by way of an introduction, as these villagers rarely, if ever, see foreigners in their lifetimes. In this snug, makeshift basement chapel Tony spoke in front of rows of pews packed with ruddy-faced peasants all listening attentively. I was struck by how brilliantly white the altar linens looked in such a dusty countryside location. There was a piety in these people that comes only with a faith practiced in frequency and routine. Catholicism was not part of the life of this community, if

was the life of this community; it was their identity, it punctuated the daily rhythms of their life.

Before our return to the bustle of the city-life we enjoyed another simple but hardy meal of steamed buns, noodles, and preserved vegetables. I felt that at each meal we bonded more closely with our Chinese friends – such is the importance of the familial table in Chinese culture.

After a day of bumpy van rides, our room was stuffy and stiflingly hot, I awoke the next morning not entirely refreshed. During our noodle-heavy breakfast I could hear the workers whispering audibly about “foreigners,” and I felt ever more confirmed that Taiyuan sees few foreign visitors. Our driver, Mr. G was waiting for us in the lobby puffing lackadaisically on a cigarette. Father Z and our two friends joined us and we drove to an industrial village where a new church was just being built at the site where the old church had been destroyed in 1900. We took some pictures and chatted with the construction workers inside the chapel, and wondered about the odd placement of the church literally across the street from a Taoist temple. I was curious who had built originally, the Taoist temple or the Catholic church? After we thought we had seen the majority of the place – ceasing somewhat to be amazed by the grandeur of these modern neo-Baroque churches – Father Z came around the corner excitedly and told Tony he had something to show him.

Out in a grungy outbuilding there lay on the floor three broken memorial tablets. A few men gathered to tell the tale of the stelae while Tony, Father Z,

and our two friends, who assisted greatly in the deciphering the local dialect, listened attentively with great focus. These stelae had only recently been uncovered. They had been carved in the early twentieth century to commemorate the burning of the church in 1900 during the Boxer Uprising, that grisly national grass-roots uprising against foreign incursions into China. Many Christian churches suffered similar fates from 1899-1901; in this case, more than one hundred Catholic Chinese villagers perished inside the flaming church building. The magnificently tall church that they were now constructing was a replacement, being built more than a century later by people for whom these events still remained powerfully relevant in their memory.

A man who was present told us that his father had hid these stelae during the Cultural Revolution of the 1960s and 1970s, as they would have likely been smashed if they had been found. His choice of concealment proved successful, in a culvert, the surface with the inscribed text facing away from the flow of water. They had only recently been found, he said, as they were demolishing some old houses, “Would we like to see the spot where they were found?” We walked down the street to a plot of land very near the church where a block of old houses had been reduced to rubble. Climbing on the mounds of brick and stone a man pointed to the location where the tablets had been discovered. We adjourned to the gatehouse of the church compound and waited while a few other local men were gathered to share their information with us as well. One man had lost his great grandfather in the attack on the church and passionately shared his story

with us. Our friends discretely recorded these oral histories, and as we departed we marveled at our good luck in having visited this church just after this discovery, and were grateful that someone there that day thought it might be of interest to us.

We paused at another small church where only the caretaker and her son were present. She too shared with us the tragic story of that church during the Boxer Uprising of 1900. Here an additional 108 persons had perished, she said. And in the courtyard of this church also, I gathered some soil from under an old tree. At each location where the blood of the martyrs had been spilled I gathered soil in remembrance of them, stored in empty plastic vitamin bottles carried with me for just this purpose.

Back in the van we traveled on until our driver pulled over abruptly. He had spotted a mechanic's shop and informed us that he was having tire trouble. We would need to disembark for a while. We didn't seem to be much of anywhere, but Father Z knew the area and told us there was a church nearby and that we could take this opportunity to visit. We had not intended on visiting this church, but it proved providential. We walked down the streets of this seemingly desolate village, with its high mud walls and dusty roads. Turning a corner we approached a church, across from which was the Party headquarters. We asked Father Z about this unusual arrangement and he informed us that, "In Shanxi, the Church is more powerful than the government." So many faithful now occupy positions of power that even many of the new church-buildings are constructed

with the help of government funds. Shanxi is unique within China for this, and we were amazed.

The front gate of the church was locked so we entered the adjacent house of the church caretaker. Many Chinese churches have caretakers since very few of the churches have their own, on-site priest. Upon entering this run-down concrete-block house, walls painted halfway with that ubiquitous green pigment, we found an older woman lying on her stomach in the process of receiving a traditional medical massage to relieve her aches and pains. We were introduced, and Tony immediately spotted something hanging on the wall that was rather unusual.

Next to what appeared to be a very old crucifix about five inches high, was a small black and white photograph of a young foreign man's face. Tony inquired about these items and the caretaker told us that this was an old photograph of Pietro Focaccia, before he was a bishop, and next to it was his personal missionary's crucifix that all such missionaries had carried with them. She happened to have these items, she said, because they had been given to her father by Focaccia himself, because her father had been his personal chef. We had never before seen an image of Focaccia so young, staring at us with his deeply thoughtful eyes. We took a digital photo of the photograph and impressed upon her the special nature of these objects, especially the missionaries' crucifix. It was here that Father Z looked up at Tony and said, "Miracles are following you everywhere." Truly, the serendipity seemed amazing.

I had read stories of missionary priests on the train, reading that lifeless black type against white paper, trying to imagine the reality behind the story – here, today, I was holding a picture of this young priest’s face in my hand. It is a photograph I continue to meditate on often, sometimes seeing those eyes as hopeful, at other times, sorrowful, but always, personal.

### Dongergou and Liuhecun Villages

After a leisurely and bizarrely luxurious lunch we drove through an industrial countryside dotted with massive factories, the source of much of the smog we had been breathing, and arrived eventually at a long-since abandoned seminary. The structures had been built during the nineteenth century and it had once been a stately compound under the guidance of Franciscan friars. As we began to explore the property, what I had originally thought was abandoned I quickly realized was inhabited. Father Z informed us that they allowed otherwise homeless Catholics to live in the buildings rather than leave them empty and potentially vulnerable to arson. We opened stiff doors and explored forgotten nooks and crannies but never did locate the former chapel.

Our Chinese friend, Mrs. F, discovered that the doorstep to one buildings off the courtyard was in fact an old Qing dynasty tombstone and we four set out, in vein, to clean the stone and read the inscription. Alas, too many years of wear had worn away all but the top-most and bottom-most characters; it was mostly

unreadable. While they cleaned and strained to make out the inscription, I paused for a few minutes in the old hall designed in a Chinese style, and poked through some of the items that cluttered the forgotten room, hoping that I might find an amazing relic of the past. What I found was only a forgotten world coated in a thick layer of white dust. White-dusted shoes, untouched for many years, lay in a pile on the white-dusted floor and impressed on me an intense feeling of melancholy.

The ghosts of another era haunted my mind. These many buildings, grouped around a courtyard in traditional Chinese fashion, with their latticework windows, were now crumbling before my eyes, the dark green paint peeling. I could imagine Franciscan friars walking here with their brown robes swishing, teaching, preaching, praying. Where did all their efforts go? How horrifically did it all come to an abrupt end? And what would become of these buildings? It was with heavy hearts that we began our ascent up the hill at the rear of the building. Father Z showed us a tree that a seminarian had planted here from a seedling he brought from Europe. Father Z plucked a leaf and we each turned it over in our hands, musing on personal legacies and the efforts made to transplant a culture.

At every turn of this zigzag path was a Station of the Cross, and at the top of the ascent was a large Chinese gate. From here we could look back down on the seminary, and from this vantage you could almost imagine it the way it had been in its glory. Turning and going through the gate, however, I had my breath taken away. Here on this hilltop was what looked like a shining replica of the

famous Temple of Heaven in Beijing. Behind the elaborately painted circular pavilion stood a long imperial-style hall, also vividly painted in bright reds, greens, and blues. A donor had funded this remarkable building project in the 1990s, but it looked as if it could have originally dated to the 1790s or earlier. Where the Chinese religious altar to heaven would have been located in the center of the open-air pavilion was here a Christian altar – the focal point of the space – able to accommodate Masses for large numbers of pilgrims.

We entered the hall beyond and an elderly gentleman, the caretaker, swiftly prepared the indoor altar for Mass; he then functioned as the altar server for Father Z. Inside this long rectangular hall, decorated in a seemingly traditional Chinese style, we began to decode what at first appeared to be traditional secular Chinese art as what it truly was – Catholic Chinese art. The elaborate paintings that encircled the ceiling depicted the fifteen mysteries of the rosary. Like the churches of medieval Europe, this was a physical, visual, represented catechism. Incidentally, Matteo Ricci had made a mistake in a sixteenth century catechetical publication, in which the woodblock print that was supposed to depict the Ascension of Christ had accidentally been replaced by an image of the Transfiguration of Christ (depicted with two prophets levitating beside him). Here in this church, four centuries later, this error had continued down through the ages. In the image of the Ascension depicted in the Glorious Mysteries series was an image, not of the Ascension, but the Transfiguration showing Christ in the air flanked by two other floating men, and cowering



apostles below them. In a country that instinctively retains and honors its ancient cultural heritage, combined with how cut-off the Catholic Church has been from its center in Rome, I was struck by the perpetuation of Ricci's printing error made nearly four centuries previously. Chinese Catholicism has developed in periods of isolation and has produced a Catholic culture unique to China.

Father Z offered Mass and as we were leaving he turned to some people who had been standing at the rear of the building and asked them, "Are you parishioners?," meaning in Chinese simply, Catholic. They answered in the affirmative and Father Z with a perplexed look asked them, somewhat rhetorically, why they hadn't joined in and received Communion. They shrugged and I wondered if it was because of our foreign presence that suddenly caused the Mass seem "private" or exclusive in that instance. This occurrence also reminded me also to wonder about the level of catechism as understood by Catholic villagers.

As we left we procured a poster from the small gift shop, in addition to our usual monetary offering placed in the red donation box. This poster was a reproduction of a painting completed by a local Catholic layperson. The image showed a tearful Virgin Mary; several local miracles have been ascribed to the image. While we refrained from passing judgment on local claims, we respected them and their devotions, leaving our minds open to all possibilities.

Tony and our two friends decided to take a bathroom break and I sat with Father Z outside near the outdoor pavilion. We had a sweet interchange where I

made a Catholic pun with his name pointing at a rock and saying he was shitou, or rock, and he said no, he was a much smaller rock, pointing to a smaller one, prompting me to point at an even smaller pebble and saying that then I must be this small, both of us laughing. It was a tender moment – one of uncountable instances of closeness between seemingly dissimilar persons.

Below the mountain shrine and the old seminary and across the road there was a church still very much used, adjoining an old convent. Several rooms had been dedicated by the local Chinese in honor of a Blessed who had achieved levels of local veneration that reminded me of devotions to St. Therese the Little Flower. A series of rooms were filled with this nun's personal belongings and displayed like a museum diorama complete with information about her. In the final room was a Chinese-style shrine in her honor with a large iconic image of her. It was there that Father Z calmed the small children who had been following and ogling us, making us seem less strange and foreign to them; after the initial shock passed, we grouped together in front of the image of Blessed Mary Assunta and took a photograph.

I was curious why this particular Western nun had especially captured the hearts of the local faithful. The holy cards that were printed of her show her sweetly smiling face surrounded by her white habit, set against a brilliantly blue background and adorned with rosy pink flowers. Blessed Mary Assunta was a Franciscan missionary sister who lived from 1878 to 1905. She arrived in China in 1904, following in the footsteps of the seven Franciscan sisters who were

martyred in this region just a few years prior. Her fate was not one of martyrdom by persecution but death from disease, which also took the lives of several other sisters and many of the orphans they cared for. When we asked about her, people still revered her generous nature. And the flowers in the image on the holy card? The scent of flowers had filled the convent upon her death and many experienced miraculous occurrences attributed to her intercession. Her memory in this community remained bright among the faithful.

Back in the van we drove through the night, finally entering a tough-looking industrial village where our headlights seemed to be the only source of light in those narrow impoverished streets. In the back room of the rectory of another church we met the local pastor over a cup of tea. We had been told earlier in the day that this particular priest, Father Q, was the local historian, and Father Z had arranged this spontaneous evening meeting with him. Father Q was a stocky, reserved man, a chain smoker. After some snacks had been consumed he began to loosen up and offered to share some of his research findings with Tony. The two of them huddled close to his computer screen as he opened file after file of digitized historic photos. Once the two began sharing information and looking at documents together it was clear that they had a strong, shared interest.

After a time two smiling cooks, with matching birthmarks, appeared and ushered us into an adjoining room where we gathered for a small feast. It was the usual noodles and pickled vegetables, but here also we had pork and fresh celery.

Father Z and I alone sampled the local rice wine, which ingratiated me to him all the more. Before we departed, the priest-historian, Father Q, took a small battery-powered table lamp outside to the rear of the church building where he showed us in a dim beam of light the standing funerary monuments honoring several missionary priests who had died here. We agreed to return the following morning and said our thank-filled farewells.

Again, I did not sleep well as nightmares plagued my dreams. In the morning, as an offering of thanks in addition to his stipend, we offered our driver a carton of expensive name-brand cigarettes. We had noticed that he loved to smoke, and he had put up with our many adventures, so we wanted to thank him in a way that was personal to him. Though a shy man, he seemed much gratified by the gift. Our first stop was to visit Father Q again and photograph the funerary monuments. From there we drove to the Taiyuan Cathedral where we seemed to cause a bit of a stir among the crowds of faithful coming and going from the offered Masses. We stood out and drew a good deal of attention, and so when Father Z appeared and whisked us into a back room, I felt relieved. We met our driver's wife, and the brother of our friend's family priest. We then met the bishop-elect, who spoke a smattering of English, and waited to be received by the elderly bishop himself.

As we waited for our audience with the bishop several older ladies were begging for alms at his door in the hallway and I was struck by the hustle and bustle of this cathedral; things seemed a bit chaotic. When our turn arrived we

were ushered into the bishop's office; a small burgundy curtain hung in the innermost doorframe, beyond which I could see a bed and washbasin. These were modest accommodations indeed for a prince of the Church. Tony offered several gifts to the bishop, who seemed a little hard of hearing and mildly disoriented.

As we left we visited the main chapel of the cathedral where a wedding ceremony was underway with a garishly dressed bride striding down the center aisle in white fur. We were speechless when Father Z informed us that they frequently rent the church for non-Christian weddings and even offer to conduct the services. We protested, "But it's a sacrament!" but quickly realized from our friends' expressions that either this was doctrinally misunderstood or that we were culturally uncouth to belabor the point, so we halted our criticisms, but our frustration remained. Suddenly I could see how profitable, in rural areas like this one, such wedding opportunities might be. I recognized that the money was indeed needed and that there were urban dwellers eager to pay for it; but Catholic priests marrying non-Catholic couples, in the cathedral no less, is forbidden. I realized that despite the strong and vibrant faith of Shanxi Catholics, they had been too long cut off from Rome and the guiding hand of the Vatican, the very center from which the Church radiates its universality. These were not just local variances of the faith, they were, at times, appearing like different religious traditions all together.

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Our driver dropped us off down the block from the old yamen, the Qing dynasty magistrate's office in the heart of Taiyuan city. It is still today a government facility, at the gates of which stood armed guards. Tony crossed the street to take a picture and when he raised his camera the guard began yelling virulently for us to desist. It was here at this yamen that many members of the nineteenth-century Franciscan mission and those of the English Baptist mission had been beheaded. This was where the seven Franciscan sisters had been beheaded in 1900 while chanting the Te Deum, their voices diminishing one by one until the courtyard was silent. While these guards were preoccupied keeping their eyes on the offending Tony, our Chinese friend, Mrs. F, collected some soil near the gate while our other friend, Mr. F, took slightly wonky photos from the camera he kept casually at his waist. We were somewhat relieved to leave but consequently pleased to have seen the yamen. On this busy road in this bustling city it was difficult to imagine the martyrdoms as they must have happened. Surrounded by modern worries and capitalist delights, the struggles of the past seemed so distant, even as you are standing in front of a building that remains largely unchanged.

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Our Taiyuan journey had nearly come to an end, and we shared a farewell meal over a steaming northern-style hot-pot. We were terribly sad to say goodbye to our new friend, Father Z. He seemed such a natural part of our lives now that we were distressed to leave him. We missed him all the more when we

arrived unannounced at the nearby rural seminary. At the gate we were all but chased away by an overly protective priest, who seemed alarmed beyond rationality at our appearance. We suddenly realized poignantly just how facilitating it had been to have had Father Z with us those past few days. Without Father Z doors that had otherwise been open to us were suddenly closed. I feared that Tony would come to blows with this irate priest who demanded we answer ominous and irritating questions such as, “Who told you you could come here?” and “Why did you come to China?” An observing nearby worker soon made himself known and pleaded our cause; after much summoning of Father Z’s name the onerous priest eventually relented and allowed us to enter the seminary for a brief visit. We were in no mood to stay long. Inside we crossed paths with several friendly seminarians who seemed happy to show us their classrooms and chapel. It was a mystifying experience.

Things without Father Z certainly were different. We drove toward a village we had heard rumor of, named Liuhecun, where thousands of Catholic peasants attended a series of rotating Masses all day long on Sundays. As we entered the apparently empty town our van went around a large statue of the Holy Family at the village entrance. This was already unusual. Loudspeakers were mounted on every street corner and from them we could hear the sound of the rosary being recited. We parked in front of a massive church façade, and pushing back a heavy red curtain to keep the cold out we entered into a cavernous space that seemed to be the length of a football field.

Inside, more than two thousand peasants knelt in prayer, reciting the rosary. I was a bit overwhelmed by the sheer number of people; at the far end of the space I could see the altar and above it a large golden figure of Christ. During Mass we sat near the back of the space and drew a good deal of unwarranted attention. Sacred silence is simply untenable in a space this size; the crowds sang and chanted with gusto. While Tony went forward to receive the Eucharist I stayed back not wanting to cause further distraction from the holy aspects of the Mass. I think all of us were a bit unnerved by the immensity of the crowd, many of whom may not have ever laid eyes on foreigners before aside from those seen on television. When we suggested leaving quietly just a few minutes before the Mass ended, our Chinese friends readily agreed. As we boarded our van a crowd of curious children gathered and we said hello to them in Chinese and English, waving goodbye to them as we drove away.

On the train back to Beijing our Chinese friends pored over maps and documents with us so that Tony and I could expand on the more nuanced parts of our completed trip. Mrs. F and I sat by the train window breaking open sunflower seeds with our teeth and chatting in a pigeon of Chinese and English mixed together -- our friendship overcoming our many linguistic failings; at times we would simply sigh and smile when words failed us, the other generously smiling and nodding back in an understanding that transcends language. Mr F. proudly showed us photographs of his cat on his laptop computer and we giggled and cooed over how cute she was, a tenderness shared for furry friends across



national boundaries. We are so indebted to these friends that a lifetime of goodwill could not repay them for the generosity they have shown us. They will remain forever in our hearts.

## China's Three Churches

Back in Beijing we made one last trip to the international courier service to mail our remaining, and newly purchased, books – three suitcases worth. This time they overwhelmed us with questions: were the books new, were they old, were they originally from America, etcetera. But in the end all the books were packed and sent, though I was a little doubtful about whether I would ever see them again. In hindsight I can say that yes, all the books arrived safely and quickly.

With only a few days remaining in Beijing we decided to take one last adventure. Tony desperately wanted to see the Beijing Catholic seminary; he had the address and we were confident that we could track it down, despite it being located in an unfamiliar suburb. We took a bus in the right direction and Tony assessed from a map where we should disembark. What ensued was an adventure that tested the limits of our patience – mostly with each other. We walked for a very long time down one road attempting to find a place to cross under a set of raised railway tracks and ended up in the middle of a park next to the edge of an old hutong neighborhood.

Coming to a major road we passed under a sign that designated the area as part of an old village named Hobajiacun. In vein we looked for the seminary down a series of long, crumbling alleyways. We asked several people to guide us in the direction of the address we had, but ended up going very much in the

wrong direction. At one point we went in a complete circle, and each new passerby gave us a different set of opposing directions. It was bitterly cold and I feared my fingers might suffer actual damage from our excursion. Admittedly, I was a tad grumpy. We bought some steamed buns from a vendor, which at least served to warm my poor fingers. In desperation, Tony called the seminary, told them our location and asked them how to get there. Frustratingly, we had been closest to them near the beginning of our trek. Farther down that long, old alley with the gate over it was, if we had just kept going, turning left instead of right (as we had done), we would have been right there in the long driveway. The Lazarists had purchased this property long ago just behind Hobajia village. With more confidence we walked back to this point and finally, as we continued, began to see an emerging bell tower.

At the tall iron gate the guard resolutely refused to allow us entry. Oh to be so close! He informed us that we needed an appointment and we must go away. Tony showed him his Vatican identification card, but the guard was unmoved. Tony changed his tactic and began asking questions: was the guard a parishioner, did he know who the Pope was, did he know that the Pope lived in Rome? In English these sound like harsh questions and a little condescending, but we were amazingly tired and looking for a little human compassion. Tony told him that he researched in the Pope's library, that he wanted to see the seminary, and that he had just called five minutes ago and was told how to get to the seminary. A little reluctantly, the guard decided to let us in. I don't blame

people too much when these type of occurrences happen in China. The system is such that those who lack positions of power are constantly in fear of jeopardizing their hard-won employment – one misstep could cost them their job. Thus people often tend to operate within a paradigm of rigid behavior.

The guard took us upstairs to the office of a priest, knocked on a closed door and made a hasty retreat. The man who answered the door was one of the head priests in the seminary and greeted us with smiles, offering hot coffee and a seat in his cozy office. Like the head priests we had met in Guiyang and Wuhan, this priest was likewise expertly diplomatic. He and Tony chatted for a long while carefully navigating many sensitive issues. He asked Tony if he had brought with him an official letter, or directive, from Rome and Tony said no, he had not. The priest indicated that this was a good thing, and that if Tony did have a letter it would have complicated the whole event. Looking at his watch he invited us to stay and join the seminarians for a simple lunch in the refectory, for which we were extremely grateful. The lunch consisted of a common northern fare of Beijing-style noodles, and we sat at long tables with the other priests and seminarians. One of these seminarians at our table had grown up a member of the Liuhecun church we had visited just days before in the Mass of more than 2,000 villagers. He was thrilled that we had visited his home parish, and we too were glad for the connection. The priest whose office we had just come from stood and introduced us to everyone present; they offered us a hearty round of applause, followed by congenial lunch conversation. I returned for a second

helping of Beijing noodles – one of my favorite foods. Everyone seemed unfazed by our presence and genuinely pleased with our being there.

Once the lunch was finished we were entrusted to a fifth-year seminarian who had been enlisted to give us the full tour of the facilities: church, two chapels, bell tower, dorm rooms, reception room, recreation room, music room, counseling room, classrooms, gymnasium, assembly hall, and library. This seminarian was still two years from graduation, reminding us how many years it takes for a Chinese Catholic man to become a priest and serve a flock so short of clergy. The dorm rooms slept two seminarians each, the chapel was very peaceful and modern, and the gym was in the process of being used by several exuberant seminarians. In all, they appeared to live a very comfortable life in the seminary, and the facilities struck me as far better than I had expected. We paused for a while in the library where a nervous librarian showed us around the stacks. We were intrigued to find near the back a collection of old French-language books, which were, for the most part, written by those from the order of the Congregation of the Mission, who had formerly owned the property. I was intrigued by the history of these books, brought here so long ago from so far away, and now gathering dust in this diocesan seminary. No one enrolled or employed currently at the seminary could read French.

We were told that the seminary had twenty-eight seminarians, twenty-three of whom were new this year. No one could remember anyone coming to visit from Rome in recent memory, and we were again struck by how

unfortunately cut-off the Church in China is from its leadership in Rome. Tony and I mused at each other over how relatively easy it seemed, with a little persistence, to visit such places, and were curious why there seemed to have been so little contact with the Vatican at places such as the Beijing diocesan seminary. Since foreign priests are banned from entering China in their priestly capacity, it seems the Vatican needs non-Chinese nationals who speak Chinese to make visits to places such as these to slowly build ties; the relationship would mature. We are always very sensitive to the fact, that, like it or not, when we make such trips we are de facto emissaries of our country, our culture, and our religion. We try always to be on our best diplomatic behavior.

We said our goodbyes and departed contemplating for a few minutes attempting to seek out the address of a newly discovered Catholic publisher before ultimately deciding to simply return home. That weekend we had a small farewell party at our apartment with our local Catholic friends. This gave us a chance to thank them for their continued help and their friendship. We gave them many of the appliances and household items that we would be unable to take back with us to America. Afterward we treated these three young friends to a tasty dinner at a nearby Hunan restaurant, where we raised many glasses to good friendship and speedy reunions. Together we adjourned to our apartment again for some late-evening tea drinking. When we finally closed the door behind them Tony looked at me sadly and said, “Can we just take them home with us?” I completely agreed with his sentiments; these friends were priceless.

Sunday morning we returned to the Mass at the British visa office and met with the Lazarists again, accompanying a priest and an American parishioner to lunch afterwards. In the basement of a granite and marble shopping mall, we four sat alone in a brightly lit American pizza chain restaurant. It felt so odd to be there, to be ordering in English, to be with other Americans who live in their own separate world within Beijing. Our stories could not have been more different. They spoke about various foreign Catholic groups in China busy offering many services to the underprivileged and forsaken of the country, offering help to single mothers and assisting in orphanages. Their world, the world that offered this help and those they worked alongside, consisted largely, almost entirely of non-Chinese: diplomats and business professionals. They were stunned at the information we didn't know and vice versa. I nearly choked on my pizza when they told us that another religious Order had deep roots and was currently ministering in Beijing. An Order? They were forbidden in China! It was shocking what information wasn't available outside of certain circles. What we knew, they did not; what they knew, we did not.

What we quickly assessed was that what Tony and I had dug into was the Catholic community of Chinese nationals, both "underground" and patriotic, not a community of foreign expatriates. The more they talked the more we listened. We felt somehow silenced, somehow excluded inadvertently, just a little bit. Our realities seemed so different. While they assisted, magnificently, in charities that helped Chinese people, we had rubbed shoulders with Chinese nationals in the

pews. I had always assumed there were two churches in China, the patriotic and the underground, but now I realized that there were three churches, including this foreign, expatriate community; this third church was perhaps even more isolated than the first two. We were saddened by how separate this foreign community was from the Chinese Catholic community. And I couldn't help but be stunned during Mass as the collection basket went by filled to the brim with hundred yuan bills. At the local Chinese churches I saw people giving ones and fives and sometimes only coins; the Chinese priests told us their weekend collections only amounted to a few hundred yuan total – here at this foreign Mass I saw upwards of thousands.

Leaving the pizza shop, groaning under the weight of the unfamiliar pizza, I was grateful that we had enmeshed ourselves in the native Chinese community, even if it had been at the cost of not getting to know the foreign priest community. During our lunchtime conversation I had asked the American women if the church she had just been discussing had foreign priests and she answered yes, and then no. After a moment of clarification we realized that when I said foreign, I meant non-Chinese in China, while when she said foreign she meant Chinese priests in China. This example serves to demonstrate just how differently our worldviews were, as ourselves both foreigners in China, living in two very different Chinas.

In that trendy part of Beijing Tony and I could not help but wonder if the foreign Catholics upstairs had ever ridden a Beijing bus. That week we had met a



few persons who had much; the previous week we had knelt in a church full of nearly 3,000 peasants who had little. In the Mass that day the American priest had announced the schedule for the upcoming Christmas Masses, which always draw large crowds. He announced that the Masses were going to be held at luxury accommodations, the River Gardens and the Hilton; at both locations the Masses were listed as “parties,” since calling it a Mass would raise red flags. Parishioners were told to bring their foreign passports and ask at the front desk for the “Our Lady of China Party.”

That evening we returned, for the last time, to our Beijing church. We said goodbye to our many new Chinese friends, posing for numerous formal photos together. We could not help but notice how much more we felt that these were our people, this was our community. It struck us as strange that we would feel more at home with Chinese than with other Westerners. On the bus home Tony and I talked about what an amazing experience this trip had been and how hard it was to leave such a tender, welcoming church community. We marveled at how close we could feel toward people we had known only such a short time, and we lamented that they might soon forget us.

## The Last Interview, the Last Trappist

After much pressing, several of our Chinese Catholic friends agreed, with an acknowledged level of risk, to put us in touch with, and accompany us to meet, the last remaining Trappist from a community almost entirely massacred by the communists in 1947. After a long taxi ride to a distant Beijing suburb we were introduced to an elderly man who met us at the base of a dim stairwell in his lower-level apartment within an eerily desolate compound of concrete apartment towers. Seated together under a massive image of the Last Supper he told us his tales, what he had seen, and how he had survived. Our Chinese friends recorded the conversation, took notes, and snapped pictures, as they had selflessly done everywhere we had gone together.

Perched on the edge of his seat, the frail-looking elderly Chinese man showed us pictures and maps. In the late 1940s he had been a postulant in a French Trappist community in China. In 1947 the communists took possession of the monastery and led the brothers on a death march, where most of the community perished, the elderly by marching and others by stoning. The man who sat before us had survived. After the massacre he and a few others took their skills from the monastery and set up a small dairy farm where they secretly maintained their monastic lifestyle behind closed doors. Though he never took final vows he had been a prominent member of the “underground” Catholic community for years. These days, he told us, he attended the Beitang or North

church in Beijing – a patriotic church that we had found attracted a large number of attendees from the underground community. His stories and his persevering demeanor humbled us all. Deeply moved by his willingness to risk possible repercussions by speaking with us, we thanked him profusely and waved eagerly as we departed. Afterward, in the car, there was a silence that surrounded us.

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Our dear Chinese friends, Mr. and Mrs. F, whom we had met at church just four short months ago, saw us off at the Beijing Capital International Airport on the day of our departure. They treated us to lunch, and so we treated them to American ice cream, their eyes open wide at the ridiculous prices. But no amount of ice cream would have been enough to repay their months of kindness. Walking toward the gate, the distance gradually growing between us, we called out, “You’re our angels!” And they said in return, “No, you’re our angels!” As Tony and I passed through the gate for the ticketed-area we reluctantly waived goodbye to our friends, turning one last time to see them and choking back our tears.

## Postface

For the record I would like to say that I offer no particular solutions, nor support for any particular political agenda. My concern remains primarily for each unique, individual soul. The views expressed in this memoir are solely my own; being human I may have mis-heard, mis-remembered, or mis-understood what I heard and what was said – indeed, it is possible that at times I may have been duped. Regardless, I am convicted that this subject deserves more wide attention and that my adventures of Catholicism in China were singular and worth sharing. It is for these reasons, and with genuine concern in my heart, that I offer these memories for your readership. Let us pray that the people of China seek Christ's Divine Will and be guided by His Mother's Immaculate and Triumphant Heart.

## About the Author

Amanda C. R. Clark is completing her Doctor of Philosophy at The University of Alabama. Since 1996 she and her husband have visited and lived periodically in Beijing, Inner Mongolia, Taipei, Hong Kong, Paris, Rome, Oregon, Alabama, and Washington state. The companion volume to this memoir is the academic record of our findings, my husband Anthony's book, entitled, *China's Saints: Catholic Martyrdom During the Qing (1644-1911)* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2011). Whereas my book tells our story, it is his book that tells the story of the saints themselves. His narrative unfurls what we found in the archives, libraries, and villages that we visited in primarily 2007 and 2008. My story – this memoir – is the tale of how we gathered some of those documents; it is the story behind the story.

