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First Expedition of Jesuits from the Philippines to China

CHARLES MCCARTHY, S.J.

In the 1670's, less than a score of stalwart Jesuits were trying to serve the Church's mission to most of China. Thinly scattered to far-flung cities, they were literally working themselves to death, and feared extinction. Catechumens came in by the thousands, with sophisticated *literati* not few among them. Fledgling Christian communities appealed in touching terms for more priests to deepen their grasp of doctrine and bring them Mass and the Sacraments.

Portugal held Macao, the recognized gateway for Westerners to enter China. Wielding *padroado* privileges and censures, the Portuguese court denied entry to new China missionaries not submissive to its policies and terms. If Portuguese priests or others cleared by the royal *placet* in Lisbon could not be brought to the East in Portuguese ships, no new laborers would pass through Macao to cultivate China's part of the Master's vineyard.

Since 1641 Portugal had been at war with the Dutch, clawing for colonies and fighting for seaways in South America, Africa, and Asia. Both nations craved the sugar and dye-wood of Brazil, the slaves of Angola and the Congo, the tea, silk, spices, and carrying-trade of the East. The Portuguese championed the Catholic faith fiercely; Dutch Calvinists proved ready to spill blood in the cause of Reform. After 1655, the Dutch avenged their loss of Recife and Brazil, by driving the Portuguese from Ceylon's cinnamon gardens, the Malabar coast and Macassar. Athwart the sealane to Macao they had that city seemingly dying on the vine, unsupplied by shipping, new men, or commerce from "home".

Spaniards still crossed the Atlantic in safety, and then from Mexico found favorable winds and a strong current to carry their galleons in respectable time to Manila. Annual contingents of Spanish Jesuit missionaries sometimes exceeded in number all their hard-pressed confreres in populous China. Alms, Mass wine, church supplies, and and an Iberian delicacy or two, were shipped thoughtfully and cheerfully to priests in Foochow by their fellow Jesuits in Manila aboard the returning junks of Sangley traders. What the China Jesuits wanted above all, though, were apostles to fill their dwindling ranks and work alongside them for souls.

In the way of this stood the Church's grants to Portugal, which showed no readiness to waive them. Still, Spanish Dominican and Franciscan friars had crossed the sea to Fukien, and had established mission bridgeheads in the land they hoped to win to Christ. The China Jesuits pleaded for men from their Philippine Province, for they wanted Chinese Christians to be taught and trained by men of "the Company", whose theology, missiology, and discipline would be close-knit with their own. Relatively, Jesuit theology seemed to them so positive, nuanced and broad of vision that it could attract influential, educated Chinese leaders. In missiology, the Society's men were rather appreciative of Confucius, and not over-quick to find in Chinese ceremonies and customs material for demands "to renounce Satan, with all his works and pomps". Divided inter-Order discipline, they thought, had laid waste the promising mission-field of Japan. True, the soil there was drenched with the blood of martyr heroes; but any witness or service by the Church above-ground had been brought to a firm and tragic halt.

In 1678 on June 24, the feast of Christ's precursor St. John the Baptist, three priest members of the Philippine Province sailed out of Manila Bay, hoping to form the nucleus of a Spanish Jesuit mission to China. Their course was set for a stretch of the Fukien coast which just then bristled with pikes and swords of soldiery attending the death throes of the Ming dynasty. Ming sympathizers held Taiwan, a patch of mainland coastline, and some offshore islands, as Quemoy and Matsui are held today. Ruthless Manchu forces pursued these remnants, intent on finally crushing the Chinese resistance which had gone on for 35 years. Spies and saboteurs were being searched out and beheaded in a reign of terror.

These are some main elements of the setting into which the following document, until now unpublished, is fitted. It is an excerpt of the annual report of Father Ferdinand Verbiest, head of the Jesuit Vice-province of China, for the years 1678 and 1679. It was written from Peking to the General of the Order in Rome. Under the chapter, *Fokien province*, Fr. Verbiest translates from the Portuguese a letter

of Fr. Simon Rodriguez, S.J., narrating in detail the adventures which the three Jesuits from the Philippines experienced on their arrival in China. (The full letter, in Latin, is preserved among the Japan-China documents, vol. 117, folia 183-198 in the Roman Archives of the Society of Jesus. This passage, about the three priests, occupies folia 191 to 193 of the letter.)

Fokien province: the metropolitan residence. The arrival of our three Manila confreres made this year 1678 memorable for the Foochow community. It was brought about mainly by the work of Fr. Simon Rodriguez, who lived in the metropolis of the province, and who, up to the present, has attended admirably and expertly to the interests of the Christians in it. His undertaking had full approval from his superiors. I shall present here in Latin the letter of Fr. Rodriguez himself, written to me in Portuguese, in which he recounts the whole course of this arduous entry to the continent.

"In December 1677 I wrote and sent from this metropolis of Foochow a letter to the Rev. Fr. Provincial in the Philippines, setting forth to him the scarcity of workers of our Society in this far-away China, and requesting that his holy Province should send us a number of helpers. I urged that those Fathers should break through whatever obstacles and difficulties against entry here might arise, and help us to preserve and likewise to promote further the nearly century-long labors whereby valiant and true sons of St. Ignatius have long been spending themselves for the conversion of numerous Christians everywhere. The workers whom we now have are not enough for the harvest, and consequently in many places our reaping seems on the decline, though the grain had happily ripened through the sweat of so many years. Under the heavy burden of their tasks, the larger part of the veteran workers have already laid down their lives with glory. The rest, right now, groan under the same load, and lament the fact that none are in sight to pursue these noble works after them.

After they had read and heard these requests, and understood the present dearth of workers in this vineyard of the Lord, almost all our Manila confreres at once volunteered

with fervor to join us. However, because they are hardly enough for their own Philippine missions, the desires of so many simply could not be satisfied. Therefore, Rev. Fr. Andres Riquelme, the Provincial of the Philippines, chose three from the rest to come for the time being, namely Fr. Ignatius de Montes (Sonnenberg), a German, and Fathers Juan de Yrigoen and Francisco Gayoso, Spaniards, all admirably gifted with the talents necessary for this apostolic task, and still of vigorous age, excepting the first who was superior to the other two in age and religious life.

On June 24, 1678, then, the three confreres sailed out of Manila Bay. Surmounting the ordinary hazards of the sea they soon arrived at the gates of China, but at a time extremely difficult for getting in. For just then this whole province of Fukien was seething in a fierce war with the pirate Cheng Ching, in whose ships they had made the latter part of the voyage to Amoy, a small island. Well-armed there he dominated all the sea round about, and also threatened the continent held by Tartar soldiery. So the three confreres had to thread their way between the two armies in order to open a way to the interior of China, attempting the enterprise at quite a dangerous risk.

A month had elapsed, enough and more than enough time than they would have needed to arrive had the situation been normal. During it I had no news about the decision taken in Manila; so gradually I began to believe that, supposing the Manila confreres had decided to come and assist us, when they saw all the harbors bristling with weapons and red with blood, they must either have gone back, or have tried to enter at Macao. For it was the easier, and indeed the only port open at the time to admit of possible entry.

Suddenly, however, on July 28 an old man in beggar's rags and leaning on a cane hobbled up to me and spoke softly, but right in my ear, saying that he was sent by Nicholas, a Christian well-known to me from the city of Chuanchow. I had previously commended this affair to Nicholas, asking that as soon as he heard of our confreres' arrival he would

notify me and assuring him that the expenses of the expedition would be taken care of.

I was astonished at the old man's news, for I had already given up hope, especially in that quarter where all contact with seafarers had been interrupted for several months. But while I stood amazed, the old man ripped open a seam in his garment, took out a letter written in European script, and handed it to me, open and without an address. Rev. Fr. Peter de Alarcon, a Dominican, had written it, reporting that he had arrived at Amoy island a few days before, and was still there in the company of Rev. Fr. Bernardo a Concepcion, a Franciscan. Just in the last line at the end of the letter he added that three priests of the Society, all hailing from Manila, were with him. Now, though from this I learned of their arrival, I was still uncertain and perplexed as to how they might get into China proper; this, at the time, seemed impossible to me. Still, I sent off the old man posthaste with a reply to those Fathers urging them that since Divine Providence had brought them so far, they should make a try at entering together through the town of Fu-an where there resided a number of Christians who often on other occasions, though in more peaceful times, had well proven their loyalty.

Whether or not this reply of mine ever reached the city of Chuanchow I have not yet discovered. However, assuming that it would arrive, I asked the Dominican Fathers living in Fu-an that, through the Christians more expert in such matters, they would also help our three Jesuit Fathers. This they promised to do, and certainly they would have done it, had not God, by a way hitherto unopened, provided another avenue of entry for our companions.

In this affair of such importance neither the Dominican Fathers nor I were sleeping. By common consent we decided to send two bright Christians in the garb of beggars and without any fine clothes to slip into the city of Chuanchow, so that they might counsel and guide the Fathers on their way with all due precaution. The two Christians at once set out

on the trip resolutely, even offering to die in the project; but after six days they returned again, saying that entry into the city of Chuanchow had proved quite impossible, for it was ringed on every side by the pirate, and that they themselves were most fortunate to have escaped without being taken captive.

When I heard this, there collapsed all the hopes I had humanly entertained of helping my confreres who, though located on the nearby island, were still kept far from reaching the mainland. Thus between constant anxiety and trouble the month of August slipped by.

New hazards were rising because of the Tartars' lack of success against the pirate, and this city was pulsing with unrest and fear. The death penalty was inflicted on many for no other crime than their being caught outside the fixed boundaries. Sometimes searches intense and severe were conducted for spies of the enemy suspected of hiding here, and for five successive days the city gates were blocked most strictly, with no one allowed to go out, and entries alone allowed.

I was still tossed amid such alarm and worry on September 23, reflecting that two months had passed without an exchange of letters with the brethren. I thought they must have changed their mind and have gone elsewhere. So I decided to comply in the meantime with the wishes of my Christians from nearby Chang Lo, asking that I go to fortify them with the Sacrament of Penance and the Blessed Eucharist. Just when the boat was already at hand, and the vestments and sacred vessels were placed aboard, a messenger suddenly arrived from Father Gregorio Lopez, telling me that the Dominican and the Franciscan had reached the mainland from Amoy, and by now had arrived safe and sound in Fu-an. Nothing was known, however, about our three confreres. On hearing this I thought I should postpone my journey for a while until more light was shed on the situation. Not without tears, then, those good Christians had to depart for home again. I promptly sent back the messenger who had come from Fu-an, congratulating the two Fathers on their happy

arrival, and at the same time asking for any details or news they could give me about our three Jesuits.

While I awaited an answer from Fu-an, I had news from the Dutch that they held a letter for me which prudently could be delivered only in person. I went to them at once in their trading center which, with the emperor's consent they still have in this city. They handed me a letter written by our Fr. Juan de Yrigoen from one of their three ships anchored at the mouth of the river. In the letter he told me that, having no one to advise them, they had consented without much choice to be brought to the China mainland by the Batavians [Dutch from Djakarta], relying on a letter of recommendation which had been given them for this purpose by the Governor of Manila. He said that his companions were waiting also on the island of Tinghai for a Batavian smallboat to bring them to the anchored ships. From there it would be easy to disembark, wearing Batavian clothes among Batavian seamen and traders, on to the mainland of China. I asked this favor of the Batavians, and insisted as much as I could. But they were afraid of troubles from which at that time it would be most difficult to extricate themselves, and asked for time to take counsel, promising me an answer within three days. I thanked them as I could and took my leave: but just as I was going away they told me that the Father who had written this letter from shipboard was no longer on their vessel, since the master's orders were to receive no one at all. Then when I asked where on earth that confrere of mine might be, they replied that he was on a deserted island not far from their ships. With this information I departed, and sent word to some of my Christians that they should come to my residence the next morning.

That night was a rough and fearful one for me, and I passed it without sleeping, for we were involved in a matter of great importance, and seemed to be depending also on the hands of heretics. At daybreak, I wrote again to the manager of the Batavian trading center asking the same favor as on the day before, and urging him, if he had any news about taking a decision or about our priest companions, to let us

know at once. Then I consulted with my Christians about the whole matter. They said it would be extremely difficult to rescue and bring in the Father who was said to be left on that desert island. For unless he were brought in by the Batavians and in their own boat, it would be impossible to bribe some other boat daring enough to go and get him. This was the case, both because some had recently paid the death penalty for a similar attempt, and also because there was no way at all to avoid passing between two forts, a line of soldiers along the river bank, and the ships keeping guard. But as for the other two Fathers on Tinghai island, they all replied together that they could easily be helped, and be brought to the mainland at night, and be safely deposited in one of the churches which we have in the outskirts of Lienchiang.

Right away, then, I sent Christians to the island and to Tinghai to advise the Fathers that they submit to the Christians and let themselves be ruled and guided by them on this occasion, for I feared they could not be introduced by the Batavians. After dispatching the Christians to this task, I was still worried very much, not so much for my confreres whom I knew to be new and quite unversed in Chinese affairs, but because our entire mission could be jeopardized this time if these three brothers of Ours were captured as spies of the enemy. Frankly, I admit that during those few days I could take neither food, drink, or sleep. Yet, turning my eyes only to God almighty, I believed (so far I could not see it) that He would not fail to have a way to bring this problem to a successful issue. Soon afterwards I did begin to see this when another old Christian, guardian of the church in the Lienchiang town, came with a second letter from Fr. Juan de Yrigoen for me.

From it I learned that the Dutch had set him down, not on that desert island, but at a center on the mainland not far from the town of Lienchiang. So I handed the old man a Manchu robe for the Father, and sent him back with a letter of mine for the Christians who awaited my decision, which bade them bravely set out on the task I had entrusted

to them. They had not yet been sure that this foreigner was our confrere, apart from the statement of his attendant who spoke some Chinese.

But, though the old man hastened to Lienchiang at a swift pace, he did not reach the town before he learned that Fr. Yrigoen had arrived at the church there before him, thanks particularly to a good young Christian who had gone to see him. Being sure he was a Father, and having remarked the danger of the place where he waited, the youth delayed no further, but quickly brought him just as he was, in body as they say, and spirit, with his Batavian hairdo and clothing, enclosed within a woman's sedan-chair. After he had him carried to the church in Lienchiang, he went about shaving his head and clothing him in Tartar apparel.

When the Christians saw one of the Jesuits already safe in their midst, and knew from my letter that they were three in all to be kept safe (along with their bundles), they deliberated about the way to proceed in behalf of the two others, who were still on Tingshai. A prefect of soldiers, one of the Christians, at once took on himself the charge of protecting the pair and their parcels from the guards at the city gate and from other interrogations and inquiries proper to the soldiers.

Another Christian, a scholar successful in the examinations, promised with other educated Christians to persuade with good reasons the prefect of the city not to conduct any inquiry in case this entry of the Fathers should be reported to him.

And because this sort of affair can hardly be handled well here in China without certain expenditures, I had provided for this also beforehand, sending there Facundus, an employee of this metropolitan church, a man truly expert, faithful, and skilled in managing affairs, with enough money to keep matters moving smoothly. All indeed went along so well that nothing else was needed than a boat to bring the Fathers with their baggage from Tingshai to the settlement in which God had already placed Fr. Juan de Yrigoen. The

way had turned out to be a unique one; no easier or safer one could be imagined. For though one could pass on a land route to Tinghai, winding around the seven white rocks, that road is haunted by tigers and plied by robber bands; it runs through countryside lacking acutely the necessities of life. So it would have been very difficult to bring our confreres in by that way and at night.

Still, the two Christians whom I first sent to Tinghai surmounted the perils and hardships of the road, and thanks to them the second Jesuit, Fr. Francisco Gayoso, came with a part of the baggage, not by land but across the water on a small boat which had arrived at the same time through the efforts of the Christians of the Lienchiang church. It was the same boat on which Fr. Juan de Yrigoen had previously arrived, and so small that it could not have taken the two Fathers with their baggage. But just then the two priests were not together in Tinghai. Fr. Ignacio de Montes, seeing the lack of boats and the danger in delay, went off a day's journey to request one boat of a sort from the pirate prefect to whose care our confreres on Tinghai remained entrusted. So the Christians did not wait for the return of Fr. Ignacio, who they knew would not get anything from the pirate, but they pressed Fr. Francisco Gayoso to board quickly with part of the baggage the boat which would soon return to take off the rest.

The one and only priest, then, still sought for was the elderly Fr. Ignacio de Montes; he was in greater danger because fear of his being taken by the Tartar soldiers was growing. The flotilla of the Tartar navy was to set out just at that hour against the pirate. Since the boat was the only one and could sail only by night, the risk increased even from delay of a single day. It turned out, however, that the fleet unit began its operation a day later than planned, and by that time the aging de Montes with all his bags was already in safety, through a singular favor of Providence. For as soon as the Tartar ships went out to pursue the pirate vessels, they captured some of the slower ones, slaughtered quite a few of the crew, and took more than 200 prisoners whom

they sent back to this city to be beheaded in order to intimidate the rest. Actually, a few days later, they were beheaded here.

So then, on October 8, our three confreres were secure and protected, content and cheerful in our church in the town of Lienchiang, giving thanks to God's goodness which brought them safe and sound through many great dangers and fears. and many great labors and hardships in the course of an almost four-month passage [Manila to Foochow], usually completed in 15 or at most 20 days.

Finally, on November 13, of this year 1678 we all embraced each other fraternally in this our metropolitan church of the city of Foochow."

Thus far reports Fr. Simon Rodriguez about whom, because he related nothing else very memorable about his church's activities this year, I likewise have dared to add no more.

Ferdinand Verbiest, S.J.
Peking