

5-2012

Reflections on Gerolamo Fazzini's, *The Red Book of Chinese Martyrs* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2009)

Anthony E. Clark

Whitworth University, aclark@whitworth.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.whitworth.edu/historyfaculty>

Recommended Citation

Clark, Anthony E. , "Reflections on Gerolamo Fazzini's, *The Red Book of Chinese Martyrs* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2009)" Whitworth University (2012). *History Faculty Scholarship*. Paper 32.
<http://digitalcommons.whitworth.edu/historyfaculty/32>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the History at Whitworth University. It has been accepted for inclusion in History Faculty Scholarship by an authorized administrator of Whitworth University.

CATHOLIC WORLD REPORT: CLARK ON CHINA (MAY 2012)
Anthony E. Clark, Ph.D. (*Whitworth University*)

Reflections on Gerolamo Fazzini's, *The Red Book of Chinese Martyrs* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2009).

The truth is always more complicated than fiction; this is perhaps why Pope Benedict XVI is so often misrepresented and misunderstood. He is truthful. While it is tempting to portray the Church in China in monochrome, a more accurate depiction provides us with a polychromatic canvas, and such a more truthful painting casts more honest lights on both China and the Church. Let me give you an example. When the founder of the Society of the Divine Word, Johann Baptist von Anzer, established his mission in China during the late nineteenth century, he brought with him an intense German nationalism, just as the French Jesuits had carried French nationalism with them when they built churches, schools, and French market areas in Shanghai. When Anzer arrived at his mission he draped a massive German flag from his church steeple and above the veranda of his rectory he installed a sign that read, “Vivat, crescat, floreat Germania,” or “May Germany live, flourish, and grow.” German nationalist songs were often intoned from his chapel with brio, and the native Chinese wondered if missionaries like him came to convert China or colonize it. Only a short decade previously, Britain had bombed China's shores and bullied the Court into legalizing the sale of Western opium, as well as to open all China to foreign missionaries. It did not help matters that Christian missionaries were thereafter connected to guns and opium in the eyes of most Chinese. There is little mystery, then, why common Chinese had become suspicious of Westerners and their religion. But despite appearances, most missionaries were not in favor of guns and opium, nor were most missionaries in favor of open displays of European nationalism.

I often tell my students that propaganda – there are good and bad forms of propaganda – is telling only one side of a story, and the more they read about history based on primary sources the more they agree with this assertion. Too often do historical monographs provide biased and un-nuanced depictions of the past, recounting a history that validates one's preconceptions rather than explain what really happened. Fazzini's collection of primary biographies, autobiographies, and documentation of Catholic martyrdom in modern China provides readers with first-hand testimonies of the turbulent Maoist era;

readers can decide for themselves how to interpret China's policies regarding the Catholic Church from 1949 until Mao's death in 1976. And, by presenting these sources unedited, Fazzini avoids propaganda, allowing those witnesses to present both the brutal years of suppression and the more lenient years that followed Mao.

The Maoist interpretation of Christianity in China was formed both by Mao's knowledge of Western imperialism, mixed as it was with mission churches marked by foreign flags, and Marxist materialism, which views religion as a form of self-comfort under the yoke of class exploitation. There is almost no evidence that Mao, or his comrades, truly understood the history, belief, and goals of Christianity apart from its nationalist underpinnings. While there were a few Christian missionaries who indeed embraced the imperialist enterprise in China, Catholic and Protestant, it is incontestable that the greater majority of these foreigners loved China and expressed that love through unselfish acts of charity. The manifest value of Fazzini's book is that it consists of a collection of original testimonies by Chinese Catholics who demonstrate a profound love of their own culture, while also expressing an abiding belief in God in an era of forceful transition. We do well to recall as we read these testimonies that it was not Chinese culture that most harshly persecuted Christianity, but rather Western Marxist materialism that inspired the suppression of all religious commitment.

In the biography of Father Li Chang, written by his cousin Li Daoming, we have an excellent example of how Catholic Christianity, as Fazzini describes, "at last began to breathe an atmosphere of relative freedom" after the reforms of Deng Xiaoping had begun (p. 138). Father Li was arrested and transferred from one labor camp to another; his crime was refusal to surrender to China's Marxist indoctrination. While held in Camp 101, Li was interrogated in a dark room:

"Are you Li Chang?"

"I am Father Li Chang."

"Don't talk nonsense! This is a courtroom! Speak! What crimes have you committed against the Country?"

"Everything I do, I do for the good of my Country. Those who know me can testify to that."

“Nonsense! We know that you are a liar and we have proofs of your misdeeds. . . . We are merciful with those who confess their crimes and severe with those who disobey us” (p. 179).

At the end of the trial it was revealed that Father Li’s “crime” was “secretly hoarding” objects, which were in fact a number of religious articles he used for Mass and devotions. For his inability to apprehend why this was a “crime,” and for his refusal to malign the Church hierarchy, Li was “locked up in a tiny cell where he remained for ten days” (p. 180).

During the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), Father Li was subjected to a string of “struggle sessions,” during which he was forced onto a platform in front of a large crowd, made to kneel, and “accused of corruption and fraud . . . spat on,” and insulted “with vulgar epithets” (p. 196). Father Li, because he remained loyal to the Pope, was accused of being “a spy, a dog in the pay of the imperialists,” and ordered, “Acknowledge your offenses, confess!” (p. 198). He simply responded, “Show me some evidence and I will confess,” and since there was none, he was at last accused of the “crime” of believing in God (p. 198). For that he was punished and humiliated. As Fazzini recounts, Li accepted his years of suffering and trial as a good priest, “with great dignity and courage” (p. 138). After all his imprisonments and torments, Father Li was released once Mao had died, and by 1979 he was able to celebrate Christmas Mass with a large and jubilant assembly of Chinese Catholics, who had also endured the chaos of the Maoist era. Two days before Mass, the faithful from neighboring villages began to pour into his small church for Confession: “he remained in the confessional for two days and two nights and continued to hear confessions until the beginning of midnight Mass” (p. 217). Shortly after Christmas, Father Li’s health declined from years of mistreatment; the area’s Catholics gathered and knelt to receive his final blessing, and Li died just as the Church in China began to recover from its long suppression.

While the diaries of Fathers Francis Tan Tiande and John Huang Yongmu are poignant descriptions of the Church in China before its restoration in the early 1980s, Gertrude Li Minwen’s prison diary is a more raw and candid account of agonizing determination to remain Catholic in a context wherein countless friends and priests collapse under the pressures of abuse and brainwashing. As I read Ms. Li’s diary I was reminded of a Catholic man I know from Shanxi who, while sharing lunch one afternoon, told me in passing of his days as a Red Guard “struggling against” his fellow Catholics through the 1960s. I asked him to elaborate; he responded simply, “I was Catholic in my heart, I’m sorry

for what I did, I went to confession after it all ended, those days are gone now.” He is now dedicated to Our Lady, loves his country, and is one of the more tender persons I’ve ever met. China after 1949 is complicated, and so is Gertrude Li’s story.

When Father Giovanni Carbone, PIME, was expelled from China at the end of 1952, he brought with him twenty-five pages of tiny Chinese characters “sewn into the soles of the missionary’s shoes” (p. 225). It was the prison diary of Gertrude Li Minwen, who had been arrested by Party officials along with several other young Catholics for their affiliation with the Legion of Mary, which was labeled “counterrevolutionary” by the State. This secret diary was written by her own hand and contains vivid accounts of official tactics to coerce Catholics to provide testimonies against foreign priests and their fellow believers. Gertrude and her friends were arrested after a tense confrontation between Catholics and Party officials on April 1, 1951. Li writes that on that day outside of the bishop’s residence, a crowd of “students from Hua Yang School shouted, ‘Down with the imperialist [Father] Crotti!’ . . . the bishop came outdoors, and the same students started shouting again: ‘Down with the imperialist [Bishop] Pollio!’” (p. 232). Angry from the shouts of the Maoist students, another priest, Father Edoardo Piccinini, came out of the church and countered with the exclamation, “Long live Monsignor Pollio! Long live the bishop!” (p. 232). On the pretense that the Catholics had stirred trouble among the people, the foreign bishop, priests, and members of the Legion of Mary were arrested for examination.

Interrogations and indoctrination sessions with the Chinese Catholic youth began immediately; they were told that the April 1 confrontation represented, “the warfare between imperialists and the people” (p. 236). In essence, they were notified that to remain Catholic was to turn against their own Chinese people; they were to choose between China and an “imperialist” foreign religion. As was common, Gertrude Li’s faith wavered as she heard of the “crimes of foreign invaders.” After being subjected to unremitting examinations and propaganda, she yielded: “I admit that the bishop and priests are imperialists” (p. 240). And when she was asked how she would demonstrate this realization, Li responded, “I will break off all relationships with them” (p. 240). But when she was moved to a better prison cell as a reward, she could hear from the coughing in the room beside hers that the bishop was her new neighbor, and she regretted her betrayal. By the end of her prison journal, Gertrude Li Minwen had decidedly turned against her captors, who in the face of her renewed spiritual

commitment expressed one last warning: “Can you imagine what might happen to you?” (p. 283). To this threat, Gertrude writes: “I remained silent” (p. 283).

Fazzini’s final entry is the most dramatic section of the book, and recalls one of the most sensitive events in the history of the Party’s treatment of China’s Catholic Church. In fact, I recall once after Mass in Beijing, when asking about the 1947 Communist army’s torture and murder of Trappist monks outside of Beijing, being told in an urgent whisper that this was a “dangerous topic to discuss in China today.” This entry deals with the “via crucis” and death of the monks of Yangjiaping’s Our Lady of Consolation Abbey, mostly Chinese, who were forced from their monastery, restrained with thin metal wire, and taken on a death march; thirty-three monks died from the abuses. When some of the monks were at last released by the Communist army they fled to Beijing where an American Jesuit, Father Charles McCarthy, SJ, was stationed for Fides News Service and National Catholic News Service. Father McCarthy was the first person to collect and record the testimonies of those Trappists who survived the brutal afflictions they endured with their confreres.

This is perhaps one of the most tragic stories of Catholic persecution in the history of modern China. Fazzini recounts:

With their hands tied behind their backs with iron wires, their shoulders bent under the heavy baggage of the soldiers, subjected to countless cruelties and torments, half-naked, devoured by lice, their bodies stooped, the monks watched their companions die little by little along the way (and often they had to abandon them on the spot without burying the corpses). Another six were executed. All told, the ‘long march’ imposed on the monks took the life of thirty-three of them, fourteen priests and nineteen brothers (p. 288).

The episode began on July 1, 1947, when the monks were summoned to be tried by a “people’s tribunal”; the charge against them was that they had “oppressed and exploited the people,” and even worse, that they collaborated with the invading Japanese (p. 292). All of this was pure contrivance, but the “people” had much to gain by facilitating the charade; the Party promised to divide the monastery property if the monks were convicted. As Aristotle wrote, “The least initial deviation from the truth is multiplied later a thousand fold.” One accusation led to another, and by July 8 the tribunal had relinquished the monastery and all its belongings to the local farmers – after the troops had first taken whatever they wanted. It was after the trial and plunder that the monks were taken on their march.

The trials were fierce. According to witnesses, the Party tribunal approached a local delegate of the “people” for the verdict: “They must die. Hand them over to us, if you want. We will take up stones and kill them” (p. 300). The tribunal’s reply: “The Communist government is the government of the people; we can only make the people’s decision our own” (p. 300). The monks were brought to the chapel corner, where the lamp of the Blessed Sacrament was hanging, and they were bound in chains; their “cinctures, scapulars, rosaries, and medals were snatched away,” and their imprisonment began. “They set out on their march in the late evening carrying the soldiers’ heavy packs, and what was worse according to the Trappists, they were endlessly berated for their faith. One soldier reportedly said, “We know that you have no fear of death, but we will beat and torture you without respite until you are half-dead. In that state we will induce you to agree with us” (p. 304). By October, the death march had ended, the remaining monks were released, and the monastery was completely destroyed by the army. Despite their torments, the monks remained Christ-like in their attitude of forgiveness. In Father McCarthy’s record of his interviews he writes:

I asked Brother Joachim how he felt during those weeks. He answered that his heart was at peace and even joyful. “The reason,” he said, “was that we were not guilty of anything.” . . . When asked what he would do to the Communists if they were taken prisoners and handed over to him, he answered, “I would forgive them.”

There are no Catholic monasteries in China today.

As I stated at the outset, there are good historic reasons for China’s suspicion, and perhaps even disdain, for foreigners, and there are examples of Christian missionary collaboration with imperialist ambitions. I should, however, add here that an entire book could be written about instances wherein Christians were protected and harbored by native Chinese – many who were not Christians themselves. Fazzini’s collection, *The Red Book of Chinese Martyrs*, provides important historical examples of where Chinese suspicion and disdain went too far, and resulted in injustice, persecution, and violence. What is often overlooked, however, by scholars who insist on connecting Christianity in China to Western colonialism is that the missionaries were almost unanimously in disagreement with the guns, opium, and arrogance that followed Western diplomats and businessmen. Yes, Christianity sometimes used the vocabulary of conquest, but as the English poet, painter, and printmaker, William Blake, once said, “The glory of Christianity is to conquer by forgiveness.” One of the manifest virtues of Fazzini’s book is that it illustrates this point

with brilliant clarity, not through the usual narrative of a secondary study, but rather through the original voices of those who lived through one of modern China's most turbulent eras.

The Red Book of Chinese Martyrs is not comfortable reading, but as China grows more influential on the global landscape, and as it hosts one of the world's fastest growing Christian populations, it is imperative that we better understand all sides of the history of the Church's role in China's modern rise. After religious practice began to recover in the 1980s, China's long-abandoned churches also began to hear hymns and prayers as the faithful crowded again into the dusty pews. After Father Joseph Li Chang's release from labor camp he organized a Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament. A Catholic man had years earlier buried the monstrance deep in the earth while the church was being ransacked by radicals. Before the Benediction the elderly man unburied the monstrance, then "covered with a layer of rust and fifth" (p. 219). Father Li carefully cleaned the monstrance with lime, and when it appeared again before the large crowd of Catholics they all knelt; the visible Church had returned.