

THE BENEDICTINE FOUNDATIONS IN XISHAN AND CHENGDU, 1929-1952

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Mission and Monasticism, Studia Anselmiana 158, Analecta Monastica 13,
(Sant' Anselmo, Rome; EOS Verlag, Germany, 2013), pp. 185-195.

The story of the Benedictines of Szechwan Province during the first half of the Twentieth Century can be divided into three epochs or phases encompassing two geographic locations. The three phases correspond to the first three superiors of the monastery, each of whom possessed a unique vision of how Benedictine monasticism could best serve the needs of the Catholic Church in China. The two geographic locations are: Xishan, near Shunqing, where the community was first established in 1929; and Chengdu, the capital of Szechwan Province where in 1942 the monks were compelled by the vicissitudes World War II to seek refuge

1: CONTEMPLATIVE ASPIRATIONS

1927-1933: Xihan, Prior Jehan Joliet

In 1926 Dom Jehan Joliet, a monk of the Abbey of Solesmes, and Dom Pie de Cocqueau of the Abbey of St. André (now know as SintAndries, Zevenkerken), departed the port of Marseilles for Beijing. They were to establish a new monastic foundation that would be a canonical dependency of St. André.¹ The Benedictine Abbey of St. André had been designated at its inception as a “Monastery for the Missions”. Since 1898 the community had been committed to monastic missionary work in Brazil by its founder, Abbot Gerard Van Caloen; and in 1910 his successor, Theodore Neve, pledged the community to work in Africa by accepting the Apostolic Prefecture of Katanga in the Congo. Through their publication of *Les Bulletin des Missions* the monks of St. André wholly identified with the vision of inculturation encouraged by Benedict XV in *Maximum Illud*, which received tangible form on October 28, 1926 with the ordination in Rome of the first six Chinese bishops. Three of these travelled to St. André with the Vincentian Fr. Vincent Lebbe to plead for a Benedictine foundation in China. Their example convinced Abbot Theodore Neve that the new foundation should be made in the diocese of a Chinese bishop. Fr. Joliet was wholly in accord with this plan. As a naval officer in the eighteen-nineties he had visited and fallen in love with China and its people; it had become his dream as a monk of Solesmes to facilitate a “harmonious grafting between an authentic Christian tradition and ancient Chinese civilization”.² Before leaving for China Dom Joliet spent a year at St. Andre, and he believed that he and Abbot Neve shared a common vision for the Chinese foundation.

After ten months of language-study in Beijing Dom Joliet and Dom Pie were encouraged by the Apostolic Delegate, Msgr. Constantini, to establish their foundation in a new diocese that would soon be created out of the diocese of Chengdu, the capital of Sichuan Province. They accepted his recommendation and were graciously received by Msgr. Rouchouse, the Bishop of Chengdu, who offered them a site called Xishan (“the Western Hill”) about an hour’s walk from the city and prospective see of Nanchong.. They were offered accommodation by Fr. Paul Wang Wen-cheng, the bishop-elect of Nanchong, who arranged for the first monastic buildings to be erected at Xishan.

¹ Although the influence of St. André would predominate in the later orientation and makeup of the community, this initial cooperation between St. André and Solesmes gave rise to what may be called a “mixed Benedictine culture” that is discernible throughout the history of the China foundation. Monks from the monastery and Congregation of Solesmes were especially prominent in leadership roles during the early years of the foundation; and monks of the Solesmes Congregation remained part of the foundation until the expulsion from China in 1952.

² Delcourt, Henri, «The Grain Dies in China», *A.I.M. Bulletin*.

Within a short time after their arrival in Nanchong serious illness compelled Dom Pie to return to Belgium; however in February, 1929, Dom Joliet was joined by two new confreres. Dom Emile Butruille was monk of Osterhout, a monastery of the Solesmes Congregation: an artist and enthusiastic student of oriental culture, he had corresponded with Fr. Joliet and initially hoped to be sent to Japan; but upon learning that Dom Joliet was implementing the ideals of Solesmes in China, Fr. Emile prevailed upon his superiors to allow him to join the venture in Xishan. Accompanying him was Dom Hildebrand Marga of St. André, a monk deeply devoted to his abbot. Fr. Hildebrand's detailed correspondence kept Abbot Theodore Neve abreast of every aspect of life in the new foundation. Within a month the monastery was ready for occupancy, and the Priory of St. Andrew was canonically erected in March, 1929; with Prior Jehan Joliet as superior. The following year the community received two additional recruits, Dom Gabriel Roux of Solesmes and Dom Dominc Van Rollenghem of St. André.

During the next four years, as postulants arrived and the project of monastic formation pressed, it became increasingly apparent that Prior Joliet wished to implement at Xishan a very different model of monastic life from that with which Abbot Neve was familiar. There was, first of all, the fundamental question of the orientation of the monastery in regard to the local diocese and the Chinese Church. Fr. Joliet envisioned a traditional monastic integration of serious scholarship with ordinary manual labor, reminiscent of the Abbey of Solesmes, where liturgical and historical scholarship are conducted in an alternating rhythm of liturgical prayer and manual or intellectual labor. Benedictine monasticism could thus model an interconnection, even a fusion, of roles that in Chinese society were kept rigidly apart through the distinction between educated, intellectual public servants (Mandarins) and a peasantry that performed manual labor.³ Fr. Joliet's vision of this fundamental orientation did not include significant external apostolates for the monks during the first years of the foundation, such as teaching or pastoral work, both of which were the norm at St. André but were very uncommon in the Solesmes Congregation.⁴

A second, related issue concerned the length of time and the degree of cultural immersion that would be necessary for the monks to become competent to preach or teach in China. Fr. Joliet admired the controversial methods of the sixteenth-century Jesuit missionary Matteo Ricci and envisioned a slow process of language-study and integration into Chinese culture. There would be no attempt to influence or critique Chinese culture until real linguistic competence had been achieved and the underlying philosophical and cultural issues had been thoroughly studied. This would take a long time: how long was impossible to say; but for the foreseeable future the Benedictine monks of Xishan would embrace a posture of listening and learning, rather than one of teaching and preaching.⁵

A third and more tangible point of disagreement between Prior Joliet and Abbot Neve concerned the canonical distinction between choir monks and laybrothers. Joliet's biographer, Fr. Henri Delcourt, has highlighted similarities between Dom Joliet's aspirations and those of his contemporary, the Vincentian Fr. Vincent Lebbe, founder of the Little Brothers of St. John the Baptist. Both Lebbe and Joliet hoped to overcome a tendency towards racial and cultural segregation inherent in the monastic distinction between lay brothers, who generally performed

³ This interpretation of Dom Joliet's vision comes from Dom Vincent Martin, who joined the community at Xishan in 1936 and spent time with Fr. Joliet at the hermitage in Hopatachang shortly before Fr. Joliet's death. *Oral History Project: Fr. Vincent*. Archives of Saint Andrew's Abbey, Valyermo. California, 2008.

⁴ Dom Joliet's biographer, Fr. Henri Delcourt, believes that Joliet may have envisioned an educational apostolate of some sort as permissible, perhaps inevitable, at some later stage in the community's evolution. H. DELCOURT, *Dom Jehan Joliet (1870-1937), un projet de monachisme Benedictin Chinois*, Paris, Le Cerf, 1997.

⁵ Dom Thaddeus Yang, who joined the community at Xishan in 1934 and knew Fr. Joliet at St. Andre, particularly stresses this aspect of "Fr. Joliet's 'Riccian' Methods": THADDEUS YONG AN-YUEN, O.S.B., *The Chinese Adventures of an Indonesian Monks*, §1 , §4, St. Andrew's Abbey, Valyermo, CA, 2000.

manual labor and were not highly educated, and choir monks, destined for the priesthood who needed to be proficient in Latin. Both founders wished to eliminate this two-tiered system, which favored Europeans and tacitly implied the superiority of Greco-Roman culture. Fr. Lebbe was able to accomplish this goal by founding a new religious order; however Prior Joliet found Abbot Neve unwilling to countenance any relaxation of the traditional canonical requirements. In the ensuing controversy Prior Joliet pleaded his case with the Apostolic Delegate, while Abbot Neve sought the aid of Cardinal Von Rossum, Prefect of the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith. In the end, however, no formal adjudication was required. Physically ill and overcome with exhaustion and frustration, Joliet resigned as prior and withdrew to a hermitage near the seminary of the diocese of Chengdu in Hopatchang on May 23, 1933, where he remained until his death four years later.

2. ACTIVE MINISTRY

1934-1942: Xishan, Priors Gabriel Roux and Raphael Vinciarelli

In the wake of Dom Joliet's resignation and withdrawal Abbot Neve chose to visit his new daughter-house in person. He undertook a canonical visitation of Xishan in 1934 and stayed at the monastery for two months. With him he brought as reinforcements from St. Andre, Dom Raphael Vinciarelli and Dom Thaddeus Yong-An-Yuen. He appointed as prior of the Xishan community Dom Gabriel Roux, who had transferred his vow of stability from Solesmes to St. Andre, and whose vision of monastic life more closely approximated that of Abbot Neve. Prior Gabriel planned to transform the Xishan monastery into "a center of learning which would serve first the Nanchung area, and later the whole province of Szchewan."⁶ He envisioned an elementary school that would serve the local Catholic community, to be staffed by laypeople but financially supported by the Priory, as well as a school for oblates to be trained as monks, and a seminary that would serve the local diocese of Nanchong. The elementary school was built first and was in operation by 1935; and although the seminary buildings were not completed until two years later, Prior Gabriel encouraged the monks to make themselves available to teach Bishop Wang's seminarians. Thus Roux was present at the priestly ordination of the first deacon taught by his monks; however he had earlier contracted typhus and was too weak to offer the liturgical responses at the ceremony. He died very soon afterwards, on April 9, 1936, having served as superior for less than two years.

Following the death of Gabriel Roux, Abbot Neve appointed Raphael Vinciarelli prior, a position he would retain throughout the community's history in China, and for ten years after its canonical transfer to Valyermo in California. The first months of Prior Raphael's administration were overshadowed by uncertainty as to the future of the Xishan community. The rural location of the monastery was criticized as too remote for an effective apostolate by certain influential monks of St. Andre: chief among these was the celebrated Dom Lou Tseng-Tsiang who had joined St. André in 1927 after retiring from a career in Chinese politics. Although he would never return to China,⁷ Dom (later titular Abbot) Lou attempted to influence the direction of the work in China "from behind the scenes" in Belgium by means of influential friends. He persuaded a Shanghai philanthropist, Mr. Lo Pa Hong, to offer St. André a plot of land in distant capital of Nanjing. Prior Raphael and Dom Thaddeus had already undertaken an initial reconnaissance of the area in 1936 before the death of Prior Gabriel. Following his appointment as prior, Fr. Raphael sent Fr. Thaddeus

⁶ T. YONG AN-YUEN., *Chinese Adventures of an Indonesian Monk*, §1.

⁷ Lou Tseng-Tsiang served China as a diplomat from 1893-1927. He served in Beijing from 1912-1922 as Minister of Foreign Affairs and briefly as Prime Minister during the tumultuous years between the death of the Dowager Empress and the rise of Chaing Kai-Shek. He was widely (and unjustly) held responsible for China's capitulation to Japan's "21 Demands" following the First Sino-Japanese War. Few Europeans understood the powerful effect this perceived infamy had on Lou; that it precipitated his reassignment to the Chinese legation in Switzerland in 1922 and effectively prevented him from considering any return to his homeland.

back to Nanjing to await developments. As time wore on it became apparent that Mr. Lo Pa Hong's support was conditional upon the return to China of Lou Tseng-Tsiang. When it became clear that this would not happen, the prospects for a shift in focus from Nanchong to Nanjing vanished, and the commitment of St. André to the monastic venture in Xishan became more secure.

Throughout his administration as prior Raphael Vinciarelli supported and encouraged the educational projects initiated by Gabriel Roux. The elementary school flourished, and the seminary where both diocesan seminarians and monastic oblates were taught was completed in 1937. Both institutions remained in operation until 1942. Prior Raphael was also in favor of external apostolates, and under his leadership the number of monks involved in both part-time and full-time ministry outside the monastery increased. This was partly influenced by the political situation in China at the time. Following the outbreak of the second Sino-Japanese War in 1937 the capital of China was moved to Chongqing. The Ordinary of Chongqing, Archbishop Yupin, requested that Prior Raphael permit Dom Thaddeus Yang to assist in what might be termed "Catholic News Ministry", first in Chongqing, then in the southwestern city of Kunming, then back again in Chongqing from 1939 to 1942.⁸ Fr. Thaddeus' work brought him to the attention of Generalissimo and Madame Chaing Kai-Shek who, now aware of the monastery's existence and resources, began to request assistance from the monks. Of three new confreres who arrived from St. André in 1937, two were assigned to full-time ministries outside the monastery in service to the Kuomintang. All three had initially been sent to parishes in nearby Suining for immersion in Chinese language and culture. In 1938, after a brief return to the priory during which he and Prior Raphael were able to visit Dom Joliet at Hopatchang, Dom Vincent Martin was asked to serve as superior of a quasi-monastic medical corps created by the increasingly famous Fr. Vincent Lebbe.⁹ Chaing-kai Shek had convinced Fr. Lebbe to undertake covert propaganda work behind Japanese lines; Fr. Lebbe thus entrusted to Dom Vincent leadership of the religious community he had founded, the Little Brothers of St. John the Baptist.¹⁰ In July of the following year Dom Thaddeus suggested that Prior Raphael send the second new arrival, Dom Wilfrid Weitz, to Chongqing as French language tutor to Madame Chiang-kai Shek. Thus only the third new confrere, Dom Eleutherius Winance, remained in Xishan to serve as assistant novice master and professor in the seminary.

In 1940 Germany invaded Belgium. The Abbey of St. André was commandeered by the German army, as it had been during World War I, and the monks were dispersed. This effectively isolated the foundation in Xishan and cut off all financial support from Belgium. The community had been heartened the previous year by the arrival of two new monks, Dom Alberic Deloring and Dom Werner Papiens de Morchoven; however it became increasingly clear that the only possibility for survival lay in additional external ministries that would enable the monks to support themselves. In October, 1941, Bishop Rouchouse of Chengdu offered Fr. Hildebrand an assignment in K'Long Lai; and four months later Fr. Wilfrid obtained a position teaching English in Chongqing. In May Bishop Rouchouse found pastoral work for Fr. Alberic in Hopatchang. However, by 1942 the monks who remained in Xishan were in desperate financial straits: they had barely enough money to feed themselves, and none to pay the elementary school teachers. In the spring Prior Raphael reluctantly approached Bishop Wang for money to pay the teachers; however the bishop was able to offer only

⁸ In Kunming he helped edit Vincent Lebbe's Catholic-patriotic daily, *I-Shih Pao*. From 1939 he edited *Le Correspondent Chinois*, as well as an English-language edition, *The China Correspondent*, which was widely-read by American soldiers.

⁹ Despite skepticism and opposition, Fr. Lebbe transformed his newly-created "Little Brothers of St. John the Baptist" into a medical corps attached to the Third Army Unit. Dom Vincent Martin served as their superior until he was captured by the Japanese in 1940.

¹⁰ Fr. Lebbe was very familiar with Belgian Benedictines and the community at Xishan. As is described above, he had travelled to St. André in 1926 with the newly-ordained Chinese bishops who encouraged Abbot Neve to make the foundation. Vincent Lebbe's brother, Bede Lebbe, was a monk of Maredsous, of the same monastic congregation as St. André; in fact, Bede Lebbe had provided a monastic scapular to the Little Brothers to use as a pattern for their habit.

the equivalent of about fifty dollars. Providentially, at this juncture Abbot Alcuin Deutsch of St. John's Abbey, Collegeville, sent an unexpected donation that enabled the community to pay the teachers at the end of the academic year; but the school would be forced to close definitively seven months later for lack of funds.¹¹ Again Prior Raphael approached Bishop Wang, this time requesting that the bishop permit the monks to serve in parish ministry in his diocese. The Bishop's reply was as unexpected as it was disheartening: "No. Why don't you send your monks to the diocese of Chongqing where Fr. Wilfrid learned Chinese so well." There were undoubtedly complex political and financial reasons for Bishop Wang's refusal of assistance;¹² but whatever his motives, his decision constituted an effective expulsion of the monks from his diocese.

3. INTELLECTUAL APOSTOLATE

1942-1952: Chengdu, Prior Raphael Vinciarelli

Left with no other alternative, Prior Raphael took the extraordinary step of relocating the monastic community to Chengdu,¹³ where Bishop Rouchouse offered the monks hospitality and financial assistance. The Japanese incursion and regular bombing of Chongqing had transformed Chengdu into a city of refuge and an increasingly important political and intellectual center. Within a few months of his arrival Fr. Raphael was invited to teach at the University of Yen-King. Over the next two years the scattered monks were able to slowly regroup in Chengdu in a house provided by Bishop Rouchouse, and one-by-one teaching positions were found for several of them. Prior Raphael, Fathers Alberic, Eleutherius, and Werner taught philosophy, language, and art history at the University and the Academy of Fine Arts. Fr. Werner also served as Catholic chaplain to the US army troops stationed in Chengdu. In 1944 Fathers Wilfrid and Thaddeus finished their work for the Kuomintang and were able to rejoin the community in Chengdu. Three priests of the community, Fathers Hildebrand, Emile, and Paul Ou, temporarily stayed behind in Xishan with the monastic candidates.

During these first "unofficial" years in Chengdu (the canonical transfer had not yet been approved) Prior Raphael conceived the idea for an "Institute for Advanced Chinese and Western Studies". He envisaged the monastery becoming a spiritual crossroads where the rich multicultural environment of Chengdu would facilitate ecumenical and interfaith dialogue and research. Bishop Rouchouse was eager for the Benedictines to play an active role in the religious and intellectual life of Chengdu, and he encouraged Prior Raphael's aspirations. Although reticent to sanction the transfer from Xishan to Chengdu, the community of St. André gave grudging approval for the new Institute. The problem of finances was solved by Madame Chiang Kai-shek, who offered Fr. Thaddeus Yang travel-money for a fund-raising expedition in the United States, from which he returned in May,

¹¹ The elementary school closed in February, 1943.

¹² Dom Werner Papiens de Morchoven, who accompanied Prior Raphael during both interviews with Bishop Wang believed that the bishop was afraid to support the monks because of Fr. Raphael's Italian ancestry. China had sided with the Allies, and at this time Italy was part of the Axis. Fr. Werner believed that in the highly-polarized political climate of wartime China the bishop feared reprisals from local authorities if he showed favoritism to one who might be suspected of complicity with the Axis Powers. Chiang Kai-Shek had sought to forestall this through a letter supportive of the Xishan monks he had sent to Bishop Wang; but in Fr. Werner's opinion "the bishop didn't believe it." *Oral History Project: Fr. Werner*. Archives of Saint Andrew's Abbey, Valyermo, California, 2008.

¹³ As prior of a dependent monastery he had no authority to close or relocate the community, and the canonical transfer of the foundation from Xishan to Chengdu would not be officially recognized by the relevant ecclesiastical authorities until 1947. Indeed, the decision to move the community from the jurisdiction of a Chinese bishop to the diocese of a European bishop was criticized by some at St. André as a betrayal of the model of inculturation the community was expected to exemplify.

1945. Despite opposition from some clerics and prelates in the United States,¹⁴ Fr. Thaddeus' "loathsome begging expedition", as he would later describe it,¹⁵ was successful; and, supported by further gifts of property from Bishop Rouchouse, the Institute and the new priory in Chengdu slowly began to take shape.

In 1947 the canonical transfer of the monastery from Xishan to Chengdu was officially approved by the Abbot and Conventual Chapter of S. Andre. On July 11, 1949, the Feast of St. Benedict, the new Priory of St. Benedict and the Institute of Advanced Studies were formally inaugurated in Chengdu. However the government of Chaing Kai-Shek was to survive for only five more months on mainland China. Chongqing fell to the forces of Mao-Tse-Tung on December 10, followed by Chengdu on December 25. In light of later developments it is significant that in October, 1949 the monks had encouraged the creation in Chengdu of a local chapter of the Legion of Mary at the Priory of St. Benedict. Members of the Legion of Mary proved to be extraordinarily successful in organizing resistance to the "Triple Autonomy" or "Three Self Movement" that required Catholics to break official ties with the Vatican. Members of the Legion were specifically targeted by the Communist authorities, and those who organized or supported the Legion were subjected to interrogation and imprisonment.¹⁶

The expulsion of the Benedictines from Chengdu by the communists was accomplished gradually, over three years. Prior Raphael was first summoned for questioning in March, 1950, and the monastery, from which all evidence of Dom Werner's work with the US army had been prudently removed, was subjected to periodic nocturnal raids in search of subversive literature. On June 18, 1951 Prior Raphael was summoned to the Office of Foreign Affairs and arrested for refusing to denounce the Legion of Mary. After three months in prison he was tried in a "people's court" with Fr. Eleutherius, and the two were sentenced to permanent exile.¹⁷ One-by-one the same procedure was repeated for the other monks, and on March 2, 1952, the last foreign Benedictine of Chengdu, Dom Gaetan Lorient, was expelled from China. During the next three years Dom Paul Ou and Bro. Peter Zhou Bangjiu who remained behind were arrested, tried as enemies of the state, and sentenced to prison. Nothing certain would be known of their fate for the next thirty years.

EPILOGUE AND CONCLUSION

In 1955 the Priory of St. Benedict in Chengdu was canonically transferred to Valyermo in the high desert of Southern California, where it was dedicated as St. Andrew's Priory (now St. Andrew's Abbey). The ranch that became the new monastery was chosen by Fr. Vincent Martin, who had traveled to Harvard to complete a Ph.D. soon after being released by the Japanese at the end of World War II. He was joined at Valyermo by Prior Raphael and Fathers Eleutherius, Alberic, Gaetan, Werner, and Wilfrid; Fathers Emile and Hildebrand elected not to join the reconstituted community.¹⁸ Two young Chinese in triennial vows, Brothers Felix Tong and Bernard Wang, had been sent from Chengdu to the United States before the community was expelled: they completed their studies, were ordained, and rejoined the community in Valyermo. News was eventually received that Fr. Paul Ou had died in prison, but that Bro. Peter Zhou Bangjiu had survived and been

¹⁴ Cardinal Cushing was particularly contemptuous of Catholic "Intellectual Apostolate" in China. Before abruptly showing Dom Thaddeus out of his office, the Cardinal railed against Chaing Kai-Shek and all those (including the monks) who opposed Mao Tse-Tung and his "agrarian reformers". T. YONG AN-YUEN, *Chinese Adventures*, §6.

¹⁵ T. YONG AN-YUEN, *Chinese Adventures*, §6.

¹⁶ J.P. CHARBONNIER, *Christians in China, A.D. 600 to 2000*, Ignatius Press, 2007, 438-39.

¹⁷ Fr. Eleutherius has described the last years in Chengdu and analyzed the psychological methods employed by the authorities: E. WINANCE, *The Communist Persuasion, a Personal Experience of Brainwashing* E.A. Lawrence, tr., New York, P.J. Kennedy, 1959.

¹⁸ Hildebrand Marga returned to St. André in Belgium. Emile Butruille stayed in the Far East and became an early member of St. Anselm Priory in Tokyo, (a foundation of St. John's Abbey, Collegeville), where he remained until his death in 1965.

released after twenty-seven years of imprisonment that included two years of solitary confinement. Following a complex series of political machinations Br. Peter was able to join the community at Valyermo in 1984.¹⁹

Although it was originally envisioned that the relocation of the monastery in Southern California would be temporary until such time as a return to China became feasible, the monastery of St. Andrew's Abbey has acquired an American identity and the community now regards itself as a permanent part of the Catholic Church in Southern California. The character of the present community at Valyermo reflects all three phases of its Chinese roots. The contemplative vision of the founder, Prior Jehan Joliet, is reflected both in its remote, austere desert location and in ministries of spiritual direction and hospitality that invite guests to share in the daily monastic rhythm of silence and speech, prayer in work. Prior Gabriel Roux's commitment to theological education is continued by monks who teach in the diocesan seminary and other institutions of higher learning. Prior Raphael Vinciarelli's openness to pastoral ministry is actualized by monks who assist, chiefly on weekends, in local and distant parishes. Although it appears unlikely that in the foreseeable future direct assistance to the Church in China will again be possible for the community at Valyermo, the monks will always remain grateful to the culture that nourished and challenged their community in its youth; and the Chinese people will always remain in their prayers.

¹⁹ Bro. Peter's autobiography provides a vivid, first-hand account of these years: PETER ZHOU BANGJIU, *Dawn Breaks In The East*, (Serenity Press, 1992).