

# The Iron Man of China

An American Missionary's Story



Dr. Paul Lavin and Robert Lavin



# The Iron Man of China

by

Dr. Paul Lavin and Robert Lavin

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# Dedication

This book is dedicated to the family of Joseph and Catherine Lavin of Framingham, Massachusetts. Joseph was born in Manchester, New Hampshire, on December 24, 1874; he died on November 13, 1955. Catherine was born in Porta Down, Armagh County, Ireland on June 10, 1874, and she passed away on February 2, 1960. Their children's generation began with the birth of their son, Charles, on October 15, 1898. It ended with the death of their daughter, Elizabeth, who passed away on January 9, 2000.

Catherine bore eight other children in her fifty-plus years of marriage to Joseph Lavin. One of these, Joseph Patrick, became a Maryknoll priest and missionary to China.

The ten Lavin children were raised in a strong patriarchal family. Their father was not merely a devout Catholic personally, but also an active member of many of the Church's organizations that were dedicated to charitable works. His wife Catherine strongly supported him in these endeavors. Those of us who were Joseph and Catherine's second generation of offspring, heard endless stories from friends and neighbors, as we grew up, about our grandparents' and parents' hard work ethic, their honesty and generosity, and even their athletic prowess. The legacy left to us by our parents' generation was one of which we were all proud, and one that we hoped to pass on to our own children.

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Passing on a legacy, however, is not a simple matter, particularly in this day and age, when employment forces so many families to move to and fro just to make ends meet. Members of even the closest-knit families often find themselves separated by great distances. And, even if they are fortunate to live in the same locale, they often have difficulty finding the time to get together to renew old ties and to reflect on the past.

Sadly, the bonds that once united great-grandparents, grandparents, aunts, uncles, and other relatives have been weakened and, in some cases, often forgotten. For many, the knowledge of, and loving admiration for, those who preceded them is missing. Yet, it was their faith and moral integrity that provided unity and direction to the generations that followed. A noble legacy, fostered and nourished, gave meaning to being a member of that particular family. Without that, cracks in the family structure occur; the separation between generations widens; and what was once a source of security, vitality, and inspiration erodes into ruins. Eventually, be it from sheer neglect or some unworthy obsession, the familial bond disintegrates, unnoticed by the disconnected generations that follow.

The generation of Lavins that preceded the authors' was joined together by an adhesive that was not going to be undone as decades passed. Joseph and Catherine were fervent Catholics who passed a strong faith on to their children, who, in their turn, did the same with their own offspring. That it was the holy faith that cemented our family together, giving to each and all the strength to endure in times of sacrifice and suffering, is markedly evident in the family photo below.

Father Joseph Patrick Lavin occupies the central place in this photograph. This arrangement did not occur by chance, but by design. Father Lavin was, in fact, the essence of what



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this generation of Lavins admired and stood for. Like a living coat of arms, with real faces rather than symbols, this picture seems to radiate that divine economy that Christ intended the Christian family to be. To Father Joseph Patrick Lavin, his parents, brothers and sisters, your grateful children dedicate this book.



The Lavin family. Sitting left to right: Marguerite, Catherine (mother), Father Lavin, Joseph (father), and Mary. Back standing (left to right): Frank, Charles, Terrence, Elizabeth, Edward, Theresa, and George.



Father Lavin with his parents sometime before his  
departure for China

# Foreword

It was in August of the year 2000 that the idea for this book was first conceived. Aunt Elizabeth, the last of the generation preceding us, had passed away several months earlier. My cousin Robert and I had met to discuss the vast amount of material that she had saved on the history of our uncle's priesthood as a Maryknoll missionary. His abundant letters, along with newspaper and magazine articles, photographs, and other documents had been meticulously cataloged by my aunt and preserved with the utmost care for over five decades! Father Joe was the "crown jewel" of the family.

One of the main concerns of my cousin and me was the continued preservation and passing on of this material. Unless our children and grandchildren were made aware of this heritage, it could become lost and easily forgotten. With this in mind, we committed ourselves to the writing of this book. This is certainly what my Aunt Elizabeth would have wanted, particularly in light of the fact that she had done so much to preserve this history.

I had the most writing experience; therefore, I undertook the work of writing the manuscript. Without a doubt this has been one of the most challenging tasks that I have ever undertaken. Although I have authored several professional works in my own field of expertise, psychology and counseling, I have no professional experience in journalism per se. And I certainly do not qualify as a theologian. I am, for all practical purposes, a simple

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layman, who has, over the past thirty years, become increasingly more alarmed by the changes that have occurred in the practice of our Catholic faith.

For the past several years I have been seeking wisdom on these matters from knowledgeable clergy and lay persons, as well as educating myself by means of orthodox Catholic books, newspaper and magazine articles and journal entries that explain the reasons behind what amounts to an orchestrated upheaval of everything that has to do with Catholic tradition. Even though I had graduated from a Jesuit college, I had spent my younger years (post-Vatican II years) as a typical card-carrying Catholic sitting in his *novus ordo* pew without a clue. That is no longer the case.

I must admit that what I learned deeply troubled me. As a practicing psychologist, I had always prided myself in understanding, redirecting and, sometimes controlling those forces influencing human behavior. Yet, inadvertently, like many of those around me, I had become strongly influenced by *novus ordo* thinking.

For those of you who are not familiar with this term, *novus ordo* means “new order.” It was applied (not accidentally, I believe) to the Roman Missal that was promulgated by Pope Paul VI in 1969. The traditional Roman Missal, for centuries, was simply called *Ordo Missae*, the Order of the Mass. With the liturgical changes that came after the Second Vatican Council (1963-65), the new missal was titled *Novus Ordo Missae*.

For me personally, however, the new changes affecting the Mass were the most disturbing. I experienced feelings not only of discomfort, but anger. I resented being forced to offer my hand and say, “Peace be to you” to anyone unlucky enough to be standing next to me. It was not that I did not wish my neighbor a holy peace, for I most certainly did;

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rather, it was that, for this hour, I had always been taught that my thoughts and prayers should be directed to the sacrificial Victim on the altar. This is where our attention ought to be focused, on the holy altar, on the solemn and reverent actions of the priest who is an *alter Christus* (another Christ). The miracle of Transubstantiation, the greatest act that could possibly occur, was taking place right before our gaze. I am just about to approach the altar, kneel, and receive the Flesh of my God as the Life of my soul, and now I have to turn away, do a 360-degree rotation, and shake hands with four or five people I hardly know!

But, like most people, I followed the crowd, minimally reflecting on these alterations and how they were affecting me and my family. Like many of my frustrated brethren, I soothed my jangled nerves by conjuring up one rationalization after another: "If the Popes, the Cardinals, and the Bishops approve of these changes, they cannot all be wrong," I told myself. "After all, isn't the Pope infallible in these matters?" Despite these mental gymnastics, however, one plaguing question after another continued to hound me. How could the practices of the traditional Catholic Church contrast so sharply with what is happening today? Why had so many priests and sisters left the Church in the past few decades? Why had the Priesthood, which was once considered to be a divine calling, become looked upon as an ordinary profession and, in some troubled minds, even a contemptible one? And what had happened to the emphasis on the rosary and the Fatima message, devotions to our Blessed Mother, processions, and the Communion of Saints?

Many of our once most revered Catholic practices had "Gone With The Wind," like the old South in Margaret Mitchell's novel. Not only the avowed enemies of the Church, but disoriented liberal loons might consider this to

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be a blessing. But, for me, and I know for many others, the loss of traditional Catholic practice left a hollow emptiness in the shell of what was left in our parish oriented lives. It was a wrenching break with the past. It left one generation disconnected from that which preceded it. It was this disconnection that prompted me to undertake the writing of this book.

My uncle, Father Joseph Patrick Lavin, was a great priest of the Maryknoll Missionary Society. Even though he has been dead for over thirty years, he, in my mind, is the linchpin in our family chain, the central figure joining our generation to those that came before us.

Many of Father Joe's letters, or excerpts therefrom, appear in this book. Unfortunately, with the passing of his generation, I was unable to sit down and interview my father, George Lavin, and my aunts and uncles, in order to record their testimonies and memories, and pass them on verbatim. Lacking such living testimony, I have had to rely on my own memory and the recollections of my cousins. We all heard the stories from our parents. What I did have to do (in the latter part of this book) was to take the liberty, based on the known facts, of making up what I thought might be the kind of dialogue occurring between my uncle and his Communist adversaries.

While I have taken this liberty, I have not altered any of the personal letters (except for deletions and bracketed gap fillers) that are part of the record. In fact, I have left the letters exactly as they were in the original, careful to preserve their personal and completely informal spirit. To sum it up, I have made my best attempt to relate the events exactly as they occurred at the time.

You see, as a psychologist, I have been trained to see life from the other person's perspective; therefore, in writing this

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book, I have specifically tried to draw on this experience by asking myself, "How would I think, feel, and behave if I were in the shoes of Father Joseph Lavin?" It was in this spirit that I constructed the dialogue that likely occurred during my uncle's trials with the Reds, basing the exchange of words on the facts recorded. However, I admit that in those cases where I have found it necessary to intervene in the story, my speculations are more accurately termed interpolations. My experience in my vocational field has helped me form a habit, let us say, of objectivity.

Nevertheless, as I wrote, I often questioned my own capability for maintaining this objectivity. I could feel my passion for the practice of traditional Catholicism seeping into, and even flowing into, my words. The truth is that while I did my best to be an objective biographer I can in no sense claim to be a neutral one. What I wrote seemed to me to be a logical extension of what my uncle, Father Joseph Lavin, would have believed in and stood for if he was alive today. I can only hope that any liberties that I have taken do not detract from my uncle's story, his reputation, and the greatness of his priestly and missionary work.

Much thanks must go to my cousin Robert, whose name appears on this book with mine. He was a source of enduring sustenance. He not only read the manuscript and provided me with needed material, but he demonstrated an intense interest and commitment throughout the life of this project. Without his assistance, this book never would have been written.

I would also like to thank Mrs. Camilla Meiser and her brother, Alex Cummings. They provided me with numerous publications without which I could never have begun considering the tackling of a project of this nature. Mrs. Meiser's

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careful reading of the manuscript during its fledgling stages, and her invaluable suggestions, were most helpful.

Finally, I thank my uncle for having been so considerate of his family to write them so many letters about his adventures in China. And I thank my Aunt Elizabeth for her meticulous care in preserving this written legacy. I only wish that I had paid more attention to all of this many years ago, when my uncle and his missionary friends and loved ones were the actual flesh and blood of the words that now appear on sometimes frayed and faded paper.

Paul Lavin



# Preface

While this book is about Father Joseph Lavin, it is also a tribute to the other Maryknoll priests and sisters who labored for Christ in China. Their unique and dedicated approach to missionary work in foreign lands set a standard that remains unequaled to this day. The local and national press coverage of those times made us well aware of the struggles that they heroically faced, particularly in China during the Communist take-over. By the early 1970's, every Maryknoller who had labored in China, either had been expelled from, or had died on, Chinese soil. The generation of bishops, priests, and sisters who so courageously toiled there are now long gone. They are in a new "field," enjoying the Beatific Vision as a reward for carrying the Catholic faith to foreign shores, suffering and even dying for it so far from home.

But, most importantly, this work is about a period of time that ended nearly five decades ago, a period that has been virtually overlooked and forgotten by the current generation of Catholics and non-Christians alike. It is impossible to read the newspaper articles, periodicals, books, and original documents that were saved by the Lavin family and not be struck by the contrast between life today and the way it was back then, particularly in regard to the practice of the Catholic faith.

Back then, being a priest, particularly a missionary priest, was highly regarded. Today the holy Priesthood has suffered a horrific scourging at the hands of too many degenerate members

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who lamentably have preyed upon their flock instead of helping to sanctify them. Woe to those mitred ones who not only allowed disoriented sodomites to pass through their seminaries, but, in some cases, even encouraged them to do so! Now, with the belated crackdown ensuing upon the pedophilia scandals, seminaries across the country continue to close.

The problem today with missionary orders is that they have lost their reason for being. Why would a young man leave his home and make the sacrifices necessary to be a priest and apostle if he, and the order he represents, do not believe one has to be baptized and believe the Catholic religion in order to be saved? Preaching the words of Christ, and actually trying to convert others to the Catholic faith is considered archaic, both here in the United States and in far-off mission lands. After all, most people believe one religion is just as good as another. Why waste time and effort trying to convince others that the narrow road, not the wide one, is the pathway to Paradise?

In poring over the many documents used in writing this book, one cannot help but be amazed by the holiness and commitment of the Maryknoll priests in administering the sacraments wherever they were called to do so. Their dedication to the baptism of the abandoned and dying Chinese babies in order to assure the salvation of their souls is particularly striking.

The missionaries who went to China were dedicated to the Blessed Virgin Mary and to the great saints who preceded them in evangelizing the heathen. Saint Francis Xavier, who died on Sancian Island off the coast of China, was revered by the Maryknollers. Many of today's Catholics have little, if any, knowledge of what this one Jesuit accomplished. The Legion of Mary (whose apostolate particularly enraged the Communists), praying the rosary, asking the saints and angels for guidance and

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protection, and even the word “mortal” in connection with sin, are passé; no longer are these considered to be a relevant part of our Catholic heritage. Yet, to the American missionaries who went to China, all of these Catholic truths and devotions were the heart and soul of what they stood for and brought to the Chinese. It is a constant, echoing loud and clear in their actions, their preaching, and in their writings. While performing the corporal works of mercy was important, it was converting non-Christians to the Catholic religion that was the missionaries’ primary motivation for going to far-away fields.

Too, this was a time when the Church openly opposed Communism. The popes who governed the Church in Maryknoll’s Catholic years, the bishops, and clergy strongly and forthrightly condemned the Communist doctrine and practice. Many of these valiant bishops and priests, who labored in enemy territory, were tortured, often unto death, rather than yield one iota to Red machinations. There was no toleration of Communist lies, and no attempt was made to “dialogue” with them. The Communists were Christ’s personal enemies. In league with the devil, they hated Jesus in heaven and they hated Him in His Mystical Body, the Church. Like the eighteenth-century French cynic and satirist Voltaire, they were vowed to “crush the wretch.”

The great saints of the Catholic Church obeyed Saint Paul’s injunction to “hold fast” to the Catholic traditions that had been passed down through the centuries. They maintained a clarity of thought and purpose during troubled times and they served as a beacon of light to keep others from going astray. They often suffered and died rather than acquiesce to current trends or “political correctness.” The founding Fathers of Maryknoll, and the bishops, priests, and sisters who followed them into China, behaved like saints. They, too, were persecuted, but they stayed

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on course, refusing to recant, change, or violate the Catholic heritage that they were commissioned to teach. So, too, did countless numbers of Chinese Christians. It is perhaps the greatest virtue of the Oriental heart and soul that the tougher they are to convince of the truth, the tougher they are in renouncing it when once embraced. This is why, even in this day, the Catholic faith in Communist China is very much alive; it is a suffering Church of some ten million souls, an underground Church, but a Church that is without guile — for she has been purged by fire.

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# Introduction

There was a time when the persecution of the Catholic Church in Communist China was front-page news. To those of us who grew up in this ominous historical period, the bishops, priests, and sisters who suffered under the Communist yoke were heroes. These were men and women who looked danger right in the eye without flinching. They adapted their lives to an alien culture, and they actually thrived therein, becoming significant contributors to the well-being of Chinese society.

These missionaries of the Catholic faith not only brought Christ's message to China but also established schools, medical dispensaries, and orphanages there. They performed every conceivable work of mercy — stupendous works of mercy — which endeared them to the Chinese people. When the dark cloud of Communism began to cast its foreboding shadow over China's mainland, many of the clergy refused to abandon their missionary posts. They had become one with their adopted people.

Their reward for such selflessness and courage was the cross of Christ. Like Him, they were falsely accused of crimes, tortured and put to death. Sometimes their martyrdom went on for many years, even decades. Some were starved, harassed, and tortured, all the while without the relief of death. Most of the missionaries were ignominiously expelled from the mainland. Even after many years of living in China, mastering its language, and adapting to its customs so that they might more easily remedy the poverty, suffering, and ignorance of so many millions, these

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servants of Christ were accused of being foreign devils, imperialists, and colonialists. Throughout all their trials, they refused to renounce their faith or to give any credence, even under torture, to the lies that were spread about them, or about the universal Church that had sent them to this “field afar.”

These Catholic missionaries were heroes indeed, and not only among Catholics. When Bishop James E. Walsh was imprisoned by the Red Chinese in 1958, even political leaders such as Senator Hubert Humphrey, Vice President Richard Nixon, Secretary of State Christian Herter, and Senator Mike Mansfield rose up in indignation to denounce it publicly. Newspapers, such as the *New York Times* and the *Baltimore Sun*, expressed admiration for Bishop Walsh, while strongly protesting the harsh sentence that was inflicted on him.

Yes, life was different back then, and the Catholic Church had a hierarchy that, although far from perfect, at least had their hands to the plow. They had not yet lost their sense of militancy, nor had they surrendered to this approaching pacifist policy of endless retreat. The Christian challenge was still a visible challenge to the forces of evil, rather than a mere “way of life” that covered in a dark closet, some private matter that was no one else’s business. No, it was the missionary’s responsibility to preach the true faith “from the housetops,” and to carry it to the four corners of the world. As Bishop James E. Walsh, who rose to become the second superior general (1936-46) of the Maryknoll Society, once stated: “Christianity is not a private way of salvation and a guide to a pious life; it is a way of world salvation and philosophy of total life. This makes it a sort of dynamite. So when you send missionaries out to preach, it is well to get ready for some explosions.”

In 1949, the Communists were victorious in China. Hence, the political match was lit, igniting a series of cataclysmic explo-



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sions that were particularly devastating to those who stayed loyal to their Catholic faith. Although over fifty years have passed since that time, the persecution of Roman Catholics in China continues. The difference is that this is no longer front-page news and little attention is paid to it, even in Catholic journals. Rather, Wall Street politicians, global financiers and even the common public opinion are all in favor of having good trade relations with China under the assumption that economic benefits might ensue for all parties. Our own country is the worst offender: ignoring the Communist Chinese government's nuclear WMD that are poised against us, their proliferation of every kind of weaponry to the highest bidder, and their flagrant inhuman injustices against their own people (which include forced abortions), every one of our presidents since Richard Nixon has granted China the highest economic trade status of "most favored nation."

To confuse matters even more for Catholics, on October 25, 2001, Pope John Paul II apologized to non-Christian Chinese (and all non-Christian people) for the "errors" of those missionaries who might not have sufficiently valued their culture. Perhaps there were missionaries who could have done a lot better in that regard. But for those bishops, priests, and sisters who suffered and died during the Red Chinese carnage this "apology" came without their endorsement. Would such an apology apply to Father Robert Greene, author of "Calvary in China", who was tortured and expelled from the mainland for defending his priesthood, the Legion of Mary, and the Catholic Church? Or how about Bishop Walsh, who was given a twenty-year prison sentence because he refused to abandon his missionary post and leave his flock voluntarily? Apologies for any abuses should have included praise for all selfless missionaries who brought the true Faith to people ignorant of Jesus Christ.

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In the May 19, 1952 edition of *Life Magazine*, a good number of American priests and prelates, who had dedicated many years of service in China, were identified as being prisoners of the Communists. Fathers John Curran, Donat Chatigny, Albert Fedders, John Tierney, Joseph McGinn, and Father Joseph Lavin were just a few of the priests identified. Also identified in this article was Bishop Francis Xavier Ford, who was taken prisoner in April of 1951. Bishop Ford, one of the first Maryknollers, worked as a missionary for thirty-two years prior to his arrest. For eleven months this courageous man was cruelly tortured and brainwashed before passing on to his eternal reward. It was only a few months after this piece in *Life* appeared that his death became known.

The Chinese Communists had condemned Bishop Ford, and all the priests who followed him, for being “imperialists,” “colonialists,” and “spies” for the American government. According to them, the missionaries’ only purpose was to exploit the people of China. Although the Holy Father’s recent apology was, of course, not for the mission work itself, nevertheless, it would seem that the reputations of all the missionaries who suffered, or were martyred like Bishop Ford, could be tainted with this stroke of the brush.

Although it appears that times have changed, they have really remained the same. A spate of short newspaper articles appearing in August and September of 2000 clearly indicated that the Roman Catholic Church is still harshly persecuted in China.

For instance, the *New York Times News Service* reported that Bishop Zeng Jingnu, an eighty-one-year-old prelate from Southern China, who had already spent more than thirty years in prison for his loyalty to the Pope, was re-arrested and imprisoned again. Bishop Zeng’s crime was that he continued to be a

steadfast opponent of the official patriotic church, which accepts the supremacy of the Communist Party over all things and rejects the pope's right to nourish Christ's Chinese flock. Interestingly, Bishop Zeng was ordained as a priest in 1949. This was the year that the Communists seized power in China. One has to wonder whether such an ordination would have ever taken place without men like Bishops Ford and Walsh who were willing to stay at their posts during this dangerous time.

That the Catholic Church galls the Communists is no secret to those who care about this issue. In September of 2000, the Church announced that, on October 1, one hundred and twenty Catholics, who had been martyrs in China, were to be canonized. In the new calendar, October 1 is the feast of Saint Thérèse of Lisieux, the patroness of the missions. However, it also happens to be Communist China's "National Day." Of course "all hell" broke loose. The Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Sun Yuxi contended that most of those to be declared saints deserved to die. He stated: "Most . . . were executed for violating Chinese law during the invasion of China by imperialists and colonialists" and that "the sanctification (*sic*) of such people distorts truth and history, beautifies imperialism and slanders the peace-loving Chinese people." Despite Pope John Paul II's previous apologies, these canonizations were timely and courageous. In fact, they were long overdue. And there is no question that the Catholic underground church in China was the motivating force behind the scenes.

Try as they might, the Communists are unable to force their Catholic Patriotic Association down the throats of the Roman Catholics in China. The government itself estimates that there are five million Catholics (foreign scholars estimate as many as twelve million) in a thriving underground church that is still loyal to Rome.

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There is an old saying that those who ignore the lessons of history are doomed to repeat them. The American missionaries carried Christ's message to China precisely because they wanted to influence the course of history. Their purpose was to free non-believers from the material and spiritual chains of the past and to prepare them for a better life in this world and in the hereafter. One such missionary was Father Joseph Patrick Lavin, who served the church in China for twenty-one years.

Father Lavin was styled the "Iron Man" by Theodore White, a reporter then stationed in China by *Life Magazine*. The *Iron Man* moniker stuck with Father Joe for good reason. Not only was he a man of immense physical endurance, but he was fearless as well. Even before the Communists dominated China in 1949, missionary Father Joe Lavin had a reputation for toughness. He was loved and respected by his people. After just a few years in China he had become Chinese: in his language, thinking, and behavior. This amazing cultural transformation enabled him to soundly defeat the Communists when they put him on trial in their futile attempt to turn the common people against him.

Although his formidable personality won some victories over his captors, like the other missionaries in China, Father Joe suffered much at their hands. The latter part of this book tells the story of the ordeals he underwent at the hands of the Reds behind their Bamboo Curtain.

This is the story of an extraordinary missionary priest. Though he worked no miracles that we know of, he displayed heroic endurance and perseverance and brought Christ to countless people who would have never known the goodness of God without his holy efforts.

# An Early History of Maryknoll

## A Missionary Society Founded by Iron Men

The humble beginnings of Maryknoll go back to the year 1906. At that time the Catholic Church had established an organization called the Society for the Propagation of the Faith. In the Diocese of Boston, the Society's director was Father James Anthony Walsh. Father Walsh was particularly dedicated to the promotion of mission work in foreign lands. This was quite interesting in light of the fact that America was still considered to be missionary territory by the Catholic Church. Despite this, however, Father Walsh, with the assistance of two other priests, began a bi-monthly review of mission work in foreign countries in a magazine called *The Field Afar*. Its purpose was to educate American Catholics about the needs of the missions, hoping that they would be responsive to fulfilling them. Moreover, Father Walsh hoped that *The Field Afar* would pave the way for establishing a foreign missionary society in the United States. Ultimately, he hoped, this society, composed of American priests, would carry the Catholic faith to people still ignorant of Jesus Christ.

Throughout the early years, Father Walsh not only dedicated himself to educating and enlisting American support for the foreign missions, but he also actively promoted the idea that American priests should be taking a major role in this endeavor. Up until this time, the French, Irish, Swiss,

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Germans, Italians, and Belgians were largely responsible for bringing the faith to China, Korea, Japan, Manchuria, and other countries in the Far East.

During these fledgling years of the Propagation, Father Walsh corresponded with a priest from North Carolina, Father Thomas Frederick Price, who also shared his missionary zeal. In 1910, these two men finally met at the Eucharistic Congress in Montreal. There, they decided to try to turn their dream into a reality by forming the Catholic Foreign Missionary Society of America. Even the name of their organization was conceived with a special identity in mind. First, "Catholic" was emphasized to make sure that the Society would be clearly distinct from the American Protestant groups who had already established numerous missions in the Far East. Second, "Foreign" was used to emphasize that missionary work was to be conducted outside of the United States. And third, "America" was specifically named in order to distinguish this society from the Europeans who, as noted earlier, were the dominant Catholic missionaries in foreign lands.

With great effort, persistence, and true apostolic zeal, the two priests were able to obtain the support of the American Church hierarchy in promoting their project. On June 29, 1911, their hard work finally bore fruit. Pope Saint Pius X gave them permission to open a seminary to train Americans for the missionary priesthood. The ground was now broken. At the insistence of Father Price, Father Walsh became the first Superior General of the society. Once this post of superior was determined, the two priests had to find a suitable location posthaste, promote the society and its purpose, recruit seminarians, and engage in all of the other bureaucratic tasks that are essential in establishing a viable organization. It was decided that the society should be located in the

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northeast portion of the United States because approximately eight million Catholics resided there. Naturally, it was assumed that they could be counted upon to provide the support and resources necessary for the project's success.

With the help of the Dominican Fathers, the society established its first headquarters at Hawthorne, New York, in September of 1911. In September of the following year, the seminary was opened and the first three students arrived. They were Francis Xavier Ford, who would later become the Bishop of Kaying and die in a Communist prison; James Edward Walsh, who would become the second Superior General of the society and Bishop of Kongmoon (before being sentenced by the Reds to twenty years in prison); and William F. O'Shea, who would become Bishop of Pying Yang, Korea. He died of a heart attack in 1945.

During this same month, the priests and students moved to a newly purchased property on Sunset Hill above Ossining, New York. This became the real Maryknoll. Actually, Maryknoll's name came about rather simply: the peak of Sunset Hill rose above all others in the district, so it was called Mary's knoll in honor of the Blessed Mother.

Needless to say, the purchase, establishment, and continued development of Maryknoll was a formidable task. The Society had to incur a debt of thirty thousand dollars, a considerable sum of money during those times. Moreover, Maryknoll's financial viability depended largely on the generosity of ordinary hard-working American Catholics, since the Society had no products to sell, or any other means of establishing an income that would make it self-sufficient. Houses had to be built; vegetable gardens and fruit trees had to be planted; livestock had to be bought and tended; food had to be prepared

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and cooked; clothing had to be procured; and, of course, the laundry had to be done, along with numerous other mundane tasks essential to daily living.

On top of all of this, seminarians had to be educated and specifically trained for the mission field. They needed more than parish priestly formation, but a more intense spiritual and physical formation that would equip them to function well in far-off pagan lands where the Catholic religion was either unknown or held in suspicion. With nothing more than a vision of what could be, Fathers Walsh and Price, who themselves had very limited missionary experience, pioneered and developed the first and foremost American Catholic missionary society. This was no small task, particularly in light of the fact — and this is a very critical point — that the more established European missionary groups considered Americans to be “soft” and incapable of adjusting to the physical and psychological rigors in the “field afar.”

After several years of grueling work and preparation, the Society was finally ready to make its entry into the foreign missionary field. In 1916, Father Walsh sailed to the Orient, traveling to Japan, China, Manchuria, and Korea. However, the Europeans, with whom Father Walsh had to negotiate in order to obtain missionary territory, were not interested in Maryknoll’s neophytes. Again, the old argument arose. Americans were unproved, inexperienced, and unlikely to have the physical and psychological stamina necessary for missionary work in a primitive country.

Undaunted, Father Walsh continued to persist in his search for missionary territory. On December 25, 1917, Bishop de Guebriant, of the Paris Foreign Mission Society, finally ceded a portion of Kwangtung province in South China to



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Maryknoll. To Father Walsh, this was probably the best Christmas present that he had ever received. For Bishop de Guebriant, however, it was probably a golden opportunity to dispose of a portion of very difficult mission territory that had a notorious past, and not a very bright future, as far as conversions to the Catholic faith were concerned. In fact, Kwangtung province had a reputation for being not only indifferent, but even markedly hostile toward Catholicism. Bandits and pirates roamed the hills and waterways. Robbery, murder, and the plundering and torching of entire villages were not uncommon. Political upheaval and sporadic petty wars were frequent and devastating to social order. Add to this an insufferable climate where typhoons often battered the province and the tropical sun virtually "fried" the inhabitants.

Kwangtung province was not what most Americans would consider to be a Christmas gift. But for Fathers Walsh and Price it was the opportunity of a lifetime. It was a chance to prove that faith, strength of character, and great zeal were not lacking in the American priesthood. It was an opportunity to show that American missionaries were "made of the right stuff."

On May 21, 1918, Father Price (co-founder), Father Francis Xavier Ford, Father James E. Walsh, and Father Bernard F. Meyer were selected as the point men who would lead Maryknoll into the Chinese missionary field. (Maryknoll co-founder and superior, Father James A. Walsh, remained at the helm at headquarters to govern the new society's affairs.) On September 7 of that same year they took passage on the steamship *Ecuador* and crossed the Pacific. A little over three months later, on December 20, to be exact, the Fathers finally arrived in Yeungkong, a city in the southern Chinese province of Kwangtung. Again, one must keep in mind that these men, although highly dedicated and determined, were American born

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and bred, personally unfamiliar with the horrors of famine or war. They were hardly seasoned or chiseled by any physical experience more difficult than perhaps a bit of poverty or sickness, or the usual aches and pains received by the typical American male in fisticuffs or on the ballfield. And they certainly had no first-hand knowledge or experience of East Asian society.

Imagine arriving in China as a young American missionary and having to cope with the following:

1. Learning to speak, read, and write the Chinese language properly — not in an American seminary, but in China. Imagine trying to speak a language whose characters, intonation, and varied dialects are markedly different from Spanish, French, Latin, or any of the other European tongues with which you might, at least, be familiar.

2. Living side by side with the sick and poor, in a tropical climate with no running water, and where unwashed human pores distilled an ever-present and malodorous sweat that challenged the sensibilities of the most committed newcomers. Add to that the relentless stench of mildew and mold that continually grew on food, clothing, and even on the books and vestments used for celebrating Mass.

3. Keeping Maryknoll's apostolic rule, which requires that you eat whatever is placed before you by the people whom you visit. Many of these culinary delights, by European and American standards, would be considered quite unappetizing to say the least. Moreover, such meals are often eaten, not only in the company of the family, but with the family's smelly livestock sauntering all around the house and even under the dining table.

4. Sleeping on a slab of wood surrounded by a mosquito net. A mattress in this hot climate would actually have been

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far more uncomfortable to sleep upon than the bare earth. Nor did the net keep away all the mosquitoes; these ubiquitous pests relentlessly peppered their victims like miniature dive bombers. To be sure, the Good Lord certainly has some unknown good use for His mosquito, but He has not seen fit as of yet to reveal it.

5. Living virtually without privacy. People are constantly looking at and staring at you, even when you are in your room.

6. Far more serious and challenging is the caring for lepers and for all kinds of diseased people who are emaciated and starving; dealing with a constant stream of beggars; caring for infants who are abandoned at your door, or left to die in the fields; and most heart-rending of all, burying the dead infants (often victims of parental infanticide), whose unbaptized corpses were discovered in the fields or even in rubbish heaps.

7. Traveling by foot, bicycle, and Chinese junks, rather than a cozy automobile. People and their animals are always stuffed together into these junks like sardines. Insects are swarming everywhere and on everybody for the entire journey – and there you are, a suspicious-looking stranger, right in the middle of what seems at first like mayhem.

I have scarcely scratched the surface of the trials and tribulations a missionary must acclimate himself to in a poor and alien land. Imagine the psychological obstacles, the conscience dilemmas for a religious soul, the loneliness and overall fatigue and fear. These are but a few of the inconveniences to be confronted and to which one would have to adjust in order to be a successful missionary. Still, even if one adjusted to these, a bigger problem still remained. The missionary's main purpose in

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coming to China was to convert the Chinese people to the Catholic faith. Unfortunately, this could easily be viewed as a harrowing, if not an impossible task. Long-established "religions," such as Buddhism (and all of its superstitious pagan derivatives), Taoism, Confucianism, oriental ancestor worship, and even wizardry and animism had far more familiar appeal than Christianity. Many Chinese believed that this "western religion" was being thrust upon them by "foreign devils," in order to pacify them into a colonial slavery.

Discouraging, too, was the fact that the Maryknollers had to rely on the more established missionaries, like the French, for assistance, until they could become independent. And these Europeans viewed them as being incapable of adjusting to the adversities of Far Eastern life. Furthermore, Maryknoll's untried methods and their philosophy of assimilating completely into the Chinese culture made very little sense to them. The French brought France to China: French architecture, French Churches, and even French customs. Maryknoll's idealism was considered to be naive and, frankly, amateurish in light of what had preceded them. Considering all of these problems, which are only the tip of the iceberg, it was up to these unripened idealists to not only overcome these challenges, but to pave the way for the younger, and even less experienced American missionaries to follow. The neophytes would be counting on the expertise of these holy pioneers for support and encouragement when they would come to carry on the work.

Obviously, this was a huge undertaking, one that would require a dedication, determination, and persistence that few men possessed. Fathers James A. and James E. Walsh and Fathers Price, Ford, and Meyer not only shouldered this responsibility, but they successfully achieved what they had set out to accomplish. By 1924, Rome issued a decree giv-

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ing Maryknoll absolute and independent control of its mission territory in Kwangtung and Kwangsis. This was a major accomplishment because it was the first time missionary land was ever placed in charge of American priests. It was further decided that this Prefecture Apostolic would be centered in the city of Kongmoon. It was placed under the authority of Father James E. Walsh, who was accordingly promoted to Monsignor.

By 1927, Maryknoll was so successful that the Prefecture of Kongmoon was raised by the Pope to a Vicariate Apostolic. Monsignor Walsh was appointed as its Bishop and duly consecrated. Maryknoll, which began this long journey with almost nothing, was now operating fifteen missions, one hundred and eighty outstations, twenty-eight schools, and six dispensaries. This was quite a feat for a group of American "softies."

Such was the early history of Maryknoll; it was a period of high idealism, hard work, and a dogged persistence that enabled the society to prosper quickly. But it was not these traits alone that led to Maryknoll's success in China. Maryknoll priests truly loved the Chinese people. Unlike many of their colonial counterparts, who were often condescending to their hosts, Maryknollers had real affection for the Chinese and treated them as equals. They ate in their homes; spoke their language; and conversed with peasants and mandarins alike while actively participating in Chinese life. Even their churches, rectories, schools, and other institutional structures were Chinese in their architecture and décor.

Not only did these American missionaries assimilate themselves into the culture of China, but they stayed with their people in the most troubled times, even when their lives were

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in danger. A good example of this occurred in 1937 when the Japanese invaded China. At that time, President Franklin D. Roosevelt instructed all Americans to leave China. If they chose to stay, he warned, they would be doing so at their own peril. Bishop Walsh, the Superior General of Maryknoll, presented the society's position on this matter quite emphatically when he stated: "There is never any question of withdrawing Catholic missionaries in time of war. There are six hundred Maryknollers in the Orient. They will stay. They do not need to be told. It is quite understood, however, that the missionaries in remaining waive all question of protection by the American government."

In 1950, Bishop Walsh reiterated this position in response to the Communist penetration of China. In the *China Missionary Bulletin*, he stated: "At a time when the Catholic religion is being traduced and persecuted with the design of eliminating it from China, I think it is the plain duty of all Catholic missionaries — priests, brothers, and sisters — regardless of age, occupation, or condition, to remain where they are until prevented from doing so by physical force. If internment should intervene in the case of some, or even death, I think it should simply be regarded as a normal risk that is inherent in our state of life and a small price to pay for carrying out our duty, much as in the case of firemen and policemen who are sometimes required to give their lives. Moreover, I think such an eventuality would be a privilege because it would associate us a little more intimately in the Cross of Christ."

As this brief history points out, between the years 1924 and 1927, Maryknoll became its "own man" so to speak. Because of its marked success in China, Maryknoll was given independent control of its own missionary territory. This fledgling

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society was now recognized by the Pope and the Catholic world itself as a key, if not leading, contributor to the missionary work in the Far East. For adventurous young Americans, who aspired to be priests, particularly missionary priests, Maryknoll projected a magnetic quality that would have naturally drawn zealous souls to it.

The Maryknoll spirit had been forged by men of iron character. It was during these vibrantly youthful years that Father Joseph Lavin, son of Catherine and Joseph Lavin of Framingham, Massachusetts, decided to enter Maryknoll College in Scranton, Pennsylvania. Interestingly enough, after being ordained in 1932, Father Joseph Lavin was assigned to Kwangtung Province in South China. This was the same province in which Maryknoll's work first began.

### The Forging of a Missionary Priest

What were the special characteristics, both in selection and training, that paved the way for one to become a Maryknoll missionary priest? A superficial examination of the early admission standards would indicate that the selection requirements were similar to that of almost any seminary at that time. However, in the case of Maryknollers, it should be kept in mind that these men were specifically being prepared to bring the Catholic religion to distant pagan lands, and to China in particular.

Obviously, not every candidate was fit for this kind of endeavor. While many pious young men might be acceptable for the priesthood here in the United States, this does not mean that these same men could adapt and function successfully in a foreign land. Maryknollers had to be particularly strong in their own beliefs about the importance of the Catholic religion and

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the salvific necessity of spreading the true faith throughout the world. Without such a conviction, it would be extremely difficult, if not impossible, to embark on a mission to a foreign land in which one might face solitude, deprivation, poor health, and the possibility of death itself. To become a Maryknoll priest, therefore, a seminarian had to be strongly committed to the propagation of the Catholic Faith. More importantly, he must be able to maintain this fervor in a nation in which there would be little, if any, of the usual social supports that can buoy up one's spirits during trying times.

Another consideration that had to be addressed was the seminarian's fortitude. He may be called upon to suffer torture and die as a martyr for the Catholic Faith. In the early years (1900s), which followed upon the heels of the outrage over the indiscriminate slaughter of Chinese Christians under the Boxer Rebellion, it may have been overly optimistic to presume that the Chinese government would never again tolerate such reactionary persecution of everything western. So, for nascent Maryknollers, martyrdom was a real, although an unlikely, possibility. However, in less than a half century, as the Communist persecution clearly showed, death at the hands of Christ's enemies was more likely to occur in a pagan land in which politics and attitudes toward foreigners can change in a moment's notice. Furthermore, even if a missionary did not directly shed his blood for Christ, he had to be prepared to face the prospect of daily deprivations of essential necessities, ambiguous communications or misunderstandings with the native people and the subsequent psychological stresses that ensued. Such adversities can significantly impact one's health over time. In the case of many missionaries, it could also lead to an earlier than expected demise.



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As Father James A. Walsh once stated: “While a missionary might not die a martyr’s death, he certainly could get ‘worn out’ over time in the service of his Maker.” Many difficult adjustments had to be made in order to endure through cultural differences that were not at all natural to the western mind nor body. Hence, getting “worn out” could happen rather quickly, unless one was physically, mentally, and spiritually robust in comparison to those of us who are just ordinary folks.

Another unique aspect of Maryknoll’s preparation was its emphasis on the importance of manual labor and first-aid medical skills. Seminarians were trained to tend animals, plant crops, repair buildings, fix sanitation and plumbing problems, cut wood, prepare meals, pump water, and treat certain illnesses and injuries. Mastering these kinds of skills is more than merely helpful in non-industrial societies. They are necessary for survival, especially for a lone missionary assigned to a post where he must be self-sufficient. In Father Joseph Lavin’s situation, his ability to fix his bicycle, and particularly its tires, made all the difference in being able to transport himself from one village to another. The more of a handy-man a missionary was in tending to his own needs, the more time he had at the end of the day to give his limbs the rest they needed to recuperate from daily fatigue.

The Maryknoll missionary truly identified with the Chinese people. He was an active participant in the community, engaging in the everyday mundane tasks that were common to the citizens of China. His virtues, charitable works, and willingness to stand firm in dangerous situations gave the individual Maryknoll priest “much face” in China. They were a catalyst for drawing people to the religion. Most important of all, a Maryknoller had to be willing to risk life and limb at a moment’s call to protect his flock from armed cadres of ban-

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dits or, in the coastal areas, from Japanese marauders. His spirit of self-sacrifice had to be habitual.

In order to obtain a real understanding of any missionary priest, the times in which he lived, and the challenges that he faced, it is necessary to hear and read his own words, how he viewed himself and the events occurring around him. Father Joe sent detailed letters to his family describing his adventures for Christ. These personal letters help to provide us with a true picture of a missionary priest, “up close and personal.” These missives, so genuine in their simplicity, give the reader insights into heroic events of a not-too-distant past.

# The Early Years: The Decision to Enter Maryknoll

Joseph Patrick Lavin, the son of Joseph and Catherine, was born on January 12, 1907, in Woburn, Massachusetts. From there, the family moved to the east side of Framingham. They first lived in a large two-story house on Beaver Street. Joseph Senior was working hard to establish his machine and supply business, and the family had to make do on a modest income.

Beaver Street was no place for wimps. The youngsters who lived in the neighborhood would go down to the railroad tracks to scrounge up pieces of coal that were dropped by the trains passing through town. Without this coal, poor families could not heat their homes in the cold months. Needless to say, tempers ran high during the search for these precious black nuggets, and hard-fought confrontations were not unusual. The Lavin boys always fared well in these free-for-alls. Led by their powerful and pugnacious brother Edward, they were a force to be reckoned with. They dominated the youthful competition that, like them, raced to the tracks whenever a train happened to pass through, in hopes that it would stop at the depot to refuel.

However, despite lean times in the early years, Mr. Lavin's business began to prosper. The family then moved to the more affluent west side of town into a two-story brick house on 575 Concord Street. Meanwhile, the Lavin family grew larger until the children numbered ten. Caring for so many required hard work and diligence on the part of both parents. Catherine was usually up and about by 5 a.m., making

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bread or donuts or a huge kettle of oatmeal. Orange juice had to be squeezed by hand. Cold or instant cereals were not considered to be proper substantial fare to serve as a breakfast for this mother's growing children and hard-working husband. Proper nutrition was a maternal responsibility not to be lightly taken.

While Catherine had a big job in getting the family off to school and work each day, she had help from all of her children. Each member had assigned chores: from setting and clearing the table to packing lunches, and everyone was to be out the door on time. The head of the house, who owned and operated The Lavin Machine and Supply Company, was always off before 6 a.m. so that he could open his shop, and make sure that his employees were properly prepared for the day's work.

Mr. Lavin was well liked locally. He was scrupulously honest, very attentive to detail, well organized, and, overall, highly respected. In fact, his reputation for honesty was such that he was able to borrow money from the bank on his signature alone, without posting collateral. Needless to say, he was a good provider, who was able to take care of his large family even during troubled economic times.

The schools in Framingham were all within walking distance of the many families residing there. As you might expect, discipline was much stricter back then, and teachers were highly respected and trusted members of the community. They made sure they knew, not only each of the youngsters in their care, but their parents as well. Education was serious business in this close-knit community. Few children would have ever bothered complaining to their parents that they had been unjustly disciplined in class — no, usually, they just dealt with such things the best they could; and, if

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they had been justly disciplined, they prayed that their parents would not hear about it. Back then, immature behavior was simply not tolerated; teenagers were encouraged to be childlike in virtue not childish, and that meant having a healthy respect for authority in all of its forms.

That was the ideal. If a youngster fell short, or insisted on getting into trouble, he was expected to handle such situations responsibly and own up to his faults. Walking to and from school, young boys were expected to have fun. The usual suburban kind of horseplay prevailed, while an occasional unsheathing of pocketed fists would launch some pretty bloody combats if some wise guy overstepped his bounds. However, most everyone arrived on time for the first bell, which served as the signal for lining up and then entering the school building. "You never would be late for school," young Joseph recalled. "Just having the principal look at you for being tardy was scary. If Pa found out that you were loafing on the way to school, the strap would come out."

There was little to suggest that young Joseph was destined for the priesthood. Unlike some of the child saints of the Catholic Church, he did not consecrate his life to Jesus Christ or the Blessed Mother during his early years. Nor did he show any propensity for sanctity. In fact, in many ways, young Joseph was just like his rough-and-tumble peers, with a healthy interest in sports, and a perfectly normal proclivity towards mischief.

To be sure, it seems that, in those school-days, all of the Lavin boys had earned a reputation for physical prowess. Edward, who was three years older than Joseph, led the parade when it came to physical strength and fist savvy. He was a short young man, with a fire-plug build that did much

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to verify his reputation of being the strongest youth in the Framingham area. It is no exaggeration to relate that Edward was seen more than once to carry a piano single handedly on his back, and he was never defeated in a battle with any peer who was willing to confront him. His brother George, who won local fame for his talents in baseball and football, related how the two of them would go down to the railroad tracks to confront toughs from other neighborhoods who were out to expand their turf. "We would take three of them on at a time," he recalled. "Ed would beat up two of them and I'd take care of the other one."

Sometimes younger brother Joseph would insist on tagging along with his two older siblings. Of course, they made it their responsibility to look out for him. Unlike his powerfully built brothers, Joseph had a physique that looked like a pencil. He was a wiry and slender youth, no serious match for the bigger boys with whom George and Edward had so many fights. Nevertheless, he would always tag along, getting himself involved, at times, in some skirmish or another, even though he had been cautioned to stay out of the way. "He would always come with us to the tracks," George recalled, "always ready to back us up, even when we tried to make him stay home. Like us, he'd get into a fight. But, whereas we would always win, he would get the short end of the stick. But Joe could always take it. No matter what, he would never give up. Even when someone had him down and could have beaten him to a pulp, he would keep on fighting. He would just never give up." Edward, who protected all of his brothers like a lion, said that when he wrestled with Joe, it was impossible to get him to say "uncle." "I'd just have to stop wrestling him," Edward explained, "You would have to hurt him bad, and even then he wouldn't quit."

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Joseph's brothers, particularly George, Ted, and Frank, were outstanding athletes who received considerable local recognition in both baseball and football at Framingham High School. While young Joseph loved sports, especially baseball, he hardly received the same recognition as his brothers. However, he did play on one of the greatest baseball teams in Framingham High's history. This team compiled a twenty-two and one record during the 1924 baseball season. George was a key player on this team, while Joseph, at second base, was noted for his quick hands, his fast release, and his ability to turn a double play. Being fearless only added to Joseph's prowess as an agile second baseman, especially when a runner was bearing down on him in an attempt to break up a double play. Actually, during his preteen days, the younger Lavin was known as a bit of a dare devil, willing to challenge anyone to out-jump him from the highest places. Too, he was a bit of a prankster as well, pulling practical jokes on other kids — and even adults — and then running like the wind to escape them.

For instance, there was the time that he and several other boys were plucking apples off one of the trees in a local orchard. The owner managed to catch all of the culprits except young Joseph. It is not that the man did not try, it is just that Joseph scampered around so fast between the trees that, when the exhausted tracker made it to the open ground, all he could see was dust. Even with the threat of added punishment, however, the other boys involved refused to rat on the future Maryknoller. Squealing on a friend was considered to be a capital sin back then, so it looked like his speed was going to get young Joseph off the hook. Or, so it seemed. Truth is, when he arrived home later that day, the guilt that he experienced was too much to bear. He decided to confess his crime to his mother first. She would be more understanding and lenient. Then,

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his father, who was less likely to put up with his shenanigans, had to be told. As expected, Pa was far less tolerant of his foolishness. He took the lad back to the orchard and made him own up to his mistake. Now that the confession part was over, punishment was swift and corporal, for, as most every good father knew in those days, a little pain was not only a remedial deterrent, it was educational. In other words the strap came out and young Joseph got a good crack on the backside.

While young Joseph was not particularly studious during his formative years, he had a sharp intellect that enabled him to receive above-average grades. With such an ordinary background, one would wonder what could have influenced this yet-to-be *Iron Man* to become a Maryknoll priest. The Lavin family was always devotedly Catholic. Their mother, Catherine, was an active member of Our Lady of Lourdes Sodality of Saint Stephen's Church. Joseph Senior belonged to the Marquette Court, the Massachusetts Catholic Order of Foresters, the Saint Vincent de Paul Society, and the Holy Name Society. He was also the Scout master and a member of the Advisory Council of Saint Stephen's Cadets. The good father was forever engaging in charitable works, always readily available when the priest or the parish needed assistance. He attended Mass and received Holy Communion regularly, went to Confession frequently, and he made sure that his children were educated in and practiced their religion faithfully. Joseph Senior was a sterling example to his sons and daughters.

For both parents, the practice of the Catholic Faith was the number-one priority. Their house was adorned with holy pictures of the saints and the Blessed Mother, and the crucifix was prominently displayed. Catherine and Joseph were particularly devoted to the Blessed Mother and the rosary. In fact, saying the rosary as a family was a deeply ingrained prac-



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tice that had a profound influence on young Joseph. He recalled the importance of this many years later, just before the Communists occupied Hoignan, the town at which he was the pastor. On October 4, 1949, he wrote the following, from China, to his mother:

*It is a good practice to say five decades of the rosary daily. Every Catholic should at least say the rosary during this month. The rosary is a beautiful prayer and recalls to our minds the mysteries of Our Lord's and Blessed Mother's life. What is more beautiful than the Creed, Our Father, Hail Mary, and Glory Be to the Father etc.! It is a well-knitted prayer and one of many indulgences. A home that is faithful to its daily rosary is assured of heaven. I remember when we were kids at home we had the family rosary. Too bad all Catholic families don't return to this beautiful family prayer.*

With such exemplary parents and a strong Catholic heritage to draw upon, there was a rich culture in the Lavin home that could easily have nourished a religious vocation. Young Joseph regularly received the sacraments of Penance and Holy Eucharist, and, needless to say, he never missed fulfilling his Sunday obligation to attend Mass. Sometimes, too, he offered to assist his father in carrying out the charitable works sponsored by the various organizations of Saint Stephen's Church. That meant eagerly participating in food and clothing drives for the poor and needy. It was through such experiences that he came to understand that extreme poverty, and certainly material destitution, could not only cripple the body but destroy the spirit as well.

Food and clothing, while certainly necessary, cannot take away the feelings of despair often associated with being down and out in a society that views poverty as a moral weakness. Young Joseph

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recalled delivering food and clothes to one of those unfortunate families on the poorer side of town. They lived in a run-down wooden shack without indoor plumbing and with trash scattered everywhere. "The kids were really happy with what we brought," Joseph recalled. "But it was easy to see that they never had much to eat. The kids were thin and their faces were pale, almost pure white. When they smiled, you could see that their teeth were in real bad shape. For the first time, I realized how lucky I was."

Such intimate exposure to the poor and destitute, during his early years, honed the compassionate side of the future missionary's personality. From the kindness and sympathy of his own father, who extended his assistance so graciously to the downtrodden, Joseph received a living education.

Another influence on Joseph was the Catholic community itself in Framingham. The majority of his friends, neighbors, and schoolmates were Catholics who all attended Saint Stephen's Church. Everyone had great respect for their priests. So highly esteemed was the religious calling in those years, and so great was the response among the young men of Joseph's generation, that diocesan seminaries and monasteries had to turn down a good percentage of applicants.

It is always true to say that behind every key decision that a prudent young man makes about his future, there is always a mentor who inspires and influences the direction that he chooses. Joseph Lavin had such a mentor in Monsignor Thomas Garrahan, the director of Saint Stephen's Sunday School. Monsignor Garrahan was an avid supporter of the foreign missions, even though he had never been a missionary himself.

Despite his advancing years, Monsignor Garrahan was a highly energetic priest with an irrepressible dream for bringing the Catholic Faith to the far corners of the globe. His sparky

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enthusiasm and adventurous spirit captured the imagination of his young charges. They, too, soon became transfixed with the idea of carrying Christ's message to distant pagan lands. Not many years later, three of the monsignor's disciples, Joseph Patrick Lavin, Arthur Cunneen, and Thomas Langley entered the Society of Maryknoll and were ordained there on Our Lady's knoll into the holy Priesthood. This Framingham trio never forgot Monsignor Garrahan, revering him with hearty gratitude for being the one who first inspired them in their quest to become missionaries for Christ.

[Note: When Father Lavin was ordained in 1932, the twenty-one-year-old Maryknoll order counted five priests, one seminarian and five sisters from Framingham, Massachusetts. Out of the one hundred and fifty-six priests in the Society at that date, to have five from the same town, was an astounding tribute to all the Catholics of that bustling suburb and its local parishes.]

While Monsignor Garrahan was a major influence in young Joseph Lavin's life, Maryknoll's recruitment efforts influenced his decision as well. During one of the Sunday Masses at Saint Stephen's, a priest from Maryknoll gave a talk on the life of a missionary. The priest talked about China in particular. Young Joseph Patrick listened in awe as the visiting Maryknoller painted pictures of the rugged mountainous terrain, while describing his travels on Chinese junks up and down rivers and across waterways; all this holy adventure so as to bring the sacraments of salvation to the Christians and new converts. This was a priest filled with zeal for his work, and it was evident to everyone that he believed that he was making a significant difference in the lives of the Chinese people. Joseph drank in every word, a seed was planted, and he became even more interested in the prospect of becoming a missionary, particularly in China.

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Exposure to Maryknoll's magazine, *The Field Afar*, to which his father subscribed, stimulated Joseph's holy desires as well. By the time he was in high school, he was already reading personal accounts of the Chinese missions written by the Society's young pioneers. Here was a land of mystique and challenge whose people seemed to beckon him to come and help them. The appeal of a life of consummate self-sacrifice, even unto death, gradually began to inflame his heart, growing in its intensity every time he picked up that little insert in *The Field Afar* asking American boys to give their lives to the work of the foreign missions. Unable to resist any longer, fourteen-year-old Joseph Lavin wrote for further information.

The seed of a budding missionary vocation had been planted. Watered by the grace of God, it took root and grew, eventually blossoming into a fully matured decision to become a Maryknoll missionary. Meanwhile, Joseph continued through Framingham High School, graduating in 1924. He was now ready to study for the priesthood. He had discussed this at various times with his parents, both of whom happily concurred with this decision, even though he was only seventeen at the time.

Just how wonderful a blessing it was for a family to have a priest in its ranks was described by the ordained Father Joseph Lavin himself, twenty five years later, in 1949, just before the Communists ravaged China. He wrote the following birthday letter to his father on December 13, 1949:

*Happy and joyful birthday to you Father! Congratulations on this great occasion of your seventy-third birthday. You have very much to be thankful for. The Lord has certainly been very good to you and blessed you in many ways. First, you have a first-class wife; second, you have ten children;*

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*third, you have attained the ripe old age of seventy-three; fourth, you are in robust health and able to get around with grace and without a walking stick, and hundreds of other blessings. Needless to say, the crown jewel in your old hat is "Chinese Joe" (the name Father Joe signed his letters with from China) because he is a priest of Jesus Christ and a missionary in China. To be the Father of a priest is the wish of every good Catholic Father. You should be a very proud Father, but proud in the sense that God gave you everything and with all humility submit to the will of God.*

When the missionary, Father Joseph Lavin, wrote this letter referring to himself as the "crown jewel" in his father's hat, this was not a statement of self-aggrandizement; it was a Catholic matter of fact.

Following his high school graduation, Joseph was accepted for admission to Maryknoll's preparatory school, Maryknoll Academy in Clark Summit, Pennsylvania. While young Joseph entered the seminary full of idealism and enthusiasm, there was a lot of hard work ahead. In the seminary Joseph began to understand more fully the details of his Catholic faith and how that faith was meant to be lived, particularly by those who would be carrying the holy gospel to a non-Christian land. It was during the Academy years that the aspiring levite grew habitually familiar with the holy scriptures, while also committing to memory all facets of the Roman liturgy and its yearly cycle, and the feast days of the saints. In essence, Clark Summit was a nursery from which would come inspiration for the many detailed letters he would write during the major seminary years that he spent in Ossining, New York, not to mention the scores of inspiring missives he would later pen home from China. His cor-

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respondence, while frequent during the Academy years, was cursory for the most part, leaving the best for later as he matured spiritually.

Clark Summit was anything but boring. Despite the many academic demands, Joseph managed to find the time to play on the baseball team. In fact, he developed a new wrinkle to his game. While he had played second base for the 1924 Framingham High School baseball team, he now decided to try his skill at pitching. This served him well, as he won almost every game that he pitched. "I actually surprised myself as a pitcher," he once confided to his brother George. "For a bean pole like me to be able to throw as hard as I did kept a lot of the hitters off balance. They never expected that I would have such speed. Neither did I. Should have discovered this in high school."

By June of 1926, Joseph successfully completed his studies at the Academy and was now ready to move up to the major leagues, the Maryknoll Seminary in Ossining, overlooking the mighty Hudson River.

# Preparing to be a Missioner in China: The Years 1929-1932

The years from 1929-1932 were the time for building the physical, psychological, and spiritual endurance that would be needed to survive and prosper in a far-off mission land. This was also the time to be immersed in theology and academic work. A thorough grounding in the Catholic faith: dogmatic, scriptural, sacramental and moral theology, and the mastering of all the pastoral applications of the one true religion was imperative if the missioner was to communicate that faith intelligently to those who had little, if any, understanding of it.

These were the years in which Joseph Lavin began his studies in the Chinese language, and the Chinese culture, as well as the time for learning all the ordinary, practical aspects of living in a society so markedly different from his own. While it would take years of first-hand experiential knowledge to become truly proficient and comfortable in the language and the customs of the people, it was essential that he acquire enough knowledge to be able at least to get his foot in the door once he arrived on the foreign shore.

Too, this was a time for the Massachusetts seminarian to get prepared physically in order to face the harsh environmental and primitive conditions of Chinese life. Learning to ride a bicycle over unpaved terrain and preparing one's feet to walk long distances for days on end, over steep mountains, through muddy rivers, were essential for survival. Convenient and comfortable transportation, and even maps, would be in

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short supply. As for a trolley? — not in China; and even if you could afford a rickshaw — what kind of a missionary would even think of riding in one amidst a squalor that was so ubiquitous? The years to come would not be like a leisurely trek down the old railroad tracks back home, and they certainly were not going to provide a missionary with paved roads and city sidewalks.

This was a time to learn to become a jack-of-all-trades. As mentioned earlier, a Maryknoll missionary had to learn the basics of plumbing, carpentry, mechanics, and those other hands-on skills needed to maintain a residence and a mission complex. A missionary had to be a doctor and a nurse; he had to have an understanding of medicines and herbs, of how to care for wounds and fractures and common and unusual diseases, when to quarantine and how far to press the issue, and, most importantly, he had to know how to minister to the dying and to their grieving families. He had to be a full-time priest as well as a part-time psychologist. Simply put, a missionary in China would not have access to a skilled craftsman or a doctor when complications arose. If he did not have the capability to solve the practical problems of everyday living, he could easily become overwhelmed and lose his missionary zeal. Learning to do all the practical things, that are too often passed off onto some specialist, was not an option. Rather, acquiring these skills, and being able to employ them with facility, was a must.

There were many letters written from Ossining to Framingham. In his correspondence, young Joseph tells his family of both the challenges of a consecrated life and the ordinary daily activities that mothers need to hear about. He writes of contemporary heroes, like Father James A. Walsh, and the example that they set for the young men aspiring to be like them. There is nothing spectacular in these letters: no



## Preparing to be a Missioner in China: 1929-1932

visions, no ecstasies. What there is, however, when one reads between the lines, is the journey of a generous soul growing in wisdom and grace.

In these letters the future missionary opens his heart to his parents regarding his preparation for ordination, his first Solemn Mass, and his assignment to China. The account of his separation from his family, particularly his mother, is as inspiring as it is tenderly moving. And, finally, there is the relation of the Nineteenth Departure Ceremony that took place at Maryknoll on Thursday July 28, 1932. The solemnity of this moment, and the profound meaning of what the ceremony meant to these newly ordained missionaries, is beautifully captured in one of the letters. For Father Joseph Lavin, July 28, 1932, was one of the last few days that he would spend on American soil for many years to come. Neither he nor his family knew it at the time, but Father Joe would spend the next fifteen consecutive years (twenty-one in all) in China.

## The Seminary Years: Preparing to be a Priest in a Field Afar

Much can be learned about Joseph Lavin's education for the vocation of the priesthood by reading the letters that he wrote to his family. The traditional Catholic faith is always the dominant theme. In much of his early correspondence, he would deliver mini-sermons to his parents and to his brothers and sisters. On December 3, 1929, for instance, he wrote the following childlike note to his sister Mary:

*The season of Advent is here. Three weeks from tonight it will be Christmas Eve. How the time goes. As Christians, we*

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*should all prepare ourselves for the coming of the infant Jesus. On his birthday, we should present Him at least with a spiritual gift. Do not let these days pass without thinking in a vivid manner of the child of the crib. Say four thousand Hail Marys in remembrance of the four thousand years that the world waited for the coming of the Redeemer. Enclosed you will find the gift of a spiritual crib. This is for everyone.*

### Spiritual Crib For the Divine Child On Christmas Day

1. 2 Golden Bedspreads - 10 Litanies of the Sacred Heart
2. 2 Golden Sides - 10 Stations of the Cross
3. 1 Silken mattress - 10 Rosaries
4. 2 Golden Arms - 1000 Ejaculations
5. 1 Silver Spring - 10 Visits to the Blessed Sacrament
6. 2 Silken Sheets - 2 days abstinence from meat
7. 2 Golden Blankets - 1 week abstinence from candy
8. 1 Feather Pillow - 5 Holy Communions
9. 2 Golden Pillow Cases - 5 Masses
10. 1 Golden Bed Cover - 5 Acts of Charity
11. To Polish the Crib - 2 days abstinence from sweets

Father Joe's letters during the China years (1932-1953) were similar to this. In great detail, he would write about the importance of a certain feastday of the Church, and how his sermon about it affected his Chinese flock. However, during his training and formation years, his family was the grateful beneficiary of his fresh devotion and postal preaching. This excerpt from a letter to his mother, dated March 2, 1930, testifies to an eloquent familiarity with the present life of the Church as an extension of the life of Christ in His members. He writes of the upcoming penitential season of Lent:

## Preparing to be a Missioner in China: 1929-1932

*The penitential season is knocking at the door. For the past three Sundays — Septuagesima, Sexagesima, and Quinquagesima — the liturgy of the Church had put on, in a small degree, the penitential vestments and signs. At Mass, the ministers have vested in violet vestments, the Gloria in Excelsis has been omitted, and so has Ite Missa Est at the end of Mass. The spirit of penance pervades the office.*

*March 5th is Ash Wednesday. Wednesday marks the beginning of Lent and terminates on Easter Sunday. Easter is very late this year. On Ash Wednesday, the priest blesses the ashes before Mass and distributes them. When putting the ashes on the forehead of a person, the priest says "Memento homo, quia pulvis es, et in pulverem reverteris" — "Remember man that thou art dust and unto dust thou shall return." In the Old Testament, sackcloth and ashes were the signs of penance. So it is very appropriate for the Church to begin the solemn part of the year with ashes as a symbol of repentance.*

*What are we going to do during the holy season? Some form of penance ought to be undertaken. No, nothing big, but deny ourselves a few small things. Be discreet in the line of penance. I know you are all planning to do something during these forty days; and let us repay God Almighty for our past offenses.*

On November 30, 1931, Joseph wrote a rather lengthy sermon to his mother on the meaning of Advent. The letter begins as follows:

*Happy New Year! No, I am not too early, in the eyes of the Church. The Catholic Church begins the new year with the first Sunday of Advent.*

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. . . During this time, the Church endeavors to prepare her children for the coming of Christ. This season is penitential in its discipline, ceremonies, and liturgy. In the early days of the faith, the people, according to the law of the Church, observed a rigorous fast and performed extraordinary acts of penance. Lent and Advent resembled each other very much. But, in modern times, this particular aspect of Advent is in the background, so the Church by means of her prayers in the Mass and Divine Office brings this fact to mind. The discipline is very mild, but, at the same time, we can all mortify ourselves in some little thing and offer this to the Christ Child as an act of self-denial. For instance: don't eat candy, or cut down the candy supply; give up smoking or only take a couple of pipe-fulls a day (today this holds for the ladies); give up something at table; good reading about fifteen minutes a day; go to Mass and Holy Communion during the week; visit the Church; say the rosary and Stations daily; practice ejaculatory prayer, etc.

The penitential strain is very visible in the ceremonies. The color of the season for Mass is violet, except on feast days. Violet denotes penance. The deacon and subdeacon do not wear the dalmatic and tunic but chasubles folded up in the front. The Gloria in Excelsis is not said. "Benedicamus Domino" is said at the end of the Mass instead of the words of joy "Ite Missa Est." The Epistles, Gospels, Orations, etc. bring forth in a very vivid manner the penitential aspect and urge us very strongly to prepare for the coming of the Christ Child. Flowers are not permitted on the Altar. The organ is not played, except for the purpose to sustain the music. At the same time, there is an evident strain of joy running through the entire liturgy. . . .

## Preparing to be a Missioner in China: 1929-1932

Of course, most of Father Joe's correspondence during these years was not so pedagogical in nature. Usually, he was simply describing the ordinary activities in which the seminarians were engaged, or the challenges they all had to endure. He wrote informally about studies, extracurricular activities, the sports and required hikes, the manual labor program, and whatever he was at liberty to relate of their religious duties. One such letter, dated June 8, 1930, to his father, was very typical. It could have been written by any seminarian anxious to make his father proud.

*My Dear Father,*

*Last Monday the day of judgment took place. It is tough when we have to experience more than one such day. Dogmatic Theology in the morning and Liturgy in the afternoon. Both of these exams went very well.*

*Tuesday morning we met and battled with Moral Theology — not so long and good. The boys were set for a long struggle in Ecclesiastical History. Talk about a marathon race. It had nothing on this exam.*

*Wednesday was a free day and [we had] a ball game with the Josephites from up the river. The Josephites take care of the colored missions in the country. Their preparatory college . . . is located in Newbury, N.Y. about thirty miles from Maryknoll. Their seminary is in Washington, D.C. We expected to have a ball game, but were sadly disappointed. The game proved to be a batting practice. The Knollers won 17 to 1. The visitors scored in the ninth. The boys don't enjoy this brand of ball. . .*

*Scripture exam on Thursday. This exam is always long and tiresome. I wrote and said a few things in exactly two*

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*hours and a half. Not so hard. Canon Law in the afternoon proved to be a short one and the written tests were over.*

*Oral exams on Friday morning. The professor shot a few questions at me between 9:30 and 9:40. Ten minutes are plenty. The exams for the school year of 1929-1930 are over and gone — Deo Gratias — Thanks be to God! . . . I was going to write immediately after the exams, but the spirit was willing and the flesh was weak. . . .*

*Today, the feast of Pentecost or Whit Sunday, is one of great solemnity in the Church. On this day nearly two thousand years ago the Holy Ghost, the third person of the Blessed Trinity, descended upon the Apostles while they were united in prayer. These crude men were filled with the Holy Ghost and they started on the mission to convert the world to the crucified Savior. You all know the story of this day. . . .*

*Tuesday, June 10, is Mother's birthday. I know you will all try your best to make this day one of extreme happiness for her. May God grant her many happy birthdays. Sister Marguerite's birthday comes on the 17th of June. I know you will remember her in some manner. I had a nice letter from her about ten days ago . . . Hope you, Mother, brothers and sisters are well. I am fine.*

*Regards to all the Lavins.*

*Your loving Son,*

*Joe*

It was during his seminary years that Joseph Lavin had the honor of meeting the founders of Maryknoll, as well as the first priests of the Society to brave the challenges of serving as American missionaries in China. One of the men he met was the co-founder, Father James A. Walsh. It would be hard to put into words just how much the seminarian respected this great

## Preparing to be a Missioner in China:1929-1932

priest. His impact on those preparing for the missions was immense. In the March 2, 1930, letter, cited previously, young Joseph wrote the following:

*February 24, is the birthday of this great man. Yes, of one who is little known in the world, except in a few circles, and in the wisdom of the world would be classified as a fool. The tendency of a worldling is to look upon and consider anyone in the religious life as a madman or a crazy fool. This man is a fool, but a fool for Christ. Jesus Christ, Creator of heaven and earth, was considered an impostor, a madman, a fool, by his own creatures while in this valley of tears. The Son of God died as a criminal upon the cross between two thieves. It is a wonderful consolation to be a fool for Jesus and spend our life in His service.*

*Fr. James A. Walsh, founder and Superior General, is the man in question. If he was in the world, he, in all probability, would make a name for himself and enjoy the best that this prior existence has to offer. If he had remained in the diocese of Boston, he would be numbered among the Prelates in the Church. Yet, he has declined to accept the honors of the Church. . . . I could write page after page about the zealous servant of God.*

*We all celebrated his birthday with much jubilation. The community presented him with a large spiritual bouquet of Masses heard or said, Communions, Stations, etc. Fr. General is sixty-four and as young as ever. He is very active and doesn't betray his age. May God grant him many more happy years with his spiritual children.*

Another missionary priest who had an impact on young Joseph was Maryknoll Father Robert A. Cairns, who later

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would die at the hands of the Japanese in the early phase of World War II. He mentions him with much admiration in a letter to his father, dated October 27, 1931. "The year's vacation for Father Cairns of Worcester, Mass. is coming to a close. He plans to leave New York City by boat on the 30th of this month and go by way of Europe back to China. This zealous missionary is ready to start on his second ten-year course. Could you picture a healthier man? I hope he gives us a talk before returning to his heart's desire."

The veteran Father Cairns had served as a missionary on Sancian Island, the very place where, on December 2, 1552, Saint Francis Xavier commended his soul to God. Father Cairns had been part of the first mission contingency to enter China in Maryknoll's fledgling years, and his holy labor, especially on Sancian, endeared him to a people who were not at all receptive in the beginning. Young Joseph did not know it at the time, but, many years later, he was to become a very critical connection to Father Cairns and his mission during the Japanese occupation of China. On numerous occasions Father Joe would risk his life by running the Japanese blockade to bring food to the island. Moreover, it was Father Joe who would be the only Maryknoller to witness Father Cairns' death at the hands of the Japanese on December 16, 1941. From a nearby island, Father Lavin could only watch at a distance as the holy man was taken out on a gun boat, bound, put into a bamboo crate, and then lowered into the sea.

The year, 1932, was a momentous year. It was the year of final preparation for Joseph Lavin's ordination to the priesthood. His letters during this time were filled with accounts of the activities surrounding the preparation for this great event that would take place on June 5th. Interestingly, the



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relevant letters, with all the complicated considerations (invitations, plane, bus and train schedules for the guests), were written to his father who gladly employed his pragmatic expertise in helping his son with these worldly matters. Then, too, making arrangements for young Joseph's first Solemn Mass on June 26, also required much attention to detail. Joseph senior was given that dutiful honor as well. Sadly, young Joseph's mother, Catherine, was too ill to attend either event. Although it cannot be confirmed for certain, more than likely her son's petition to the Boston chancery for permission to come and offer a Mass for his mother at the Lavin home was granted.

On June 28, only two days after Father Lavin's first Solemn High Mass, the departure ceremony was to take place at Maryknoll. Our newly-ordained priest would then be leaving for China. Previously, in May of that year, Joseph was notified that he would be serving in the Orient, halfway across the globe. On the 17th of that month he penned a very touching letter to his failing mother. It was an attempt to console her beforehand, knowing that, after his ship sailed, they might never see each other again. The letter reads as follows:

*My Dear Mother,*

*The time for the big day is getting closer and closer. About nineteen more days and the desire of my life will be here. As we near the destination, I feel all the more unworthy, but Jesus Christ will assist me in this stupendous undertaking and help me with His manifold graces. This is the way that I feel about the whole thing — Jesus has chosen me, and He has guarded and watched me during these years, and this is an infallible sign of a true vocation to the*

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*priesthood and more so to the missions in distant lands. Glad to hear that you and the rest of the family took the appointment so well. What difference does it make in the end? Everything will pass away. God gave me to you to give me back to Him. This is the best possible return; just try to imagine the happiness and joy of ordination day and more so of the heavenly jubilation. If the cold arm of death had taken me — my earthly career would be over. If I got married, maybe I would move away, and we would see each other very seldom.*

*But now everything is rosy. I shall always be of the household and never separated. My life's work is one of love, sacrifice, and charity. All of you will participate in my prayers, sacrifices, and good works. You will be constantly on my mind. Mother, bear this picture in mind. When Christ was starting out on His public career and missionary activities His Blessed Mother kissed Him goodbye, and with heavenly joy in her heart, and a celestial smile, she bade her boy goodbye and Godspeed. Yes, I am sure you will play the part of the Blessed Mother in regard to your son. Rejoice and be glad because the Lord is good.*

*Departure ceremony at the Knoll is on July 28. Our group sails from the coast on August 6.*

*Tell Mary I sent extra envelopes last Saturday. They are bound to spoil some of the envelopes and these extras are just for that purpose. Tell her to send the envelopes as soon as possible. If she can't get some of the addresses, forget about them. Received Father's last letter.*

*Love to all. Your loving son,  
Joe*

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Two days after the departure ceremony, the Maryknoll missionary was on his way to China. As his ship pulled anchor to cross the Pacific, the young apostle no doubt recalled the assuring words of our Lord: "Everyone who has left house, or brothers, or sisters, or father, or mother, or wife, or children, or lands for My name's sake, shall receive a hundredfold, and possess life everlasting."

### The Nineteenth Maryknoll Departure: Father Joseph Lavin's Legacy Begins

On Thursday, July 28, 1932, Father Joe joined the nineteenth group of Maryknollers departing for the Far East. He followed many courageous pioneers who already had established a "beachhead" in China and were now attempting to expand the peace of Christ throughout the mainland. China, as a nation, had never been conquered for Christ. As a whole, the entire Far East, with the exception of the Philippine Islands, Korea and Vietnam, preferred Buddhism, or Shinto, or Taoism, if not forced by the sword into Islam. Saint Francis Xavier himself had little success in this part of the world, if one measures success by the numbers of converts rather than by the quality. Those Orientals who did embrace the true religion over the later centuries did so with a holy zeal that was simply glorious. Their perseverance in the faith, even without priests and the holy Mass, proved their fidelity. Their Catholic fortitude, under unheard of tortures, populated heaven with many of its most resplendent martyrs.

Yes, the Church Militant was true to her name in Father Joe's day. It was a time when the primary purpose of missionary work was not simply the performing of good works, but challenging

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disordered consciences that needed to be upset in order to be healed. The conversion of souls to the Catholic faith was the main objective. It was necessary for salvation.

How deeply ingrained this dogma of salvation was to the true Maryknollers can be seen from the Hymn for the Nineteenth Maryknoll Departure Ceremony, as it was sung in 1932. Here are the very lines those missionaries sang before boarding their ship.

### Departure Hymn

*Go forth, ye heralds of God's tender mercy;  
The day has come at last the day of joy.  
Your burning zeal is by no fetters shackled;  
Go Forth, O brothers, happy you! go forth,  
How beautiful the feet of God's apostles!  
We kiss those feet with holy, loving awe.  
How beautiful are they on hills and valleys,  
Where error's darkness reigns with death.*

### Refrain:

*Go Forth, Farewell for life, O dearest brothers;  
Proclaim afar the sweetest name of God.  
We meet again one day in heaven's land of blessings.  
Farewell, brothers, farewell!*

*Dear brothers, hasten then to save the heathen,  
Engulfed deep in death's cold, dark abyss.  
Without true God, without a hope to soothe him,  
Shall he forever be a child of wrath?  
Brave soldiers, rise, destroy the throne of Satan,  
Deliver from his grasp the groaning slave;*

## Preparing to be a Missioner in China:1929-1932

*bring souls the freedom which by Christ was given,  
And plant the Cross in every land.*

*We, too, are ready to forsake forever  
The home of childhood, and our land of birth,  
To bid adieu to parents and to brethren,  
To cross the ocean's stormy, boundless deep;  
We, too, will gladly brave its raging billows,  
To be apostles of the Sacred Heart.  
Oh! When shall we, as you, go forth in gladness,  
To work with you and share your crown!*

*Though far asunder we are ever brothers,  
United in the bonds of tenderest love;  
The Sacred Hearts of Jesus and of Mary  
Contain as in an ark our pledge of love.  
When separated by the seas and mountains,  
Let prayer be unto us a link of love.  
Oh Jesus grant that we may be united  
In life and for eternity.*

The missionary priest was sent forth in the service of Jesus Christ as His apostle (the word apostle means "one who is sent"); and he went forth to preach His doctrine to pagans, tyrants, the humble, the proud, the indifferent, the searchers, those of good will, those of bad will, to kings and to slaves. Crosses and trials were his daily bread. They were embraced as blessings.



# The Years 1932 - 1947

For fifteen straight years Father Joseph Lavin remained in China. During his tenure there, the young priest from Framingham not only became acclimated to life in China, but he actually thrived in that alien environment. After several years, in his letters to his parents, he stopped signing “Your loving Son, Joe” and began to salute them as *Chinese Joe*. Sometimes he even referred to himself as “Old Black Joe” because, from the long exposure to the hot sun, his skin had become as brown as an over ripe berry.

Moreover, the way that he spoke, dressed, ate his food – and, just the manner in which he conducted himself in general — made him appear to be Chinese. It did not take Old Black Joe too long before he had become fluent in Cantonese Chinese. He smoked the strongest Chinese tobacco and ate black beetles by the handful, a treat that Chinamen relished.

When invited to dine with his Chinese friends, Father Joe feasted on a variety of strange foods that would make the ordinary westerner cringe. Yet, without batting an eye, he would devour each mysterious dish, smacking his lips and making plenty of noise in a courteous compliment to the cook that produced them. Father Joe’s brother, George, the father of this author, related a story about the missionary’s invitation to eat in some remote village in which his host produced a live lizard-like creature as the main course. The chef then placed the creature in a frying pan searing it quickly on both sides right

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before his guest's eyes. Father Joe devoured the reptile as if it was a Thanksgiving turkey.

So attached had Father Joe become to his people that whenever his time was up for a reprieve leave to the United States, he always found some reason to convince his superiors that he needed to stay at his post. Theodore White, the *Life* reporter who dubbed Father Joe the "Iron Man" really added nothing to his reputation as far as his Chinese friends were concerned. That was old news to the people in the many villages that he visited. He could out-walk anyone and ride a bicycle further and faster than anyone whom they had ever known. And when anyone of his parishioners happened to be on the wrong side of virtue, Father Joe could be fearsome, if that is what it took to bring the obstinate back into the fold.

Father Joe had to spend much time keeping accurate records on the number of people who received the sacraments. He wrote detailed accounts about specific Church feast days and the importance of prayers and devotions. Missionary priests, during these times, were considered to be the apostles of the Catholic Church and, since the Church was a sovereign and visible kingdom by divine institution, the missionary had a sort of ambassadorial role to fill as well – that is the reason for exact record keeping. Father Joe's correspondence clearly reflects this.

While much of Father Joe's correspondence was filled with accounts of the conversions of some of the Chinese people, he also focused on many of the hardships he faced and his methods of coping with them. For example, he describes in detail how he circumvented the Japanese soldiers who had occupied coastal regions, how he eluded marauding pirates, and out-foxed highway bandits when he was trying to deliver rice to the starving people of Sancian Island. Other adventures are



## The Years 1932-1947

related of his forays into dangerous and remote areas so that he might minister to the sick and dying, and provide necessities for his orphans and the poor during the devastating famine that coincided with the Japanese occupation.

Father Joe tells about the many mundane activities as well, and how time-consuming they were: the constant repair of bicycle tires that were forever going flat, the upkeep of the church, the mission and orphanage, and the risks inherent in the transportation of needed goods to distant mission outposts over rugged terrains that were seasonally untraversable. And much more. All of that is in the pages ahead.

### Loting: The Building Block of the Future (1932 - 1938)

Father Joe's first post in China was Loting. He was assigned to that mission as curate to Father Robert Kennelly. Caring for and baptizing abandoned babies and running the orphanage were an important part of Maryknoll's work there, and Father Joe jumped into this assignment with both feet running. He even authored several pieces for *The Field Afar* about the founding of the Loting Mission by Father Daniel McShane. In one early article entitled, "Suffer the Little Ones to Come Unto Me," Father Joe not only describes his assignment, but also discusses the many prejudices and obstacles that had to be overcome to save the bodies and souls of these unwanted babies. Here follows a good chunk of that article; it is enough to give the reader a very clear picture of what the Maryknoll spirit was all about:

#### *SUFFER THE LITTLE ONES TO COME UNTO ME*

*The Loting Orphanage stands as a memorial to the late Father Daniel McShane. His name will always be connected*

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*with the work for abandoned babies. Even today, the Christians and pagans alike remember the great work done by this Apostle of Christ for these helpless castaways.*

*The care and attention for abandoned waifs was a dear work to the heart of Father McShane. His heart was Christlike and he imitated the Savior in his love for the little ones: "Suffer the little children to come unto Me for of such is the kingdom of heaven." . . .*

*Through the charity of American Catholics, Father McShane was able to build an orphanage at Loting, but under very trying circumstances. He sang "Te Deum" in 1923 when the Maryknoll Sisters came to Loting and assisted him in the care for the little ones. Too much praise cannot be given to the Sisters for their splendid work and untiring zeal among these poor babies. The people thought that the babies were brought to the establishment, and left to die from hunger and ill-treatment, or murdered, and finally the babies eyes were plucked out for medical use. These accusations were heart-rending to Father McShane, and it took many years to prove to these pagan people that these accusations were false and groundless. Their ignorance can be explained in the fact that we are foreigners and they cannot understand why we leave home to take care of out-cast children; and secondly, the charity of Christ as such is unknown to pagans.*

*A few years later, Father McShane opened another orphanage for undesired babies at Lintaan. He bought an old Chinese shack on Iron Street and put a Chinese woman in charge. The people were very bitter and showed their hostility on many occasions by stoning the small shack — it is a good thing that Chinese dwellings have no glass windows.*

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*The old patented charges were hurled at the Church, but as time went on, the people were gradually educated, and now things are calm and peaceful.*

*Father McShane died at Loting on June 4, 1927, a victim of smallpox. He contracted smallpox from one of the babies whom he baptized. No one else would handle this baby covered from head to foot with smallpox, so after the saving water of baptism was poured upon her head, Father McShane put the little thief of heaven in a small wooden cradle in the orphanage to die. On the following day, the newly baptized infant entered the gates of heaven to enjoy the beatific vision and there pray for her spiritual father and the Loting orphans.*

*Fourteen days later, Father McShane passed on to his reward. What must have been his joy when this abandoned waif and countless other orphans greeted their Spiritual Father at the gates of paradise? . . .*

*Just the other day, I baptized an orphan, who was covered with this dreadful disease of smallpox. Of course, the story of Father McShane's death rushed through my mind. We have many cases of smallpox and other contagious diseases.*

*The custom of throwing away babies does not exist in every part of China, but it is a fairly widespread evil and exists to some extent in most large cities. The custom of discarding babies in Loting and Lintaan is practiced on a scale that even amazes the Chinese.*

*Only the baby girls are the victims of wholesale slaughter. The Chinese never abandon or throw away a baby boy, because the boys are the pride of the Chinese family and the future of the clan depends upon them. A Chinese father said: when a boy is born, he is given a piece of gold to play with;*

## The Iron Man of China

*when a girl comes into the world, she is given a piece of clay to play with.*

*What is the source of this evil practice of throwing away baby girls? The chief reason is superstition. Poverty also plays an important role in discarding infants, but the parents always find sufficient food to nourish and rear a baby boy. The baby boy must be brought up at the cost of any sacrifice or hardship.*

*Superstition plays havoc in China and it meets these poor people at every turn during the day. It is a very rare case when the mother does not want to raise the baby girl. A Chinese mother loves her children - boys or girls - just as the mothers in the rest of the world. Motherhood is the same the world over. The husband, or members of the clan, force the mother to get rid of the baby girl because of superstition.*

*The fifth and ninth months of the Chinese calendar play an important part in this evil practice. The fifth month is by far the most superstitious and it is a well-known fact that a baby girl, born during the fifth month, and reared by the family, the father of the child will certainly die. Last year during the fifth month, the Loting Orphanage received one hundred and fifty waifs - this is a record.*

*Fortune tellers and "devil or witch women" play an important part in the lives of baby girls. The baby girls are brought to the fortune tellers or "devil women" and if the verdict reads that the baby will bring misfortune on the family, naturally the parents do away with the girl. Fortune tellers and these "devil women" cause the destruction of many helpless infants and are a curse in China.*

*The poor waifs are sometimes brought to our door by the mother or some member of the family, or some friend. Our*

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*hired nurses, and other women friendly to the Church, bring in most of the babies. It is not an uncommon sight to see a man bring an abandoned baby. Women with the babies strapped to their backs walk for miles to give the little ones shelter and care at the Loting asylum. I know of one case when a woman with an infant strapped to her back walked over twenty-five miles to bring the little tot to our institution.*

*Loting has four blind orphans. Pauline, the oldest, is in charge of three tiny waifs - feeds, washes and takes good care of them. She takes great pride in her work and is an inspiration to all of us. The blind girls can cut grass, pull up and carry water, grind and pound rice, take care of the small orphans and do other odd jobs.*

*Since the establishment of the Loting and Lintaan Orphanages, about sixteen thousand waifs have been received and cared for. Out of this number only eighty-five have been reared [to adulthood]. Their ages run from six months to sixteen years old. The babies are baptized, and then given out to the nurses, who care for them for one year, and then the waifs are returned to the orphanage and cared for by hired women and the older orphans. At first sight this seems to be a very low average, but when you recall to mind that infant mortality in China is very high, and, secondly, that the majority of these waifs are brought to us when in the jaws of death, the percentage is not so startling. Most of them die because of former hardships and hunger. Many are diseased, and smallpox is very prevalent, and lockjaw is very common.*

*On an average, the Loting Orphanage receives about twelve hundred babies and Lintaan about four hundred a year.*

*Famine is now striking heavily at our door. This year two crops of rice and sweet potatoes have been destroyed due*

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*to drought. Hungry mouths demand food, and when the cupboard is bare, we call and plead with our friends for help in our necessities. Remember, St. Paul said: "It is better to give than to receive." We feel confident that you will come to our assistance and give us the necessary money to feed and clothe these abandoned waifs. Last month, due to the famine, one hundred and sixty-nine babies poured through our doors. It is a hard job to raise these abandoned babies, but the burden becomes heavier and also hopeless when financial help is lacking.*

*Loting has been called "the subway to heaven for abandoned babies."*

*Most of these waifs die shortly after the saving water of baptism has been poured. Your small offering will help us to buy more babies, and thereby increase the population in heaven.*

*The Maryknoll Sisters, with the assistance of the native women, are in charge of the two orphanages. Too much praise cannot be given to the Sisters for their splendid work with the orphans. They are a great help and give the orphans the necessary medical care, schooling, and a good Catholic training.*

*The care of the little ones is dear to the Heart of Jesus Christ, and also has a special appeal to each and every one of us. We can all do our share in praying for the success of the orphanage work and also by giving a little mite to feed and clothe these abandoned children. "Suffer the little children to come unto Me, for such is the kingdom of heaven."*

Father Anthony Hong, a Chinese priest who authored an article in the December, 1948, edition of *The Field Afar*, entitled: "Tears for Luk-Shan-Fu," commented on Father Joe's excellent care of these female castaways. Father Hong stated: "Hoignan orphans, thanks to Father Lavin, make good brides. They are

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desired because they've been to school and are well-trained." The writer has much more to say about Luk-Shan-Fu:

*Father Lavin had the mind and heart of an over-seas Chinese; he was busy day and night for his orphans, just as an over-seas Chinese works ceaselessly for his family of children. He wore a pathway from the orphanage to the UNRRA office, begging food for the famished of the mission and the whole countryside. Everything he did, everything he talked about, every aspect of his interest had to do with the orphans and the people of Hoignan (Note: this was Father Joe's assignment after Loting).*

*For a long time, Luk-Shan-Fu, as Father Lavin is known among us, had thought of returning home to visit his old parents and all the Lavin clan once again; but he would never consent to go while the problem of feeding the Hoignan youngsters remained. At last UNRRA concluded its term of service, and the famine was over, at least for awhile. Then it was that our pastor took his leave. I shall never forget the touching scene, when the little ones sobbed so woefully at his departure that they brought tears to the eyes of this great, strong priest.*

In a piece entitled: "With a Junk Ride for a Honeymoon," Father Joe described the marriage of one of his female orphans at Loting. Her name was Clotilde. As a baby she had been the victim of one of the "witch women's" curses. The original, unedited manuscript called: "Another First," was addressed to the Lavin family. Father Joe described the marriage as a "Red Letter Day" for the orphanage, partly because more than three hundred and fifty Chinese pagans attended the Catholic ceremony, and they were very impressed by it. In

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fact, at the conclusion of the article Father Joe expressed the hope that "some pagans will be led into the Church through this simple but impressive ceremony."

In November of 1934, Father Joe penned another two-page article for *The Field Afar* about the founder of the Loting mission. Even during the beginning of his missionary career, the priest from Framingham was developing into a fairly prolific writer. It was shortly after the second article about the Loting mission appeared in *The Field Afar*, that Father Lavin contributed another composition for the bimonthly, entitled: "Mr. Poon of The Long Pipe." Mr. Poon was a man whom Father Joe described as having "plenty of face." This means that he was a highly respected and influential man in the community. This charming essay reads as follows:

### The Field Afar

#### The Magazine of Maryknoll

Mr. Poon of the Long Pipe— and some of his Neighbors

*Meet Mr. Poon of Loting. He's an old-timer and a perfect picture with his long Chinese pipe. No matter where he goes, his pipe travels with him, although, as you can see from his picture, he does believe in keeping his pipe at a distance.*

*These long Chinese pipes are made out of bamboo and give a cool refreshing smoke. A tobacco pouch, which looks like a spider, is suspended from the pipe on a cord. The pouch must be kept handy because the pipe only holds enough tobacco for a few puffs.*



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*You should see Mr. Poon light his pipe. The pipe is so long and his arm too short to light it with an ordinary match, so this is the procedure: he prepares the pipe, lights a long Chinese slow match, places the match on the table, walks a short distance, sits down, puts the pipe in his mouth, contacts the match, and puffs away. At other times, he puts the Chinese slow match between his toes, rests the pipe on the ground and lights it. I found this operation rather amusing when I saw it the first time. These Chinese are rather clever!*

*Mr. Poon is sixty-six years old, a school teacher by profession, and he is very influential. As the Chinese say, "He has plenty of face." He brings his friends, business men and government officials to the mission and helps the Shen-fu (Spiritual Father) talk doctrine with them. He knows the doctrine quite well himself and is a valuable assistant in explaining it to others. Mr. Poon tells his friends that he wants to be a Christian, but can't, because he smokes opium and has two concubines. "Oh, I will get in yet," he says. "I will find the right path before I die." Mr. Poon is indeed an apostle, although outside the Fold himself. Many of his friends have joined the Church through his efforts, and we trust that God will yet give him the grace he needs.*

### Becoming "Chinese Joe"

While his writing during the Loting years was plentiful, the letters to his family were often shorter and less detailed than those that would follow in later years. Actually, it was during the years at Loting that Father Joseph began signing his letters as *Chinese Joe*. He was young, highly energetic, and intensely enthusiastic about his work. For this human dynamo, there

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were simply not enough hours in the day to complete all that he had set out to accomplish. The following packet of excerpts are indicative:

*October 12, 1936: "Once more you must excuse your wandering boy (a letter to his mother) for being so brief. Time is very scarce these days. I must get caught up with the fast world some day."*

*October 19, 1936: "Hate to say so, but this will be another short letter. Haven't much time these days to even write home. I know you and the others understand and forgive the wandering boy."*

*March 3, 1937: "Excuse the brevity, but can't be helped. Never seem to catch up with my work."*

*October 27, 1937: "Just another week shot to the flames. Oh boy! How the time flies over here. A day of twenty-four hours is by far too short. What a blessing it would be if we poor mortals never had to sleep or eat."*

Even the announcement of the death of Maryknoll's Superior General, Father James A. Walsh, which Father Joe communicated to his mother that May, was right to the point:

*The death of Father General of Maryknoll was quite a shock to us over here because he was convalescing so nicely. He was well prepared for death and is now praising God in his heavenly court. The common opinion is that Bishop Walsh of Kongmoon will be the next Superior General. The Special General Chapter will be held in Kongmoon this July. It is much easier to hold the Chapter over here. Father Winslow, being a member of the Council, ipso facto (by that very fact) will make the trip to the Orient for the General Chapter.*

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*Father Winslow deserves the break and such a nice trip. I hope to have him come up to Loting for a few days.*

In that same letter, Father Joe went on to describe his adventures with the boys at the orphanage. This particular anecdote is hilarious. In fact, it is the antidote in the anecdote that is so funny. Father Joe must have enjoyed giving his mother all the details:

*Enclosed is a picture of myself giving out worm medicine to the boys studying doctrine. Worm medicine is part of the course. The worm pills are round and taste like candy and the kids enjoy them. The dose varies according to age. Enjoy these pills for three days and on the fourth a good stiff dose of Epsom salts is administered. I brought the twelve kids down to the convent, sat them on the benches in a row, and handed them the Epsom salts by putting it in their own rice bowl, which they brought along. The Sisters poured the lukewarm water and I stirred the contents and told the kids to go to it. They hated the poison and drank with much hesitation, except two. One kid was forced to drink by pouring it down his throat. The other kid refused, cried like a baby, and spit out the salts. He is fifteen years old. Finally, I gave him a minute to drink the salts or administer another dose and with this threat, I brought the large can of salts over to his place and, oh boy!, how he put away the salts in nice order and made a beeline for the priest's property. The kids then went back to the men's property.*

*In a few minutes, I came up to have a laugh at the kids. They were all out back washing their teeth, mouths, and trying to vomit the salts up. What a crew and how I laughed. In short order, the kids were making beelines for the toilets. They all had worms. I asked them jokingly how many times*

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*the salts worked. Some shouted twice, three, four, five times, and claimed I gave them gunpowder to eat. Such is life, and what fun we have with the kids.*

There was something else, something very revealing, in that May 6th letter to his mother that cannot be passed over. It is found in the final part of the letter. Father Joe is writing, as a son and a priest, about the illness of his parents and the prospect of coping with death. His inspiring words help us to appreciate the abundant graces strengthening the *Iron Man* so as to enable him to fearlessly face even the most dangerous circumstances on a daily basis:

*God has asked much of you in sickness, but remember true love is proven in such times of hardship and sickness. Sickness purifies the soul if taken in a true Christian spirit and as God's Will. I know you are enduring all with patience, charity, love, and as coming from the hand of God. Sickness is a form of purgatory on this earth and this ought to give you much consolation to be able to suffer here instead of hereafter.*

*God is a loving Father and knows what is best for His children. . . . God's Will should be our will. We must bend our puny wills to His Divine Will. If death comes, it is His Will and I have no fear because God's Will is my will. Death is a heavy burden for our loved and dear ones to bear, but Jesus Christ will give us the necessary grace to bear up under such sorrows and a heavy cross. God loves us and desires our happiness with Him in Heaven. Think a few moments daily on the subject of death and then you will have no fear of departing from this valley of woe to the celestial kingdom.*

*Life is only a probation and preparation for death. Death is only a free ticket to our true home in Heaven. Death should*

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*possess no fear for us because through it we pass to our heavenly reward. Our watchword should be: watch and pray; "Oh death, where is thy sting?" God's Will is our will.*

For Father Joe, even working in a Chinese prison was an exciting adventure. He was a missionary to the core, as can be seen from this letter sent home to his mother on March 24, 1937:

*The writer still sits behind bars every week. Just imagine your son behind the bars of a Chinese jail every Thursday for a few hours. For the first half hour the prisoners listened to a doctrinal talk and then medical treatment — at least fifty sick are treated weekly for all kinds of diseases. Many funny and queer things happen. At present the jail hosts a full house to overflowing — over two hundred jail birds. Many have to sleep and live in the courtyard. Most of the prisoners have been put behind bars because of gambling, smoking opium, or robbery, very strict rule at present in this province against opium and gambling. Robbery is very common this year — many robberies every night because two crops of rice failed and the people are forced to steal to keep from starving. We have a few night prowlers on our property. Variety is the spice of life. Prison work is very interesting.*

As the early years of the mission flew past, Father Lavin grew to identify more strongly with the Chinese people. The Maryknoller loved his work and he seemed to enjoy writing about it. The following missive, sent to his mother on December 19, 1937, provides us with a picture of a typical two-day tour in the life of our missionary going about his priestly visitations. He signed it *Chinese Joe*.

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*On Sunday night the writer prepared for a mission trip to the country. Mass at six o'clock on Monday. The baggage carriers and I left here for Kwangsi territory at 7:30 by foot. We had a good day's walk and climbing before us. The weather was ideal for hiking. Arrived at our destination, Wong Ling Kang at 3:30 — about twenty-five miles. Our lone Christian was home, but no house to live in since it was burned down. At any rate, we managed to pass the night under the tile roof of his rice gruel stand, or otherwise called the baggage carriers' pagan shrine.*

*Four of us sat down for supper — the Christian had invited an old friend of his. This old friend drank too much wine and was unable to walk home over the mountains. At eight bells in the evening, my boy and I decided to take the old boy home and thereby pay a visit to the village. Three mountains to climb and what steepness! We managed to get him home safe and then sat down and talked doctrine for an hour with the people. We returned home about 10:30. Then we had to find boards for a bed. The boards were just wide enough, but not long enough. Before long, the sand man closed our eyes.*

*Up at seven in the morning and about ten pagans were present for the Mass. Had breakfast and left for home at 9:30. On our way home, we stopped at another Christian's home and spent the night, said Mass the next morning, and back to Loting for a ten o'clock breakfast.*

*In the afternoon of the same day, the carrier and I left for another mission trip by bus and a walk of three miles. Spent the night there, said Mass in the morning, and back home for a late breakfast. Fr. Kennelly left for Loking early in the morning and I returned at 8:30 in the evening.*

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*The carrier and I left for another trip on Friday. He went by bus and I rode my bike. We met at Laui Sui Hau and we walked to the Christian's village — about nine miles. We got there at five. Went visiting after supper and talked doctrine to 10:30. Up the next morning, said Mass, and then went over to visit the assistant Mandarin. Back for breakfast and then off for home. I got home for a late dinner. Fr. Kennelly left for Lintaan. He returned on Sunday.*

*Will write later on the three trips — plenty to say. Time is scarce — just the high spots.*

*Love to all,  
Your loving son,  
Chinese Joe*

One gets an even more graphic picture of Father Joe's endurance in an excerpt from a letter written one week prior to the previous one. That segment reads:

*Left by bike from Loting at 10:05 in the morning over the bus road. The country is rather wild, mountainous, and very poor. Climbed at least two good mountains. Had to get off the bike five times on account of the mountains and this entailed thirty-five minutes of walking. Some of the wooden bridges had been washed out. Rode for thirty-seven miles and stopped at the first town for a drink of Chinese wine and chewed on a stick of sugar cane — couldn't buy gruel because it wasn't market day. Nothing like a little wine and sugar to brace a person up. Sugar cane is excellent when you are thirsty. Rode twelve more miles and stopped for a bowl of rice gruel. The two stops took twenty-five minutes. Arrived home at 4:35. The entire trip of fifty-four miles took 6 1/2*

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*hours. Actual riding time 5 1/2 hours, because I had to walk 35 minutes and 25 minutes for lunch.*

Although the “Iron Man” was certainly well known for his pedestrian and cycling agility, it was the reason behind all his traveling that endeared him to the Chinese people. It was his corporal and spiritual works of charity, and his courageous determination in providing succor to so many that gave him such “good face.” The Sancier Islanders, for example, who benefited much from the Maryknoller’s good works during the Japanese occupation, said that Father Joe was “braver than a pirate” and, too, that “he had a heart — a heart as soft as a flower.” In a letter dated May 26, 1937, a year and a half before he would become pastor of Hoignan, he described his labors among the sick and diseased.

*On Monday morning, the catechist and writer went visiting the sick and needy in the villages. We took the bus to Waou Kok and then had to walk. Oh boy! Wasn't that sun extra hot even with the sun helmet, black glasses, and umbrella! The glare is bad over here and black glasses are a necessity.*

*Our first stop was Lau Chuk to see an old woman of sixty-odd summers, who has heart trouble, TB, and a few other complications. She wants to come to the Church, but the husband objects. Treated another woman of seventy winters for a cough and indigestion, and old age in general.*

*Next halt was at the home of a catechumen. He has two wives and one boy. Used to have money, but now he can't find enough to eat. First wife feeds herself.*

*After a twenty-minute walk, we greeted our leper friend at Tau Loai. Heard his confession. His days seem to be numbered, but hard to say with lepers. He is just a bunch*



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*of bones; can't get up but must be assisted, and no one will assist the poor chap. His hands are useless to him and now he can't even eat rice gruel — no one will feed him with a spoon. He is a pitiful sight. He asked me for some special wine and cookies.*

*Next we went across the way to see our other sick Christian — he has a hernia and a few other troubles. Heard his confession and gave him regular medicine.*

*Half hour walk to the next village. Treated another old lady of seventy-six. She is blind in one eye and the second isn't much good. She wants me to cure her eyes and old age. Gave her some medicine to keep her spirits high. Treated a few girls and children in the same place. When we got into the hills, two or three people came running after us for medicine for sores and skin diseases.*

*A short distance away, we stopped at a Christian's home. The wife was baptized two years ago on her deathbed and now enjoys good health. One of our catechists baptized the husband a few days previous. He has dropsy and a large sore on the leg. I fixed the leg up, then supplied the ceremony of baptism and heard his confession. He is much better now and maybe will live — so much improved I didn't anoint him.*

*The leper at Tau Loai died Tuesday night at five bells. No one to bury him. Sister Richard gave the aunt three dollars for funeral expenses. It's good the Lord called the leper to the next world.*

One of the seemingly insignificant factors that helped activate the transformation of this New England prankster into *Chinese Joe* was his accommodating nature. He seemed to have an easy time, compared to most other missionaries, assimilating himself into the Chinese culture. That included an inten-

## The Iron Man of China

sifying affinity for Chinese tobacco – and that was no easy accomplishment. In a letter dated November 22, 1937, *Chinese Joe* wrote about this to his mother. Shortly after that letter arrived, Father Robert Kennelly, the pastor at Loting, managed a visit to the Lavin home while on furlough in the United States. The family gave Father Kennelly two boxes of JA cigars, which he brought back to Loting for Father Joe. The following thank you, from a very grateful son, reads like a refreshing caricature sketch of a true aficionado who gave himself space to occasionally appreciate at least one of “the finer things” in life.

*Thanks very much for the two boxes of cigars - 7 - 20 - 4's and JA's. You gave one box to Father Kennelly for me and one for himself. He gave me also his own box because he is a cigarette smoker. Two boxes of cigars mean at least one hundred hours of paradise. U.S. cigars can't be beaten — even the best Manila cigars have a funny taste. I smoke the pipe most of the time and use Chinese tobacco. Cigars of U.S. tobacco are too dear if I have to buy them myself. All the cigars I smoke are gifts. Of course, I buy a few cigars when in Hong Kong for the holidays.*

*Chinese tobacco is tough stuff to get used to. The first month on this foreign weed is by no means a sweet memory — but, after the monthly test, you don't mind Chinese tobacco. A fellow over here can get used to anything if the will power hangs in there. . . .*

It was during the years at the Loting mission that Father Joe began to wear Chinese attire. Gradually he had become fully acclimated to Chinese life. This transformation can be clearly seen in the excuse he gave for not going to Bishop

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Paschang's consecration in Hong Kong. "I don't like Hong Kong and the city life," he told Father Kennelly, "it is too expensive and nothing to do or see there." Moreover, he had no winter clothes "of the western style." All of his clothes were of Chinese style. "I wear Chinese clothes all the time up country," he said, "they are cheaper and much more convenient. . . . Yeah! Joe is a hick, doesn't care for city life, and [he] isn't a social lion. . . . I feel right at home in a Chinese surrounding and with the Chinese. What more happiness can a foreigner ask?"

By the time that this letter had been written, Father Joe's time at Loting had just about run out. Both he and his pastor, Father Kennelly, did not know it at that time, but, in early January of 1938, Father Joe would be transferred to Hoignan to become pastor of that larger mission.



# From Loting to Hoignan: 1938 -1947

It was in February of 1938 that Father Joe moved from Loting to the Hoignan Catholic Mission in Kwangtung province, South China. Hoignan was a port city in the Toishaan district. The Chinese named Hoignan, "Ocean Banquet," because of the plentiful and delicious seafood that could be obtained there. In worldly parlance *Chinese Joe* had been promoted. He was now a pastor responsible for what he described as "the toughest mission in the Kongmoon Vicariate."

In a letter to his mother dated February 6, 1938, the Maryknoller tells about the scenic trip in moving from Loting, "at one end of the Vicariate," to Hoignan, "at the other end of the Vicariate." His detailed description of the city and its population, his initial meetings with Bishop Paschang and Father Bower ("two old Chinese hands"), and his reception by the people make a fascinating report. Too, one cannot read this letter without being impressed with Father Joe's humility in regard to his promotion to the rank of pastor. He attributes his advancement to the shortage of priests and refers to himself as one of "the poor tools" of which Bishop Paschang must make use.

*My new address: Catholic Mission  
Hoignan, Toishaan  
Kwangtung, China*

*My Dear Mother:*

*February 6, 1938*

*Well, at last, the writer is home again after being on the road for one solid week. I left Toishaan on Monday morning —*

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*Chinese New Year's Day and, according to the Western calendar, on January 31 — by bus and rode to Kwang Hoi in less than two hours. Two baggage carriers were hired for three bucks apiece for carrying the baggage for twenty-four miles. The weather was ideal for walking and the sun didn't prove too hot. The plains, mountains, trees, rivers, and the ocean provided plenty of scenery. We climbed over two mountains and at the top of the second one, the vast ocean was in view and the air was permeated with that salty smell. . . .*

*Covered the distance in six hours and a half. Bishop Paschang and Father Bower were in the chapel and in a few minutes greetings were exchanged. This is the first time I ever met Bishop Paschang. I felt right at home from the time of arrival.*

*On the following day, Bishop Paschang, Father Bower and I went out to a nearby village about four miles — and Bishop Paschang introduced me to the people there. We returned home at about three bells. . . .*

*The catechist and the writer left Friday afternoon for Taan On village and on the way stopped at Pak Kong Lei to see the Christians and after an hour's visit proceeded on to our destination. Hundreds of Christians gave the new priest a great welcome and firecrackers galore. This entire village is Catholic — about 800.*

*Chapel packed for night prayers. Confessions during prayer time. While hearing confessions, the native virgin informed me of a sick call. I went immediately and found the man rather weak. He had a case of dysentery and for a few months had been suffering. He was anointed after hearing his confession. Confessions after supper. Total number of confessions were eighty-four.*

## From Loting to Hoignan: 1938-1947

*Mass the next morning and fifty-three confessions. Brought Communion to the sick man, then breakfast and another sick call. This man has some serious stomach trouble. Returned to Hoignan for medicine and after dinner proceeded back to Taan On. Total number of confessions before and after supper were 54. Then went out to see the sick man and on the way back stopped in the store for an hour's chat with the crowd of men. The store keeper had been four years in Mexico.*

*Fifty-three received at the Sunday Mass and I even preached a sermon. The confessional for three days straight brought much consolation, because nine people had been away from the sacraments for ten years plus, made their peace with God, and once more were receiving the Bread of Life. . . .*

*I suppose you are all wondering if the writer likes his new appointment, etc. Yes, I like the new appointment as pastor of Hoignan and am very happy and pleased. Any place where my hat hangs is home to me. It doesn't matter where we preach the Word of God as long as we do our best and try to follow the Will of Jesus Christ.*

*Bishop Paschang hasn't enough priests to staff all the missions and that explains my sudden appointment as pastor here. The Bishop has to make use of his poor tools. Father Kennelly is now alone in Loting and won't have any spare time on his hands.*

*The writer has now a new home. There is plenty of work here for two priests and then some. Here is a bird's-eye view of the Hoignan Mission: — Christians 1500 and the majority of them are lax and indifferent; four churches and three chapels and many villages; three schools and a prayer school; six men teachers and one lady; five men catechists and one lady catechist and our Sisters (native virgins); enrollment of Hoignan lower elementary school is 218 — Taan On school*

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*has about 80 — and Shek Lau Haang has around 20. Boys and girls in the school and the majority are pagans. Hoignan prayer school has about one hundred boys and girls; one orphanage here with 21 orphans; one creche, which receives about 300 abandoned babies yearly, and fifteen wet nurses are employed.*

*Well, Ma, I have a feeling that Hoignan will be my present and future work — an unconscious feeling detected by the “sixth sense.” There is a lifetime job here and the writer is willing to tackle it and give his best.*

*In the Kongmoon Vicariate Hoignan is considered about the toughest mission for many reasons. The Christians have a tendency to be very lax and indifferent and this means years of labor to try to bring them back and at the same time make new converts. The Christians in this section are extremely poor and have to work hard for their daily food. We can't expect too much from these people; and the only way to bring them back is through charity, kindness, patience, and most important, prayer.*

*Some have said that the Hoignan language is another drawback. From my point of view, the local dialect doesn't differ very much. Of course, there are very many differences, but in three or four months the differences will vanish with study and constant talking with the people. I must confess that I don't have much trouble with the language. A good number of the people can understand good Cantonese, and the local dialect resembles Cantonese. In the past few months, I have talked with many people, visited two villages, and found very little difficulty. What I don't understand the “sixth sense” supplies. . . .*



## From Loting to Hoignan: 1938-1947

*Please say a prayer for your wandering boy that God will give him the necessary grace, kindness, prudence, strength etc. to carry on God's work in the new field of labor. Love to all. I am well, happy, and no gray hairs or worries. . . .*

*Your loving son,  
Chinese Joe*

### Hoignan: "The Toughest Mission" of the Kongmoon Vicariate

"In the Kongmoon Vicariate, Hoignan is considered the toughest mission," wrote Father Joe. The Catholics in Hoignan were lax and the pagans were stubborn. In general, the people were extremely poor; food was difficult to obtain; hunger and sickness were commonplace; the legal system had the reputation of being unjust, favoring the strong over the weak; and gambling, opium use, and robbery were rampant.

Robbery was particularly problematic in the Hoignan district. In fact, it was so pandemic and the robbers themselves were so intimidating, that they nearly destroyed whole villages. Just how bad this problem had become was explained in Father Joe's December 11, 1938, letter to his mother. While Father Joe was a priest whose main purpose in China was spiritual, his concern for the temporal welfare of his people, and his willingness to get involved in helping to free them from this "scourge", as he called it, is clearly evident in this very paternal communique.

*During the afternoon a robbery took place in one of the Christian homes. The house is built of brick and [it is] one of the best in the village. The husband is at present working in the Indies and sends considerable money back to the wife. She*

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*and one of the ladies were working in the fields. The other lady went out for a short time to gather potato leaves for the family while the six-year-old daughter sat at the rear door as a guard. The girl saw the robber enter with his gun and knife and the robber closed the main door after him. The little girl ran immediately to the next door and told the lady that the robber had entered the house. The good pious lady came to the main door and found it locked. She listened a little while and concluded that the girl was day-dreaming and went back home. The little girl recognized the man who entered. He forced open the door that led up stairs, took a board out of the staircase and crawled through and entered the side room. He broke open the strong box and took one hundred dollars, then came out to the main room, entered the side room and went upstairs and took the money that was in the clothes. If the little girl hadn't made so much noise, he probably would have lifted all the good clothes, and the two guns that are worth three hundred dollars apiece. He broke the door upstairs and escaped over the roof. The two women returned and found the money gone. No doubt some people saw and knew the robber, but they are afraid to speak out because he will probably kill the squealer later. He is a Taan On young man and a dangerous and notorious robber. He has the poor people scared "pink" or in other words "buffaloed."*

*Taan On has two dangerous and notorious robbers and, of course, they are only nominal Christians (they were baptized years ago and have failed to practice their religion for years). They are both also inveterate opium smokers and gamblers, and this vice is hard to deal with. The only work they do is to rob the people. Of course, these two good-for-nothings started out in robbing small things and gradually [came] to bigger prey. The entire village is afraid of these*

## From Loting to Hoignan: 1938-1947

*strong notorious men and can't make up their mind to put them behind bars. These two men have been working together like a kid - glove and, about three months ago, had a fight and they threatened to kill one another, so the weaker of the two beat it for another place and is afraid to come back. The weaker of the two was accused by the police about four months ago by the school teacher (he is from Yeung Kong City) because he robbed his clothes and took twenty dollars. Of course, I gave the school teacher permission to accuse the robber. The police went after him three times and failed to catch the culprit. During the past few months, he returned home for a few hours one night after dark and beat it before dawn. He has a police warrant hanging over his head and he knows that the people are out to catch him.*

*Since his departure, the second one has become bolder and [has been] going in for bigger game. Within the last month, he has robbed two houses at Taan On in the day time and got away on the first occasion with about five hundred dollars in money, jewelry, and clothes; and, on the second occasion, one hundred dollars in money. The people know and saw him commit these robberies and are afraid to speak out, and the elders in the village are "scared cats."*

*Why should the priest take an interest in this mundane robbery episode? For countless reasons — to free the people from this scourge and have the law punish the culprits. The robbers are lowering the morale in the village and, before long, others will try their hand at the game. The people are afraid to leave their homes even in the daytime to work in the fields or go to morning and night prayers and even to attend Mass on Sunday. If they leave their houses unguarded, the robbers will steal the pigs, hens, ducks, clothes, rice,*

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*and anything else for a few dimes in order to buy opium for a smoke. Why are the people afraid to tell the police? Because the robbers might be caught and put in jail for a few months and, then, they will return and maybe kill the accusers. A mighty good reason to be scared. The robbers are afraid of the priest and give him a wide berth.*

*At nine o'clock on Wednesday night, I called the head of the village in for a conference. He told me what he knew of the robbery and said the woman in question is afraid to call the police. We went to the house and investigated the robbery and the lady finally got up enough courage to go to the village head and to ask the police to arrest the robber. We went back to the priest house and called the eight night watchmen in. We talked about the pros and cons of the case and finally at 11:30 I told them to go to the next village where the robber was smoking opium and seize and bind the culprit and turn him over to the police. While the night watchmen were entering the village, the brother of the robber saw them and ran and informed him that they were coming. They searched for one hour without results. They went back and we went to bed at 1:30. We failed to catch the robber but, at last, the people are worked up to a pitch and won't stand for any more nonsense. No, I didn't go personally to help to seize the culprit. I sat in the back seat and did the directing.*

*Thursday, December 1 — Mass at Taan On with 52 Communion. Shortly after breakfast, the head of the village told me that the robber left for Kwong Hoi at three o'clock last night. I told him that the robber had to be accused just the same to the police and put behind the bars, with the added proviso that he and the other robber be thrown out*

## From Loting to Hoignan: 1938-1947

*of the village for good and never able to return. We agreed to let the case rest for a few days for consideration.*

In order to help the people with problems of this nature, Father Joe called for a civil meeting that he held at the church to address the three ills: robbery, gambling, and the use of opium. Four hundred people showed up. Both the Maryknoller and the head of the village spoke to the crowd.

In a letter dated January 23, 1939, he described another town meeting and a subsequent arrest.

*At seven thirty we held a meeting of all the village elders (33 in all) in the priest house. An open forum for all. Robbers, robberies, gamblers, and other business was taken up and decided upon. One of the men of the village is notorious for robbery and smoking opium and for the past five months has been out of the village because a warrant of arrest was on his head. He returned home a few days ago. During the meeting, the guards were told to go to his house and bring him in bound. He didn't resist. They roped him up very tightly and waited downstairs while further matters were discussed. The house was divided on this robber's fate. Some wanted to beat him, others hand him over to the police, and others to throw him out of the village. I interceded to give him a chance to reform. He was brought downstairs and the law was broadcast to him in these words: "We give you a chance to reform, and the first time that you steal or smoke opium, you and the family must get out of the village." He agreed and signed the paper. The meeting broke up. After all left, I rubbed his bruises with turpentine and gave him some sound advice and paternal instructions. He was lucky to get off alive and at least not to suffer a very severe beating and flogging and then be ushered off to court.*

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*Say a prayer that the man will reform. I think he will reform.  
After a good rubdown, I walked him home.*

It is evident that if Father Joe had not intervened on behalf of this man, his very life would have been in jeopardy. Nevertheless, being so “fatherly” was not always an easy task. Rather, there were many situations where his advocacy became complicated, time-consuming, and a drain on his energy. Fishing rights, property boundaries, loans, inheritances, marriage disputes and burial problems — everyone expected the priest to be the arbiter. Unfortunately, as Father Joe explained in one of his letters: “Chinese law was administered by the strong and, in most cases unjustly, and, consequently, the poorer people suffered immensely. But the Chinese law is becoming better and better daily and, in most cases, justice is administered. The officials are a better-educated class of people than formerly.” Being an advocate for justice was more often than not “quite a game”.

Besides involving himself in the civil affairs of the community, Father Joe had the responsibility of running the school and the orphanage. Working with the orphans was a labor most dear to him. But, like all of the other responsibilities that he willingly took on, this, too, could be emotionally draining. In a lengthy letter to his mother, dated August 15, 1938, Father Joe described one story in great detail that demonstrates some of the taxing difficulties that went into caring for the unwanted or abandoned children.

*The two enclosed pictures tell a unique story. I have numbered them 1 and 2: 1 for after the first week of arrival and, then 2, after three or four months of care and good eats. The one in white was to be baptized as Mary and one in black was to be baptized as Martha.*

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*Mary arrived at Loting Orphanage in January of 1937 in a dying condition and while I was over at Wan Tau. We usually don't receive big girls unless they are near the door of death and, even then, the parents or guardians must sign a contract handing the girl over to the orphanage. Previous to her arrival at the orphanage, Mary had been in the Loting Government Hospital and the doctors gave her case up as hopeless and only [to be] a short time in this valley of woe. Her uncle, or in other words her guardian, brought her to the orphanage. He is a hump-backed person and about fifty years old. Mary's parents died when she was a mere tot and her uncle took care of her. When Mary was five years old, she was sold by the uncle to a family in the village of Great Peace, about seventeen miles outside of Loting, and sold as a bride-to-be.*

*In the course of time Mary had an accident when she fell from the house loft and injured her stomach. Nature took time to mend the injury. Then, the poor girl experienced years of sickness and, finally, this adopted bride was returned to her uncle in a critical condition. He had to hire a sedan chair to bring her home. She was received in the Loting Government Hospital and, after a few weeks of treatment, the two doctors and nurses sent her back home in an incurable state with a short time to live. Her uncle's financial position was unable to take care of the sick girl, so she was carried in a basket to the orphanage and received because Sister Richard figured that her days were numbered. The uncle signed the contract and was glad to be released of the burden for many reasons. She was to be baptized that night.*

*Martha was sold as a slave girl into one of the village families and, to say the least, was treated roughly and suffered*

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*many a severe beating. She was only about eight years old when the sale took place and for six years lived a miserable life of toil, hardship, undernourished, and treated like an animal. Martha arrived the day after Mary by the express basket. The adopted parents signed the contract over to the orphanage. Martha was to receive the waters of regeneration on the same day.*

*Sister Richard fully realized that the two girls needed extreme care and expensive medicines. I arrived back from Wan Tau and found the two new orphans. Sister Richard took extremely good care of her two new charges and in a week they were able to walk around a little bit. How they could eat and eat. Mary could put away seven heaping large bowls of rice at a meal and still be hungry; and a large bucket of rice gruel was only an appetizer. Martha ate a little less than Mary. Mary would eat anything eatable — clean or dirty.*

*To the surprise of all, the two girls lived and began to put on weight. The second picture was taken after four months of motherly care, and [what] a big improvement. The two doctors and head nurse from the Loting Government Hospital came over on a friendly visit and toured the orphanage with Sister Richard. The three visitors couldn't believe their eyes when they saw Mary and Martha walking about. They went over and examined them minutely to make sure of no deceptions and were surprised beyond degree, [telling] Sister Richard about the time these two girls were at the hospital and discharged as hopeless cases and a few days to live. What man could not do, God did.*

*Mary is smart, quick to learn, witty, and a wise and capable girl. She was now in vigorous health and the orphanage*



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*schedule didn't suit her. Her appetite was still enormous. Sister Richard had to be extra strict to make Mary obedient. During the former life, she had been rather care-free, able to roam about, steal to eat, and on many occasions ran away and lived as a beggar. During Sister's absence, Mary ran away one morning, while the orphans were hearing Mass. Sister Francis informed me of the fact and I said [to] let her run away, and one of our problems was solved.*

*During breakfast time, the uncle came in and told me the girl ran away. He noticed that I wasn't surprised and then asked me if I didn't want the girl. I told him that the orphanage wasn't a prison and we didn't keep people against their will, but I assured him that the girl was still an orphan and didn't belong to him. I informed him that he could take back the girl if he paid for the medicine and board. He was willing at first to take her back, but when money came into the deal he wasn't so anxious. One of the women at the orphanage went down to the street and brought the runaway back.*

*A week or so later, Mary jumped the wall to freedom and was away for a few days and I didn't do anything about bringing her back. Two men were sent in by the uncle to talk the case over, but they were informed that they had no business in the matter and [to] tell the uncle to come tonight and see me. The uncle came in and I told him to go out and get the girl. Mary returned unwillingly. We talked and argued for over three hours and I offered Mary every possible chance to study, learn how to sew, etc. She flatly said that she didn't want to live at the orphanage. A foolish girl because the orphanage provided her with food and everything, and good possibilities. The uncle wanted her, but wasn't able to pay the*

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money. He is poor and unable to pay twenty dollars, cheap as dirt for medicines and food. The uncle wanted to leave her at the orphanage and the girl refused. The uncle told me to put chains on her so that she would be unable to run away. I told him that we were not in the prison business, but if the girl refused to stay, I would hand her over immediately to the police (only said this to scare her). I went outside and took the house boy and water carriers to get chains and be ready for the horseplay if necessary. I called the catechist in and told him to call the police to take the girl to jail. For a half hour she sat motionless and said nothing and appeared unmoved. The fake ceremony of rattling the chains outside and the approach of the house boy and water carriers on the porch didn't move her. My fake play proved useless, so I didn't have the two enter with the chains.

I finally convinced the uncle to take her home for the night and bring her back tomorrow and I would give her to a Christian family in Loking. Mary was willing to go to Loking.

The uncle and Mary returned the next day and the catechist took her to Loking to a Christian family. Glad to get the trouble off my hands. The Christian family liked Mary at first, but in a few days they found out she had a big appetite, lazy as a snail, tendency to steal, liked to roam about etc. and the family decided to return her to me. She stayed there two more weeks and I gave her to another Christian family and she lasted two more weeks. The Loking Sisters boarded her for seven days and found the girl impossible. Too late to reform or learn new tricks.

One night, I called the uncle over and said that the girl was returning here the next day because two families did

## From Loting to Hoignan: 1938-1947

*not want her. He didn't want her either because of her many failings. He himself wanted her back, but his wife and family wouldn't listen to his plea. He said nothing doing on the proposition and left. The trouble was still on my hands. Everyone knew that she was received as an orphan and we were responsible for her in every way. My only fear [was] that she would return, run away, and bring disgrace on the orphanage.*

*One of the ladies brought the girl here the next morning by bus and she still refused to stay at the orphanage. I called the uncle in again and told him that I was willing to return the girl to him without giving back money. He flatly refused the girl. After two hours of talking, I finally convinced him to take back the girl. She was in good health and [he] could sell her as a bride for a good sum somewhere. The agreement was settled and the girl in question came up from the orphanage. She was glad to see the uncle. I gave him back the contract paper and thereby relinquished any claim on the girl. They went out the front door and [that was] the end of that trouble.*

*The practice of the Church is to baptize infants or children up to seven. When the child reaches the age of reason, he must study the doctrine first, and later be baptized. This is under ordinary conditions. In danger of death, anyone can be baptized and those who have reached the age of reason must desire baptism, etc.*

*When big girls are received at the orphanage, they are nursed back to health, if possible, study the doctrine, and then [are] baptized. If a girl is in her last agony, baptism is administered. Father Lavin didn't baptize Mary or Martha because they were not at the point of death. If*

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*Mary was baptized, I would not have been able to give her back to her uncle and the orphanage would still have a problem on its hands. We did all we could for Mary and gave her every opportunity. She refused to stay at the orphanage and the latter course had to be adopted. I haven't heard or seen anything of Mary since she and her uncle went out the front door.*

*Mary goes out the door and Martha comes on the scene. Her return to health was much slower, but her appetite is big as ever. She is dumb as an ox and rather satisfied with orphanage life and no danger of running away . . . because she knows that this is a good home. She works and plays and is dumb to study and even today I don't think that she is able to make the sign of the cross correctly. Sisters, catechists, and orphans have tried in vain. She does not want to be baptized and, for that reason, the orphans call her the "little devil." At present, she is one of the active orphans and not baptized.*

*Hope these few lines find you and Pa enjoying better health. The Lord is good to those who suffer. Suffering in most cases is a blessing and a grace from God. Patience and much patience is necessary in long sickness and what a great reward is awaiting one in heaven who suffers patiently and willingly, and even joyfully, because it is the Will of God.*

Even though Father Joe and the sisters had tried so hard to help these two orphans, Mary's and Martha's cases were not happily resolved. Nevertheless, as this patient missionary often said in the face of such disappointment, "Such is life." Or, again, as he writes in the last paragraph, "patience and much patience is necessary . . ." and we must accept our suffering in the proper spirit, "because it is the Will of God".

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### Fulfilling Maryknoll's Missionary Purpose in China

Much has changed in terms of the essential purpose for Catholic missionary activity since Father Joseph Lavin finished his service as a Maryknoll priest in China. Whereas, in the past, the conversion of souls to the one true faith, and from sinful practices, had always been the primary reason for any man leaving home to labor for Christ in a non-Christian or foreign land, this has not been the number-one priority for the last forty years or so. In Father Joe's day Catholic missionaries tried to emulate their exemplar, Jesus Christ. Knowing what was in man, the Son of God spent three years going about Palestine preaching and working wonders, but not without upsetting the anesthetized consciences of His people. In the past, a Catholic missionary was sent out to expand the kingdom of God on earth, so as to expand it in heaven. Heretics, schismatics, Moslems, pagans and Jews were pitied by the true man of God, and his heart was restless to bring them to the Catholic faith. This was the mandate delivered to the Church by our Lord Himself, and, for nearly two thousand years, the Catholic Church had never swerved from that position. That perennial platform was most eloquently reiterated by the great Abbott Dom Prosper Gueranger in his monumental work, *The Liturgical Year*, written just a century and a half ago. Gueranger:

*And as the worst of poverties is the ignorance of divine truths, because it would make a man poor and miserable for eternity, therefore have there risen up in every age zealous apostles, who bidding farewell to home, and fatherland, have carried the light of the Gospel to them that sat in the darkness and the shadow of death. They heeded not the fatigues or the perils of such a mission; what cared they for all these things,*

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*if they could but make Jesus known and honoured and loved  
by one poor savage or Hindu?*

Father Joseph Lavin did everything he could to help the Catholic Church establish "face" in China. In March of 1947, after fifteen years in the field, he was still delaying his departure to the United States. Why? Because he was engaged in an important relief work that he described as "a golden opportunity . . . to help the Church and make the name of Christ better known to the millions of pagans."

While Father Joe wrote much about his administrative activities and pastoral challenges in China, many of his letters centered around his duties as a Catholic priest. Conversions and sacramental administration were so imperative to Maryknollers that they were required to keep accurate records on the dispensation of each sacrament, as well as the circumstances surrounding the conferring of the same. An example of one of scores of such accounts, along with a description of the hardships that the people faced, was written by Father Joe and published in Maryknoll's Mission Letters (Volume 11, 1944). That particular relation reads:

*During the past month, starvation has been very acute, and this month will be worse. The war is the cause to some extent, but the primary cause was the failure of last year's crop of rice and the failure of this year's crop of sweet potatoes. In peaceful times, the failure of a crop of rice can be taken care of by importing rice from Singapore, from other countries in the world, or from other parts of China. But, at present, the outside world is practically cut off from China as a source of supplies.*

## From Loting to Hoignan: 1938-1947

*Planting time has been delayed because of the lack of rain. Some people, close to the mountains and rivers, were able to plant at the ordinary time, but most of the farmers had to wait for rain. This delay, of course, means a poorer crop of rice. For the past ten days, there has been plenty of rain, and most of the fields have been planted. In some sections of this region, the farmers had to abandon the planting of the fields because the rain came too late and because the rice seedlings were too old to be transplanted.*

*The Chinese - American Relief Committee in Toishaan and other places is doing splendid work. They feed eight hundred daily in the city and have seven other soup kitchens in different places.*

*Hoignan had a fair year in the line of converts. We baptized 59 catechumens (49 from the new village, and 10 others). The new village Look Chuk Ch'ong has been studying for the Faith two years. The orphanage has 40 girls and 30 boys. The lower primary school was conducted as usual. Throughout the whole mission, 100 dying persons received the Sacrament of Extreme Unction, but total deaths for the year amounted to 335. Annual confessions were 408; annual Communion, 392; additional confessions, 3,436; additional Communion, 9,863. Fifteen persons received the Sacrament of Confirmation in danger of death. Three Catholic marriages were performed. Many refugees were aided, and dispensary work took up a great deal of time.*

*During the past year, the people have very little time to devote to religious exercises, because they worked from the crack of dawn until sundown, in an effort to find enough to eat. Everyday it is the same old story. The farmers are busy;*

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*people carry goods for days at a time; some go to the mountains for grass and firewood, while others have to stay at home to watch the house to keep burglars and petty thieves away. May the Lord bless China with a bumper crop of rice in the fall!*

—Father Joseph P. Lavin,  
of Framingham, Massachusetts,  
now in Hoignan, China

This particular published relation appeared in the year 1944. However, long before that happened, Father Joe was sending statistical accounts on the number of converts, and so forth, directly to the Lavin family. It was a tremendous consolation for them to know that their son was so diligent in caring for, dressing, and protecting the Good Lord's vineyard. That his tenure as the Master's steward was so fruitful gave them a holy pride.

Backtracking some years, there was a very significant letter written by *Chinese Joe* on October 30, 1938. World War was once again threatening to explode in Europe, and the Japanese had invaded China. Pearl Harbor was only three years away. In this letter, written to his mother, Father Joe emphasized that the acknowledgement of the Kingship of Jesus Christ was essential for the establishment of world peace. It was the glory of this royal feastday that made his heart soar as he penned the following:

*Today is the feast of Christ the King. This festival was instituted and first celebrated by the Holy Father at St. Peter's cathedral in Rome, in 1925, and the Universal Church celebrated the same the following year. It always occurs on the last Sunday of October. On this day throughout the entire universe*



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*in all Catholic Churches, the consecration of the whole human race to the Sacred Heart and the litany of the Sacred Heart are recited before the Blessed Sacrament exposed.*

*Jesus Christ is King of heaven and earth and all nations should acknowledge this sublime title and give the required honor and respect. Holy Scripture gives us Christ's own words before the judgment seat of the Roman governor, "I am a King." The Old Testament and New, and the prophets, and the Church for close to twenty centuries, has honored Christ as their King. Make Him King of all your actions and let Him set up His Kingdom in your pure heart.*

*Ever since the World War [the First], Europe and the world have been in turmoil and chaos. Why? Because many nations have refused to acknowledge Christ as their King and Supreme Ruler. Even Catholic countries have put Jesus Christ in the background and on the shelf. Result! The world is at war and nation upon nation is trying to conquer land and people. Facts —Europe is in turmoil today and on the verge of another terrible war; Russia says that there is no God and has cast Jesus Christ aside; Germany is carrying on an unrelenting and unsuccessful struggle against the Catholic Church; Spain has been in the grips of a devastating civil war within its own borders for the past two years because the Communists are trying to overthrow the Kingdom of Jesus Christ; Mexico, for a number of years, has been trying to chase Jesus Christ and His Church out of the country; Japan refuses to acknowledge the Prince of Peace and, therefore, is at war with China.*

*Solution? Can this chaotic universe be arranged with some semblance of peace and order? The answer is yes! How? By having all nations, or at least the most powerful ones,*

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*acknowledge Jesus as their King and Prince of Peace — acknowledgement not only by word of mouth, but this recognition should come directly from the heart and made a daily practice. Jesus Christ, the Prince of Peace, is the only solution for a peaceful world and less warlike nations.*

*How can we few Catholics help in solving this perplexing question? Everyone should pray daily for peace of the world and storm the Sacred Heart of the Prince of Peace with prayers [and] works, offer[ing] everything for the exchange of war into peace.*

That the Maryknollers were of the utmost earnest in winning Christian converts from among the pagan Chinese was manifested by their policy concerning baptized orphans. Once an orphan was baptized, the youngster could not be returned to the parents or relatives unless they also became Catholics. "A pagan from one of the villages wanted his baby daughter back," Father Joe once wrote to his mother, "Impossible to grant him his wish because the baby girl was baptized last night. Hated to refuse, but rules are rules." In another letter home, dated February 2, 1941, Father Joe described a second case in which he was faced with the same dilemma. An excerpt from that communication gives the details:

*Experienced another sad case today. Grandpa and Grandma came to the orphanage to claim the baby girl of their son. These people are well-to-do and have a store and some money, and this old couple are very good. A few days after the birth of the baby girl, the father and mother didn't want to raise her, and gave the waif to the orphanage. The father's parents found out a few days later and [they] came to the orphanage to ask for the baby. I had baptized the girl the previous evening and the rule*

## From Loting to Hoignan: 1938-1947

*doesn't permit us to give back babies to parents, or relatives, who are pagans, because the baby is baptized. Of course, the Sister at the orphanage refused the request. The Grandpa and the mayor of the town came to me with the same request and the mayor who is a good-for-nothing Catholic promised to guarantee the girl. In this case a guarantee could not hold because of the pagan party. It was a difficult case, and in order not to make both parties lose face, I told them that I had no authority in the case, but would write to the Bishop. In this way, everyone was satisfied. The Sisters were unable to hire a wet nurse so the man found us one. We hired her for eight dollars a month and the grandfather also gave eight dollars a month to the woman for special care. No doubt, the poor waif will wing her way to eternal glory before long.*

The resolution of the preceding conflict involved the saving of "face" for the Church, the grandparents, and the mayor of the town. Father Joe followed Maryknoll's Catholic policy, even though he recognized that the grandparents were, as he said, "very good". Because the grandparents were pagans, the Church feared that the child's soul would be endangered if they obtained custody of her. The issue, during these times, was not whether the parents, grandparents, or relatives were naturally good people. Rather, the salvation of the child's soul, and whether or not she would receive the sacraments needed to achieve this goal, was the crux of the problem. The infant girl, because she was given up by her parents and baptized, was considered to be a child of the Church. Her spiritual welfare was the most important priority.

Needless to say, in Father Lavin's day, and in the centuries before then, the saving of souls was serious business. Only the truth had rights; and error, although tolerated, was deemed

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destructive by the very nature of its unreality. So, while the baptismal policy posed problems in a pagan country like China, Maryknoll priests and sisters still enforced it. Was this easy? Or was it enforced in a careless and arbitrary manner? The answer is NO! The Maryknollers empathized with those Chinese who, naturally, loved their offspring. As Father Joe stated: this was "another sad case", and, in the situation with the pagan father, he "hated to refuse". Not that the policy was unjust, for it was not; but the policy was a challenge to nature, and that is what made it "a hard saying." It was a policy that gave supernature its divine right over even the most natural of affiliations.

The holy sacrament of baptism was the gateway to the Catholic Church and, as our Savior Himself insisted, it was necessary to the salvation of one's soul (John 3:5). Maryknollers went to China, as the 1932 Departure Hymn stated: "to save the heathen" and "to destroy the throne of Satan." The seriousness with which Father Joe dispensed the sacrament of baptism and his active role in destroying "the throne of Satan" in China can be seen from so many of his letters. Here is an excerpt from one that is most pertinent. It was written August 28, 1938, to his mother.

*Left for Lun Teng on a sick call. A young man, Mr. Chin Shin Yau, thirty years of age, was dying of a contagious disease. He was a big powerful fat man, and a hard worker, until six months ago he contracted the disease and within that time he spent all of his money on doctors without success, and he withered away to bones. The correct doctor, and medicine four or five months previous, would have cured him.*

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*He wanted to come into the Church before, but his old grandmother is extremely superstitious and would not consent to his plea. He talked doctrine with the catechist and had studied, so he knew some doctrine. He said he wanted to be baptized and saved. I asked a few questions. The poor chap had a strong, childlike, and confident faith. Superstitious tables, pots, joss sticks, etc. were lavished all over the home. . . . I asked him if he was willing to renounce the devil, all superstitions, and allow me to break up the superstitious things, and the answer came immediately "yes," and not only that, but the superstitious grandmother, his wife, and two boys wanted to become Christians. One of the sons is studying the doctrine. He sat up against his bed with his back resting against the wall and watched the catechist and myself rip off the tablets and all the ornaments of the devil and the writer had the pleasure to smash the tablets into small pieces of wood, smashed the pots, vases, and tore off the superstitious paper etc.*

*After we got through the inside and outside of the house, he and the wife asked me to rip down and destroy the superstitious things in their second house, which is used as a storage room. It took one hour to smash up these things and, oh boy! wasn't it hot — but, on second thought, Mr. Devil must have had one hell of a hot time when the wave of destruction rooted out his folly and planted the Cross of Christ in the family. The sick man watched us with a smile of contentment.*

*After this little act of pleasure and giving the devil a good stiff beating, the sick man was baptized Joseph, after St. Joseph. His breathing was very heavy and he could only talk a little. After baptism, he received extreme unction. Our next act was to hang up on the wall a good size picture of*

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*St. Joseph and this pleased the newly baptized and family very much. Christ and St. Joseph replaced the superstitious tablets. I told the poor chap that he only had a few days to live at the most and when the death angel summoned him to the throne of God, eternal peace and happiness would be his lot. Taught him how to bless himself and say a few ejaculations. This is the first time in China that I removed and smashed up superstitious things.*

The first time, but not the last! For example, according to a February 26, 1939, letter he did the same thing again, or, to put it more accurately, he had his converts do it:

*At ten o'clock in the morning, I went to Sha Tau and blessed two pagan houses. The woman had been begging me for the past month to gather up the superstitious tablets, pots etc., and bless her house and her aunt's house. They want to come into the Church. After some investigation, I found out that the ladies were sincere and told them to take down the superstitions themselves. They did as advised and took them down. It was a good test of their sincerity in disbelieving the devil. They feared the devil, and begged me to bless the house with holy water and thus they would have no fears. So just two days before the Chinese New Year, the ladies called and the catechist and I went over and blessed the two houses. All the superstitious things were broken into bits by me at both places and a picture of the Sacred Heart had a prominent place in the main room, instead of the usual inscriptions of red paper. The Christians use red paper [strips], but write Catholic inscriptions [on them] and paste them over the main doors, rooms etc. The catechist wrote the signs for these two families.*

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It was a serious matter. Expelling the devil from a Chinese household was no mere symbolic ceremony. This Maryknoller did not view the controversial tablets, pots, vases, joss sticks, and red paper as harmless cultural artifacts worthy of preservation and quasi-veneration. On the contrary, they were considered as superstitious works of the devil, and so, the good priest, quite unceremoniously, destroyed them. Moreover, these former pagan homes were, quite ceremoniously, blessed with holy water and, then, re-adorned with pictures of the Sacred Heart, Our Lady and Saint Joseph, to make sure that the demons of hell never returned there.

### An Everyday Iron Man in China

It was not easy for Father Joe to live up to his *Iron Man* status. Nor does the conferral of such a title follow upon one heroic act performed at one climactic moment. In the next chapter, the reader will become acquainted with a seventy-year-old Protestant lady who came to Father Joe for help. He described her as being, "as lively as a youngster," and noted that she "works hard in the fields daily." Would the Chinese expect less from an ambassador of the Most High God? You see, endurance is proof of real strength in a man or a woman. An *Iron Man* is more than a man who performs the mundane tasks of everyday living in an extraordinary way, he is one that does this consistently and cheerfully, day in and day out.

It is the little crosses, unnoticed by others, that are often the hardest to bear with patience, good humor, and dignity. For Father Joe, one such little cross was his bicycle tires constantly going flat. Did he complain? After all, he did not come to China to be a bicycle repairman. No! He figured out how to fix the tire and he fixed it. And he fixed it again and again.

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Father Joe depended on that bicycle. Souls depended on that bicycle. So, he nursed that two-wheeler like a sick parishioner when it needed attention, and, then, when it got him from one village to another, he caressed it like a faithful hound.

Yes, it is doing the ordinary, mundane tasks in an extraordinary way that draws the attention of others. And, if you are able to do all the rugged things that the Chinese do, and do them consistently and with excellence, then one's labors become particularly noticeable. To be sure, it was after asking Father Lavin to take him as quickly as possible over the Kwangtung mountains that *Life* reporter, Theodore White, dubbed his guide the *Iron Man*. The priest had set the pace. After walking forty miles, the exhausted journalist had to be lifted into bed.

Walking and bicycling long distances were standard fare for Father Lavin. Every few days, he peddled over the high mountains of Toishaan and back again to Hoignan. That was a sixty-mile trip. And, usually, the priest carried fifty pounds of supplies with him! Thirty-and forty-mile treks were somewhat routine for Father Joe. He would often walk these distances to visit other missionaries and then stay up half the night chatting away. Speaking of bicycle tires. Why not tell mom?

*Monday, November 7 — Mass here with fourteen Holy Communions. Two baggage carriers with two loads of Father Bauer's books left at six o'clock for Puak Sha. . . . The back tire [of the bike], that is the inner tube, has been rather troublesome for the past two weeks. Last Thursday, the house boy and I took the tire out and patched it in ten places. Did a good job, and at supper the tire was flat as a pancake. The tire is almost two years old and the hot weather over here plays havoc with rubber, and especially bike tires. No place in town*



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*to buy a new inner tube or have the bike fixed. Yesterday, when I got back from Taan On, I decided to take another look at the bum tire, but something came up and it was eleven o'clock in the evening before the tire got attention. Took the inner tube out, examined it, and put on another patch. Pumped it up, and in a few minutes it was flat as a thin dime. Just about to pull out a few hairs and say a few words under my breath when the basin of water revealed no leaks in the tube. I examined the inner rim of the outside tire and found two small pieces of bone which had gone through, and one piece of bone was puncturing the inner tube. The pliers removed the two pieces of bone, then another patch, pumped, and everything okay shortly after midnight. Much better to spend an hour or so fixing the bike and ride the fifty-six miles and save the shoe leather. Off to bed for a few winks.*

One gets the obvious impression that Father Joe is a very happy man, enjoying every minute of his adventures. There are no complaints to spoil the lightheartedness of the entire account. "Wading through water and sand," he seems to be a man exempt from gravity – such is the stuff of saints who like their tobacco.

The life of the *Iron Man* in China could not have been more full. In a July 9, 1939, letter to his mother, Father Joe described a trip to some former Christian villages in the mountains. They were so remote that they could only be reached on foot. In one day, he covered thirty-five miles, visiting one poor hamlet, ravaged by bandits, that had not seen a priest for thirty years!

*We left with one of the Christians for Paak Shik. After seven miles of hot walking we arrived. We sat under a big tree to cool off while the Christians called the men out. It was*

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*too hot in the houses. We all enjoyed tea and an hour's talk. Paak Shik formerly was a fairly good size village and had many Christians. The bandits ruled this country and the village of Paak Shik was totally burned to the ground and many people killed and some fled away. The church was totally destroyed by fire and today only a few feet of the wall remains. The affair happened over thirty years ago and these people haven't seen a priest for thirty years or so. The banditry in this section was wiped out about twelve years ago. The village of Paak Shik is being rebuilt. It now has 17 houses made of mud brick and covered with a straw roof. A few Christians are still there. I promised to return and stay overnight on the next trip.*

*Then we moved on to Yan Tung about three miles away. The village of Yan Tung formerly had three Christians. We were not permitted to enter the village because some superstitious rite was being performed. No one except the villagers themselves can enter the village while this rite is being performed. It was raining a little so we sat under our umbrellas until the villagers came out. Introductions were in order. I asked about the Christians and a man said that the three lone Christians had died. Thirty years since a priest had been out this way. We talked for 1/2 hour and moved on and were lucky to reach a pagan temple when a downpour came. After the shower we moved on, stopped at a country school (which consists of six boys), had tea, and chat, and then moved on to look over two ore mines. The country is loaded with ore, some gold and other minerals. The people are very poor and tillers of the soil. Through the whole district, I saw only one brick house with a tile roof (this belonged to the Christian and, incidentally, he is the mandarin of the district — he is known as the king). . . .*

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*Ten more miles brought us to Sha Laan. The whole country of Taa Lung Tung is mountainous and [there are] some high ones. We followed the only path out to Sha Laan, crossed the bus road rice paddies, and came to the village of Shaan Tsui. I had passed this place several times on the way to Toishaan but didn't know it was Shaan Tsui. My cook had told me that it had been over ten years since a priest visited this place, and two years ago a boy came in asking for a priest to see his dying mother. Unfortunately, the priest wasn't home at that time. We came to the front gate, entered, and sat down — it was 6:30 in the evening. Gradually a few men and boys gathered around and wanted to know what the foreigner wanted. I told them that I was a priest. No one invited me into the house. Some one brought out tea and benches. I finally inquired about the Christians and with the baptismal book found out who were deceased and who were living. They invited me to stay overnight, but I pleaded no time. Shaan Tsui formerly had a three-story church. It was now in ruins — burned by the bandits years ago — [it] now has no roof, part of the third floor having fallen in, and two large cracks in the walls. I looked the chapel over, had some tea, and about seven left for home. Twelve miles had to be covered but, luck, half of the distance was a public highway. We stopped on the way for tea and cookies and arrived home at ten o'clock. We walked between 30 and 35 miles on this day and covered plenty of territory.*

These abandoned villages were within Father Joe's domain. Therefore, he made it his business to try to find the Christians who still resided there, and to minister to their needs. In this same letter, he described visiting Noam Tau,

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a village that had not seen a priest for eleven years. Father Joe was not received very well there at all. Despite this fact, Father Joe did not give up on the village. He decided that, with patience and persistence, he might later be able to assist the people there in returning to "the worship of the True God." In a July 17, 1939, letter to his mother, the Maryknoller described a follow up visit to Noam Tau. Here is a brief excerpt:

*The catechist and I left for the village of Noam Tau at one o'clock. Sisters Hok and Leiung from Taan On had already arrived there. A few of the families are interested in returning to the fold of Christ and [they are] glad that the priest came, while others are indifferent, and a few [are] hostile. Eleven years since a priest visited this village and practically all have apostatized. An old lady of 68, formerly zealous and who refused to apostatize, was sick. She had been in bed for five days and had been unable to get up. I gave her some quinine and aspirin and a few extra doses. She insisted on going to confession and to confession she went. She knew her doctrine and prayers very well. She made me think of an old Irish mother or grandmother. Her grandson, who was born in Peru, had just come back from Hong Kong, where he goes to school.*

*Some of the women, even after eleven years without a priest, knew the doctrine and prayers very well and understand fully about Confession and Holy Communion, a miracle to say the least. Some of the families still have the holy pictures and crucifixes hanging on the walls of their homes. The second visit was more pleasant than the first one.*

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Father Mark Tennien, a Maryknoll priest who was in China with Father Joe, wrote an article about him years later in the August 1953, edition of the *Catholic Digest*. Even after the Communists had expelled his co-laborer, Father Tennien described him as a man “with the iron still in his soul” and “with fun in his laughter.” He even described his habit of chewing on his pipe and blowing forth clouds of smoke. He ended the piece by stating that Father Joe “relates every experience with a sprinkling of laughter. From his lips it seems like just another frolicking episode (i.e., his encounter with the Communists) in the adventurous path he walks so merrily. Anyway, he gets a lot of fun out of life.”

Although the twelve apostles, prior to Pentecost, were (contrary to a common assumption) literate men well versed in the scriptures, they were still undistinguished in worldly terms – be they fishermen (like most of the twelve), or tax collectors (like Matthew). They were not theologians, nor scribes of the Law, like Saul of Tarsus. They were certainly not orators. Nor did they exude very much in terms of leadership qualities, at least not of the charismatic type, as some of the false prophets did that immediately preceded our Lord’s advent.

Yet, right after the Holy Paraclete’s descent on Pentecost day, all of this changed. These men, who had been cowardly for a time, now feared no man; they were ready to, and they later did, become martyrs for the faith. Hardly eloquent before, the Holy Ghost transformed them into powerful preachers of the Word of God. And they also were given the gifts of healing and other wonderful charisms.

Pentecost was a particularly special feastday for Father Joe. “This feast should be dear to every Catholic,” he wrote home, “and yearly we should pledge our devotion to the Holy

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Ghost." These words were penned when the Japanese were at war with China and he was risking his life delivering rice to Sancian Island on the Sancian Rice Ferry. It was during these times that Father Joe slept with his working clothes on, "expecting the Japs, or bandits, or Reds to knock down the gate, and you would have to jump over the back wall to beat it away." (He admitted this in a letter to his parents dated December 31, 1945, after the war was over).

According to Father Joe, "We should pray to the Holy Ghost many times during the day. Before we begin any work or action, and the completion, we should invoke the Divine Spirit." *Chinese Joe* put this advice, which he gave to others, into practice. And it served him well. Here is an excerpt from a June 1, 1941, letter dealing with feast of Pentecost and the Sacred Heart:

*Today is the feast of Pentecost and, therefore, one of the four big feast days of the year in China. This feast really marks the birthday of the Church. When the apostles had received the gifts of the Holy Ghost, they became fearless men of God and preached the Gospel everywhere. Peter preached the Gospel and three thousand people were converted and baptized. On another occasion, Peter preached and five thousand were washed with the water of regeneration and became members of the Church.*

*This feast should be dear to every Catholic, and, yearly, we should renew and pledge our devotion and life to the Holy Ghost. The Third Person of the Blessed Trinity is always near us and directing our steps to the throne of God. We are temples of the Holy Ghost and, therefore, we should never mar our sacred souls and bodies with mortal sin. As long as we are free of mortal sin, the Holy Ghost dwells in our souls and*

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*rules all our actions. As soon as we commit one mortal sin, the Holy Ghost departs from our temple and the devil enters our soul and takes His place. Even when we are in mortal sin, the Holy Ghost stands at the entrance, and knocks and waits, until we go to confession and rid our soul of the dreadful foe, mortal sin and Lucifer. The Holy Ghost is Most Pure and, therefore, we must be free of mortal sin, if we want to entertain Our Divine Guest.*

*We should pray to the Holy Ghost many times during the day. Before we begin any work or any action, and the completion, we should invoke the Divine Spirit. A short prayer in any form will be acceptable to the Spirit of Love. Such as, "O Holy Ghost assist me: O Fire of Love inflame my heart."*

*For any Christian to reap the full benefits of this Pentecostal Feast, it is necessary to make a worthy confession, hear Mass, and receive Holy Communion. "Blessed are the clean of heart for they shall see God."*

*Today is the first of June, and this month is consecrated to the Sacred Heart of Jesus. All Catholics worthy of the name have a strong devotion to the Sacred Heart. If we are faithful in our devotion to Jesus, we have nothing to fear in this vale of tears, or hereafter.*

Father Joe's concluding sentence is worthy of reflection: "If we are faithful in our devotion to Jesus, we have nothing to fear in the vale of tears, or hereafter." Nothing was "complicated" in Father Joe's devotions; they were unhampered by any "new theology," or Chardinian fantasies. *Chinese Joe* could have cared less about what Father Karl Rahner was soon to write about "anonymous Christians." He wanted to make real Christians. And he wanted to make sure that, through his prayers and letters, everyone in his Catholic

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family back home: aunts, uncles, nieces and nephews, would all meet (as Saint Thomas More was wont to say), “merrily in heaven.”

Many Maryknollers were especially graced with the gift of counsel, the ability to provide direction, guidance, and even solace to those who were troubled, confused, and periodically overwhelmed by the problems of everyday living. The fact that the Chinese sought out and followed the counsel of a priest, particularly a foreign priest, says a lot about that man’s “face” in China. It is a mark of respect for the character of the man, which is not easily acquired from those who have been taught to believe that all westerners were “foreign devils” whose sole purpose for being in China was to “exploit” them.

That Father Joseph Lavin was imbued with the gift of counsel was well documented in many of the letters that he wrote to his family. On May 5, 1941, Father Joe wrote a letter to his mother describing how he served as a “middle man” in settling a dispute “over the rice fields between the village (Taan On) and one family.” Cases involving rice fields and the production of rice were obviously “a big deal” in China. This is the kind of affair that would tax the patience of anyone, let alone a priest. The *Iron Man* had to take care of it – and he did — to everyone’s satisfaction.

These are all matters involving money, “the root of all evil;” it is often the driving force behind much of mankind’s most despicable behavior. All of us are aware that unscrupulous “money changers” are quite shrewd and skilled in appealing to and manipulating the dark side of our human nature. In order to be able to deal successfully with them, therefore, a negotiator who is of good will must be equally adept and tenacious in



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bringing about a fair resolution to monetary problems. Father Joseph Lavin could have shrugged such matters, but that would not have helped him gain "face" with his flock. Moreover, he did have a gift for arbitrating, and the peacemaker in him would not allow him to refuse anyone help that he was able to give.

It was not only the civil problems of Catholics that the Maryknoller arbitrated. Any victim of injustice that came to him for help would at least get a hearing. But if he judged that the cause was beyond his field of influence or expertise, he would simply decline his services. No one was ever misled by Father Joe, or given false expectations. One of his letters home dealt with the legal problems of an old Chinese Protestant woman who stood to lose the produce from her rice fields.

*On the following morning, an old lady came to see me about her troubles. She is seventy-seven years old and as lively as a youngster. She works hard in the fields daily, good eye sight, doesn't smoke tobacco or drink wine. She has been a Protestant for over 40 years and a staunch one, and one who has faith in Jesus Christ. She thought the Catholic and Protestant Churches were the same, but I explained the differences. When she was a youngster her feet were bound. The Protestant minister told her to wear [sandals] or cloth shoes, which she does. She stayed over an hour and explained her religion and sang some hymns. She is a typical old grandma and true to the core. Her husband is in Portland, U.S., working. She has no sons.*

*What is her trouble? She is having a fight over her fields. She let her fields out to another man and she receives rice yearly in return. The man this year gave the rice to one of his relatives and gave her none. The head man in the vil-*

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*lage refused to help her and the Chinese Protestant minister is helpless. She has no money to fight the case in court. She finally came here and asked me to try to give her a helping hand. I promised to do my best and made her happy. Might be able to assist her.*

Obviously, this seventy-seven-year-old “staunch” Protestant woman was confident that this Catholic priest had the social clout to assist her in this problem, whereas the Protestant minister, even though he was Chinese, was helpless. While the resolution of this matter is not noted, the fact that the woman sought out Father Joe demonstrates just how respected he was in the community.

Here is a letter to his mother, describing Holy Week at the mission, 1940. The apparitions at Fatima were so hushed by the hierarchy at that time, one wonders if Father Joe even knew, twenty-three years after the event, the importance of the day in May that he chose to write home. “Russia will spread her errors throughout the world,” Our Lady told the three children in Portugal on May 13th, 1917. China, a nation well on its way to conversion in 1940, was about to be ravaged by those diabolical “errors.”

*May 13, 1940*

*My Dear Mother:*

*March 21 — Holy Thursday — Heard 48 confessions, Mass at Taan On with 10 confessions. After Mass, the procession took place to the repository and then followed the stripping of the altar, etc. The chapel was packed. Took care of the sick and spent a good part of the day trying to fix up a land sale between two Christians and failed. Night prayers followed by 46 confessions. Adoration took*

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*place all day and night. The Christians in groups watched during the day and up to ten o'clock at night and then the Sisters and a few Christians continued the night vigil.*

*Good Friday — a fine attendance for the Good Friday services. Back to Hoignan because of market day. The girl whom I received at the orphanage last year to work was having trouble with her mother. Maybe you remember the case. The whole family is pagan. The daughter married a pagan, and he wasn't any good because he smoked opium and smoked everything up, even sold his bride's clothes. They were only married a few months and the husband told her he was unable to support her and gave her a letter saying that he had no claims on her and that she could marry again, go back home, or do whatever she wanted. The girl took the letter and went back to her mother. It is against Chinese custom to live in her own native village, so I took the girl in to work at the orphanage and the parents gave me full rights over the girl.*

*I came back from Taan On today and the Sisters told me the latest news of the above girl. The girl herself told the Sisters that her mother is always nagging her for the second marriage to take place in five days to a pagan. Of course, everything was supposed to be on the quiet and not let the priest know. The mother instructed the girl to run away on the day of the marriage and when she arrived at the bridge, the bridal chair would be waiting.*

*I called the Sisters and said to send the girl to see me, and asked the girl about the recent rumors of this second marriage and she acknowledged all and didn't deny. I told her that her Ma and Pa had no power over her concerning a second marriage. It is contrary to Chinese customs for the*

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*father and mother to give their daughter a second time in marriage. The government, or civil court, had to annul the first marriage, and then a second marriage could take place. If she ran away and got married with the parents' consent, I would be forced, I told her, to put her and her parents in jail and then she would have to go back to her first husband (you've got to scare people now and then). That's all until I see the parents. The girl was baptized a few months ago and she obeys the priest.*

*Back to Taan On at four by bike in a drenching rain. Stations of the Cross at seven o'clock.*

*Holy Saturday — service and Mass at Taan On with 78 holy Communion. Still pouring out and unable to go to Hoignan Center for confessions. Most of the day spent in investigating sale of land and the past twenty years had to be reviewed. Confessions, eighty.*

*Easter Sunday — heard 2 confessions, Mass at Taan On at six with 154 Communion. A smaller attendance because the Christians are busy in the fields and many away from home working. Walked back to Hoignan and arrived at 8:10 and the whole country was one pool of water; had to be careful or drop in a ditch. Water hip deep in many places. Heard fifty confessions here and started Mass at ten. Sixty-five received Communion — poor attendance because of work and rain. Benediction after Mass and then I preached. Gave out medicine etc.*

*Left for Taan On and arrived at 4:30. Some of the Christians were quarreling over a will separating a two family house. Settled the trouble after much persuading by allowing the man to build a small wall and only take four*

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*inches instead of a foot. Night prayers, Benediction, and I preached, and then heard thirty-eight confessions.*

*Hope you are all staying in the best of health.*

*Love to all.*

*Your loving son,*

*Chinese Joe*

## Crossing the Cultural Divide: The Key to Missionary Success

When one reads about the many charitable works of the Maryknoll Fathers in China, it appears astounding. Their dedication to saving and preserving the lives of orphans; their attending to the sick and dying; and their immense efforts in the procuring and distribution of food to the starving peasants were just a fraction of the humane endeavors which they applied themselves.

One of Maryknoll's main objectives was to form an indigenous clergy in China. As an initial step in that direction the missionaries recruited unmarried Chinese catechists in the hopes of preparing them for the priesthood. It was believed that, ultimately, these recruits could communicate the ideals of the Catholic faith more effectively to their people than any American clergyman. After all, the Maryknollers were foreigners. Having been reared in a different culture, it was assumed that (naturally speaking) even the best of them would not be as capable of empathizing with the Chinese and interpreting the faith to them.

So, while training catechists and developing an indigenous clergy was important, those Maryknollers who were charged with this responsibility had to be as good, if not better, than

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those whom they were preparing to become China's native clergy. In other words, the teacher needed to be at least as skilled as the pupil in communicating the faith to the native people. If he lacked this capability, then it is unlikely that any conversions would occur.

It cannot be underestimated just how suspicious and cynical was the general view of the pagan Chinaman toward Catholicism. As stated before, in the eyes of many, the Catholic Church was just another western implant, the sole purpose of which was to exploit them. This point of view was quite prevalent even before the Communists came to power. American Maryknollers, therefore, could not sit on their hands hoping that they could train a native clergy to accomplish what they had set out to do. Rather, they themselves, had to become Chinese through and through if any real success was to be achieved.

In truth, the ideal had become a fact. Over the years, the Maryknollers in China had become so Chinese that even their most vocal enemies would often shun an open confrontation with them, unless the odds could be heavily stacked in their favor. Yet, on numerous occasions, even this strategy backfired, and their antagonists came away from a duel with "egg on their face." For instance, there is the bout Monsignor John Romaniello, who was stationed at Kweilin, had with the Communists there. The Monsignor, unbeknown to his antagonists, not only had great courage, but he was an expert on Marxist - Leninist dialectics. Moreover, he spoke fluent Chinese. At first, the Communists tried to trap the Monsignor in a battle of words in which they ended up faring very poorly. Monsignor Romaniello just let them ramble, then he turned the tables on them. He challenged the commissary to a public debate on Marxist - Leninist doctrine.

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The commissar, after reflecting on this challenge, recognized that he was no match for this astute Maryknoller. Monsignor Romaniello was provided with an exit permit and the debate never took place.

The battles with the Chinese Communists, by Maryknollers like Monsignor Romaniello, made front-page news in the United States. However, it was not these well-publicized confrontations that won “face” for the Church in China. Rather, it was the everyday resolution of controversies between Maryknoll priests and the ordinary Chinese people that ultimately determined whether or not the Church was perceived as a respected institution.

Then, too, in order to establish “face” for the Church, the priest had to discern when to be firm and when to be flexible in dealing with the people. When Chinese Catholics became lax, it was up to the priest to admonish them and to inspire them to return to the faith. A typical case occurred in the village of Pak Kong Lei. Father Joe had closed the church there because of the villagers’ laxity. The community lost “face” as a result of this. Father Joe makes mention of the sad event and the church’s happy restoration in this clip from a December 1, 1940, letter.

*Went by bike to Pak Kong Lei at three. Heard 13 confessions. This village has been punished for the past two years by closing the Church’s doors and only opened for prayers, and when the priest comes. The church also has a side room for receiving visitors etc. and this was also closed. The village lost plenty of “face,” but the priest was forced to this harsh measure because the Christians were very lax. Glad to say the village is slowly returning and now realizes its former mistakes and slothfulness. The Christians are experiencing a*

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*new resurrection. I was going to change the lady catechist, but they begged me to let her stay and I conceded them a favor on certain conditions. The doors of the chapel and rooms were opened for good once more.*

Although Father Joe reopened the church in Pak Kong Lei, the problems were still not fully resolved there. A follow-up letter describing the final resolution of the villagers' problems and the full restoration of the community's "face" was written on January 26, 1941. Father Joe describes the case of the "number one man" in the village whom he put out of the Church because of his vices. This man had negatively influenced some of the weaker Christians. However, because the Church was perceived as being "powerful," and Father Joe stood his ground, the Catholic Church, rather than the "number one man," prevailed. As one can see from the following extract Father Joe was very pleased that the Church "received plenty of face" in the eyes of the people.

*I left for Pak Kong Lei at two o'clock. Many came around for a visit. The number one man of the village came around and admitted his mistakes. This man was put out of the Church and a Christian's house almost three years ago, by me, because he used these two places as an opium and gambling den. Of course, he lost plenty of face, but the priest had no other remedy, and thereby the Church and priest were more powerful than this individual and, therefore, received plenty of face. He is a Christian and took plenty of time to admit his mistake and return to the Church. Tonight in the presence of many, he admitted his mistakes and wanted to be reinstated and promised to help the priest in every way. During the past two years, he had*



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*caused me plenty of trouble, and kept some of the weaker Christians from the Church.*

*For the first time in many years, the chapel was packed and many old timers were present. After night prayers, I gave a talk on the resurrection of this village and plead for unity and a spirit of cooperation. During the sermon of forty minutes, many Christian men and women at different times shouted out at the top of their voices that the Christians were on the resurrection wagon. Heard nineteen confessions.*

*After night prayers, most of the men and boys came around for a talk. The village elders and all wanted to write up a contract and have everyone sign it. I told them to think the matter over first and maybe on the next visit. The contract will contain many things, such as: all return to be good Christians and obey the laws; no opium smoking, no gambling, no stealing etc. Punishments would be settled and the priest would rule as supreme.*

Father Joe expected to be in charge of the church and the parishioners. This was not a subject for negotiation. There was no parish council to advise him or to tell him how to run the church. He viewed his priesthood as giving him this authority and he acted accordingly.

As noted earlier, Maryknoll priests understood the importance of the notion of “face” and how to apply this value within the Chinese cultural framework. For the Chinese people, preserving “face” was a powerful force motivating each person to behave as expected. Gaining or losing one’s membership in the church was fast becoming a source of acquiring or losing “face” in the community. This particularly applied to the poor and destitute, who relied on the church for support in hard times, particularly at the time of

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death. In fact, not to honor the dead is tantamount to a curse among the Chinese. In an early letter dated November 5, 1933, while Father Joe was serving at the Loting mission, he described how being a Catholic helped one poor man's pagan family keep "face" when they were too destitute to afford him a proper burial.

*One of the sisters had baptized a catechumen in danger of death that morning. The sick man walked home. The man was dying and dead at 2:00 am. The funeral was scheduled for Saturday morning. The man was the only Christian in the village. He had a wife and four small tots. . . . The family just about had enough to exist on — extremely poor. If the "thief of paradise" hadn't become a Christian there would not have been a funeral — just drop his remains in the ground and put dirt over him. Becoming a Catholic meant a funeral and plenty of "face" for the family and village. A funeral is a big affair over here and the acquisition of plenty of "face" if distinguished in any way. Families lose "face" when they are too poor to honor their dead. The loss of face is almost as bad as the loss of life.*

*The dead man was in the box outside of the courtyard. One of the rooms was fixed up and prepared for Mass. The room was just big enough for some part of a small altar and about one hundred pagans. The pagans were on all sides of the altar and just barely enough room to move around. The pagans never witnessed the celebration of the Mass before, nor the vestments, nor the movements of the priest, nor a Christian burial. They realized that something very serious was taking place and kept a reverential silence and were very respectful. The cries and noises of the babies could be heard at all times.*

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*Mass and the blessing of the body were over. The priest said he didn't think he ever said such a devout Mass as this one before in his life. For the first time, Christ was brought down on the altar in this village.*

*The line of procession formed. The casket was carried on the shoulders of the men. A few Christians displayed with joy the few big banners and flags. The village people took their place in the line of march. The cemetery was a short distance away. The destination was reached — a hole in the ground just large and deep enough to receive the mortal remains. The priest had a small Rituale in one hand and a bowl of holy water in the other. The final prayers were said and the priest sprinkled the holy water on the box. The box was covered with dirt and an oval shape mound of earth marks the grave. The ceremony was over and the people scattered and hustled back to their homes.*

The solemnity of the funeral Mass, even when it was offered in such an unmajestic setting, seemed to fill the hearts of those reverent pagans with awe. This was certainly a moment of grace for all, and, most especially, for one poor family who had saved much “face” during a most trying time.

### The Alleviation of Physical Suffering

While Maryknollers were sent to China to evangelize, the alleviation of physical suffering was of critical importance. Christ Himself, by His divine power, performed wonders and miracles of healing in order to validate the truth of His revelation. He gave sight to the blind, hearing to the deaf and made the lame to walk. While He forgave sins, it was His constant works of healing that drew the ordinary people to Him.

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Taking away the pains and infirmities of others clearly demonstrated the great compassion that Jesus felt for them. If He had only cured their spiritual suffering, it is unlikely that so many thousands would have flocked to Him. The gentleness and mercy that He displayed for sinners nearly always coincided with some manifestation of His divine authority over every illness; and it was this powerful combination that brought every kind of Jew and every kind of gentile, like the humble Roman centurion, to salvation in Christ.

Like Christ, the Maryknollers made great efforts to alleviate the physical pain and illnesses of the Chinese people. Being merciful sounds easy when we view it in the abstract. Who among us would not feel compassion for a sick and starving child? Who among us would not give a few dollars of our money, or some of our time, to help to alleviate the suffering of a man or woman with a terminal disease? But to minister to the sick and dying in a very poor country can be an extremely difficult and trying task. Day in and day out, people besiege you for medicine and treatment. Because of the intensity of their suffering the needy often become persistently demanding, overly aggressive and impatient. Their only concern, naturally, is to be rid of their pain. Then, too, even when they are given food and medicine, they are not necessarily appreciative, sometimes acting as if you were providing a service that you owed them. Add to that, the problem with professional beggars bent on usurping goods that were intended for the truly helpless. While they may have some illness, they might grossly exaggerate their plight in order to induce the compassionate into giving them money. Dealing with such behavior on a daily basis can dull your sense of empathy and quickly replace your feelings of compassion with a hard-nosed cynicism.

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To be perfectly blunt: the wretched groaning associated with pain, coupled with the abject sight and smell of deteriorating flesh can become so repugnant to one's sensibilities that these can actually induce vomiting. Being kind, patient, and compassionate in such circumstances requires something more than a natural altruism. And to maintain these superhuman virtues year after year, without becoming insensitive to the human misery around you, is the stuff that saints are made of. In a letter to his brother, dated November 3, 1939, Father Joe painted a frightful picture of leprosy in both its physical and moral dimension. Here is an excerpt:

*The world everywhere has people afflicted with the most dreadful disease called leprosy. Leprosy of the body is about the worst disease in the world, but leprosy of the soul is by far the most odious disease possible. What I mean by leprosy of the soul is the stain of mortal sin on the soul. Leprosy of the body has only killed the body temporarily, but leprosy of the soul ruins the body and soul for all eternity. Leprosy of the body, if not too far advanced, can be brought under control and cured by medicine; leprosy of the soul can only be healed by baptism or confession. A Christian's motto is never fall into mortal sin, and if by chance we fall into mortal sin, we should seek the consolation of confession as soon as possible and clean the soul of leprosy and make it pure as snow once again.*

*Every country has lepers and China has more than its share. . . . A few weeks ago, I sent two lepers to Hgai Moon: one Christian woman from Taan On and a pagan boy from Hoignan Street. The boy is nineteen years old and the leprosy is far advanced and beyond medical care. His mother and older brother are still living and it was heart-rending for all to see the boy go. I offered him the chance [to go*

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to Hgai Moon for treatment] with expenses paid and he seized the opportunity — no compulsion on my part. . . The woman is Christian and about forty-five years old and has been afflicted with leprosy at least ten years. Her husband, two daughters, and three sons are living. The two daughters were married off years ago before the leprosy marked the mother's face and the other family didn't know that fact. If they did, it would have been impossible to marry the girls in this district. From all appearance, the [three] sons haven't any trace of the disease, but it might be latent. The youngest son, no doubt, has the disease, but it isn't very apparent at present. It was impossible for the sons to take a wife as long as the mother stayed home. The family is fairly well off. I was told about the case and Ngai Moon was the solution. I saw the lady in question and asked her if she wanted to go to Ngai Moon and explained the situation. She consented to go and that made the affair easy. The trip took three days to the leper asylum.

On my trip to Waang Shaau, I am usually greeted by the lepers with 'God bless you Father' and they ask for a few coppers. I give them a few coppers or twenty cents. Four women make up this band and three are in tough shape. I stopped the other day and had a chat and told them about Ngai Moon and they all agreed to go if I could provide them with the means of travel. Sending the above two lepers cost me over one hundred dollars. No doubt that there are many others living in the hills. The lepers are afraid to tell you about the others until they become well acquainted and realize you are out to help them. If Ngai Moon can provide for these four, I will find means of sending them along.

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What would Father Joe not have done for these poor unfortunates? He did everything that he could possibly do. In fact, when the Japanese tried to break up the leper colonies, and the lepers had to flee from them, it was Fathers Lavin and Joyce who ran ahead of the diseased refugees to set up aid stations for them. Such was the spirit of our Lord Who had so much compassion for poor lepers. But it was moral leprosy, that of the soul, which concerned this *alter Christus* even more than that of the flesh. Conveying a spiritual message, even when describing the worst of temporal conditions, is a consistent theme that runs through much of Father Joe's correspondence.

In a letter dated October 23, 1938, the *Iron Man* sent home a lengthy missive describing his work in treating the sick in several villages. With all the detail, we are given a clear picture of just what kind of medical intervention the missionary had to involve himself with as pastor and physician of souls.

*As I came to the village of Noh Ma Kong this morning a lady met me, and she was rather perturbed in mind for a very good reason, because her husband gave the oldest married daughter the wrong medicine to eat. The daughter came home on account of sickness — malaria and what not. Just yesterday on my way back from Sha Waas, I stopped at the village and saw the sick girl and her father. The father, about six weeks ago, while fishing, was clawed by a crab or lobster and it made a bad cut. He neglected to nurse the wound and it healed on the surface and in a few days he was forced to bed with a swollen and infected foot. The family was too poor to call a doctor or buy medicine. As a result, the entire top of the foot is minus skin and covered with puss, and a few worms had eaten into the bones. He had some grass and cow manure covering the foot and when this damn foolish dressing was*

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*removed, the whole room was filled with a strong odor. A person gets used to this thing and especially if you smoke Chinese tobacco. I told the guy how to take care of his foot and promised to give him some medicine if the son would come for it. I gave the girl some quinine.*

*During the day (yesterday—Monday), the son came in for the medicine.*

*The next morning, while entering the village, the mother told me that the father gave the daughter the two small pills and in a few minutes the girl vomited plenty and in the course of the night had diarrhea. After Mass, I went to the house and the girl was having stomach pain but no worse vomiting or diarrhea. The Lord was good to her — the vomiting saved her life in all probability. The man's foot was a little better.*

*At three in the afternoon, I left for Taan On. On the way I visited the sick man and daughter at Noh Ma Kong. Gave the girl a big bowl of salt water to drink and no doubt it washed the stomach out, within a short time, by vomiting. Had the mother buy some eggs, broke two in a bowl, took out the yellow yolks, and told the mother to give the white of the eggs to the daughter to eat in the evening, and also in the morning, and the next night. Left some medicine for the father. Stopped at Pak Kong Lei for a few minutes.*

*Before and after supper, forty-two confessions, October devotions as usual. About 8:30, I went to see a sick boy of seven days old. Just another case of lockjaw because, at the time of birth, the necessary precautions are not used. Ignorance in this regard is astonishing. The people use anything to cut the cord — dirty knife or scissors or a broken bowl etc. Sister Richard said that at the Loting orphanage eight out every ten babies die*



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*of lockjaw. I baptized the infant at the house and instructed the parents what to do in future births.*

*Wednesday October 19 — heard three confessions, and Mass for a deceased woman in the Church, forty-five received Holy Communion. The old lady was the oldest in the village and only 86 years old. She was practically stone deaf. She was anointed a few months before and, from time to time, she received confessional absolution. Died suddenly.*

*The funeral took place at ten bells. . . . I said the prayers of the Church, sprinkled holy water and incense and the procession started.*

*Upon arrival at the grave, the Christians prayed while the grave was dug. During the procession, the usual abundance of firecrackers and the fife and drum and tom-tom players were busy making noise. The grave was blessed, body lowered, accustomed prayers, and all was over.*

## A Profile of Caring and Courage

Father Anthony Hong, a curate who was mentioned in a previous chapter (he had written an article about Father Joe in the December 1948 issue of *The Field Afar*), gave this tribute to his inexhaustible friend:

*Among the bicycle riders, Father Lavin was known as the fastest and best; among the walkers, he was known as the strongest and most enduring. Once, when the Japanese drove him away from his orphans, he came secretly on foot to see them, and on that occasion he walked continuously for twenty-four hours. I do not exaggerate in my praise. I repeat to you only what the Chinese say.*

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Walking continuously for twenty-four hours is an amazing feat by any standard, particularly in light of the fact that Father Joe had to traverse some very rugged terrain without the benefit of cushioned Nikes. His motivation for making this particular trek was to check on his beloved orphans, many of whom had been plucked from the jaws of death itself. The *Iron Man* made this journey knowing full well that if the Japanese captured him, he would be killed and probably tortured first. And the Chinese knew full well what kind of risk this man of God was taking. Father Joe had “good face” with his adopted people. Nevertheless, it was not popularity that he sought to gain, but the eradication of superstition, ignorance and vice. There were times when he had to “wield the sword,” or, in the following case, a club.

A vice that was particularly problematic in China was gambling. In fact, gambling was such an endemic menace that the government had made strict laws to prohibit it. Because reckless betting was such a nemesis to those Catholics in the villages visited by Father Joe, he took personal responsibility for enforcing these laws. In a letter to his mother, dated March 7, 1939, he related just how persistent he had to be if the disorder was going to be uprooted. After a reference to the seventh commandment of God and the Church’s application of that prohibition to the subject at hand, he went on to tell about the troubles he had with the village of Taan On, a Catholic community addicted to wagering.

*A few weeks ago previous to New Year’s, the laws against robbers and gamblers were made and approved by the Taan On people and the laws for opium smokers were also approved, but not to be put into force until opium medicine is freely given to the offenders. The priest (Father Joe) was*

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*the one who really made the laws and it's partly up to him to put the laws into force. No doubt some of the people thought that the priest wasn't serious. Well, just to prove that the priest was in earnest, he and the head of one of the villages on the first day of the Chinese New Year at nine o'clock in the morning made the rounds of the village and caught five different groups gambling. I took the gambling devices away from them and didn't bother with the new pennies. Took their names and told them that the fine of two dollars would have to be paid later. One of the groups proved to be of the fair sex and were having a great game when I walked in on them — and what a surprise. We nabbed nineteen in an hour and then everyone realized the laws were meant to be observed. None of the offenders had a word to say. During the day and night and for the next two days and nights, I made the rounds at different times and caught nobody at the pastime. Most likely, a few were indulging in the game, but were well under cover. It is necessary to be strict with the people once a rule or law has been made.*

Despite the preceding efforts, gambling in Taan On reared its ugly head once more when Father Joe returned to Hoignan. After several weeks, he was notified by government officials that some of the villagers in Taan On were running an open gambling establishment. The officials informed Father Joe that unless this was stopped, a stiff punishment would be enacted against the village. "Leave it to me," Father Joe told the officials who brought him the message. "I'll take care of it."

Father Joe then wrote a letter to the citizens of Taan On telling them to close the establishment or, "I'll close it for you." Upon receiving the letter, the village tough guy, who ran the operation, responded to Father Joe's challenge with a letter of

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his own in which he threatened to have the priest killed if he interfered with the business. Forty signatures were affixed to that manifesto. The *Iron Man* was not one to be intimidated. "I'll be down there tomorrow," he wrote back.

The next day the Maryknoller walked into Taan On with his familiar curved pipe in his mouth. But that was not all that he took with him. There was a short heavy club in his hand that he was gripping like a baseball bat. As he marched down the narrow streets of Taan On, the people not only took notice, but the merchants closed their shops, and many of the peasants left their rice paddies to follow him. The truth of the matter was that the peasants feared the local bruiser and his gang. However, they did not have the courage to confront them. The appearance of Father Joe walking toward the little casino with a determined eye and a club in his hand inspired them, at least to the point of following along and rooting for his success.

As they watched Father Joe leading this parade of disgruntled citizens, the local hector and his friends suddenly began to feel a bit disconcerted. Their bravado began to fizzle. Soon there was no air left at all in their once-bloated balloon. They were the ones who were afraid; in fact, so much so, that they locked themselves inside the wagers' den. The *Iron Man* did not bother knocking when he came to the door. Rather, with the force of a brawny lumberjack, he smashed the door into splinters. Meanwhile, the gang stampeded out the building's rear exit. They were no match for this one man wrecking crew — and they knew it. The villagers watched in awe while Father Joe, single-handedly, destroyed every piece of gambling equipment. He then hauled the pieces out into the street and set them on fire. Then, for good measure, club still in hand, the mighty missionary went back inside the building and broke up all of the furniture as well.

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Needless to say, all gambling operations in Taan On ceased on that day. Interestingly, soon after, the village bully actually became a friend of Father Joe. In fact, years later, when the Communists came to Taan On, they tried to coerce the ex-tycoon to accuse Father Joe of crimes. This he would not do. Rather, he told the Reds that Father Joe was “a good man,” and he adamantly refused to accuse him of any wrongdoing. This is probably one of the highest tributes that could be paid to a missionary. Here an American Caucasian priest literally destroys the man’s lucrative gambling operation, and the swindler ends up giving the foreigner such a testimony of praise! When the opportunity arrived to obtain vengeance, for which he would have the support of his cohorts, he declined to do so. Though there is no record of what ensued with the Communists, there is little doubt that this former ruffian must have paid a high price for his loyalty to Father Joe that day.

When it came to giving succor to the Chinese people, Father Joe did not confine his activities only to his own district. When the Japanese occupied China’s coastal cities and controlled her waterways, they inflicted much suffering on the inhabitants there, as well as on the people who lived on the islands surrounding the mainland. As noted earlier, Hoignan was a little town near the seacoast, some sixty or seventy miles north east of Hong Kong harbor. The bandits who lived in the surrounding hills, and the river pirates, and the Japanese gunboats stalking for prey around the shoreline, were always formidable adversaries to be avoided at all costs.

Due to the fact that the waters off the coast of South China were so treacherous, the missionaries had to become expert sailors in order to navigate them. The sea was the best thoroughfare for shipping goods, particularly between Sancian Island (which had a Maryknoll missionary post) and the

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mainland. Sancian Island was of special significance because it was there that Saint Francis Xavier died on December 2, 1552. Unfortunately, the Japanese were no strangers to Sancian Island. In fact, Father Robert Cairns of Worcester, Massachusetts, whom the reader will recall from an earlier chapter, was warned by a friendly commander of a Japanese boat to evacuate the island just after war broke out between Japan and the United States. This commander even offered to take the missionaries on his boat and set them ashore on the Free China mainland where Father Joe was located. Father Cairns refused the offer rather than leave his people. When a second gunboat came, they were not so friendly, and the mission was looted. Father Cairns then sent his native sisters and many of the young women to the mainland for protection. The following day, Father Cairns was taken prisoner by another band of Japanese. It was at their hands that he suffered martyrdom, having been dropped into the sea while locked in a bamboo crate.

The loss of Father Cairns and the devastation that the Japanese pillaging had inflicted on the islanders left the inhabitants completely destitute. Sancian Island was not only overrun by plundering Japanese soldiers, but they burned their fishing craft and junks as well. These boats were the only means of bringing needed goods to the island. Moreover, the waters of the China Sea had been closed to all Chinese vessels, thereby leaving the people of Sancian desperately in need of food.

Fortunately, Father Joe's parish in Hoignan was in Free China. Although there were bombings in his area, Hoignan was spared from the Japanese assault. Shortly after the war broke out, Father John Joyce, who was with Father Cairns, was able to leave Sancian Island surreptitiously to seek out

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Father Joe. As he approached the gate of the Hoignan mission, Father Joe could see that this tall man, who was wearing a straw hat and weaving hurriedly through the crowd, was distraught, tired and, no doubt, very hungry. With a broad smile Father Joe greeted Father Joyce and asked: "How are you?" The weary priest quickly responded: "I'm hungry. How about yourself?" Without waiting for an answer, the visitor asked the key question: "Have you got much food?" Father Joe, not yet catching his friend's drift, assured him that he did. "Come on in," he replied, "and I'll whip you up a platter of eggs. Sounds like you are a man with an appetite." The expression on Father Joyce's face abruptly began to change. His smile vanished and his voice became more somber: "I don't mean for myself, Father Joe."

Father Joyce then went on describing in detail the devastation on Sancian Island. When Father Joe heard the story, he offered his entire stock of supplies and his services to his fellow Maryknoller. The two priests then transferred the supplies to the mission boat that was moored at the riverbank close by. After waiting for darkness, they headed for the island. While the crossing was uneventful, the landing was difficult because of the presence of many Japanese soldiers. However, a group of Chinese islanders were waiting for the priests in a small cove. After landing, they shouldered the boxes and baskets to an appointed area for distribution. This was only the first of many trips that Father Joe made to Sancian. "He is brave!" the islanders would say about him. "He is braver than a pirate. But, he has a heart as soft as a flower."

After the attack on Pearl Harbor, leaving Free China and making trips to Sancian Island was an invitation to death. However, again, Father Joe was the kind of man who placed

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himself in, and directly confronted, adverse circumstances, particularly those that impacted on the lives of the ordinary Chinese people. Father Joe was no stranger to witnessing the effects of hunger and starvation. That he had a “soft spot” in his heart for starving children was markedly evident in both his deeds and in his writing. In the January, 1949, issue of *Maryknoll Magazine*, Father Joe authored an article entitled “Hunger: Starvation Becomes an Indescribable Word.” The article is reproduced here in its entirety.

“May I have a ticket to the rice kitchen, please, Father?” Father James Smith turned to look at his questioner. He saw a wisp of a girl, about seven years old. Her long, black hair was matted with dirt and bits of straw; her face and hands were caked with grime; her clothes were tattered; her little bare feet were sunk in the mud of the courtyard.

Weary from hours of passing out congee to the famine-stricken people, Father Smith answered: “No tickets for children. Your mother or father will have to get one for you.”

“But I have no mother or father. And I’m starving!”

Slowly the little girl started to walk away. Suddenly she stopped. Father Smith saw her foot pawing in the mud. Then quickly the child bent over. Her tiny hand groped in the thick ooze of the courtyard and emerged with a fish head—a remnant of refuse that had somehow been dropped there. Immediately, with the fierceness that comes from the pains of hunger, the girl began gnawing at the mud-caked fish head.

Father Smith went over to the girl and pressed a ticket in her hand. Then he turned and hurried into the house, unable to speak, and feeling nauseated because of the drama he had just witnessed.



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Starvation! Who can find words to describe it? To understand it remotely, a person needs to live in the midst of it as we have lived in China. You would have to have hunger daily knocking at your door as happened to us in Toishaan. You would need to try and alleviate the results of famine with food, medicine, clothing, and shelter, as we strove to do.

What horrors we must witness! People forced to sell their clothes, fields, homes, and finally their children. Living skeletons wandering over the countryside in search of food. Children with bloated stomachs, dull and sunken eyes, yellow skin drawn tautly over protruding bones, piteously-moaning as they search refuse heaps for scraps of food.

In the city of Toishaan during the last famine, the average death rate was fifty people a day. On one day, 102 emaciated corpses were picked up from the city's streets. Entire families of from five to ten persons were wiped out.

In the vicinity of Toishaan, twenty-five congee kitchens were opened, for free distribution. The size of the kitchen depended upon the population and the need.

Congee is a native dish consisting of rice gruel, to which have been added salt, peanut oil, and bits of vegetables, pork or beef. The ingredients are boiled together, in large kettles, and the congee is served with a scoop. Each hungry applicant receives ten ounces in a bowl.

Help for the stricken people came from many sources. The Red Cross, United China Relief, United Nations Relief, and other organizations, sent supplies of wheat, rice, canned goods, and clothing. Maryknoll's Fathers John Joyce, Francis O'Neill, Joseph Farnen, and Joseph Sweeney assisted untiringly. Reverend Mr. Mills, a Protestant missionary

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from Canada, did remarkable work. Misses Mary, and Agnes Chan, Mr. Chue, and Mr. Tsui co-operated generously in the behalf of their own people.

The congee kitchens supplied more than a quarter million meal tickets during the recent famine. In Hoignan we started to feed two hundred people and worked up to a thousand. After signs were posted throughout the district, informing the starving residents that we would distribute meal tickets, there was a stampede on our center. It took three days to make the distribution. Each ticket was good for one month; after that period of time, it could be renewed if the need continued.

Although congee was served at one o'clock in the afternoon, many people began lining up before dawn. It took about two hours to serve the crowd. The congee had to be eaten at the kitchen, because otherwise some applicants would sell the congee or the ticket. At times, instead of congee, we served plain rice. Children received eight ounces of rice; the older people, ten. As funds dwindled, we cut this measure to six ounces.

Our Hoignan orphanage cared for about a hundred children. We had to refuse admission to other hundreds. It was heart-breaking to turn those starving boys and girls away, but we did not have the funds to buy the necessary food for them. At times we found that we were penniless. Often we had to borrow money and rice to keep our mission operating. During the terrible Toishaan famine, our district, too, experienced the pangs of hunger. Money was scarce, and the price of rice was exorbitant. In May we were able to feed our orphans only six ounces of rice in the morning and two ounces of congee at night; in June the orphans got only four ounces of congee a

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clay. Those were starvation rations, but we could give nothing else. It is heartbreaking to watch youngsters in your care growing thinner and thinner. It is saddening to see them going down to the ocean each day, looking for seaweed for food. But that is what famine causes. Only this type of experience will impress the meaning of starvation.

As this article shows, the *Iron Man's* physical prowess and courage were not the only attributes that endeared him to the Chinese people. His compassion and readiness to empathize with them is what enabled him to become indigenous to their world. In describing Father Joe, whom the Chinese referred to as Luk-Shan-Fu, Father Anthony Hong gives us his own little sketch: "Luk-Shan-Fu's cassock is Chinese, his clothes were Chinese, his tobacco was Chinese. Much as he liked Lucky Strikes and Camels, his usual smoking fare was our strongest local tobacco, which sometimes he rolled into cigarettes and sometimes used to fill his big pipe."

Father Mark Tennien, who was mentioned previously, paints another fascinating picture: "The language (Chinese) was not difficult for one of Father Lavin's talents. He is a natural mimic, and a good storyteller with a chatty interest in people. People at home in another language are not always at home with the strange foods of another nation. But the Chinese never saw the *Iron Man* raise his bushy eyebrows at dishes which make foreigners shudder. He knew how to smack his lips and make plenty of noise in courteous compliment to every mysterious dish. Black beetles are as precious to the Toishaan folk as caviar to the Russians. Fellow missionaries on the Toishaan train have watched Father Lavin buy a handful of these roasted bugs from a train hawker and chew them up like crispy crackerjacks."

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### The Sancian Rice Ferry

Between the years 1938 to 1941, during the height of the Japanese occupation, Father Lavin and Father Joyce operated what they called the "Sancian Rice Ferry." The two priests literally brought tons of rice from Hoignan to Sancian Island. Even if there were no Japanese to contend with, this would have been a difficult undertaking. But with the threats of these invaders hanging over their heads, the "ferry ride" was a dangerous adventure. It would become far more dangerous in the autumn of 1941, after the attack on Pearl Harbor. Still, even before the United States entered the war, Father Joyce, the curate under Father Cairns, was accosted by Japanese soldiers and barely escaped with his life on March 22, 1941.

Although they did not inhabit the island, the Japanese would often land soldiers there to make sure that no clandestine military operations were being organized against them. During one of these raids, the Japanese found a gun in the house of a Catholic parishioner. Because of the language barrier, the man was unable to communicate to the officer in charge that the gun was used to protect his property from thieves, not for military purposes. The man, fearing that he would be killed, led the soldiers to the mission. Father Joyce, who was alone at the time, tried to diffuse the situation. However, because of the language barrier, he, too, was unsuccessful. The Japanese officer became frustrated with Father Joyce. He made him stand against the wall of the church. Then using the parishioner's rifle, he shot right at him. But, God had more work for this missionary because the bullet veered off course, missing its target. And, strangely enough, instead of firing again, the officer just stormed off and went on searching the village. The neutrality of the U.S., at the time, meant nothing to this soldier.

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But not all the Japanese officers were of this type. After the incident at the mission, the commanding officer found out what had happened and he did offer an apology to Father Joyce. However, this officer still tried to get Father Joyce to have his catechist collect all the rifles in the village. Despite nearly being killed, Father Joyce refused to comply with this request. It was this kind of courage that won the Maryknollers both the love and the respect of all the island people, while, on the other hand, it placed their lives in a very precarious position with the Japanese.

Like Father Joyce, Father Joe had experienced a dangerous run-in with the soldiers of Nippon a few months earlier. He was stopped by one of their patrols after visiting some of the villages in his area. Because these villages were located in bandit-infested territory, Father Joe had considered carrying an old 45-caliber pistol with him on that day. When Father Joe purchased the pistol, he cleaned and oiled the gun barrel and firing mechanism. The gun was in good working order. Father Joe had even fired several practice rounds so that he could get used to handling the pistol. The 45 had a powerful kick and was a formidable weapon.

Even though the *Iron Man* was traveling into bandit country on that day, for some unknown reason, he decided not to carry the gun. Lucky for him! On his way back to Hoignan, he was coasting on his bicycle down one of the hilly roads that populated the mountainous mainland. Just as he turned a corner, there was a Japanese patrol walking up the path toward him. There was no escaping them. Immediately, rifles poised for action while their coruscating bayonets thrust menacingly in his direction. Peddling like a fullback through the metal gauntlet would have been suicidal. Father Joe began to apply the brakes in an attempt to slow his descent. "Maybe they will let me pass through," he thought to himself.

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It was not going to be that easy. "Halt!" the officer leading the patrol shouted. "Pull your bicycle over to the side and dismount." Strangely enough, the order was given in very confident English. But, no matter! The officer was not a friendly sort and he certainly was not well disposed to Americans. Rather, he was an Imperial Japanese soldier and acted more like a machine programmed to intimidate. Father Joe complied with the officer's instructions. "Open your baggage," the officer haughtily insisted. Again, Father Joe did as he was told. The officer then scattered all of his belongings on to the ground, fingering each of the items as he examined them. After several minutes of silence, he looked up sternly at Father Joe and, with an air of sarcasm in his voice, asked: "Don't you carry a gun or a weapon to protect yourself from the bandits here?" Father Joe knew that if he had been carrying his 45-pistol, the Japanese would have shot him right on the spot. "I am a priest of the Catholic Church," he responded. "We trust in God to protect us from those who would destroy us and His message. We are here to preach God's word, not to kill others." Then, in imitation of the strategy our Lord Himself used against the pharisees and sadducees, he asked them a question. "Why would a man who trusts in God's Providence carry a weapon? Wouldn't that show very little faith in my Maker?" The officer grunted an inaudible response and asked no further questions.

Finally, after rummaging through the scattered items, the officer instructed Father Joe to put them all back in his pack. He did so while waiting for the next round of interrogation. That never came. Rather, the officer, gesturing with his right hand toward the road bellowed: "Get on your way!" Father Joe was not one to look a gift horse in the mouth; he mounted his bicycle and peddled on. It was a very close call.

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While Father Joe was not one to write to his family about every hazard that he faced, he did describe some of his encounters with the Chinese pirates and the Japanese. His correspondence indicated that he had little, if any, fear about coping with situations that other people would have avoided at all costs. On the contrary, for Father Joseph Lavin, confronting, enduring and when possible, overcoming adversity was the only means of really helping the poor people of China. One fear, the natural fear of life-threatening danger, was a challenge that he was determined to overcome. He simply would not allow such fear to thwart his labors in the vineyard of Christ.

In the June 22, 1941, letter to his mother, *Chinese Joe* described one dangerous encounter that occurred one month before at the beginning of a Sancian Rice Ferry run. The boat was just entering the open water when the boatman and Father Joe espied a Japanese patrol boat in the distance. The skipper wanted to turn back immediately. He was an ordinary man, who clearly realized the danger, and was opting for an out. But Father Joe had a mission to complete. He wrote in the letter that, "the idea was vetoed." Then he added, "I insisted on going in spite of trouble. Variety is the spice of life and nothing like new experiences." The letter goes on to describe the trip, his encounter with the Japanese, and the successful delivery of the rice to Sancian Island. "Father Cairns was at home," he wrote. "Had a good meal and talked until the wee hours of the morning."

Although the Japanese soldiers were certainly one of the main dangers in running the "Rice Ferry," the Chinese pirates were a formidable adversary as well. These pagan brigands were a law unto themselves and they had little or no respect for the lives of anyone, least of all the foreign Maryknollers. They patrolled the waters with impunity between the mainland and Sancian Island looking to seize bounty from the

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unsuspecting traders that sailed there. Such a huge supply of rice would have been a plum for them. The pirates could have sold the grain for a huge profit on account of the desperate situation of the starving people. While the pirates did make numerous attempts to capture the Ferry, providentially, they were always unsuccessful.

## Encountering Chinese Bandits

The hills of South China were the stomping grounds for bandits. They showed no mercy: robbing, raping, and killing their victims for profit. Even Bishop James E. Walsh fell prey to them on one occasion. One sad story about how ruthless these brigands were involved Father Otto Rauschebach who was a missionary stationed at Watnam. Watnam was located along the West River close to the Wuchow Border. When the Japanese attacked the town, Father Rauschebach hid in the mountains, living in a hut there. He then visited the people on market days in order to dispense medicine, provided that the Japanese were not in the vicinity. Father Rauschebach was given the opportunity to move to Loting, which was a much safer area. However, he declined to go there. He said that he would rather stay in the mountains so that he could be close to his people. Father Rauschebach was not intimidated by the Japanese. But it was not the Japanese who finally did him in. Rather, it was suspected that Chinese bandits robbed and killed him just before the war's end. He died twelve miles outside of Watnam on May 14, 1945.

Father Lavin also had several encounters with highway robbers. On one occasion, he was returning from Toishaan on his bicycle. While peddling down a mountain road, he passed a heavily wooded area surrounded by several large boulders. As



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he peddled by the line of trees, two armed bandits came from behind the boulders and leveled their rifles at him. "Pull over!" they demanded. They were blocking the path so Father Joe had no choice but to comply. The two men walked toward the front of the bicycle. They were wearing red cloth headbands, brown jackets, and baggy pants. "We are government inspectors," they shouted. "We have been assigned to inspect the baggage of all travelers who come over this road. The government suspects that opium is being smuggled over the mountains into this area. It is our responsibility to make sure that you are not carrying opium." Of course, these men looked nothing like government officials. Their appearance and manner indicated what they were: bandits looking for a quick stash of money, probably so that they could purchase opium for themselves.

Father Joe was in a fix. He was carrying money for the orphanage and the mission. The last thing that he wanted to do was to donate it to these misfits. In the face of an armed enemy there was no way that the priest could outrace them to escape. He had to find another way to get out of this predicament. Providentially, a short time before, Father Joe had noticed that when he came over the mountain ridge, a large group of people were traveling together on the road. They were some distance away from where he was, but they would soon be approaching the area. The bandits could not have seen them because they had been waiting for him at a much lower vantage point. "If I can stall these men until the group arrives, the bandits will be the ones who will be at a disadvantage," he thought. "They won't dare to try anything with so many people around."

Father Joe decided to take a chance. He started arguing with the men in order to buy time. "I am a priest in Hoignan," he said. "You can see this by the clothes that I wear. Priests do

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not smuggle or use opium. This would be against God's law. I do not give opium to the people of Hoignan and I preach against its use. Opium is the devil's toy. I would never carry opium and work for the devil," he added. The bandits still insisted that they were required to inspect his luggage. "We see that you are a priest but we must inspect your luggage," they asserted. Without any hesitation Father Joe argued further. "There is another reason I would not be carrying opium," he stated. "I am a foreigner who is a guest in China. If I were to break the laws of the Chinese government, I would be thrown out of your country. You see, it would be stupid of me to be carrying opium." The bandits were starting to become more insistent. "You must open your baggage for inspection," they demanded.

Father Joe realized that he was pushing the limits. "One more try," he said to himself. "I still need a little more time." So, he continued to parley. "By making me open my baggage you shame me," he said. "You are not showing me the respect that a priest who has come all the way from America to China deserves. I would lose face if my people back home and in my village could see me being treated like a criminal. They would think I might have done something wrong," he contended. This diversionary ploy temporarily stopped the bandits in their tracks. They understood what the loss of face meant. For a short time, they appeared to be mulling over what Father Joe had said. However, they soon recouped their senses. Again, they insisted that the luggage must be inspected. Father Joe knew that he had stretched his luck to the limit.

Just then, the group of travelers came over the horizon. Father Joe's strategy had bought him the time that he needed and he immediately seized control of the moment. As the group approached, he waved to several of the people and

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asked that they join him and the “government opium inspectors.” He said that he needed witnesses while he opened his luggage for inspection to prove that he was not smuggling this illegal drug. “I’d like you to be witnesses to the fact that I am not carrying opium,” he requested. “I am a Catholic priest from Hoignan and I am carrying money for the orphanage and the mission there,” he added. The travelers gathered around while Father Joe opened his baggage so that all could see that he was telling the truth. As a result, the bandits were foiled in their purpose. They had no choice but to release Father Joe or they would have difficulty with this large group of people who had inadvertently saved him. Father Joe returned to Hoignan unmolested. He had successfully outsmarted the bandits, at least this time.

He was not so lucky the next time that he ran into them. Again, he was returning from Toishaan to Hoignan over the mountain road. The bridge over which he had to cross was out of commission, so he had to wade through the river in order to get to the other side. He had a bag of money tied to his waist. This was to be used for relief work, the mission, and the orphanage. The bag also contained money that he was carrying for some of the merchants in his village. Just as Father Joe got to mid-stream, four thieves came out of the bushes and pointed rifles at him. One of the four was part of the duo who had been previously tricked by Father Joe, so there was no talking his way out of this situation. The bandits not only took the money but his watch, glasses, and even his papers and passport. Father Joe was lucky to get away with his life. And, do you know what upset him the most about the experience? “The meanest thing they did,” he wrote, “was to slash the bike tires. I had to walk home stripped of everything but my pants.” Of course, as soon as

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the bicycle was repaired, he went right back to making his trips to Toishaan and back to Hoignan. Nothing had changed, despite the temporary setback.

Even though Father Joe accepted being robbed in good humor, he did take the matter very much to heart, even sending an appeal to his family for help. In all, he was out about one thousand U.S. dollars, a huge amount of money in the early forties. One way or another he was going to repay everyone that had entrusted their funds to him. But, he had to request his family keep the entire matter of the robbery secret.

One almost gets the impression that Father Joe was blaming himself for what had happened. Perhaps he believed that he should have taken more stringent precautions, or followed a safer route. Possibly he underestimated the danger and over-estimated his ability to deal with it should it arise. He was certainly well aware that bandits were particularly problematic right after the war. He had said as much in his previous correspondence. Then, too (no doubt this bothered him the most), he knew that the mission and the orphanage, especially in these difficult times, were relying on this money. Moreover, the merchants in the village had entrusted him with their money as well. The fact that he referred to this incident as, "a little secret," not to be discussed outside the family, suggests that he may well have been embarrassed about what had happened.

For the *Iron Man* to be robbed might have temporarily caused him to lose face with the people. In an early letter written during the Loting years on June 9, 1936, Father Joe briefly described an incident in which the boy who worked for him was robbed. "Our boy stayed down for a few days and someone robbed him of seventeen dollars while he was sleeping. He

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hung around a few days trying to catch the culprit, but failed. To be robbed is quite a “loss of face” over here and all enjoy a good laugh at the poor guy’s expense. He finally got home and told the story with childlike simplicity. No doubt, he was robbed. He took the affair pretty hard.” One can be sure that Father Joe was downright miffed about his own episode, not because of his own losses, but for that of the orphanage.

### Chinese Joe’s Psychology

To be sure, *Chinese Joe* had a winning manner about him with his people; he had a natural warmth and affable tone of voice. People enjoyed talking to him. They were anxious to tell him about their families, their businesses, and the ordinary affairs that impacted on their lives.

Much has been said about Father Lavin’s character, but he had a relaxed and confident personality as well. Because he was at peace with himself, his heart was big enough to accommodate Christians and pagans alike. The holy faith has a beauty of its own, consonant with the awesome truth of the Incarnation. Father Lavin radiated that beauty and made the Catholic religion attractive to non-believers. Moreover, he was undaunted by the adversities that were endemic to life in China. No matter how annoying or frustrating things were, he could always find a viable way to make the best of a bad deal. It was his sincere love for others, and life itself, that enabled him to pull this off with a seeming effortlessness.

For example, on November 7, 1939, Father Joe wrote a letter to his mother in which he described waiting for a boat to take him to Sancian Island so that he could visit Father Joyce. The boat was supposed to leave at three o’clock in the afternoon. When he arrived at the dock site, the boat was delayed

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three hours. In the letter, *Chinese Joe* describes striking up a conversation with a shopkeeper while he waited for transport. What makes this rather uneventful little episode so interesting is that it was a lesson in “Chinese psychology,” or as Father Joe put it, “the best way to make a Chinese a good friend.” A few paragraphs from that communique will suffice to testify to his genuine affability:

*While waiting for sailing time, I entered a small store and struck up a lively conversation with the owner, and we treated all subjects. He is forty-two years old; mother and father are living; he's married and has four sons and three daughters; the oldest daughter was married last year and the second daughter will enter the matrimonial boat at the end of this year; his father has been working in the United States for a company in California for over twenty years and hasn't returned once to China; his father sends back money regularly and the son has built a fine home and bought some rice fields.*

*I spent one hour and a half at the store and during that time many customers came in and we engaged in conversation. Maybe you think it funny for a foreigner to ask a stranger the above questions about family etc. This is ordinary Chinese courtesy and the best way to make a Chinese a good friend. These questions to the Chinese are not personal and they like you to know about their family etc.*

*I asked the guy if he would mind if I left my bike at the store for a few days and he said okay. Found a place and locked the bike. Bought two ounces of Chinese wine and a few cookies and a few peanuts for the trip in case we got in late. The storekeeper refused to take the money, at least this time, but I kept insisting and he finally took it.*

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There was another quality trait that also endeared Father Joe to his people. It was his knack for finding humor and fun in almost any situation, no matter how dire that situation might appear to others. Discouragement was simply not an option. Note the inner joy that seems to exude between the lines of this happy account of a tour he made to several hamlets in the mountains. It was posted to his mother.

September 4, 1939

*My Dear Mother,*

*Last letter closed the beginning of the trip back from Toishaan to Hoignan. Remember it had rained daily for days and the sky promised rain today. On Saturday morning after a good breakfast, catechist Paul started on ahead at 6:45 (This trip took place in the early part of August and terminated a few days before the feast of the Assumption.) I left at eight bells with about sixty pounds of luggage on the back carrier of the bike. The roads were in terrible shape and in many places the mud was almost knee deep. An ordinary ride of two hours took 6, and then we weren't halfway home. Stopped at the orphanage at Hoi Hau for some coffee and cookies. The road from there to Kwong Hoi was in pretty good shape.*

*Left Kwong Hoi at four bells and we were fortunate to get to a road stand before the half-hour downpour commenced. Arrived at the foot of the mountain and it was getting dark rapidly. Lucky enough we hired two fellows to carry the bikes over the mountains and I carried the luggage because Paul had all he could do to walk. This was about seven o'clock. We stopped in at the village nearby and found the small store.*

*We travelers were thirsty and hungry. We ate plenty of cookies and tea and water. The old man of the store was very nice*

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*and the usual crowd came around to see the foreigner and the bikes. The wife of the store-owner was a kind soul, but not well-mannered. She called me a foreign devil without batting an eyelash and I had a good laugh and told her that the foreign devil could understand and speak her language. The catechist got peeved at her and told her to call me a priest, but I told him the Grandma didn't mean any harm and she thought that was my title. We all had a laugh. She called me that name again at least four more times. She was puzzled that I could understand and speak her language. Finally I told her to rush the tea and she did. The tea finished and I told her to get some mountain water and she did. What fun.*

*Hired a guy to lead us out on the bus road because it was very dark and the streams were deep in places. Got to the bus road and [we were] unable to ride because of the pitch darkness and mud. . . . All roads have been cut up because of uncertain conditions (the Japanese) in the country and this section of the road must have been done by Lucifer himself. No exaggeration — the mud was knee deep in many places, plus the darkness, and baggage, and many times [I] had to go back and carry the catechist's bike. We stopped and rested on the bridges and he slept. This was our schedule for the rest of the night. We landed at our door at daybreak at five-thirty. I took a shower, heard fourteen confessions and said Mass and rested for a good part of the day.*

*Variety is the spice of life and we get it over here. Plenty of fun these trips.*

*Love to all.  
Your loving son,  
Chinese Joe*



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### Can One Foreign Priest Make a Difference?

From the beginning it was Maryknoll's policy to train a native clergy so that they could teach the Catholic faith to their own people, ordain their own priests and, hopefully, gain China for Christ. However, without the sustained presence, example, and dedication of individual Maryknoll missionaries, this would seem an impossible task. It was the missionaries who attracted the interest of potential priestly candidates. They were the ones who, together with Chinese and American sisters, were educating them in the Catholic religion, and their labors bore fruit slowly and sporadically. Moreover, the task of education had to be accomplished in conjunction with the performance of numerous works of charity that, out of necessity, had to be done on a daily basis. In a letter written on the feast of the Immaculate Conception in 1939, Father Joe explains the importance of this policy in light of the Church's future in China. This is only a segment from that communication.

*Fathers Joyce and Leiu arrived here from Sancian on December 5, about two in the afternoon. Of course, as usual, I had to be out. I had to go to (name of town not clearly written) on some business about mortgaged rice fields and didn't return until five-thirty. Both of the visitors looked fine. Father Leiu is a Chinese priest and the first and only Chinese priest that Kongmoon Vicariate has at present. He is an excellent priest and knows English very well and talks the English tongue very well.*

*Father Leiu is thirty-three years old and has been ordained a little over five years. His first five years were spent in the Kongmoon Junior Seminary teaching the boys. He has severe eye trouble and was forced to leave the seminary work. He is*

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*at present going around to all the missions giving retreats to the Sisters, catechists, and school teachers and Christians. His present work benefits the priest and everyone concerned. Next year we will have a few more Chinese priests. The native clergy is a necessity in every country and the Church does everything in her power to promote and educate the natives for the Priesthood, Sisterhood, and Brotherhood.*

When World War II was raging in China, even before America's involvement, there were Maryknollers who stayed in their mission territory rather than leave their people without the sacraments. Father Joseph Lavin was one of these men. Having arrived in China in 1932, he was at his post for fifteen years before taking a home leave back to the United States! Typically, in the halcyon days, Maryknollers would remain at their mission site for ten years. They would then return to the United States for one year of rest and relaxation before returning to their field. The *Iron Man* insisted on deferring his leave and his superiors acquiesced time and again. He was always reluctant to leave his people, fearing that no other priest could endure the fatiguing journeys that were necessary in order to give succor to so many villagers. Moreover, he was deeply concerned that their material needs would not be taken care of because of the many complications involved in procuring food, medicine, and other necessary supplies from the various private and governmental agencies. Starvation was a very real possibility in the more remote areas, or on islands like Sancian. Men like Father Joe, who had assimilated themselves so completely with the Chinese, were indispensable.

*Don't you, Pa, or the rest of the Lavin clan worry about old Black Joe. He is safe and sound, healthy, and not in the danger zone. It is foolish to worry, no matter what happens. God will take care of us and we should leave the rest in his*

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*Divine Hands. The papers carry much war news and don't believe all you read and hear because most of it is false. The papers have a tendency to over exaggerate and make big news out of nothing. Most likely you have noticed in my letters the absence of war news and this is for good reasons. My future letters will be lacking in war news. We are over here to save souls and not spread war news. You understand my position.*

Once America entered the war two years later, there was no doubt that Father Joe would remain in China for the duration of the conflict. Even when the war with Japan terminated, he continued to remain at his post for three more years before finally returning to the United States. Victory against the Japanese brought little relief to the ordinary Chinese peasant. There were rice and other food shortages, rising inflation of currency, and a social and political instability that threatened to explode into civil chaos.

In a letter written on September 22, 1946, Father Joe attempted to explain to his mother and father (who were hoping he would take his leave after the war's end) why his departure would be delayed. Although Father Joe cited the dangers and problems of traveling in China as major obstacles to his return, it was tending to the essential needs of his people that actually caused the delay. Part of that letter reads:

*China is a big place and ways of travel are not the best. While the war was on, we didn't travel unless the Japs were on our heels. We stayed close to home. During the entire war, the Japs were damn close and we had to be on the alert at all times. In Hoignan, besides the Japs, we had Reds and bandits and pirates to contend with. Had a number of close shaves, but that is part of life. Life is never at a standstill in this section of the country.*

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*Of course, you all know that my leave has been granted for the past four years. During the war I would not think of going back home for various reasons — 1) too expensive; 2) too dangerous; 3) travel too uncertain; 4) take at least six months to get home; 5) this territory would be without a priest; 6) during the difficult times, I felt it was my duty to stay on the job and provide for the seventy orphans here and the poor people etc. etc. You all can understand my position.*

While this excerpt surely provides some good reasons for Father Joe's delay, it is in the next paragraph that he sums up his true feelings about leaving the mission:

*At present, we are getting help for the orphans here and that means a lot. We have to fight for financial help in the line of rice, wheat, milk, beans, canned goods etc. As long as I stay here we will get more help. Another added reason to delay my trip.*

It would be easy to say, "Let someone else carry the ball for a change." The *Iron Man's* conclusion that, "As long as I stay here, we will get more help," might be challenged by some naysayers who like to maintain that no man is indispensable. That is a moot point. The fact of the matter, as the next excerpt demonstrates, is that Father Lavin, in this circumstance and time, *was* indispensable – short of extraordinary divine intervention, that is. The letter was dated March 7, 1947.

*The second item holding me is relief work (passport problems were given as the first reason) for the Hoignan orphanage and also for the poor people. If Father Convey and the writer were not on the Toishaan Relief Committee, our orphanage, most likely, would not be getting any help,*

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*or very little, and the poor people would get very, very little. The Toishaan Committee including the Mayor and committee members have been very good and just in distributing relief in the Toishaan area. Father Convey and myself are getting plenty of help for our orphans, including rice, wheat, beans, canned goods, clothes etc. I have been in relief work for five or six years and only during the past eight months have I been getting help for the Hoignan Orphanage. This form of relief work will most likely terminate on April 1, 1947, and, thereafter, we might not get any more help. Hate to go home when things in relief work are coming our way in regards to our orphanages and also a big help to the poor people. As you know, a new hand doesn't know all the ropes of the game. The meetings are all conducted in Chinese and, therefore, it is important to understand what is said and also to be able to express one's ideas in Chinese and to be able to discuss and argue back and forth. We have plenty of discussions and many arguments and, at times, Father Convey and the writer must oppose the Mayor and the entire committee on some things and it takes plenty of arguments to change their point of view. We are saving millions of dollars for Bishop Paschang by securing help from the relief.*

It was not only an absolute necessity for the Maryknollers to obtain the rice, they also had to get it to all the destinations, beginning with the most needy. There could be huge transportation problems. In a follow-up letter, the missionary related to his parents that, through his efforts with the Relief Committee, he had obtained seventeen tons of rice for the orphanage and the poor people of Hoignan! However, transporting the rice from Toishaan to Hoignan was a major

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undertaking. It required making multiple shipping arrangements and keeping the information as secret as possible lest the bandits or pirates find out about it.

*Chinese Joe* was right. If he had not been available to conduct these relief negotiations and make the shipping arrangements, then the job, in all likelihood, would never have been completed. A lot of people would have died of starvation.

In the years immediately following World War II, the Catholic Church in China was at its highest level of prestige. In no small degree this was due to the example of those Maryknoll priests who weathered the storm of the long war with Japan. In fact, Father Joe commented on this in his March 2 letter, citing it as a third reason for remaining at his post. The number one reason for remaining was that the relief work was making "the name of Christ better known to the millions of pagans." Father Joe concluded that same letter with, at least, an expression of hope that he would be home soon.

*Please try to understand my reasons for not rushing home — mother, father, brothers and sisters. There is work to be done and the writer must do his share before going home. When my work is finished, I can go home with a peaceful conscience and enjoy my furlough with Ma, Pa, and the Lavin Clan. God has given us all many spiritual and temporal blessings during the past fifteen years and He will not fail us now. It won't be long before we have one grand family reunion on 575 Concord Street.*

*At present, I am in Toishaan on relief work and next Saturday I must go to Lou Cheung for a committee meeting. The committee in Lou Cheung is in charge of all the work*

## From Loting to Hoignan: 1938-1947

*in these five districts and the committee asked me to become a member. Of course I accepted.*

*May God bless you all and Mary protect you. Keep me in your good prayers.*

*Your loving son,  
Chinese Joe*

By June of 1947, the relief work was over. *Chinese Joe* had run out of reasons for not returning to the United States. On June 20, he penned the following message to the Lavin family:

*The relief work is over for the present. There is new relief work and it is not certain how the administration will be handled. Most of the Kwangtung area will be administered in Canton by different outfits, such as the Catholic Church, Protestant Church etc. This will be a good thing and in this way the poor people will be assisted in many ways. There are plenty of relief goods in Canton and mountains more of them coming to Canton from America for distribution. I hope at least some of this reaches the poor man. If the Church organizations and other good relief societies are in charge of the distribution, the poor man will have a chance. Otherwise, the poor man will die of starvation. Plenty to say on this subject, but what is the use. We do what we can to help the orphans, poor people, and ones in need.*

*The only thing holding me in China is my new passport. No news about the passport yet. . . . No doubt, one of these days Chinese Joe will be walking in on you all at 575 Concord Street.*

On July 13, the passport finally arrived. On August 28, Father Joe was scheduled to sail from Hong Kong to San Francisco on the *President Taft*. Because of delays, the ship did

## The Iron Man of China

not depart until August 30. With stops in Japan and the Hawaiian Islands, the President Taft did not arrive in San Francisco until September 19. He was able to pen a letter home relaying more definite information. From the ending of the letter we can imagine a youthful priest who could hardly wait to see his siblings and, most especially, to bring the joy of his presence to his aging parents.

*We left the island of Hilt on Saturday night at eight o'clock, September 13. The rest of the journey was uneventful except for a few rough days and cold weather. I most likely will stay one or two days in San Francisco and then one or two days in Los Angeles and maybe a day at Maryknoll, New York, and then home to 575 Concord Street for one big grand reunion of the Lavin clan. Yes, I will be very glad when I hit the porch and greet you, brothers, sisters, and the entire clan. As you know, no pen will be able to express my inner feelings of joy and consolation. Most likely, [I will] get home next Friday or Saturday — 26 or 27 of September. I will let you know later just when I will arrive in Framingham so Pa can come down in his old Ford and pick me up and tear hell bound for election through town and up to 575 Concord Street.*

It turned out that *Chinese Joe* arrived home early on Wednesday, September 24. After fifteen years of labor in a vineyard halfway around the world, he had returned to Framingham. And who was it that met him at the train station? His father, Joseph — in his “old Ford.” Then — something like grads after their last day of school — they tore “hell bent for election through town” to 575 Concord Street. There, his mother, Catherine, waited for him with all the rest of the family. Many tears were shed upon his arrival home that wonderful day. There was incredible joy.



# The Founding of the Father Lavin Mission Club: 1948-1972

Father Joseph Lavin had performed his duties so well that he received both local and national recognition. Earthly glory, however, had no place in the heart of our priest; rather, his primary concern was to raise funds for the relief of the suffering Church in China and for the support of the Maryknoll missions. In addition to his humility, his selflessness, his enthusiasm for life, and his strength of character, he had a winsome personality that naturally drew people to him. Most of all, it was his years of labor for the poor Chinese that moved many of those with whom he came in contact to assist him generously in the funding of his missionary work.

In fact, when Father Joe was on leave during the years of 1947 and 1948, an organization called The Father Lavin Mission Club was formed by the residents of his home town. The purpose of this club was to educate people about the objectives of missionary work, to pray for its success, and to raise money for the projects that might be undertaken in China. Other than the establishment of the Mission Club, there is nothing extraordinary to relate about Father Lavin's reunion with his loved ones that year. There was no need to write, so no letters are available to enlighten us as to the family's activities. All that we know is that Father Joe definitely gained some weight.

Actually, it was from Hoignan, on May 20, 1949, after his return to China, that Father Joe wrote his first newsletter to the members of the Mission Club. He thanked them for

## The Iron Man of China

their assistance and explained how helpful their support had been to the Chinese people. Here is a good chunk from that inaugural salute.

*Dear Friends:*

*I received the Easter card and greetings of fifty-one names on April 21st — just four days after the feast day. Maybe, instead of Dear Friends, it should read Dear Gang. Thanks for the greetings and your thoughtfulness. These few lines are for each and everyone of the gang and be sure [that] all read my return greetings.*

*Maybe this news will gladden your hearts as it did mine. On May 14, I received an airplane letter with the enclosed check from Mrs. Betty Parent, the Treasurer of the Father Lavin Club. The check was for one thousand and thirty dollars (\$1030.00) U.S. money. That's a good sack and will come in handy for the various needs, such as the orphanage, catechists, schools, poor, charity etc. Will use the money with extra care. Last November, before leaving, the club gave me a check for three hundred U.S. dollars. The club is doing marvelous work in a quiet way and all the members are missionaries at heart. You all realize, the Church needs missionaries at home to help by prayer and money and also missionaries on the field of action. All credit and praise must be given to Helen Foley, Betty Parent, Neal Goley, the Lively Captains (the Captains collected money from the members), and all the members of the club. The old saying, "in unity we stand, divided we fall." The motto of our club is: "join when you wish and drop out when you like." Free for all, and no restrictions. Anyone can join the band of this home mission Club. A new member helps the mission cause. Words cannot express my humble thanks.*

## The Father Lavin Mission Club:1948-1972

*I finally went to Toishaan, received the rice permit from the Mayor, then to San Oui City to have the Mayor sign the rice permit, and then to Kongmoon City to buy the rice. Ever since returning to Hoignan, I have been distributing rice to the blind, lame, old, poor, and especially to the kiddoes. In Kongmoon, I bought sixty Chinese piculs. At first I only helped the most extreme cases. Just the other day, at least four hundred came in for rice, but I only gave rice to 320 and turned the others away. One can take care of the needy cases. Cannot help everyone, because of limited funds. Everyone receives 10 ounces of rice daily. A good many come in from three or four miles. The ones who live at a distance, I give five days supply — the most needy receive 50 ounces and others 30 ounces (of course most get 50 ounces — some are able to beg a little). The ones who are near come in daily for their 10 ounces. A good many of them are pitiful cases and you would not believe [it] unless you saw the rice line.*

*At the orphanage, we have thirty-one girls and twenty-three boys, aged 2 - 17. There are about fifteen waifs in the Creche. This is quite an army to provide for. Monthly the Creche receives about twenty infants and most of these die from lock-jaw or improper care at birth. On May 11, Rose Cheung Lau Fuk and Joseph Wong Kwok were married here at a Nuptial Mass. Rose is an orphan. That makes twelve orphans married and four are proud mothers of bouncing baby boys. Maybe [I'll] marry off a few more before the end of the year.*

*Things are quiet and peaceful here. Nothing to worry about.*

Always the optimist! Yet, while this letter was being written the well-armed and well-funded Communists were waging a murderous campaign against their own countrymen, the

## The Iron Man of China

government, and the Nationalist army. As we well know now, the Red terror would dominate, and although Father Joe had hoped, in 1949, that their revolution would die of its own hate, it was even then winning major victories. To be sure, by the time that the Father Lavin Mission Club had received this letter, the threat of a wholesale persecution of the Church loomed ominously over the horizon.

Meanwhile, the intrepid Maryknollers went about their daily work. On September 24, 1949, *Chinese Joe* wrote his parents a letter of gratitude for all that the Mission Club had done over the past two years.

*For a long time, I have intended to write this letter to thank you for being an active member of the Father Lavin's Club. Words fail to express my thanks and appreciation. You cannot fully realize the great sacrifice on your part and the countless good that your generosity is accomplishing in China.*

*For successful missionary work, the Church needs the active members in the field and the active members at home. My duty is to preach, instruct, baptize, and to minister to the needs of the Christians and pagans. Your duty as an active missionary at home is to spread the mission idea, pray for the missions, and give financial aid if possible.*

*We have a good example in Saint Francis Xavier and Saint Theresa, Little Flower of Jesus. St. Francis Xavier, one of the greatest missionaries in the annals of history, labored for ten years on the missions and died on Sancian Island — just across from Hoignan. St. Theresa never went to the missions, but her whole life was one of prayer and sacrifice for the missions. The Holy Father chose these two saints as Patrons of the Missions. The Vicar of Christ asks you to imitate the*

## The Father Lavin Mission Club:1948-1972

*examples of St. Francis and St. Theresa, and your participation in the work of the foreign missions will reap many blessings for you and numerous souls. As you know, prayers are important, but alms are also necessary.*

*Every morning at the altar during the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, you and all the members of the club are given a very special remembrance. All of your intentions and petitions are included in this memento. You share in my labors, sacrifices, and spiritual works for the salvation of souls.*

Founded in 1948, the Father Lavin Mission club continued to operate until May of 1972, a year and a half after Father Joe's death. Even though its "priest" was expelled from China on April 1, 1953, the club gave its support for nineteen more years to the Church that remained there and to the poor. This was certainly a tribute, if not a lasting monument, to the *Iron Man*. Actually, there were a few years following Father Joe's expulsion by the Communists, when the Club was dormant. As we shall see later, during that dormancy, the Maryknoller needed a lot of physical care if he was going to recover from his exhausting ordeal in China. Due to malnutrition he had gone almost completely blind and (for the same reason) a good portion of his stomach had to be removed. When his health did stabilize he was assigned to Promotion and Propaganda for Maryknoll as a preacher and fundraiser. In 1956, *Chinese Joe* wrote the following lines of encouragement to the Mission Club members in order to bring the organization back to life:

*Dear —,*

*Just a note to say hello.*

*I want to thank you very much for being a member of the Father Lavin Mission Club. During the past eight*

## The Iron Man of China

*years, the Club has done much good for the Chinese in China and in Hong Kong. Our work is now restricted, but we are still able to help the Chinese in many ways with their fight against Communism.*

*Do you still want to be an active member of the Father Lavin Mission Club, or not? It is still the same old story — one dollar every month to help China and the Chinese. In this way, you are an active missionary in the homeland helping the foreign missions.*

*Please check “yes” or “no” on the enclosed Father Lavin Mission Club Card and return in the enclosed self-addressed envelope. For example, put a check mark (yes) if you still want to be a member, or check (no) if you want to drop out. Thanking you for your cooperation in answering “yes” or “no.”*

*May God bless you abundantly with the choicest blessings and graces for your interest and financial support of the foreign missions in the Father Lavin Mission Club.*

The response to this simple and unaffected summons was overwhelmingly positive. Within a short time, the club was back in full swing. On January 6, 1957, he wrote a bulletin to the club members explaining to them how the money was being used to help those who had escaped the clutches of the Red dragon.

*575 Concord St.  
Framingham, Mass.  
January 6, 1957*

*Greetings of this Holy Season!*

*I want to thank you for being faithful members of the Father Lavin Mission Club. Your zeal, kindness, thoughtfulness, generosity, and prayers have been an inspiration to*

## The Father Lavin Mission Club: 1948-1972

*me since 1948. You have been faithful to me and the Chinese during all these years. The mere word "thanks" is unable to express my sentiments.*

*The big question — "Where is your monthly contribution going?" The one dollar monthly collection from every member is helping the Chinese. The following names are not real. Here are a few examples:*

*Patrick, a Hoignan orphan, was allowed out of Red China and is now in Hong Kong. He has been stricken with tuberculosis. Three months ago, I told Pat to go to the hospital and our Club would pay the bill. He is taking the long cure and is doing well. No idea what the bill will be!*

*Mary, another orphan is studying for the native Sisterhood in the colony of Macao. We support her.*

*Joseph, another orphan, is studying in Hong Kong for the priesthood. He started his studies last September. We will try to take care of his expenses.*

*Orphan Anna came to Hong Kong, married, and now lives in Canada. Needs no help. Her sister is still in Red China and the "Redlegs" refuse to allow her to come to Hong Kong. She studied one year for the Sisterhood and wants to continue but is deprived. Pray for her.*

*Orphan Paul is listed among the lucky ones. He came out on a pass and did not return. He finished his high school and a short course in accounting school. He wanted to go to Japan for his accounting course at the initial cost of one thousand and six hundred U.S. dollars. I wrote back and told Paul to get a job and forget about Japan. He acquired a job and now we do not have to help him.*

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*Big orphan Eddie is now working in Hong Kong. He was faithful to me under the Commies. We help him when out of work.*

*Agnes, the daughter of one of our former catechists, is now working in the sewing department for the Maryknoll Sisters. She wants to get married and asked for some money to buy furniture etc. I wrote to Bishop Paschang and told him to give Agnes forty dollars U.S. money as a marriage gift. They cannot get married on love alone. We try to share in the hardships and happiness of others. Her mother, father, brothers, and sisters are still in China.*

*Another family fled from the Reds in China and now lives in Hong Kong. [The father] was one of my school teachers. He has six sons and one daughter. His grass roof hut burned to the ground on Christmas Day in 1955 and he lost everything. They now live on the street. The price for a new refugee home is two hundred U.S. dollars. I hope in the near future, we will be able to give him money for a new home. What happiness will be theirs! This homeless family is also penniless and we help them as much as possible.*

*The appalling story behind the Bamboo Curtain will be told later.*

*Our prayers and financial support are needed for the Chinese. Many needy cases are desperately awaiting our help. You are still active and powerful members of the home front. Keep up the good work!*

*We have a good number of faithful members. Our motto is — "Join when you want and drop out when you feel like it!" No obligations! Every club wants new members. If every member could enlist a new member in 1957, we would be much stronger spiritually and financially. Just a suggestion!*



## The Father Lavin Mission Club:1948-1972

*May the Infant Jesus on "Little Christmas," and every day in 1957, fill your hearts with the choicest blessings and graces.*

*Rest assured of my prayers and a very special remembrance at my daily Mass for you and your intentions.*

*May Jesus, Mary, and Joseph love you always.*

The *Iron Man* was not going to just sit back and let the Reds drag China into their hellish police state. One by one he would attempt to rescue as many souls from the Luciferian revolutionaries as he could. He did this through the avenues of charity that assisted the victims of the terror and provided for the security of those Chinese that had religious vocations. Reports like the one above touched the hearts of the club members. New members were quick to enlist. In fact, by 1963, the Mission Club had grown so steadily that he had to send out a special letter just for them by way of an initiation to the holy cause.

That particular letter of greeting was written from 575 Concord Street, two years after the *Iron Man* had taken an early retirement from Maryknoll. He was then serving as a parish priest at St. Stephens Church in Framingham. As we shall see a bit later on, Father Joseph Lavin would find himself growing more and more disenchanted with Maryknoll's change of spirit. The Society, by the late 60s, was not the same order that he had dedicated his life to.

Despite his retirement from Maryknoll, our priest continued to personally direct and promote the Father Lavin Mission Club. That included sending periodic letters of gratitude to the members, as well as inspiring updated notices keeping everyone informed of the status of the beneficiaries of their gifts and prayers. Father Joe also reminded the members of all the spiritual blessings that were guaranteed to each and every one who had given a "cup of cold water" to the needy in the name of

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Christ. Our Maryknoller never ceased to support what he considered to be the true work of a "Chinese" missionary: helping those individual priests and sisters who were serving the victims of Chinese Communism.

The Father Lavin Mission Club was one of the major vehicles enabling this Maryknoller to maintain his commitment to the Church in China. But, in January of 1971, this all came to an end with the *Iron Man's* death. The final notice dissolving this magnificent organization was sent to club members in May of 1972 by the Lavin family. The bulletin was as brief as it was sad. It was simply an expression of gratitude and a promise of remembrance on behalf of Father Joe's family for many generous benefactors.

*575 Concord Street  
Framingham, Massachusetts  
May 1972*

*Dear —*

*Thank you for being a member of the "Father Lavin Mission Club." This club was very "special" to Father Joe. It was the club and your generosity for the missions that enabled Father Joe to feed, clothe, and educate some of the poor people of China. Many of these people were his former orphans or, as he referred to them, "our adopted Chinese." Father Lavin and his club members will long be remembered by them and their families. The Father Lavin Mission Club was dissolved when Father Joe died.*

*Enclosed you will find a prayer "Memorial Card" in memory of Father Joe and a picture of the convent which you all helped to build.*

*Thank you again for your kindness and generosity.  
May God bless you always.*

# The Final Years in China: 1948-1953

After his one-year furlough in the United States, *Chinese Joe* returned to his beloved China. At first, he simply continued on as he had in the past. With his usual whirlwind of activity, trudging the muddy roads, or negotiating his bike over mountainous terrain, he went about making his tours from village to village. Caring for the sick and needy, giving counsel and solace to the poor and downtrodden, baptizing babes and converts, offering Mass and administering the sacraments: it may appear routine to us as we read these lines in the comfort of our homes, yet it was anything but routine to the man in the field.

Father Joe had his hands firmly to the plow. Many times he must have called the Lord's words to mind: "Sufficient for the day is the evil thereof." The future looked more and more threatening each day. Even though people were converting to the Catholic faith in large numbers, the Red asp was winding its way through the cities, towns, and villages of China. At first, the wily serpent appeared to be benign. It allowed and even encouraged the people to speak their minds openly, and to carry on business as usual. His forked tongue oozing with guile, the old serpent had his agents praise the good works of the Catholic Church, whose missionaries were feeding the hungry and providing medical services for the sick and suffering.

Many missioners began to believe that even if the Reds took over they would still be able to carry on as they had in the past so long as they distanced themselves from political squabbles.

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After all, they thought, the Communists did say that the people would have “freedom of religion.” So, maybe the new government would not be that bad. As long as the missionary societies stayed with preaching the Word and performing good works, there would be no reason for the Communists to interfere — at least, that is what some of the more gullible missionaries thought.

Even Father Joe’s letters, right into the dawn of 1950, appeared optimistic about the Church’s continued role in China. However, deep down inside, he seemed to sense that the Reds were simply biding their time — ferreting out their enemies by deceptive promises. The tactic is an old one that seems never to fail. Once in power, encourage the opposition to speak their minds openly. After all, “we have a free society.” They give their adversaries a podium, maybe even a newspaper. Then the dirty liars move in, and if your name is on the wrong mailing list, or you have been too vocal, they come knocking at your door in the night. Hitler did it; Stalin did it; Chairman Mao did it; Chou-En-lai did it, and the Red party today is still doing it.

By the middle of 1950, the benign disguise was fully stripped away. The viper rose up and sank its fangs into its enemies with a vengeance. Anti-Communists were hauled into so-called “people’s courts” where they faced public trials on trumped up charges from false witnesses. Helpless victims were declared “enemies of the people,” brutally tortured, imprisoned and killed. There were diabolical spectacles springing up all over China that rivaled those of pagan Rome. In one city a fourteen-year-old girl was so brain-washed by Red propaganda that she accused her own parents to bloodthirsty officials. That was not enough. To strike more terror into the heart of any resistance, she was assigned

## The Final Years in China: 1948-1953

to be their executioner. It took two public attempts on two consecutive days, after intense brainwashing, before she finally performed the act. The police handed the steely-eyed girl the dagger this third time. She strode up the steps of the bloodstained platform, stood before her pleading mother and father and, with two deranged strokes, plunged the knife into each of their hearts. A Protestant minister, Leslie Millin, who happened to still be in the city, witnessed this sickening event from his hotel window. Once the executive director of the Freedom Foundation in Canada, Reverend Millin did much to awaken consciences in the west by giving lectures on the horrors of the "people's cultural revolution."

Needless to say, the "freedom of religion" that was once promised evaporated away like the morning fog. When the mist cleared, the true color of the great Red beast glared forth in all of its ruddy ugliness. Like a bolt out of hell the persecution of the Catholic Church, and those who represented and adhered to its doctrines, began in full force. Death, torture, imprisonment, and, for the more fortunate, expulsion from the country became the standard policy throughout China for religious, clergy and suspect Catholic laymen. The Reds had no intention of "dialoguing" with the Church. Their purpose was to annihilate it. Communism was atheistic and, therefore, was antithetical to everything that Catholicism stood for.

It did not take long before Father Joseph Lavin, like many other of the Maryknollers in China, was put through the wringer. His orphanage was confiscated; he was put on public trial and accused of crimes against the People's Government; he was put under house arrest and confined to one small room with his associate, Father Rocco Franco; he was starved, harassed, and condemned by many who knew better; and he

## The Iron Man of China

was robbed of the physical strength and endurance for which he had become so well known.

In the following pages, we will walk with Father Joe as he passes through each of these tribulations.

The Chinese Communists were not fools. They did not want to make a martyr out of *Chinese Joe*. This would have only created public indignation against them. So they did the next best thing. They expelled him from the country. They tore him away from the people to whom he had dedicated nearly twenty-two years of his life. For *Chinese Joe*, being thrown out of China was even more heartrending than the persecutions he had endured. Being told by the government to “pack your things, get out, and never return, or you will be killed,” was a blow that nearly took the breath out of his very soul. It would all happen so fast.

When Father Joe crossed “Freedom Bridge” into Hong Kong on April 1, 1953, he was still *Chinese Joe*. He was still the *Iron Man*. Despite all that he had suffered, he did harbor some lingering confidence that one day he would return to his adopted nation and continue his work. However, this would never come to pass.

### Red Terror: The Plan to Annihilate Christianity

In order to understand the suffering that Maryknollers and other foreign missionaries endured, it is important to reconstruct what life in China must have been like for those who chose to remain there under the Communist dictatorship. Prior to 1949, a battle of approximately twenty years had been waged between Chang-Kai-Shek’s Nationalist Kuomintang and MaoTse-tung’s Communist party. During much of this time period, the Nationalists dominated both

## The Final Years in China: 1948-1953

militarily and politically. Communism was hardly of any influence in the life of the ordinary Chinese peasant. However, after 1949, the tables were turned and the well-funded Communists were suddenly victorious on every front. They soundly defeated the Nationalists, driving them from the mainland to the island of Taiwan.

While Maryknoll's missionary policy was to remain politically neutral, their clergy were earmarked for persecution right from the beginning. Those Chinese priests and sisters who stood steadfast for their faith were particularly singled out by the Red dragon. To be sure, the Reds hated all religion, but the Catholic Church was viewed with a special detestation on account of her immutable authority. Right from the beginning of their ascent to power in Russia, they were bent on exterminating the Catholic Church from the face of the earth. Their goal was to create a classless atheistic society in which the citizens were subservient to the state in all things, rather than to God and His representatives.

Military leader, Chang Kai-Shek, even though he was viewed negatively by many western politicians and media moguls, accurately summed up the objectives of Communism after negotiating with Mao Tse-tung over several days at the former's home. He wrote the following in his diary:

“The essentials of the organization of the Communist Party are: (1) violence and ruthless killing; (2) special agents and repression. The purposes of its training are: (1) the elimination of the nationalistic spirit and the development of the international spirit (destruction of the nation's history and ethics); (2) elimination of human nature and the development of animal nature (arbitrarily dividing the society into classes and causing hatred and struggle).”

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That Mao was a dyed-in-the-wool Communist, who showed no mercy to his adversaries, is no longer speculation but an historical fact. He surpasses Joseph Stalin as the greatest murderer of all time, having been responsible for the deaths of some sixty million of his own countrymen in his long and diabolical reign. And the bloody terror continues in China even until this day. In modern times, were it not for the Cardinal Kung Foundation, we in the west would know very little about the ongoing clandestine arrests and imprisonments of dissidents, especially those who are religiously allied to the Vicar of Christ.

[Note: Ignatius Cardinal Kung, the heroic Bishop of Shanghai, was born in 1901 to a pious Chinese family of five Catholic generations. He was incarcerated by the Red Chinese in 1955 on September 8, our Lady's birthday. After spending nearly a third of his life in a prison cell, his sentence to life in prison was reduced to "house arrest" in 1985. Although he did not know it until years later, at the age of seventy-eight, he had been made a cardinal *in pectore* (i.e., secretly), by Pope John Paul II. The Reds finally released him from prison in 1987. At the age of eighty-six, he was flown to the United States to pass his last days with some of his relatives in Stamford, Connecticut. The "last days" of an old champion of the faith went on for another fourteen years. During that time he was invited to Rome to receive the red hat from the Pope in a solemn consistorial ceremony. When the Vicar of Christ called his name, this most ardent defender of the Petrine office lifted himself out of his wheelchair, dropped his cane to the floor, and walked up a half dozen steps to kneel at the feet of John Paul II. The Pope, visibly moved, stood up and lifted the ailing prelate to his feet. He, then, gave him his cardinal's red cap and remained standing



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in honor of the holy man as he ambled back to his wheelchair. It was the eve of the feast of Saint Peter, June 28th, 1991.

When Cardinal Sin of the Philippines visited Bishop Kung in 1985 (while he was under house arrest), the Reds would not allow a private reception. Instead, they had the Cardinal attend a banquet where he and the prisoner were seated at each end of a long table with ten Communist officials on either side between them. Since they could not speak to each other, and the whole atmosphere was stiflingly boring, the Philippine prelate suggested that everyone at the table sing their favorite song *solo a cappella*. When Ignatius Cardinal Kung's turn came, he sang a hymn in Latin. His favorite song was not to be silenced. It went beyond that banquet hall and was heard around the world. *Tu es Petrus*, he sang out, *et super hanc petram aedificabo ecclesiam meam*. (Thou art Peter, and upon this rock I will build My church.)]

The Chinese Communists were well organized, highly dedicated, and utterly ruthless in the pursuit of their goals. They were trained to show no mercy to their victims and to employ terror, in the cruelest sense of the word, in order to control the populace through intimidation. Lenin, Mao Tse-tung's Russian mentor, laid down the one and only absolute for the Communist: "The scientific concept of dictatorship means nothing else but this: power without limit, resting directly on force, restrained by no laws, absolutely unrestricted by rules." This kind of bravado, then, provided an incendiary mantra for igniting the fire of Mao's "purges" and for those insurgents who, quite literally, worshipped him.

The plan for bringing the Chinese people under the Communist yoke was simple but consistent, and repeatedly implemented throughout the provinces of China. It worked

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like this: Once conquest was achieved, then the populace was subjected to terror tactics. The victims were selected in advance. As to the clergy, those at the bottom of the ecclesiastical hierarchy were the first to undergo Communist brow-beating. Foreign priests were the first to be put on public trial, appearing before a pre-approved “judge” who was, no doubt, bogus. A crowd was pressured into assembly, incited, and instructed to bitterly condemn the accused. The Communists took note of those who refused to participate in the charade. Even those who were hesitant, or opposed to these tactics, ended up participating out of fear for themselves and their families.

During the trial, the accused would be viciously insulted, humiliated, spat upon, and beaten so that the crowd could taste the terror. The opportunity for defense was minimal at best, and the conviction was a foregone conclusion. The imposed sentence for foreign missionaries was usually imprisonment or expulsion from the country. Although execution was not usually imposed on foreigners, the incarceration in a Communist prison could be far worse. Torture, sleep deprivation, starvation, and brainwashing were inflicted on foreign prelates in an attempt to extract false confessions or renunciations of their faith. In the course of these grueling ordeals a number of missionaries received the crown of martyrdom.

Chinese priests and sisters suffered an even worse fate than the foreign religious. Not only were they beaten and tortured, but they were put on public display in stocks and chains with tags hung around their necks labeling them “running dogs” of the Americans. Any native religious who failed to cooperate was imprisoned for life or executed.

## The Final Years in China: 1948-1953

A good example of what a Maryknoll priest or sister could expect from the Red Chinese occurred at Kongmoon shortly after the Communists took power. Bishop Adolph Paschung, who was mentioned several times in Father Joe's correspondence to the Lavin family, was then residing at Kongmoon. This holy prelate had once cut up his own episcopal garments to make dresses and coats for the orphans there. The Communists put him on public trial because he refused to confess to crimes against the state. He was beaten, kicked, and spat upon. Because the bishop refused to confess, he was paraded through the streets, and pulled along by a noose hung around his neck. Men struck him on the back of the neck, and women hit him across the eyes until they turned black. Finally, his persecutors took him to the border of Macao and expelled him from the country. Such was his reward for years of dedicated service to the Chinese people.

For the Maryknoll priests and sisters who remained in China when the communists came to power, this is the fate that awaited them. Province by province and village by village, the scene was repeated again and again until every Maryknoller was either imprisoned, expelled, or killed. For some, the terror came right away in the early years of the Communist domination. For others, it came a few years later. But, before long, there was no one, no matter how selfless and dedicated he or she had been in serving the Chinese people, who escaped the wrath of the Red dragon.

As a Maryknoll priest or sister, you knew that the Communist leviathan would eventually arrive in your province. There was little that you could do about it except wait, pray, and hope that God would provide you with the grace and courage to endure the trial. There would be little, if any, support, understanding, or compassion given to you

## The Iron Man of China

during these tribulations, even from those friends who had been close to you during better times. Except for the Almighty, you would be on your own — and you knew it. If you had been spared thus far, your turn to suffer was sure to come. It was only a matter of time. The suspense could be more of a torment than the beating one had to anticipate.

This was the enemy's "hour and the power of darkness." The good would triumph through the cross. All the Maryknollers chose to stay in China, refusing to leave even when the Communists gave them the opportunity to do so. Such fortitude was expected; it was inherent in the risk freely embraced when one chose to be an apostle of Christ. It was inherent, too, in choosing to be a disciple of Fathers James Anthony Walsh and Thomas Frederick Price.

### The Beginning of the End: 1949-1950

We must return now to the actual chronology of our biography. We had left Father Lavin in Framingham on his year's furlough. After that, Father Joe left the U.S. for China in the latter part of 1948.

After a short stay in Hong Kong, Father Joe arrived at Kongmoon on January 8, 1949. It was here that he was to receive his assignment. Actually, even though he had been very successful in Hoignan, there was no guarantee that the *Iron Man* would return there. Father Joe described his meeting with Bishop Paschang in a few words: The Bishop was sitting on the porch and called me over. The conversation was short and snappy. The Bishop said, "Are you willing to go back to Hoignan?" [Father] Joe answered, "Okay with me Bishop." The second question was, "or do you want a change from the old stomping grounds?" The writer's answer, "No. I don't want

## The Final Years in China: 1948-1953

a change and Hoignan is just the place for me.” That settled the assignment and both were happy.

“Am I glad to go back to Hell’s Kitchen?” Father Joe asked in a letter to his family. “Don’t ask such a foolish question. You all know that I am glad and very well satisfied with the Hoignan mission: orphans, Catholics, pagans, and the whole shooting match. During my stay in the States, I always had the feeling that Hoignan was my position and certainly I would go back there. I couldn’t publish this fact because many things could happen before returning to the old post.” He continued, “My mission policy and outlook right from the beginning has been that any mission is okay because there is plenty of work no matter where you go. It is foolish to set your heart on one mission because God’s ways are not man’s ways. Go where the Bishop tells you and be satisfied. It’s the same old story — the grass always looks greener in the other fellow’s backyard.”

While the *Iron Man* was certainly glad to be back in China, the readjustment was not an easy one. The fifteen years he had already served in the field had been his most youthful. His body had been chiseled during those years into that of a rugged and slender Chinaman. Even his skin ceased to be that of a Caucasian. He was not just *Chinese Joe*, he was *Black Joe*. His physical health was in mint condition; he had the stamina, then, that went with being the *Iron Man*. However, after a year of rest and relaxation in the United States, all this changed. Father Joe was now in his early forties. His body had softened considerably from the change in diet and the lack of the rigorous exercise to which he had previously become accustomed.

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On January 8, Father Joe arrived in Kongmoon. Although the sisters there were overjoyed to see him, they could not help but notice the change. "I went over to the convent to see Sister Patricia and the Chinese sisters. I was dressed in my black suit and clerical collar. The Chinese sisters told me that I got very fat and white of skin and didn't look Chinese anymore. We all had a good laugh over that and especially when I said I was just another foreign devil." A similar welcome awaited him in Hoignan. Tall as he was, his 184 lbs. was apparently too much weight to carry if he was to measure up to his old reputation.

Just how difficult it was for Father Lavin to change back into old *Chinese Joe* was clearly reflected in a rather lengthy letter written on May 20, 1949, to his mother and father.

*Catholic Mission  
Hoignan, Toishaan  
Kwangtung, So. China*

*May 20, 1949*

*My Dear Mother and Father:*

*On May 13, a sick call came from Taan On at noon. Left immediately on foot with the boy of the sick mother. . . . After twenty minutes, I took off my shoes because the water was too much and I wanted to save the shoe leather. Walked bare footed for the next hour and a half through the water, mud, and slush — even the mud was knee deep at times. Mud, water, and slush are nice and cool and dirty on the feet and legs, but the hard caked and uneven mud, rocks, pebbles, and sand are damn tough on poor tender feet. The sun was out in all its glory [and] splendor, and hot as the "old Harry." The sand was very hot and tough to walk on. Too much trouble taking off and putting on the shoes. Not too bad on the way over. That vacation in the States and the*

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*Chevrolet did everything but harden my feet. During the war, and even after the war, I would think nothing of walking ten, twenty, and even fifty miles in a day and many of these miles were done without shoes — just plain barefoot.*

*The writer was used to that mode of travel at that time and the bottom of my feet were hard and better than leather. The old boy has become soft and especially the feet when it comes to walking barefooted. After a number of times of walking without shoes, the feet will become as hard as nails. Finally arrived and just outside of the village washed my feet in the brook and put on shoes and socks.*

*Two hours for the trip, which should have taken only one hour and ten minutes. It is only about four miles. In a straight line, it is only two miles but the rice paddies, carriers path, streams etc. are as crooked as a winding path up a steep mountain. Just like going around in a circle. The village seems so near, but the paths leading there are so far and long. . . .*

*The woman was dying. She had been sick for the past two months. The doctor saw her once and [was] unable to do anything for her. She is very poor and has two sons — 20 and 16 years old. They can't even support themselves. The older boy watches cows. The mother and younger son beg. Plenty of money might have saved her in the first stage of sickness — now it was too late. She is 48 years old and her husband died a few years ago from starvation. She begged our Lord and the Blessed Virgin continuously to help her. She went to confession, then was anointed and last blessing. Gave her some medicine and rice.*

*I left for home at two thirty and [it] took exactly two hours. Walked for ten minutes and off came my shoes. Ah!*

## The Iron Man of China

*Oh! Saw my poor frail and tender feet, ached, burned, and touchy at all points. What a mess! What a hell! Oh my poor feet for a kingdom of ice cream or a Chevrolet! Can't take it like the good old days. I am soft, fat, flabby, and ripe for the old folks home. For fifty minutes I walked, waded through water and mud and the heated sand and pebbles were like shots of fire. . . . I finally arrived home and gave out rice to about two hundred people.*

*Things are quiet and peaceful.*

*Love to all and God bless you all.*

*Your son,  
Chinese Joe*

During the early and middle part of 1949, missionary life proceeded as it had in the past. Even though the Nationalists and the revolutionaries were embroiled in an escalating war, Father Joe continued to engage in his ordinary religious and charitable activities unencumbered by the events going on around him. Although there is no record to tell us if Father Joe knew the good news beforehand, in early July (to his surprise or not), Father Rocco Franco arrived in Hoignan to serve as his curate. The Italian priest was a gift from heaven. In the following letter the *Iron Man* wrote to his mother, describing his new compadre, one can sense an almost childlike excitement.

*Fourth of July came and went like any other day. I almost forgot this great U.S. event. Celebrated by bringing some candy for the orphans. Busy as usual because of market day. This day should be dear to every American and should be kept alive. The Fourth of July seems to have lost a lot of pep and zip in the States — not like the old days and celebrations. No doubt you all celebrated U.S.-style and had a good time.*



## The Final Years in China: 1948-1953

*The biggest event of the year, or week, was the arrival of Father Rocco Franco on July 6, at seven o'clock in the evening. He has been appointed by Bishop Pashang for one year to Hoignan as curate. The word helper or side-kick is a better word. He arrived with seven students from Kongmoon by boat. The kiddos are on vacation from school. The other orphans have not returned yet.*

*Father Franco is twenty-seven years old and was ordained at Maryknoll in 1948. He spent his first year, or nine months, in China at the language school of Taon Chuk. He has a fair grasp of the language but still is a "baby in arms" at this Chinese mysterious sing-song lingo. At the end of three years a person is pretty good and after five years you should be able to stand on your own feet and take care of all problems and difficulties. After a hundred years, the language comes easy. No matter how long you are in China, there is something new to learn every day about the language, customs, and ways of the Chinese.*

*. . . Father Rocco is a regular guy and easy to please and get along with. He is eager to learn the language and customs of the country. He is trying out the Chinese menu to see if he likes it. If not, we will eat Western style. Eating Chinese style is much cheaper and easier to prepare and not as much fuss.*

*. . . So far he likes the Chinese menu. Foreign pineapple is in season and we have pineapple soup, pineapple in pies and cakes and sliced pineapple. . . .*

Father Joe ended his letter on a customary note of optimism: "Father Rocco will share the work here and that will be a big help. We should have a good time together and do more work in the villages." Again, while the overall tone of this let-

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ter paints a positive picture for the future, one gets the impression that Father Joe's reflection on the importance of Independence Day had a deeper meaning in light of what was about to occur in China.

Toward the latter part of 1949, the Reds were defeating the Nationalists, and they began to occupy nearby towns and villages. The Communists posted proclamations guaranteeing freedom of religion and the right of the clergy to travel from village to village to conduct religious services. All of this, as was explained earlier, was pretense.

In his letters home, Father Joe, like many of the other Maryknollers, downplayed the danger of the Communist takeover. Of course, he had to be very circumspect in what he put on paper. As already stated: there were intimations of impending trouble in his correspondence; sometimes these messages were expressed in a kind of cryptic code. For instance, he concluded his July 3 letter by stating, "Please keep China in your good prayers. Things are peaceful and quiet and don't worry about me. I can still run and play hide and seek." Three weeks later, he wrote: "Things are quiet and peaceful. Don't believe all you read in the papers." By September of 1949, however, Father Joe was more concerned, and his missives home, although very upbeat, were more candid. "These times are troubling," he explained to his parents, "and some things must wait. No immediate danger, so don't worry. I'm still in good shape and can run if events turn for the worst. Nothing like a little fun to break up the monotony."

Here was a man who lived in the presence of God. He had that holy confidence that goes with strong faith. In fact, the very word "confidence" is a compound of the Latin *con* and *fides*, which means "with faith." Then, too, it is obvious that

## The Final Years in China: 1948-1953

Father Joe was anxious not to trouble his parents. It would do them no good to worry. In a letter to his sister Mary, dated September 5th, the Maryknoller was much more frank about the dangers that he was facing. The communication is very detailed:

*Hope you and Peg (his sister) received that one-page letter last week. I promised to write at length last week but kept putting it off from day to day. Well, here it is and you can show it to Ma, Pa, brothers, and sisters, if you deem it wise. No matter what happens we are not in extreme danger and no sense to get hysterical or be upset about the current events. Yes, for the past two months or so, we have been sitting on top of the volcano and even enjoying life as usual. Why worry about the future and the present moment takes care of itself? Perched on top of the volcano will never give a person cold feet. Nice and warm all times. If and when the old volcano called China erupts in Canton or the Hoignan area, we will try to work underground or get kicked out and go back to that terrible (?) place called U.S. God knows what is in store for us and He will protect, guard, and watch over us. We have no fear, no matter what happens. . . .*

*The present government is called the Nationalist government, or the Nationals, or the Kuok Meng Tong (Kuomintang) and the opposing government is styled as the Reds, or Communists, or People's Government. As long as the ruling body is fair and gives religious freedom to the people, we can work under that government freely. The Nationalist Government of China has been square with the Church, and especially during the last World War, and now the present government is very favorable to Christianity. Another name is the "Old Government" and the new government (Reds or*

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*Peoples' Government*). We do not know for certain what the new Government holds for Christianity and already in many parts of China, the New Government has been hostile to all forms of Christianity. The whole question boils down to this: if the Communists of China ally themselves and depend on Russia it is a closed book for Christianity in China, and out we must go; on the other hand, if the Communists of China are only against the Old Government and want to establish a new government without consulting Russia, it might or might not be hostile to Christianity. That is the big question! Pages and pages could be written upon this question. What you are interested in is this situation around "Hell's Kitchen."

When I arrived back here from the States on January 12, 1949, Hoignan was under martial law or curfew from dusk to dawn. The soldiers (Nationalists) were here. Remember, in that letter, we were received with a volley of rifle fire — the soldiers were firing at the boat on the river. During the following months, the Reds were recruiting the farmers and [there was] plenty of propaganda. The first Communist scare to Hoignan Kaai came on March 23. On March 28, at 9:30 in the evening, the soldiers and Reds fought for about half an hour. The Reds tried to get into the town. Two Communists were executed in Hoignan Kaai on April 11 by the firing squad. That night, retaliation at midnight for one hour, the Reds tried to storm the town.

The Nationalist soldiers were recalled from Hoignan to Toishaan and left here on May 30, by boat — Rumor had it that the government was unable to defend the ninth (Hoignan) and tenth district of Toishaan and were giving the territory to the Reds. On the following day, the Red army

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arrived in Hoignan Kaai at one in the afternoon and took complete charge. Of course, the government officials had all gone with the soldiers. There was no fighting or resisting by the people. The Reds came in quietly and were received by the people because their fifth column and propaganda had been active for months. They didn't molest the people at least. The big village, all fell in line without any question — Man Ts'uen, Hoignan Kaai, Noh Ling, Noh Ma Kong, and Sha Laan. At Noh New Kong, the Reds met a little resistance. About one thousand Reds came in the first time and a few hundred were well equipped. On June 7, about two thousand Reds returned to Hoignan Kaai — mostly local Reds. The Reds demanded and took the guns — rifles, pistols, machine guns, etc. from the guards and local people. Naturally, many did not give up their guns. That is the first thing the Reds do — disarm the people, because they are afraid of an uprising.

The Reds didn't cause any trouble to the people and declared that they were their friends and only came to liberate them and form the Peoples' government. They didn't bother me, the Christians, or Church. They proclaimed religious freedom. That is their usual procedure until they secure power, and then [they] start tightening the screws and the people are helpless. On two occasions, they wanted to use the school for sleeping purposes, but I said no, and I got away with it. Another time they wanted to cook at the orphanage and were about to take over the stoves when I arrived and said nothing doing. The two cooks were damn astonished but picked up their wood and rice and left. Most likely this was the first time they were refused a place to cook, and especially by a foreigner. My policy is to be friendly but keep them out of the property as much as possible. The Reds were okay and apparently friendly. They came in dur-

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*ing the day to sit around and talk. A number of times they came in to eat breakfast and supper (meals cooked outside) in the yard. In the early morning they used our yard to drill. They did not trouble me and I was no nuisance to them. While they were here, they were the government and everything went along smoothly.*

*They formed the new officials, a farmer's union, a coolies' association, and had good order. Naturally, they grabbed a few government officials and spies and shot them if they did not turn over.*

*On July 1, the New Government was established in Hoignan Kaai (this is the center of the district). This took place amid great pomp and ceremony with the new Mayor and other officials. All the schools and their bands were present, all kinds of sports, and speeches galore. I was invited and naturally did not attend. No one from the Church went for the affair. During the entire occupation, they had Chinese shows and plays, sometimes twice a day — afternoon and evening — and free of charge, plenty of propaganda talks in the villages. They were men, boys, women and girls, and even small children. Naturally, they were all against the Kuomintang or Old Government. During the celebration, two planes came over and during the scattering two people were crushed to death.*

*On August 1, the Reds had another big mass meeting in Hoignan Kaai and all the people from the villages attended. During the latter part of July and first part of August, they held a two-week course for school teachers. I did not send any of my five teachers. During the occupation, everything seemed to go along okay. The top officials apparently were okay, but the minor officials squeezed as much as they could*

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*from the people, and the people were afraid to report the matter. The people were afraid of the New Government and they spoke in whispers and were very very cautious. You can draw your own conclusions what my sentiments were, or are. Our duty is to preach and help the people no matter what form of government exists.*

*For two or three weeks, rumors were ripe that the soldiers were coming back. On August 13, the Nationalist soldiers arrived at Sha Laan after fighting their way over the mountains, and [they] stopped at the road to sleep at night about three miles from Hoignan Kaai. The Nationalist soldiers came into Hoignan Kaai on August 14, at the break of day without any opposition from the Reds. The enemy just picked up and fled. The soldiers did not molest the people, but searched stores and homes. They came here for the usual search on two occasions during the day.*

*On the 17<sup>th</sup>, the two armies fought a good part of the day. On the 19<sup>th</sup>, reinforcements for the Nationalists arrived. On the afternoon of the next day, the soldiers all left town and the rumor said that they were leaving for good. That night some of the local Reds returned to Hoignan Kaai. The following day — Sunday, August 21 — the soldiers returned to Hoignan Kaai and recaptured the town after two hours of battle.*

*Our work here for the past eight months has been anything but normal. Our work at the Center has been moving along smoothly under both governments — church, orphanage, schools, dispensary, rice line etc. Our schools in the villages and the Christians have been okay. Our village visitations have been hampered and I have not made one visitation since returning here. I have made trips to the villages to see the sick and give the last sacraments. Since*

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*July, we have been going to the village of Taan On every week for Sunday Mass (a few times we did not go). During these times, you must use your head and not take too many foolish chances.*

*That is the story up to date. There is nothing to worry about, and don't you worry or fret and carry on. God will take care of Black Joe and we will have that Christmas reunion in 1955 or 1956. I think it is okay to show the letter to Ma and Pa — use your own judgment. Don't let this information get to the newspaper. See Peg's letter. God bless you all.*

By the middle of October, 1949, the Communist victory was a foregone conclusion. Despite the change in government, Father Joe continued to minimize the potential danger by trying to convince his parents that the press in America was exaggerating the seriousness of the situation. On October 14th, he jotted off this note:

*The newspapers must be hot with China news these days. Read all the news and do not be upset with what you read in the newspapers. No doubt, the reports about China will be exaggerated. We put our trust in God because He knows what is best for us. He is our Father and He will protect us in times of trouble, difficulty and hard going. [It] is well to turn to God, keep smiling, hope for the best, and put your trust and confidence in Jesus Christ. Needless to say, we poor human beings should rely and turn to God not only in times of trouble but in times of prosperity. Trials and hardships force us to turn to God. Keep smiling and praying.*

Just four days after the preceding letter was dispatched, the Reds took Hoignan for the final time. Here is an excerpt from a communication sent home on October 23, relaying the



## The Final Years in China: 1948-1953

news. Even still, the Maryknoller tries to remain optimistic. Note how careful Father Joe was in choosing his words — just in case the Reds might intercept it.

*Another week has gone by and a few notable events took place. You read in the newspaper that the New Government took over Canton around October 15, in a very peaceful manner. The Old Government pulled out and the New came in without fighting and very peaceful. In this way, it was much better for both armies and especially the people and very little loss of life. If they fought, the city would be destroyed and thousands of people and soldiers killed and destruction would be on all sides.*

*On Tuesday, October 18, the Old Government troops pulled out at the break of day in an orderly and peaceful manner and the New Government took over a few hours later. No fighting and no disorder. So you can see, we have been liberated once more. As you know, we are over here in China as missionaries to preach the gospel, baptize, run orphanages, schools, help the poor and needy, and all kinds of charitable works. We have nothing to do with the government, and this is not our sphere of work. We are in China as Catholic missionaries and not as American citizens. There are missionaries in China from all countries of the world. The Catholic Church is universal and the fundamental doctrine is to teach the people of the world the love of God, how to serve God, and how to be happy in this world, and how to attain the reward of heaven. Every human being wants to be happy in this world and the next.*

*You (Father Joe was referring to his mother), Pa, and the family have nothing to worry about. Things are peaceful and we can carry on our work as before. We make our visitations*

## The Iron Man of China

*to the villages, three schools have classes daily, the orphanage is still going strong, the rice line is enjoying free rice to one hundred fifty most needy people, and Father Franco and the writer are enjoying the best of health and happiness. Keep smiling with us.*

Father Joe's optimism continued to persist even into the month of November. As this paragraph from a letter written November 6, shows, nothing appeared to be changing.

*Things are quiet and peaceful here and no trouble in the least. Our work is unhampered and we sail smoothly along. In this peaceful place, we do not know a war is being fought. We have no radio, no newspaper, and must rely on the bamboo wireless for news. Not a bad situation in the least. We eat, sleep, work, play, and carry on in this tranquility. The optimist is always better than the pessimist. Why worry about tomorrow or the future. The tomorrow will take care of itself. We have complete trust and confidence in God and, in this state of mind, we have nothing to fear and no regrets. Keep smiling and work away. Adopt this philosophy of life and you will be happier, and rely on God entirely.*

*A big celebration was held on Sancian Island on December 3, the feast of Saint Francis Xavier. Father Joyce sent his sail boat to pick up Chinese Joe, Father Franco, and some of the orphans, so that they could attend the festivities. A big crowd attended the Mass offered by Bishop Paschang at the Memorial Shrine. The Bishop confirmed twenty-four people. Father Joyce baptized four children. Many people attended night prayers and benediction with the Hoignan orphans singing the Tantum Ergo and O Salutaris Hostia. It was a very happy day, a very blessed day.*

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On Christmas Eve of 1949, things were still looking favorable. A large shipment of food arrived at the mission just in time for the celebration of Christmas. Father Joe was so grateful that he inventoried every item.

On Christmas Eve, the chapel was packed with two hundred and fifty people. Father Joe greeted all of them individually after Mass and gave each person three small pieces of candy. With a dash of humor he reasoned: "Why three (referring to the pieces of candy) — you tightwad? How do you like this explanation? — In honor of the three kings who came and adored the Babe of Bethlehem on the feast of the Epiphany. The Christians are pleased when the priest gives them something — no matter how small. A Christmas gift to all is my motto."

On Christmas afternoon, the mission sponsored a track meet with the Christian men from the village of Lok Chuk Chonga. It was "a barrel of fun" for all, especially for "old" *Chinese Joe*.

After all of the fun on Christmas Day, Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament was conducted in the evening, followed by a sermon. "The chapel was packed to the doors," Father Joe wrote. "In Hoignan, at present, there is a trend toward the Church and especially [in] the village next to the church called Tung Cheung. Formerly, most of the village had entered the Church and many have become lax and gone back to superstition. Because of the times, you would think that the people would leave the Church instead of coming back, and converts [are] coming in."

New Year's Day came and went in a splendid fashion. Mass attendance was good, with about seventy holy communions, and there was a large crowd at the benediction and prayer service that evening. Then, too, the groups of dragon dancers

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that performed every New Year's Day, to the annoyance of Father Joe, appeared as usual.

In spite of the Communist take over, the beginning of the 1950's decade seemed peaceful enough. Supplies were still plentiful; the mission was running as smoothly as ever; the people were still practicing the Catholic religion; and converts were entering the Church in larger numbers than usual. The *Iron Man* had certainly recouped. Nevertheless, in his mind's eye, Father Joe knew that this "live and let live" honeymoon with the Reds was not going to last. It would only be a matter of time before the two kingdoms would clash. The Marxist creed was the same in China as it was in Russia. Religion was "the opiate of the people."

As the months rolled by, the civility and benign tolerance that the Communists first displayed to Fathers Lavin and Franco began to evaporate. The Reds had become fully entrenched in Hoignan. They had gradually built up their monolithic organization there, and now, humanly speaking, it was air-tight. The time was ripe for the new government to begin chipping away at the mission's independence. Their tactics were typical and by the book. First, surveillance and monitoring of the priest's activities increased. Then, the procuring of travel permits became more difficult. By the latter part of 1950, the Maryknollers were told to remain in their local area because their safety from bandits could no longer "be assured." Further, they were instructed to engage in their usual activities, but only between the hours of 8 a.m. and 8 p.m. Next, the Communists attempted to isolate the Maryknollers from the local population. School children were told to stop treating the Fathers courteously. Catholic adults were pressured into severing their connections with the Church in order to avoid being labeled as "running dogs of

## The Final Years in China: 1948-1953

the Americans,” and it got worse. Soon, the Communists boldly decreed that it was every Chinese Catholic’s patriotic duty to join their own newly-formed church because it was independent of foreign influence. With the start of the Korean War in June of 1950, the people were even more adamantly encouraged to show their patriotism by opposing “American imperialists” like Father Lavin.

### Entrapment and Persecution: 1951-1953 Setting the Trap

Before an open war could be declared against Fathers Lavin and Franco, the Communists knew that being well prepared was the key to success. They began to set snares to entrap the Maryknollers by trying to turn the people against them and the Catholic Church. This could not be done all at once, or in a blatantly obvious fashion. Rather, it had to be done gradually, especially in light of the fact that Father Lavin was well liked and respected by the people. First and foremost, the Roman Catholic Church had to be done away with. It was the Communists’ archenemy and incompatible with China’s new “patriotic” direction — that is, the elimination of all foreign influence from the mainland. The Communist strategy was to replace the Church with their own reformed version of Catholicism called the Catholic Patriotic Association (CPA). The substitute church would mimic the Roman exteriorly, but it would be under the direction of the People’s Government. They would appoint the bishops and clergy and determine policy and direction. Before the Communists could achieve

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this goal, however, they had to determine who would and who would not help them to implement their plan.

In order to test out the possibility of establishing a CPA Church in Father Joe's territory, a meeting with the Catholics of Hoignan was requested by an important government official from Canton. Without consulting Fathers Lavin and Franco, the local Party affiliates set up the meeting. Of course, the two priests were not invited to attend. The Communists expected that no more than twenty people or so would be present. Much to their surprise, approximately six hundred Catholics showed up to hear what the new government had to say.

Despite their miscalculation, the meeting was conducted as scheduled. The purpose was explained and the people were encouraged to provide their input. Because no prior pressure had been placed upon them, many in the audience spoke freely. Led by Mr. Ma Mung-Lui, the school principal at Father Joe's mission, the Catholics had one voice in adamantly refusing to start any national church that would cut them off from the mother Church in Rome. That this irritated the official from Canton was evident when he sarcastically declared: "But you have a duty to China. This should come first. The Roman Catholic Church is foreign. It cares not for our people. Its only purpose is to control and exploit us. Don't you see that?"

Mr. Ma, who had strongly defended the Church, rose in response to the Cantonese official's inquiry. "No! I don't agree," he answered. "Nor do the rest of the people who have come here. We are loyal Chinese citizens, but we are also Roman Catholics. We cannot in good conscience support a national church in Hoignan." The meeting ended on this note. Everyone left and returned to their homes. The Catholics had made their point and they made it forthrightly. A valiant Mr. Ma would

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later pay the price for his frankness at that meeting. In October of 1951, he was arrested on charges of “being the principal Christian in Hoignan, a land owner, and a local tyrant.”

Hurling false accusations at the Catholic Church was not going to turn anyone against Father Joseph Lavin. They knew him too well. This was the priest whom Anthony Hong, a native of China, applauded so energetically in the December, 1948, edition of *The Field Afar*: “How the people respected him! I recall an occasion when he and I returned from a village, and both of us were half dead from thirst. We stopped at a house, but it was barred for the night. I shouted and knocked, but there was no answer. Finally, Father Lavin called out, ‘Mr. Choi, it is Luk Shan-Fu.’ (This was the name the Chinese gave Father Joe.) Immediately the householder jumped from his bed and opened the door.”

One of the favorite lies that the Communists used to discredit Maryknollers that worked with orphans was to accuse them of killing the infants who were brought there. Because many orphans arrived at the hospice mortally ill and died, it was easy to blame the priests and sisters when they were unable to save them. Again, we have the testimony of Father Hong: “He (Father Lavin) wore a path from the orphanage to the UNRRA office, begging food for the families of the mission and the whole country side. Everything he did, everything he talked about, every aspect of his interest, had to do with the orphans and the people of Hoignan. . . . God has blessed Father Lavin’s orphans in a special way.” Father Hong then tagged on the following finale to insure that the reader would take what he had written seriously: “I do not exaggerate in my praise; I only repeat to you what the Chinese say.”

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### Springing the Trap

For six months prior to his trial, the Communists had given Fathers Lavin and Franco official notice that they could not call public meetings. Also, Father Joe had to stop visiting the villages because of the vicious calumnies that were being spread among the people to defame him. Apparently, there were enough gullible and superstitious sorts floating around – perhaps even bribed bandits — that traveling alone in the country was too much of a risk. The incredible array of accusations included the following: The foreign priest, Father Joseph Lavin, neglected the orphans and starved them; Father Lavin was a murderer who used babies' eyes and brains to make medicine; Father Lavin mixed wine and poison and fed this to many babies; and Father Lavin dropped infants out of the orphanage's windows and from the roof top in order to cripple them.

Beside being a murderer of orphans, Father Joe was accused of financially cheating merchants and peasants with whom he did business. Even though the Communists had declared "freedom of religion," he was accosted for preaching the gospel, and it was claimed that he was bribing people to come to the Catholic Church. And, of course, like all Americans, he was accused of being an agent for the United States government. Yes, as our Lord told His first Apostles: "They shall speak all manner of evil against you."

Even though the Communists had some success in spoiling Father Joe's reputation among the ill-informed, many of the local people kept sending him advance warnings as to what the Communists were planning next. On November 1, 1951, the Party made its first brazen attempt to subdue the American missionary. A government official assembled a crowd



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of ordinary citizens and a number of “hand-picked” locals, then he boldly issued a loud proclamation: “Today is the day that we, the people of Hoignan, will liberate the orphans of our village from the foreign American priest. He has, by force, taken into his orphanage the sons and daughters of our people. They suffer and die because he fails to care for them. The People’s Government can no longer ignore these helpless victims. We will demand that the orphanage be turned over to us. We will not tolerate any protestations.”

This noisy conglomerate of ignorance was then led by the Party official to the Hoignan mission. Upon arrival at the front entrance, he encountered one of the employees. With an air of pomposity, he demanded that the worker summon Father Lavin “to answer the People’s charges against him.”

Father Joe knew what was coming. He had prepared himself for this confrontation. After receiving the message, which was so loudly proclaimed that it could be heard throughout the compound, he came to the entrance to meet the Red entourage. Father Joe walked quickly and confidently, making direct eye contact with his adversary: “What seems to be the trouble?” he inquired. The official tightened his jaw. Then, trying to convey an attitude of superiority, he condescendingly bellowed the official line of incrimination: “The People’s Government charges you, American priest, with forcing children to come to your orphanage and then letting them die because of your neglect. The orphans that you keep here are your prisoners. You exploit them and care nothing for what happens to them. We, the citizens of Hoignan, demand that the orphanage be turned over to the People’s Government.”

Father Joe shifted his eyes, looking out at the crowd whose blustering had somewhat subsided. He recognized a few

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among them who had been the direct recipients of his good works. It was to them that he initially directed his retort to the false accusations. "My friends," he began, "many of you have known me for a long time. I have lived and worked here far longer than the man who levies these false charges against me. You know that the infants and children who come here have either been abandoned or brought here by their own mothers and fathers who cannot care for them. The accusations of forcing orphans to come here is wrong. In fact, if the parents of these children want and can care for their children, they are free to take them."

A few in the crowd began to murmur in support of what Father Joe said. They knew that his words were true. The fumbling official, a bit ruffled by this show of support, then shouted: "You hoard food for yourself and sell it to make unfair profits. You care not whether the children and peasants starve." Again, Father Joe bypassed the official and appealed to the audience: "Another false charge, and you know it," he answered. "We have personally begged for and distributed tons of rice to the people of Hoignan and the surrounding villages. Some of you here have received that rice and have thanked me personally for helping you to feed your families in hard times. Do the orphans here look like they are starving? Look around you! What do you see? No, my friends, you know that these accusations have no merit. Many of you have witnessed our work here: distributing food, providing medicine, and educating your children."

Once more the crowd began to murmur in support. Then, for a few seconds, there was silence. Father Joe, knowing how to seize the advantage of the moment, looked directly toward the Red agitator and his associates in the front of the crowd. With a firm tone in his voice, he stated: "If Mao Tse-tung and the

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government want the mission, I am happy to give it. You do not need to falsely accuse me to take charge of this orphanage. It is yours to have as of this moment if this is what you want.”

The official and his cronies were taken aback by this offer. They were hardly prepared to take on this responsibility. They had no reply. They had achieved what they intended. They had “liberated” the orphanage from the “foreign devil.” However, it wasn’t supposed to happen this way. They were supposed to have overwhelmed Father Lavin and humbled him in a cowering defeat before the people. Their exhibition was an abysmal failure. They certainly gained no “face” that day.

Even though Father Joe won the battle, he knew that the war was lost. After this confrontation, he was isolated to the rectory. The orphanage would soon be closed. He knew that the Communists were planning to put him on trial and to accuse him of mistreating the orphans. However, depriving the Communists of the propaganda effect of public seizure to “liberate” these helpless victims was now most important. Father Joe hurriedly distributed most of the children to Christian families. In this way, they would be protected and well cared for. He then wrote a letter to the magistrate suggesting that the government take over the orphanage. Once more, the local Reds were knocked off balance. But, they had already taken their ill-conceived course of action with considerable bravado and bluster. To try to save “face”, therefore, the show had to go on.

### Observing the Red Blood Sport

Although Fathers Lavin and Franco had not yet been put on public trial, they knew that this day would soon be coming. The waiting and anticipation of such an event

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would have kept the nerves of any person constantly on edge. In the days ahead, the two fathers would have to watch their Chinese friends being put on public trial, tortured cruelly, and then executed. They would have to listen to their screams for mercy — agonizing screams — that only added to the diabolical glee of the Communists and their sympathizers.

Once the Communists became firmly entrenched in Hoignan, the so-called “land reform” began. “The land will be returned to the people,” they promised. Anyone who did not cooperate in handing over their land was thrown into jail. Everyone who had been connected with the Old Government was imprisoned as well. Guns, firearms of any type, and even knives were confiscated.

It was after this campaign of seizure that the public trials began. The first trials were held in the public market in the center of the town near the Maryknoll mission. Fathers Joe and Rocco could hear and see everything that went on. Prisoners were led onto a platform on which the police and judges sat. The hands of the prisoners were bound behind them and sometimes their feet were bound as well. The prisoners were then thrown up onto the platform like a sack of rice. They were forced to kneel facing the people. On many occasions, they were made to kneel with their heads touching the floor of the platform.

Although the trials were styled “public”, in the sense of “by the people”, the only thing public about them was their market-place location. Party members ran the proceedings, while Red sympathizers made up a crowd that was controlled, but aroused. Any one of the spectators could accuse the prisoner. As the accusers and informers came up to the platform they

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would each hurl fantastic charges at their victim. Then they, the accusers, would beat the hapless defendant with wooden clubs and iron rods.

Father Joe remembered observing the trial of Chiu Ts-ung-Shaang, whom the Reds described as the “number one favorite son” when they first took over Hoignan. He recalled that Chiu Ts-ung-Shaang was accused of “a growing lack of cooperation”. It seems that he had complained too much about the confiscation of his land.

Even before the trial began, the Communists intimated that they wanted Mr. Chiu to be executed. So they set their plan into motion. The day that the judicial fiasco was to take place was declared a gala holiday. Bands trooped into town from all over the district. Women and children were requested to wear festive colored clothing. Dancers, wearing sashes and carrying banners, paraded through the streets. Even before the accused appeared, the assembling crowd had been goaded into anger by trained agitators. Government officials then gave irate speeches about Chiu Ts-ung-Shaang’s reactionary behavior and the crimes that he had committed against the people. They insisted that the death sentence was warranted but, of course, that was “up to the people”.

This appeal to mob psychology worked like a charm. The crowd was whipped into a frenzy. They were screaming for Chiu Ts-ung-Shaang’s blood even before the trial had begun. Once the crowd was sufficiently roused, Hoignan’s “number one son” was marched out to face them. The accusers made their charges. No defense was allowed. The “favorite son” was then beaten with a wooden stick until he finally confessed to the trumped up crimes. The Red sympathizers in the crowd

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screamed out repeatedly, "Death to the reactionary! Death to the tyrant! Death to the enemy of the People's Government!"

What was left of Mr. Chiu's bruised and battered body was dragged into a nearby field of the town. Once again, he was forced to kneel on the ground facing the massive crowd that had followed along to observe the final act of this hellish spectacle. When the shattered victim faltered, a Red soldier hit him in the chest with a gun butt forcing him to kneel up straight. The soldier then put his gun to the back of Chiu Ts-ung-Shaang's head, hesitated for a few seconds, and pulled the trigger. The force of the blast blew the man's skull into pieces, scattering his brains in every direction. Communist atrocities, such as this, however, were commonplace. One must realize that the Reds did these diabolical things to incite terror.

Father Joe painfully recalled how loudly the crowd cheered following the execution. It was like the hoopla at a football game. Nevertheless, as bad as Chiu Ts-ung-Shaang's execution was — in his case the Reds were actually merciful. They killed him with only one shot. When they wanted to make someone suffer longer, they shot him in a spot that was not vital. Then the blood spurt and all the savage madness surrounding it could be prolonged for hours.

What frequently followed executions of this nature — again, typical Communist methodology — was to force the son of the victim to sign a certificate attesting that the execution of his father was just. The Chinese Reds followed the satanic Stalinist program to the letter. This was especially true when it came to their attack on the family. Although they were never able to mandate the dissolution of a structure so natural to man, the Communists did effectively destroy the allegiance of children to parents. They achieved this in the government

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schools where Marxist facilitators re-fashioned young minds with an incessant barrage of propaganda. You see, most of a youngster's waking time was not spent at home but in the classroom. How agonizing it must have been for the Maryknollers to watch children accuse their own parents of treason and not be able to do anything about it. Even worse, the children were often so brainwashed that they would scream at, curse, and kick their mothers and fathers as they were being marched off to jail.

### The Trial

On November 6, 1951, the public trial for Father Joseph Lavin and Father Rocco Franco took place in the Hoignan market. The two Priests were escorted by two armed guards and made to sit in the first row with the people. Several thousand Chinese were on hand to witness this debacle. Many were there because they were ordered to be there; others came because they were afraid that they might be singled out as sympathetic to the American priests if they stayed away; and still others came because they had joined the revolution.

Communist agitators took up their positions as they mixed in with the crowd. Actually, the spectators appeared to be quite pensive, although rumblings against the fathers could be heard from time to time. The usual barking insults flared up in measured intervals: "foreign devils, dogs, murderers, American agents". Finally, several local Communist brass entered the market place and mounted a makeshift platform serving as a stage. They sat pompously behind a table, surveying the vast audience and the two priests who were seated in front of them.

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One of the senior magistrates walked to the front of the stage. He spoke directly into a blaring microphone. "There are two American priests who have been called here today to answer for their crimes against the Chinese people. These liars and murderers are responsible for the death of many of our children at their Hoignan orphanage. These men are agents of the reactionary Catholic Church that preaches a foreign religion. They speak against the People's Government and the true savior of our people, Mao Tse-tung. Today you will hear the accounts of their treachery. Witnesses who saw, and were victims of, their evil plot to subvert our nation will speak against them."

After a brief pause, the official went on: "But the government is not the final judge of these American devils. It is you who must decide their fate. It is you to whom we turn, the people of the new democratic government of China. You must decide, on the basis of the testimony given today, what should happen to these American spies."

After this inflammatory introduction, the official pointed directly at the fathers and, with a caustic tone in his voice, he went on ranting: "You foreign devils, you will be placed at the people's mercy for your crimes against the People's Government of the new China." Throughout the initial proceedings, it was obvious that both priests were just being set up. They would be drawn and quartered by calumny even before the so-called witnesses were called to testify.

After a few minutes, the magistrate's tirade ceased. The accusers were called to present their testimony against the Fathers. There were about twenty people, mostly all pagans, who were scheduled to speak. A few Christians, however, had been coerced into presenting false testimony as well. The main



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thrust of their accusations centered around the killing of babies in the orphanage, although one of the accusers claimed that he had been financially short-changed by Father Joe in a business transaction. There were some loud snickers from the "audience" after this creature spoke. Father Joe had an impeccable reputation for honesty, as everyone knew, whereas his accuser was a well-known cheat.

A few apostate Christians came forward to strike at the heart of the whole matter: "Father Lavin preached that Jesus Christ was our Savior," they said, "not Mao Tse-tung. Father Lavin was a reactionary who taught a foreign religion that was opposed to the People's Government." One witness added intrigue to the charges: "Father Lavin kept records, detailed records. He sent these by mail to his superiors in China and to the United States. Therefore," the accuser concluded, "Father Lavin must be a spy, sent here to exploit the Chinese people."

As the audience listened to the charges, agitators attempted to rouse the people by shouting, "murderers, liars, cheats" and other derogatory calumnies. Soon, some of the ordinary people joined in the chanting; it was as if the volume of the lie somehow made it contagious. The presiding official was delighted to see that the tide was turning in the government's favor. Rising from his chair, he held up his hand to silence the crowd. "What should be done?" he asked. One of the inciters bellowed out: "Make the American devils confess to their crimes!" On the heels of this outburst, several others chimed in their support: "Make them get up before the people and confess. Make them admit their guilt!"

After about thirty minutes of listening to the accusers, the two defendants were led onto the platform and made to face the people. Then they were ordered to kneel. Father Franco

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was not dropping down fast enough for one of the guards, so he kicked him in the backside, cursing at him and yelling, "Move quickly, you American dog!" The priest nearly toppled over from the force of the blow, but he recovered quickly and regained his composure. The two Maryknollers were now facing an increasingly hostile crowd. The government official then sauntered to the front of the platform and stood over the two missionaries: "Are you ready to confess to your crimes? Are you ready to admit your guilt?" he asked.

Father Joe raised his head and looked out at the audience. There was no hesitancy in his voice as he delivered a forceful response to the government official's questions. "Don't the accused get the right to answer the charges of the accusers?" he asked. "Those who have accused and insulted us have caused Father Franco and me to lose much 'face' with the people of Hoignan! This is a serious matter. If the People's Government is democratic, as you say it is, then we should have the right to defend ourselves against those who have slandered us and our work here in China." Father Joe then paused for a moment, but he quickly continued before the magistrate could cut him off. "Letting us answer these false charges is the only way that the people can determine the truth and judge us fairly. I know the Chinese people. They are honest and would not want to punish those who are innocent. But, we must have the right to answer if we are to save 'face' and restore our good name. I now ask you and the people here to give me that right."

Even from this kneeling position, Father Joe's voice rang out strong, and it was easily picked up by the microphone. Almost the entire crowd heard what he had said. Both those who knew him and those who had only heard of his reputation were impressed with his response. Soon they were yelling out, "Let the priest speak. Let us hear what he has to say!"

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The official, not wanting to look foolish, gave Father Joe permission to answer the accusations. "Because the people are generous you will be allowed to speak," he said, not without adding his own barbed warning: "Do not abuse this privilege by telling clever lies to deceive us further." The official spoke sternly, but he still had to show some magnanimity lest he lose face with the crowd. His arrogant manner indicated that he firmly believed that Father Joe had no chance of prevailing. No doubt, he was counting on the foreign priest making a fool of himself with too many words. "Why not let this American priest look foolish; he will have no chance trying to defend himself against those who were born and reared on Chinese soil?" At least, that is what he was probably thinking. Remember, too, the bulk of these Red soldiers and police were not local. For the most part, they did not know the *Iron Man* — nor did they know *Chinese Joe*.

Still kneeling, Father Joseph Lavin presented his defense in fluent Chinese. He answered the accusations so cogently and gracefully that cheers arose from the audience. Suddenly, it was those who had condemned him who were being ridiculed. The *Iron Man* had risen to the occasion. His words issued from the heart. Here spoke a man without guile, a man who said the truth, and surely, the Holy Spirit had added a bit of thunder to his voice:

"Many of you at this meeting know me. I have been in China for twenty years. Yes, I am an American. But I am also Chinese. I speak your language, eat your food, wear your clothes, and smoke your tobacco. I have visited your homes, eaten meals with your families, given medicine to your sick, and stayed with you during troubling times. When the Japanese invader came to China, I did not run away to America. I stayed here and even lived in the hills rather than

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leave you, my people. When hard times came to China and rice was dear, I begged and argued to make sure that you had rice for your families. I have been accused of killing babies by dropping them out of windows and from the roof of the orphanage — even killing them by feeding them wine mixed with poison. These charges are absurd. For twenty years, I have taken in your children, fed, clothed, and taught them at our school. Yes, there are many babies who have died. But not because of the treatment at our orphanage. They have died because they had been abandoned. They were left on their own and they were too weak and sick to care for themselves. By the time that they were brought to our orphanage, it was too late to save them. You all know that. Many of you have seen this right in your own villages. Why would I take them in and drop them from the windows and rooftop? Why would I go to the trouble of mixing wine and poison to kill them? Why would I be so foolish as to kill these babies in the presence of witnesses who could later condemn me — like what is happening here today?”

Father Joe paused briefly allowing his responses to sink in with the crowd. The government officials were uncertain as to what to do next. Father Joe recognized this and so he went on, giving them no room to take away his advantage. “If I wanted babies to die, I would just leave them where they had been dropped by those who refused to care for them. In that way, even more babies would die because there would be no one to take them in. Do you really believe these false accusations against me?” he asked the people.

That the people did not; however, moods can change quickly when trained agitators are at work. They can inject fear in an instant with a veiled or overt threat. They can transform a crowd into a mob. Knowing the fickleness of human nature,

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Father Joe could not afford to let a pause linger too long. "It was you," he continued, "the people of Hoignan and your many villages, who called me Luk Shan-Fu, your 'spiritual father.' How could I be your spiritual father and lie to you? I brought medicine to the sick; some of you received that medicine and it cured you. Why would I poison the little ones and then bring medicine to take away your suffering? I appeal to your honesty and good sense in judging this matter!"

The good sentiments of the people had been stirred. Even among those who did not know Father Joe personally, many knew that what the priest had said was true. There were just too many people, in Hoignan and elsewhere, who had been the recipients of his charitable work. "What he says is true!" shouted one old man. "When we were starving, it was Luk-Shan-Fu who got rice for the children and the poor. How could this man kill children and then give us food to keep us from starving?" A young woman rose and spoke. She had been reared in Father Lavin's orphanage and had become the bride of one of the local merchants. She said she had never seen anything happen as the accusers had described. "These accusations are false!" she boldly asserted. Several other people clamored in support of Luk Shan-Fu.

The trial was not going well for the Communists. In fact, if the commoners and local merchants were left to themselves, and they had not been disarmed and had their families threatened, they would certainly have routed these mendacious hate-mongers before things had ever gone this far. Yet, as Chairman Mao liked to boast in his own twisted attempt at self-assurance: "Power is in the barrel of a gun," and the Reds had the guns.

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The official had had enough. He stopped Father Joe, covered the mike, and waved his hands in an attempt to calm the audience. "Wait my people," he insisted. "Wait and hear the truth from those who went to his foreign Church and heard his words. Don't let this clever American spy deceive you."

The trial was not over. The Reds needed to recoup and try and do better in Round 2. After several minutes had passed, the crowd began to settle down and several other witnesses shuffled up onto the platform. They claimed that Father Lavin preached that Jesus Christ, not Mao Tse-tung was their "Lord and Master". One apostate contended that Father Lavin paid people to come to his Church. He, like the previous witnesses, said that he saw Father Lavin make notes and keep records; therefore, he must be a spy. "Father Lavin is an agent of the American government," he insisted. "He was sent here to preach a foreign religion so that he could control and exploit us. He is not worthy of the people's mercy." Because a few of these accusers were once Christians, the government official assumed that their testimony would give the Communists the upper hand.

Again, this strategy backfired. Father Joe once more appealed to the basic decency and good sense of the ordinary people. "These accusers claim that I preached that Jesus Christ is our Lord and Savior. I am a Catholic priest and cannot deny this. If I deny this, then, like these accusers, I would be a liar. I would not be worthy of being your 'spiritual father'. Because I preached that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, does not mean that I have denounced Mao Tse-tung or the People's Government. As a priest, it is my duty to be concerned with the spiritual welfare of those who come to the Catholic Church. It is my obligation to teach about Jesus Christ, the sacraments of His Church, and saving one's immortal soul."

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After a very short pause, Father Joe raised his voice higher: "It is not my business to get involved in the affairs of Mao Tse-tung or the government of China. And I have not done so. I am only exercising the right that the government has guaranteed to all of its people: freedom of religion. I have even offered to turn the orphanage over to the government, if this is what they want. How, then, am I the enemy of the People's Government?"

As for "bribery", the Maryknoller explained: "To pay someone to come to the Catholic Church would be wrong. I would be giving money and favors to people for doing something that they would be unwilling to do otherwise. Jesus Christ wants people to come to His Church freely, by their own choosing. To bribe people to come to the Catholic Church would be an insult to what He stands for. If I preach the Gospel, as these accusers claim, then how could I go about bribing people to come to Christ's Church. I would be going against His wishes. I would not be a true Catholic priest."

In conclusion, Father Joe reaffirmed his innocence: "These charges are false, my friends. I admit that I have given help to many of the people who have come to the Catholic Church. However, many of these people did not practice the Catholic religion and had no desire to become Catholics. Despite this, they were given food and medicine. They were given help because they were in need. Some of you here at this meeting have received this help and are not Catholics. You know that what I am saying is true."

Again, the audience timidly voiced its support of Father Joe. A few brave souls openly made comments verifying what he had said. "I have been to the mission many times," one man loudly proclaimed; "Father Lavin gave me food to

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help me to feed my family when we were hungry and could not get rice. He never made me go to Church before helping me." Others stood and gave similar testimony. Father Joe's old "sixth sense" told him that the mood of the crowd was heavily in his favor. Hoping to seize the moment he lifted his voice even more forcefully: "As to the charge of keeping records: of course, I keep records. Like any of you who have a business, I keep a log of my inventory and expenses. My superiors in China and at Maryknoll can then determine what supplies I need and how much money is necessary to run the orphanage, the school, and the mission. Any of you are free to see these records. In fact, the accusers here today say that they have seen me writing notes and keeping records. If I was conspiring against the people, wouldn't I keep these records secret? Wouldn't I write notes someplace where no one could see me? The fact that these accusers actually saw me writing and keeping records shows that I have nothing to hide!"

One more accusation had to be dealt with – the charge that he was an American spy bent on exploitation of the Chinese. Seeing that the magistrate was about to silence him, he quickly added this final proof of the genuineness of his charity. "Some have called me an American imperialist who only came to China to exploit and make money from the people here. If this were true, I would never have come back to China two years ago. I spent fifteen straight years in China before finally returning to the United States to visit my family. If I was an imperialist or capitalist, I would have taken my profits and never returned here. I would have stayed in America and enjoyed all of this money while I was still a young man. Instead, I came back here to China. I have continued to care for the orphans, distribute rice in hard times, and provide med-



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icine to those who are suffering. I cannot and will not confess to being a murderer of your children, an American spy, or an exploiter of the Chinese people! And I trust that you, the people whom I have known, will judge me honestly and fairly.”

The people were now clearly in Father Lavin's corner. Many cheered fearlessly and boldly began to deride Father Joe's accusers. At this point, the government official stopped Father Joe cold. He now recognized that he had underestimated the *Iron Man*. “You are skilled with words,” he grunted. “Well, we have had enough of your clever lies. Now, keep silent.” Two guards were then instructed to make sure that Father Joe remained silent throughout the remainder of the trial. The last six witnesses made their accusations. One of the guards kept making passes with his fist, waving at Father Joe. Although he did not hit him, it appeared to those in the audience as if the priest was being struck in the face. When a number of the people protested, the guard stopped the act.

The people obviously were not responding in the manner that the Communist brass had intended. Although the trial had only gone on for one-and-a-half hours, it was decided to terminate it before the situation deteriorated any further. After the last witness testified, the government official abruptly asked the crowd: “You have heard the accusations against this foreign devil. What do you, the people, wish to do?” This was the cue for the Maoist sycophants, who had been spread throughout the crowd, to take over the situation “in the name of the people”. They had been instructed already as to what to shout. So, at the top of their lungs, they dutifully obeyed: “Hand them over to the government for deportation. Deport them!”

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Although the Communists would have preferred to execute the two priests, they did not want to make martyrs out of them. They had grossly underestimated the strength of Father Joe's good reputation and his ability to rally the people. Turning them over to the government, or house arrest, was the next best alternative. The two priests would then be neutralized until the government should deport them. Perhaps, too, with a house arrest, the Reds could arrange for the two priests to die a slow death from "natural causes", like their friend Bishop Francis Xavier Ford, whose demise was blamed on "old age". The Communists would not be blamed directly for such a misfortune. Nevertheless, the official sentence was deportation: that was the verdict of the People's Court. The trial was over. The people were ordered to return to their homes. Fathers Lavin and Franco were led under guard to their rectory, which would be the place of their confinement.

### Returning from the Trial

While suffering this indignity, Fathers Lavin and Franco chose to remain silent. A number of people passed by them. Many were walking with their heads down, avoiding eye contact with the "foreigners". Some strangers glanced at the fathers, and uttered derogatory comments: "Go back to America. Take your foreign religion with you," snapped one teenage boy. Another man in his mid-twenties shouted: "You deserve to be executed for keeping food from the orphans and exploiting the people."

One frail old woman, bent over from age, openly chastised the two young men for their spiteful invective. "Fools," she said. "Luk Shan-Fu was the one who got rice for us when the people were hungry. He gave us medicine when we were sick.

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They tell lies about him!" Irritated by this fearless rebuke to the two Communist sympathizers, one of the armed guards gave her a warning, "Get along, old woman, before you get into trouble. These foreign devils deserve to be deported for their crimes against the People's Government." The old woman turned, and with a "humpf" in her voice, she sauntered away. She may not have given a literal cup of cold water, as Jesus said, but the comforting words of this frail little lady must have provided a most quenching refreshment to two weary apostles in their hour of need.

As they shuffled slowly over the rough-hewn road, Father Joe took his large curved pipe out of his breast pocket. He put it into his mouth and chewed on the stem while he walked. There was a partial smile on his face that was somewhat hidden by the over-sized pipe. He had defeated the Red dragon, at least for the moment, and he knew it. He walked with his head erect and there was confidence in his gait. The enemy's serpentine tactics had only stiffened his resolve to continue the struggle. Intimidation was not going to break his will.

Nevertheless, reflecting back over the past several months brought sad thoughts to the Maryknoller. For over twenty years the Hoignan mission had increasingly become more influential in the lives of the local and surrounding villages. Just before he had left for the United States in 1947, the prestige of the Catholic Church in Hoignan was at its optimum. People were flocking to the mission. Many converted to Catholicism and were receiving the sacraments regularly. On the day that he finally took his furlough, nearly two years before, and left Hoignan for the United States, the villagers came in droves to say goodbye. "Don't forget us, Luk Shan-Fu. We will be anxiously awaiting your return," one seasoned parishioner cried out. These were the sentiments echoed by his

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entire flock. "Return to us soon, Luk Shan-Fu!" He had returned as he had promised and, for a short while, the future of the Church in China had looked very encouraging.

"But things are different now," he thought. Even if he were free to, he could no longer visit the surrounding villages because of the many lies that had been spread about him. The worst part was knowing that some of the very people who had once cheered and heralded his return to Hoignan in 1948, had now been turned against him. How could this happen? How could their affection change so abruptly? The sleight of hand had worked. The illusion of wrongdoing had prevailed in the minds of those who were afraid or did not know any better. Tell a lie long enough and loud enough, and the majority of fools will come to believe it, and, even if you are vindicated of some calumny, the mud still leaves its mark. It had happened.

As the two priests neared the front gate of the mission, Father Joe reflected on how the compound had been gradually altered by the machinations of the Red dragon. First, he could no longer publicly say Mass because the church had been closed. Then the People's Government had "requested" the use of the church building for the storage of rice, "rice to be used to feed the hungry and poor of Hoignan," so they claimed. What choice did he have but to "give it" to the government? To do otherwise would give them a propaganda ploy that they could use, however unjustly, against him and the Catholic Church. So "donate" the church building he did, since they would have confiscated it anyway. What a sad day that was as the helpless priests watched the Reds destroy the altar and carry away whatever artifacts he was unable to save. The Stations of the Cross were torn from the walls; the statues of the Blessed Mother, Saint Joseph, and the saints were

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smashed and hauled away in pieces to a dump; the wooden benches and kneelers were broken up and used for firewood.

As they passed through the front gate, Father Joe looked over at the school that had also been “given” to the People’s Government. Now it billeted the soldiers of the Red Army. This was the school that had educated those female orphans who had been discarded and left without care. Many had become fine young women who were sought after as brides by the young men in the community. This was the school in which the children were taught reading, writing, and arithmetic. It was here that they learned about the Catholic Church, the sacraments, and how to say their prayers. This was the school where *Ma Mung-Lui* served as principal. Father Joe recalled how bravely Mr. Ma defended the Church when the Communists tried to replace it with their Catholic Patriotic Association. Mr. Ma was a good friend. He could always be relied upon to give sound advice; someone whom you could count on when the chips were down. But Mr. Ma was gone now. He had been arrested and his whereabouts were unknown. Father Joe knew that he would probably never see his old friend again.

The orphanage still existed, but, of course, it was not the same. The girls still were housed there, while the urchin boys had been moved to the third floor of the priest’s rectory. The two fathers were now confined to the second floor. Their privacy and space were no longer respected. These were violated at whim by the Red entourage. There was loud conversation, noisy disruptions, confrontations, and just plain endless tramping around. A sound night’s sleep was impossible. Moreover, the constant disruption kept the boys on the third floor on edge. They became frightened, insecure, and anxious: “What will happen to us if we show allegiance to these

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foreigners?" some thought. Already many of the boys and girls were being ridiculed for saying their prayers and showing respect for the Maryknollers. Trying to comfort and assure these frightened orphans had become a daunting task.

The public trial was over. In somber silence the two priests were escorted into their own rectory by armed strangers. The guards watched closely to make sure that they went directly to their rooms on the second floor. In a surly tone of voice one of the guards said: "Make sure you get permission before leaving your assigned area." Father Joe turned and responded sternly to the young man's impudence: "Do we request it verbally or in writing?" The guard, sensing the sarcasm, glared briefly at the *Iron Man*. He then turned abruptly and walked away. Father Joe and Father Rocco closed the door behind them. It was the end of a trying day, no pun intended.

### November 4-13: Sister Wong and the Red Soldier

While, at first, Fathers Joe and Rocco were closely monitored, the soldiers lightened up somewhat on the strict implementation of what could have been a total quarantine. Since they were not yet formally placed under house arrest, they were allowed to leave the rectory and move about the mission compound without asking permission. However, on occasion, either one of the soldiers or a government official would, at a whim, tell them to return to their living quarters. At times, when the two priests were interacting with the orphans or peasants, a soldier would butt in just to intimidate the poor people: "Move along now. Stop talking with the American spies. They will only make things difficult for you." Whenever anything happened like this, the fathers would immediately

## The Final Years in China: 1948-1953

terminate the conversation. They feared that if the orphans or peasants defied this arbitrary and unwarranted command they might be singled out for persecution later on.

Sometimes, however, the people themselves would rebuke the official who issued the order. For example, there was the feisty Sister Wong. She was an older woman, a widow, about fifty years of age. In fact, Sister Wong had been in charge of the orphanage for twenty-four years. That is longer than Father Joe had been in China. Everyone called her "Sister" Wong, not because she was a real nun, but because she was a good and pious Christian living a single life of chaste devotion. Sister Wong was a small, spry woman, very energetic. She spoke intensely and rapidly, especially when her ire was aroused about matters pertaining to her orphans. When the orphan boys had been sent to live on the third floor of the rectory, she had become particularly annoyed. Sister Wong felt that such a move unfairly infringed on the Maryknollers' living space. However, what aggravated her maternal heart most of all was that these boys were not now receiving the guidance and discipline that — as she modestly put it — "only an old Chinese lady like myself can give". Sister Wong blamed the Reds for this problem — and she was furious about it.

Even though her temper had been tweaked, Sister Wong recognized that the current situation was a delicate one. She knew that she would have to wait until a safe moment to speak to Father Lavin. That moment having eventually come, she stopped Father Joe just as he came around the corner of the church building: "Father Lavin," she said, "I want to talk to you about the situation here. I have some important concerns. . . ." At that point, a Red soldier, who had been carrying a bag of rice into the church, just happened to be leaving the building. He abruptly interrupted Sister Wong with a

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nasty reprimand: "There is no need for you to be wasting your time talking to this man. He no longer has any authority here. Get along and perform your duties!" That was it! Immediately, Sister Wong ignited like a flaming blowtorch: "Young man, Father Lavin ran this orphanage long before you came here. If it were not for him, these orphans would have had no place to live. You are the one who has no real authority in this matter. I intend to report your impudence to your superior officer!"

The soldier was taken aback. For the moment, he was speechless in the face of this little keg of dynamite. Father Joe had to think fast as to how to diffuse the situation. After all, this man's pride was severely wounded. The priest recognized that this could pose great problems for Sister Wong and the orphanage should this soldier decide to take action against her. He had to intercede: "Please excuse Mrs. Wong," he told the soldier, "She, like all loyal Chinese citizens, cares deeply for the orphans here. Mrs. Wong has been in charge of the orphanage for many years. She does not know that I am planning to turn it over to the People's Government. They will be the final authority, of course. Mrs. Wong did not mean to reprimand you. She is just frustrated and took her anger out on you. Please forgive her."

Sister Wong recognized what Father Joe was doing and she respected his prudence. She had seen the *Iron Man* confront and argue with the Communists and other deviants in the past. She well knew that he was not a man who would back down from a fight. But this was neither the time nor place for such an altercation. Matters could only get worse if she continued to overreact. Sister Wong had become the linchpin who held together the orphan girls and the hired help. Too, it was this intrepid little caretaker, to whom Father Joe had secretly



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entrusted the Blessed Sacrament. She hid the communion wafers in a match box, so that the orphans, other sisters and staff could receive our Lord in these most trying times.

So the two Maryknollers were still able to say Mass in their room, even though the church was closed and public gatherings were no longer permitted. Father would smuggle the consecrated hosts to Sister Wong with the help of one of the trusted boys from the third floor. After her outburst, the good sister realized that this present order of things could all be jeopardized. She bowed her head in deference and said to the soldier, "Please forgive me. I am an old woman. I did not understand that the government will be in charge here. In the future, I will bring my concerns to them. I did not mean to offend you."

The young man, who still had a spark of decency left in him, did not want to make trouble for this grandmotherly matron. None of his comrades had witnessed Sister Wong's scathing attack, so he had not suffered any loss of "face". He replied: "I accept your apology. But you must not be caught talking to the priest and taking his side against the government. Otherwise, things will go badly for you." Sister Wong bowed her head, turned, and walked toward the orphanage. As she passed Father Joe, she said remorsefully, "I'm sorry for bothering you, Father. I understand how things are now." Father Joe sensed that this brave woman understood her role perfectly. Without her, there would be no home at all for the orphans. And, without her, the very souls of the orphans would suffer from hunger. As if to console her, the priest let her know this: "I'm counting on you, Sister Wong, and so are the children and people who remain here."

The young soldier, having observed this interaction, had become much more subdued as the situation cooled. He was not a bad sort of fellow. He was just another one of China's

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youth who had been swallowed up and indoctrinated in the messianic doctrine of the Revolution. With a speck of kindness in his voice, he turned to Father Joe and said: "I have heard that the people call you Luk Shan-Fu. They say that you are a good man and that you have much love for the people in China. They respect you and the work that you have done here. But the government says that you are a murderer and an American spy. I am a soldier of the People's Liberation Army and must do what they say. Some of the soldiers know of you. They say that you are fearless and strong. But they, too, must do what they are told. It is best that you go to your quarters now. I can say no more." The *Iron Man* thanked the soldier for his kind words.

Forty soldiers had been assigned to guard the two priests. Although they had been instructed to harass the prisoners, Father Joe noted that they were not all "bad eggs", as he termed them. His natural affability and interest in other people caused him to strike up conversations with a number of these men. Many had been recruited from the local villages by the Communists. They were ordinary people who had been caught up in the times and in a movement that promised them paradise on earth. At heart, they meant no harm to anyone. In fact, deep down, Father Joe sensed that they liked him and Father Franco. Of course, they dared not make this too obvious.

### November 13: The Official Petition

A week had now passed since the public trial. In his letter to the magistrate, Father Joe had offered to turn the orphanage over to the government. As of yet there was no response. Father Joe knew that trying to hold on to the orphanage was a lost cause.



Monsignor Garrahan poses with his newly ordained spiritual sons.  
Left to Right: Frs. Gilleran, Cuneen, and Lavin.



Father Lavin's ordination class at Maryknoll, June 1932  
Fr. Lavin is on the far left. Fathers Gilleran and Cuneen are fourth from top right and first from bottom left respectively.



Shipping rice to market



Father Kennelly and orphans



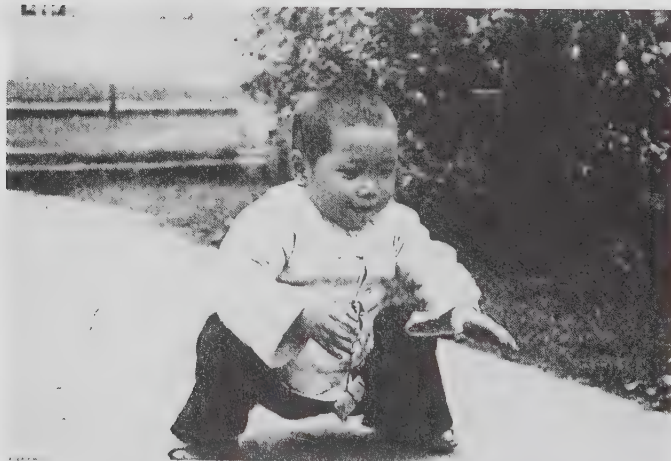
Tintaan bus people — A tough crew



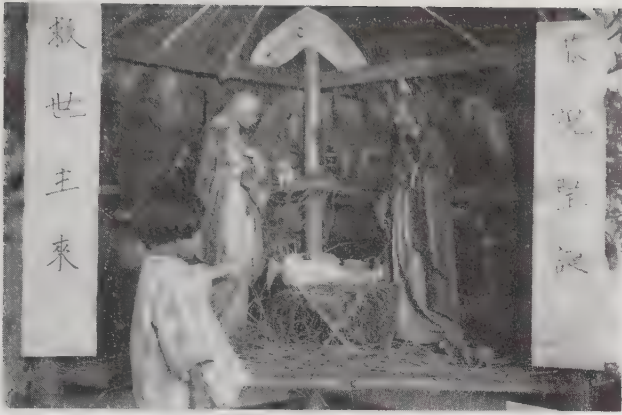
Three happy orphans: Theresa, Margaret, and Salome



Catholic newlyweds Peter Faan and Clotilde Jo



Vincent Faan - "Sumo Wrestler"



Christmas crib at the Loting convent



Anna and Mary Wong



Human horses - men and women  
pulling a heavy load of salt



Obstacle race at the Hoignan Mission





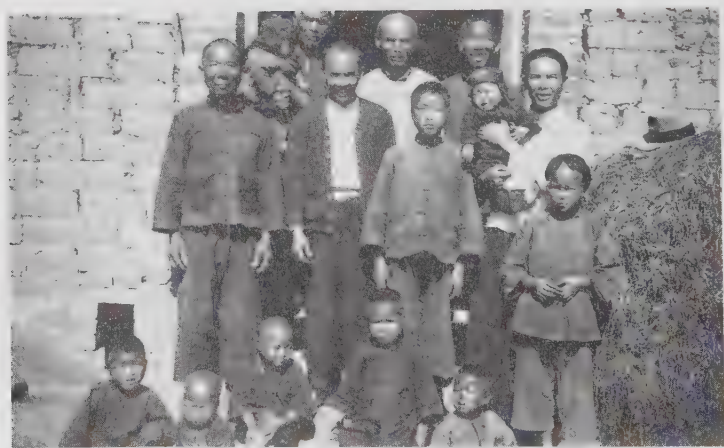
Hungry children line up outside  
the orphanage



Sister Wong (center) and seven of her orphans  
who were happily married



Loting chapel



Just the men and boys from one of the larger Catholic families, the Sons of the Toking Mission



Mealtime at the Loting orphanage



Augustine, a Loting orphan, devouring a treat - a bowl of vermicelli



Sister Mary Francis and some of the Loting orphans at class



Father Joe feeding the orphans



A happy crew from one of Fr. Joe's  
mission schools



Sister Wong and some of her orphans from  
Hoignan Mission



One of the dragon boats in the big festival



Bishop James E. Walsh (right), and Fr. Burke with a graduation class of the Kongmoon Seminary



Some of the local boys from Lion-taan village in Kwangtung came to the orphanage for a photo-op.



Father Joe the story teller



Pauline, the oldest of the blind orphans, with Sr.  
Mary Francis



Left: Rose Chen, cook at Hoignan Mission  
Right: Agatha Lok, an orphan helper





Sr. Richard and two orphans at the Loting Mission



At the Loting Mission. Left to right: Fathers Lavin, Kennelly, Raushenbach, Weber, Churchill, and Fitzgerald



Arrival at the Maryknoll house in  
Kowloon, April 1, 1953



Fr. Kennelly (right) enjoying a farewell dinner with  
his replacement, Fr. Joe, at the Loting rectory.



Fr. Rocco Franco upon his  
safe arrival in Hong Kong



Loking Christian men with Fr. Kennelly



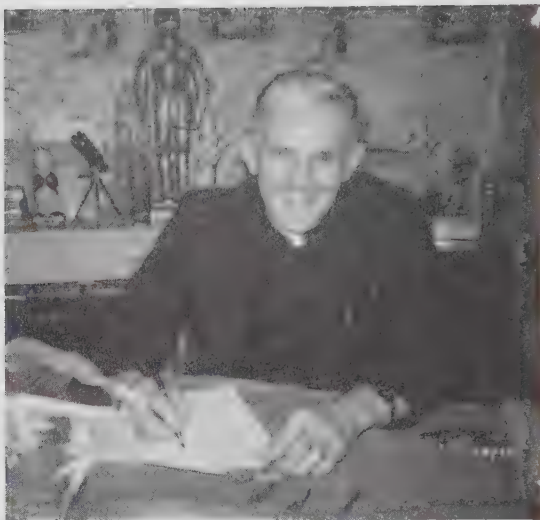
Rose Chue was the first baby received at Loting orphanage. In this photo, she is grown up and nurturing a new orphan.



Fr. Chatigny, veteran Maryknoll missionary in China, greets Fr. Lavin upon his arrival at Kowloon



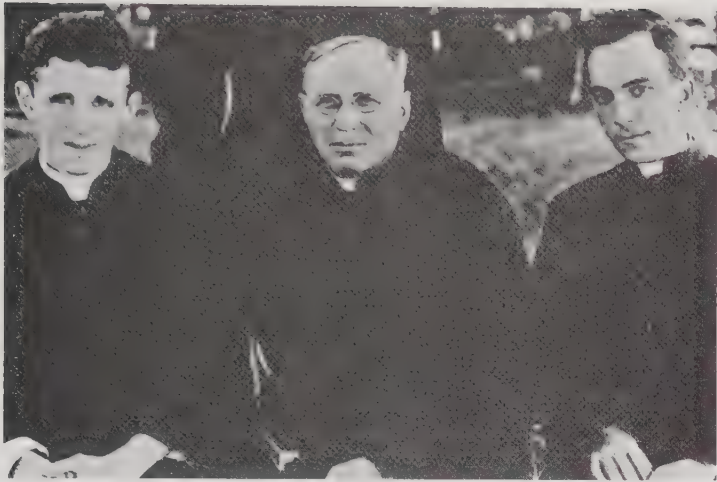
Fr. Lavin with Loting and Loking seminary students



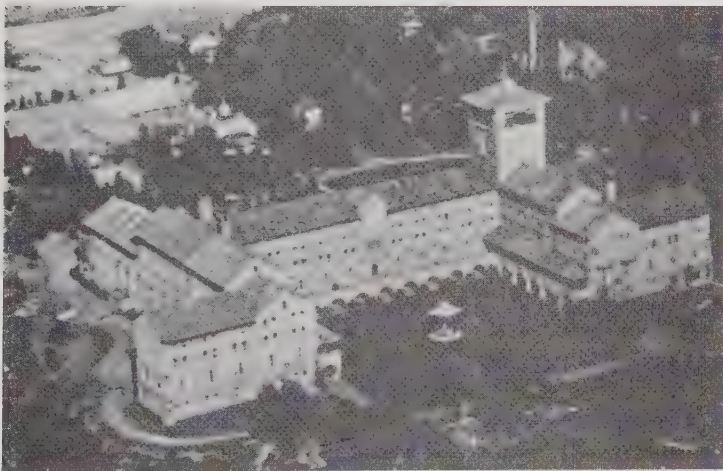
Fr. Lavin working at his desk in  
Saint Stephen's rectory, Framingham



Fr. Kennelly with his orphans before arrival of Fr. Lavin



Left to Right: Father James E. Walsh (later Bishop),  
Father Thomas Price (co-founder of Maryknoll), and  
Father Francis Xavier Ford (later Bishop and martyr)



Aerial view of Maryknoll



Father Lavin offering Mass in the mission chapel at Loting



Christmas play at Loting — Seven orphan shepherds





This child was abandoned at Loting with severe burns. He died within two weeks after being baptized.



Catechism class



Fr. Lavin and his mother upon his return home after his banishment from China



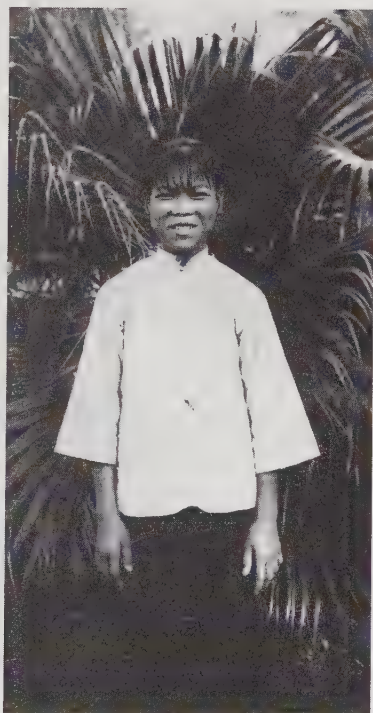
Sampans loaded up with food at a dock.



Planting and cultivating rice



Smoking the long pipe



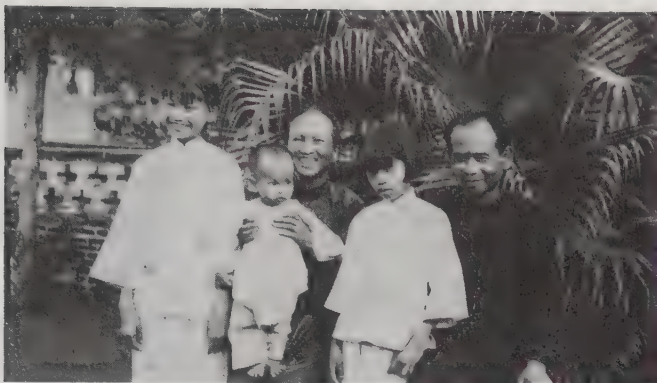
Rose Hoh



Fathers Lavin and Glass having "glass dreams"  
while warming their backs at the fireplace



Picture of rectory in sunlight



Catholic family, the Wongs — daughters are Rose, Anna, and Mary.



Father Lavin with Loting and Loking, Kongmoon, students.



Fathers McShane and Sweeney and some of  
their school boys



School days



Pauline Chue



A new arrival is baptized.



Chinese Sisters



When wedding bells rang - 1937.  
The bride was much older than she looks.



Proud mothers pose at one of the Missions.





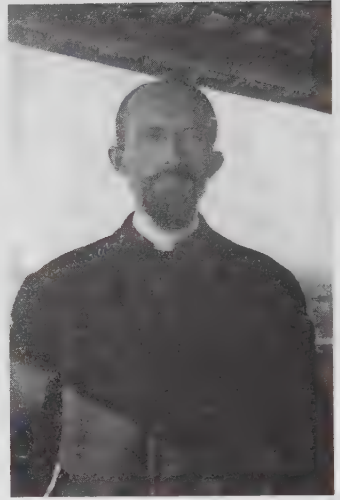
Lintaan Christians



Maryknoll Sisters



Rose Hoh, always smiling



Fr. Daniel McShane  
founder of Loting  
Mission



Two of Lintaan orphanage's more serious children

## The Final Years in China: 1948-1953

Fortunately, Father Joe was able to obtain valuable advice from a longtime friend, Sister Teresa, a native of China. Sister Teresa was one of the Kongmoon sisters. She had been put in prison with Father Gaspard when the Communists came to power in her district. Before that, she had been working with orphans in Loting and Lintaan under Father Gaspard's direction. Sister Teresa had observed firsthand the Communist tactics in using the orphanages for propaganda purposes. She understood how masterful they could be in blaming the missionaries for the deaths of children who had been abandoned or willfully given up by their parents.

The Communists had trouble building a case against Sister Teresa. They could find no one to testify against her. Her good works and loving personality were legendary in the Kongmoon area. Even those who were bribed with material rewards and threatened with execution refused to testify. Moreover, the Chinese sister was fearless. When the Communists offered to free her for testifying against Father Gaspard, she firmly denounced them stating, "I would rather die in your prison than lie about Father Gaspard." Then, when they threatened to execute her, she gave them a taste of the fortitude of the martyrs: "So be it! Take my life. The sooner I will be with my Savior."

The Communists were particularly concerned about the latter part of Sister Teresa's statement. They did not want to make a martyr out of her because they feared that this would incite the people. So, they simply sent her away under surveillance, back to Hoignan, her native village. There the Reds hoped that the holy woman would no longer pose a threat to them. Once back home, there was little that Sister Teresa could do to openly help the Christians. Try to imagine her fortitude! Closely monitored, she put herself to work in the fields

## The Iron Man of China

and raised pigs and chickens in order to appear innocuous. She had to be extra careful about her movements.

Although Sister Teresa was in close proximity to Father Joe, she knew that it would be dangerous to have direct contact with him. The *Iron Man* also understood this and, therefore, he did not seek her out. However, one of the trusted orphan boys was able to smuggle the Blessed Sacrament to her while she was working in the fields. Because of his innocent-looking face and unassuming appearance, this boy was hardly ever bothered by the Red soldiers. Yet, the young man was very intelligent and he had an excellent memory. So, whenever Father Joe was in need of Sister Teresa's advice, the boy was able to request this and relay the information back to his priest. The brave youngster well knew that this was risky business. However, he was strong in the Catholic Faith and very attached to Father Joe who had reared him since early childhood.

Shortly after the trial, Father Joe needed advice from his trusted friend as to the future course of running the orphanage. He sent the young messenger to the field in which Sister Teresa was working with this message: "Tell Sister Teresa about my plan to turn over the orphanage to the People's Government. Ask her to give her opinion on this matter and how it should be handled."

The boy went to the field and found Sister Teresa. Making sure that no one else was nearby he delivered the question. Sister Teresa told the boy to have Father Lavin draw up and sign a formal petition requesting that the government approve one of three options: 1) allow them to close the orphanage gradually; 2) to close the orphanage immediately; or 3) to hand the orphanage over directly to the government. After seeing what had happened at the orphanages in Loting and

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Lintaan, she said that this was the best course. It would deprive the Communists of using the orphanage for propaganda purposes. Moreover, the Fathers would be on public record as having attempted to cooperate with the government.

With the help of Father Franco, Father Joe drew up the petition listing the three options suggested by Sister Teresa. Moreover, he stated specifically that he was having great difficulty obtaining funds to provide the services that the orphans needed. This was the reason for seeking the government's direction. Both Maryknollers personally delivered the petition to the senior government official who was in charge of administrative matters. They were also careful to take along with them several witnesses who could be trusted to verify that the official received the document.

The magistrate realized that he had been boxed into a corner. The fathers, in an apparent gesture of good will, were attempting to acquiesce to the government's directive and, therefore, they were forced to appear to seek its help for their orphans. If the official refused the petition, the government would look hard-hearted and careless. Ascertaining this, the magistrate took the petition and laid it on his desk: "I will read your request," he proclaimed. Then he added these pathetic words, so heartlessly insipid as to make even the most idealistic Marxist nauseous: "The People's Government certainly wants to do what is best for its smallest and most vulnerable citizens."

The petition was now filed. The two priests left the office and returned to the mission compound. No answer came in regard to their request. They continued to care for the orphans and to place them with Christian families who could look out for them. Filing the petition had at least put them on public

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record for having attempted to cooperate with the government. Of course, this was simply a strategic maneuver to thwart the diabolical chicanery of the Red dragon. At least for now, the Maryknollers had thrown a monkey wrench into the wheels of the machine.

## The Loss of the Cook

The victory, of course, was only temporary. It gave the priests time to at least get some of the orphans into caring Catholic homes. Eventually the situation got worse. On December 15, 1951, Mr. Chan, an official from Canton, came to Hoignan in order to take over the orphanage and the dispensary. At first, the orphan boys continued to live on the third floor of the rectory. Because the fathers had no cook, the boys relied on the orphanage's cook to prepare meals for them.

When Mr. Chan arrived in Hoignan, he gave the Maryknollers permission to hire their own cook. He knew full well that they would have trouble finding someone to take the job. In fact, Mr. Chan seemed to derive a perverse satisfaction in watching the two priests going about the village with no success.

Finally, an older woman, who had been a parishioner and a dedicated Catholic, agreed to prepare their meals. During the famine, Father Joe had given rice to her and her family when they were starving. The woman's name was Mrs. Lau. She had resided in Hoignan for all of her fifty-five years. Her husband had died at the hands of the Japanese while fighting with the Nationalist army of Chang Kai-Shek. She remained a widow.

Following her husband's death, when Mrs. Lau fell on hard times, Father Joe had often come to her aid. She was a pure soul who knew the value of gratitude. This is why she took

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the job, even though she was harassed almost immediately for doing so. "What are you thinking about?" some of the Party sympathizers would ask her. "Let the American priests fend for themselves. Let them go hungry. Then they will know how the people feel."

The fact that Mrs. Lau's husband had fought with the Nationalist army under Chang Kai-Shek caused her to be viewed with a jaundiced eye by the Communists. Being a practicing Catholic did not help her case either. Now that she had willingly taken on the job of cooking for the priests, the Communists had become even more suspicious of her. As a result, the good widow was continuously monitored when she went to the market or walked through the mission compound. In fact, one of the minor syndics and his dupes in the local community were given specific instructions by the top brass to harass her.

Day after day, week after week, the poor woman was subjected to this bullying. After several months of this, one of the higher Red officials confronted her in the marketplace with this ominous warning: "The purge will come some day, old woman." Then, he issued a direct threat: "You had better think about leaving the foreign devils if you value your life and the lives of your family. There is no place in the New China for reactionaries and imperialistic sympathizers."

While all the previous insults had been upsetting, this admonition provoked marked anxiety within the soul of Mrs. Lau. This man who had threatened her was notorious for his cruelty in dealing with anti-Communists. He particularly hated those soldiers who had fought with the Old Government forces under Chang Kai-Shek. The reason for his impassioned hatred was because several members of his family had been

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killed by the Nationalists in the war. He was obsessed with getting any kind of vengeance.

This official had made it a personal crusade to track down those who had fought with Chang Kai-Shek and bring them to trial. When they were discovered, he would have them hung by their thumbs in the public square until they confessed to the new crime of treason against the People's Government. The shrieks and groans of these suffering men were so chilling that it was impossible to forget them. When they did confess, they were cut down, but hardly forgiven. Rather, they were subjected to a savage beating with a wooden club or an iron rod. By the time the victim died, he was simply unrecognizable — a bloody mass of broken bones and a battered skull were all that was left to call a corpse. That was not all. The families of these men were often targeted for persecution as well. Their fate was not much better than that of the patriot soldiers. If their lives were spared, they ended up in squalid prisons where they often were tortured. Mrs. Lau understood clearly that she and her family would suffer unspeakable torment if she failed to heed this official's warning.

So, with a heart full of apologies, this wonderful lady was forced to go to Father Joe and resign her job: "I am so sorry, Luk Shan-Fu," she said. "My family and I are indebted to you for all the help that you have given to us. But I must terminate my position here. The government is threatening me and my family. For myself, I am not concerned. But my old mother, my daughter, and my sons and their children will suffer for my work here." Mrs. Lau's head was bowed as she spoke to Father Joe. Her voice was strained and she sobbed bitterly.

Father Joe knew what Mrs. Lau had been subjected to these past five months. He appreciated her strength and fortitude,



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but he also knew that the wicked official was not bluffing. "I thank you for everything that you have done for us," he said. "Of course you cannot jeopardize the lives of your family to be a cook here. Leave with my blessing." Mrs. Lau cooked her last meal at the orphanage that day. She felt relieved because Father Joe understood and supported her decision in this most difficult time. Even still, she was well aware that because she had willingly worked for the missionaries, her loyalty to the People's Government would continue to be under suspicion. The brave widow had to be extremely careful.

The following day, Father Joe asked to see Mr. Chan and the latter agreed. Always the good pastor, the Maryknoller had devised a sort of diversionary ruse in order to try to improve Mrs. Lau's situation. In other words, he was going to color the facts to protect her. As he had expected, the official who had made the threats, along with several of his cronies, was there as he entered the magistrate's office. "Mr. Chan, Mrs. Lau, my cook has resigned," Father Joe lamented. "It is obvious to me that she no longer wants to cook for me and Father Franco. She thinks it is far better to avoid being associated with someone who has been accused of being a criminal by the People's Government. Despite the fact that I paid and treated her well, she is not willing to work for me any longer." While Mr. Chan and his associates pretended not to gloat, it was obvious that they were pleased that their intimidation tactics had worked.

For a few seconds, Father Joe let them languish in their petty victory. Then, he said: "It would be best if Father Franco and I take care of our own meals from now on. It is unlikely that anyone else would really want to cook for us. Even Mrs. Lau only cooked for us out of duress. She felt obligated because I gave her rice during the famine." Mr. Chan agreed, with a gibe: "It is not likely that any citizen of the People's

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Government would wish to be employed as a servant to a foreigner, particularly an accused American spy.”

The meeting terminated on that note.

### House Arrest and Poisoning the Minds of the Orphans

March 7, 1952, was a “Red-Letter Day” for the Communists. It was the day when the orphan boys were removed from the third floor of the rectory and sent to live in the church building. Father Joe and Father Rocco, from this point on, had no contact with those children for whom they had cared so many years. No longer were the boys able to receive Holy Communion from them. Without the help of the trusted boys, they could no longer send the Blessed Sacrament to the sisters and the orphan girls.

Now that the Communists had isolated these young men, they began to gradually indoctrinate them. The soldiers who guarded the orphanage would ridicule those whom they caught saying their prayers. “Don’t be foolish. You waste your efforts praying to some God that you can’t see,” they said. “Mao Tse-tung is your god. He is the one who is your savior. What the American priests tell you is false. If their Jesus Christ is so powerful, He would save them.”

Despite the harassment, many of the orphans continued to openly say their prayers, ignoring the quips of the soldiers. At times, some of the tougher boys lost patience, turning on their taunters with retorts like: “We don’t care what you say. Father Lavin took care of us. We believe what he taught us.” These brave unfortunates were harassed with greater ridicule. They fast learned that it was best to pray secretly and to keep quiet.

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Although many of the orphans held steadfastly to their beliefs, some did not. A few even turned against the Fathers — or, more correctly put, they were turned against the fathers. But turn they did, going so far as to become informers. It was not easy for a youngster to remain strong in the face of Communist indoctrination. After all, some of the Red soldiers were only teenagers themselves. The devil inverts the natural order of things. A little authority is given to the young in order to make them feel important, while, at the same time, they are encouraged to mock their elders who are of no use to the Revolution. It was understandable that many young men and women of China, who had no true religion, would look up to these decorated juveniles. After all, they had a cause to fight for. It did not matter that the cause was built upon no foundation, that it defied natural justice, that it was cruel and destructive, or that, in the end, it would make every commoner a slave of the state—no, the only thing that mattered was the illusion of an earthly paradise of plenty. That is the dream that drove these Maoists on. That was the positive motivation; on the other hand, there was the very coercive fear of the consequences of defection.

The Red leviathan now had control of mainland China. The agents of the beast arrested people; they beat them; and they executed them without mercy. They exercised real power, power right here on earth that was visible to the naked eye. They exercised the kind of power that makes being “bad” look good — the kind of power over mortal life that makes diabolical men believe that they are gods, particularly when they are young, proud, and convinced of their own invincibility.

And so it was that some of Father Joe’s own orphans wanted to become like those who worshipped the Red dragon. They, too, wanted to possess the attributes of the gods of the New

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China. So they renounced their faith and swore allegiance to a false god: "I believe in Mao Tse-tung and in the People's Government. I believe that there is no life after death and that Communism can create paradise on earth." The Judas orphans even agreed to spy on their benefactors and to report what they observed to their new masters.

On May 30, 1952, the Communists commenced with the final stage of their program. The two fathers were now formally placed under house arrest. They were moved to one small room on the ground floor. The orphan boys and girls were moved to the second and third floors of the rectory, but without distinction of sex. In the "worker state" there was no distinction made between males and females, so why bother to separate them.

The fathers had no contact with the orphans. Nevertheless, they had been informed "through the grapevine" that some of the orphans had been indoctrinated and would be spying on them. They had to be careful. Several days earlier, just before they were moved, they had offered their last Mass in China. They no longer dared to continue celebrating the Holy Eucharist for fear of possible desecration. The orphan spies, therefore, had little to report about the Maryknollers' religious activities.

Even if the Judas orphans were unproductive as spies, Mr. *Sin Fukwoh* (Father Joe referred to him as Mr. Sin), who had replaced Mr. Chan, had other plans for using them. Mr. Sin was described as "a real bad egg" by Father Joe. Because the two priests had no cook, the orphans began bringing them food. Mr. Sin encouraged the orphans to hurl abuse at the Fathers while they were delivering the food. The usual ranting: "American dogs, foreign devils, enemies of the people", spiced with other insults too foul to print, was now part of

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their daily menu. Those orphans who had been most influenced by the indoctrination were further encouraged to throw stones, mud, urine, manure, and other garbage into the priests' room and onto their beds. To top matters off, some of the worst of the lot actually entered the room, slapped the fathers in their faces, tweaked their noses, spit on them, and whacked them with sticks.

Mr. Sin was hoping that the Maryknollers would retaliate, at least against those boys who stormed into their room. But, Father Joe knew the consequences that would follow if he or Father Franco retaliated. Both priests had to endure this scourge without giving the Communists what they wanted — a pretext for further charges and incriminations. How difficult this must have been! And from Whom did they draw all the virtues necessary to endure such outrage, except from Him Who endured so much more for all men. Yet, their virtue did not nullify the fact that these little hooligans were for the most part Catholic boys who had turned not just into brats, but into vipers.

On August 28, 1952, the orphanage was closed. When the government had taken it over eight months before, there were thirty-eight boys and girls living there. On August 28, thirty-two of them were turned out. The only children remaining were a few crippled orphans and those who had become informers. The children who were released were not given their mosquito nets, quilts, or blankets. They were simply discharged with no more than their clothes on their back. So much for Commie altruism. No doubt, Father Joe replayed in his mind the words of that official to whom he had submitted the petition requesting the government to take over the orphanage: "The People's Government certainly wants to do what is best for its smallest and most vulnerable citizens," the man had said.

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In reality, however, the dismissal of the thirty-two orphans backfired on the Communists. Because of their heartless action, they soon lost “face” with the people. In fact, so roundly were they criticized for discharging so many helpless ones that they took back four of the boys who were, at the time, starving in the street. Moreover, a few other orphans from the Chikkai orphanage, which had also been closed by the Communists, were sent to Hoignan. The orphans were then subjected to the usual party line: “Mao Tse-tung is the leader of the people. He and he alone liberated us from the foreign oppressors. Many of you have had your brains washed by the reactionary Catholic Church. You have been told lies in order to exploit you and the people of China. You are now citizens of the People’s Government. Your loyalty should be with us.” It was simply a return to business as usual. The new boys were educated in regard to the two Maryknollers who were under house arrest. They were encouraged to abuse them: “The foreign priests deserve your insults,” the officials stressed. Then, they related to the newcomers all the different ways and means that the orphan informants had successfully been using to torment the alien priests. They smiled as they described the whole dirty ordeal—and then they praised the boys’ uncouth behavior as “most exemplary”.

What the Red officials did not count on, however, was the fact that not all of the boys were impressed or intimidated by their bluff and bluster. A tall, slightly-built young man of sixteen years was becoming increasingly annoyed as the officials railed on about Father Lavin and Father Franco. When the government officials had finished with their tirade they invited questions and comments from the orphans. The sixteen-year-old stood up. His peers were staring at him as he arose. To be sure, the lad was quite nervous and a bit hesitant in

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beginning his speech, in fact, he was biting his lower lip. After a few seconds had elapsed, he looked directly at the officials and, with a forthright clarity in his voice, he said: "It was the Maryknoll priests and sisters who found me and took care of me when I was a child. It was the People's Government that sent me back to my village to starve. The priests and sisters were kind to me. They educated me, and here is what I believe." After a short pause, this anonymous twentieth-century confessor of the Faith went on: "I believe in God, the Father Almighty, the Creator of heaven and earth, and in Jesus Christ, His only Son, our Lord, who was conceived by the Holy Ghost, born of the Virgin Mary . . . ." The boy recited the entire Apostles' Creed before the officials and his peers without flinching. He had dared to speak openly and to profess his faith courageously. Immediately, two soldiers were called in. The boy was beaten in front of all the other youngsters and dragged from the premises. He was never seen or heard from again.

In spite of the impending doom hovering over the Church in China, there were precious consolations that helped Father Joe recognize that his twenty-plus years of work had not been in vain. There was little Rose Shan, who was only four years old. Rose had been adopted by the orphanage cook's mother. This devoted woman had adopted the tiny child to make sure that she persevered in her faith during the Red persecution. Little Rose's assignment was to go to the priests' room after they had eaten and to take the empty food pot back to her mother. Even though she was only four years of age, she had learned the deceptive ways that one must adopt for self-protection in a totalitarian society. So, when the orphans were around, Rose would appear to join them in the abuse, passively, that is. However, when she was alone, she would chat

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respectfully with the two priests: "Father Lavin," she would say, "I'm sorry for what the boys say to you. They are disrespectful and should not act that way. My grandmother says you are a good man and that I must pray to Jesus and Mary." The pious grandmother was a wonderful influence on Rose.

There were a few occasions when this little girl could not remain silent, even exhibiting an heroic fortitude. For instance, once when the Judas orphans were particularly vulgar, she confronted one of them saying: "You should not curse at the Fathers. What you say is wrong. One day you will be punished for it!" The boy, whose pride had been challenged, reacted aggressively. He pushed the little girl aside and shouted: "What do you know, stupid girl! Get away from here or I'll beat you!" Rose turned and walked away. She knew that this bully was quite capable of carrying out his threat. Moreover, he would be sure to receive support from the soldiers. God only knows where little Rose is today.

There was another Rose for whom Father Joe could be filled with consolation. This Rose was a twenty-three-year-old orphan; she was crippled and epileptic. Mr. Sin had specifically instructed her to stop saying her prayers. "Stop praying to the God of the foreigners," he said. "I forbid it! Mao Tse-tung is your god now. The People's Government is your church. Stop this superstition now and for always!" Rose would never comply with this demand and, in a spirited retort, she so informed Mr. Sin.

That "very bad egg" grew more and more frustrated because of this poor handicapped young woman's open defiance. Personal pride is a big thing with the Orientals — and his was wounded. Mr. Sin needed to get rid of Rose so that he would not lose "face" in the presence of the other orphans, and he



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needed to do it in such a way that he did not lose "face" for obvious cruelty. So, the clever Mr. Sin made an arrangement to "marry off" Rose to an older man in the community whom he had bribed into service. There was nothing Father Joe could do to help the valiant young woman. She was heaven's "Rose".

### Outwitting the Garbage Throwers

Once Father Joe and Father Rocco were confined to one room, the Communists became even more effective in poisoning the minds of not only the orphans but also, of the other young people in Hoignan. Having little or no interaction with the members of the community took away their opportunity to rebut the claims that the Reds were making about their presence in China. "The foreign devils deserve your wrath," the young people were told. Many teenagers who had been treated kindly by Father Joe, ended up swallowing the Red propaganda hook, line, and sinker. Volatile emotions replaced reason.

The Reds encouraged the young hooligans of the village to throw rocks, garbage, and other vile-smelling refuse through the window of the priests' one room cell. And this is exactly what they did, repeatedly, throughout the day. Needless to say, this was most unnerving to the two priests. Not only was it painful to see these juveniles destroyed by the Red propaganda, but, the mess that their ballistic revelry created was almost unbearable. The beds, the furniture, the floor, and the walls were splattered with debris and excrement so often that they were impossible to adequately clean. And with each assault, the mop-up became harder and less satisfactory.

Complaints to the soldiers guarding the compound did no good. "What can you expect," the priests were told. "The

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people are angry. They want revenge. You exploited them for many years. There is nothing that we can do to prevent their righteous indignation against you and the imperialistic government that you represent." The Communists had removed all of the religious pictures from their room. In their place, they had hung a large picture of Mao Tse-tung, the spiritual icon of the New China. When Father Joe asked why the picture was being hung in their room, the soldiers shouted in his face: "Mao Tse-tung, not Jesus Christ, is the liberator of our nation. We hang Mao Tse-tung's picture here to remind you of that fact."

Father Joe realized just how much the Communist machine had deified this diabolical monster. One day, after a particularly harrowing assault, he decided that the picture of Mao might serve a useful purpose after all. He motioned to Father Rocco, who was sitting in the corner of the room during the garbage *melée*, to take the picture off the wall and slide it toward him. "We will see how much the people revere the great Mao Tse-tung," he said. There were a few lingering hoodlums around who were still hurling debris through the window. Father Joe grasped the framed picture in both hands. He then held it up in front of him, walked toward the window, and placed the picture on the sill so that it could be clearly seen by all those outside of the building. At that moment all activity stopped. "To defile the portrait of Mr. Mao would be a sacrilege to these Red devils," Father Joe thought. "From now on Mao will have a permanent place in our window."

From that day on, all assaults on the Fathers' room terminated. When a Red soldier questioned Father Joe about placing the picture in the window, he gave him this ingenious answer: "We put Mao Tse-tung's picture in the window so that the people could see that he is our protector as well as the pro-

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ector of the Chinese people. Mao Tse-tung, as you have told me, is a kind and just leader. He expects that those who have been put on trial, like us, should be treated fairly under the law. The picture should remind the people of that." Then Father Joe added: "The picture also reminds the people that the People's Government, under Chairman Mao's leadership, owns this building, this room, and this entire compound. This makes it more likely that the people would want to treat the government's property with respect rather than to defile it." What could the Red soldier say to that? It all made good sense to him. So the picture stayed in the window. The garbage assaults ceased. The *Iron Man* had outwitted his enemies, making life a little more bearable for another day.

### Confinement with no Privacy

Following their house arrest, the living quarters of Fathers Joe and Rocco were open to the public. According to the Communists, this was one of the "ten freedoms" guaranteed to the people. It was called the "freedom of inspection". Anyone, or any group of people, could burst into one's quarters at all hours of the day or night. So, in the name of "freedom", they would just march in demanding to search the prisoners' room or to interrogate them. Drawers were opened. Clothes were taken out, tried on, and thrown to the ground in ridicule. Toothpaste was squeezed from the tube all over the place. Pictures were examined. Mixed groups of mischievous boys and girls would come in the room at whim. Some would kick at the door, track mud into the room, spit on the floor, and behave like animals. Their questions were endless. "Why do you live here? Who pays you? What is it like in America?" Some would expound on the glories of

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Communism and try to convert the two priests. A few of the local wise guys, like the orphan informants, slapped the fathers' faces and pinched their noses. The unfamiliar western nose drew their particular attention and ridicule — much like people the world over have always found some physical characteristic of a different ethnic race to be “odd-looking”. These young thugs found this infantile pastime to be particularly humorous and they made liberal use of it.

These older teenagers and young men were particularly annoying to Father Joe and Father Rocco. Putting up with their abuse was more difficult because the young men ought to have known better. The younger boys, however, were children without as much training so there was some excuse for their behavior. One can imagine how hard it was for the two priests not to retaliate. Like the Christian soldiers that they were, the Maryknollers made no remonstrances. They offered to God all that they endured in silence. Actually, refusing to defend themselves against their tormentors gained them some reprieve. Showing agitation would have only spurred on more of the sordid sport.

Providentially, there came about an apostolic side to this “freedom of inspection”. Soldiers, farmers, merchants, and students took advantage of the “inspection”, walking into the room when curiosity prompted them, or when they were in the spirit for an argument. Some actually seemed to be sincere in searching for the truth. In fact, many who first came to tease or mock, ended up remaining to listen to what the priests had to say. And, sometimes, they would return with more questions. As a result, Father Joe began to appreciate these latter kinds of visits. He would make good out of an evil. “It was a chance,” he thought, “to explain [to them] the

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position and the doctrine of the Catholic Church. What they learn here may come to flower at a later date.”

During one ten-day stretch, about four thousand people had to come to Hoignan in order to attend some kind of mandatory meetings. The Maryknollers' room was filled from dawn until 10 o'clock at night. Young and old alike crammed themselves into every nook and cranny as only the Chinese can do. The room smelled bad enough as it was (from all the dirty missiles), and now, with no fresh air at all, every breath was a penance. But stagnant air did not stop the people from coming in and grabbing a space. Questions and answers flew back and forth. And, at times, debates grew heated. However, when *Chinese Joe* spoke (in their dialect), the tone of his voice, his spirited enthusiasm, his guileless wisdom, and his quick sense of humor caused many of his visitors to wonder. Despite all that he had been through, the *Iron Man* still possessed the magnetism that made him a successful missionary. This genuine sincerity caused some of the more obnoxious visitors to change from being derisive to being, at least, respectful inquirers. At times, some of them even became his supporters.

The most frequently-asked question was, “Why don't you believe in Communism?” Father Joe would always give the same answer: “Because Communism doesn't believe in the existence of God and the existence of the soul. We consider these to be incontrovertible facts.” Then, he would usually add, “Even if Chairman Mao Tse-tung should come here and tell us that if we do not believe in Communism we must die, we would rather die.” This ardent response astonished his interrogators. “Do you really believe as strongly as that?” they asked. “Yes!” replied the Maryknoller. “Not only Father Franco and I, but also any good Catholic must say the same thing.” Many would shake their heads in amazement. They

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were confused. "Why would your God want you to give up the life that He gave you?" they inquired. "Why not just say that you believe in Communism, even if you don't? You can still believe inside of you without anyone else knowing. Then, the People's Government would set you free," they added. Father Joe would then launch into a discussion on Jesus Christ, Who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life, why He came to this earth, and how He suffered and died for the sins of all men. He talked about Christ's founding of the Catholic Church and the many saints and martyrs who refused to deny the true Faith in the face of persecution.

During these parleys, the discussions often became quite profound. While some ridicule and antagonism was still manifest, there were many in the audience who disputed with an open mind; some were even docile. At times, they would chastise those who came only to mock. "Be quiet!" they would yell at them. "We want to hear what the man has to say. If you are not interested go elsewhere."

That Father Joe had actually made some friends during these meetings became more evident after the ten-day convocations ended. Some of the outsiders came back to Hoignan several times to pose more questions about the Catholic Faith. Even a few of the Red guards had come to like and respect this foreigner who appeared to have had no selfish motive in leaving his own country and becoming one of them.

On one occasion, some young Red politicians got together and decided to attend a meeting at the popular little dorm. Their only purpose for coming was to heckle the two priests. And so they did — much to the disgust of the sincere disputants. In the middle of an explanation about the Faith, they interrupted Father Joe with their usual gibe: "Your religion is false and

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deceives the people,” they heckled. “Your words mean nothing. Take your Catholic religion back to America. You are an American spy who came here to exploit us!” These outbursts eventually became so irritating that several unbiased attendees accosted the politicians and asked them to leave. Next, some other young man, committed to the Revolution, started railing against these open-minded listeners, calling them, “running dogs of the Americans”. Things started getting hectic. Several of the soldiers, who were participating in the discussion, became enraged because they thought that the insult was directed at them. After all, they were also listening, inquiring, and engaging in the discourse with Father Joe. So the good soldiers got miffed. Jumping to their feet, they took hold of the young Communist ideologues by their collars, and proceeded to throw each of them out of the room with a warning not to return. The arrogant young hecklers, obviously no physical match for the soldiers, walked away, mumbling under their breath, and dragging their tails behind them. The soldiers returned to the Maryknollers’ room and the discussion continued in peace. Father Joe went on planting seeds, trusting in God, and hoping that someday these seeds would bear fruit.

### Christmas Day, 1952

The Communists were well aware of what Christmas meant to the Christians. From dawn to dusk, Red agitators tormented Fathers Lavin and Franco with taunting comments about the birth of Christ and the pageantry surrounding the upcoming holy day. “What foolishness you preach,” one young Red soldier jeered. “How can a child be born of a virgin. This makes no sense. You came all the way to China to preach a religion that deceives the people.” Another agitator

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protested: "Christmas celebrations and all of your superstitions are just a way to excite the people! It keeps them from thinking. It keeps them from being enlightened. It keeps them under the control of capitalistic Chinese landlords and imperialists like yourselves."

From sun-up to sun-down, just prior to Christmas day, the healthy dialogue that had been occurring in the priests' quarter was replaced by the sneering monologue of the government's professional *agents provocateurs*. There was no sense arguing with the Reds, especially during these holy days. Their only purpose was to ridicule Christmas, not to learn about it. This was clearly their assignment — to make the most festive day of the year as miserable as possible for two Catholic priests. Silently, the Maryknollers said their prayers on Christmas morning. They even managed to put a small paper crib, which they had hidden, on a little table in their room. But, the Communists made it clear that they would not be allowed to offer any religious services in commemoration of the birth of Christ.

Father Joe thought back to his first Christmas in Hoignan, December 25, 1938, fourteen years earlier. That Christmas was particularly memorable because a Mass was offered for the entire Lavin family. Also, there was much consolation that day. Father Joe recalled hearing 151 confessions on Christmas Eve, and about twenty of these had been from Christians who had been away from the sacraments for up to twenty years or more! He remembered how beautifully decorated the chapel was with the many varicolored crepe paper streamers and Chinese lanterns. And, too, how the young men and school children had gathered shortly after eleven o'clock that night to sing Christmas carols. With one large drum and two small ones, accompanied by bugles, the marching choir paraded through



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the village singing "O Holy Night" and many other hymns in their own language and in Latin.

The chapel was packed with at least four hundred people for the midnight Mass. The liturgy was as solemn as Father Joe could make it, with sung propers, many bells and lots of incense, all of which seemed to hold the people spellbound.

Father Joe recalled that 220 people received Holy Communion. How consoling this was in light of the fact that he had to combat so much laxity and indifference when he first came here. And what made this Christmas even more gratifying was that all of the people stayed for the second Mass at 1:00 a.m., and some even stayed for the third Mass that was offered for the Lavin clan! After the Masses, the people came through the sacristy door for Christmas greetings. How happy they were when Luk Shan-Fu gave them Christmas holy cards and a few cookies. Yes, that was a memorable Christmas, his first one in Hoignan, fourteen years ago.

The year 1938 was a good one. Father Joe recalled the first day of January, 1939, and the gala banquet that he had prepared for sixteen town officials in order to usher in the New Year with festive joy. He had sent one of the orphan boys around with the invitations — red New Year's greeting cards with gold lettering. The officials all came. They enjoyed cigarettes and Chinese dainties, followed by a sumptuous meal with the best wine. They toured the grounds, the school, and the orphanage, and then they all attended Benediction of the Blessed Sacrament. Everyone had a good time and they got to know this American priest and the mission a little bit better. Father Joe remembered, too, how impressed the villagers were when they found out about the banquet and the festivities. Ceremonial functions like

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this were very important to the Chinese people. Yes, January 1, 1939 was a splendid day indeed.

As his memory meandered nostalgically, Father Joe thought of a more recent Christmas, three years back, and how different it was. The school children and their teachers put on a marvelous Bethlehem play that Christmas Eve. For the Nativity scene, a baby orphan, only a few days old, stood in (or laid in) for the Christ Child in the crib, and it was a real crib at that. There was the Blessed Mother, Saint Joseph, the angels, the shepherds, and even the Three Wise Men; everything was perfect. Christmas carols were sung in Chinese, Latin, and English. Father Joe remembered preaching a sermon about the meaning of the great feastday to an audience of seven hundred people. How attentive the Chinese were to the beauty of the truth so short a time ago.

And there was a lighter side to the Christmas show. There was that hilarious clown act that had to be seen to be appreciated. And, following that, there was a very clever play, all casted by the youngsters, involving one henpecked husband and, on the other hand, a fearful wife who had a bully for a husband. The boys and girls who acted the parts did a splendid job. Everything they said and did was so true to Chinese life that the audience was howling with laughter. In the final act, the tables turned. The compliant henpecked husband became the demanding slave master of his wife and the husband, who had been a tyrant, became the quivering lackey of a browbeating matron. At the very end, a priest was called in and the quarrels and troubles were all fixed. Now this was only a few years ago. The priest was held in great respect then, even by the unbelievers. He was viewed as a man of wisdom, a counselor, a friend of justice. How could such things have changed so dramatically — and so quickly?

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These were the memories of the remote and recent past. They were unlikely to be repeated any time soon. Instead, they had to listen to the taunts of a boorish guard who would not let up: "Christmas is the opium of the people," he sneered. And, for the one-thousandth time, they heard the demonic refrain: "Mao Tse-tung is the savior of the Chinese people, not Jesus Christ." And, again, "It was Mao Tse-tung who freed us from the bandit Chang Kai-Shek. You preached the Christian religion only to chain us, while the United States loaned money, planes, guns, and military equipment to that American running dog."

"No sense arguing with the Reds today," Father Joe thought. "That will only keep the nonsense going. Best to let it run its course." So the harassment went on and on. However, like any activity that fails to achieve its desired objective, it was not fun anymore. The stalwart, blank, and emotionless reactions of the two priests were not producing what the Communists intended. They wanted to see frustration, angry outbursts, and even aggressive retaliation. The Reds needed to provoke the Maryknollers into doing something that they could use against them. But the strategy failed. As Christmas day went on, the agitators actually started to vacate the room, leaving the fathers, at last, to themselves.

Later that day, the usual fare of three bowls of rice, some solid fish, and a little vegetable dish were delivered by one of the orphans. Some unknown benefactor also slipped in four ounces of pork to this standard daytime meal, making it a special Christmas treat. So the two Maryknollers relished their special collation in quiet gratitude. It was the first meat that they had eaten for a long time.

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Although the fathers were not allowed any Christmas visitors, the supervision of that prohibition grew lax as the holy day rolled on. Consequently, a few old Catholic parishioners were able to sneak in the room and exchange Christmas greetings with them. One very cautious old man entered the “rectory” toward evening when there were no guards in the vicinity. He suspiciously looked around, repeatedly glancing over his shoulder as he entered through the door and came into the room. “Luk Shan-Fu,” he said, looking directly at Father Joe, “I have a letter that is to be delivered to you.” Then he added, “You still have many friends, even though the Communists tell lies about you.” The old man nervously handed the letter to Father Joe. As he was leaving the room, he lifted his voice and said, “Merry Christmas and God bless you.” In his haste, he did not stop to wait for a response from the fathers.

Father Joe had known the old man for a long time before the Communist takeover. He was a man who could be trusted. It was obvious that he took a great risk in delivering this letter. The letter was a single page, a typed document, written by Fathers Joseph Sweeney and Carroll Quinn from the leper colony at Ngaimoon, Kwangtung, South China. After informing their co-laborers that the New York Yankees had won the World Series, the dispatch ended on a sad note: Bishop Francis X. Ford and Bishop Byrne had both passed away. Bishop Ford expired from malnutrition in a Communist hospital. Bishop Byrne literally died on his feet in Korea during the war; as a prisoner of the Reds, he was forced to walk till he dropped in the infamous “Death March”.

Even though this missive contained sad news, receiving any unexpected letter from fellow Maryknollers added some joy to the day. Again, on the bright side, they did get to eat fif-

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teen cents' worth of pork – that was a pleasant surprise – and, more importantly, the small paper crib symbolizing our Savior's birth had survived the day. While the Communists mocked Christmas, and all that was associated with it, they did not confiscate this small but endearing consolation. "December 25, 1952, was not so bad after all," mused Father Joe. Always the optimist!

### The Hunger Strike

December 26 brought with it an abrupt return to the monotonous boredom of house arrest. For meals, the fathers were given the same meager amount of food that was given to the orphans as rationed by the government. This was hardly enough to provide proper nourishment for two men.

When Father Joe returned to China, his weight had stabilized at 170 pounds. He now weighed 132. The *Iron Man* was emaciated and he was beginning to look frighteningly skeletal. Moreover, his vision was deteriorating. He could not see clearly enough to read his breviary. And he had a hard time even focusing on a face.

During this time, Father Joe lodged numerous protests about the insufficient amount and poor quality of the food. At one point, when a government official entered his room, he pointed to the picture of Chairman Mao: "Look at your leader," he said. "You say that he is a man of the people. That he endures what the people endure and lives like them." Then the Maryknoller drove home his point. "How much do you think Mao Tse-tung weighs?" he asked. The official, not fully understanding where this was all going, stared blankly at the priests. "Look how heavy the man is," continued Father Joe. "He must weigh at least two hundred pounds. Do you think Mao

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Tse-tung eats the same food that you feed to us and the orphans? Is this how he would treat those who are under the rule of the People's Government?"

The government official became tongue-tied, unable to formulate a sensible response. The *Iron Man* went on: "I doubt that Mao Tse-tung would tolerate what is going on here. He would be ashamed of the government in Hoignan. You would lose much 'face' if he saw how little and how poorly you feed us and the orphans." The official was speechless; he turned and left in a huff. As a result of the confrontation, the two priests were allowed a little more rice and green vegetables, but that was still hardly enough nourishment.

Worse than the paltry diet were the times when even the pittance they were rationed was inedible. One time the rice looked oddly spiced – and it was – with sand. On January 31, 1953, the two priests had had enough. The food that day was particularly repulsive, so Father Joe took his portion and hurled it right back at the heartless Red who had given it to him. "We are going on a hunger strike for better food. We want no more of your swill!" he vehemently protested. The delivery man was apparently one of the local officials, and, although he was at first startled by Father Joe's ire, he recouped fairly quickly. "Do what you please," he grunted. Then he walked away mumbling to himself.

For the Maryknollers, the hunger strike was just another strategic maneuver. Father Joe still had a flare for drama and he intended to make use of the many friends that he had to publicize the strike. Moreover, the priest also was counting on some positive chatter from some of the more humane soldiers who were responsible for guarding him. Through these means word spread around that he and Father Franco were being

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starved to death. This was big news and all of Hoignan was buzzing over it. Mr. Sin, chief honcho at the orphanage, could not care less whether the two priests died of hunger. However, when the word got to the head magistrate (i.e., the mayor) about what was happening, Mr. Sin began to worry. He had been given orders at the start not to let the Americans die lest they be turned into martyrs. The priests were still popular with many of the people and, although the commoners had resigned themselves to the Communist yoke, the starvation of the two priests might trigger an uprising.

The chief syndic decided to go and talk with the two fathers. As it was, if anything happened to the Maryknollers, he would not be viewed favorably by the People's Government. And to lose favor with the ruling tyrants meant a total loss of "face", job, and perhaps even life. As he entered the "rectory", he told the soldier to stand guard at the entrance and to make sure that he was not disturbed.

The magistrate closed the door of the priests' room so as to have absolute privacy. He looked at the prisoners, focusing mostly on the *Iron Man* as he spoke. He knew that he was the mastermind behind this plot. With some trepidation in his voice, he said: "Father Lavin, your decision to go on a hunger strike is a foolish one. It will get you nowhere." Father Joe, of course, knew that the magistrate would not have come to see him if the threatened hunger strike was of no consequence to him. The fact that he had come to see the Maryknollers, in privacy, no less, spoke volumes on the negative impact that the strike was having on him and the government. "On the contrary," answered Father Joe. Then, showing that he had even approached this with a sense of humor, he stated: "Father Franco and I have only been trying to determine whether this would be a McSweeney hunger strike or a Ghandi protest

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strike. McSweeney held out for a couple of months before he died, but Ghandi survived several hunger strikes. I'll see," he added, "if I can break their records." (If the Irish Maryknoller feared death at all, he obviously feared melancholia much more.) "I know nothing about that of which you speak," the magistrate rejoined. "I must insist, however, that you stop this ridiculous protest. The People's Government will not allow it." [Note: Terrence McSweeney was the Dublin Mayor of the 1920's who died as a result of a hunger strike that he undertook to protest British terror tactics.]

Father Joe realized that the magistrate was under pressure, so he kept to his guns. "Why do you or the government care when the boss of the orphanage is so unconcerned?" he asked. "He feeds us slop that is not fit for the pigs." Then, looking directly at the magistrate, he spoke slowly and firmly: "Unless our requests are honored, we intend to continue this right to the end. We are abused by Mr. Sin and those orphans whom he has influenced against us. It is a disgrace that the People's Government would allow this to happen."

The magistrate recognized that the orphanage boss was a major culprit in exacerbating this problem. If he refused to give Father Joe negotiating power with Mr. Sin, then his own fate would be sealed. "I will confer with Mr. Sin about this matter," he said. "I'm sure that with my help, we can resolve these difficulties. In the meantime, I would like you to resume eating." Father Joe had the last word: "We will only stop the protest when the boss makes the changes that we are seeking. We refuse to eat the swill that he feeds us." In the end, however, the priest told the magistrate that if he would buy some crackers and meatballs, they would eat. But, again he insisted that he would not eat the food that was given to him from the orphanage.



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The magistrate hesitated. He did not want to override Mr. Sin's authority and cause him to lose "face". This would only result in his becoming Mr. Sin's enemy. However, he needed to keep the Maryknollers alive to avoid being reprimanded by the Party. He needed time so that he could apply the appropriate pressure from above and thus insure Mr. Sin's cooperation without alienating him. So, Hoignan's top official agreed to allow Father Joe to purchase the crackers and meatballs. But, he insisted that this be done secretly, by a trusted orphan perhaps. And so it was done. A few meatballs and crackers helped the two priests to survive over the next several days while the ostensible hunger strike continued.

Following this parley, the magistrate made the appropriate "administrative arrangements" to insure that Mr. Sin would cooperate with the Priests. Comrade Sin, meanwhile, had to adjust himself to a less atrocious treatment of the Maryknollers, but, because they had outmaneuvered him, he harbored an even greater resentment toward them.

On the sixth day of the strike, Mr. Sin finally ceded to the missionaries' request to do their own shopping and cooking. Actually, he was hoping that the people would make their shopping experience very uncomfortable. "I can protect you from the people while you are in your cell," he said. "But I cannot be responsible for their actions when you go out into the streets." To which Father Joe replied: "There is no need for protection." Much to Mr. Sin's disappointment, once again Father Joe was correct. His old parishioners and beneficiaries greeted him with bright eyes and a smile, even if covertly. Some even braved the hostile glares of the Red police by openly approaching the priests with the warmest greetings: "How glad we are to see you again, Luk Shan-Fu."

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As for money, the Fathers had received a remittance from Hong Kong through the bank. They were able to buy everything that they needed, at least for now. Moreover, mail could now be sent and received more freely, although this had to be done very judiciously. One might even say that things were looking up. The Maryknollers had gained another temporary victory. All the more reason why the Communists wanted to get them out of Hoignan. Not only had the hunger strike succeeded, but the defector orphans and village brats were instructed to cease and desist their customary harassment.

### February and March of 1953: The Stranglehold Loosens

Along with this slight improvement of conditions came a continuing deterioration of Father Joe's health. Of course, the *Iron Man* played down the problems contending that he was "in good health" and there was "nothing to worry about just because old age was creeping up". Letters written on February 7 and February 18, 1953, to Father Bill Mulcahy confirmed the fact that Father Lavin was not well. Difficulty in expressing himself and in the very mechanics of writing were readily apparent. Moreover, Father Joe uncharacteristically signed these letters, "as ever, Joe," rather than *Chinese Joe*, which had long been his trademark signature.

The text of this correspondence clearly showed that the *Iron Man* was having a tough time. In the February 18 letter, he even asks the reader to "excuse the wording and mistakes because I am using a pair of Joe Sweeney's glasses to write this letter".

Who was Joe Sweeney? Father Rocco, of course. The Irish priest was forever the jokester.

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While Father Joe presented things as being better, it was evident that he needed money badly in order to keep him and Father Rocco from starving. In both letters he asked for three hundred Hong Kong dollars. In their weakened condition, shopping for food and preparing their own meals was not an easy task, even though it did allow the priests a temporary change of venue. Then, too, every time they left their cell their nerves were on edge because of the constant monitoring from the Reds. Not only were their interactions with the peasants watched, but also their negotiations with the market vendors. Should any of these poor people be perceived as being too cooperative or supportive with the plight of the fathers, they and their families could be subjected to dire consequences.

So vigilance was always the byword. "Silence is gold" as Father Joe would put it. Even in his correspondence with the family, he implied that this principle was to be put into practice. Only eleven days before his expulsion, he wrote the following to his parents:

*Catholic Mission*

*Hoignan, Toishaan*

*Kwangtung, So. China*

*March 21, 1953*

*Dear Ma & Pa:*

*Just a few lines to wish you and the families a blessed and happy Easter. May the peace and happiness of the risen Savior always abide with Mother, Father, Charlie, Ted, Marguerite, Mary, Ed, George, Frank, Lil, and Theresa — Aunt Jennie-Charlotte & family-Rose & family-Eleanor, Mae-Margaret and family-Nora & family-Miner & Rosemary & family-Ed & Patsy & family-Aunt Kate & Margaret, Uncle Jack & Aunt Margaret.*

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*I wrote to you for Christmas and also on February 10. Tell Mary I received her letter on Feb. 25—the first letter from home since last May. Great to hear from home. Will answer later. Congrats to young Frankie for joining the Marists.*

*Send letter to Mulcahy or Maurice Ahern and they can send them on to us. I just want to hear from home and from no one else. Tell the gang and friends to pray for me but not to write. You understand.*

*Regards to the Club Members and friends and blessed Easter to all of them.*

*Rocco and I are well and happy. . . . We eat well and have plenty. We manage to keep busy.*

*Special regards and Easter greetings to Father Garrahan and congratulations on his 50th Anniversary.*

*Hope you are all well and happy. God bless you all. Keep smiling.*

*Your son,  
Joe*

Despite the trying times, the *Iron Man* continued to minimize the danger and to maintain his sense of humor. As far as he and Father Rocco doing so well, it was only a wish, not a fact. To have written the actual truth about their condition would have put their lives in jeopardy, should that information get into the wrong hands. True, the Communists had released their stranglehold on the writing and receiving of letters for Americans, but it was only to lure their victims into a false sense of security. Father Joe understood the baiting tactic well. The more letters that came into China, the greater the chance of government inspectors finding what they would consider incriminating material to use against their captives. "Silence is gold."

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### Final Interrogation and Expulsion

On March 27, Father Joe was summoned to the Hoignan police station for questioning. It was the feast of Our Lady of Sorrows.

The American Maryknoller was to be interrogated by some higher official from Toishaan, the county seat. He was informed of that beforehand, and that the head of the orphanage would be present. Accompanied by an armed guard, the prisoner entered the station through the front door. An attendant told him to sit in a wooden chair across from the Toishaan official. The official was at his desk thumbing through some papers as Father Joe came into the room. Once Father Joe was seated, the magistrate looked up. In a brusque manner, he snapped: "I'm sure you know why I'm here today. Isn't that so?" Father Joe replied, "No. I have no idea. I have already been questioned by the People's Government many times."

"Why did you come to China?" the official asked.

"I came here to teach the Catholic religion," Father Joe answered, "and to help those in need here in China."

"Who sent you?" asked the official.

"Maryknoll, in New York, sent me," Father Joe responded.

"We thought so," the official said with contempt. "Maryknoll sends spies like you into places like China. It is used by the American government for the purpose of espionage. Isn't that true?" he asked.

"That is absolute nonsense," Father Joe retorted. "Maryknoll is a Catholic missionary organization. Its purpose is to spread the gospel of Jesus Christ. It has no interest in spying."

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The official, ignoring this response, simply went right on with the interrogation. "The People's Government has accused you of killing orphans. You poisoned, starved, and dropped them from the roof of the orphanage. Witnesses testified that you killed thousands of children. Admit this!" he demanded.

The official then turned to Mr. Sin who had just entered the room, seating himself in the far corner. Pointing at him, he said to Father Joe: "This man is the boss of the orphanage. He has given us proof of your crimes. We know what you have done. Confess and the People's Government might be merciful. We are giving you another chance to admit your guilt. Tell us the truth!"

"I have not murdered any orphans," protested Father Joe. "The infants whom we found, or who were brought to us, died because of exposure, neglect, and disease. They were either abandoned by their parents or given to us by them or their relatives."

The interrogator was not interested in the truth. Looking sternly at Father Joe, he said with a sneer, "Isn't it a doctrine of your Catholic Church that you are supposed to confess your sins? Well, what we are asking you to do is confess. Admit that you committed crimes against the People's Government — that you killed orphans. We have proof. All we want you to do is to confess!"

Father Joe was just as adamant as the official at this point. "You are not asking me to confess," he rejoined. "What you are asking me to do is to lie. Neither the Catholic Church nor the People's Government believes that lying is honorable. A person who lies has no 'face' in China."

After this rapid-fire exchange, the official's voice began to soften. His belligerency was obviously getting him nowhere. He

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now decided to try a more congenial approach. "Look, Father," he said, "you are an educated man. You understand how things work. All we are asking you to do is to confess to what you have done. The People's Government then can make arrangements for you to leave China. You can go back to America."

Father Joe was furious. He hated this kind of mendacious duplicity. "I have never killed any children," he snapped back. "I have always taken good care of them. The people of Hoignan know this." The magistrate had had enough. Off came the mask. Rising to his feet he walked toward his prisoner: "I have been sent here to judge you," he said with slow deliberation in his voice. "Do you understand that? I want you to admit your crimes. I insist that you confess!"

Father Joe was startled by the frank admission. "I refuse to admit to something that I did not do," he replied with indignation. "You say that it is Catholic doctrine to confess a sin. That is true. But to confess to a crime that one did not do would be a lie. This would be a false confession. This is against Catholic doctrine."

The "judge" from Toishaan was dumbfounded. For a few moments, he did not respond. Returning to his desk, he sat down and lowered his head. Suddenly, he erupted, his flat nostrils heaving as he blared out: "You, American foreign devil, are a murderer of orphans. But you refuse to admit your guilt. Either you will speak plainly and confess or things will go hard on you! Will you confess?"

The *Iron Man* held firm: "I will not admit to lies."

At this point, three modern day lictors entered the office carrying heavy ropes. Pointing to them, the judge fired another threat at his captive: "These guards have been instructed to tie you up and beat you if you refuse to cooperate. Because the

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People's Government is merciful, we will give you one more opportunity to answer our questions truthfully. Let's begin with the first question. Why did you come to China?"

Father Joe refused to be intimidated by the ropes, the men carrying them, or the threats of a beating. "The answers that you seek," he said, "are already in reports that have been made to the government. Information on my work with the orphans is in the files and records held by Mr. Sin. He can supply these to you." The Maryknoller's voice stiffened as he accented his words: "You can tie me up and beat me as you wish. I have already replied to the charges before the government's judges. I refuse to speak further about these matters!" Father Joe was adamant.

The three scourgers were only present to intimidate; having failed in that, the Toishaan official did not bother to follow through on his threats. Rather, he abruptly terminated the interrogation. "We can kill you under our laws!" he thundered. "Since you refuse to cooperate, you will be put into prison until further notice. As far as I am concerned, you can stay there indefinitely. This may make you think about confessing to your evil ways."

The official then fired one more missile at his victim, this time at the priest's psyche. It was the same tactic Henry VIII used on Saint Thomas More in an attempt to demoralize him regarding the fate of his friend, Saint John Fisher. "Unlike you," he said to Father Joe, "the other priest who is with you will be allowed to go home to the United States. You, on the other hand, will be sent to jail and stay there indefinitely." The Toishaan official was trying to create the illusion that Father Franco had cooperated and was being rewarded accordingly. That clever ruse was wasted on the *Iron Man*. His facial expression remained unchanged. He was then led away by the guards



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to the rear of the police station where he was shoved into a jail cell with twenty-eight other prisoners. It was about 1 p.m.

Father Joe knew most of the incarcerated men. Some had attended Church services at the mission. Others were persons with whom he had done business. Several of them had received help from him when they had been down on their luck. However, the *Iron Man* did not greet or speak to anyone. He did not know who among them might be an informer. Too, if Father Joe were to acknowledge any of the prisoners, they might have to suffer brutal consequences just for having been associated with the priest in the past.

For three hours, Father Joe refrained from uttering a single word. At 4 p.m., Father Rocco was led into the cell. He was allowed to drop off some food and bedding. This was instrumental in helping to break the wall of silence that Father Joe had erected between himself and the other men. As soon as Father Rocco left, one of the merchants, with whom the Maryknoller had done business in the past, approached the priest with much reverence offering to help him set up his bed. "I cannot believe that they would put a man like you in here," he confided to Father Joe. Some of the other men then chimed in expressing the same affection.

The ice was broken. From this point on, the prisoners talked openly in their condemnation of the government. One man said he was accused of being a capitalist because he owned a few acres of farmland. "I objected when they wanted to take my land and divide it up," he explained. "I worked hard on that land and fed my family from the produce that we grew there. We were even able to sell vegetables at the market and make some extra money. When I argued, they insulted me, and beat me, and brought me here."

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Another man, who was a Christian, said that he was sent to jail because he did not approve of atheistic Communism. When the Party called meetings, which he was required to attend, he did not demonstrate the appropriate enthusiasm. Now he was regarded as a potential danger to society, "an enemy of the State", as they called him. Several others acknowledged that they had been jailed because they were Catholics. The fact that they had openly practiced their religion made them a danger to society in the eyes of the government. All of their fates were uncertain. Most expected the worst, either a long prison sentence, or possibly execution.

A number of the prisoners informed Father Joe that Mr. Ma, the school principal, had been detained there. "Mr. Ma was a fine Catholic," they said. "The Communists tried to get him to speak against you and the other Father. When he refused, they beat him. No matter how much they beat him, he refused to say what they wanted. They would say to him, 'Tell us about the crimes of the Americans. You are Chinese and must help us to get rid of foreigners like them. How many orphans did they kill? Tell us!' He would always reply, 'The priests are good men. They have committed no crimes. They help the people.'" The men went on to describe how his answers only infuriated the Communists. They beat Mr. Ma so badly that eventually he passed out. Several of his teeth were knocked out. There were red and purple welts all over his body. And he was covered with blood. Eventually, when he could say no more, they hauled him away like a sack of rice. No one knew what happened to him after that day. He was "true gold", as one of the prisoners put it.

Hearing all this, Father Joe had a rush of sadness. "What a friend!" he thought. Mr. Ma defended him right to the end and probably lost his life for doing so. "No greater love does a

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man have," Jesus said, "than to lay down his life for his friend." Mr. Ma had done exactly this for a priest of Christ. Although Father Joe knew of his friend's arrest when the Reds first came to Hoignan, he did not know the details of his martyrdom—until now. And this weight of sadness was given to him on March 27, the feast of Our Lady of Sorrows that year. Father Joe thanked the prisoners for telling him about Mr. Ma. From this point on, he chatted freely with them except when a guard was present.

Father Joe spent two nights and three days in jail. On Sunday morning, March 29, an official came to his cell. Father Joe had not had previous contact with the man. He was short, slender, and had a vacant, soulless look in his eyes. The man told Father Joe to pick up his belongings and to get ready to leave. Father Joe knew that something was up. He expected to be in jail for a much longer period of time. He packed his stuff and acted like he was unconcerned about the decision to move him. But, there was something different about this Red. His taciturn manner actually troubled the *Iron Man*.

Father Joe turned and left the cell without speaking to any of the prisoners. He was still fearful that some of the men might be singled out if he spoke or even looked at them. Accompanied by the official, and a guard, Father Joe returned to the mission. Before entering the compound, the official told him to pack and to prepare to go to Toishaan. "You will be transferred to another prison," he said. The official then added: "When you enter the mission, you are not to speak to the other priest there. If you say anything, we will make life difficult for him." Father Joe's sixth sense told him that this man meant business. He had better follow his instructions.

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Father Joe went to their room and packed without speaking to Father Franco. The latter was quick to read the signals and not ask questions. For now, it was best to do what they were told to do. When Father Joe was just about finished packing, the official looked at Father Franco and said: "You are to pack all of your belongings now. You will also be leaving here." After assembling all of their luggage, the priests were escorted from the mission. They would never see it again.

Once they left the mission grounds, they were told that they must hire bicycles. They were not told of their destination. Mr. Sin was to go with them and, of course, an armed guard. The Fathers had no trouble hiring two bicycles for themselves and three bicycles for carrying their baggage. They were also able to hire three riders for the bicycles on which the luggage was loaded. Because they were not accompanied by the guard when they rented the bicycles, the man who rented them was openly friendly to the two priests. He was a kindly old gentleman who had known Father Joe in the past. "I will give you a good price for hire, Father," he said. "I remember when you helped us during the famine. Hopefully, you will be going to a better place than here."

The two priests were eventually told that they would be traveling to Kwong Hoi. The trip would cover a distance of twenty-one miles over two mountain ridges. At first, the *Iron Man* thought that this journey would be a piece of cake. After all, in the past, he made bicycle trips over the high mountains to Toishaan, covering thirty miles each way. Moreover, he usually carried fifty pounds of supplies with him. However, there was a strong wind blowing the day of the move and they had to peddle directly into the face of it. Both men soon discovered that the past few years of poor food, little rest, and the lack of vigorous exercise had taken its toll on them. Their

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strength and endurance quickly faltered as they ascended the mountain ridges. They began to have trouble breathing and Father Joe's vision was even more blurry on account of the wind. Occasionally, he would trip over roots, ruts and rocks. Many times, they had to stop and rest before continuing.

Finally, the Maryknollers arrived in Kwong Hoi but there was still another leg of the journey to endure before the day's end. They had to board a bus to Toishaan City, twenty-four miles away. That trip was largely uneventful. Although some of the co-travelers made eye contact with the priests, no words were exchanged. This eerie detachment of the people gave the two fathers a chance to rest and doze before the bus finally arrived at its destination. When they came to Toishaan, they were immediately brought to the police station by Mr. Sin and the armed guard. They were then escorted to a room that had two makeshift board beds, a small table, and a few chairs. There were bars on the two windows and one door with a lock at the entrance. The room was bland and had no pictures – not even of Mao.

The two priests were famished after the long trip. They asked the guard, who had not spoken to them during the entire time, if he would purchase some food for them. He agreed to do so. A short time later, he returned with some rice, vegetables, and even some meat and fish. Father Joe thanked the guard, who appeared to be a regular sort of fellow, and he bowed his head slightly in response. After consuming a hearty meal, the priests were revitalized.

Father Joe then asked the guard if he could get a chessboard from his luggage. Still amenable the fellow said "yes" before drifting off into a trance. Like the Maryknollers, it looked as if he would have preferred to be somewhere else. While the

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Fathers were engaged in the game, the boss of the orphanage and an official from the police station came in to check up on them. The two Fathers pretended to ignore their visitors. They concentrated on the board and on making their next move. Father Joe, with a half smile and a glint in his eyes, kept bantering back and forth with Father Franco. He would look down at the chess board and then up at him. He kept repeating these movements as they played on.

"Chess is a tough game," Father Joe uttered. "It's important to have a good strategy or you'll get whipped." Father Franco caught the drift of what Father Joe was conveying to him. It was important to behave nonchalantly. Never let the Reds think that they can get the best of you. Give them an inch and they will take a mile. "You'd better watch your queen," Father Franco retorted. "If I get that, then I'll check your king, and the game will be mine." "Not a chance," Father Joe replied. "The Italians can never beat the Irish," he ribbed, while moving one of his pawns forward. And so the banter went back and forth. The two priests made jokes, engaged in light conversation, and acted as if they had not a worry in the world.

Inside themselves, however, Fathers Joe and Rocco knew that their fate was out of their control. But insecure they were not. As Chinese Joe once stated in a letter to his mother: "Don't you, Pa, or the rest of the Lavin clan worry about old Black Joe. It is foolish to worry, no matter what happens. God will take care of us and we should leave the rest in His divine hand."

After observing the Fathers and their continuous chatter, the police official interrupted: "It is time to end the game. You have been playing for several hours now. This may be fun for you, but it is boring for us. We must get an early start in the morning. This is the last game." It was midnight.

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Father Joe then made a quick error, allowing Father Franco to capture his king: "Ah, that was an easy one for you," sighed Father Joe. "It's time to stop, even though I could play this game all night." The two priests put the chessboard away and the officials left the room. The guard resumed a relaxed sitting position on his chair with a faraway look in his eyes. The oil lamp was lowered, leaving just a tiny flicker of flame. The Fathers said their prayers and lay down to sleep on the rough-hewn planks.

At seven o'clock the next morning, the police official and two armed soldiers came to the room. "Which one of you is Father Franco?" he asked. After Father Franco identified himself, the official announced: "You are going to Canton. From there you will be going back to the United States." Believing that this was just another ruse, Father Franco did not respond. He simply went on packing the few goods that he had. After a few minutes had passed, the official said to Father Joe: "You will also be going to Canton. The two soldiers will accompany you there to make sure that you get there safely." Like Father Franco, he showed no emotion. He just went on packing his luggage.

The soldiers escorted the Maryknollers to the bus station where all four men mounted the bus that would take them from Toishaan to Sancheong. The bus, as usual, was filled with people who chattered incessantly back and forth. Some carried boxes of produce and some even had penned-up chickens with them. The crowded quarters created a stifling atmosphere. These were the kind of people *Chinese Joe* had made his own: simple, hardworking and big-hearted. With a warm smile, he nodded his head at each and greeted them in fluent Chinese. Then he took out his large curved pipe, filled it with the strongest Chinese tobacco, skillfully lit it on fire, and, with an

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air of confidence, filled the air with sweet-smelling clouds. Yes, Father Joe was right at home here and, once again, like in the days of a few yester-years, the people responded with genuine affection to his friendliness. Some recognized that he was a priest and they addressed him accordingly: "Good morning, Father. Where are you traveling to?" they asked. After answering them, Father Joe would ask them about their families, their businesses, or some other thing that he knew touched their everyday life. He was being his priestly self again, reaching out to others and relishing every moment of it. His sincerity and unaffected interest in their affairs helped relax all the passengers and they enjoyed every morsel of his conversation. It was a trip the two Maryknollers hated to see end in spite of the stolid presence of their armed escorts.

When they arrived in Sancheong, the foursome immediately boarded a boat that was to take them to Canton. It, too, was packed with people. They had all kinds of goods and livestock with them. There was the usual banter and palaver that was characteristic of the Chinese people. These were also ordinary folks who were visiting relatives or transacting business. The presence of the Red guards had little effect on their willingness to socialize with the two foreigners. One old woman, who was quite frail but very spunky, had no qualms about expressing her low opinion of the present government. She talked so loudly, in fact, that many on the boat could hear her. "The government says that they are for the people," the woman said. "In my village, they took the land that belonged to others and gave it to the people. They said that they deserved it — that this was a good thing. Then, they taxed the people so much that there was hardly anything left. Most all of the people who had their land and businesses taken were good people. They were honest and worked hard. They were not all bad



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like the government said. They beat and killed some of them for no reason. Things were bad before, especially during the famine. But they are much worse now.”

Several people muttered in support of her criticisms and nodded their heads, saying, “The woman is right.” It was obvious that the people who heard the woman either agreed with, or were not opposed to, what she had said. Not one person spoke up in favor of the Communists. And no one attempted to correct, modify, or silence her as she spoke. Even the two stalwart Red soldiers, who were guarding the Fathers, remained silent in the face of the woman’s tirade. They could easily see that attacking the poor people would do little good. The comments were made about the government, not them personally.

On Tuesday, March 31, the boat finally arrived in Canton. Oddly enough, the two guards helped the priests to gather their luggage so as to whisk them off the boat as quickly as possible. The Fathers were then escorted to the provincial police station. The chief official at the Canton headquarters was now responsible for the Maryknollers. After about fifteen minutes, the police chief came into the holding room where the fathers were waiting. Addressing Father Franco, he told him to pick up his luggage for he would not be returning to the station. Then the two priests were led a short distance to a government office nearby, where they were brought before a neatly dressed and well-groomed middle-aged man. He appeared to be a high-ranking official in the People’s Government. The official spoke politely, bowing his head from time to time as he talked.

“The People’s Government is only interested in punishing criminals,” he began. “Determining who is innocent and who is guilty is not an easy task. This is particularly difficult

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when we are dealing with Americans and other foreigners who have exploited China for many years. As you know, America is at war with our North Korean comrades. This makes it even more difficult to determine who is, and who is not, spying for your government. But not all foreigners are criminals," he conceded. "Some are just unwitting accomplices of their own government. Innocent or not, they are used as tools to get information from us so that their government can use this against us."

The official, who was seated behind a large, well-polished wooden desk, suddenly stopped talking. He began rummaging through a stack of papers. Finally, he pulled a sheet of paper out of the pile. After briefly examining it, he went on: "The People's Government is just, but merciful," he said. "In the case of Father Franco, for instance, the government knows that you are from Maryknoll, a spy organization out of New York." Looking directly at Father Franco, he then continued: "You have been in China for only a short time compared to Father Lavin. He has been here for many years. It is our judgment that Father Lavin, not you, is responsible for the crimes against the orphans of Hoignan. I am, therefore, authorized to tell you that the government does not find you guilty of any crimes against the Chinese people." The official paused before concluding: "There is no reason to detain you further. You will be taken to another police station and immediately transported to Hong Kong." The official ordered one of the guards to help Father Franco with his luggage.

The decision had caught both Fathers off guard, but they did not show it. Again, it was important to maintain control and to be strategic under fire. This could simply be another ploy to see how the two men would react. Maybe they would exhibit some weakness that might be exploited for political

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purposes. Neither of the Fathers took the bait. Looking directly at each other, Father Joe, with a smile on his face, shook Father Rocco's hand: "Good-bye, Father," he said. "I hope that your trip to Hong Kong is a good one." Father Joe showed no sadness about the departure of a man who had become his close friend. He simply resigned himself to the fact that he would have a longer, if not permanent, stay in Canton, or some other part of China.

Following Father Franco's departure, Father Joe was escorted back to the Canton police station. He was accompanied by the police official and another man from the government office. This government official and Father Joe went to a small room where his baggage had been stored. No one else was in the room. "I am required to ask you some questions," the official began. "You probably have gone over these many times before. But it is my duty to ask them. It would be helpful if you would cooperate," he added.

The tone of the man's voice had an almost remorseful quality to it. The relatively benign expression on his face gave Father Joe the impression that he, at heart, was a decent chap. He was simply carrying out an unpleasant task that was assigned to him. The usual round of questions was presented: "Why did you come to China? What organization do you work for? How much did you get paid? How many orphans did you kill?" and so forth. When the perfunctory interrogation was finished, the official declared stoically: "I, the personal representative of the New Chinese Government, accuse you of murdering thousands of orphans, and tomorrow I will escort you to the border and expel you from China as an undesirable alien. You must never return to China." The official issued this statement as though he was reading it from a script. There was no emotion whatsoever in his voice.

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For the next three hours, the official combed through every item of Father Joe's baggage. He even squeezed and shook certain things thinking they might contain secret compartments. Sometimes the official would ask questions during the examination. When he came across one of Father Joe's chalices, he inquired about its purpose. Father Joe briefly explained the Mass, the consecration, and the importance of the chalice in relation to them. This seemed to satisfy the official and he moved on. At the end of this long and laborious procedure, Father Joe was allowed to keep seven chalices, five ciboria, two oilstocks, and three pyxes. However, the title to the Hoignan properties, which he had managed to bring with him, was taken. Even the two pictures of the Dragon Boat Festival at Loting were confiscated – they did not belong in the hands of a western imperialist.

It was late afternoon by the time the ordeal ended. Afterwards, Father Joe was brought to a room in a hotel opposite the railroad station. Pointing to the station from a window, the official informed Father Joe that he would be leaving from there in the morning, adding, "You will stay in this room tonight. The guard will stay with you for your safety. You may go out and buy food. The guard will accompany you. I will see you tomorrow." It was now five o'clock in the evening and the day had been long and draining. The tired priest put on a smile and went out with his guard to eat. He found a small shop near the hotel and dined on dumplings, vegetables, some rice, and some meat. The food was well prepared and tasty. It cost him about \$1.00 in U.S. currency.

After eating, Father Joe and the guard returned to the hotel. No words were exchanged between them. It was very cold that night. Tomorrow would be another long day. The *Iron Man* uncharacteristically decided to retire early after finishing his prayers. As he closed his eyes, nostalgic thoughts from the

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past came to mind. Father Joe had spent twenty-one years in China. Unless this was another Communist trick, it would be his last night here. His thoughts were wandering. He really wanted to keep those two pictures of the Dragon Boat Festival at Loting. It was a spectacular festival. He had written in detail about it, describing every facet, even the history of the legend behind it, to his mother. How irked he was when the government official had taken the pictures away. These pictures represented the Old China, a China whose customs he loved, the China that had been deeply ingrained into his heart and soul through many years.

Now, the Dragon Boat Festival was a thing of the past. The People's Government deplored all legends, and (at least for some time) they outlawed the celebrations attached to them.

Father Joe rose at 6 a.m. It was "April Fools' Day", a perfect day for a Communist trick. The morning was cold and the sky was blue. The official came to the hotel to get Father Joe. He had a decree of expulsion in his hand. He showed it to the accused and then read it to him out loud. Essentially, it stated that Father Joseph Lavin had murdered thousands of orphans and committed crimes against the People's Government. He was an undesirable alien who was "mercifully" being expelled from the mainland. If he should ever return to China, the penalty would be death. Again, Father Joe showed no emotion and made no comment as the official read the outrageous decree.

The two men boarded a train to Shunchun, the last station on the Chinese side of the border. The ride was quiet and uneventful for the most part. When they arrived in Shunchun, there were no porters to help Father Joe with his luggage. The official told him that he would help until a porter could be

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found. Father Joe thanked him. To be sure, helping a “criminal” – a foreign one at that — was a rather gutsy act for someone with rank in the People’s Government.

Before crossing into Hong Kong, Father Joe was granted permission to go to the Bank of China and take care of the currency exchange. He exchanged part of his JMP (Chinese currency) for \$10.00 H.K. (U.S. currency) which was the amount permitted to those leaving China. The remaining 360,000 JMP (about \$100.00) was arranged to be sent back to Hoignan for two old ladies who were seventy years of age. They were poor, but devout Catholics.

Once these financial transactions were completed, Father Joe and the government official from Canton were separated. In fact, the Red just walked away without saying a word. Even though he had shown Father Joe some kindness, he was still a Communist. Another stony Red honcho, who was at the bank, was assigned to complete the escort to the border. After reaching the boundary that would take them into Hong Kong territory, this last deputy, who had said very little, now asked Father Joe to sign a receipt that simply stated: “I have arrived safely at the Shunchun border.” Father Joe was happy to sign the receipt.

The sight of the bridge crossing into Hong Kong was a vision for sore eyes. Father Joe, carrying the full load of luggage on his back and shoulders, walked briskly over the span. His large curved pipe was stuck between his teeth and there was a smile on his face. Bag of bones that he was, he strode along with verve in each step — or, to quote one of the Psalms, he walked “like a giant running the way” (Ps. 18:6). For the first time in two years he was a free man.

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Once across the bridge, Father Joe was greeted by Inspector Robson of the Hong Kong police. After shaking the welcoming hand of this peace-loving policeman, the *Iron Man* dropped the baggage from his shoulders, stretched, and took his pipe out of his mouth: "I never thought I'd see this day!" he exclaimed. A priest then came up to where the two men were standing. Inspector Robson introduced him to Father Joe. "I'd like you to meet Father Poletti, the pastor at Taipei," he said. "Father Poletti comes to the border every day to assist those who have been expelled by the Communists." The two priests shook hands. "We know you had a tough time with the Reds," Father Poletti said. "Everyone who has come through here has been subjected to, and seen, terrible cruelties. What can we do to help you now?"

"Well," Father Joe answered, "I'll need to get in contact with Maryknoll. Where is the society stationed now?" "Nearby, at Kowloon," Father Poletti answered. "You can take the next train to Kowloon Station. Inspector Robson can call ahead and arrange for someone to meet you." Inspector Robson quickly chimed in, "You are in luck today, Father. The train will be here in an hour. I'll call ahead right now to make sure that someone will be there to meet you." Before the inspector left, Father Joe asked the two men about Father Franco, but they had no information, other than the fact that he had not crossed the border yet.

Father Joe spent the rest of the time talking with Father Poletti about Father Franco, the house arrest, and their many other adventures with the Communists. The *Iron Man* was very concerned about his fellow missionary. "What do you think the Reds might be up to regarding Father Franco?" he asked. Father Poletti answered: "You never know with the Reds. Perhaps someone from Maryknoll knows what is going

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on. They can tell you when you get there. My bet is that, if he hasn't come over yet, he will be here soon. From what you have told me, it would suit their purpose to release him. It's good propaganda for them. The truth is that they don't want martyrs on their hands right now. Their flagrant atrocities have given them bad press. They need to create illusions from time to time. Using Father Franco for that purpose may be one of them. He'll be coming through soon." The words made sense to Father Joe and they gave him hope.

On the way to Kowloon, Father Joe reflected in silence on all the things that had happened that day. "Someday I'll return to Hoignan," he thought. "The Reds might have the upper hand now, but that can't last. We'll be back," he mused optimistically. "But in the meantime, it will be good to see old friends again. We'll shoot the breeze and share war stories. Should be fun." The priest from Framingham was always ready for some lively conversation and a good time. When the train pulled into Kowloon station, Fathers Ahern, Tennien, Keelan, and Chatigny, old China veterans, were waiting for him on the platform. Still April 1, and, thank God, no tricks.

### Leaving Hong Kong: The End of an Era

Before the day was ended Father Joe cabled a few words to his mother and father to let them know that he had arrived safely in Hong Kong. On April 2, he wrote them a bulletin-like letter itemizing the major events of his recent ordeal. And this time, he did not spare them the facts about the life-and-death situation that he and Father Franco had survived. As much as Father Joe loved the Chinese people, it was evident from this missive that he was elated about leaving the land of the Red dragon.



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In past correspondence, Father Joe had to hide his true feelings about the horrendous events ravaging China. "Don't believe everything that you read in the press," he would write. And, "Things are quiet and peaceful here." — this was when World War II was in high gear and the wave of Communist terror had begun to inundate the countryside all around him. For example, in a letter dated February 4, 1951, even though the Communists were by then well entrenched and unleashing their diabolical plan, Father Joe went on discussing the future of the Catholic Church in China in an optimistic light. He was still busily engaged in the administration of the sacraments to Chinese converts, as in the village of Luk Ch'ong:

*On February 2, I arrived by boat at the village at 8:30 a.m. At nine o'clock the ceremony started. We have no church there and the houses are small. It took the catechist much time to write the names of the various groups and much time for me in examining and putting them in line. We divided them into five groups — first two groups of men, then the students, and then two groups of ladies, girls, and babies. The entire ceremony took 5 1/2 hours. I baptized 139 in all. There are still about twenty to be baptized. After baptisms, I anointed a sick lady and blessed five homes. The people themselves removed the superstitions. Sister Hoi was the godmother and Mr. Kai was the godfather for the entire group. Most of the men and boys were given the name Joseph and the women and girls received the name Mary (most of them). Makes it easier this way. What a happy bunch of Christians. This is the biggest number I ever baptized in China in one day.*

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*Needless to say, plenty of consolation. So you see our work here is bearing fruit.*

*"Keep China in your good prayers," (2/4/51).*

There was no mention in his correspondence of the tightening of the Red noose, the public trials, or any of the other Communist terror tactics.

Father Joseph Lavin was now free at last from Communist domination. In the first paragraph of his April 2, 1953 letter, he clearly expressed how he felt about leaving Red China and crossing over into Hong Kong — "the land of freedom".

*Maryknoll House  
Stanley, Hong Kong*

*April 2, 1953*

*Dear Ma, Pa, & Sisters & Brothers, Aunt Jennie & Lavin  
Clan:*

*Enclosed is a letter written on March 21, in Communist China at Hoignan. I mailed this letter to Father Ahern and asked him to send it to Concord Street. The luck of the Irish beat the letter to Hong Kong by one day. April Fools' Day of 1953 will hold a dear place in my memory for years to come. The reason! — on that day I crossed the dividing line from Communist China to Hong Kong — the land of freedom. The difference between darkness and light — tyranny & liberty — prison & freedom — hell & heaven.*

*. . . By this time you have received my cable & no doubt are very happy. Love to all. Will write later.*

*As ever,  
son, Joe*

## The Final Years in China: 1948-1953

By Easter Sunday, April 4, 1953, the mystery about Father Franco's whereabouts was happily resolved. What had happened was that Father Franco had put up a fuss with the Reds about his typewriter being confiscated. The People's Government was now "investigating" this incident. People with typewriters were viewed with a jaundiced eye because the Communists suspected that these were used for producing information for the spying American government. Had Father Franco not put up such a stink about the typewriter, he would have been released as planned. The investigation in Canton was delaying his departure.

On April 17, 1953, Father Joe jotted off a brief note to his parents.

*Dear Ma & Pa:*

*Excuse the pencil because the pen went dry and on a strike. Enclosed are some pictures which explain themselves. On April 1st — on arrival in Hong Kong I weighed 133 lbs. On April 15, I weighed 147 pounds. Not so bad — a pound per day. I must watch my waist & girlish complexion. Glad to say that my eyesight is better and has improved. I have not had eye glasses and will wait until I arrive in the States. By that time, my eyes might be better. Busy buying presents for the Lavin Clan & Club members. Father Franco is still in Canton and waiting for his typewriter. He should be out soon. Love to all & regards to my friends. Keep smiling!*

*Your son,  
Chinese Joe*

*Chinese Joe!* He had not used that familiar title in quite a while. To be sure, exiled or not, Father Joseph Lavin was still a spiritual citizen of China. .

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On April 24, 1953, Father Franco was finally expelled from the mainland. That afternoon, after crossing the border, he met his Irish Maryknoll compadre at Kowloon Station. In a letter to the Lavin family, Father Rocco related more of the facts regarding their ordeal. Here is a portion from that communication.

*Forgive me for not writing sooner. I have been getting my eyes examined and my teeth fixed. At any rate, I am sorry about being slow with this letter. Joe and I left Hoignan on March 29. After a two-day travel, we arrived safely in Canton. We were escorted by two soldiers. We were taken to the Kring On Teng. We were treated cordially. At the Provincial Police Bureau, I was told that I was to leave China. (As you know from the newspapers, all priests and sisters in charge of orphanages were accused of crippling, blinding, slaughtering, and murdering orphans. It was a farce and we plainly told them so).*

*Since Father Lavin was pastor and in charge of the orphanage, I thought he was going to be jailed in Canton. I requested to remain with Father Lavin until he would be released and we could both go out of the country together. The official replied that it was not necessary. I asked him [whether] Father Lavin [was] leaving. He answered, "He is leaving soon." His answer could be taken as anything from one minute to even months of duration. I was told politely, but firmly, that I must go. I said goodbye to Joe and then went to Canton City Kring On Kirk. At the Municipal Police Bureau, my baggage was examined. I casually mentioned [that] my typewriter was not returned to me by an official in Hoignan. They made their mistake when they asked me to sign a statement that in the course of my investigations, I incurred neither losses or damages. I refused to*

## The Final Years in China: 1948-1953

*sign that since I did occur a loss in Hoignan — namely, my typewriter. My refusal to sign put them on the stop. They agreed to return the typewriter. First, they told me to wait until the fourth of April. Then they told me to wait until the twelfth of April. I waited patiently. But, when they told me to wait until the twentieth of April, I figured that they were just trying to be nasty. Finally, I was told to wait until the thirtieth of April. By that time, I was very much resigned. On April 23, my father's birthday, incidentally, I was called to the Kring on Kirk. There my typewriter was returned to me. My exit papers were given to me. I was told that I could leave China on April 24. I left Canton in the morning. I arrived at the Red China—Hong Kong border in the afternoon. Joe met me at Kowloon Station. We were happy to see each other again. In our hearts, we knew how happy our parents would be over our release and safety. Years of prayers on the part of your family and mine were finally answered when the Reds let us out of China. We thank God for protecting us at all times.*

On Saturday, April 26, “old” Chinese Joe set sail for the United States on the *President Jefferson*. The ship was to arrive in Honolulu on May 18, and San Francisco on May 23. While on the *President Jefferson*, the *Iron Man* wrote several letters describing the voyage. He mentioned China in only one of the letters: “Imagine that! The Reds gave me a two-and-a-half-year vacation in China and now Maryknoll gives me a year's vacation in the States. After the year's vacation, I will have to go back to China to rest up.”

To have seen Father Franco safe and sound before boarding the ocean liner made the trip home a lot easier for Father Joe. His friend had weathered the Red storm and returned safely to

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the Maryknoll House in Stanley (Kowloon), Hong Kong. There, in a short time, he was restored to good health. Sadly, however, this courageous young priest was killed in a motorcycle accident in Hawaii not long after he came back from China.

In the eyes of the world, such a death as this makes no sense, especially in light of what the good priest endured in China. If Father Franco was going to die young, it would seem reasonable that his death should have occurred under the clutches of the Red dragon — that he should have died a martyr for the Catholic Faith while the fire for the holocaust was flaring in his bosom. However, this was not to be. Yes, we may all be tempted to say that this kind of death, for such a priest, is absurd, the result of a fluke accident. Then again, death comes to all and, no matter the cause, the whole happening appears outrageous to nature. Indeed, it is outrageous, if we prescind from sin and the consequent divine decree. Even still, the very reality of it is abhorrent to man. But, wait! Death is much more for a Catholic than a divinely ordained necessity in punishment for sin. No! Death has assumed a glorious face in the death of Christ. No matter how we die, if we die in grace, it is our last grasp at imitating our Savior in this life. We have in death our final opportunity to fully conform to Jesus! Even if our exit from this vale of tears takes a mere instant—if in grace, we die in Christ. That is a wonderful thing! A marvel to angels! It is the difference between the horrific death of sinners and the glorious death of the saints. Whether it be in a motorcycle accident or in a hospital bed, it must always have its touch of violence, but our Crucified Lord has robbed it of its sting: “O death, where is thy victory? O death, where is thy sting?” (1 Cor. 15:55). Which is to say: what is death in comparison to the eternal life unto which it has become, in Jesus, the gate of entry?

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Furthermore, our faith assures us that there are no accidents with God. Our final hour is determined by God's providence. It is not easy to understand or accept, but that is what faith is all about. "Precious in the sight of the Lord is the death of His saints" (Psalm 115:15).

On May 23, 1953, Father Joe landed in San Francisco. He had finally returned to the continental United States. During the trip across the Pacific, "Joe Pig", as he actually did refer to himself, went up to 163 pounds. He wrote: "So you see that the writer is beginning to lose his slender and pencil-line figure. My kingdom for slenderness! I still have plenty of hair, even if the Greyhound Bus has left traces in my gray locks." While the *Iron Man* liked to joke about his alleged "good health", this was far from the reality. Chronologically, he was only forty-six years old; but his eyes and his interior organs had their own biological clock — and it was ticking down. The harsh treatment that he had received at the hands of the Communists, including two years of a paltry and deficient diet, had left their mark. Inside, he was beginning to break down.





# Life After China: Assignment Hawaii

After returning from Hong Kong, Father Joe spent twenty months at home with his family before being assigned to the Hawaiian Islands, which, at that time, was considered to be missionary territory. He arrived in Honolulu on February 7, 1955. On February 9, he was assigned to Immaculate Heart Conception Church in Holualoa, temporarily replacing Father Kennelly. Father Joe had served as Father Kennelly's curate at the Loting mission when he first arrived in China. As one can see from this letter, dated March 14, 1955, Father Joe is happy once again to be writing home as a Maryknoll missionary.

*My Dearest Mother:*

*Father Kennelly returned to Holualoa last Thursday (March 10) from the hospital in Honolulu. He was released from the hospital on Wednesday. Father Kennelly entered the hospital on Sunday, February 6, with ulcers of the stomach and he bled very seriously. . . .*

*So let's start from the beginning of the epilogue:*

*Reception at our home took place on Sunday, January 30. You and the rest of the family were kept busy that day. We had quite a number of visitors and everyone enjoyed themselves. At ten in the evening, we were tired and happy.*

*On Monday, I raced from here to there trying to visit the old folks and sick, etc. Monday night we had the reunion of*

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*the Lavin Clan at 575 Concord Street. We Irish all had a good time.*

*On Tuesday, February 1, I raced around with Charlie, Elizabeth & Mary to visit the old folks & sick, etc. Remember, I did not start to pack my bags until 5 p.m. on the same day and I threw everything in the bags. Just like the rest of the Lavins!*

*Father Foley came to see me pack. Father Foley and I grabbed a quick lunch of sandwiches about 6:15. At 6:30 p.m. I said goodbye to Pa, Jennie, & you, Mother Dear and, like a good soldier of Christ, not a tear in the family. That is the way to be! We hate to part, but it is the Lord's work. I was fortunate to be home with you, Pa, and the rest of the family for about one year and eight months. That is a long time for a "lazy man". I enjoyed my vacation at home with you, Pa, and all the family and the work around the house and at the beach and with my friends. . . .*

*I want to thank you, Ma, for the gift of \$25.00 when leaving for Honolulu. It will come in handy for this and that. I also want to thank you for the Christmas gifts and all the good times that we had at home.*

*Keep up the good fight and do not work too hard. Take it easy.*

*God bless you always Mother, Father, brothers, sisters, Jennie, & the entire Lavin Clan.*

*I am happy and well. This is a great place.*

*Your son,  
Black Joe*

After a short period of time, Father Kennelly returned to his post. On April 15, Father Joe was assigned temporarily to

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Hilo, Hawaii, at Saint Joseph's Church. Father John Joyce, his old China friend (he was once pastor on Sancian Island), was the pastor at Saint Joseph's and the dean of the school there as well. Father Joe helped with the ordinary priestly duties at the parish. He also served as what he called a "floater", traveling from one church to another to assist needy parishes.

The *Iron Man* embarked on a new adventure while at Saint Joseph's. He became a teacher at the parochial and public schools. "Imagine, after all these years, I start to teach school," he wrote. "Teaching is okay. I teach at the parochial school on Monday and Wednesday. On Monday—September 19—we start to teach doctrine in the public schools at release time. I have Monday, Wednesday, and Thursday. The classes are in the afternoon. Much good can be done in the public schools as far as the Catholic Faith is concerned. We have eleven public schools to take care of. The sisters and lay people are a big help."

Even though he was able to teach, Father Joe continued to battle his failing eyesight. In a letter dated September 12, 1955, he briefly discussed his struggle to once again get his driver's license and how important this was to him:

*For the first day in seven years, I decided to try my hand at the wheel of an automobile. I went out for the day with Father Collins and drove for about 1/2 hour and without glasses. It did not take long to pick up where I left off in 1948. Great to get back to the wheel again. Thanks to Lil [Father Joe's sister] for finding my old license and thanks to Mary [his other sister] for sending it to me. Maybe the old license will help when I apply for a new license in Hilo, Hawaii. I will practice for sometime before applying for a license. No sense rushing the issue. It will be much better when I get my license and then I will not have to depend on*

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*other people. It is really necessary to drive over here. You are almost lost here when you cannot drive.*

The old *Chinese Joe*, when confronted with a challenge, would attack it with a feisty determination and sustained energy until it was overcome. However, the new Father Joe had learned to become more patient with himself. "I will practice for sometime before applying for a license. No sense rushing the issue," he wrote. Such patient acceptance of his own limitations was in marked contrast to the younger *Iron Man*. But men do age and, once we physically pass our peak, we must all come to grips with the limitations that the inevitable process places upon us. For some it is a more difficult challenge to accept charity when we need it than to give it. Father Joe made this transition quite courteously.

However, it was not only adapting to bodily changes that could be problematic for a Maryknoller like Father Joe. Life in the Hawaiian Islands, while still missionary territory, was hardly like life in China. The old *Chinese Joe* correspondence was filled with tales of adventure, excitement, and even intrigue. On the contrary, life in Hawaii was a different story. It had all the conveniences of the modern era. Compared to China, this was a soft life. In a July 18, 1955 letter to his parents, Father Joe described these new conditions:

*My Dear Ma & Pa:*

*The television gives us much entertainment. We have only one channel, #9 here, and the reception is very good. This September will bring us another station. At present, we get the relay from the Maui station. We have some good programs — Life of Riley, I Love Lucy, Miss Brooks, Meet Minnie, Ed Sullivan's show, etc. Hope you, Pa, Jennie, &*

## Life After China: Assignment Hawaii

girls still enjoy the television. Our set here is a 21-inch screen Zenith and cost \$172.00. Of course, we got a good discount.

The mango season is here. Mango is a nice fruit if you like it. It is a warm country fruit. Florida and California must have the mango. We have one large mango tree in the back of the yard and plenty of fruit on it this year. The tree must be about fifty feet high and very broad. It looks like an umbrella and oval in shape and plenty of shade. Did you ever try a mango? It has a peculiar flavor on first eating it. A person has to like mangoes. The only trouble is that it stains white cloth and clothes and [it is] impossible to take the stain out. It has a large stone inside. You cut this fruit almost in the center, length wise, take out the large stone, leave the skin on the fruit and eat with a spoon or out of your hand. It makes wonderful ice cream. Mangoes can be used in many ways. Our trees are the small mangoes. The large mangoes are the best.

What started me on that subject? . . .

Well, it took about four days to clean up [my new] room. . . . Plenty of light and air. A good comfortable bed. . . . Also have hot and cold running water and wash basin or bowl in the room with a medicine cabinet and looking glass with electric light to see while shaving. Even have an electric light in clothes closet and use it now and then to keep clothes from molding. Hilo is a damp place.

There is also a telephone connection next to the bed. We have a movable telephone and the priest on duty takes the telephone and plugs it into his room. Very handy. We also have a telephone in the main recreation room upstairs on the second floor, one in the main office downstairs, and one next to the kitchen. In each room, there are seven push buttons

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*and one for every priest (five) — one for the kitchen — and one for the front door. The front door also has these seven push buttons and our names on each. When a person comes to the rectory, he can push the button of the priest he wants to see or the priest on duty. If a telephone call comes in for a certain priest, the priest on duty just pushes his button. No need to call or chase after him. This is a very nice system. What a tough life! ! !*

*Adjoining my room is a single bathroom and toilet, shower, and foot bowl with door leading to porch. Another door from bathroom leads to the guest room. Not so bad with a private bathroom. . . .*

*Keep smiling. Hope you, Pa, & Jennie get out for many rides in your car. God bless you all.*

*Your son,  
Joe*

What a contrast to the missionary world that *Chinese Joe* had known.

Besides all the luxuries that Saint Joseph's rectory provided, the food in Hawaii became a source of temptation for the once angular missionary. He actually began to experience a new kind of weight problem. No wonder. His description of the cuisine on the Hawaiian mainland would make one's mouth water. In one letter to his parents (May 30, 1955), he waxed eloquent, not from the pulpit, but from the palate:

*"The food is excellent. Even as good as Theresa's (Father Joe's younger sister)! . . . The steak and meat are first-class and chicken that melts in your mouth. Do not care too much for chicken! The steak and meat you can cut with a fork. The Island of Hawaii is noted for its ranches and its cattle (the sec-*

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*ond largest ranch in the world is located on the island — the largest is in Texas). Hilo was excellent for meat, but Kona was lousy for meat. You can buy beef, pork, and other meats. There is also excellent fish to buy. Plenty of fresh vegetables and fruits. Bread is bought at the stores just like at home. Canned goods, etc., can be bought at the stores. The cook is also an excellent pastry girl — pies, cakes, cookies, candies, etc.”*

There was one huge plus about being assigned to Hawaii. Because the islands were mission territory, many of the other missionaries, who had been expelled from China, were re-stationed there. So there was plenty of priestly camaraderie. One particularly good friend was Father Thomas Langley, who also hailed from Framingham, Massachusetts. As youngsters, both Father Lavin and Father Langley were mentored by Monsignor Garrahan of Saint Stephen's Church. The two men had kept in touch with each other for many years.

Like Father Joe, Father Thomas Langley remained at his post in China during the Japanese and Communist occupations. He had been a language teacher at the Taanchuk mission when the Communists came to power. In November of 1951, a party of Red soldiers, guns drawn, marched into the mission and seized him. They tied his hands behind his back and dragged him off to jail. Several weeks later they put a noose around his neck, paraded him through the streets of Pingnam, and led him to a public trial on a platform erected in the high school court yard. There, his tormentors, including little children, shrieked accusations at him. Father Langley was denounced as an American spy and a leader of that “counter-revolutionary” organization called the Catholic Legion of Mary. [How the Red serpent hated the heel of Mary and her

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“legions”, knowing that one day soon she would crush his head (Genesis 3:15).] Father Langley was also accused of giving care to enemies of the people in the mission dispensary. Unconditional charity towards the sick and hungry was not tolerated in the new “people’s republic”.

During Father Langley’s trial, party stooges chanted their usual ritualistic nonsense in an attempt to incite the crowd: “Death to the American spy! Death to the American imperialist! Kill the counterrevolutionary!” Meanwhile the priest was forced to his knees with the assistance of rifle butts. After the trumped-up charges were declared, agitators infected the crowd with more bloodlust: “Kill him! Kill him!” the mob screamed. The judge was pleased, so he sentenced the priest to death.

That sentence was never carried out. As with other Maryknollers, the Communists did not want to make a martyr out of this one. So they commuted his sentence to permanent banishment from China. The Reds wanted the people to think that they were merciful. Father Langley got an armed escort into Hong Kong.

Interestingly, in almost all of Father Joe’s homeland correspondence, he hardly ever mentions being in Communist China, or his discussions with other Maryknollers who had been there. One exception is found in a terse paragraph from a letter written to his parents on November 6, 1955, one week before the death of his father. It reads:

*Today is another banner day in the life of Franco and Lavin. On November 6, 1951, Father Rocco and I went through a public trial in Hoignan Kai. It was a good experience. Everyone knows that the public trial was a failure as*



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*far as the Communists were concerned. The people as a body stood behind the two Catholic American priests. The trial was dangerous and tense, but God took care of us. That day will never be forgotten.*

Despite the pleasant Hawaiian climate, congenial working conditions, and excellent food, Father Joe began to have problems with his stomach. During the month of September, he wrote to his family commenting on his busy schedule and explaining that he did not expect a break until the end of the school year. Father Joe never mentioned that he was beginning to have abdominal pain and difficulties digesting his food. At first, he tried to minimize the problems, attributing these to his diet, age, and weight gain. However, the difficulties worsened. He began vomiting with greater frequency, and there was evidence of internal bleeding. When the *Iron Man* finally sought help, the doctors agreed that his condition was serious, yet they were unable to diagnose the source of the problem. Father Joe had been nauseous from time to time after being expelled from China but, eventually, the sick feeling always passed. Now the pains were chronic and barely tolerable. Father Joe was losing weight fast.

In November of 1955, Father Lavin was sent back to the mainland U.S.A. for further medical tests and treatment. After consulting with various specialists in Boston, it was determined that the priest's ailments emanated from a diseased stomach, but again, the cause, or causes, could not be specifically identified. Finally, when evidence of further deterioration was manifest, an exploratory operation was scheduled for December 7.

The exploratory discovered a stomach so diseased that three quarters of the priest's intestines had to be removed immediately. Following the operation, he wrote a note to his mother from

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the Leonard Morse Hospital in Natick, Massachusetts, only about six miles away from his home. It was typical Father Joe.

*Operation 12/7/55 — Natick Hospital*

12/14/55

*My Dear Mother:*

*Just a line to say howdy and bid you the top of the morning. Just imagine — operated on a week ago today. God did not want me, and the devil refused my ticket, so here I am wrapped in a new package of health. I am feeling fine and able to get up, walk around, eat, etc.*

*Yesterday's schedule: up at 5:30 — washed my face & shaved. Walked for 1/2 hour in room for exercise. Had a cup of tea. Sat in lounge chair, read, and talked. Had breakfast at 8:30 — oatmeal and tea. Choice of drinks every two hours — 1) water, 2) orange juice, or 3) tea. Cup of custard or jello every two hours. Lunch consisted of tea & custard. Fathers Gatley, Foley, and a few others came in the morning.*

*Nap after dinner. Visitors in the afternoon including Ted. Supper consisted of cup of tea and a good dish of scrambled eggs. I ate all the eggs but the half-slice of bread I did not eat. No trouble from the food.*

*Visitors in the evening. Fathers Evans & Riley — Fred Parent — Peg, Margaret, Eleanor Mae, Lil, & Theresa. Read after they left and to sleep at eleven bells. Had a good night sleep and did not get up till 9:30 in the morning. Still have one special nurse, Mrs. Smith.*

*Glad to hear that you are much better. God bless you always.*

*Your son,  
Joe*

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After being discharged from the hospital, the *Iron Man* returned to 575 Concord Street for rest and recuperation. With the removal of so much of his intestines, at least he would not have to battle with a middle-age weight problem. In all seriousness, it took many months for him to recover and regain his strength for the next phase of his missionary career — Promotion and Propaganda for Maryknoll.



# Assignment Buffalo, NY: Promotion and Propaganda

On November 5, 1957, with a clean bill of health and not much left of a stomach, Father Joseph Lavin left for his new assignment to the Maryknoll Fathers, on 71 Jewett Parkway in Buffalo, New York. His mother was well enough to accompany him to the Boston airport. Six days later, he jotted off a few lines to her: "I want to thank you very much for the Green Gift of twenty-five dollars on the day of departure for Buffalo. Words are unable to express my thanks." In reference to the new assignment, he wrote: "My work here is Promotion and Propaganda for Maryknoll. I am a newborn babe in this work and will have to learn the ins and outs. It is interesting and plenty of fun."

Right after his arrival in Buffalo, however, an interesting event occurred in which Father Joe's knowledge of the Chinese language proved to be still salutary. On November 19, 1957, he wrote to tell his mother the story:

*Started to write to you last night but a telephone call to Father McGuire interrupted the schedule. Father Hanna, the chaplain of the emergency hospital, wanted to know if some priest could understand Chinese. A Chinese was hit by a hit-and-run auto and about to undergo an emergency operation and only able to speak very little English.*

*It took us a half-hour to arrive at the hospital with Father McGuire at the wheel. Father Hanna met us at the door and we went up to the X-ray room. They were taking*

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*many X-ray pictures of the Chinese. After they got through, it was my turn.*

*Here is the story — he was hit at 7:30 last night by an auto while crossing the street. His left leg was broken in three places and twisted badly and head injuries on the right side with a bad bruise near the right eye. He was able to talk, but suffering much pain. These injuries were severe, but he also had a bad heart condition. They expected within an hour to operate on the leg with a spinal because of the heart condition.*

*His name was Cheung Sz-Hoh from San Ooi, China, and [he is] sixty-five years old.*

*We had a mission in San Ooi and I was there many times. He left China when young, lived in Canada and in U.S. over forty-six years. Worked in laundries and restaurants. He is now retired. He spoke very good Cantonese without a dialect. Nice old timer — doesn't believe in pagan gods and no religion. He asked me to go over and call his best friend, Wong Kwan Tsik.*

*I explained the rudiments of religion to him and told him to be sorry for his sins. In case of danger of death, Father Hanna would have the opportunity to baptize him. We understood each other very well.*

*Mr. Cheung signed his name in English and gave the doctor permission to operate. Fathers Hanna & McGuire, doctors, and nurses were well pleased.*

*Father McGuire & I found his friend. I found him with about ten others in the shop. All from Toishaan area and we had a great reunion. There are about 150 Chinese in Buffalo — at least three restaurants. Got home late. Had a very enjoyable evening.*

## Assignment Buffalo, New York

In a sense, Father Joe's wish was coming true. Perhaps this unofficial apostolate would be his way of returning to China. Through Cheung Sz-Hoh, he discovered many other Chinese who had immigrated to the United States. Finding this enclave in Buffalo was an elevating experience for our missionary, especially meeting those men who had come from the Toishaan area, his old stomping ground. As the letter stated, "I had a very enjoyable evening."

Nevertheless, ministering to the Chinese was not the reason that Maryknoll assigned Father Lavin to Buffalo. His duty was to raise money for the missions through promotional activities. The promotional schedule was a hectic one, requiring a lot of travel beyond Buffalo, by plane and automobile, to various cities and towns. His work took him as far away as Detroit, Minneapolis, and even North and South Dakota.

Even though the missionary was heavily involved in promotional work, he still found plenty of time to meet with the Chinese community of Buffalo and discuss the evils of Communism. Too, the Chinese began asking for his personal help, which, of course, he could not refuse. In a letter penned on March 6, 1958, he describes the situation with the immigrants and exiles.

*Sunday night at six o'clock the Chinese banquet took place at 172 Genesee Street in Buffalo City. The Chinese Association hall was very simply decorated and 130 Chinese out of 150 [resident] were present. There were many children and a few Chinese husbands with their "white" wives. Many of the Chinese wives were there with their husbands and children.*

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*The usual speeches took place before the banquet. Five gave speeches in Chinese and one in English. Some of the Chinese do not understand the Chinese language. Many were born in this country. All spoke of China, the present disaster in their Motherland, the fight against Communism, the hope of a quick victory over the Reds, etc. Finally the usual toast with good U.S. spirits took place. The delicious Chinese meal then came on the table and was enjoyed by all.*

*In the middle of the banquet, I was asked to say a few words — naturally in Chinese. I talked for about seven minutes and told them that I was a Catholic Priest; spent twenty years in China; named the various places in China and especially Toishaan and Hoignan; the present distress, persecution, and the slavery of the Chinese people under the Red tyranny; the fight that we must continue daily against the Red Devils; prayer is the answer, etc., etc., etc.*

*At eight o'clock, the banquet started to break up and I met many of the Chinese and the few whites while they were departing. A few of us sat around talking and [we] took the invitation to eat with the waiters.*

*A certain Mr. Wong told me that he and his family are Catholics and belong to the Cathedral Parish. He said that at least 1/3 of the Chinese are Catholics. . . .*

*All things happen for the good. The accident to that Chinese man, Mr. Cheung, on November 7, was tough for him but much good has already come from it. . . .*

*Mr. Cheung was discharged from the hospital and sent to the County Old Folks home in Alden, N.Y. He went to the new home on Monday, February 24. I visited him on Wednesday, February 26. . . .*



## Assignment Buffalo, New York

*A few of the Chinese asked me to help them with their families or friends to [get to] U.S. from Hong Kong. I will do all I can. A lawyer called up yesterday and I saw him about a Chinese case in Hong Kong trying to come to Buffalo.*

*Many more things to write about, but enough is enough. Love to you and the rest of the Lavin Clan. May God bless you and the Clan everyday. Keep smiling.*

*Your son,  
Chinese Joe*

On April 1, 1958, the fifth anniversary of his expulsion from China, the *Iron Man* seemed to relive the day in every detail. He recounted each event in a letter to his mother. Although there is no need to repeat the details of what happened prior to his expulsion in 1953, the first chunk of the letter is significant in that it reveals just how much those events affected his priestly heart.

*My Dear Mother:*

*Does this date mean anything to you, or does it recall a memorable event in the life of Chinese Joe? April Fools' Day — happy feast day to all the Lavin Clan! Sez whom! I will always remember this day as long as there is life in the old fossil. Just five years ago today — April 1, 1953 — I was finally released by my good Communist friends and arrived in Hong Kong a free man. . . . That day marked the end of darkness, tyranny, and freedom once more came into being. Deliverance from hell, imprisonment, darkness, tyranny. Freedom, sunshine, heaven, etc., once again started to flow and vibrate in my veins.*

*Will be home Holy Saturday, but arrive in Boston at 1:45 — go to the Maryknoll convent to hear some Chinese*

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*confessions, and then to Framingham by bus. Will be home for supper.*

*Love to you and the Clan. God bless you all always.*

*Sincerely,  
Chinese Joe*

Unlike his correspondence from Hawaii, the letters written during his promotional fund-raising apostolate showed a greater enthusiasm for his work and a deeper interest in what he was attempting to accomplish. After being in Buffalo, the old signature, *Chinese Joe*, appeared again and again at the end of his missives.

A change, however, was imminent. The assignment at upstate New York was nearing its end. On May 5, Father Joe wrote to his mother informing her that he was to be transferred to Minneapolis, Minnesota. Doing his best to maintain detachment, he wrote: "What is the difference? One place is as good as another in promotional work." Nevertheless, it was not an easy sacrifice. "I hate to leave Buffalo," he added, "but such is life — I like Buffalo." And, no doubt, Buffalo liked him. In religious life, there are no guarantees when it comes to where you hang your biretta.

# Minneapolis: The Resurrection of Chinese Joe

During his time in Minnesota, Father Lavin spent much of his time on the road. He traveled to various parishes throughout the area, preaching about the needs of the missions, encouraging vocations to the missionary priesthood, and raising money for Maryknoll. While this was demanding work, it continued to provide the *Iron Man* with the opportunity to talk about his experiences in China as an instrument of God's benevolent grace; and it also afforded him the opportunity to educate concerned American Catholics about the present impact of Communism on the Chinese Catholic Church and all the poor people who were suffering under the Red yoke. From his letters home it was evident that *Chinese Joe* enjoyed his promotional work in Minneapolis and St. Paul very much.

On the feast of the Immaculate Conception, December 8, 1958, Father Joe wrote to his family from a small parish in Miller, South Dakota, 340 miles west of Minneapolis.

While *Chinese Joe* was not in the missionary field any longer, he was very much involved in the work for the Propagation of the Faith. In fact, he was so involved that when he was arranging his trip home for Christmas in 1958, he requested that the family not pick him up at the airport. Rather, he would take a bus home because he wanted to stop off at the Maryknoll house in Boston in order to hear the confessions of the Chinese sisters and workers.

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In the same letter, the *Iron Man* described some upcoming missionary activities that would occur when he returned to his Minnesota location after the Christmas holidays. "I plan to leave home Sunday night by plane for Minnesota — Sunday, January 4. I have a talk on China and Communism on Monday night, January 5, to a group of Juniors and Seniors in some high school. Not a bad vacation, eh!"

Not only the Chinese, but the Church in the whole Orient concerned Father Joe. In a very brief letter home, dated November 4, 1958, he enclosed a news-clipping on Catholic Christians in Japan. "The clipping on Japan," he wrote, "should be of great interest. Do not throw it away. I will pick it up at Christmas." The actual clip reads as follows:

### The Springfield Daily Christians Still Hide in Japan

#### Odd Sect Still Worships in Secret Despite Two Centuries of Liberty

*Tokyo (Nana) — Religious freedom came to Japan almost two centuries ago yet today thousands of Japanese still practice Christianity in secret.*

*Three times a year, New Year's Day, Easter, and Christmas, — they erect a temporary altar at a hidden meeting place and conduct services behind closed doors and shuttered windows, according to Dr. Koya Tagita, professor of comparative history at Nanzen University in Nagoya.*

*This group of "Kakure Kurishitan" — secret Christians — are descendants of Japanese converted to Christianity by*

## Minneapolis: The Resurrection of Chinese Joe

*St. Francis Xavier. Most of them live on the small islands of Ikitsuki, Natsu, and Sotome, off northwestern Kyushu.*

*The majority of the secret Christians are illiterate and continue their secret practices only because, "as far back as they can remember this is the way things have always been done," explains Dr. Tagita.*

*They numbered some 30,000 out of 500,000 Christians in Japan. Japan's total population is about 90,000,000.*

*Christianity was introduced in Japan in 1549 by St. Francis Xavier. The Faith spread rapidly but was banned in 1613. Persecutions practically wiped out the new religion. Thousands went underground and took their beliefs with them.*

*They hid their Christian practices so well that they were undetected for centuries. It was a dangerous business. Rewards for turning in a Christian could make a man rich. The Christians, however, fooled the authorities for years with secret passwords and even took the Japanese goddess, Kannon (Mercy), and carved statues of her which in reality were intended as sculptures of the Virgin Mary. They are on display today in Nagasaki.*

*In 1865, shortly before formal religious freedom was granted to the Japanese under Emperor Meiji, a French priest erected a small church in Nagasaki for the foreign colony there. When a group of Japanese walked into the church and secretly questioned him about the crucifix, his robe, and then recited several prayers for him, it was discovered that the underground Christians had retained and passed on from generation to generation what they had learned from the early missionaries.*

*Much later, about half of the early Christians publicly acknowledged their faith, and schools and churches were*

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*opened. But others, too distant to reach, continued to practice their faith secretly, without a priest, and they still do today, according to Dr. Tagita.*

*"They have no churches, but worship secretly in people's homes," Dr. Tagita said. "It is strange, but their ancestors went underground so long ago that it is almost impossible to convince them that the persecutions they feared have been gone for almost a century."*

Father Joe does not discuss the significance of this clipping, nor why it was important to him. No doubt he was much inspired by the whole story. Perhaps, too, he envisioned himself returning to China, organizing an underground church with secret codes and passwords, and continuing his work covertly, even though it might cost him his life. This is certainly within the realm of possibility. After all, as this exiled missionary well knew, this would not be the first time in the history of the Catholic Church that missionaries returned to lands from which they had been expelled to continue preaching the Catholic Faith. And it would not be the first time that they were martyred for doing so.

In sixteenth-century England, while Queen Elizabeth was hunting down priests for execution, the exiled Jesuit, Edmund Campion, secretly came back to England in order to provide the sacraments for persecuted Catholics. He knew the risk he was taking, as did many other priests like him. He could easily be caught or betrayed and killed. And he was! On December 1, 1581, after being subjected to terrible tortures in the Tower of London (including an outlandish visit from the Queen herself), Saint Edmund Campion was hanged, drawn and quartered.

## Minneapolis: The Resurrection of Chinese Joe

One need not go back four centuries to find accounts of such heroism. There were martyrs in every century, including our own. During Father Lavin's time, both Popes Pius XI and Pius XII had sent priests clandestinely into Russia to minister to the Catholics there. Every one of these men was systematically arrested, tortured, and either executed or sent to the Gulag. There were indeed recent precedents which Father Joe was probably thinking about. He was certainly not afraid to face the Communists, even though he was threatened with death if he should ever return to China. What is quite revealing is that he signed this brief letter to his mother with the old moniker, *Chinese Joe*. And, as already noted, this signature appeared with greater and greater frequency during his promotional tours.





# From Minneapolis to Pittsburgh to Chicago

After Father Joe returned to Minneapolis, getting promotional dates with parishes was becoming increasingly more difficult. Dioceses throughout the region were having various drives of their own in order to fund their Catholic schools and other Church related projects. Allowing Maryknollers to engage in fund-raising for the foreign missions would have only diverted money that was badly needed for local causes. So while Father Joe and his missionary associates were able to solicit subscriptions for the Maryknoll magazine and talk to young people about a missionary vocation, they were limited in their efforts to raise money for their orphaned flock across the sea.

In spite of this understandable handicap, wherever the Maryknoll missionary went, the audiences were receptive and as generous as they could be. And, most importantly, the Church in America was getting an education. People were learning first-hand about the rigors of missionary work and the salutary impact that work had on the ordinary Chinese peasant. Furthermore, being in the public-relations aspect of missionary work gave Father Joe the opportunity to refute newspaper articles that attempted to portray Communism in China in a favorable light. In response to such leftist articles (and just before leaving for his new assignment in Pittsburgh), he wrote about the Reds' persecution of their own people. He posted this impassioned communication on January 25, 1959, and sent it to his mother.

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*Most of the Chinese priests in the Kongmoon Diocese have been forced into the "Communes". We know this has happened to Fathers So, Lei, Hoh, Ne, and Lui. Mr. Mok, our former school teacher and catechist, has been sentenced to [prison and] hard [labor]. Wong a'Hoi, our former school teacher and language teacher, has received the same fate. They are starving to death. The old grandmother [Wong a'Hoi] broke her arm two years ago, no medical attention and, therefore, [it] never mended.*

*The "Communes" started in China last April. The Communes are just a large army barracks. The men are in one and the women in another. There is complete segregation. Their children are raised in orphanages and schools — a better word would be raised in zoos. The children will become a pack of wild animals. The parents are allowed to see their children once a week for one or two hours provided they have time.*

*The people in the Communes start work at 3:00 a.m. and quit at 8:00 p.m., and in emergencies work until 11:00 p.m. The ordinary day of labor is seventeen hours. They have two fifteen-minute breaks for dinner and supper. Their work is assigned to them daily — either on the farm or in the factories or building dams, roads, etc. They work on a starvation diet because of the scarcity of food. Impossible to keep up this pace. Remember, about seven out of ten have TB. Maybe the Reds want to kill off about one-half of the population. The husbands and wives see each other on Saturday night for one or two hours. The idea of the Commune is to destroy completely the Chinese family. The family ties in China are very sacred and the entire life of the Chinese has been built*

## From Minneapolis to Pittsburgh to Chicago

*around the family for the past five thousand years. I think this will be the death blow to Communism in Red China. [Apparently Father Joe, like other Maryknollers, still believed that Communism would eventually collapse.] Let's hope so. The Chinese are now only a machine and worse than animals. They only own the clothes on their backs.*

*Please pray for the Chinese, especially the priests, sisters, Catholics, and all of them.*

The *Iron Man's* strong feelings about the diabolical aspects of Communism were loud and clear in this excerpt. When *Life Magazine* featured an innocuous article about Communism in China in their January 5, 1959 edition, *Chinese Joe* was infuriated. In a February 11 letter to his mother, he wrote:

*Next Sunday is set aside for a day of prayer and supplication for the persecuted Chinese in China. This is for the entire world and Pope John XXIII asked all Catholics to participate in a particular way. The Chinese need our prayers. By the way — there was an article in Life magazine — January 5, 1959 — “The New China” — pages 44 - 61. The eighteen pages of pictures are very very misleading and do not give a current picture of present-day China. They only show the better part of Communism in China and not the misery and suffering of the Chinese. The article “Misery, Oppression, Fear Inside China's Communes” from pages 64 to 74 gives a true documentary story and picture of the Chinese under the diabolical heel of the Reds. If I can pick up an extra copy, I will send it to you.*

Just one week later, Father Joe wrote another follow-up letter home (2/18/59). Again, he attacked this “propaganda stunt”, as he called it. A relevant part reads:

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*Under separate post, I am sending that article on Red China. There are about eighteen pictures and the pictures give a very false story of Red China. No doubt, it is a propaganda stunt. The article following of about nine pages gives a true picture of present Red China. Red China is hell on earth. The people work from 3 a.m. until 8 p.m. and in emergencies, they work until 11:00 p.m. Last Sunday was a day of prayer throughout the world for the persecuted Chinese. The Chinese really need our prayers.*

Father Joe was about to implode. Why wasn't Maryknoll asking his help in refuting this blatant misinformation? *Chinese Joe* was engaged now face to face with "the powers of this air", as Saint Paul refers to one of the two worst choirs of demons. These are the high powers of darkness, crafters of lies, who manipulate public opinion with such cleverness that gullible masses chant their song like mindless parrots: "Good is evil and evil is good." No, this champion of God was not going to let this challenge go by without a fight. The Chinese were still his people and the Red legions were their mortal enemy. So he spoke out, attempting to correct the misperceptions of the popular media. He would do his best to support the persecuted Chinese, even though he was now over ten thousand miles away.

It was not only his public relations work that rekindled Father Joe's missionary zeal, it was also his refreshing new relations with the Chinese people who had fled from the Communists. In a January 18, 1959 letter to his mother, he tells her about two of these refugees.

*Mr. and Mrs. Cheng stayed for 1 hour and 15 minutes and we had a great time talking English and Chinese.*

## From Minneapolis to Pittsburgh to Chicago

*They came from Hang Kow in North China and have been Catholics for generations. They fled to Canton from the Reds and beat it to Hong Kong in 1949 before the Reds took over. During the war, he worked with the Intelligence and traveled extensively in China. He and his older brother [from 1932–36] studied at St. Bonaventure College in New York and then [they] went back to China.*

*In Hong Kong, he worked with the Intelligence and taught school for a few years in the Jesuit College — he taught physics. He and his family came to this country in 1957, spent [one more] year in China, then came [back] here. He works as a chemist in one of the food companies and has a good job.*

*The family consists of three boys and one girl. One boy is in his third year of premedical college in Ohio; second boy in college; third boy in high school; and girl in fifth grade parochial school. No doubt, his parents were well-to-do people in China, but lost all to the Reds. The father educated two sons in St. Bonaventure College in New York and that takes plenty of money.*

*Picked up Father Lange at 8:45 at the airport. Then went out to visit my Chinese friend Tony Chin. He, his wife, and I talked about China, etc. I had ten long Chinese letters and he read them for me. I did not get home until 2 a.m. Lots of news in the letters about conditions in China. Write to you later on this.*

There were certainly a lot of good things happening with Father Joe since he left Hawaii. One of the best new developments was that the Father Lavin Mission Club was back in full swing. Through the generosity of the members of the club he was able to assist many of the victims of Communist oppres-

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sion; and he was also blessed with grateful return correspondence from those that had benefited from his charity.

When promotional work dropped pace in Minnesota and the surrounding states, Father Joe was sent to Pittsburgh for two weeks. He worked out of St. Albert the Great Church and, once again, there were few spare minutes. It was a very active parish with a wonderful spirit. The visiting missionary was impressed:

*The people are very good, and all pitch in to help with the parish affairs and work. Their spirit is great and lively. Sunday, of course, was the big day for the Maryknoller. I sang the 10:30 Mass and said the 12:15 Mass. The Church was only half full for the High Mass. The 12:15 Mass was jammed to the doors. At both Masses, I spoke on heaven and then talked on China and Communism; just short sermons of thirty minutes. It was good for the people to learn about Communism in China.*

The two weeks in Pittsburgh were stimulating for the reinvigorated Father Lavin. But it was his assignment to the Maryknoll Fathers in Chicago that sparked the missionary's enthusiasm even more. Chicago had a thriving Chinatown and Father Joe was able to minister there to St. Theresa's Mission Church. On March 10, 1959, he wrote to his mother about one of the families he had befriended:

*On Friday night at 6 p.m., Mr. and Mrs. Norman Li and their two daughters came in for a visit. This Chinese family came from Hunan in North China. They both became Catholics in Hunan and later met and were married there. Mr. Li and his brother graduated from St. Bonaventure College near Buffalo, New York, in 1936. They returned to China and taught at the University of Hunan.*

## From Minneapolis to Pittsburgh to Chicago

*When the Reds came, they fled to Canton, and then to Hong Kong where he taught for the Jesuits in the University of Hong Kong. He, the wife, and three sons came to this country. His girls were born here. He has taught chemistry for seven years in the Catholic college in Pittsburgh (cannot recall the name). One son is in the third year of medical school — second son in college — and the third in high school. The girls must be about eight and six. Mr. and Mrs. Li speak excellent English, Cantonese, and Hunanese (similar to Mandarin). They are excellent Catholics. We had a good talk. They are nice people.*

By spring of 1959, Father Joe was a regular visitor in Chinatown, meeting Chinese families, eating in their restaurants, and administering the sacraments to the Catholics. On May 5 he wrote: "Father Johnson and I went around to visit the Chinese and he blessed some houses. I met a few Catholics from Hoignan. Great to see the hometown people. Had a nice Chinese supper at one of the Chinese restaurants."

Then, on June 2, the sports-loving priest had to forfeit a seat at Comiskey Park and miss a great rival match-up: the Chicago White Sox vs. the Boston Red Sox. "The Friday night game is out because I am saying the First Friday Mass at 7:30 in the evening in Chinatown and will preach in Chinese." The *Iron Man* certainly loved baseball. Upon returning to the United States, he frequently commented on major league teams, the World Series, and various ballplayers, particularly Ted Williams. However, being able to preach in Chinese was far more uplifting to this priest than watching some slugger smack a grand slam. On June 8, he wrote a letter to his mother about

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that First Friday Mass. Of course, he also relished his dinner afterwards. Father Joe loved shrimp.

*On Friday night, I went to Chinatown and sang High Mass at St. Theresa's Church. Friday was the feast of the Sacred Heart. I sang Mass at 7:30 p.m., preached in English and also Chinese. There was a good attendance. The Chinese children under the Maryknoll Sisters sang an excellent Mass. After Mass, there was a meeting of the Sacred Heart Club with coffee and refreshments. After [that], Father Becka and I went out to a Chinese restaurant for supper. We had an excellent meal of rice with shrimp, fried shrimp, and the third dish was sweet and sour shrimp. The sweet and sour shrimp was excellent.*

*After supper, I met a good number of the Chinese ladies of the Sacred Heart Society. Left at 9:45 p.m. with Father Johnson; back home to pack my bag and off to the Baltimore and Ohio Railroad.*

This was *Chinese Joe's* idea of a big night out on the town — to be with his fellow Chinese, break bread with them, and nourish their souls. Father Frederick Becka, with whom he had dined, had himself endured two years of persecution under the Communists. Like Father Langley, he had been studying the Chinese language at Maryknoll's mission in Taanchuk before his expulsion.



## On to New York

A true Maryknoller never gets attached to persons, places or things. From one big city, it was on to a bigger one: New York. Judging from these following lines to his mother, Father Joe was pleased.

*Here is good news for you. I am being changed from Chicago. I am helping out in Transfiguration Parish on 29 Mott Street in New York City for July and August. They need help badly. This parish belongs to the Archdiocese of New York, but is in the charge of Maryknoll. Italians and Chinese make up the parish, so we need priests who can speak Chinese or Italian. Must brush up on my Italian! Ha! Will be close to home. I enjoy this kind of work. Nothing like moving around and seeing the U.S.*

Now his knowledge of the Chinese language and culture could be put to better use than ever. In addition to that, the full-blooded Irishman had to brush up on his Italian. He could have used his old side-kick, Father Rocco Franco, for that. Unfortunately, Father Rocco had long since passed away. His parents, however, did live in New York, so Father Joe went to visit them. Although he could not have been more warmly received, the Irish Maryknoller could see the pain still written on their faces. For a parent, to lose a son so young was like losing a piece of the heart; to lose a young son who was a priest was even more bitter sorrow. It was a cross that few could joyfully carry. On August 11, 1959, he wrote home to tell his

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mother about the visit: "Yesterday afternoon, I went over to see Mr. and Mrs. Franco. Had an excellent Italian meal. Mrs. Franco certainly can cook. They are enjoying good health and much happiness. They still miss young Rocco."

Chinatown, in New York City, was a bustling little city of its own. Although Father Joe was only supposed to be in "The City" for the months of July and August, this assignment was extended on account of Father John Moore's new assignment to the Maryknoll mission in Hong Kong. Father Moore was the only priest at the Transfiguration parish who spoke Chinese. Father Lavin, therefore, was now indispensable to New York's Chinatown. On October 14<sup>th</sup>, Father Joe posted the news to his parents:

*As you know, I have been assigned here and will take over Father Moore's Chinese work. This work is very interesting and plenty to do. Much good can be done for the Chinese in New York. I know the Chinese language, the Chinese people, their ways etc. I will be close to home and able to see you at least one day a week. That's that!*

The Maryknoller's letters had a new spice to them. A youthful enthusiasm, such as that which permeated the bulk of his letters from China, had returned. It was as if he were just ordained. In fact, some of his missives from New York read more like mini-sermons, just as they had not so many years ago. For example, here is a clip from a letter written to his mother on the feastday of Saints Peter and Paul, June 29<sup>th</sup>, 1959. After speaking about the martyrdom of two great apostles, he added these amazing facts about the society's growth:

*Today, June 29, is also Maryknoll's Foundation Day. Maryknoll was founded by Fathers Walsh and Price. [The*

## On to New York

*congregation] was authorized by Pope Pius X in Rome on June 29, 1911. We are forty-eight years old today. It is a great day for Maryknollers throughout the world. We did not have any celebration here but just another day.*

*Maryknoll now has about 815 priests, 200 brothers, and about 800 students studying for the priesthood. The Maryknoll Sisters are similar in name but distinct as a society. The sisters have close to 1400 in their ranks, and they do foreign mission work as well as home mission work.*

*Maryknoll has missions in Mexico, five countries in South America, Hawaiian Islands, Philippine Islands, Hong Kong, Formosa (China), South Korea, Japan, and Africa.*

By 1959, the rapid growth of the society was astonishing — and the future looked promising, at least then. Little did Father Joe realize at the time that the Communists already had their sympathizers in the hallowed halls at Ossining. But that is another story.

In this same letter, Father Joe related another story about a Chinese family that Father Moore had introduced him to. The detailed account of the family's history shows just how much paternal interest this holy priest had in his adopted people. He was, after all, *Chinese Joe*.

*Father Moore and I left Maryknoll on Friday night at 7:30. He was driving the parish car. On the way, we stopped at Yonkers, New York, and saw a Chinese family. Father Moore knew the family in Kwangsi, China. Father Moore was in the Province of Kwangsi in South China for nine years, 1941 - 1950.*

*The Chinese family that we visited was Mr. and Mrs. Lee. First we went to the restaurant (Chinese) and saw Mrs. Lee*

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*and her two sons. She is the manager and also the owner (with her husband) of this beautiful Oriental restaurant. The business is excellent and they say the food is good. She is a girl in her forties, very beautiful, speaks English very well, . . . and well mannered. I think she must be the second wife — maybe the first wife is dead. She invited us to have a drink and a meal, but we refused with grace. Spent about a half hour with her, spoke Chinese most of the time. Then we went a short distance to the home and met Mr. Lee (Chinese name — Lei Hon Man) and two daughters. They have a nice comfortable home with all the American comforts.*

*Mr. Lee was governor of the Kwangtung Province at one time. He was a general in the army and fought the Communists in 1925-26, the Japs in 1932 in Shanghai, fought the Japs again in 1937-45, and the Communists again, 1948-49. He and his entire family fled to Hong Kong before the Communists came to Kwangsi, and then the entire family came to America. The restaurant business gave them a nice living and [they were] able to put their children through college.*

*Mr. and Mrs. Lee have two boys and three girls (they had three boys but one boy died at the age of six from pneumonia in the hills while fleeing from the Japs). Two boys going to college, the oldest girl graduated from college and was a dietitian and is now married with two children and lives in the city; the second-oldest girl has just graduated from college with a degree in science and is studying for her Master's; and the third girl is eight years old and is in the fourth grade. The two oldest girls went to Catholic colleges and are very good Catholics. Maybe the whole family will come in [i.e., to the church].*

# The Break With Maryknoll

The year 1959 rolled on. Father Joseph Patrick Lavin was fully engaged in all the priestly and charitable activities germane to being a domestic missionary in New York City's Chinatown. Too, he had become a very successful fund-raiser. His vast knowledge of the China mission, his profound insight and understanding of the Chinese culture, and his ability to articulately describe what he had experienced under the yoke of the Red dragon were a great calling card for Maryknoll. In fact, the society began featuring his missionary experiences with photographs in their magazine. Several secular newspapers even carried accounts of his ordeals under the Communists. Pictures of Father Joe with his pipe, posing together with Chinese sisters, children, families, and local officials could be found in more than one secular magazine and even in books dealing with the persecution of the Church under Mao's bloody reign of terror. Moreover, his oral presentations on China and the Red menace were drawing larger and larger audiences. Generous contributions followed every talk. Every penny went to Maryknoll to further their missionary work in the Far East.

Father Joe was above all things a priest. For him, fundraising was not merely a humanitarian endeavor, but it was a means of keeping the true Faith alive in a land whose government proscribed all religion in order to crush the only one that it actually feared. The *Iron Man* knew this well. Giving financial relief to

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the poor Catholics in China was one way of keeping the Word of God alive there. Prayers were the most important thing anyone could give the Chinese, but in the missionaries' absence (and given the prohibition of printed religious material, etc.), corporal works of mercy, by way of donations, were the only way of tangibly communicating with the souls of the captive people.

As the fifties drew to a close, the visible revolution within the Catholic Church loomed ominously over the horizon. Pope John XXIII was now at the helm. Under his pontificate, the traditional notions about the role of the missionary priest were beginning to be undermined by liberal theologians. In less than a generation's span, the ideal of converting non-believers to the Catholic Faith was no longer a missionary's main purpose. In fact, it was discouraged outright.\*

For nearly four hundred years, aspiring missionary priests had looked up to Saint Francis Xavier as the exemplar of the Catholic missionary. Through his preaching and his charisms and miraculous gifts, this Jesuit converted more pagans to the Catholic religion than any other missionary, other than Saint Paul. Yes, Saints Paul and Francis Xavier both gave their hearts to the poor, as did our Lord, but their main concern was the salvation of every man, rich or poor — for all men are sinners in need of God's mercy.

Some Maryknollers, like Bishop Francis Xavier Ford, had been martyred for their faith. Others, like Bishop James E. Walsh, suffered long prison terms. Two of Bishop Walsh's twelve years in Communist prison were spent in a coffin-sized hole in the ground. The remaining Western priests, brothers, and sisters had been brutally treated and expelled from China. Maryknoll

\* No more "triumphalistic proselytizing" was the new mandate of liberal hierarchs promoting false ecumenism.

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priests, like the founders of their great missionary society, had given the best years of their lives to establish the Catholic Church in China and to make sure that it flourished there. They never questioned the Word of God, like the comfortable “liberation” theologians cavorting about in the West since 1970. This new so-called “theology of liberation” has had its own publishing house, *Orbis Books*, to further promote leftist propaganda.

The Communist mock trials were a painful reality to the Maryknoll missionaries. Bound before their accusers, victimized by hatred and injustice, in their torments they relived the passion of Christ in their hearts and bodies. How does one find common ground with such an enemy? How does one tolerate an ideology based on atheism and class warfare? If tolerance were the true “golden rule”, rather than authentic love of God and neighbor, then, certainly, Jesus Christ would have demonstrated this by His example. And certainly, if He had done this impossible thing, i.e., deny Himself – He would never have been crucified. When the time had come for our Lord to deliver Himself up to His enemies, He went forth by His own will as the divine Victim, the Lamb of God, marching to the slaughter in silence. Jesus had confronted the Jewish priests, scribes, and Pharisees in public on many occasions. He gave them instruction, refuted their errors, and exposed their sins and hypocrisy. The divine Physician came to heal souls, and the process began when He disturbed the lax conscience.

In order to understand how false ecumenism and the new “liberation theology” must have affected the *Iron Man*, it is imperative that we try to imagine what it was like to walk in his shoes after being expelled from Red China. Keep in mind that Father Joe had been a Maryknoller for more than thirty years, over twenty of which had been spent on the Chinese mainland. He had grown up during the years in which

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Saint Pius X and Pius XI were at the helm of Peter's barque. For fifty years, prior to Vatican II, all priests were required to take an oath against "Modernism", promising to oppose all novel doctrine or practice that deviated from Catholic Tradition. When missionaries were sent to foreign lands, they were expected to conduct themselves like holy men, emulating the example of Saints Peter and Paul, Saint Francis Xavier, Saint Isaac Jogues, Saint Jean de Brebeuf, Saint Pierre Louis Chanel and Blessed Theophane Venard, the last of whom had been martyred in Vietnam not many years before the *Iron Man* was born. These great saints, and many others like them, whose lives spanned twenty centuries, were a Maryknoller's exemplars.

The mission in China, which had been Maryknoll's "crown jewel", had been dismantled and destroyed. Over forty years of hard work and dedication had been destroyed — visibly, that is, by the diabolical revolution. Mao Tse-tung and his comrade Chou En-lai were directly responsible for the murder of 63,784,000 of their countrymen during their liquidation purges from 1949 to 1958. Father Joe had directly observed the ruthlessness of the Red scourge.

What a heavy burden must have weighed upon the shoulders of true Maryknollers like Father Lavin! Seeing the Catholic Church and their own society infiltrated by freethinking radicals was far worse for them than the loss of the missions in China. And there was no one left to turn to, this side of heaven. The founders of Maryknoll, Fathers James A. Walsh and Thomas Price, and Maryknoll's heroic martyr, Bishop Francis Xavier Ford, were all dead. Sanity seemed to be dead. Father Joe had known the good founders of Maryknoll personally and he admired them immensely. They were his mentors and heroes. Too, Father Joe must have thought much about, and prayed



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much for, his imprisoned superior and friend, Bishop James E. Walsh. Given the bishop's age and health, Father Joe expected that he would never see the holy man again. [Note: After twelve years of torment, Bishop Walsh was finally released from prison in 1970, not many months before the death of the *Iron Man*.]

As we walk in our missionary's shoes, try to imagine the disheartening effect that this new "ecumenism" must have had on such a genuine apostle of Christ. Hear the cacophonous voice of religious babel, if you can! Is it not ubiquitous today! "One religion is just as good as another. They are all just parallel roads leading to heaven. The Catholic Church is just one of many such avenues; it may be the best way, for some men, but not for all. As long as you are sincere, that is all that matters. Be a good Jew, a good Buddhist, a good Mohammedan, a good whatever, and God will save you. And do not worry about denying His Son – so long as your conscience tells you to do that, you're all right. And, as for baptism? That is just an antiquated ritual, certainly not necessary for salvation." [Note: Actually, it would not be too long before parishes began calling the holy sacrament "the rite of initiation". If that appellation means anything at all, then, one might as well call the whole exorcism (for, in truth, an exorcism it is!) a merely symbolic ceremony – geared more for the social amusement of the family and spectators than for the actual regeneration in grace of the baby.]

This latter heresy must have been particularly piercing to the heart of the *Iron Man*. He must have recalled those hundreds of Chinese babies ("waifs", as he called them), whom he had plucked from the jaws of death and baptized. He must have thought about Father Daniel McShane, whom he had so much revered, the founder of the Loting orphanage. Father McShane died after contracting small pox from an infected

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Chinese baby. In approaching the child, this priest knew the risk. Nevertheless, he did so, anointing the waif and baptizing it in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Oh, if he had only known better. Poor stupid man! He did not realize that under the new theology, this heroic gesture was unnecessary. Had he been less fervent about the importance of baptism, he could have had a longer life; he could have donned secular clothes and gone about promoting the social gospel rather than upsetting consciences about the truth of the Catholic religion. Good priests, like Father McShane, would have condemned the new theology with vigor, had they the misfortune of seeing its propagation.

There was another danger, besides risking one's health, that Father Joe and his fellow Maryknollers exposed themselves to when they ministered to seriously sick children. When one of those children died, the pagan mind was prone to view the baptismal ceremony with suspicion. When the Communists took over, they exploited that suspicion and turned it into superstitious fear. When any of the sick children died at Father Joe's orphanage, especially after receiving baptism, the administration of the sacrament inadvertently gave the Communists a bogus reason for persecuting the priests. Their zeal to baptize the little ones, therefore, put the missionaries in much danger. Unlike in Christian countries, the priest could actually hear the devil roar with each reborn child the fallen archangel was forced to relinquish.

The new spirit that had rocked Maryknoll must have been a bitter blow to loyal missionaries like Father Joe. Young recruits were now being educated not only about respecting the customs of non-Christian peoples (which was fine), but about respecting their religion as well. What was true in their religion? All religions have elements of truth. That is not the

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issue. Jesus is the issue! The pope is the issue! Holy obedience is the issue! The *ex cathedra* dogma that there is “no salvation outside the Church” — the most foundational of all Catholic dogmas — was put up to ridicule and contempt. The new breed of missionary was instructed that baptism should only be administered to the children of Catholic parents who specifically requested it. There would no longer be any “proselytizing”. And, to add insult to injury, the teachers of the new prospects arriving at Maryknoll implied, or declared outright, that the old Maryknollers had been errant in both their beliefs and their actions. Essentially, their missionary activities, outside of their corporal works of mercy, were misguided, a waste of effort, even damaging to international relations. The new “mission” was to pave the way for a “new order of things”.

Father Joseph Lavin continued his work raising money for Maryknoll missions through 1960 and into a good part of 1961. Every penny the *Iron Man* raised was given from Catholic motives “in the Name of Christ”. People were very much moved by the veteran missionary addressing them. Nevertheless, Father Joe must have wondered about the future of the society. Was the money really going to the cause he espoused? If not, should he continue to obey, keep silence, and pray that all would be well in the end? The priest from Framingham must have felt the crushing weight of this dilemma for quite some time. Perhaps he did put his concerns in writing, send them to his superiors, and attempt, thereby, to work through the proper channels. Father Joe took his vow of obedience very seriously, as did most priests of his generation. He was not one to openly criticize those in authority in the Church. So, what he did not do was alarm his family about the situation, at least in writing.

## The Iron Man of China

Sometime before the fall of 1961, Father Lavin stopped his fund-raising activities. Then, in September, after serving the missionary society for thirty years, he requested and received permission for an early retirement. He also received permission from the Boston Archdiocese to serve as a parish priest at Saint Stephen's Church in his home town. While Father Joe still helped individual missionary priests and the Chinese through the Father Lavin Mission Club, he was no longer associated with Maryknoll itself, except in name only. Although he never officially left the society, one might say that, in spirit, the society left him. More accurately, the society left the spirit of its founders.

Father Joe was not an old man by any means, although his body had weathered enough storms to render the fifty-four-year-old vessel a bit less than seaworthy. It would have helped the veteran missionary to have had an old friend in Maryknoll to confide in, a priest from the same field, perhaps. But, almost all of his co-laborers in the Chinese mission were dead.

A critical moment came for our priest when his friend and fellow Maryknoller, Father Arthur Cunneen, died. Father Joe decided to drive to New York, to Maryknoll, to attend the Mass and burial service. Cunneen had also been persecuted by the Chinese Communists. And, as mentioned at the start of this biography, he, too, was from Framingham, and he, too, once attended Father Garrahan's Sunday School at St. Stephen's Church. There was no question, then, that Father Joe would attend the funeral.

What happened at the Mass left the *Iron Man* stone cold. The service was a far cry from the traditional requiem ceremony that Father Joe expected. Out of respect for his friend,

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however, he remained in his pew up until the point when some “happy people”, with surrealistic smiles started strumming guitars and singing folk songs. On that sour note, Father Joe got up and walked out of the church. He never again returned to Maryknoll.

Another of his unexpected crosses was the death of his boyhood friend, Father Thomas Langley. Both he and Langley were from Framingham, both entered Maryknoll together, and both were expelled from China by the Reds. Father Langley passed away after his assignment to Hawaii. He was buried in the Maryknoll cemetery in New York, together with all the other missionaries who had passed away at home after bringing Jesus Christ to foreign lands. Father Joe did not attend the funeral service at the knoll. In fact, he made arrangements for his own burial in the family plot out of Saint Stephen’s Church, not in Ossining.

Following the unofficial break with Maryknoll, Father Joe jumped into his parochial duties at St. Stephen’s with the same unrelenting energy that he exhibited in his missionary work. He volunteered right away to be the local hospital chaplain. And it did not take long before he became well-known throughout the area for his compassion and care of the sick and suffering. Father Joe’s own health had continued to deteriorate, but he never complained about that. Rather, enduring the discomfort of his own maladies gave him greater empathy for others who were forced to suffer with chronic pain. What the *Iron Man* was able to do – and priests have this grace from the character of holy orders – is to inspire those who must suffer to suffer willingly for their own sins and those of others, rather than reluctantly for no one.

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At all hours of the day and night, Father Joe could be seen trudging through the hospital corridors. When he went to the hospital, he visited everyone, not only Catholics, but Protestants and Jews as well. They all looked forward to seeing him. His kind words, encouragement, and his Irish sense of humor were an elixir that made life at least a little more bearable for them, if not enjoyable, for a little while. Father Joe had a knack for cheering up even the most desolate patients. Nor was it only those who experienced physical suffering to whom he attended. He also had a sympathetic ear and sound advice for anyone whom he met at the hospital: visitors, doctors, nurses, cooks, cleaners, and launderers. Father Joseph Lavin was that kind of priest; he had the gift of availability.

During his time at St. Stephen's, Father Joe also busied himself with the parish grammar school. As *Chinese Joe*, he had always loved the "kiddoes", as he called the little ones in China. It was no different now. In fact, it almost seemed therapeutic for him to banter around playing with the school children. He still had plenty of youthful pizzazz and his charismatic smile and laughter easily drew the "kiddoes" to him. The only problem was that he was no longer any match for them in a foot race. His number had already been retired by his fans in China.

Soft spot notwithstanding, Father Lavin could be a tough disciplinarian, particularly when it came to reverence at holy Mass, and not only during Mass, but at all times in the house of God. His sermons could last for thirty minutes or more, and he expected his parishioners to pay attention to them. The *Iron Man* had a strict "no nonsense" conduct policy that he firmly enforced when he was offering the Holy Sacrifice. If the children misbehaved, Father Joe would stop and openly reprimand the offenders. More than that, he would actually bring them up to the front of the church and force them to

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sit outside of the altar. And the scolding that the offenders would receive from this tough Irish priest was a scolding they probably never forgot.

That Father Joe loved the old Latin Mass was obvious to everyone who knew him. In his eulogy at the *Iron Man's* funeral, Father John Foley stressed this fact: "Daily Mass was his greatest moment," he said. "He loved the Mass." In fact, when Father Joe's eyes could no longer read, he memorized several of the Masses, including the readings, so that he might never be separated from the altar.

How much the *Iron Man* loved the traditional Mass was never more apparent than Christmas Day just before his death. The year was 1970. Toward the last few months of his life he suffered greatly and was often bedridden. The prolonged malnutrition inflicted on him by the Red Chinese led to gradual progressive heart failure, a pulmonary embolism, necrosis of the liver, and hemorrhagic enterocolitis. In layman's terms, this means diseases of the heart, the blood vessels in the lungs, and the liver and abnormal bleeding in the intestines. Father Joe was a very sick man. His stomach was no longer able to digest solid foods. He could barely get out of bed, let alone fulfill even the minimum of his priestly duties.

On the feast of the Nativity every priest is permitted to offer three Masses. Father Joe had not yet been hospitalized, but he was confined to his bed at 575 Concord Street. Early on Christmas morning, Father Joe called his sister, Elizabeth, into his room. "You know I have permission to say three Masses today," he said. "I want you to drive me to St. Stephen's. Don't try to talk me out of this." There was a slight pause. With a firm voice, he added: "It will probably be the last chance I get to honor the Holy Family on this blessed day."

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Lil, as Elizabeth was called, was not so easily swayed. This sick priest, with the gaunt face, puffy eyes, and failing voice was her brother. He might want to die at the altar, but she did not want that. Who could blame her? Father Joe had lost a lot of weight and his emaciated body looked like it was demanding its own final requiem. He was obviously in a lot of pain. Lil tried to assert herself calmly: "You should stay in bed and rest," she said. Elizabeth knew that when the *Iron Man* made up his mind, he could become quite feisty. She did not want to battle with him and upset him, so she tried to be gentle in her urging: "You'll only make yourself sicker," she pleaded. "Besides, nobody expects you to say Mass today. Even the other priests at St. Stephen's won't be saying three Masses. Please reconsider." But, her brother was determined. "Nonsense," he retorted. "I'll be fine. Now just be a good sister and drive me to the church without giving me a tough time."

Father Joe managed to dress and groom himself, while Lil continued to protest. Ignoring her pleas, he went about his business and hobbled down the stairs to the living room closet. He put on his overcoat, and walked out the side door into the driveway. A cold blast of December air hit him in the face as he shuffled his feet toward the passenger side of the automobile. Opening the door, the *Iron Man* plopped himself down in the front seat. He was ready to go to church. Lil finally gave up pleading, got the car keys, and dutifully started up the engine. She knew that there was no changing her brother's mind. Father Joseph Lavin was going to say three Masses and nothing on this earth was going to stop him.

Both brother and sister sat silently as they made the five minute drive to St. Stephen's. The *Iron Man* fully realized that if he had attempted to walk the distance he never would have made it – that is how sick he was. When they arrived, Lil drove



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around to the side entrance of the church, thinking that she would drop her brother off there and then go park the car. However, the priest had other plans in mind.

What was happening here was very mysterious and personal. It was as if Father Lavin were responding to a summons from our Lord Himself, moving his heart to come alone into this "holy place" — and consecrate the bread and the wine these three times in intimate solitude with God.

"It's eight o'clock now," he told his sister. "Come back and get me at eleven." Lil was a bit taken aback. "I'll go with you," she insisted. She knew that Father Joe was extremely weak. She feared that he might collapse and need help. The *Iron Man* did not need any help. He would somehow make it, just like he always had before. He held firm. "I want to do this by myself," he insisted. "I'll be saying the Masses in the private chapel. I don't want anyone with me."

"But Joe . . ." Lil started to say. "I'll be fine," her brother interrupted. "Just do as I ask. God protected me when I was in far worse shape in China and He will look out for me now. Just come back for me at eleven."

Again his sister acquiesced. All she could do was watch as Father Joe exited the automobile and walked through the side entrance of the church. How he managed to muster enough strength to say three Masses was a mystery to his family and friends. But, by the grace of God, he did it. Lil picked him up at eleven and drove him back home. This was Father Joseph Lavin's last Christmas day on earth. Offering those three Masses was a feat that our younger generation of Lavins still remember with wonder and awe.



## Death of a Missionary

Father Joseph Lavin's love of the traditional Roman liturgy continued right up until the last moment of his life. In order to make sure that, upon his demise, his body and soul would receive all the proper Catholic graces and blessings due to a priest, he laid down the law for his own funeral. Father Joe specifically requested the traditional Requiem Mass with black vestments. At the time of his death in 1971, the Church was using white vestments for funerals and calling the Mass of the Dead, "the Rite of Christian Burial". Father Joe did not want eulogies from people assuring each other that he went straight to heaven. He wanted prayers for his soul and Masses; he wanted his real friends to assume that he was in purgatory. In other words, he certainly did not want lugubrious tears nor, on the other hand, useless praise — he wanted prayers, joyful prayers, for his speedy entrance into heaven. And so, his life ended accordingly. Father Joseph Patrick Lavin was the last person buried from St. Stephen's Church with a black Requiem Funeral Mass. The Good Lord allowed for no pastor or bishop to override his dying request.

Father Joseph Patrick Lavin died on January 28, 1971. He was sixty-four years old. It was the feastday of Saint Peter Nolasco, co-founder with Saint Raymond of Pennafort of the Order of Mercedarians. These two holy men dedicated the religious order they founded to the ransom of captives

## The Iron Man of China

held enslaved by the Mohammedans. *Chinese Joe* likewise dedicated his life to ransoming the captives held by Satan under the chains of paganism. For the *Iron Man*, the immediate cause of death was a pulmonary embolism of the artery leading from the heart to the lung. It was a blockage in the artery leading from a heart (to quote the words of the Sancian islanders) that was “as soft as a flower” to the lung of one whose every priestly breath fought to make Jesus Christ known and loved.

On January 28, 1971, the headlines in the obituary of the priest Joseph Lavin in the *Framingham News* read as follows:

Deported by Reds

Rev. Joseph Lavin — Missionary to China

The obituary went on to describe Father Joe’s work in China, mainly focusing on his confrontation with the Chinese Communists and his eventual expulsion from the country. The obituary reported that Father Joseph Lavin’s body “will lie in state in St. Stephen’s Church on Sunday (January 31, 1971) from 4 to 9 p.m”.

Father Joe was a simple and humble priest. He was never elevated to any rank higher than that of the first order of priesthood. No, he never even served as a pastor of any parish here in the United States. He was not a dignitary of any sort. Yet, his body lay “in state”, an honor that is generally reserved for those of higher rank.

On Monday, February 1, 1971, St. Stephen’s Church was filled to overflowing for the final burial service. The eulogy was delivered by Father Joe’s close friend, Father John E. Foley. Father Foley eloquently summarized the *Iron Man*’s life when he referred to him as “a man for others”.

## Death of a Missionary

Even one year later, after the funeral, tributes of praise were being forwarded to the Lavin family by those who had known and worked with Father Joe. On January 28, 1972, the following was written to Father Joe's brothers and sisters from one of the Maryknoll sisters. She is as childlike in her praise as she is confident in her petition:

*Dear Mary, Elizabeth, and Ted,*

*. . . our dear Father Joe, [I] have him in my thoughts and prayers much of today, his first anniversary. I have been laid up with a bad attack of arthritis this past week, hence this tardy note.*

*How I envy Father Joe's being in Heaven! He has the better part and I trust that his intercession for the Maryknollers . . . will bear fruit, especially for the Maryknoll fathers who are making preparations for this Burial Chapter this coming September. He is now in a position to help the Society much. Would you as his brother and sisters ask him to do so? He loved his family intensely and would refuse them nothing if he could possibly grant it.*

*Ask him to help me bear this cross of illness with the magnificent fortitude he showed all his life. He is known as "the Iron Man" among Maryknollers as perhaps you know, and yet he was most understanding and generous in ministering to the sick. Running the Japanese lines on Sancian to bring Father Cairnes food and a few hours of companionship was something that he risked his life to do many times. Father Joe was the only witness the Society has had so far of Father Cairnes being taken off in a boat, put into a bamboo [No word followed after bamboo. This was probably a crate of some sort.] and lowered into the sea, while Father Joe looked on from a nearby island. The Japanese did not want him then, thank God!*

## The Iron Man of China

*Your family was blessed with a saint. May the joy he is experiencing and sharing with you completely replace any sorrow still in your hearts!*

*Lovingly in Our Lady,  
Sister M. Irene*

## Epilogue

In 1958, the Communists arrested Bishop James Edward Walsh and held him for two years before trying him “in absentia”. This occurred five years after Father Joseph Lavin had been expelled from China. Following this mock trial, the Maryknoll prelate was sentenced to twenty years in prison in Shanghai. He was accused of being an American spy. This sentence began in 1960. Given the bishop’s age and health, he did not expect to live through such a long ordeal. However, twelve years later, at the age of eighty-one, James E. Walsh was released from prison and expelled from the country. The event was a significant one because Bishop Walsh was the last Catholic American missionary to serve the Chinese people in their homeland. He was also one of the Maryknoll pioneers who, together with Fathers James A. Walsh, Thomas Price, Francis Xavier Ford, and Bernard Meyer, were the first Maryknoll missionaries to go to China. Bishop Walsh died on July 29, 1981.

China was Maryknoll’s first missionary post. It was the society’s first venture, its rite of initiation, into an apostolate dominated for centuries by other orders. Their undaunted courage and perseverance in this most difficult endeavor paved the way for Maryknoll’s entrance into other Asian countries, as well as Africa and Latin America. Moreover, priests like Father Lavin proved that the society’s philosophy of having their priests completely assimilate themselves into the indigenous peoples’ way of life worked, not only in getting the Chinese to accept

## The Iron Man of China

their works of charity, but in converting them to the Catholic Faith as well. Furthermore, it was in China that Maryknoll's unique spirit was forged into an effective vehicle of grace.

The importance of this legacy, so characteristic to Maryknoll, was highlighted in a brief article written by Bishop Raymond A. Lane, who would later become the superior general of Maryknoll during the years when the Chinese Communists were ascending to power. Bishop Lane cited a series of notes (December, 1948 edition of Maryknoll's *The Field Afar*) registered by Maryknoll's first superior general, Bishop James A. Walsh, just before his death in 1936. The following notes help one to understand why Maryknoll was able to produce "iron men." With regard to the importance of tradition, Bishop Walsh wrote: "The traditions of Maryknoll should be noted and guarded. Progress will call for changes, but these should not be made lightly, and if made, always from the high motive of a better apostolate. Human nature never changes." The society was only twenty-five years old when Bishop Walsh penned these prophetic admonitions.

What are the bases of these traditions mentioned by the bishop? They are rooted in the gospels. He wrote: "'Seek first the kingdom of God.' This maxim is one of our foundation stones. Our privileged task is to find Christ enthroned in our own hearts and then make [Him] known to others. Our search within, and our efforts without, will be successful in the measure of our motive. We seek Christ for our soul's life and for the souls of our fellow man. The task is not easy." No, our Lord's yoke is sweet and His burden is light, but in no sense is the soul's conformation into the life of Christ "easy" — especially for the high calling of a missionary priest. Yet, it was precisely this conformation in Christ that provided



## Epilogue

Maryknoll missionaries in China with the fortitude to confront the godless Red dragon.

Lastly, however, it was Bishop Walsh's comments on the impact of sad and traumatic events that affect the human mind and how these events influence our feelings and conduct that were particularly insightful. "Physical suffering or loss of relatives or dear friends will naturally upset the average man, apostle though he may be; but when loss of face, ingratitude, or lack of appreciation by superiors or inferiors sadden us exceedingly, we may be convinced that something is wrong within ourselves — usually pride or jealousy or self pity, sins that are extremely common, though rarely admitted." This, in essence, was the formative spiritual psychology that the Maryknoll missionary was reared in, nurtured in, and imbued with day in and day out. It was an Iron Man psychology that required that one look oneself right in the eye and come to grips with "common sins" and imperfections.

For the Maryknoll missionary, there was no excuse for sustained depression, despair, or self pity. These men had a deep faith in God and the enduring strength of character to carry and preach Jesus Christ to the most religiously destitute people in the farthest corners of the globe. Maryknoll priests beat the odds. They succeeded in accomplishing what many thought was an impossible task. Even the Communist persecution did not make them balk in the face of danger.

Despite the passage of time, these "iron men" of China have left us with a profound legacy that should not be forgotten. It is up to all of us to keep this heritage alive by handing it on to our children, our children's children, and the succeeding generations that follow until the end of time. For this is the substance of which Catholic tradition is made.



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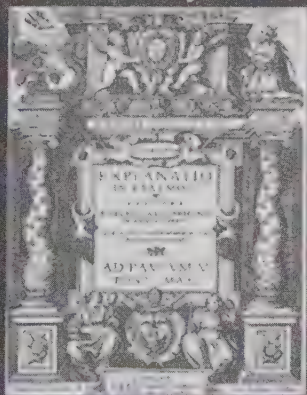
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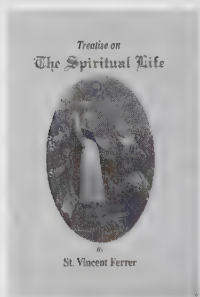


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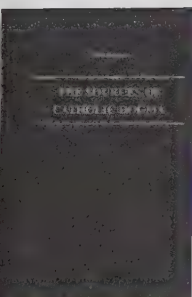


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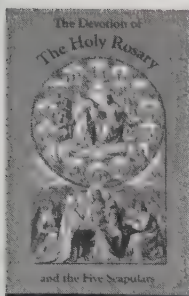
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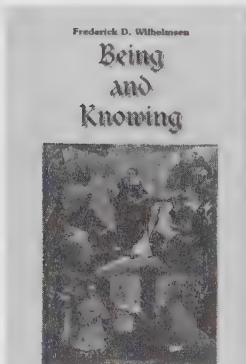


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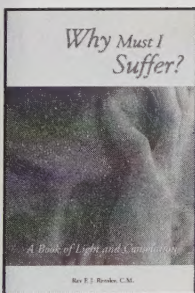
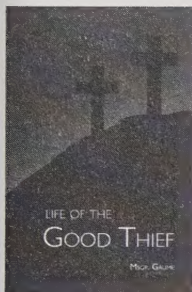
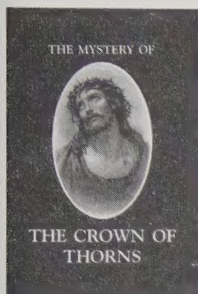
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## The Iron Man of China

Without knowing the story of the man whose life is recounted on these pages, *The Iron Man of China* may seem a curious title. This moniker, however, was not the invention of the author of this book. It was given to the Maryknoll missionary, Father Joseph Lavin, by Theodore White, an American news correspondent, in an article that he wrote for the May 19, 1952 issue of *Life* magazine, which dealt with the Communist persecution of Catholic missionaries in China.. Except for a year furlough home in the states, Father Lavin served the Chinese people for twenty years (1932-1953), traversing thousands of miles by foot or bicycle, and exposing himself to all kinds of life threatening dangers. Whether the dangers he faced were from roving bandits, river pirates, Japanese invaders, rabid xenophobic Communists, or his daily proximity to the contagiously diseased, this Maryknoller possessed all the mettle his well-deserved title implied. It was on April 1, 1953, that the Communists expelled him from the mainland threatening him with death if he should ever return.

Although others called him *Iron Man*, Father Lavin referred to himself simply as *Chinese Joe*. However, this is not just the story of one priest. It is the story of many other Maryknollers, priests and sisters, who labored in China. Their stalwart dedication, courage, and endless works of mercy earned them the love and respect of their adopted people, rich and poor alike. There are an estimated ten million Catholics, loyal to Rome, in China today. They have all paid and do now pay) a heavy price for their faith, especially the indigenous clergy.. However, without missionary priests, like Joseph Lavin, and bishops, like James E. Walsh, the true Church in China may never have been so firmly established. May the blood of her holy martyrs be the seed of a vibrant church in China and may she soon feel the lifting of the heavy yoke of her Communist oppressors.



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P. O. Box 603  
Fitzwilliam, NH 03447  
603-239-6671  
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