

The Legion of Mary's Role in Strengthening the  
Church During the Communist Takeover of China.  
By Rev. Father Francis J. Peffley

1917 was probably the most significant year for the Church in the 20th century. The first World War was devastating Europe and it seemed as though the end was not near. Lenin and his followers sparked the Communist Revolution in Russia which would soon set ablaze many parts of the world with the evils of Communism. It was also during 1917 that Our Lady was appearing at Fatima, offering peace to nations and aiding her children in the struggle against the growing Russian Revolution. History reveals much about the Divine Plan, for during the same time that these pivotal events were occurring, Our Lady was beginning to raise an army of her own. This army, dedicated to the Blessed Virgin and having as its end spiritual goals, came from Ireland and was known as the Legion of Mary. It would not be long before this spiritual army of Our Lady would become a major enemy to the Communists in their revolutionary takeover of China during the 1950's.

During 1917 the foundations for the Legion of Mary were being laid. Frank Duff and other members of the St. Vincent de Paul Society were at that time holding monthly meetings and doing spiritual and corporal works of mercy. They continued this format for the next five years, and from this gathering of Catholics emerged the Legion of Mary.

On the eve of the Feast of Our Lady's Nativity, September 7th, 1921, a priest, Frank Duff, and fifteen young women gathered together in the top back room of a flat in the poor section of Dublin. Kneeling before an image of Our Lady, the Holy Spirit was invoked and the Rosary recited. Afterwards, the small band discussed their proposed work of visiting cancer patients in South Dublin Union Hospital. From that day on the group performed weekly apostolic work assignments and attended the weekly praesidium meeting. The membership soon grew to four praesidia and on the Legion's first anniversary there were almost 100 active members in Dublin.

1927 marked the first year that a branch was started outside Dublin, this being in Waterford. In 1928 the Legion was taken to Glasgow, Scotland and the following year, to England and Wales. From there it spread to India, the United States, Australia, Canada and New Zealand. The first Legion envoy left Ireland in 1934 and came to the United States. Two years later, Edel Quinn began her envoyship in missionary Africa, establishing thousands of praesidia before her death in 1944. From 1930 to 1950 over thirty full time envoys were sent throughout the world to found and build up the Legion, During these years envoys labored in Central America, France, Egypt, Israel, Mexico, the Philippines, and China.

The Legion of Mary was brought into China in 1937, but for the next nine years it was little known. However, the appointment of Archbishop Riberi as Interuncio to China in

1946 marked the beginning of the spread of the Legion throughout China.<sup>i</sup> The Archbishop had met Edel Quinn while in Africa, and had witnessed what the Legion had accomplished there. Seeing the desperate condition of the Church in China, he asked Fr. Aedan McGrath, a Columban Father, to undertake the work of spreading the Legion.<sup>2</sup> The Internuncio spoke to Father McGrath saying, "Have you realized the impossibility of the situation? Five hundred million people and only 5,000 priests Even if I doubled and tripled that number the conversion of China is still impossible."<sup>3</sup> Clearly the faith and the ideals which this great Archbishop had shone forth.

Fr. Aeden McGrath had come to China in 1930, and spent the next fifteen years running from Mao Tse-Tung. Mao Tse-Tung had set up a Communist government at Hankow in 1928, and after World War II he extended his rule over most of mainland China, forcing the nationalist leader Chiang Kai-Shek to withdraw to Formosa.<sup>4</sup> When the Communists proclaimed the People's Republic at Peking in October of 1949, there were 4,000,000 Catholics, 3080 foreign priests, 2351 foreign sisters, 2557 Chinese priests and 5112 Chinese sisters.<sup>5</sup>

Ten years before Archbishop Riberi came to China, Bishop Galvin had given Fr. McGrath the Legion handbook. To Fr. McGrath's surprise the Legion took hold in his parishes, and by 1943 he had six praesidia at work and these had already instructed 700 adult converts.<sup>6</sup> However in 1943 the Japanese took him out of T'sien kiang and put him under house arrest in Hanyang. After two and a half years, Father returned expecting to find chaos. Instead, he found perfect order. His parishes were running perfectly, children had been baptised, adults had been instructed and marriages corrected.<sup>7</sup> It was then that Father knew the value of the Legion in his parishes, which could survive and flourish even in the absence of a priest.

Now, with the coming of Archbishop Riberi, the Legion was able to operate on a large scale in China. Once Father McGrath was assigned to spread the Legion, he set out immediately and went to Shanghai, Hong Kong, Chungking and other major parts of China. The Legion spread with amazing rapidity. Within one year there were 1000 praesidia. Within two years, 2000!<sup>8</sup>

By this time, 1949, the Communists were in control of nearly all China and became aware of this rapidly growing movement. They ordered Fr. McGrath to stop his Legion activities in Chungking, but he protested saying that the Legion was a purely spiritual organization. He gave them a copy of the Handbook and invited them to attend a meeting to see for themselves. This they did, and afterwards returned the Handbook, with permission for the Legion to resume its work in Chungking. Their comment was, "This is a great organization, just like Communism."<sup>9</sup> It is interesting to note that there are striking similarities between the Legion and International Communism. Each adopted the nomenclature of the Roman legion and both organizations use the terms "praesidium" (the name for their meetings) and "tessera" (the title of their membership cards). Another interesting points the color of the Communists is red, and the Legion's color is red.<sup>10</sup>

All remained fairly quiet during the first year of the Communist occupation. But then persecution of the Church began, directed first against foreign missionaries. Priests and sisters were arrested, falsely convicted and expelled from China. Many hundreds were sentenced to long prison terms within the Bamboo Curtain.<sup>11</sup>

Up to this point, there had been no unfavorable mention by the Communists of the Legion. Then in the Summer of 1950 the Communists proclaimed their intention to establish "Patriotic Churches" which would be run by the government and be separated from Rome.<sup>12</sup> This was called the Three Autonomies Movement and it began on July 28, 1950. "Under the guise of self-rule, self-support and self-propagation they demanded absolute separation of the Chinese Churches from any alignment with foreign congregations."<sup>13</sup> These same tactics had been followed in Communist-dominated countries of Europe, since setting up an "independent" church has always signified independence from all control but that of the Communist government.<sup>14</sup> Newspaper propaganda in the official press supported this to such a degree that "for months the Peking People's Daily devoted daily space to the patriotic obligation of Catholics throughout China to participate in the movement."<sup>15</sup>

The real challenge had come. The Chinese hierarchy refused to support this new movement, and the Legion of Mary set to work informing and instructing the Catholic faithful about the issues at stake in this undermining plot.<sup>16</sup>

When the Communists realized that the effort to separate Chinese Catholics from Rome was failing, they began a violent attack in the Communist press directed against Archbishop Riberi, the Catholic Central Bureau and the Legion of Mary. Within a year, the Internuncio was expelled from China and most of the leading priests were jailed, including Fr. McGrath.<sup>17</sup> The Legion came under very fierce attack by the press, which described Frank Duff as "that imperialist" and "of the party of those who are in power in Ireland."<sup>18</sup> It also stated:

This Handbook speaks without evasion of the fact that the Legion of Mary is like the legion of the ancient imperialists of Rome which acted only for the tyrants of the age and killed people as one cuts down grass; this shows us that the Legion of Mary is indeed founded on these principles without any doubt. We may know thus that the Legion is a secret army which under the guise of religion really works for the imperialists.<sup>19</sup>

Why was the Legion vilified in such a way? The Catholics in China were a small and comparatively uninfluential minority, and the Legion numerically less substantial. Fr. McGrath believes that the main reason was the "part played by the Legionaries in frustrating the Communist plan for a schismatic Catholic Church in China."<sup>20</sup>

The next Communist move was to suppress the Legion in Tientsin, Shanghai and other centers. Legionaries were ordered to register their names with the police. In

Shanghai, where there were fifty-one praesidia, about fifty registration centers were set up, and manned by a highly trained Communist staff who had undergone an intensive training course, which even included study of the Legion handbook.<sup>21</sup> A six foot high notice-board outside each center proclaimed, "Secret Subversive Organisation, Legion of Mary-Meaberi3' Registration Center."<sup>22</sup> On each side of the notice-board stood soldiers, in full battle attire. Even more alarming was the form which each member was expected to sign. It read:

I, the undersigned joined the reactionary Legion of Mary on. . . and conducted secret counter-revolutionary and evil activities against the government, the people, and Soviet Russia. I hereby resign from the Legion of Mary and promise never to participate in such activities in the future.<sup>23</sup>

To register under these terms was equal to signing one's death warrant, since with "revolt against the country and having contact with imperialism" there came a punishment of death or life imprisonment.<sup>24</sup> Signing this also meant admitting to the false charges brought against the Legion and removed the member's name from the ranks of Mary's army.

Only a handful signed the forms, and most of these later returned and withdrew their registrations. The Legionaries as a body refused to give up their membership. Those in Shanghai wrote a letter, signed in their own blood, to the Bishop of Shanghai. "Monsignor, we will follow you wherever you go," said the letter. "We are proud to live in this age of persecution and there can be no compromise"<sup>25</sup>

The refusal of Legionaries to register led to the arrest of thousands. Soon, every Legion officer was in prison. Among these was Johanna Hsiao, a girl in her early twenties, who before being jailed had set up three hundred and sixty-two praesidia in the North of China. She was imprisoned in 1951, and as far as it is known, is still there today.<sup>26</sup> Even very young Legionaries showed heroic courage. Led by their 19 year-old President, the members of a Junior praesidium marched down the public streets singing from their St. Matthew's Gospel, "Blessed are you when they shall persecute and calumniate you and say all that is evil against you untruly in My Name. Be glad and rejoice for your reward is very great in heaven."<sup>27</sup>

The total number of those executed by the Communists is almost unbelievable. In the aid 1950's Time Magazine estimated that between the years 1949 and 1952 20,000,000 people were put to death under Mao TseTung.<sup>28</sup> A recent figure estimates that between the years 1949 and 1970, that number increased to 60,000,000.<sup>29</sup> As for Fr. McGrath, he was released from prison in May, 1954 and saw the state that the Chinese Church was in:

At the end of 1954 only 61 (foreign missionaries) were still in the country of whom 21 were in prison. In 1955 there were still two foreign bishops

and 20 priests in China. Of these one bishop and 17 priests were imprisoned. Of the Chinese priests about 500 had been imprisoned.<sup>30</sup>

The Communists still pressed on, attempting to establish an independent Church from Rome. Their plans had been frustrated by the faithful priests, bishops and members of the Legion. In 1954, Pius XII wrote the encyclical Ad Sinarum Gentem which took issue with the three autonomies and strengthened the support against a Reform Church.<sup>31</sup> However, in 1954 and 1955 a new wave of arrests and persecutions assailed the loyal Catholics. The Communists began winning over priests and bishops and by 1957 the Association of Patriotic Priests was founded.<sup>32</sup> The next year, 1958, the Patriotic Church was formally established.

What is the state of the Church in China today? Before the Communist takeover, there were approximately 3,500,000 Catholics. Today it seems as though there is only the Patriotic Chinese Church with its glorious parishes in Peking, Shanghai, Canton, etc. But this is only a facade. The Roman Catholic Church is still alive inside China although it is seldom able to communicate with Rome. It is now being discovered that in the center of China there are between six and seven million Catholics.<sup>33</sup> These Catholics have no churches, but hear Mass in straw houses, and do not wish to have anything to do with the Chinese Patriotic Church. It seems that after most of the priests and bishops had been imprisoned in the 1950's, and after almost all of the foreign missionaries had been expelled, the Chinese laity held the Church together. For years the laity had very few priests but they continued to evangelize, instruct and baptize. Legion of Mary members were among these laity.<sup>34</sup>

A word should be mentioned also about the Legion's effect in South Korea and the Philippines. The Legion was started in South Korea by the Columban Fathers after they had been expelled from China in the early 1950's. There were 350,000 Catholics in South Korea at that time.<sup>35</sup> The Church was growing rapidly and the "in Legionary work was evangelization and catechetical instruction. In just 30 years, by 1982, the Legion had grown to 47,000 active members and 3400 praesidia.<sup>36</sup> A recent statistic of February 1984 shows there are now 87,000 active members and 6700 praesidia!<sup>38</sup> South Korea alone brought in 60,000 converts during 1981-8 and has, in the Cathedral parish, approximately 2000 parishoners attending daily Mass.<sup>39</sup>

The Legion came into the Philippines in 1941 when a praesidia was started at Santo Thomas University. During the next forty years the Legion grew at an incredible rate and by 1982 there were 200,000 active members and 14,700 praesidia.<sup>40</sup> Today Santo Thomas University has 18 praesidia, and there are now 15,500 praesidia in the Philippines.<sup>41</sup> The late Archbishop O'Dougherty of Manila, who had seen the change in the Philippine Church since the advent of the Legion stated, "I can now dream dreams and I say to myself 'this is the only Catholic nation of the Orient, why should it not convert the Orient?'"<sup>42</sup> In fact, these words of the late Archbishop are being fulfilled today. At this moment Fr. McGrath is stationed in the Philippines training hundreds of Legionaries for the missionary life. He is teaching them Chinese. When the Bamboo

Curtain opens, the soldiers of Mary will be ready, and the Queen of Heaven will lead her spiritual army into China and once again offer them her Divine Son.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Father Henry, O.F.M. Cap., Ed, The Capuchin Annual 1956-57 (Wexford John English 1957). P. 364.
- <sup>2</sup> Ibid, p. 365.
- <sup>3</sup> Ibid, p. 365.
- <sup>4</sup> Newman C. Eberhardt C.M., A S of Catholic History (St. Louis: B. Herder Book Co., 1962), II, P. 805.
- <sup>5</sup> Kurt Hutten, Iron Curtain Christians: The Church in Communist Countries Today (Kenosha: Augsburg Publishing House, 1967), page 421.
- <sup>6</sup> Fr. Aeden McGrath, "Heroic Witness of Legionaries in China," The Immaculate Vol. 19, No. 1 1968 p. 6.
- <sup>7</sup> Ibid, p. 6.
- <sup>8</sup> Fr. Aeden McGrath, "The Church in China," Christendom College, Front Royal, Va., 1 December 1983,
- <sup>9</sup> Henry, p 366
- <sup>10</sup> Ibid, p. 282.
- <sup>11</sup> Ibid, p. 366.
- <sup>12</sup> Ibid, p. 366.
- <sup>13</sup> Thomas J. Bauer, M.M., The Systematic Destruction of the Catholic Church in China (New York World Horizons Reports, 1954), page 10.
- <sup>14</sup> Ibid, p. 10.
- <sup>15</sup> Ibid, p. 10.
- <sup>16</sup> Henry, P. 367.
- <sup>17</sup> Ibid, p. 367.
- <sup>18</sup> Ibid, p. 367.
- <sup>19</sup> Ibid, p. 368.
- <sup>20</sup> Ibid, p. 368.
- <sup>21</sup> Ibid, p. 368.
- <sup>22</sup> Ibid, p. 368.
- <sup>23</sup> Bauer, p. 13..
- <sup>24</sup> Ibid, p. 13.
- <sup>25</sup> Henry, p. 368.
- <sup>26</sup> McGrath, "The Church in China."
- <sup>27</sup> McGrath, "Heroic Witness of Legionaries in China," p. 8.
- <sup>28</sup> McGrath, "The Church in China."
- <sup>29</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>30</sup> Hutten, p. 426.
- <sup>31</sup> Ibid, 428.
- <sup>32</sup> Ibid, 431.
- <sup>33</sup> McGrath, "The Church in China."
- <sup>34</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>35</sup> Msgr. Charles Moss, "True Devotion," Washington Retreat House, Washington, D.C., 24 February 1984.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> McGrath, "The Church in China."

<sup>39</sup> Ibid p. 108.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid p. 111.

<sup>41</sup> McGrath, "The Church in China."

<sup>42</sup> Henry, p. 285.



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<sup>1</sup> Father Henry, O.F.M. Cap., Ed, The Capuchin Annual 1956-57 (Wexford John English 1957). P. 364.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, p. 365.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid, p. 365.

<sup>4</sup> Newman C. Eberhardt C.M., A S of Catholic History (St. Louis: B. Herder Book Co., 1962), II, P. 805.

<sup>5</sup> Kurt Hutten, Iron Curtain Christians: The Church in Communist Countries Today (Kenosha: Augsburg Publishing House, 1967), page 421.

<sup>6</sup> Fr. Aeden McGrath, "Heroic Witness of Legionaries in China," The Immaculate Vol. 19, No. 1 1968 p. 6.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, p. 6.

<sup>8</sup> Fr. Aeden McGrath, "The Church in China," Christendom College, Front Royal, Va., 1 December 1983,

<sup>9</sup> Henry, p 366

<sup>10</sup> Ibid, p. 282.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, p. 366.

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- <sup>12</sup> Ibid, p. 366.
- <sup>13</sup> Thomas J. Bauer, M.M., The Systematic Destruction of the Catholic Church in China (New York World Horizons Reports, 19 page 10.
- <sup>14</sup> Ibid, p. 10.
- <sup>15</sup> Ibid, p. 10.
- <sup>16</sup> Henry, P. 367.
- <sup>17</sup> Ibid, p. 367.
- <sup>18</sup> Ibid, p. 367.
- <sup>19</sup> Ibid, p. 368.
- <sup>20</sup> Ibid, p. 368.
- <sup>21</sup> Ibid, p. 368.
- <sup>22</sup> Ibid, p. 368.
- <sup>23</sup> Bauer, p. 13..
- <sup>24</sup> Ibid, p. 13.
- <sup>25</sup> Henry, p. 368.
- <sup>26</sup> McGrath, "The Church in China."
- <sup>27</sup> McGrath, "Heroic Witness of Legionaries in China," p. 8.
- <sup>28</sup> McGrath, "The Church in China."
- <sup>29</sup> Ibid,
- <sup>30</sup> Hutten, p. 426.
- <sup>31</sup> Ibid, 428.
- <sup>32</sup> Ibid, 431.
- <sup>33</sup> McGrath, "The Church in China."
- <sup>34</sup> Ibid,
- <sup>35</sup> Msgr. Charles Moss, "True Devotion," Washington Retreat House, Washington, D.C., 24 February 1984.
- <sup>36</sup> Ibid,
- <sup>38</sup> McGrath, "The Church in China."
- <sup>39</sup> Ibid p. 108.
- <sup>40</sup> Ibid p. 111.
- <sup>41</sup> McGrath, "The Church in China."
- <sup>42</sup> Henry, p. 285.