

Documents

A Catholic Pilgrimage in China

An account of an eye witness in March 1980
at the Marian Shrine in Zose, Shanghai

Preliminary Notes

Zose, one hour's bus ride from Shanghai, is the only hill near Shanghai. In the last century a modest church and a house for the Jesuit Fathers were built on the hillside. The church served as the parish church of the surrounding villages. In the 1930s a large and beautiful church was built on the very top of the hill, visible from far away. On the top of the spire was a bronze statue of Our Lady holding above her head the Child Jesus with outstretched arms. From a distance it looked like a cross on the top of the spire. In the last century the Jesuit Fathers built an observatory on the top of the hill.

On a wide path winding up the hill from the lower to the upper church the Stations of the Cross were erected, with life-size figures of Jesus and others. Under the present régime these have completely disappeared. Even the winding path is overgrown.

The communist régime took away the observatory; they are still using the old instruments. During the cultural revolution the bronze statue of Our Lady with the Child was knocked down from the spire. Everything in the two churches was destroyed and the gates of the churches were locked. A road was built on the other side of the hill leading up to the old observatory. The whole hill is closed and is guarded by soldiers, since tunnels dug inside the hill are being used as a military arsenal.

In earlier years one could approach Zose either by road or by water, for the surrounding plains of Shanghai were covered by a vast network of canals. Most of the canals have now been filled up. A bus service starts at the piazza in front of the big church at Zikawei in Shanghai.

Before the days of the communist régime, Catholics from Shanghai used to go to Zose in large groups in May and October to pay homage to Our Lady. When the hill was closed they used still to go, individually or in small groups, under pretence of picnicking. When the hill was closed they still used to walk round the hill, praying and meditating and saying the rosary. Some went so far as to take the ashes of their relatives and bury them secretly at the foot of the hill of Our Lady.

Every year in May and October one could see hundreds of fishing boats approaching Zose on the canals from all directions, bringing people to pray for three days and three nights in the churches. These fishermen's ancestors were converted 200 years ago during a previous persecution of the Church: the priests went into hiding among the fishermen, and converted them.

For many years now the hill has been closed and the pilgrims have been unable to come. This year, however, they reappeared. They had heard of some extraordin-

ary happenings in Zose in October 1979 when some groups of Shanghai Catholics went there and reported having seen a shining light and heard a message that the light would reappear on 15 March 1980. The news spread, particularly as the communist press of Shanghai published it, condemning such superstitious beliefs. Accordingly the fishermen began moving in early March this year so that they might be in Zose by the middle of the month. Apparently no miraculous events took place, though some say they saw extraordinary lights. The extraordinary thing was the courageous manifestation of faith by many thousands of people, old and young, coming from far away.

A Chinese Catholic businessman from Hong Kong happened to be in Shanghai at the time. He went to Zose and jotted down what he saw. To understand it, it is necessary to know that Catholics (and indeed all Christians) are deeply divided between those who joined, or were forced to join, the communist-organized so-called Patriotic Church, whose activities are directed by

the Communist Party, and the bulk of the Christians, bishops, priests, sisters and the faithful, who refused to join. Great numbers of these have suffered fearfully for their faith during the last twenty years. Many were killed, others suffered in prison and forced labour camps.

It is also necessary to know that Bishop Ignatius Gong, Bishop of Shanghai, was arrested on 8 September 1955 and is still in prison. His name comes up in this account.

The name Wenzhou appears several times in the account. Wenzhou lies in the south of Zhejiang province, about 360 km. south of Shanghai. The people of Wenzhou region, who speak a dialect different from that of other parts of Hejiang province, are diehards. The turmoil of the cultural revolution lasted longer in Wenzhou than in most other places. In 1975 peasants in Wenzhou distributed the collective land. Today, with disregard of all restrictions, religious life flourishes in Wenzhou more freely than anywhere else.

Before 11 March there were already more than forty fishing boats at the foot of the hill. They came from faraway regions. On 15 March the river was full of boats and there were people who had come by land, even from distant provinces. It was difficult to get a bus ticket from Shanghai in the direction of Zose. The 8:25 and 9:00 a.m. buses were full and many had to wait until 11:00 a.m. The buses were overcrowded. Some Catholics from Shanghai had left on the evening of 14 March and spent the night at the hill. On the morning of the 15th the fishermen broke open the locked door of the church on the middle level of the hill, and all within the four bare walls of the church knelt down. The church was absolutely full. Indeed, the whole hill was full of people. Some estimated there were 10,000 Catholics there. The Patriotic Catholic Association and the Communist Party's United Front Department as well as the police sent contingents, but no disturbances occurred.

A little later the two side-doors of the church were broken open by fishermen and more people thronged in. Many carried candles and firecrackers. The candles lit up the whole church, and outside the firecrackers made a mighty din. The Shanghai weather bureau had predicted rain on the 15th, but

the sun was shining high in the sky. There were stalls selling food, soft drinks and fruit.

The fishermen had spent the night in the church praying and they let the Christians who had come from elsewhere sleep in their boats. The same thing was repeated on the 16th—candles and firecrackers, and people praying. On the 17th the bus company had to add more buses and young Christians sang hymns on the buses, something not seen for many, many years.

The fervour of the fishermen was simply indescribable. They all had rosaries. People said they had bought them in Wenzhou. There were holy pictures and crucifixes and medals hanging in the boats, things that Catholics in the cities do not have. By the 17th the road leading up the hill was full of burnt-out candles and firecrackers.

It was estimated that 98 per cent of the crowd came from faraway regions and only 2 per cent from Shanghai. Shanghai Catholics saw with amazement the fervour of all these people, most of them fishermen, who had come from far away. Did not Jesus preach first of all to fishermen?

Formerly, Catholics used to go to Zose by boat, but more than twenty years have passed and many things have changed. Many

canals have been filled in, and the level of the river-water has sunk. For the last few years it has looked like a dead pond, with reeds growing everywhere. But what happened? Was it not the Will of Heaven? In these few days there was non-stop rain and the river came alive so that boats could pass over it. People were astonished. In the afternoon there was no more rain. When people were waiting at the bus stop in Zikawei in the morning, heavy rain began to fall. Few pilgrims had umbrellas. They were kneeling in front of the church. Then the sun came out.

I could not sleep on the night before the 15th. I was afraid my alarm clock would not wake me. At 6:20 a.m. I was at the bus stop.

I met a fisherman's family, indeed a clan, more than one hundred persons, all bearing the same surname. They had left home on 9 March and had come from all directions on rivers and canals to gather at the hill. This meant that for many days they had not been working or earning. What a sacrifice! They told us that last year the fisherfolk sent representatives of Wenzhou and bought a thousand holy objects, pictures, rosaries and medals representing the Holy Trinity. They brought these back and found that there were not enough, so numerous are the Christians among the fisherfolk in their place. They were still looking for holy pictures.

I met a girl aged about 25. She had come all alone from a distant county and had arrived the night before in Shanghai. There were many other folk visibly not from the city. They had come from Wenzhou. I admired their spirit. The bus was crowded and they were talking loudly. One group said they had come the night before. They had never been in Shanghai before. They did not know where to go, so they sent to the church of Zikawei where they met four priests (of the Patriotic Church). These priests tried to persuade them not to go to Zose. They said they should not believe in rumours spread by evil people. These good people did not listen to them and took the bus to Zose.

The buses were full and stopped only at major stations. When they arrived there was a huge crowd to be seen, and the river was full of boats. The fishermen said that there were about two hundred boats on the spot and that further away there were many more. Many others came walking. Many had a medal of the Holy Trinity on their

breasts. There were also long rows of bicycles at the bottom of the hill.

Walking up the hill I was stunned to see so many people. In front of the mid-level church there were three small kiosk-shrines—empty. The statues of the Sacred Heart, of Our Lady, and of St Joseph were no longer there.

Candles were burning in front of the three shrines. I looked at them for a long time. It began to rain and the wind blew out the candles. But new candles came and the light went on uninterrupted, one row of candles lit after the others. There was a family, grown-ups and children, about thirty persons, praying in front of the shrine of St Joseph. They made the sign of the cross, then went to the shrine of Our Lady and knelt down and prayed.

Somebody put a statue of Our Lady on the pedestal on one of the three empty shrines, a small statue half a metre high, clad in blue, her hands folded on her breast. It looked so beautiful, so merciful. Under her feet was the serpent. Somebody said: "Where Our Lady is, there the crowds are attracted."

A man aged about thirty came alone. He made the sign of the cross and pulled out a candle from his pocket and lit it. Then came another. This second man did not make the sign of the cross but took firecrackers from his pocket, and as they were lit, one after the other, they went zooming up and exploded with a big bang. All made the sign of the cross and prayed to Our Lady. Then this man knelt down alone and made the sign of the cross and returned to his family. Everything seemed very orderly and dignified. There was nobody to give orders or directions.

Small children, too small to know any prayers, looked at their parents and folded their hands. I kept thinking of the words "The Kingdom of Heaven is theirs". This is the real Church of China, these poor people.

People then went to the third shrine, that of the Sacred Heart, and repeated the same quiet ceremonies. One could hear them reciting prayers to the Sacred Heart of Jesus.

Wherever the eyes could see there were crowds of praying folks, little children in trousers with "open doors" at the back, old people held up on both sides by younger ones, such a devout crowd, so moving, on their knees with hands clasped, praying for one, two, three four hours without moving;

praying and singing, singing and praying. Young fishermen hung up a big wooden cross above the door of the mid-level church, and put up pictures of the Sacred Heart of Jesus and of the Immaculate Heart of Mary. Many candles were burning—all done by the fisherfolk.

At 11:25 a.m. a group of strong young fishermen went on to attack the main door of the mid-level church. It was closed and fenced with barbed-wire. They pushed till they broke the door open. The floor was covered with dust—the dust of ten years, twenty years? These daring young men pushed the gates open at 11:40 a.m. Next to me stood an old man from some distant village, in tattered clothes, leaning on a stick. In one hand he held a rosary. I heard him saying: “The Doors of Heaven are open now”.

There may have been 5,000 or 6,000 people on this spot. One could hear the fishermen speaking in their own dialects. There were quite a number of people from Wenzhou and there were some from distant provinces, from Zhejiang, Jiangxi, Guangdong, Guangxi, Fujian and Hunan, even from Henan and Hubei. Almost the whole country was represented.

There were many policemen present, and a number of party officials of the United Front Department for Shanghai. There were also men sent by the Shanghai street organisations and several Party cadres. Is it not odd that the Patriotic Catholics tried to persuade people not to go to Zose, but went themselves? But they came only to see what was going on. They stood there, and the crowds kept pushing them here and there.

At 12:40 p.m. the banging of firecrackers started in the space in front of the mid-level church. One cracker after another went off, bing-bong, bing-bong, for a long time. These villagers carried the firecrackers in little bundles. They had all prepared well. The firecrackers exploded, and up they went. It was such a joyous, noisy celebration, the firecrackers banging in the ears. The hill of Zose high and low seemed decorated in candlelight and mighty sound, in great solemnity.

The rain stopped. When I passed through the mid-level church an amazing spectacle opened before my eyes. An immense number of people on their knees on each level leading high up the hill. Nobody was walking. There was no room for walking. All were on their knees, slowly praying the Sta-

tions of the Cross. Many were waiting below at the first level to start the climb, climbing slowly, kneeling down at each level, climbing up to the top of the hill. It was an extraordinary spectacle. It looked like a long colourful chain, or rather like an endless long silk ribbon leading up to the top of the curving road.

The people went up slowly praying the Stations of the Cross. The old winding road of the Stations was no more, but these village people knew what to do. Crowds and crowds, walking, opened a new path, a winding path like the station path in the old days. It was difficult to walk up there. City people found it hard, but they went one after the other in a steady, slow and very orderly way. It was very moving. I thought, a wonderful scene, worth taking photographs of. It was not we but the police, men of the security organs, who were taking photographs.

Crowds of villagers, men and women, old and young, were making the Stations of the Cross on their knees. A man, fifty or sixty years of age, reached his hand into the pocket of his cotton clothing and took out a holy picture and put it on a sort of pedestal. He looked like the elder of his group or the father of his family. They all knelt down and prayed and sang. Two policemen came near them wondering what they were doing. I also went close to them. I wanted to see the picture. It was very small. Looking closer, I saw it was a picture of the head of Jesus wearing the crown of thorns, and there was blood on the face, which showed suffering and compassion. Looking at all these people I felt deeply moved. How much I should have liked to give them a large, beautiful holy picture, but I had none. How much I should have liked to ask them when they would come next, so that I might bring them some.

Yet not everyone there was praying. There were others standing watching, with ice-cold eyes, what was going on.

To go up to the church on top of the hill one had to follow those who were praying the Stations, level by level, on their knees. Some put pieces of cloth under their knees, but many were kneeling on the wet stones. Two policemen were looking at this solemn procession. One could see from their faces that they did not understand what kept these people, old and young, moving.

The church on the top had also been opened by force. It was so full that one

could hardly kneel. Some people put up a sort of an altar, a desk covered with a coloured bedsheet and someone had put a picture of Jesus on it. Others put small holy statues. Many candles were lit. Seeing this I could not hold back my tears, and I saw others also wiping their eyes.

The big church on top of the hill was so full that one could not have inserted a pin. I saw them (the Patriotic Catholics) sweating, telling people to go out, but the villagers did not listen: they pushed them out. The Party cadres were silenced: these fishermen were genuine proletarians.

At that time I heard two "patriotic" women saying: "These village folks, what do they know? They call us renegades although we love the country and love God and love the Communist Party". Truly amazing! Among the thousand million Chinese only those who call themselves Patriotic Catholics love their country? Finally, who are more numerous, those in the Patriotic Church or those not in the Patriotic Church? These idiots can handle only city people. When they meet real proletarians they can do nothing.

The curious thing is that not one of these people who call themselves Patriotic, and say they love their country and love God, made a single sign of the cross, and nobody saw them kneeling down, not even once. They only looked around, their eyes like search-lights, checking what was going on.

It is difficult for the rich to enter Heaven. How true are these words! Heaven belongs to these poor people who were filling the churches kneeling, in the mid-level church and the church on the top of the hill. On hearing them reciting the prayers aloud, one could not but be moved to tears. Not many came from the city, and how many of these dared to kneel in the dust? And even if they knelt, their knees ached and soon they stood up. But the simple folks kept on kneeling for two or three hours, non-stop. Then they stood up and began to sing, singing hymns to Our Lady. There was a group of young women, twenty to thirty years of age, their hands folded in prayer, their eyes fixed on the heights of the empty church and tears falling from their eyes. The police stood there beside them and whispered: "Why are they crying? Where do all these tears come from?"

At 3:00 p.m. we went down the hill. The fishermen let us use their boats for the night. The boats were full of guests. Each boat

became a small hotel, a hotel that did not charge guests, full of people who till then did not know one another and who did not even speak the same dialect. Wonderful fishermen! Seeing you, one feels ashamed. The boats were full of people but there was still a big crowd in the square where the buses stopped. From a distance we could still hear the firecrackers.

Today, Sunday 16 March, many people came. There were also more than twenty from the Patriotic Association, but at the bottom of the hill a strong group of young fishermen formed a "human wall" to stop them from going up the hill. They got into a long argument. A Patriotic said: "You were setting off firecrackers. This is contrary to the regulation of the Catholic Church." The answer was: "And you have smashed everything in our churches. Is this the rule of the Catholic Church?" These young men may not have had much education, but they had clear minds and courage. The Patriotic Catholics had nothing to reply. They were allowed to go up the hill individually and as long as they kept silent there was no trouble; but as soon as they opened their mouths they were surrounded by these fishermen, and they had to shut up. I was told that two of them were forced to bow in front of the church before they were allowed to go down the hill.

One of them on the top of the hill happened to say: "Bishop Gong is a counter-revolutionary." He was promptly surrounded. He must have felt as though he had been caught in a hornets' nest. These uneducated villagers, speaking their own dialects, did not understand of whom the man was speaking. They heard him as speaking against an Archbishop (the word "Archbishop" sounds like Bishop Gong's name pronounced in the Shanghai dialect). These villagers, hearing somebody saying that an Archbishop is a counter-revolutionary, must have felt as if somebody was calling their ancestors counter-revolutionary. They raised hell. The man saw that the situation was not good, and he ran. He could not run down the hill by the path because people were kneeling on every level. He dashed down the slope of the hill. The villagers ran after him until he reached two policemen. I could not help thinking of the famous phrase (of Mao's) "The people, only the people . . . !"

On 17 March it was raining. In front of the mid-level church there was a carpet of mud. This was not soil washed down by the rain. It was the remains of three days of firecrackers, mixed with the rain. Inside the church, in front of the hurriedly made wooden cross, there were fresh flowers, and dozens of candles were burning. There were small pedestals—should they be called altars?—and miniature statues of Our Lady. An old lady was leading the prayers of the rosary and there was singing of hymns in honour of Our Lady.

At the back of the church there were two peasant families. One put up a small picture of Our Lady, a few inches high, and lit candles before it. The other family put up a mirror with a small holy picture attached, and lit two rows of candles in front of it. The family was kneeling in front of these pictures. I saw some city people kneeling in silence, tears flowing down their cheeks. Shanghai people and the villagers prayed in different ways. People from Shanghai prayed in silence. The villagers prayed together in a loud voice, the family praying together.

There was a big crowd at the bus station, including many familiar faces. There was the mother and daughter from Wenzhou who had come with us to Zose on the same bus. We met and smiled (we did not speak the same dialect). The buses were crowded and the conductor said that this was an extra bus, added to deal with the traffic. In the morning two more buses had been added to the line, he said. The conductor also knew that most of the visitors to Zose had come from faraway regions and that today was the last day¹ in Zose. Tomorrow, he said, the buses will be empty. On the bus in front of me there was a couple with two children. As soon as the bus started they let the children fold their hands and pray: "Help of Christians, pray for us, Our Lady of Zose, pray for us." No, they did not pray it, they sang it, slowly, drawing out the words. It sounded

very beautiful. If there is music in Heaven it will sound as clear and moving as the voices of these children. I gazed at their shiny little faces, their dark eyes and their little hands.

When the bus left Qi-pao (a stop between Zose and Shanghai) a woman sitting right behind the driver began to sing aloud. She was an old woman, over fifty years of age. In her hands she was holding a sheet of paper. She had a bundle hanging from her shoulder and a water canteen and an umbrella. She looked like somebody who had travelled a long distance to make her pilgrimage to Our Lady. She had not much musical skill and did not sing well. She sang in her own dialect and people did not understand the words. Is she crazy, one wondered. But two young men sitting not far from her also began to sing. They sang hymns to Our Lady. While they were singing they took from their pockets a bundle of sheets with hand-printed hymns on them. Hands from all sides reached out for copies, and each got one, including the driver of the bus. "You lead the singing, we will follow," people said; and all sang, the whole crowded bus, apart from five or six who were not Christians. I looked around and saw a happy crowd singing, following the two young men, singing with enthusiasm. It could not be called a first-rate choir. Each sang as best as he could. The young had some difficulty; probably they did not know the hymns. Probably the older ones had not sung for many years. Yet all sang.

Think about it! Who would have thought that a busload of passengers would sing to Our Lady on Chinese soil in the 1980s, here on the road between Zose and Shanghai?

(In May 1981 the hill at Zose was officially reopened and a pilgrimage organised by the Catholic Church in Shanghai took place. It was attended by between twenty and thirty thousand pilgrims. A special film made by Chinese television on Catholic life in Shanghai gave it extensive coverage.—Ed)

Russia's Spiritual Traditions Live On

This account of the life and ministry of starets Tavrion, who died in 1978, shows that one of the great traditions of Orthodox Russia is continuing, although in a greatly restricted way. A starets (plural startsy) is an elder or holy man who after many years of

prayer, solitude and a rigorously ascetic way of life is recognized as a person of deep spiritual insight, capable of guiding and counselling the faithful. Generally they are clairvoyant, that is, they know people's thoughts before they are uttered. It was customary for