

St. Luigi Versiglia
and
Bishop Walsh of Maryknoll

Try to discourage the man with confidence in God, and see what happens. Calamity cannot wither nor pessimism stale his infinite variety. He will try anything once, twice or a dozen times. He works hard, smiles often and worries not at all. His strength is as the strength of ten because it is not his own. He knows in Whom he has believed, and he can do all things in Him. In the eyes of God, if not in those of men, he will be a successful missionary.
Bishop James A. Walsh, 1931.

CHIANG KAI-SHEK may have driven the Russians from China but he was impotent to extinguish the smoldering flame of communism they had ignited during their stay. From Peking in the north to Nanning in the south that flame blazed sporadically but incessantly and its fingers curled and seared the innocent. Bishop Walsh's Kongmoon vicariate was continually blistered by the Red fire. Bands of armed Communists sacked churches and tortured and terrified those who resisted them. For the violent-weary Chinese, life once again became a game of Russian roulette.

¹ Excerpt from: *Bishop Walsh of Maryknoll. A Biography.* By Raymond Kerrison. G. P. Putnam's Sons, New York.

A vignette from a biography of Bishop James A. Walsh, co-founder of the Catholic Foreign Mission Society (Maryknoll) and Bishop of Kongmoon, China. Bishop Walsh's Vicariate bordered that of Bishop Versiglia's Shiu Chow.

In the harsh winter of 1930, Bishop Walsh felt the sting of communism again. The incident, aside from revealing the viciousness of the self-styled liberators, provided a remarkable insight into the character and desires of missionary priests.

But, above all, from Bishop Walsh's narrative of what happened, it unlocked the secret of the bishop's own life and provided the key to his extraordinary heroism in later years.

On this occasion he had gone north to Canton for his annual retreat. It was February and it was cold, so cold that his hands were mosaics of chilblains. The cathedral and its environs did nothing to alleviate the bleakness. The French missionaries reared in the tradition of Sparta, scorned heat.

Dismal, it's terribly dismal, thought Bishop Walsh as he sat and shivered on the veranda. Bishop Fourquet, his friend and confidant, approached with a thick, woolly sweater. "Here, Bishop Walsh," he said offering the sweater. "Put this on. It will keep you warm."

With the missionary's shame at the suggestion of comfort, Bishop Walsh declined and went on shivering. Besides, he knew that his thin, old gray-bearded friend had nothing more than a hair shirt under his cassock.

As Bishop Fourquet took his leave, Bishop Walsh went back to reading his breviary, pausing occasionally to glance at the cheerless garden about him. The once-graceful bamboos were bedraggled and forlorn in the monotonous drizzle and icy east wind that blew through their nakedness.

"I'm thoroughly miserable," Bishop mused, "but I'm perfectly happy. Physical discomfort seems a happy normality. It is my element; I am home, I am a missionary."

His reverie was shattered when Bishop Fourquet rushed up to him. "I must go to see the governor immediately," he cried. "Bishop Versiglia is dead. Father Caravario also. The Reds captured and killed them."

Before Bishop Walsh could answer, Bishop Fourquet had disappeared around the corner.

The American went quietly into the chapel. As he knelt before the King in the tabernacle, he did not know whether to pray for, or to, that saintly bishop whom he knew so well. Memories came flooding back, tumbling in one on top of the other.

Bishop Versiglia's vicariate was adjacent to his. He had known him for ten years. He had attended his consecration. He knew him as an ardent, restless, zealous missionary, a man who never seemed to think he had done enough and one who, in the midst of all his activity, went far beyond the unflinching kindness that is the mark of the conquering apostle.

Bishop Versiglia was the first Salesian missionary in China, the first bishop of Shiu Chow. He had done the pioneering. He had set up the mission, opened the districts, started the seminary, installed the Sisters, established the schools and orphanages and then, for eight years, had presided over them until all was in smooth working order.

In the dim light of the chapel, amid the damp stones and floor, Bishop Walsh knew that the only thing left in the field of his friend's apostleship was to crown and seal it with his own blood. Does not the good shepherd give his life for his flock? God has given him the final glorious palm, thought Bishop Walsh.

His thoughts raced to the maimed bodies of his friends lying on the hillside up on the North River where their journey had ended. They had been captured a week before. Father Caravario was the youngest priest in the mission, ordained only eight months. The oldest and youngest were taken in one swoop.

They must have been very holy men to merit such a grace, thought the bishop.

He cared little about the last cruel moments of his friends. He reasoned they were cruel only in the imagination. What had come to his friends was a happy, glorious privilege, stern, it is true, but bearable—even sweet—because it had come from the hand of a loving God.

At supper that night, a big rawboned man with a black soutane and distinguished manner strode in to tell the story of the martyrs. He was Father Dalmasso, an Italian priest who himself had survived six months as a prisoner of bandits and had emerged from their hands with the assurance that if ever mission work slackened, a good, well-paying job awaited him in their ranks.

In rapid-fire Latin, Father Dalmasso² told the story. A week ago, Bishop Versiglia, Father Caravario, two Chinese students and three young women graduates from the bishop's school had set out for a distant mission post named Lin Chow. The route lay along a small tributary of the North River so they went by boat.

Their bark wound along the little stream slowly and peacefully, the tranquility of the evening broken only by the subdued recital of the Rosary. Then, with the suddenness of a light switch, a voice barked from the bank, "Halt, or we fire."

From bushes lining the bank, twenty ruffians jumped into the open and trained their rifles on the little boat: Bishop Versiglia had no choice. "Push ashore," he said to the boys. "They will only shoot us down, if we refuse."

The crew on the bank demanded five hundred dollars.

"Sorry," said the bishop, "we haven't got it. We never carry much money. We have a few dollars for the expenses of the trip. We cannot stop you taking them."

"Well," snapped the leader of the group, "we'll take the girls."

"Not in my lifetime, you won't," rasped the bishop. "These three women are schoolteachers of the Catholic Mission. Hands off!"

² Fr. Umberto Dalmasso (1889-1950). Born in Cuneo, Italy. Professed as a Salesian in 1905. A missionary in the Shiu Chow district for over 20 years, he led the group that returned the bodies of Versiglia and Caravario to Shiu Chow.

The men lunged at the women. One girl jumped into the water to try to drown herself but the Reds yanked her out by the hair of her head. The other two clung to the arms of the bishop.

One of the men picked up a thick, heavy stick and began beating the bishop's arm to release his hold on the girls. Another attacked Father Caravario. In an instant, the clash became a brawl. Finally a bandit smashed his stick over the bishop's head, knocking him senseless. The others pounced on Father Caravario and pinned him to the ground.

Some of the bandits turned to the girls and revealed their true colors.

"What are you doing joining this foreign Church?" they asked. "They came to China only to spy out our land so their government can seize it. They are our enemies. They teach you superstition. We are Red soldiers—you might as well come with us. If our army gets to Canton, all you girls will have to march naked in the streets, anyhow."

It was typical Communist talk in the China of 1930.

The goons bound the two missionaries and dragged them into a clump of bamboos, ready for the coup de grâce. At that moment, their attention was diverted by strange noises off to the east. In the time it took the Reds to investigate, Bishop Versiglia struggled into consciousness. The bishop and the priest heard each other's confession.

"In this case," quipped the bishop, "I think I'll use my episcopal authority for the last time and dispense with the rubric of giving the blessing—seeing that our hands are tied behind our backs."

It was their last joke this side of heaven.

A minute later, two shots rang out. The bullets went through the heads of the missionaries. But the rage of the killers was not yet spent. They finally smashed the priests' skulls with clubbed rifles.

They turned about to discover that the two boys with the missionaries had fled. Sure that soldiers would soon be on their trail, they themselves fled.

Father Dalmasso went on, "A group of our missionaries went to the spot right away on hearing the news. We found the broken bodies of our bishop and our youngest priest. We will bury them in Shiu Chow." Father Dalmasso paused.

"Eat your supper, Father," Bishop Walsh urged him. "You've not eaten all day. No point in dying in the bargain."

With a hearty laugh, Father Dalmasso pitched back, "I might as well eat, I suppose. Just think, the original idea was for me to go with them. At the last moment, the bishop decided I should stay at the mission. I missed my chance."

In the next few days, bishops and priests from surrounding missions converged on Canton to make the ten-hour rail trip to Shiu Chow for the funerals.

A bishop, a lifelong friend of his martyred peer, was torn between sorrow and envy. "Let us promise not all to get martyred at once," he smiled, "so we can attend each other's funerals."

Another bishop, also an intimate of the martyr, was positively annoyed.—"What's the idea of Bishop Versiglia getting himself martyred at fifty-seven?" he demanded. "They should have waited a few more years at least. According to my theory, all missionaries should be taken out and shot at sixty, since they have both earned and need the martyr's crown. But this is forcing things. As for Father Caravario—at twenty-six—it's practically stealing. It's just like the infants of the Holy Childhood."

Bishop Walsh explained the apparent frivolity. "We loved our departed ones no less, but we simply envied them too much to pity them. On the train trip to Shiu Chow, I hardly knew whether we were going to a funeral or a picnic. We were miserably cold, so we spent the ten hours shivering and joking."

Fifteen priests—Italians, French, Spanish, Portuguese, American and Chinese—made the trip. Every one of them, with their hearts and hopes in the next world, would have gladly died as their friends had. They were men of God and of logic. They did not know any reserves. In these moments, the exquisite and irresistible love of the missionary for his cause was as apparent as the sun at the equator.

In Shiu Chow, the orphaned Salesian Fathers were proud and cheerful. The townspeople, contrary to custom, stared at the arrivals more with awe than curiosity. At the mission, Bishop Walsh and his friends saw the coffins and the relics of the martyrs. They kissed the ropes with which the Reds had bound the martyrs. At the funeral next morning, the streets were lined with respectful crowds, a rarity in China. The missionaries had been well known and liked. Soldiers marched as a guard of honor.

After the martyrs had been buried, the Provincial of the Salesian Fathers made the last speech. He spoke briefly and on one point alone, but for that point he chose the pinnacle of the Christian religion, the forgiveness of injuries.

"We loved our bishop and our young priest," he said. "Our hearts are heavy at their loss. The manner of their death was cruel. Our hearts are anguished at the recollection. But we preach the religion of Him Who died on the Cross, forgiving those who put Him to death, and like Him, we have only one word to say. We forgive."

The fifteen visitors were quiet on the journey back to Canton. From the train, they studied the picturesque scenery, admiring the bamboo groves lining the winding river and the baby pines struggling up the cut over the hills beyond. It was well into March now and the weather was changing. These passengers did not shiver any more. The first hint of spring was in the air; on the lychee trees a few buds had appeared.

The winter is over and gone and flowers have appeared in our land thought Bishop Walsh. And the Shiu Chow mission will bear fruit from the seed that has been planted. We have had few martyrs—and few converts. Maybe our turn is coming now. God knows best. Let us prepare for what He disposes. In any case, a life is little enough to give in such a Cause as this. The Yoke is sweet and the Burden light.