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THE TRUTH ABOUT THE RELIGIOUS PERSECUTIONS IN CHINA
CONTAINED IN THE PRISON DIARY OF AN EXPELLED NUN.

It was the last stronghold of Christianity in the immense expanse of China. Eight nuns gripped by terror, under the threat of persecution -- cut off from the rest of the world. The expulsion that brought them to Hong Kong, after eight days of hunger and sleeplessness, was not the worst thing. They could have ended by being tortured, massacred, as many Franciscan Missionary Sisters of Mary were -- the Congregation founded in 1877 by the French Elena Chappotin de Neuville -- which, from 1866 to now, has endured its most difficult apostolate in China itself.

They established the first missions in the coastal provinces -- and, with the years, went into the interior. Almost immediately, they were subjected to the atrocities of martyrdom. In 1900, during the flaring up of the Boxer Rebellion, an entire mission in the Taiyuan-fu Province was massacred. The authorities had posted this edict in the streets of the chief town: "The stench of Christians reaches the sky. That is why it no longer rains or snows." Among the victims, there were seven Franciscans -- two of them, Italian: Maria Chiara Nanetti, from Rovigo, and Marianna Giuliani, from Bolsena.

And the persecution did not abate. With the passing of the years, the Franciscan Missions witnessed more and more the destruction of the good works that they had been able to accomplish. Three other nuns -- Chinese converts -- were killed in Changlo Province. In the years prior to the Communist revolution, the Franciscan Missions had sixty-three Houses and two hundred nuns -- distributed throughout a vast territory. They suffered the loss of another victim in 1947, when the Spanish nun, Maria Teresa Lina, became the hostage of a horde of marauders. And then there was the breaking up of the Missions. With the Communists in power, every order was subverted. The religious orders -- especially the Catholic -- were exterminated. The history of the persecutions that had persistently been inflicted on the Christians who had landed in China -- since their very first arrival in the seventh century -- was repeated with raging cruelty. The story of barbarism, against which the Missionaries throughout the centuries have had to fight.

They were prisoners.

The last to give up were the eight Franciscan missionaries who were recently expelled. In 1914, the Congregation had founded an international school in Peking and this is what made it possible for them to somehow survive. Thanks to the interest of some Western diplomats who needed instruction for their children, the Institute was tolerated by the Government. The eight nuns -- including the Italian, Rosa Millefanti, Sister Maria Luisa, who is now sixty-six years old -- and another nun, a Chinese, who had recently joined and of whom all trace has been lost -- kept the Institute going.

(Persecutions Cont.)

But their life was not easy. They were prisoners, explains the Secretary of the Congregation in her interview with me at the Mother House in Rome, where the other nuns live in anguish over the fate of their sisters. Constantly under surveillance, almost within sight, with no possibility of making contacts with the Missions which in the meantime, have sprung up in Macao, Hong Kong, and Formosa. These Missions were established through the efforts of other Franciscan nuns who had previously been expelled from Peking and are a refuge for thousands of refugees who have succeeded in escaping from the regime.

The Secretary of the Congregation gave me an exceptional document to read: the prison diary of a nun who was forced to spend nine months in prison before expulsion was decreed. It is an account of the life at close hand with common criminals, in a medieval prison, described by Sister Crisante some years ago, at a time when the government was again persecuting the Missions -- and later destroyed the evidence. A diary that leaves us disconcerted. Let us trace the most important parts. The introduction is the farce of the court procedure.

"Escorted by armed guards (Sister Maria Crisante and other women who were arrested for the most varied reasons) were led to the judge's chambers. In one brief sentence, he announces to us that we have acted contrary to the law and he points to a door. I ask what law it is that we have violated, and he repeats the same sign. There is nothing to do but to submissively follow the armed guard, who leads us to the iron door of the prison. Women of all ages are seated on the ground, in a circle, crowded together in a dormitory. In a corner, there is a half barrel with two handles at the sides, which serves as a lavatory and that must be emptied every morning. The set of rules is attached to the wall. Above all, one must not cry. In the center of the room, there is a sort of fan -- the 'fondsgan' -- which consists of a piece of cloth stretched on two wooden strips that two women prisoners -- in half-hour shifts -- activate by hand when the whistle of the supervisor blows. Since there are no regular washing facilities, the prisoners pass a large spittoon from one to the other. Among the prisoners near me there is a cranky, syphilitic woman, a blind beggar who has tuberculosis, an old woman with breast cancer, several traffickers in opium. After a meal, everyone washes in public on one small basin, the contents of which are the color and consistency of mud. The lack of air, the pestilential stench, and weakness cause frequent fainting. The fainted person is then pinched, to the point of bleeding, on the neck, on the nape of the neck, and on the arms. A small form of torture among a thousand others -- including the impossibility of cutting one's nails. Day by day we see them grow, until they become claws. The other prisoners succeed in ripping them off or in rubbing them against the floor. But what is most wearing are the long indoctrination sessions. They keep us immobile on the ground. The prisoners are made to concentrate, to examine their consciences, to humbly acknowledge their faults, to submit to re-education -- and

laughing, crying, singing, speaking out loud, and thinking about one's own affairs are all prohibited. It is true brainwashing. We spend the first week of every month blaming ourselves personally. With humility and frankness, each person has to give an account of the slightest non-adherence to, and infraction of, the set of rules, as, for example: having mentioned one's sentence, being preoccupied with one's fate, having broken silence, having thought of one's family, having cried, having dozed during the indoctrination session.

"Then, every once in a while, there is the farce of the photographer who comes to take our pictures while we carry out our duties -- 'without protest' -- especially during the catechist sessions. For some days, they have not been distributing rice any more -- but only stale bread. I cannot swallow more than half a meal. They accuse me of using the bottom of my bowl of boiled water to wash the vegetables, instead of drinking it all, according to the rules. Up to now I had not cried. But in my state of suffering and weakness, of exhaustion and of filth, tears ran down for no reason at all, irresistibly, sometimes just because I did not want to cry."

Thus it was for months -- up to the time of the sham trial that decreed the expulsion of Sister Maria Crisante -- and the recent expulsion of the remaining eight nuns. We continue to read in the diary of the prisoner: --

"Finally they bring me to the judge along with two other 'guilty' persons: a Canadian doctor and a young Protestant missionary. There is a crowd of men and women students, wearing their typical caps. The photographer gets ready to immortalize the scene. Turning to all three of us, without specifying any definite sentence, the judge informs us that, if we wish, we may enter an appeal within four days. I think that probably we will be shot in the meantime. Then we sign our expulsion document. The whole trial took place without our having said a word."

Sister Maria Luisa and the seven nuns who were recently expelled from Peking can consider themselves more fortunate. They did not have to endure long suffering in prison before expulsion. But, at the same time, they were the last to witness the total destruction of the Mission. Years of struggle reduced to nothing, with just the weak hope of being able to begin again some day. In China, the era of the catacombs is still in progress, especially now that Mao's "unchained" persons, drunk with fanaticism, rebel against anything that has a Western flavor. Until when? This is another topic.

And who will be the supreme commander
of this immense army?

A large butterfly --

Graceful, light, and flying about.

In brief, someone who delights in swimming. Could the verses that Tu-Fu bequeathed to us twelve centuries ago be prophetic?