

**CATHOLIC WORLD REPORT – CLARK ON CHINA**  
**SPECIAL SERIES: “CHINA’S MODERN MARTYRS: FROM MAO TO NOW”**  
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**Part 2, Torments**

*“The body of Christ which is the Church, like the human body, was first young, but at the end of the world it will have an appearance of decline.” St. Augustine.*

As I sat with Brother Marcel Zhang, OCSO (b. 1924), in his Beijing apartment I thumbed through his private photographs of Yangjiaping Trappist Abbey, some from before its destruction in 1947, and some that he had taken during a recent visit to the ruins. What was once a majestic abbey church filled with divine prayer and worship had been reduced to debris and an occasional partial outline of a gothic window. When the Peoples Liberation Army (PLA) attacked the monastery in 1947 and began its cruel torments against the monks, Zhang was one of the monks. He shared with me some of his recollections – no doubt at great risk. As we looked at a picture of the Abbey church as it appears today, where the monks gathered for daily Mass prior to 1947, Zhang paused to contemplate the ruins. “It’s already gone . . . already, the church is like this,” he said, insinuating that the ruins of the Abbey “church” metaphorically represented the “Church” in China, still haunted by the past, still tormented in the present.<sup>1</sup>

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After the Peoples Court had demanded the collective execution of the monks of Our Lady of Consolation Abbey at Yangjiaping, they were bound in heavy chains or thin wire, which cut deeply into their wrists, and then the Trappists were confined to await their punishments. Brother Zhang recalled that during the many trials, Party officials

presiding over the interrogations accused the Trappists of being, “wealthy landlords, rich peasants who exploit poor peasants, counterrevolutionaries, bad eggs, and rightists”; essentially, they were charged with all of the “crimes” commonly ascribed to the worst classes in the Communist list of “bad elements.”<sup>2</sup> Normally, only one of these accusations was sufficient to warrant an immediate public execution, but some of the accused from the abbey were foreigners, and news that Nationalist forces were on their way to save the monks alarmed the Communist officers. Punishments had to be inflicted on the road, on what became the *Via Crucis* of the Trappist sons of Saint Benedict. More interrogations were staged during stops, and Brother Zhang noted that new trials, or “struggle sessions” (鬥爭) as he called them, were orchestrated at every village. Zhang himself was questioned more than twenty times at impromptu People’s Courts. He remembered that he was treated with much more leniency than the priests, as he was still only a young seminarian in 1947. The priests were much more despised. “After the interrogations,” Zhang recalled, “we would go out to relieve ourselves, and I saw the buttocks of the priests, which were red [from their beatings]; the flesh hung off like meat.”<sup>3</sup> Chinese Catholics who know about the Yangjiaping incident refer to these torments as a “*siwang xingjun*,” 死亡行軍 or a “death march,” and this is when most of the Trappists who died received their “palms of martyrdom.”

### **The Death March: A Trappist “Way of the Cross”**

Late in the evening of August 12, the feast of St. Clare of Assisi, one of the Communist officials who had ordered the severe beatings at the People’s Court, Comrade Li Tuishi, gathered the wearied monks for their march. He told the assembled community

that they “had been blinded by their religious Superiors and by their life behind the cloistered walls.” “Things have changed,” Li exclaimed, now they were to leave the abbey and see the glorious new China under Communism.<sup>4</sup> The Communist army was actually fleeing from Nationalist forces as torrential rainfall accompanied their march. Each monk was burdened with PLA packs, heavy with supplies, and the first night march through narrow mountain passes extended until noon the following day. As Theresa Moreau describes it, they were “whipped and beaten with sticks” as they walked, and after arriving at their destination they were “herded into sectioned-off rooms” in a landlord’s home that the Communists had confiscated from the hapless owner.<sup>5</sup> The first to die was Brother Bruno Fu, OCSO, (1868-1947) who collapsed from overexertion; he was eighty-two years old and his frail body was unable to endure the torturous climbs and long hours of marching on steep trails with a heavy pack. Father Charles McCarthy, SJ, (1911-1991) noted that Brother Fu “died on the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his final vows” as a Trappist. He was “buried without a Mass, almost without a ceremony at all.”<sup>6</sup> Hearing that the PLA had escaped with their prisoners, the Nationalists abandoned their rescue mission, and on August 18 Li Tuishi commanded his troops to return to the abbey, then empty after days of pillage.

The rigors of the return march claimed the lives of two more Chinese confreres, Brothers Phillip Liu, OCSO, (1877-1947) and Clemens Gao, OCSO, (1899-1947). When Father McCarthy asked whether they had died from “beatings,” “from hunger, or the poor food,” the surviving witnesses simply replied, “*Kusile*,” 哭死了 “He just died from anguish.”<sup>7</sup> On August 29 the Communist forces again assembled the Trappist community and forced them on another march, this time for nearly 100 miles without rest in constant

rain that made their packs even heavier. Several of the monks were too infirm to walk, and had to be carried by stronger confreres until they were allowed to briefly rest in a large, muddy pigpen. As they set out again, Father William Camourieu, OSCO, (1874-1947) had to be carried, but his bearers lost their grip on him during the long march, and the old priest fell to the ground and gashed his head on a sharp stone. He lost so much blood from his injury that a nearby priest “edged over and administered absolution.”<sup>8</sup> His body was hastily buried and the march continued to another small village named Dengjiayu (鄧家峪), where they were housed in cold, leaky rooms for more than three weeks. There they endured even more violent treatment – all of the monks were bound with thin wire that cut into their arms. One witness told Father McCarthy that, “Those whose hands were bound in front of them could make out well at meal times; those whose hands were bound in back had to eat from their rice bowls like animals.”<sup>9</sup>

At the village, the Communists invited the Catholics to outline their religious views, though surviving Trappists described these exchanges more as taunts than sincere attempts at dialog. One Communist soldier derided:

We’ve seen you pray when you were beaten. You don’t feel the first ten blows badly; but when you have had a hundred, you quail and ask God to help you. Does God prevent you from feeling further blows? If he’s a God that does not care to help you or cannot help you, we want none of him. For our part, we don’t believe in God.<sup>10</sup>

The monks were unmoved by these insults, however; they understood well Bl. John Henry Newman’s (1801-1890) assertion that being Christian “increases our

difficulties.”<sup>11</sup> And they had time and again read in Sacred Scripture: “As then, he that was born after the flesh persecuted him that was born of the spirit, even so it is now.”<sup>12</sup> Many, however, physically succumbed to the violence that accompanied the trials and struggle sessions at Dengjiayu.

Five Chinese brothers died from sheer exhaustion: Conrad Ma, OSCO, (1872-1947), Jerome Li, OCSO, (1873-1947), Mark Li, OCSO, (1885-1947), Aloysius Ren, OSCO, (1872-1947), and Bartholomew Qin, OCSO, (1893-1947). Each of these monks was buried in a shallow trench, and the rains were so severe that their bodies were exposed as the waters washed away the soil. While the brothers died mostly of extreme fatigue, the priests suffered deliberate torments. When Father Damian Huang, OCSO, (1890-1947) arrived at the village he crawled on his knees for the last portion of their march, since he had previously suffered frostbite on his feet and could barely walk. His hands were mercilessly tied tightly behind his back, and Huang was thrown into a pigsty, where soldiers kicked and punched the humble priest.<sup>13</sup> He died in February the following year, after six months of suffering related to his abuses. Brother Marcel Zhang described to me the final agony and death of Father Alphonse L’Heureux, OCSO, (1894-1947) whose anguish was particularly severe. Zhang remembered that Father L’Heureux “had been in China for several years, and had just contracted severe dysentery” before the Communists besieged their monastery.<sup>14</sup>

While marching to Dengjiayu village, Father L’Heureux’s trousers were entirely saturated with excrement, since he was never allowed to stop relieve himself along the way. The Communists confined him at the village, and tightened the wire around his wrists so that his wrists swelled and burst into open wounds. Testimonies recount that

Father L'Heureux begged the PLA soldiers for a priest to hear his final confession on the night before his death. A sympathetic soldier permitted one of the priests to hear his confession and bring him some water. The next morning, September 13, Father L'Heureux was found dead, and Brother Marcel Zhang was ordered to bury the body. Zhang said that the priest's expression was serene, and that one of the Communists remarked that Father L'Heureux looked like "the man on the cross in the abbey church."<sup>15</sup> Buried beside his Chinese confreres who had just died, the earth covering his grave, too, was washed away as rain continued to fall. These men had died from neglect and abuse, others were killed outright.

In Theresa Moreau's account of the final executions of six monks, she recounts that the Communist "death squad" shot them after they endured merciless beatings and interrogations in staged struggle sessions.<sup>16</sup> Brother Marcel Zhang recalled that other Trappists from Our Lady of Consolation Abbey were forced to kneel while the Communist soldiers pummeled them to death with stones, which they did after asking the monks how people were killed in the Bible.<sup>17</sup> Still others died more hideously with stones, including the holy Fathers Chrysostom Zhang, OCSO, (1917-1947) and Seraphim Shi, OCSO, (1908-1947). Father P. Decroix, MEP, writes that these two priests "were made to stretch out on the ground with their heads resting on a rock, then jagged stone was dropped on them, crushing their skulls and cutting the heads from their bodies."<sup>18</sup> This grim description was supported by Brother Marcel Zhang, who said they were martyred as the Communists "crushed them with stones" (被石頭給砸死了).<sup>19</sup> In his carefully preserved record of the tragic torments of the Trappists of Yangjiaping, Father Stanislaus Jen has verified that of the seventy-seven monks who were in the community

during the Communist persecution of the abbey, fourteen were murdered, while nineteen others died from negligence and maltreatment; this makes “a total of thirty-three martyrs” who died in 1947.<sup>20</sup>

Bl. Pope John Paul II’s (1920-2005) encyclical, *Tertio Millenio Adveniente* (As the Millennium Draws Near), reasserts Tertullian’s adage that, “The blood of the martyrs is the seed of Christianity,” and in it he wrote that:

At the end of the second millennium, the Church has once again become a Church of martyrs. The persecutions of believers – priests, religious, laity – has caused a great sowing of martyrdom in different parts of the world. . . . *This witness must not be forgotten.*<sup>21</sup>

His exhortation to remember the martyrs is meaningful in that by remembering their sacrifices we better understand Christ’s sacrifice for us; their deaths witness to God’s love for humanity, which turns death into life.

### **The Victory: Our Lady of Consolation Becomes Our Lady of Joy**

We can recall the events of 1947 at Our Lady of Consolation Abbey only because there were survivors to tell what happened. Tired of dealing with the monks, General Zhu De’s (1886-1976) troops were ordered to leave the remaining Trappists at Dengjiayu, and local officials sent them to another village in October. They were then released in small groups that made their way to Beijing, where Father Charles McCarthy, China’s Jesuit reporter for Fides News Service and Catholic News Service, collected their testimonies. Exhausted, hungry, and emotionally drained, the survivors who staggered into Beijing were looked after by the Benedictine community then operating Fu Jen

University. Some of the Trappists decided to remain in Beijing, including Brother Marcel Zhang, where they established a dairy farm on property purchased from a Russian man who used the money to move to America.<sup>22</sup> With fifty cows, the survivors were able to maintain their Trappist routine of daily Office and Holy Mass. Perhaps not knowing that the dairy farm was a clandestine Catholic monastery, many Communist officials purchased dairy products from the Trappists confreres; the first premier of the People's Republic of China, Zhou Enlai (1898-1976), was among those who bought milk from the monks.<sup>23</sup>

For two years this secret community of Roman Catholic Trappists sustained its monastic obligations, and their dairy profits even allowed them to provide financial help to other Catholic congregations that struggled under the political uncertainty of that time. But in January 1949, Communist forces entered Beijing triumphantly, and by the end of 1950 the Party began to more closely monitor activities within the city. By spring 1953, the “dairy farm” in Beijing accommodated sixty Trappist men, and China's new government confiscated their farm, sending all of them to labor camps where they “had to undergo another martyrdom.”<sup>24</sup>

Many of the survivors who made it to Beijing in 1947 relocated to Lantau Island, near Hong Kong, and built Our Lady of Joy Abbey, where Trappists today fill the choir with divine praise to God. This beautiful new abbey is the daughter house of Our Lady of Consolation, and the community of men there still operates an active dairy farm. In the May 1954 issue of the *China Missionary Bulletin*, a series of photographs of this new community was published to celebrate their new monastery and restored Trappist life of prayer, penance, and fasting. The habited monks are seen planting new trees, growing

strawberries, milking cows, praying the Divine Office, in the library at *lectio divina*, and offering the Sacrifice of Mass.<sup>25</sup> Lantau Island's Trappists are especially devoted to the Mass, as the blood of their martyrs in 1947 echoes poignantly the sacrifice on Calvary. Nearly a thousand years before the martyrs of Yangjiaping gave their lives, the Trappist Father, St. Bernard of Clairvaux, expressed the motive for their suffering:

What reward shall I give unto the Lord for all the benefits which He has given me? In the first creation He gave me myself; but in His new creation He gave me Himself, and by that gift restored to me the self that I had lost. Created first and then restored, I owe Him myself twice over in return for myself. But what have I to offer Him for the gift of Himself? Could I multiply myself a thousand-fold and then give Him all, what would that be in comparison with God?<sup>26</sup>

Earlier this year I wrote to the abbot of Abbé de Sept-Fons in France, the motherhouse of Yangjiaping's now abandoned Our Lady of Consolation Abbey. His response to my inquiry was telling; the events of 1947 are still too recent for some monks, too painful and sensitive, to discuss. He asked me to patiently await more testimonies as time stretches the distance between now and 1947.

I knew that Brother Marcel Zhang, too, was recounting his memories of that year only with great emotional sorrow. He showed me a photograph before I left his small apartment in suburban Beijing. The picture was taken at the fiftieth anniversary party of a priest's ordination; the priest was the nephew of an "underground" bishop, His Excellency Peter Zhao Zhendong, (1920-2007) who was pictured near his nephew. This photograph was an instant reminder to me that while events such as the martyrdoms of 1947 are, at

least for now, in the past, the Church in China is still suffering. Bishop Zhao was arrested in 2005, placed in prison, and forced to undergo “reeducation” classes. Sources later revealed that Bishop Zhao, whose nephew was a priest at Yanjiaping, was being compelled to join the Catholic Patriotic Association, and he was attended at all times, even as he went to the bathroom. The Communist Party’s opinion of the Catholic Church has not changed; it has only adjusted its tactics.

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While at a Paris archive this summer, I worked through several folios of materials related to the Jesuit mission in late-imperial China. One folio contained several photographic series of 1950s anti-Catholic activities in China; one set of images showed the trial and executions of many people, presumably Catholics. As I looked through these photographs I recalled Pope John Paul II’s appeal, “This witness must not be forgotten.” In the next edition of “Clark on China” I will turn to China’s modern martyrs of the Maoist era, 1949-1976. The Catholic resistance of this Maoist era is little known, and yet its impact on the vicissitudes of modern China – and the world – has been profound. In 1957, Father Jean Lefevre, SJ, who had lived in China during the Maoist era, published an account of the Party’s campaign against the Church in Shanghai, *Les enfants dans la ville*.<sup>27</sup> The anti-Catholic strategies described in Lefevre’s book so upset Premier Zhou Enlai, who preferred these facts to remain secret, that he asked his friend, Simone de Beauvoir, (1908-1986) to write a response. The result was her *The Long March: An Account of Modern China*, also published in 1957.<sup>28</sup> Both of these books were bestsellers in France, one exposing the Chinese Communist Party’s atrocities, while the other praising its “benevolent liberation of China.” While these two works stirred a

literary war in Paris, the Catholics of China were involved in another battle, the battle to survive. To this conflict I shall turn to next.

## Images:

- 001: Fr. Chrysostom Zhang, OCSO, of Our Lady of Consolation Abbey, Yangjiaping, China, martyred by Communist troops in 1947.
- 002: Three Trappist monks at Our Lady of Consolation Abbey, Yangjiaping, China: All three monks were martyred by Communist troops in 1947.
- 003: Fr. Alphonse L'Heureux, OCSO, of Our Lady of Consolation Abbey, Yangjiaping, China, martyred by Communist troops in 1947, and buried by Br. Marcel Zhang, OCSO.
- 004: Fr. Necius Zhang, OCSO, and Br. Marcel Zhang, OCSO, of Our Lady of Consolation Abbey, Yangjiaping, China: Both men survived the death march in 1947. This photo was taken shortly after their release from labor camp.
- 005: The Trappist dairy farm in Beijing established by the survivors of the 1947 death march.
- 006: Inauguration Mass at the newly built Our Lady of Joy Trappist Abbey at Lantau Island, near Hong Kong: This is where the survivors of the two Trappist Abbeys relocated to after the Communist destruction of their monasteries in Mainland China.
- 007: The ruins of Our Lady of Consolation Abbey, Yangjiaping, China: This photo was taken while many survivors visited the site in ca. 2005.
- 008: Br. Marcel Zhang, OCSO, and Dr. Anthony E. Clark, during their interview, 2008.

All photographs are from the private collection of Dr. Anthony E. Clark, and Ren Dayi 任達義, *Yinshui siyuan Chahaer huai laixian Yangjiaping Shengmu shenwei yuan Shengmu shenle yuan zhi muyuan* 飲水思源察哈爾懷來縣楊家坪聖母神慰院聖母神樂院之母院 (Hong Kong 香港: 1978).

**Notes:**

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<sup>1</sup> Interview with Bro. Marcel Zhang, OCSO, December 2008 (Beijing).

<sup>2</sup> Interview with Bro. Marcel Zhang, OCSO, December 2008 (Beijing).

<sup>3</sup> Interview with Bro. Marcel Zhang, OCSO, December 2008 (Beijing).

<sup>4</sup> In Stanislaus Jen/Ren Dayi, OSCO任達義, *Yinshui siyuan Chahaer huai laixian*

*Yangjiaping Shengmu shenwei yuan Shengmu shenle yuan zhi muyuan*

飲水思源察哈爾懷來縣楊家坪聖母神慰院聖母神樂院之母院 (Hong Kong 香港:

1978), 100.

<sup>5</sup> Theresa Marie Moreau, *Blood of the Martyrs: Trappist Monks in Communist China* (Los Angeles: Veritas Est Libertas, 2012), 36.

<sup>6</sup> Charles J. McCarthy, SJ, "A Trappist Tragedy," in Paulino Quattrocchi, *Monaci nella Tormenta* (Abbaye de Cîteaux, 1991), 145.

<sup>7</sup> McCarthy, "A Trappist Tragedy," 145.

<sup>8</sup> Stanislaus Jen, *Yinshui siyuan*, 101.

<sup>9</sup> McCarthy, "A Trappist Tragedy," 146.

<sup>10</sup> Quoted in McCarthy, "A Trappist Tragedy," 146.

<sup>11</sup> John Henry Newman, *Parochial and Plain Sermons* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1997), 131-132.

<sup>12</sup> Galatians 4:29.

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- <sup>13</sup> See P. Decroix, MEP, *Supplement to Asian Martyrs and Unsung Heroes* (Paris: Société des Missions Étrangères de Paris, 202), 21, and Moreau, *Blood of the Martyrs*, 40.
- <sup>14</sup> Interview with Bro. Marcel Zhang, OCSO, December 2008 (Beijing).
- <sup>15</sup> Interview with Bro. Marcel Zhang, OCSO, December 2008 (Beijing). Also see Moreau, *Blood of the Martyrs*, 43-7.
- <sup>16</sup> Moreau, *Blood of the Martyrs*, 70.
- <sup>17</sup> Interview with Bro. Marcel Zhang, OCSO, December 2008 (Beijing).
- <sup>18</sup> Decroix, *Supplement to Asian Martyrs and Unsung Heroes*, 21.
- <sup>19</sup> Interview with Bro. Marcel Zhang, OCSO, December 2008 (Beijing). Also see M. Basil Pennington, OCSO, *Twentieth Century Martyrs of the Cistercian Order of the Strict Observance* (Spencer, MA: St. Joseph's Abbey, 1997), 21.
- <sup>20</sup> Stanislaus Jen, *Yinshui siyuan*, 107.
- <sup>21</sup> Bl. John Paul II, *Tertio Millenio Adveniente* (As the Millennium Draws Near), 37.
- <sup>22</sup> Decroix, *Supplement to Asian Martyrs and Unsung Heroes*, 23, and Stanislaus Jen, *Yinshui siyuan*, 127.
- <sup>23</sup> Stanislaus Jen, *Yinshui siyuan*, 127.
- <sup>24</sup> Stanislaus Jen, *Yinshui siyuan*, 135.
- <sup>25</sup> See "A Monk's Last Mass," *China Missionary Bulletin* (May 1954), beginning on pg. 437.
- <sup>26</sup> Quoted in Owen Collins, ed., *Complete Christian Classics*, Vol. 1 (New York: Harper Collins, 2000), 9.

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<sup>27</sup> Jean Lefeuve, SJ, *Les enfants dans la ville: Chronique de la vie chrétienne à Shanghai, 1949-1955* (Paris: Témoignage Chrétien, 1957).

<sup>28</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *La Longue Marche: Essai sur la Chine* (Paris: Gallimard, 1957).