CHAPTER 6

Father Leonard Amrhein, CP: Missionary Zeal and Shared Experience of Suffering and Compassion with Chinese Catholics in Wartime and Late Twentieth-Century China

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Introduction: Suffering and Compassion and the Missionary Experience

Given that the theme of this volume is "China's Christianity," the transition from a missionary to indigenous Church, I suspect that my contribution presents material from an often overlooked historical angle and area of Sino-Christian history. This chapter dilates on the role American Passionists, especially one priest, played in the narrative of indigenization in China's Catholic Church. The American priest I shall form my study around, Father Leonard Amrhein, CP, (1911–1990) was from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. From 1940 to 1945 his life was very directly influenced by the Japanese who controlled Beijing, China. Given that my research here centers largely on one American, it is necessary to ask: how much could his zeal for souls have shaped the indigenous Catholic Church in China, especially given his history of confinement?

I propose the answer to this question invites us to see the evangelical missionary landscape in twentieth-century Republican China (1911–1949) as one that makes sense in a politically and socially unsettled society best described by the Chinese term for chaos, luan (亂). This term variously suggests disarray, political rebellion, or natural disorders such as earthquakes or famines. In whatever context luan appears, it describes a society in an unpleasant state.¹ For both foreign missionaries and indigenous Chinese alike, the world in which Father Amrhein lived was a chaotic world fueled by war. I suggest that the rituals of life endured by Amrhein during the Anti-Japanese War (1937–1945) led up to and paralleled struggles that were later lived out in similar fashion by his American and Chinese counterparts as they attempted to bring to life and live out the local faith in the Catholic diocese of Yuanling, (沅陵) Hunan (湖南),

entrusted to the Passionists in 1921. Participation in suffering and understanding compassion is what links together the overall experience Father Amrhein with the indigenous Hunan Chinese Catholics discussed in this chapter.

These two terms—“suffering” and “compassion”—are useful expressions for understanding the missionary context in China because they speak to the experiences of both foreign missionaries and Chinese persons alike, Catholic or not. Other terms that have been used to describe the suffering of missionaries, such as “persecution,” can be divisive because they describe one group’s suffering at the hands of another. For this reason, I tend not to dwell on the word persecution—though it happened—but rather I posit that suffering and compassion encompass at a deeper level what those inside and outside of the mission encountered, and that these shared experiences shaped the mid-twentieth-century Chinese Catholic faith in West Hunan.

First, I shall offer a short introduction on the Passionists in West Hunan. This will be followed by attention to the China ministry of Father Amrhein from 1939 to 1949, alongside the narratives of other Catholic foreign missionaries assigned especially to West Hunan. Finally, a summary of the lives of Chinese Catholics John Zheng (1927–2000), Father John Nien, (1922–circa 1960), and Father Bede Zhang, (1921–2001) shall provide us an understanding of the development of an indigenous Catholic Church in West Hunan.

The Passionists

Founded in 1720,2 Passionists came from Italy to the United States in 1852 at the invitation of Bishop Michael O’Connor (1810–1872) of Pittsburgh to work with immigrants. Expanding to other locales, their monastic-apostolic lifestyle allowed them to spend a portion of their time preaching to the public. Though technically theirs was not a monastic congregation lifestyle, the monasteries were considered austere and many considered their way of life monastic. Their founder, St. Paul of the Cross, (1694–1775) emphasized the importance of preaching about suffering, because he believed that healing could come through helping others to understand and to name their suffering. Over time, “We preach Christ crucified” became their refrain.