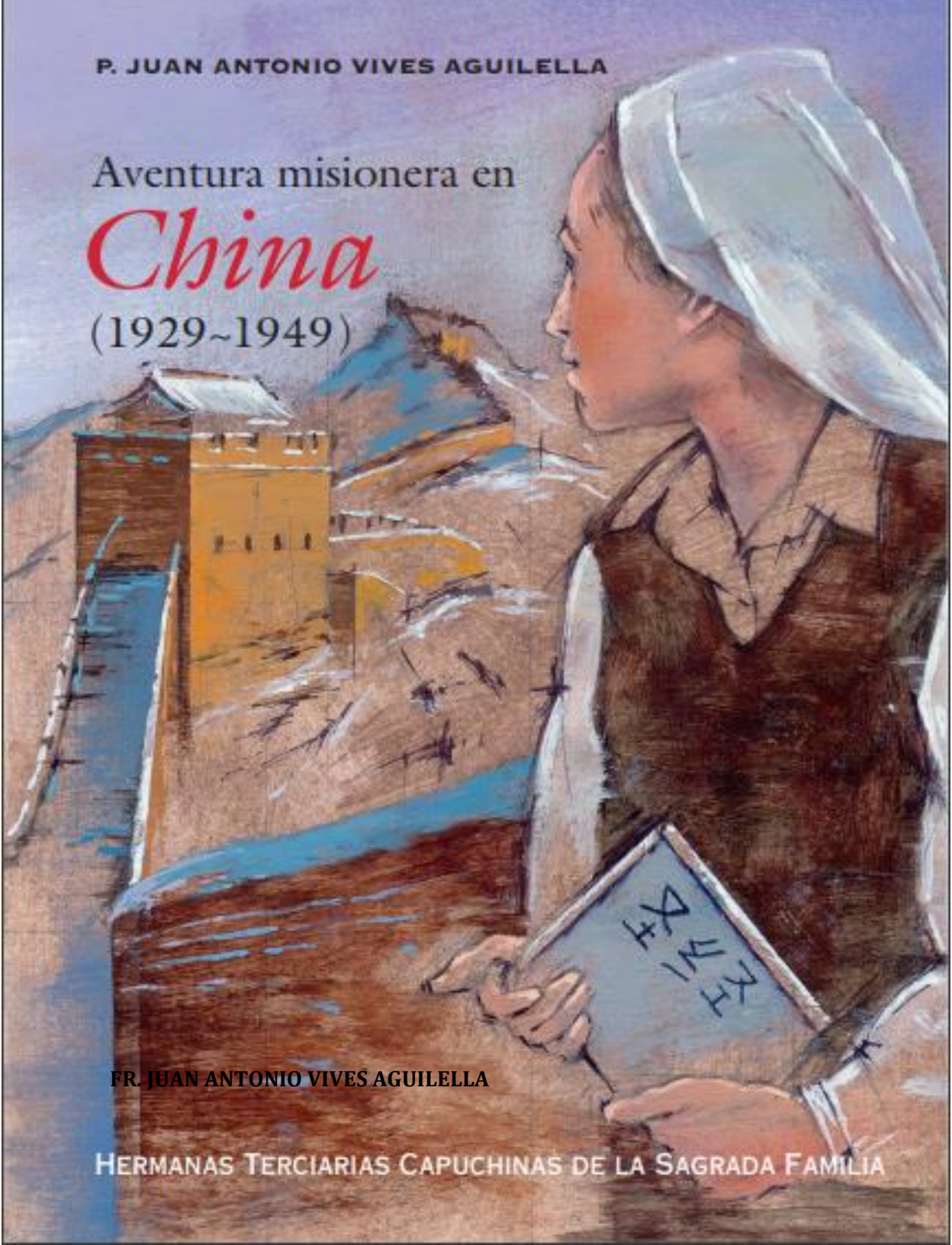


P. JUAN ANTONIO VIVES AGUILELLA

Aventura misionera en

# *China*

(1929~1949)



FR. JUAN ANTONIO VIVES AGUILELLA

HERMANAS TERCIARIAS CAPUCHINAS DE LA SAGRADA FAMILIA



Missionary Adventure in

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# *China*

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**CAPUCHIN TERTIARY SISTERS  
OF THE HOLY FAMILY  
(1929~1949)**



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Edited by: Surgam Editorial

ISBN: 978-84-946433-4-7

Printing: Martín Gràfic

C / Pintor Jover, 1

46013 VALENCIA

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## ***Foreword***

After the publication of the book ***"Missionary Adventure in China"*** which counts with already two Spanish editions, to have the Chinese translation of the same was of great concern to its author, Fr. Juan Antonio Vives. It was realized then, the urgency to have it translated into English considering its readers, being of major interest for our own sisters in the Vice province. After several attempts to do so, finally the petition of Sr. Encarnación Aranguren to Msgr. Joseph Nacua, OFM Cap for its translation to English, didn't find a second of hesitation.

It is a joy for me to have the English translation of the book ***"Missionary Adventure in China"***, a book that aside from being worthy to be read, is also the source of formation and encouragement of the missionary vocations in the Vice province of Saint Clare. This demarcation, born from the mission, is precisely the daughter of the missionary dream of China and brings in itself the missionary genes that have made possible its expansion in six countries in Asia.

It is clear that the efforts and objective of having this book in English are for the sisters of the Vice province for we all know that it is impossible to love what we do not know. It is necessary to maintain the historical memory! The missionary spirit of our Congregation has been inscribed here in its most genuine way, consequently none of the Sisters of the Congregation and much more of the Vice province can ignore this book.

Our sincerest and heartfelt gratitude to Msgr. Nacua for his generosity in translating, to Sr. Ma. Elena S. Echavarren who carried out the first correction, and to a number of sisters in the Vice province who completed the final correction and editing of the book.

Further, it is noteworthy to mention that some minute corrections from the original have been introduced and they have been recognized with an asterisk.



With the desire that the missionary commitment may be strengthened by the testimony of our sisters we leave this book and the evangelical treasure contained in each of its pages, in the hands of each TC sister of the Vice province. With the certainty that our heroines and missionary sisters of China continue interceding for this portion of our beloved Congregation. Let us also not forget the words of our Venerable Father Luis Amigó: *"do not fear perishing on the steep cliffs and precipices you will have to place yourselves on to save the lost sheep, nor be intimidated by the thorny thickets and ambushes in which the enemy will try to envelop you, because you can be sure that if you manage to save a soul, you are determining the destiny of your own."*(OCLA 1831)

Sr. Angela Ma. Martínez S.  
Vice provincial Superior  
June 17, 2021

## ***Presentation***

God is amazing and makes the history of the Congregation as the theological place of His manifestation in the events that take place in the day to day happenings.

The Congregation of the Capuchin Tertiary Sisters of the Holy Family, founded in 1885 by a Capuchin Friar Luis Amigó y Ferrer, from that beginning began to write a fruitful history of faith, sacrifices, of effort, of martyrdom, the cross and hope. Each deed is compiled in the historical annals in order to preserve the “congregational history”, the charismatic heritage that identify us as Capuchin Tertiary Sisters in the Church and continues to hand it down to new generations in forms that are oral, written and testimonial.

Accepting the invitation of Pope Francis during the Year of Consecrated Life, to “*Look to the past with gratitude, live the present with passion, and embrace the future with hope,*” this new historical writing is a tribute of thanksgiving to our Father Founder for his coherent faith and to his capacity for missionary risk-taking and for the missionary vocation of our Sisters sent to China.

This is also a tribute of thanksgiving to whom, without even visiting mission lands, maintained the dream of entering China, a land of mystery and unfamiliarity, of a thousands of years culture that is fascinating, where the early sun burns like the heart that burns when coming in contact with the Gospel. A homage to the Sisters of the first expedition (1929): Guadalupe of Meliana, Maria Pilar of Altura, Catalina of Sesma, Pacifica of Anna, Leontina of Pamplona, and Amelia of Oroz-Betelu – three from Valencia and three from Navarra. Also to the Sisters of the second expedition who joined them (1932): Agustina of Sesma, Milagro of Ororbía, Liberata of Azcona, Marina of Iturmendi, and Imelda of Yelz – all from Navarra, women who lived the present with passion, valiant, risk-takers, disposed to traverse the dusty and bloody roads of the mission of Pingliang, from where they also opened other presences in order to bring a

balm of compassion, of mercy and hope and leave to the Sisters of the Congregation, footprints of their missionary spirit that will forever impel all to give a response to the needs of the men and women in frontier lines, precisely there where “life calls.”

We want to remind ourselves, through these pages, of the sacrificial adventure, in the day to day, of this group of Sisters and discover in them the face of God in our Congregational history; we also want to listen to the invitation directed to us to turn our gaze on China and allow ourselves to be captivated by the urgency of proclaiming the Gospel and inculturate ourselves in this land of the East where they left their youth and some even their ashes; they are today vocational calls to the young Chinese who have begun to live according to the pattern of Jesus Christ within our Congregation.

The History of the Congregation in China is aimed at motivating us to prepare ourselves for the road back to this country, to make us enthusiastic, from within, to return one day, with the help of the Capuchin friars, to that which was ours. The Congregation has been nurturing with wisdom and prudence, during these many years of the recent past, the projected return, through our presence in the Philippines followed by South Korea, obligatory steps towards fulfilling the missionary dream of our Father Founder.

In this book, our Brother Juan Antonio Vives Aguilera, also a Capuchin Tertiary Religious of Our Lady of Sorrows, gathers a series of facts regarding the life and missionary adventure of our Sisters in China; reading them, we want to revive in ourselves that close presence that today has come true in the group of Chinese Sisters which the Lord has gifted the Congregation with; they are the carriers of the message that many times Sister Modesta Noain (Amelia of Oroz-Betelu) used to say in the hearing of Sisters who passed by her side: “Return to China.”

With the Chinese Sisters, in a day God disposes, we want to take up once more this journey to that unfamiliar country, of immense population, who

awaits that the “Seeds of the Word” would flourish once more, that the Incarnate Mystery become Word in each one of us who will make it known to others, precisely where they do not know Him.

This new history touches the heart of every Sister; and it is this: behind the Great Wall of China, the fascinating face of a vigorously energetic nation is hidden which our brother Juan Antonio Vives Aguilera has revealed and has given shape in these pages as the movements of this group of young, intrepid, and audacious Capuchin Tertiary Sisters, who on the altar of their sacrificial obedience, sowed the Gospel for all time.

To the Sisters of the General Vice province of “Saint Clare”- Asia, our recognition for the initiative of proposing to our Brother Juan Antonio Vives Aguilera to write the history of the Congregation in China. To him our gratitude because, once more, he leaves imprinted in these pages the Amigonian charism, his fraternity and belongingness to the Congregation, and with his dedication and diligence has made the history of our missionary sisters, written on keys of the Gospel and our charism, be in our hands. I present this with the assurance that reading this will surely make our hearts vibrate and thrill us before the experiential witness of our Sisters.

Sr. Ana Tulia Lopez Bedoya  
GENERAL SUPERIOR  
*Rome, February 28, 2017*

## ***PROLOGUE***

I still remember, with renewed affection each time, the first time I saw her and how her mere presence and appearance impacted me.

It was in the month of April 1989. I arrived at the sanctuary of Our Lady of Montiel in Benaguacil to take part in the XVII General Chapter of my Amigonian Congregation. Sr. Modesta, or if you prefer, Amelia of Oroz-Betelu, as she was known for many years among the Capuchin Tertiary Sisters - was there as member of the community from the year 1984.

With her cheerful countenance, an attitude that shown through at the same time simplicity and fraternity, and that naughty look that characterized her and which highlighted the vivacity of her spirit, she welcomed us at the entrance door and accompanied us while we arranged our things in what will be our home during the time that the Chapter assembly lasted.

The days I stayed there numbered twelve all in all and there was not a day that I did not linger to exchange some words with her. And during our conversations, *China* invariably surfaced. It could not be otherwise. *China* had really captivated her in her youth. *China* shaped her along during those nineteen long years she lived there. And since the time she returned to Spain, *China* was with her day and night through her memories of the experiences lived there and also through the scarcely contained eagerness and desires to return to what was her first apostolic love. Her words, always evocative of the life among her “young Chinese boys and girls” never failed to transmit a strong and deep emotional charge of affection and tenderness, which contaminated her listeners with enthusiasm.

Of course, I myself was also fascinated by her expression of sentiments, sprinkled with longings and anecdotes that revealed with spontaneity the missionary spirit that continued to nourish them –as it did continue to nourish her until the end- and, on saying goodbye to her after the Chapter, I clearly noticed that, despite our age difference, there was born between

us a friendship nuanced, all the while, by ingrained Chinese characteristics.

Subsequently, in my trips to Valencia from Rome, I always sought and found an occasion to visit her either in Montiel or in Massamagrell. I visited her then as a very dear person to me, and in turn she reciprocated with much affection. And it was during these times that we could share sentiments, sometimes sprinkled with anecdotes which allowed to peer deeply, especially through her look that was not exempt from a “naughtiness” up to a point that she had really identified with the Chinese culture and ways. Much later, when in 1995 I returned to Spain, I went up to Montiel several times, where she was again residing.

It was a delight to listen to her stories of happenings, her pilgrimages, her comings and goings in those faraway lands of Asia. It was endearing to feel the depth of her sentiments, fruit undoubtedly of a profoundly human spirituality and a humanity profoundly spiritual, which she developed in herself rooted in both joys and sadness, of dreams and disappointments, of hopes and fears that she experienced during those first twenty years of her religious life which she never tired of retelling, with wit and healthy mischievousness proper to her, thus transmitting to her listeners a contagious hope for missionary action.

I still could visit her -weakened in body but not in spirit in the Old Sisters Home in Massamagrell, and in the midst of her aches and pains, her conversation revolved on her thankfulness for her faith that she professed to God who sustained her at every moment in the journey, and ended up inevitably –as usual- on China, her beloved China, from which she had to depart but never abandoned because it remained vibrant and present in her heart.

Finally, when in October 14, 1998, I was invited to preside at her funeral, close to the tomb of our beloved Father Founder, I expressed, among other things, this sentiment and belief that she had transmitted to me in more than one occasion and which was ever deepening in her life: “China” –she

used to say- “was for me a **kairos**, a strong experience of God in my life, making me surrender without measure in being a sister to all, but in particular to whoever was in greater need.”

And in the moving rite of internment –in which I was also present- I promised her and to myself that I would do all that was in my capacity so that the missionary adventure, lived by her and by the other ten Sisters who went to China as witnesses of the faith in the Resurrected Lord, will not be relegated to oblivion.

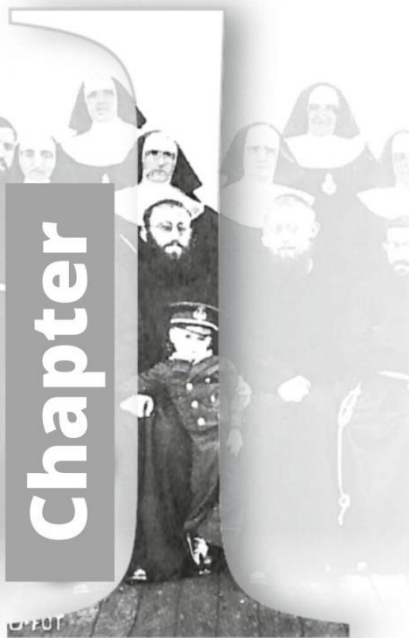
Some part of my promise was already fulfilled when I wrote and published the book entitled *50 Years of History: Province of the Holy Family. Capuchin Tertiary Sisters*. I dedicated three ample sections in that book: - *China, the fascinating; China: the great isolated; and Only China says, until next time!* All that was to recover something of the missionary story of the sojourn of the Congregation in this great and dazzling country.

My spirit, however, was not totally satisfied with only those. I dreamed of a book –without great pretensions, of course, if you wish- but exclusively dedicated to bring together and transmit to the present and future generations something of what that great adventure was. And the opportunity presented itself on December 13, 2016. That day, Sr. Martha Patricia Ramírez, Superior of the Vice province of Asia, found herself in the premises of the Professional Schools Luis Amigó, where I was residing since 1998, explaining and acquainting the students on the theme about the missions and presenting to them in a concrete way the project called Theresia Karunalaya Center Children’s Home to be built in Trichy (Tamilnadu, India), and in one of the break time came up to my office to greet me and inquire about my health. And there, while enjoying a cup of coffee, broached the plan which the Vice province had to return to China and establish the Congregation there once more. Immediately –in a manner completely spontaneous- the promise I made one day to Sr. Modesta and offered myself to writing a small book –more for public consumption and promotion of vocations- wherein may be gathered together the essential elements of the sojourn of the Congregation in that

country lasting twenty years. At that, Sr. Martha Patricia welcomed my offer with joy, and, at that same moment, set my hands to the work in order to bring to successful and happy reality this small book that you now have in your hands.



# *Preparing for the Adventure*



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Although the missionary adventure of the Capuchin Tertiary Sisters in China officially began in 1929 and its immediate preparation began in 1927 –as we shall see-, not everything began during those years, but harked back in time long ago, if we want to find the first roots of the evangelizing feat.

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## *Many years before<sup>1</sup>*

The history of the Catholic mission in China carried out by the followers of St. Francis of Assisi is as old as the Franciscan Order itself.

The Franciscan John of Montecorvino (1247-1328) was the first bishop of Khambalic –formerly Peking, but now Beijing- but forty years after his death, Christianity was prohibited in the country with the arrival of the *Ming* dynasty that replaced the Mongol *Yuan*.

Two hundred years passed and -in 1579- a Franciscan expedition, composed of Spanish religious friars, had the intention of once more bringing the Gospel to China, but their attempt failed because of the obstruction by Portuguese colonialism.

Subsequently, they had to wait until 1633 when the Franciscans were afforded the opportunity to evangelize the lands of China. From these years, the Franciscan missionaries in the Empire of the Great Wall began a long history of successes and persecutions that would be prolonged until precisely our time.

Forty years before the erection of the Diocese of Peking -in1690- and a new bishop was nominated in the person of Bernardino Della Chiesa, OFM, the missionaries –with the intervention of the Jesuit Stephen Lefevre whom the Franciscans immediately followed- finally entered the regions of Kansu. Nevertheless, at the time of 1650, it was not easy for them to develop the Catholic faith, because they encountered many and diverse kinds of hostilities.

In 1848–almost two hundred years after the first missionary incursions made in Kansu–the *Apostolic Vicariate of Kuko-noor-Kansu-Turquestan-Tungu* was erected. This was the first ecclesiastical organization in the integrated part of Kansu.

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<sup>1</sup> The data presented here are excerpted principally from: Gulina, Rafael de, *Kansu, the poorest mission in China* and from Beizama, Manuel de, *History of Missions in China* in [iglesiasanantonio.capuchinospamplona.org/wp](http://iglesiasanantonio.capuchinospamplona.org/wp)

When the Apostolic Vicariate of Kuko-noor was suppressed, Kansu passed to be part and integrated into the *Apostolic Vicariate of Shenxi*. In Kansu, at that time, there was only a small mission station, hidden in the eastern mountains, which accommodated Christians who emigrated from Shenxi, because Christians from Kansu were few in number at that time, just around a thousand.

Finally, on June 21, 1878, Pope Leo XIII, desiring to give a new thrust in the evangelization of this region, erected the *Apostolic Vicariate of Kansu*, detaching it from that of Shenxi, and which he entrusted to the Sons of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, also known as the Congregation of Scheut.

### ***The Vicariate of Kansu is divided<sup>2</sup>***

In 1905, Monsignor Hubert Otto –who succeeded the first Apostolic Vicar of Kansu, Mons. Fernando Hammer- divided the territory of his jurisdiction into two Prefectures: the one in *Northern Kansu* with its capital in Lanchow and the other one of *Southern Kansu* with its capital in Tsinchow.

Despite this, the Vicariate did not take off and by 1920 the Christians themselves –together with those of the two Prefectures- did not go beyond the thousand five hundred. One of the reasons for this scarce number of baptized was that many missionaries lived in the cities and were not assiduous in visiting the villages and mountains, rendering themselves truly unknown to the people in the outskirts.

Already by 1922, the Prefecture of the North was elevated to an Apostolic Vicariate. And in this same year of 1922, the *North Vicariate* was changed to *West Vicariate* while the *South Vicariate* came to be known as the *East Vicariate*. Moreover, this last, would be entrusted to the German

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<sup>2</sup> Also in this section, the data are drawn, as the preceding, from the works of *Frs. Rafael de Gulina* and *Manuel de Beizama*.

Capuchins and *Fr. Salvator Peter Walleser* was nominated its Apostolic Vicar.

During the *I Council of the Catholic Church in China* –held in Shanghai from May 16 to June 12, 1924- it was decided that all the Vicariates take on the name of the place where the respective Vicars held residence. So, *West Kansu* passed on to be called *Vicariate of Lanchow* while that of the *East*, as the *Vicariate of Tsinchow*.

### ***Finally, Pingliang, Apostolic Prefecture<sup>3</sup>***

With the organizing talent of the Capuchins, the impetus given to the *Vicariate of Tsinchow*, so that, in only three years of its creation in 1922, the necessity to divide it was evident. For such an end, Mons. Walleser established communication –through the mediation of Fr. Vicente Larrasoaña, who came from the missions of the Carolines-Palaos- with Fr. Joaquin of Beriain, Provincial of the Capuchin Province of Navarra-Cantabria-Aragon.

In July, 1926, the Provincial of Navarra officially announced a new missionary sending to China from his jurisdiction and was asking for volunteers. For the moment, Frs. Andres of Lizarza and Gregorio of Aldaba, who were once professors at Lecároz, were chosen. Departing from Spain on August of the same year of 1926, they arrived in Kansu on December 20 and were officially presented in Pingliang on April of the following year 1927. In that same year of 1927- 15<sup>th</sup> of August- a send-off of other four Capuchin missionary friars were held in Pamplona among them Fr. Rafael of Gulina, an old acquaintance of the Sisters to whose Novitiate in Massamagrell he channeled more than thirty vocations. To this second expedition would be immediately joined by Frs. Fernando of Dima and Simon of Bilbao, coming from the Custody of Chile-Argentina.

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<sup>3</sup> In this section, the data are extracted from the same works by *Rafael de Gulina* and *Manuel de Beizama*.

Two years after the second expedition, the third expedition composed of four Capuchin friars departed from Spain in November 10, 1929. In this expedition the first six Capuchin Tertiary Sisters for China also journeyed. When this expedition left Spain, Fr. Gregorio of Aldaba have already been nominated –the same year 1929- as *Vicar Forane* for the region of Pingliang. It was the first step towards the creation of an *Apostolic Prefecture*. Months after this nomination –and in view with the arrival of the third expedition made up of twelve priests and six religious Sisters, Mons. Wallesser believed that the moment arrived to separate the region of Pingliang from the territory of the Vicariate of Tsinchow, raising the region into a new Apostolic Prefecture. He proposed this idea to the Holy See, so that –through the Decree of January 25, 1930, while the Sisters were already in Shanghai for a month- the *Apostolic Prefecture of Pingliang* was created.

The new Prefecture comprised at its beginnings the district of *King-yang-tao*, that counted sixteen mandarinates and had a territorial extension of 54,000 sq. kilometers with 2,000,000 inhabitants, of whom only 1,669 were Catholics.

Integrated into the seventh *Ecclesiastical Region of China* –called Region of Kansu- were also included there the Apostolic Vicariates of Tsinchow, Lanchow, Sining, and the Independent Mission of Sinchang (Chinese Turkestan), the Prefecture of Pingliang was not distinguished precisely for its economic possibilities. The Apostolic Visitor Mons. Guebriant had already sent a written report to the Holy See stating that “of all the Missions in China, the *Mission of East Kansu*,<sup>4</sup> was the poorest,” it also can be very well added that within East Kansu itself, the poorest part was integrated in the new Prefecture of Pingliang.

The majority of the population was engaged in agriculture, and its *yellow soil*,<sup>5</sup> extraordinarily fertile, could yield two harvests of cereals a year, if

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<sup>4</sup> Cfr. Gulina, Rafael de, *Kansu, the poorest mission in China*, p. 5.

<sup>5</sup> The lands of Kansu are enormous deposits –or *loess*- of fine yellow clayey sand, transported to the Gobi Desert by the wind from Siberia. This earth that gives a tint to the waters of the river,

accompanied by the weather. But, unfortunately it was not always so, because there were summers- which was supposed to be the season of rain- in which water was not present and so caused the loss of the harvest and caused great scarcities- which still made some extreme temperatures that could reach 25 degrees below zero in winter and 50 degrees in summer extremely unbearable - and which, moreover, favored the proliferation of gangs of robbers and raids against the population by wild animals –leopards, panthers, bears, wild pigs, wolves, etc.- that inhabited the nearby forests.

At the time of its creation, the Prefecture of Pingliang was organized in these seven districts: *Sanshelipu*, *Kinyang*, *Kingchow*, *Chengyen*, *Tsuschent*, *Yituchen*, and *Sifengchen*, where the various Mission Stations of *Sanshelipu*, *Kingchow*, *Chengyen*, *Tsuschent*, *Yituchen* and *Sifengchen* were located. In time and while the Capuchin Tertiary Sisters remained, other Mission Stations were opened: *Kingyang*, *Piagtsuan*, *Tsingning*, and *Paishui*.

### ***To China, if God wills it***

On October 17, 1854, a child was born in the town of Massamagrell in Valencia, whose parents were Gaspar Amigó Chulvi and Genoveva Ferrer Doset, baptized with the name *José María*.

At nineteen years of age, he left home and country, went to the Capuchin Convent of Bayonne (France) where he was invested with the habit on April 12, 1874, with a change of name to *Fray Luis of Massamagrell*.

After his return to Spain in 1877, he initially resided at the Capuchin convent of Antequera (Malaga) and subsequently Montehano in Santander. In this last convent, he was ordained priest on March 29, 1879, and transferred after two years to the convent of St. Mary Magdalene,

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called Yellow River, had its decisive importance in its day for the life and the civilization of Northern China so that even the emperors liked to be called “Lords of the yellow earth.” (Cfr. Gulina, Rafael de, *op. cit.*, pp. 9-10.)

located in his town of birth Massamagrell. While here, he was in-charge to accompany spiritually the members –both men and women- of the Franciscan Third Order Secular of the area, and from this apostolate the two religious Congregations he founded: *Capuchin Tertiary Sisters of the Holy Family*, on May 11, 1885, and the *Capuchin Tertiary Religious of Our Lady of Sorrows* in April 12, 1889.<sup>6</sup>

As ends of the Sisters' apostolate: attention to the sick, teaching of girls and young people, and the education of girls welcomed in orphanages, although he also insisted that they “ought to give regard with utmost docility” to go to the Missions where they were asked.

Led precisely by this missionary spirit, present in his spiritual identity from the beginning, the Sisters went in 1905 to the missions of Colombian Guajira, and in 1928 to the Venezuelan Caroní.

When the foundation became a reality in Venezuela, however, they were already negotiating with the Capuchin Friars of Navarra, with their sights on China.

It began a little after those religious of Navarra committed themselves, in 1926, to take charge of the Mission established in the areas of Pingliang. And the instigator of the idea was Fr. Rafael of Gulina, who as soon as the group established themselves in that area of China, at the beginnings of 1928, while answering a letter sent to him by the General Superior of the Sisters, told her, perhaps with “a tendency to let out the rabbit”:

- *Last night I dreamed that the Capuchin Tertiary Sisters are going to come to work with us in China.*

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<sup>6</sup> Following these foundations, and after having fulfilled distinguished offices in his Capuchin Order –among them, being Provincial of the Province of Valencia- Fr. Luis of Massamagrell was nominated bishop on April 18, 1907, and thus came to be called until the end of his days: *Luis Amigó y Ferrer*. He administered the Diocese of Solsona at first, after that –from 1913- that of Segorbe. Nearing his eightieth year of age, he died in Godella (Valencia) on October 1, 1934. His remains lie from then on in the Mother House of the Capuchin Tertiary Sisters in Massamagrell. On June 13, 1992, he was declared *Venerable* in the presence of Pope St. John Paul II.

To which Sr. Genoveva –familiar with the Missions and who was not easily intimidated before the challenges and difficulties- answered him with wit:

- *If this is from God, wherever He would bring us, even to China!*<sup>7</sup>

The entire idea “ought to have been of God” for a short time after, the General Superior and the Provincial of the Capuchin friars of Navarra began to take steps –in January of 1929- to make possible the journey of the Sisters to Pingliang, and on July 13, of that same year of 1929, a document with the title *Bases para que las Hermanas Terciarias Capuchinas puedan cooperar con los Capuchinos en el Kansu Oriental* (Bases so that the Capuchin Tertiary Sisters can collaborate with the Capuchin friars in East Kansu) was signed. Among the established bases –leaving aside others that are economic in nature- the document also stipulates:

- *For the moment a minimum of five and a maximum of seven Sisters will be sent. The Superiors commit themselves to send and keep in that Mission religious suitable for the works that are properly missionary: put up orphanages and instruct those taken in and serve in hospitals, but not to build any College for teaching and for education of young girls.*<sup>8</sup>

### ***An odyssey of almost six months***

On May 1, 1929, they made first profession in Massamagrell, Srs. Amelia of Oroz-Betelu and Leontina of Pamplona, aged 24 and 25 respectively; and only five months later –on October 18- they departed -on their way to Pamplona- in the company of Sr. Catalina of Sesma who professed two years before and who was 26 years of age- to bid goodbye to their

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<sup>7</sup> Cfr. Vives, Juan Antonio, *50 years of History. Province of the Holy Family*, p. 97.

<sup>8</sup> Cfr. A copy of these *Bases* is kept in the *Provincial Archives Nazareth*, Madrid, 5.1.0.1.



families, since they were chosen- among those who offered themselves voluntarily- to become part in the first expedition of the Capuchin Tertiary Sisters going to China.

The first stop of their farewell-taking was *Sesma* –the birth town of Sr. Catalina- where, the parish as well as the entire town populace gave them in the church –replete until the rafters- a very touching homage in which some boys and girls dressed in typical Chinese costumes took part, reciting various poetries alluding to the Missions, while the parish priest preached with enthusiasm, and they were invited to kiss a crucifix which the youth kissed emotionally while asking:

- *How is it possible that these Sisters leave a wholly young life in order to dedicate themselves –and perhaps forever- to those distant lands and moreover in a time of hunger?”*<sup>9</sup>

On October 21, they left Sesma and, passing by Pamplona, they arrived in Oroz-Betelu, where Sr. Amelia, or if you like, Modesta as she was later known, was born. Here too the send-off was solemn and it was held in the church and in the schools of the town. Through the years, Sr. Modesta will express in her Diary the emotions that she felt during that time with these words:

- *“The send-off was grand in both church and schools, with songs, poetry, etc. It was, for me, a tremendous outpouring because my little blood-sisters, who were nine years younger than me, were the declaimers of poetry. I thought I could not hold back the feelings since it was a year and a half since I bade goodbye to them for the first time as I was entering the Novitiate. What strength did the Lord give me! Thanks for having deeply Christian parents who understood my vocation. If*

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<sup>9</sup> Cfr. Noain, Modesta, *Diary on the journey to China*, p. 1. This Diary is found in the *General Archives of the Capuchin Tertiary Sisters*, Rome, 5.4.0.2. The text is not page-numbered; the page numbers appearing in this work I myself put, numbering them from the beginning until the end, totaling 50 pages.

*the goodbye before going to the Novitiate was emotionally deep, that of going to the Missions even deeper.*

- *Twenty years passed in the missions without seeing them –she would also add in her Diary- without visiting our country, nor we were visited either. Neither were we visited by our Superiors. Thanks to the fact that we were souls of strong faith, because we did undergo so much, but God gives the strength for every occasion.*”<sup>10</sup>

From Oroz-Betelu, they proceeded –on the 25<sup>th</sup>- to Pamplona, the capital city where Sr. Leontina first saw the light of day. On the 27<sup>th</sup>, a send-off was celebrated for the four Capuchin friar-priests and three of the Sisters from Navarra who were going to the Mission. The church was bursting at the seams:

- *“It was out of the ordinary –Sr. Modesta would recall in her Diary-. What memories came to mind of the many visits we did to this same House of the Capuchin Fathers (during the period of vocational discernment) and of how well we were always treated. We remember especially Fr. Gumersindo, who was responsible of bringing almost a hundred Sisters to the Congregation.*”<sup>11</sup>

Here in Pamplona, another very moving and endearing scene in the home of Sr. Leontina, because when she bade goodbye to her mother who was sick, the mother told her:

- *“Do not suffer any regret for me. I am very pleased and content of having a missionary daughter.*”<sup>12</sup>

On October 28<sup>th</sup>, they left Pamplona and on the 29<sup>th</sup> they arrived at the Sisters’ House in Massamagrell. In November 3, the official send-off for

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<sup>10</sup> Cfr. Noain, Modesta, *op. cit.*, p. 1.

<sup>11</sup> Cfr. Noain, Modesta, *ibid.*, p. 1.

<sup>12</sup> Cfr. Iriarte, Lázaro, *History of the Congregation of the Capuchin Tertiary Sisters*, p. 176.

the six missionary Sisters –three from Navarra and three from Valencia– took place here at which the Father Founder was present and some hundred Sisters among whom were from the community of Massamagrell, from other convents, and some forty Novices. Fr. Gumersindo of Estella, as delegate of the Provincial of the Capuchin friars of Navarra, did the preaching and imposed the crucifix on the missionary Sisters.

The most emotional event, nevertheless, was the moment when they knelt before their beloved Father Founder to ask for his blessing:

- *“He –Sr. Modesta remembers- began to weep with tears and moans. He could not pronounce a word. We could not understand what he was trying to tell us. He seemed to have an intuition of everything that we had to suffer during the voyage and during the twenty years that we remained alone, almost without preparation.”*<sup>13</sup>

On November 6, they left Massamagrell in the direction of Barcelona in the company of Fr. Gumersindo. In the Catalanian capital they lodged with the Josephine Sisters. During their stay there, they visited the *Mission Exposition* which was being celebrated that year in that city, the *Pueblo Español*, the *Cathedral* making a pause at the tomb of St. Eulalia, and then went to the convent of the Capuchin friars to greet them.

Four days later –the 10<sup>th</sup>– they boarded the steamship *Saarbrucken* at the port of Barcelona. They were already at that time accompanied by a special blessing from Pope Pius XI and a telegram of King Alfonso XIII, wishing them happy success in the mission.

After a whole day’s voyage, they reached Genoa, staying at the Hotel Noderse. They stayed for three days –the 12, 13, and 14– in this Italian city and finally, at 12:30 hrs. of the 15<sup>th</sup>, the steamship left port towards Asia. The send-off at this port –where added to them and to the Capuchin friars, other missionaries who boarded– was truly very emotional. The Salve was

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<sup>13</sup> Cfr. Noain, Modesta, *op. cit.*, p. 1.

sung, and, as remembered by Sr. Modesta, “*they could not hold back the tears on account of the feelings.*”<sup>14</sup>

When they were ready to weigh anchor and set sail, Fray Gerardo of Erro, dedicated these verses from Spain:

*Those six Capuchin Tertiary Sisters,  
Who were sisters by the habit and by zeal,  
Dressed up to follow us with the same longing ...  
They are, they are the heroines!  
In appearance, simple sparrows,  
But true eagles in flight;  
I saw them exchange the cloister, sweetness of heaven,  
for this wasteland of thistles and thorns.  
Indeed, I saw them: the stormy seas,  
Fluctuating zones and weather conditions,  
The bitter cold of a thousand anguished wounds  
from sharp lances,  
The perfidies of immoral persons,  
Everything they conquered. Heroines!  
Superior to all and to themselves!*<sup>15</sup>

The concrete itinerary of the journey is minutely described by Sr. Modesta in her Diary<sup>16</sup> and between one annotation and another annotation of what might be a true *ship's logbook*, expresses her sentiments such as these:

- *In Port Said, the treatment of women impacted us deeply. We saw a man binding the women with a three-meter long rope so tightly that they could not breathe. Here they loaded coal for the ship's boilers and the porters were treated with lashes from a whip.*<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Cfr. Noain, Modesta, *op. cit.*, p. 2.

<sup>15</sup> Cfr. *Verdad y Caridad*, 1930, p. 383.

<sup>16</sup> The daily itinerary can be followed in the maps of the second journey up to Shanghai, which can be found in the Album of Photographs of this book.

<sup>17</sup> Cfr. Noain, Modesta, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

- *Passing through the Suez Canal, we could espy Palestine on one side and Egypt on the other. We also passed by the place where it is believed that the Israelites crossed the Red Sea.*<sup>18</sup>
- *The 29<sup>th</sup> was a day of rude awakening, of thinking that very close was the day of making confession, and because this was very strange, since we had to do it without a confessional box. Everybody was looking at us with curiosity, because, as the Superior*
- *wanted, it be done so, all of us in a single line with no one missing. The majority of the passengers were Protestants. The difficulties of some Sisters were great. I did not find any difficulty, for if I had any difficulty, I spoke looking at the sea.*<sup>19</sup>
- *On December 8, we celebrated the Solemn Feast of the Immaculate Conception in the steamship. After lunch, a half-glass of Benedictino (a liquor) and shortbread sugar cookies (the last ones left from what we brought from Spain.)*<sup>20</sup>
- *In Singapore –where we arrived at 7 hrs. of December 11- we disembarked to visit the city. Men pulling carts caught our attention. We wanted to buy shoes but were more expensive than in Spain. In the end, we ended up buying six dozens of handkerchiefs. The attire of men and women and local costumes also caught our attention. At evening, small boats with men, looked like as God created them (without clothing), approached the ship bringing diverse articles and offering them to the passengers to buy.*<sup>21</sup>
- *At daybreak, on the 16<sup>th</sup>, we could catch sight of the Philippines and at 12 noon we docked at the port of Manila. Three Capuchin priests were waiting for us and some Sisters of Charity brought us to their house in Sedoban. Here we could take baths and change our clothes. The Sisters laundered all our clothes.*

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<sup>18</sup> Cfr. Noain, Modesta, *op. cit.*, pp. 3-4.

<sup>19</sup> Cfr. Noain, Modesta, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

<sup>20</sup> Cfr. Noain, Modesta, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

<sup>21</sup> Cfr. Noain, Modesta, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

*In the chapel of these sisters –Sr. Modesta continues remembering her feelings- I felt such happiness that I do not know how to express it! What a feeling to be near the Tabernacle! What an emotion to be close to the Hidden God! It was almost a month since we last saw a Tabernacle and it seemed a year already to us. Here we spent quite a long time, giving thanks to God for so many benefits and asking Him to follow closely our route.*

*We were able to meet the girls of the school –around eight hundred - and then went to greet the Capuchins. We also visited the School of St. Elizabeth where we met a religious, a friend of Leontina. Afterwards, we went to another school called La Concordia.*

*At sleeping time, the beds called our attention, which consisted only of bed-springs and a thin mat. I –emphasized Sr. Modesta- spent almost the whole night waiting for a mattress.*

*On the 17<sup>th</sup> we assisted Mass at the church of the Capuchins and the friars invited us for breakfast, entertaining us with funny anecdotes and the “misdeeds” during their days in the Novitiate. For some of us, just recently finished our Novitiate, it was an example of sincerity and simplicity. Here, with the Capuchins, we took pictures around the statue of the Virgin of Lourdes. We visited also the Hospital where there were many religious sisters from Navarra and following this, we also visited the parents of Sr. Bienvenida,<sup>22</sup> who were wonderful hosts.<sup>23</sup>*

- *At 16hrs of that same day of the 17th, we left Manila and the 18<sup>th</sup> was a day of seasickness for everyone. It was then that I*

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<sup>22</sup> Sr. Bienvenida from Libmanan—was named thus by the Filipino people where she was born- saw the light on September 27, 1890; was invested with the habit on January 11, 1912, and made profession on January 11, 1914, and pronounced her perpetual vows on January 11, 1920. She was the first vocation of the Congregation from Asia (Philippines), arriving in Massamagrell sent by the Capuchin friars in Manila. When the civil war in Spain began, she was repatriated, and died in Manila on December 26, 1941, a victim of the Japanese bombardment. Her baptismal name was Agustina Goyena Flores.

<sup>23</sup> Cfr. Noain, Modesta, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

*noticed –Sr. Modesta narrates once more in the first person- that one of the friars was undergoing something. He seemed to have an idea fixed in his mind. He was always alone in one of the corners of the prow. I decided one day to ask him, and he answered me that he felt nostalgia when thinking of his mother ... The Lord arranged something to draw him out of his self-absorption. One day, the sea turned rough and the waves reached into the prow and one wave drenched him leaving him drip like soup and this made him seek the company of the others. I unleashed various loud laughs seeing him come near the group.<sup>24</sup>*

- *On December 19, we arrived in Hong Kong and, the following day, various German Dominican Fathers came near the steamship and, after breakfast, brought us to the Convent of some foreign nuns who had 500 students. In this convent we greeted a religious sister who was a former companion of Sr. Bienvenida. After visiting the Cathedral, we returned to the ship and at 12:30 hrs of the 21st, we sailed to Formosa.<sup>25</sup>*
- *After refueling in Formosa (Taiwan) on the 23<sup>rd</sup> until 17 hrs. we arrived in Shanghai at 8 hrs of December 25, 1929, Christmas Day. What emotion did we feel on seeing the port, with the thought that soon we would be stepping on Chinese soil!*

*In Shanghai, we were lodged, at the start, in the Novitiate of the Daughters of Charity, where we were accompanied by the priests of the Society of the Divine Word who were waiting for us at the wharf.*

*As our stay here would be prolonged, because it was a year of hunger, robbers and highway men were waiting in ambush in the roads, we transferred to the convent of the Franciscan Missionaries of Mary –also known as Missionaries of Pamplona or White Sisters- where we felt more at home. They prepared us for the Mission, by sharing their many experiences with us. They taught us how to run a dispensary and to visit the*

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<sup>24</sup> Cfr. Noain, Modesta, *op. cit.*, pp. 7-8.

<sup>25</sup> Cfr. Noain, Modesta, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

*sick in their homes. These teachings were very useful to us since no nurse journeyed with us because those who were supposed to come drew back.*

*The Lord allowed many things to happen to show us that He is the Giver of strength. And He saved us from hundreds of difficulties!*

*Here in Shanghai we performed our first baptisms.<sup>26</sup>*

- *On March 21, 1930, we left Shanghai by ship to Tientsin, where we arrived on the 23<sup>rd</sup>, staying with the Daughters of Charity.<sup>27</sup> Two days later—the 25<sup>th</sup>— we reached Peking (now Beijing) and we were welcomed cordially by the Daughters of Charity once again into their convent. How much do we have to learn!<sup>28</sup>*
- *In Tayanfu —where we arrived from Peking passing thru Suara—we were lodged once again in the convent of the Franciscan Missionaries of Mary. How I enjoyed! In my decision to join the religious life, the martyrs among these Sisters in Tayanfu<sup>29</sup> had much to do. I had desires to join the religious life, but, at the same time, did not want to, despite the push that the Lord was giving me. But one day a picture of the seven martyrs fell into my hands. What a hope entered to me to be, if the Lord so wanted, a martyr like them! Because I felt the missionary vocation in me for a longtime... When we entered the house in Tayanfu where they lived, my heart burned, because the Lord granted even the desire. The emotion grew much more when they brought me to the place where they were imprisoned. It was a very small room, with the same grills that I saw in the picture, with a “kan” made of earth like what the Chinese had, and on the other side, another small room where they imprisoned the bishop. From here we proceeded to the place of martyrdom, a little distant from the city and from the jail where they were detained. They told us that the martyrs were made to*

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<sup>26</sup> Cfr. Noain, Modesta, *op. cit.*, pp. 9-10.

<sup>27</sup> The trip from Shanghai to Pingliang may be followed also in the maps included in the Album of Photographs.

<sup>28</sup> Cfr. Noain, Modesta, *op. cit.*, pp. 10-11.

<sup>29</sup> Martyred in 1900, they were canonized by Pope St. John Paul II on October 1, 2000.



walk on foot one after the other ... What envy did everything gave me! at the same time I was thinking: “And what do I know about what kind of martyrdom will I give more glory to the Lord, since this is a great grace that I do not deserve”. From there we went to the cemetery where they buried them. Close by was also the tomb of Blessed Asunta Pallota, who died of typhoid, and whom even the pagans themselves had great devotion. They also commented that in the early days, they did not know where the martyrs were buried, but God heard their prayer and over the tomb grew a flower –rose or sweet-smelling lily (azucena)- and so digging there, they found their remains.<sup>30</sup>

- After a sojourn of four days in Tayanfu, we continued –on April 2- the journey to Pingliang, lodging, at nightfall in an inn. Here we had plenty of difficulties preparing food since the stoves used kerosene and the wind did not allow the stoves to stay lit. In the end, we were able to prepare soup and eggs with tomatoes and we also ate some canned sardines, the few ones left of the supply we brought from Spain. Afterwards, the six of us together lay down on a kan, a kind of bed, made of clay and straw with a hole on one side where they loaded dried cow dung and set aflame to heat it in winter. At dawn, we breakfasted with coffee that tasted like “dish washing water.” And with that kind of breakfast we continued our journey.<sup>31</sup>
- April 3-5, we made a stop-over in Yunchen, finding lodging with the Dutch Sisters. And on the 5<sup>th</sup>, we left early, and by 12 noon found ourselves to cross a river. A river that we crossed on the backs of the Chinese who were accompanying us.<sup>32</sup>
- In one of the final stages of the journey, we came to an inn and we were so tired that we could scarcely climb the small wooden stairs. We had eyes totally caked with yellow dust that we looked Chinese already, because tears were falling and making furrows but if we clean them, it gets worse. What hilarity

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<sup>30</sup> Cfr. Noain, Modesta, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

<sup>31</sup> Cfr. Noain, Modesta, *op. cit.*, p. 12.

<sup>32</sup> Cfr. Noain, Modesta, *ibid.*, p. 12.

*entered us on seeing Fr. Tarsicio, who asked for a glass of water or tea at every stop with which to rub his eyes, making it worse every time! By looking at ourselves, we felt both pity and laughter at the same time. Moreover, we have had nothing eaten during the whole day, until at around 18hrs we prepared a combined lunch-dinner. And what a dinner, we consumed the last crumbs of our Navarra!*<sup>33</sup>

Finally, the first expedition of Sisters –but third for the Capuchin friars– arrived Pingliang on April 19, 1930. It was Holy Saturday and the thermometer registered 20 degrees below zero. From the time we left Barcelona, five months and nine days have passed.

The reception, organized by Fr. Andres of Lizarza, with some young Chinese girls and children of the Holy Infancy, was spectacular.

Sr. Modesta will remember in time both the arrival and the reception that was offered to them:

- *As we were arriving Pingliang, we were telling ourselves: “Our misadventures and travel difficulties are ended.”*

*We felt an indescribable emotion. We do not know how to give enough thanks to God who saved us from so many dangers*

...

*The blessed Fr. Andres of Lizarza welcomed us with much joy and immediately brought us to our small one-storey house of adobe and straw, because local houses were like that or caves in the ground.*

*The emotion was so deep on arriving and seeing the affection on how we were received... An old catechist –who looked like the prophetess Anna– and 15 little girls had prepared a song to the tune of the Ave Maria of Lourdes, but in Chinese. To remain with a serious face was rather hard for a*

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<sup>33</sup> Cfr. Noain, Modesta, *ibid.*, p. 12.

*time, because everything seemed strange to us and made us laugh.*<sup>34</sup>

Ten days after the arrival of the Sisters –on the same month of April- Fr. Gregorio of Aldaba was nominated *Apostolic Prefect of Pingliang*, and on May 2, he officially took possession of his responsibility as the first Prefect of the nascent Prefecture.

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<sup>34</sup> Cfr. Noain, Modesta, *op. cit.*, p.13.

# Years of Intense Dreams (1929-1935)



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The Sisters arrived at their destination with deep emotions and –what is most important- full of apostolic zeal to give themselves to those people, to whom they had freely consecrated their lives.

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The city of Pingliang –the seat of the Apostolic Prefecture - in which they were about to establish their first missionary settlement was situated at more than 200 kilometers from Lanchow, the capital of the region. It stands on the road from Zungaria to Peking and is at 1,386 meters above sea level.<sup>35</sup>

Twelve kilometers from the populated area, Kongton Mountain, a place sacred to Taoism, Buddhism and Confucianism, is found.

At the time the Sisters made their appearance there, the city counted some 50,000 inhabitants and the whole city was walled and had its own militia for defense especially against robbers. Precisely because of that, the city gates were closed at night.

The houses were old and poor in general and some even looked like stables for animals than living spaces for humans. There also were families who dwelt in caves.

There was no electric lighting and they had to use lamps of oil or kerosene for lights.

The means of communication were, generally, carts, pack animals, some sporadic automobile, and some few bicycles, imported mostly by the missionaries themselves.

The inhabitants<sup>36</sup> –like the rest of people of Kansu- were by nature good, peaceful and above all extraordinarily calm. They were content with their house or cave, they had their farms stupendously well-maintained, they owned some animals and were preoccupied with domestic issues of their very extensive clans. Out of their small domestic world, there was hardly anything that worried them. They were hospitable and very meticulous in

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<sup>35</sup> Its location, according to the coordinates of parallels and meridians is: 35° 34' 38" north latitude and 106° 40' 39" longitude

<sup>36</sup> The following description of the town and its principal characteristics is basically taken from Gulina, Rafael de, *op. cit.*, pp. 12-15.

their courtesy. They cultivated social relationships with the same care and affection as they do their orchards. Public calamities –quite frequently droughts, and consequent famines and repeated raids by robbers- slowly strengthened their character to endure with stoic patience those misfortunes and fight, always without haste, to overcome them. *Respect for the aged* was also their characteristic –to the point that an aged person could present himself in public, with the confidence that everybody will show respect and greet him while on his way- and their *reverence for the dead*. In this last matter, they spared no expense to make the funeral according to the wishes of the dead expressed while still alive.<sup>37</sup> In the religious aspect, the original inhabitants of the place followed a syncretic spirituality of elements from Taoism, Buddhism, and Confucianism mixed together with a background of primitive cults to the spirits, the mastery of nature and of superstition. They believed in the existence of a supreme being (*Lo-tien-ye*), in the immortality of the soul and in the necessity of supernatural aid in daily struggle. In all towns the silhouette of the *pagoda*<sup>38</sup>, center of cult with the permanent service of the bonzes, towered over the lowly houses was always prominent. Moreover, by the roadsides, fields, and crossroads small temples or little pagodas dedicated to some protector spirit were raised. There also was a sizable community of Muslims, migrants from Turkestan, but who lived in the outskirts, since the time they were vanquished during the Mohammedan revolution of 1865 to 1876. The Protestants settled likewise in the city with much luxury, had set up a magnificent temple and schools, but when the famine of 1929 hit, they suffered various raids from robbers, who even assassinated their Pastor, and this caused an almost disappearance from the place, leaving behind only a small group of Protestants.

In all of this environmental situation that Pingliang presented on the eve on the start of the missionary adventure in this locality by the Sisters,

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<sup>37</sup> The local people, for example, do not forgive a son who, upon the death of his father, does not do the utmost sacrifice within the limits of his means and, if he did not do so, they consider him a degenerate. There were families, for that reason, who willingly spent their entire fortune on the funeral honors of a beloved dead (in the Album of Photographs of this book, an example of the Chinese Catholic funeral can be seen).

<sup>38</sup> The pagoda of Pingliang is shown in the Album of Photographs.

another element must have to be added which contributed to the fact that the situation was precisely much less, idyllic. The year 1929 –as we referred repeatedly already to it- was a year of atrocious hunger accompanied by other calamities which the Capuchin friars themselves who were there described thus:

- *It was a fateful year for the North and Northeast China and especially Kansu, Fr. Gulina would write.*

*The absolute lack of rain during the year caused the loss of almost the entire harvest.*

*Hunger multiplied banditry that fed on the population.*<sup>39</sup>

- *Hunger –the Prefect himself noted- was terribly fearsome, which I never imagined, if I had not seen it myself. There were many people who died of hunger every day in the cities. It was my lot to see many people die of hunger, in the middle of the streets or in the outskirts. Rabid dogs due to hunger, so much so as they say, that they bit people who were sleeping. What is known for certain is that hungry wolves were coming down from the mountains to the populated areas and devoured some children.*<sup>40</sup>
- *In Lung-nan –recounted by Fr. Gulina too - a terrible exanthematic typhoid epidemic which caused great havoc, even among the German Capuchins in the southern part of the Vicariate of Tsinchow, causing the death of three priests, one brother, two religious sisters, and the wife of the doctor of that mission.*<sup>41</sup>
- *It seemed that the civil war was over with the victory of the government of Nankin...*

*Above all, the poor people who lived in the fields were playthings of the robbers as never before. The robbers entered the houses with impunity and sacked them barbarously. In vain did the home-owners take precautions by hiding their valuables and money under the ground. They bound the owner of the house hands*

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<sup>39</sup> Cfr Gulina, Rafael de, *op. cit.*, p. 28.

<sup>40</sup> Testimony by Fr. Gregorio of Aldaba, in Gulina, Rafael de, *ibid.*, p. 28.

<sup>41</sup> Cfr. Gulina, Rafael de, *ibid.*, p. 28.

*and feet, then took a red-hot branding iron and applied it to different parts of the body.*

*But the most harm was actually inflicted by soldiers (robbers turned soldiers).*

*The small militias formed in Kansu were not less than five.*<sup>42</sup>

### ***Pingliang, the first love***

The Sisters' beginnings in the Mission of Pingliang were very hard on account of the extreme poverty that was there and the difficult conditions of life that they found there. But they overcame all with nobility of spirit and even with Franciscan joy, thanks to the robustness of their faith and the constancy of their prayer life that engendered in them such an apostolic zeal that –as the Father Founder indicated in the Constitutions– made them available at all times to attend to “with the utmost solicitude and alertness to the bodily and spiritual needs of their neighbor, transfusing them with divine love which animated them.”<sup>43</sup>

The environmental conditions of the house assigned to them as their initial dwelling and the vicissitudes that accompanied their first days in the Mission, are described by Sr. Modesta in her Diary this way:

- *We had a common dormitory and it seemed strange to us that the separation between beds were prepared to have curtains. Where did they procure so much cloth with the poverty they had?*

*There were only two towels and another one which they left us for everyone to dry oneself, since our luggage did not yet arrive.*

*On the first day, when dinner time came around, and since we did not have anything, they brought us to have dinner with the friars (something they did with much hesitancy because the Chinese did not look on this kindly).*

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<sup>42</sup> Cfr. Lorca, Berardo de, *Letter*, in *Verdad y Caridad*, 1931, pp. 118-120.

<sup>43</sup> Cfr. OCLA, 2292 and 2293.



*One day, on coming back from dinner, we were accosted by 5 or 6 soldiers or robbers and this gave us a good scare. From that time on, the friars brought something to our house and we prepared meals at home.*

*We had only one kitchen that looked like the stables in our hometowns: one big cauldron for heating water, with a great big wooden bellows which the Chinese operated by sitting on it with much calm ... four coarse clay pots (and what pots!).*

*For lighting, we used a small candle made with a kind of oil that exuded a repugnant smell. In those twenty years that I was there, I did not see light at night.*

*The roof of the dormitory was paper with some reeds, from where rats fell on our beds or into the basin which we used to launder clothes.*

*On the first sunrise during our stay there, a catechist together with some girls presented herself at the door, each one of them bearing their own washbasin –certainly quite dirty-containing hot water. We thanked them very much, but how much did it cost to accustom ourselves during those first days!*

*Finally, they did bring us –I do not know from where they got them- basins for each of us. It was a success and a relief, because I was thinking: ‘if I had to go out for my necessities, where could I go?’*

*They were not used to having bathrooms there and, in the beginning, we did not have one either. So, one day, we purported to make one for ourselves. All of us worked together: some made bricks with clay, others brought straws and adobe, while others yet drew water from a 50-metter deep well. Everything seemed too little in order to have our own bathroom.*

*During these first months, they conducted Chinese lessons for us. What was bad was that we had no time after class to continue the learning owing to the amount of work we had.*

*Within a short time, the Superior suffered an attack of rheumatism that almost did not allow her to walk ... We distributed the different assignments and the task of caring of the clothes fell*

*on me... To others, care of the chapel and the sewing... The heaviest fell on the one in-charge of the kitchen, who was good cook but in addition to not having the conveniences, was very slow, and so very rare was the day when she prepared the meals on time. I, sizing up the situation, spoke to the Superior -who was nervous because of it- "Look, Sister, the sister cook suffers a lot and cannot cope up. Why not put me in the kitchen and we will see what I can manage. Be aware that there is no abundance of things, nor pots and for many days no water because the man who takes charge of fetching water is not there and the sister herself has to fetch it from the well with a pail using a 50-meter length of rope." (How important it is for superiors to be familiar with these kinds of task and also to understand the sisters in-charge!) The Superior then asked me: "But do you know how to cook?" I answered: "I will try and we will see what results." And so, she put me in-charge. How much help did the Lord and the most Holy Virgin gave me! but thanks to them, not a day did it happen for the meal to be late and so the conflicts ended... On Sundays the other Sisters came so that I may teach them and a little later the friars fell sick and could not prepare their meals and so we brought them there to be cared for until they recovered and could go back to their respective Mission Stations.*

*Regarding matters of the spirit, we had no complaints, since we were well attended to and the hope, I had in the Novitiate about the Tabernacle will never be lacking when we were in the Mission, was satisfied. And we had it from the beginning. In contrast, the German Sisters were lacking of that for many years before they were given. The monthly Recollection we did with a priest, while each one continued to do her assignment and we came together at a certain hour. It was that way for twenty years. The Mass was never missed. In days when the priests were out in the field, making their rounds among Christian families, if there was need of baptism "in articulo mortis" (near death) we*

*performed them. And if someone died, we led the prayers with the Christian community and buried the dead.*<sup>44</sup>

### ***Adaptation and daily difficulties***

As Sr. Marina would one day write “at least two years are necessary to acclimatize oneself to the Chinese culture that is so different from that of Spain.”<sup>45</sup>

Despite everything, the Sisters of the first expedition –perhaps because of the reigning necessity- made it relatively quickly.

The language, although they were given lessons, they basically learned “more by talking with people than by studying it in classroom.”<sup>46</sup> And they also quickly adapted some of the customs of the place in terms of dress: “we wore the habit, but long trousers under the habit like Chinese women”. Doing that allowed us moreover, to mount our rides with confidence.”<sup>47</sup> “Gradually, the people came to know us and so accorded us much affection.”<sup>48</sup>

This process of adaptation –constant and always in need of improvement- was coupled –as is natural for the day by day future - with *difficulties* and, given the political–and social situation that was unstable in China at the time- with also the *scares* which in some occasions, were grave:

- *We had to launder our clothes with almost no soap, but we learned to make tallow. We laundered the priests’ clothes, of the various chapels, in addition to those of the girls which in a short time did not look the same, but so pretty and fine that they began to come to us.*

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<sup>44</sup> Cfr. Noain, Modesta, *op. cit.*, pp. 13-14 and 18.

<sup>45</sup> Cfr. Galarza, Eugenia, *Narration of China*, p. 8. The original report is found in the *General Archives Capuchin Tertiary Sisters*, Rome, 5.4.0.2

<sup>46</sup> Cfr. Noain, Modesta, *op. cit.*, p.15.

<sup>47</sup> Cfr. Noain, Modesta, *ibid.*, p. 15.

<sup>48</sup> Cfr. Noain, Modesta, *ibid.*, p. 15.

*We made starch by putting wheat in a jar of water until the husk was removed. We then changed the water as many times and then putting it to dry in those kinds of wind and that yellow dust. What a struggle!*

*The irons used rock coals. The irons were of pig iron and were black like charred pieces. How much did we strive hard to clean them! And with these we ironed our veils also, so annoying for use in the Mission.*

*We every week did anew the Hosts, because while there, they can't be maintained for a long time.*

*We also sewed the priests' clothes (who dressed like the Chinese) and we even succeeded in making their overcoats.*

*During these years, we endured much poverty because very often we did not know with what to prepare meals for so many people. Furthermore, I lacked experience since with just 1 kg of meat and bones I had to make steaks for everybody. We can say that, we spent almost all that time with salted pork (bacon) and eggs. I believe I got a tapeworm at that time. I had it with me for 34 years.<sup>49</sup> Another daily difficulty was –in the beginning- the too rigid character of the Superior. Arising from the experience she had in this sense, Sr. Modesta would later write:*

- *Superiors should be very careful and know whom to send. In order to go to the missionary front, the first thing that is necessary is much simplicity, or in other words to be very Franciscan. It is necessary to have much prudence and to be deeply human ...*

*While still in Barcelona, I, who had just professed a few months earlier, noted something in her that made me doubt her missionary spirit... And if we are not watchful, she would, little by little, send everybody back... She wanted to command even the friars, if they allowed her to... One day a Sister fell asleep in the bathroom; another fell asleep over the sewing machine. And the Prefect himself noticed the situation and so had to tell her to, please, allow the sisters more time to rest. There were times, during the winter, when we could not sleep well the whole night*

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<sup>49</sup> Cfr. Noain, Modesta, *op. cit.*, pp. 15 and 17.

*because the cold was 28 or 30 degrees below zero while we were stuck in a sack of straw. Insufficient food was not helpful either. And on top of all that, the Superior wanted everything done at the ringing of the bell and to the letter. Blessed be God for everything! Thanks to the fact that we were people of faith, so we could endure until when, little by little, things improved.*<sup>50</sup>

Neither was our excessive economic dependence of the Capuchin friars being too helpful:

- *They were the ones who gave the orders, since the contractual bases that were agreed upon by our Superiors were too long. Five years would have been enough so that we could have been free to work in many other circumstances, because the friars were strangers to the many miseries and other needs that we, being women, could see and then could have attended to.*<sup>51</sup>

And aside from those daily difficulties, we endured scary situations which were not few since our arrival:

- *When we arrived Kansu, the region was completely abandoned by the Government...*

*We suffered a lot from robbers who said they were a private army of this or that general... we underwent tremendous scary events... On one occasion they pointed a revolver at my chest at 2 or 3am at dawn ...*

*On the occasion of the Chinese New Year of 1932, we and the Sisters who came in the second expedition were about to go to rest. The new arrivals were very relaxed but we, the older ones, were not. In fact, I already told Sr. Pacifica -who was so pacific in everything-: "Look, we are not going to lie down because this seems to be ominous" (galloping hordes of horses were heard*

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<sup>50</sup> Cfr. Noain, Modesta, *op. cit.*, pp.10 and 18-19.

<sup>51</sup> Cfr. Noain, Modesta, *op. cit.*, p. 14.

since the early hours of the evening), but she answered me: “I am well relaxed and I am going to sleep.”

Suddenly the robbers came -3 young men and with guns in hand. One of them entered to the cell of Pacifica who came out wearing her night habit and a very frightened face. One of the young men had grabbed her chin and was trying to pull out her teeth crowned with gold but did not succeed and so desisted.

Three or four of them surrounded the Superior and a young robber was trying to remove her ring with his teeth. I told them: “You will have to wait until they bring some soap.” And so, I was able to pull it out.

Then I went into the room where Liberata and Agustina slept and while two young men watched, they, very relaxed, washed their faces, combed their hair and then passed through amidst their guards and came to our side. The truth is that they did not notice what was happening, since we had warned them before going to rest: “If ever you hear anything that is because of the Chinese New Year.”

One of the Sisters –whom they thought was Chinese for being so snubbed-nosed- and one of the children did not appear. When everything was ended, they emerged from the pigpen where they were hiding. The Sister was wearing the habit while carrying the other habit, in reserve, in her arm (that goes to show the appreciation we had for the habit).

Finally, the robbers took the little that we had and went off. I accompanied them to the gate and, while crossing the courtyard, the alarm clock we used to wake us up, rang in the pocket of one of them. When I returned to the Sisters, I almost fainted from the shock that I endured and I was filled with bumps, (as big as kidney beans). Two of the children who were victimized by the frightening event suffered, died a few days later.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Cfr. Noain, Modesta, *op. cit.*, pp. 14-15 and 17-18.

## *The Mission progresses*

Having overcome in great part the hard epoch of the famine and scarcity that we suffered between 1929 and the Fall of 1930 - during which time any other work could scarcely be done, except that of gaining the sympathy among the people through works of charity- the *catechism*, the *catechumenate*, the *Holy Infancy*, and *schools*, were organized in the Mission including a campaign of dissemination in the fields (outskirts).

At the same time, the Prefect laid the foundations of the future *Seminary*. “In Yutuchen, a selected group of young Christian boys were doing –between the disruptions of the raids and plunder of bands of robbers- the difficult learning of the priestly ministry in the Missions.”<sup>53</sup>

The *catechism* was put under the responsibility of the catechists and of the priest in-charge.

The catechumenate, however, certainly gave the Sisters more than enough work, but also full of satisfaction in return:

- *Our work with the catechumens* –Sr. Modesta recalls- *consisted in preparing meals for them, attending to them in the infirmary, listening to their problems, and helping them to overcome the vice of opium.*

*All the work, nevertheless, seemed little to us, especially when the day of Easter came around forty or more of them, holding hands, entered the church to be baptized.*

*Seeing an 80-year-old man, women, and children with 7 years or less, was truly touching.*<sup>54</sup>

Another project that could be put in operation in the Mission, after the season of scarcity, was the *Project of the Holy Infancy*, aimed at welcoming and educating children, especially girls, who were abandoned by their families:

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<sup>53</sup> Cfr. Gulina, Rafael de, *op. cit.*, pp. 32-33.

<sup>54</sup> Cfr. Noain, Modesta, *op. cit.*, pp. 35-36.

- *An old Christian one day confessed to me: “Here in Kansu, the horrible custom of ‘exposing young infants’ did not exist, but now, without doubt because of the calamities that have been afflicting Kansu in these last twenty years, cases of abandoning children has become rampant.”*

*As soon as possible, the Mission established the Holy Infancy and put the Capuchin Tertiary Sisters in-charge. And since its creation, several hundreds of abandoned boys and girls were put into the care of fosters-mothers. Some of those children who were cared for and instructed became excellent catechists, others formed Christian families, and some who longed for the return of peace so that they could go to Spain and enter the religious life in order to become missionaries like the good Sisters, were not lacking.<sup>55</sup>*

Beside the buildings of the Holy Infancy, an Asylum was also built for the aged (men and women) who “passed the time entertaining themselves with whispering peacefully to one another or praying the rosary, and who, at the proximity of the sunset of life, found the **Light** and were waiting in peace the Lord’s call.”<sup>56</sup>

In 1933, it was also possible to open *Schools* –under the care of Chinese teachers and where Sr. Liberata lectured on classes of sewing work- but above all that of the longed for desire to open a *Catholic Hospital of Pingliang*,<sup>57</sup> called *St. Michael*, attended to by a Chinese doctor -Doctor Mei, who received his medical formation at the *Aurora University* of the Jesuits in Shanghai- and where the Sisters, lent their services as nurses and dispensers –as pharmacists do- of medications according to prescriptions.

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<sup>55</sup> Cfr. Gulina, Rafael de, *op. cit.*, pp. 54-55. Farther down Cfr. also: *The dream that could not be realized*, p. 123-126.

<sup>56</sup> Cfr. Gulina, Rafael de, *op. cit.*, p. 55.

<sup>57</sup> Previous to the opening of this hospital, a *Dispensary* was already functioning in the Mission, attended to by the Sisters and a Capuchin brother, and treated a total of 6,060 sick people in 1931 and was serving around 40,000 patients just before the opening of the Central Hospital. (Cfr. Gulina, Rafael de, *op. cit.*, pp. 34-35.)



One of the missionary friars gave this news report to his confreres in Spain:

- *For a year now, we have a doctor in the Mission. The Capuchin Tertiary Sisters serve as nurses, as practitioners, and in-charge of the medicine cabinet.*

*At the beginning of last week, the first important operation was carried out: it was on a woman who was suffering from hydropey.*

*Do not think, however, that delicate operations can be done here since it lacks what are most essential.*

*Our hospital is within a narrow place, separated by a thin partition of paper and reeds. One section is where surgeries are done. The other serves as lodging for the nurse religious.*

*In the section dedicated for operations, there is but one very poor table that serves for everything except for a clinic; close by is a bed with a pallet of straw. And he ended by saying: Lighting, disinfectants, and other elements so indispensable for a surgical operation, shine by their absence.*

*The doctor who is a very good and clever Chinese, lacks everything. But the utmost poverty of our Mission, perhaps the poorest in China, does not allow us much more luxuries.<sup>58</sup>*

Another project begun in 1933 –and which indicated also the progress of the Mission- was the construction of a more comfortable dwelling for the Sisters, consisting of two-storey house in the shape of a Pagoda.

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<sup>58</sup> Cfr. *Verdad y Caridad*, 1934, pp. 381-382. Also Gulina, Rafael de, *op., cit.*, p. 58. This hospital, in the face of the economic crisis caused by the internal fighting in China and the lack of help from Spain, caused likewise by the civil war “closed its doors in 1936; Dr. Mei had to go and what he wanted to be a resplendent *Catholic Hospital* was demoted to its former status of being just a *humble dispensary*” (Gulina, Rafael de, *ibid.*, p. 58).

## ***Reinforcements arrive***

Since the difficult conditions of life in China between 1929 and the end of 1930 principally caused by hunger provoked by the loss of harvests have already been in great part overcome, in 1931 the Superiors of the Capuchin friars and of the Sisters prepared a new missionary expedition to Kansu. It was the fourth expedition for the Capuchins where three Fathers and three Brothers were sent; while it was the second for the Sisters composed of five Sisters, namely: *Liberata of Azcona*, *Agustina of Sesma*, *Imelda of Yelz*, *Milagro of Ororbia*, and *Marina of Iturmendi*.

In the parish church of Amurrio which was full of people –with the attendance of the Sisters of the Convents of the town of Amurrio and of Respaldiza, including some other Sisters who sought refuge in this last Convent since the burning of convents in Valencia in 1931- the send-off for the new missionaries took place.

The mass –celebrated at 10:30- was presided by Fr. Gumersindo of Estella. In the afternoon –at 15:30- a ceremony that comprised the recitation of the Rosary and then the preaching of Fr. Gumersindo, and in addition, the five Sisters went up one by one to the sanctuary and, after *making the promise to serve the Mission for which they have been destined*, received from the hands of the priest the missionary crucifix. At the end of this ceremony –at 18hrs in the parish hall- a program of a *Literary-Musical Evening* in honor of the missionaries, where, among sentimental songs and some skits pertaining to the missions, different poetries were declaimed.<sup>59</sup>

A few days later, there took place in San Sebastian –in the church of the Good Shepherd- the official sending of the whole group of missionary men and women –a total of eleven: six friars and five Sisters- who were ready to embark for China. The church was bursting at the seams and the Father Provincial of Navarra gave to each of those being sent their

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<sup>59</sup> Cfr. *Verdad y Caridad*, 1931, n. 92, pp. 380-381.

respective obedience and giving them the Crucifix, which identified them as missionaries.<sup>60</sup>

On the 11th of November 1931, they boarded the steamship *Coblenz* in Barcelona –the ship belonging to the Bremen Company which also owned the *Saarbrücken* with which the first expedition of Sisters sailed. On bidding goodbye to this seaport, they sang a *Salve* with full voice so that the outcome was unforgettable and very moving for everybody.

The maritime itinerary –as related by Fray Conrado of Salinas-<sup>61</sup> was identical as that of the first group of Sisters.

Sr. Eugenia of Galarza –Marina of Iturmendi in religion- synthesized her experiences during that long itinerary, thus:

- *In a journey of 48 days, there was time for everything, especially for getting seasick, because the ship lost its bearing in the high seas. In one of these occasions of seasickness, one of the brothers had his dentures fall into the sea as well as whatever was left in his stomach.*

*Fr. Rafael of Gulina was waiting for us in Manila on the 24<sup>th</sup> of December. From here we docked in Shanghai on the 28<sup>th</sup> and stayed there until the day of the Three Kings. The trip from Shanghai to the Mission we did by train on some days and in other days by truck, seated on our baggage. Everything was a wonder of Holy Poverty! One entire day, we went by a van carrying goods, non-stop.*

*We arrived at a residence of some Italian priests, disposed to devour whatever they served us. They served us pieces of round bread and scrambled eggs. We broke the bread and to one of us a regular-sized louse emerged ... she removed it peacefully and then ate the bread with gusto.*

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<sup>60</sup> Cfr. *Verdad y Caridad*, 1931, n. 92, pp. 368-369.

<sup>61</sup> Cfr. Salinas, Conrado de, *Letters* of 3-12-31, of 3-1-32, of 12-2-32 and of 29-2-32, in *Provincial Archives of the Capuchins, Pamplona*.

*Some days later, we lodged again in this house of the Italian priests, but this time it was the Central House. We rested here for two days. On the third day we arrived at our Mission*<sup>62</sup>

Fray Alfonso of San Martin -a companion in the expedition - completed Sr. Eugenia's narrative:

- *After forty-eight days of journeying, we spent another fifteen of errant life, going by train, from mission to mission, loaded with suitcases, valises and blankets for the trip, looking like vagabonds and, certainly, not of the best kind.*

*We slept for two nights on benches of the train; another two on the dining tables of a very poor Italian Station where everything was lacking, except the charity of the missionaries who slept on the floor, while hiding it from us.*

*We also had to sleep for a couple of nights in those famous "kans" and in one of these, Fr. Pedro of Tolosa took advantage to roast half of the meat he was carrying. One day we happened to be lodged in a Chinese "gaming house" ... which made me think of the portal of the cave in Bethlehem, envying St. Joseph who enjoyed the heater he must have found between the mule and the ox. The next day, we rented a car which was eaten by rust long ago... Twenty-five times the driver got down to blow on the engine; while we had to alight four or five times in order to prevent some precipice of the many that escorted us on the way and blow away the flickering flame of our lives. There was a time when the steering wheel failed and the car ended up in the embankment ...*

*We arrived in one Mission Station of Italians where we met a missionary from Beasain -27 years in the missions- and a Catalanian who was already in China for 20 years.*

*After pleasant days spent together passed, we continued the last stage of our journey in a rickety truck... We had not gone 20 kilometers of the last remaining 500, when the axis of one of the*

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<sup>62</sup> Cfr. Galarza, Eugenia, *Narration of China*, pp. 1-4.

*wheels broke while passing a bridge... Arriving 24 hours late at the end of our journey, we considered ourselves very fortunate.*

*Well muffled in our overcoats, hats of skins well settled upon our heads, and our goggles to protect us from the dust laced very well, we entered Pingliang.*<sup>63</sup>

Arrival in Pingliang took place on February 27, 1932, and the reception for the new *missionary men and women* was impressive: bear hugs, shout outs, tears, everything. Even a Chinese canon was fired in their honor, according to the story of Fray Alfonso of San Martin.

On the part of the Sisters already in Pingliang for almost two years, the sentiments they felt for the arrival of the reinforcements, was expressed thus:

- *The newly arrived personnel were already more prepared. And with their help, we felt capable of everything. We –those who were already here- with the experience of the past two years in tremendous poverty, amidst frightening events and with the cold of 28 and 30 degrees below zero. Thanks to the fact that for the newly arrived, four cold months have already passed, but even so they will have to endure their own, because until June, it was still cold. But we have passed too much endurance!*

*We strove to attend to them. It was hard for them to adapt, but it was not the same than us who learned almost everything through signs.*

*We spent a few days happily together, but very few indeed, for in May I did my profession of perpetual vows and had to go and to found Sifengchen.*<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Cfr. San Martin, Alfonso de, *Letter to the Students of the School of the Immaculate of Pamplona*, in *Verdad y Caridad*, 1932, pp. 187-189. This project may be appreciated in a picture included in the Album of Photographs that shows the moment of arrival in Pingliang and how the men and women missionaries were dressed.

<sup>64</sup> Cfr. Noain, Modesta, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

The Sisters who just arrived dedicated themselves, in the beginning and a manner almost exclusively, to study the new language.

- *Now recovered from the long journey we began to learn Chinese. It was, indeed, quite difficult because of its pronunciation. Personally, it did not frighten me too much, however, because the Basque language was even worse. So, to us who spoke Basque, it was not so difficult to master Chinese.*<sup>65</sup>

### ***With Sifengchen, the initial plan was fulfilled***

The foundation at Sifengchen was already foreseen –according to the plan originally sketched between the Capuchin friars and the Superior of the Sisters, which was to be simultaneously carried out with that of Pingliang-leaving three Sisters of the first expedition in Pingliang while the other three would go to Sifengchen.

However, it was not possible before, given the initial difficulties with the language and also because of the fact that one of the six Sisters manifested quite early –as we shall see- that she was not comfortable in the Mission. But in 1932, after the arrival of the five Sisters, it was thought that it was the opportune time to put in operation the foundation that was then put on hold.

- *As soon as I professed –says Sr. Modesta- the Father Prefect told us that we had to go to Sifengchen, because the robbers also known as soldiers wanted to lay claim to the house.*

*We had a few things to prepare, we had so little! We carried only whatever clothes was indispensable for change.*<sup>66</sup>

The first days of June, 1932, Sisters *Amelia of Oroz-Betelu*, as Superior, *Milagro of Ororbia*, *Pacifica of Anna* and *Marina of Iturmendi*, left for Sifengchen.

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<sup>65</sup> Cfr. Galarza, Eugenia, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

<sup>66</sup> Cfr. Noain, Modesta, *op. cit.*, p. 19.

They traveled the whole day in horse buggies, amidst grave difficulties. They crossed three rivers in no small dangers. One of the rivers was so high that they had to cross over on the backs of Chinese men. They arrived at Sifengchen as night was falling.

The great surprise they met at their arrival was related by Sr. Modesta, thus:

- *About the house we found nothing," because the only thing there were some stables for animals. So, it was for us to build the house.*

*For a month, we took our meals with the friars –two were at that Mission Station- and had to sleep in common the four of us. Thanks to the quite ideally spacious place, we could relax a little.*

*The work began shortly after. Over the walls of the frame, they placed the roofing made of reeds and paper that seemed like cigarette paper.*

*Within a short time, we already had "guests" that peeped through the windows that they themselves made from inside the walls. What big rats!*

*Finally, we could enter our house, so poor and yet so beloved.<sup>67</sup>*

One of the first things: that they did, at the same time that we were working together with the priests –as in Pingliang - was to open a *dispensary* by “building a small room to place it; while taking dinner in the street.”<sup>68</sup> The dispensary was attended to principally by Srs. *Milagro of Ororbia*, who was a professional nurse, and by the Superior herself who was specializing, like a typically good autodidact, by reading the medical books brought along by the Sisters:

- *The very good feeling that the people felt at our coming cannot be imagined; not to mention that of the poor missionary friars!*

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<sup>67</sup> Cfr. Noain, Modesta, *op. cit.*, pp. 19-20.

<sup>68</sup> Cfr. Galarza, Eugenia, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

*When the dispensary opened, the people immediately called on us from their houses and their caves. And when we went outside to do cures, we were being followed by a crowd waiting to be cured<sup>69</sup> with the few medicines that we had. There was a day when we attended to 180 cases of syphilis, scabies, leprosy ... As they brought us new medical books, so I, -the most ignorant- had to consult them very often, to be able to make those ointments which we called “by the missionaries” and which the Chinese appreciated very much, because it healed all kinds of illnesses. In reality, it was a kind of Yodoform (an antiseptic and analgesic). When I was preparing it near the kitchen (since the house was very small) Sr. Marina, the cook, told me: “Since you are making that here, I will not prepare meals.” And I answered her: “Look, if not for these ointments that we manufacture, we cannot eat because although we give it almost free to the sick, but since they think that what costs money are the best, we charge them a very small price and so with what we get we can buy more medicines as well as what to eat.”*

*I, helping out the Sister in the infirmary, was learning even to inject intravenous, because the nurse is so afraid to do it as something may happen to the patient. God knows the number of Septenaries we prayed to the most Holy Virgin, so that by the intercession of our Father Founder we may be helped! And how much did he help us!<sup>70</sup>*

Aside from attending the *infirmary* –that also entailed home visits to the sick- they also had charge of the Holy Infancy, the care of the Home for the Aged, attending to the catechumenate and preparing the food for everybody, and of the laundry and arranging clothes. Besides of all these: they visited the jails of the locality, full of criminals and guerillas, treated their wounds, and, in the absence of the priests, they also cared for the diverse pastoral needs like assistance to the dying, the holding of burial rites, and the administration of baptisms.

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<sup>69</sup> Cfr. Galarza, Eugenia, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

<sup>70</sup> Cfr. Noain, Modesta, *op. cit.*, p. 20.



They gained –by their testimony of generous commitment to the people- a good relationship with the authorities of the place –mandarins, mayors, Muslim chiefs, etc., and these called upon them as nurses, visited them with some gifts, including inviting them to some banquet, but seldom did they attend. They availed of every opportunity to sow the seeds of the Gospel.<sup>71</sup>

Certainly, difficulties and deprivations were not lacking:

- *Here we had to do laundry on the street while soap, moreover, shone for its absence; we had bleach that we made from vegetal carbon ash. We had to boil all our clothes, because if not the lice will not go away. They were even found in the meals. A Sister – jokingly- asked a priest whether it was all right to eat them on Friday and he answered in the affirmative, since it was fish meat.*<sup>72</sup>
- *During winter hungry wolves made frequent visits searching for food and launched attacks on children. In one occasion, thanks to house dogs that stood against these wolves, the Sisters could rescue a little girl that the wolves had taken.*<sup>73</sup>

In 1934 –while they were administering Sifengchen for two years- Srs. Pacifica and Marina came out of the community, destined to Pingliang. Sr. Modesta commented about these changes:

- *Now we are just three to do cures. There were many sick and only one could not do it alone because of the many home visits in the streets of the town or in nearby small towns.*  
*During this epoch –she adds- cholera struck. People were falling dead in droves. In the Mission we had a few sick men and women. Thanks be to God, no one died! We bound their hands and feet and applied pads soaked in hot vinegar (as hot as they could*

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<sup>71</sup> Cfr. Iriarte, Lazaro, *op. cit.*, pp. 182-183.

<sup>72</sup> Cfr. Galarza, Eugenia, *op. cit.*, p. 4.

<sup>73</sup> Cfr. Iriarte, Lazaro, *op. cit.*, p. 183.

*endure) and we noticed this strengthened the intestines. What tragic days! The three of us, inexperienced on the matter, attended to this, while the fourth one, to heat the vinegar and boil the drinking water.*

*We were telling ourselves: "At any moment any one of us may succumb." But the Lord gave us the strength to help those poor people, that we forgot everything!*<sup>74</sup>

### ***The scary events multiply***

In 1921 –eight years before the arrival of the Sisters in China- Chen Duxin founded in this country the Communist Party that settled fundamentally in the Southern Provinces of Jiangxi and Fujian, where Mao Zedong had established the ***Soviet Republic of China*** between the years 1930 and 1934.

In those same years, nevertheless, General *Chiang Kai-shek* cut collaboration that was maintained with the Communist Party and encircled the Southern Provinces where they grew strong. In the face of this situation, the communists succeeded in breaking the encirclement, initiating –on October 16, 1934- the well-known *Long March of Mao*, that traversed 12,500 kilometers in 370 days, arriving to the Northeast Provinces and, among these provinces, Kansu.

While Mao continued his advance to the North, groups of communists were already active, since the end of 1933, in the forests of the Pingliang Prefecture, from there committing different raids and robberies, especially against the rich and the missionaries.<sup>75</sup>

Sr. Modesta, recalling these years, would write:

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<sup>74</sup> Cfr. Noain, Modesta, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

<sup>75</sup> Cfr. Gulina, Rafael de, *op. cit.*, pp. 36-38. In these pages, Fr. Rafael also tells the story of the kidnapping of Fr. Fernando of Dima on November 12, 1933, in Sanshelipu and the punishments and the scorn that he endured without losing his smile. He was not liberated until January 5, 1934, thanks to the successful raid by Chang-Kai-shek's army (cfr *Ibid.*, p. 181).

- *We had the communists always nearby and frequently came to our dispensary... They really liked us because we were for everybody equally. On the other hand, they looked upon the missionary priests as people of the bourgeoisie...*<sup>76</sup>

### ***Sanshelipu. Field Hospital***

On February, 1935, there was an encounter between the communists and the government troops in the outskirts of the Mission Stations of Kingyang and Sanshelipu.

In the face of this situation, the Prefect gave instructions to the missionaries to abandon those Stations.

Before the priests went, however, the Muslim general Majongping, of the 35<sup>th</sup> Division, that counted 9,000 soldiers, received orders from Lanchow and Nanking and go in pursuit of the communists.

The battle was very bloody and, at the end of the fighting, -the casualty counted 300 communists dead and 60 of their horses, while among the regular army tallied only 2 dead and 9 wounded- the Muslim general offered the management of the Military Hospital installed in Sanshelipu.

Accepting the commitment, the *Sisters Milagro of Ororbia* and *Liberata of Azcona* went to this hospital the next day, both from the Mission of Sifengchen, who were “armed with heroic valor, overcoming all obstacles for love of God and for souls, and with Franciscan joy,” they launched themselves to treat the wounds of both groups and, at the same time as curing bodily wounds with their hands and their medicines, also strove, in whatever way possible, also to cure the much more gave wounds of the souls by their good example and edifying words.

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<sup>76</sup> Cfr. Noain, Modesta, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

At the beginning of May, the three wounded who remained were transferred to Kingyang and by the middle of the same month, the two Sisters returned to Sifengchen.<sup>77</sup>

Sr. Modesta kept these memories also of the Sisters' stay in Sanshelipu:

- *The Muslim general –who was a good man- thought that no one was better than the virgins –as the religious were called- to take care of the wounded, those confined in the Field Hospital that he had established within the Mission of Sanshelipu.*

*While Liberata and Milagro were there, Sr. Agustina and I continued to attend to the Mission of Sifengchen day by day.*

*The general, on his part, was preoccupied that we could have regularly received the news on how were the displaced sisters in the hospital, and one day he invited us, who remained in Sifengchen, to go to the Hospital so that the four of us may pass a day together. They came with a truck –and I don't know how they managed to come up through those mountains- and on arriving he had prepared a banquet for us ... The food could not be more delicious and the general himself personally served us, tasting first the courses, so that we could eat them safely.*

*At the end of the meal he announced to us that the work was over. He thanked us for the service we gave and gifted us with precious cloths and some money.*

*While Milagros and Liberata were in the hospital, they brought another general who was almost blind, and almost could not open his eyes. I treated him with pads of water “vosicada” and he was healed on the third day. He left so happily for having been cured, so that, he returned the next day and handed some dollars to the priest for the virgin who healed him.<sup>78</sup>*

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<sup>77</sup> Cfr. *Letters of Fray Conrado of Salinas and of Fray Leonardo of Berbinzana, in Verdad y Caridad*, 1935, pp. 241-246 and 249-251.

<sup>78</sup> Cfr. Noain, Modesta, *op. cit.*, pp. 23-24.

The scariest event took place, however, on August, 1935, with the arrival of Maoist troops around Pingliang.<sup>79</sup>

The more well-known priests in the Mission Stations of the South, came to Pingliang because they were in danger by the proximity of the communists. The brothers in Sifengchen also took refuge in Pingliang.

On August 14, before the imminent threat of the communists entering the city, it was decided to evacuate the Orphanage, distributing the children among Christian families, while the men missionaries, the Sisters, and the seminarians took the road for Sianfu, the capital of Shensi.

They arrived Sianfu a few days later –the 16<sup>th</sup>- after a very hard journey, in which they had to sleep in caves and endure a severe storm.

The Sisters remained in Sianfu for two months, visiting the poor and the sick around and did treatments for which they were paid, and so contributed to their upkeep.

While in Sianfu precisely there, the Capuchin friars proposed to the Sisters, for the first time, returning to Spain until the political situation cleared, but almost all the Sisters opted to undergo the same fate as the others.<sup>80</sup>

When the danger passed, the Sisters and the seminarians returned to their respective Mission stations.

### ***The group of eleven was reduced to eight***

Of the eleven Sisters who came to China in the two expeditions, only eight remained by the end of 1935.

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<sup>79</sup> Days before arriving Pingliang, the Vicariate of Tsinchow was attacked and the German Capuchins had to disperse, while their seminarians and religious fled to *Sianfu* (cfr Gulina, Rafael de, *op. cit.*, pp. 39-40).

<sup>80</sup> Cfr. Iriarte, Lázaro, *op. cit.*, pp. 181 and 183.

The first to abandon China was *Sr. Pilar of Altura*.

*“While we were still in Barcelona” –Sr. Modesta noted in her Diary- “I noticed something between her and the Superior. The case was that in Carcagente where both were together in the community between 1920 to 1929, nothing was noticed.”*<sup>81</sup>

The case is that, once in Pingliang, Sr. Pilar showed signs that she was not adapted to the kind of life we had there and so repeatedly manifested her desire to return to Spain.

With the idea that she calmed down a little, she was sent to another Mission in the company of Sr. Leontina, but neither those two months she stayed in the new house made her change her mind.

In the end, the Superiors decided that she returned to Spain in December 1931 when the second expedition of Sisters arrived in China.

*Sr. Pacifica of Anna* was the second casualty, although, certainly for a very different reason. During the end of 1933, “the exhausting work that she took upon herself, moved by her spirit of charity and service, ended up exacting a price and so her health was quickly and severely affected.” And though she was transferred to Pingliang in order to get better care, on February 24, 1934, she died, not even reaching her 42 years of age.”<sup>82</sup>

From then on, therefore, together with two other Sisters who died in China, she waits in Pingliang for the return of the Congregation.

The third casualty happened before the end of 1935 and it was *Sr. Catalina of Sesma*. The decision to return she made, while in Sianfu where the missionaries took refuge caused by the strain political and social drama they were living under, when the friars broached the idea of

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<sup>81</sup> Cfr. Noain, Modesta, op. cit., p. 16.

<sup>82</sup> Cfr. Vives, Juan Antonio, *Necrology. Capuchin Tertiary Sisters*, Vol 1, pp. 58-62.

returning to Spain until everything was clear. Her companions rejected the idea, while she welcomed the proposal since she did not feel that she had the stamina to continue. And, so, with the permission of her Superiors, she returned to Spain in December, 1935<sup>83</sup>

### ***Their father founder does not forget them***

When the first expedition of Sisters destined for China bade goodbye in Massamagrell -in November 3, 1929- the Father Founder –as recorded by Sr. Modesta, “wept with sighs and moans”<sup>84</sup> foreseeing, perhaps, that he would no longer see them.

However, it was not totally a goodbye, because although their bodies –that of the Founder and those of the Sisters- were distant from one another in space, their spirits remained united and possibly more closely than when they were physically close by. Neither was he ever separated from them in affection, nor were they forgetful of having him constantly present.

- *The first baptisms that I performed –Sr. Modesta noted- were for my Father Founder and I wrote him a letter, which he answered, wherein I shared that one of the baptized children I gave him the name “Luis” in his honor. What a pity that when the communists arrived to the Mission, they burned it together with the other documents!*

*I remembered that one day I was called to assist a woman in labor. When I entered, I saw an old woman next to the woman about to give birth with a knife in her hands, and had fingernails like sticks ...*

*The birthing woman had a big strong rope tied around her waist, so that the child would not go up to the stomach... Since I saw how dire the situation was and that I could do nothing, I told them: “Look, I have not brought anything to give her, but I do have some leaves at home that are very effective and will be of*

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<sup>83</sup> Cfr. Vives, Juan Antonio, op. cit., Vol 3, pp. 997-1002.

<sup>84</sup> See farther above, p. 31.

*help to her.” And since they had sent us leaves or petals on the occasion of the death of our Father Founder (I do not know whether from a box or touched by his hands) which, in problematic cases, we frequently gave them.*

*And since she had much faith in us and our medicines, she took it... And what was my surprise, when by nightfall, they came to inform us that she had given birth, without Caesarean section or anything ...*

*Filled with joy, we gave thanks to God because our Father Founder truly hears us... All of us who were there knew him and had much devotion to him.<sup>85</sup>*

If her daughters did not forget him, neither did he forget them, and had them always present and close in the affection of his heart. In fact, one of his biographies recounts that when he was lying on his death-bed, they informed him that his sons in Colombia and Italy were with him in prayer and that his daughters in China wrote him a letter, on hearing China, he pulled out his hands to applaud.<sup>86</sup>

### ***General Missionary Plan***

The missionary work, though it never left off having a tinge of adventure, not for that did we had any improvised activity, on the contrary, all these works developed in accord with a previous plan, with objectives and means.

The General Missionary Plan put in actual operation by the Capuchin friars, not only in China but in many other places, is explained in synthesis by Fr. Gulina:

- *The missionary projects are the arms and hands with which the missionary works in the souls of pagans.*

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<sup>85</sup> Cfr. Noain, Modesta, *op. cit.*, p. 20.

<sup>86</sup> Cfr. Luis Amigo. *Information Bulletin*, n. 257, p. 22.



*The obstacles to faith that the ignorance and fear to an unknown culture were neutralized with dispensaries and schools.*

*With the others like the Catechumenate and the Seminary – were designed directly for the conversion of those who do not yet profess the Christian Faith, or to promote those chosen towards formation of indigenous clergy.<sup>87</sup>*

Special relevance and significance were given to the *Catechumenate*:

- *In all Primary Stations -where a missionary habitually resides- we strove to build a long building, divided into three departments: study hall, dining hall, and dormitory. That is for the catechumenate.*

*The catechumens stay separately in it during some months, a number of men and women that the resources of the Mission would allow, instructing them in the principal truths of the Faith. It appeared as an intensive course that ended with the baptism of those found to be prepared.*

*During the catechumenate, all expenses were shouldered by the Mission.*

*It functioned during the winter –ordinarily from October to April- and aimed at graduating –three batches of new Christians. Catechists, paid by the Mission explained the truths of the faith under the supervision of a missionary.*

*A missionary was in-charge of the recruits for the aspirancy and for catechists during the Spring and the Summer.*

*Once they are baptized, the catechumens return to their homes, are periodically visited by the missionary who has to do untold work especially at the beginning in order to maintain Integral Christian life.*

*This is how, as narrated by a missionary, the baptism of the catechumens in the frozen courtyard of the Mission Station: “It was the eve of Christmas and the first catechumens learned the*

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<sup>87</sup> Cfr. Gulina, Rafael de, *op. cit.*, p. 49.

*catechesis on baptism and the initial and main prayers. The baptism of the men was something that must have deeply impressed the souls of the neophytes. Twenty-one men stood escorted by their godparents, formed a semicircle while at the center, on a stool, and was seated one of them who bore high a kerosene lamp that threw shadows of what was happening against the walls.*

- *“Do you renounce Satan?” the priest asked.*
- *“I renounce ...!” they decisively answered one after the other...*

*An old teacher, when it came to his turn, wept with loud shouts and a very young seminarian murmured behind the Prefect: “Watch how much it is costing him to leave aside bad company...”*

*Half an hour later, when the clock of the Cathedral –as if Pingliang would have had a cathedral or a clock at least- would indicate midnight of the Good Night, the baptismal water that was poured by the Prefect from a small jar on the foreheads of the new Christians, was replicated on the depth of the basin like silver bells on the night of Christmas.”<sup>88</sup>*

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<sup>88</sup> Cfr. Gulina, Rafael de, *op. cit.*, pp. 50-52.

# To the rhythm of the Great March (1935-1945)



## Chapter

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In mid-October of 1935, the Sisters were able to return from Sianfu –where they took refuge- to their respective Mission Stations in Pingliang and Sifengchen, but their life at every moment no longer had the same tranquility they had – though it was never really absolute- the same as when they first arrived in China.

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The socio-political situation was getting worse, each time in accelerated manner, and the Sisters had to endure these years as true, *foreign strangers and pilgrims*, somehow at the same pace as the progress of Mao's Great March.

The start of the Spanish Civil War - July 18, 1936- was the first serious setback for the Missions of Pingliang, because it supposed the isolation from their Religious Superiors –both of the Capuchin friars as well as those of the Sisters- so they were not in a position to send new reinforcements of personnel, and likewise supposed the dip in their economic capacity, seeing that financial help was practically cut off, of food, medicines, and so forth, which they were regularly sending from the home-country of Spain.

On the other hand, in China itself –and more concretely in the territories of the Prefecture of Pingliang, after a short period of relative tranquility, favored by the retreat of the communist troops from those territories, thanks to the action done by the governmental army, the panorama was quickly darkened again by the kidnapping of General Chiang Kai-shek by the troops of Chang-sho-leang and by the communists themselves.<sup>89</sup> For his freedom, Chiang-kai-shek was constrained to sign an agreement with his kidnapers, committing himself to fight together with them against the Japanese.

Through this pact, the Red Army was considered as a Regular Army –with the same rights and ranks of the Nationalist leader's army- although he was designated the Generalissimo of both armies. By this same pact, moreover, the regions dominated by the communists were confirmed to be under their control on the same day the pact was signed, the communist system and methods were applied to these territories as well as even in other territories of the Nationalists of Chiang Kai-shek. Precisely for this

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<sup>89</sup> The kidnapping took place in the city of Xi'an and lasted from December 12 to 25, 1936. He was accused of responding half-heartedly and weakly to the Japanese invasion of Manchuria on September 19, 1931, imposing there a puppet government subservient to their own interests.

agreement, the northern half of the Mission of Pingliang came under communist hands.<sup>90</sup>

Six months later, after signing the pact between the Nationalists and the communists, the Japanese, perhaps thinking that the union of military forces of China, could be a serious threat to their imperialist plans in Asia, officially declared war on the Chinese government on July 7, 1937.<sup>91</sup>

As it was feared, this opening of a new war front complicated –naturally– the situation of the Sisters even more, because they did not only have to flee the incursions of the communists who continued to wait in ambush in the vicinity of Mission Stations, but also had to protect themselves from the bombardment in the region carried out by the Japanese at that time.

The situation became even more grave with the entrance of Italy in the war on the side of the Germans, on June 1940, therefore closed a fundamental line of communication and supply route for the missionaries. There were important disadvantages also: the attack against Russia by the Japanese which interrupted the Trans-Siberian Line, through which the missionaries could communicate with relatively considerable speed; the Japanese forces' occupation of Hong Kong and the Philippines, which closed another conduit from where financing and other aids came through.<sup>92</sup>

The Apostolic Prefect himself summarized the situation of his missionaries caused by the opening of different warfronts:

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<sup>90</sup> Cfr. Gulina, Rafael de, *op. cit.*, p. 43

<sup>91</sup> This war will become another front of the World War II in 1941, when Japan allied itself with Germany and Italy and formed the Berlin-Rome-Tokyo Axis. The Sino-Japanese war, therefore, did not end until September 9, 1945, when the contest in the Pacific ended with the surrender of Japan to the United States.

<sup>92</sup> Cfr. Gulina, Rafael de, *op. cit.*, p. 44. This blockade –added Fr. Gulina himself– was much more tragic for the Missions of Pingliang because “while other Missions had savings in different banks, Pingliang lived one day to the next.”

- *One cannot make out for himself the difficulties we have to endure. Since the beginning of the war, all outlets were being closed ... We had to sell our pack animals and the missionaries had to walk long distances on foot, which is the same in good times as well as in bad. The majority of missionaries had only one formal meal, that is to say, they ate a little more abundantly only once... but did not taste meat.*

*Here in Pingliang, for dinner we took no more than a saucer of vegetables... We had to close the schools and the catechumenate and lay-off teachers and catechists... We are using every means to earn a little money here, in Kansu itself, in order to maintain this very poor Mission that seems to be close to its last agony. The materials we bought and gathered for the construction of the church, and many other things too, we began to sell... So that you may get an idea of how deep our difficulties are, I tell you that the "tu" of wheat which previously would oscillate between 1 dollar or 2, now costs 60 or 70 dollars... and so too are almost everything else.*"<sup>93</sup>

### ***Pingliang: An unexpected goodbye***

On May, 1935, the Sisters –despite being in the midst of difficulties- celebrated joyfully the *Golden Jubilee* of the Founding of the Congregation, and in the month of July, the General Council proceeded to the triennial appointment of new superiors of communities and the composition of the communities.

At the time the respective Obediences could reach the communities of China- both that of Pingliang and that of Sifengchen- were weighed down by delicate moments since the Sisters –gathered together in Pingliang because of communist threats- were forced to abandon the city on August 14, 1935, and seek refuge in Sianfu.<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> Cfr. Gulina, Rafael de, *op. cit.*, pp. 44-45.

<sup>94</sup> See farther above, p. 73.

Upon their return from the exile –already in the month of October- they could, finally, fulfill the Ordinances received from their General Government.

For the house of Pingliang, Sr. Modesta was appointed Superior, and she herself took charge, one more time, to record in her *Diary*, the manner how this change was done:

- *In 1935, I returned to Pingliang as Superior, Sr. Milagro also came along and Sr. Liberata came a little later for the school.*<sup>95</sup>

*Many people took refuge in Pingliang because the Japanese had entered Shanghai. There were many children both Christians and pagans. Among them was the daughter of a Chinese general who was fighting in Spain.*<sup>96</sup>

*The house in Pingliang was not the same that we left when we went to Sifengchen in 1932. It was Pagoda-shaped, of two-storey and was arranged into small cells separated by Chinese plywood (through which even breathing could be heard).*

*Sr. Milagro was in-charge of the Infirmary and we, Fr. Conrado<sup>97</sup> or Fray Francisco and myself, were helping her. So many people came daily to the Infirmary. I could see entire armies of people waiting for their turn lying on the ground... I also saw 8 or 9 persons, held by the arms, almost blind because of gonorrhea. To these people we got in time (between 2 or 3 days) and we cured them with a single injection.*

*How much did we suffer at seeing so much misery and yet not being able to do more for these poor people! With what faith did*

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<sup>95</sup> In 1935, the community of Pingliang was composed primarily by: Modesta, Milagro, Liberata, and Marina. When Leontina arrived from Sifengchen, Sr. Marina transferred there.

<sup>96</sup> It is very likely that this refers to Chen Agen, who, despite being described by a Sister as a general, in reality was leader of a syndicate who organized the Syndicate of Shanghai and the only one among the more than a hundred brigade-members who fought on the side of the republican troops during the Spanish Civil War, who came directly from China (cfr *Kaoson-bared.net/history of the Chinese brigades who fought in the Spanish civil war*).

<sup>97</sup> Fray Conrado of Salinas de Oro died in Pingliang itself on January 2, 1936. That very same year, Fr. Felix of Arbizu also died in the month of May, and in December the Chinese *Felipe Wang*. By February of 1937, Fr. *Berardo of Lorca*, also died.

they come to our Infirmary, which is so poor, but with a wealth of goodness and compassion which at times, although without remedy for their sickness, left happy and suffered their illness with greater resignation! During these occasions we did all that we were capable of, spoke to them about our God whom they called “the Grandfather in Heaven”... Many were not instantly converted through these conversations, but then they called to us later, when their last moments arrived...

*The house, beside the features already mentioned, had two wash stands, a spacious dining room, a big chapel for all personnel –we were around a hundred- a second-hand European cooker they sent from Spain and with which, thanks to this, we could cook pasta and bake bread according to our style during greater feasts.*

*Since we were so many people, aside from our own responsibilities, we were busy with preparing the meals and laundering the clothes of the priests and of the chapel, also of the seminarians<sup>98</sup> – they were around 40 - to whom we sent a packet of clean clothes, darned and ironed, every week.*

*We already had irons of steam –no more those irons using rock coals. We had a helper solely dedicated for drawing water from the well.*

*What gave us more work was laundering and ironing the “sanses”, the long dress of the priests in Chinese style, which were white for the summer.*

*We also were in-charge of the clothes of the girls –around 60- and care for the sick elderly and of some very young girls of 2 or 3 days old, infested with lice and other worse things, whom they brought to us.*

*We had a courtyard and quite spacious schools with two teachers, a Father who gave them music; Sister Liberata, sewing*

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<sup>98</sup> During the course of 1935-1936, a true *Minor Seminary* with 21 students was inaugurated. This Seminary functioned together the *Preparatory Seminary for Natives*, that actually functioned for Major Seminarians and which, despite the tight situations through which the Mission was going through, could still function since 1936.



*work, and some external teachers and Father Wan, a Chinese educated in Europe and who did not get along very well with the other Fathers.*<sup>99</sup>

In this panorama that was somewhat idyllic, within the life in the Missions of Pingliang at that time, quite soon they had to institute restrictions, such as fixing the maximum number of admissions of catechumens or the closure of some of the schools dependent on the Mission.<sup>100</sup>

At the beginning of the Sino-Japanese war in 1937, they lived this situation in Pingliang:

- *During the Sino-Japanese war we endured much. We treated so many soldiers they brought to us. Some arrived completely covered all over with wounds, with hanging pieces of flesh that the bones were visible. How much pity did we feel!*

*There were also young boys who came from the war front, full of weeds and from the worst diseases. They were like torn sacks. There was no way of understanding that much misery!*

*One day, the church bell of the Protestant church announced the first Japanese bombardment of Pingliang.*

*We went down to the basement and immediately bombs began falling ... Those from the Infirmary hid under a table together with the sick.*

*We emerged from the basement when the noises could no longer be heard and verified that in our house there were only some broken window panes.*

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<sup>99</sup> Cfr. Noain, Modesta, *op. cit.*, p. 34.

<sup>100</sup> The Catholic School bested – in almost every city- the Official Centers regarding the curriculum. So, it happened that the fact of having studied in a Catholic School, constituted an excellent recommendation. By 1940, despite the dire straits, three Catholic Schools for the first grade and another for second grade could still function. The ideal would have been to set up a *Normal School* where teachers could be trained, but the economy of the Mission could not support it (cfr Gulina, Rafael de, *op. cit.*, p. 53).

*Around the house, plenty of bombs fell and destroyed many things, and they began to bring us such number of the wounded that there was not enough supply of medicines.*

*Every time there was a bombardment, the priests and children came to our house, because our house had a small basement. Sometimes we needed to eat there.*

*We, the sisters, always enter there the last because we had to prepare something for them to eat. But we never went down without having lighted candles to St. Joseph, despite the planes started to drop bombs.*

*We had placed all our confidence in St. Joseph and he never failed us.*

*On one occasion, the planes with a terrible load of bombs to be dropped on Pingliang arrived –it was a Wednesday, much more reason for St. Joseph to protect us- and when planes were flying over our city, they divided into two columns and proceeded to bomb Lanchow instead.*

*The priests kept repeating that we had something, when it was instead the Lord helping us. And we said that all that happened through the intercession of St. Joseph to whom we asked to help for the missionaries and the few Christians whom we had distributed around, and thanks be to God, no one fell victim. Let us give thanks to God!<sup>101</sup>*

In the midst of that climate of war, to the Sisters still waited one more “bomb” before the end of 1940 of which St. Joseph would not be able to save them:

- *In the year 1940 –narrates Sr. Modesta- we gathered together in Pingliang to have our retreat. How much did we enjoy it! It was the last year that the eight of us spent together (the four in Pingliang and the four from Sifengchen).*

*The situation was gradually getting worse ... A few days after the Sisters of Sifengchen left, the Prefect arrived with a*

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<sup>101</sup> Cfr. Noain, Modesta, *op. cit.*, pp. 31 and 36-37.

sealed letter and said to me: "See here, Sister, I bring news and if you wish, I myself will read it to the Sisters."

I answered him: "I myself will read it to them." Because I thought: "I do not know what the contents will be and what would be the reaction of the Sisters before him."

I went to the chapel. And, after praying the Seven Sorrows of the Sorrowful Virgin and to ask help of St. Francis and of the Father Founder, then I read the letter. And what would my surprise to read that, please, we had to go to Paishui where they built a small house and a Dispensary, that by going there to leave our house in Pingliang to some recently professed religious of a Diocesan Congregation founded by a German priest and a Chinese religious who was their general (the recently professed were girls whom we educated when they were with us).<sup>102</sup>

I thought about the young girls without experience who are now the new religious and the dangers that surrounded them, so I told my sisters in the community, handing the letter to them: "Look, Sisters, this is very hard on us, but the Lord wants something from us."

Being humans, we felt leaving a house which cost us so much to fix and we equipped and supplied in order to face the hard winter prepared with tins of preserved food... But what pained us much more was to leave the girls and the people who loved us so much.

The Sisters, despite a wounded heart, showed serenity and gave a witness of patience when the hour to face the predicament.

The letter was given to us two days before the feast of the Immaculate –December 6, and for the feast –the 8<sup>th</sup>– we had to be in Paishui. So, on the eve –the 7<sup>th</sup>– the four of us packed

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<sup>102</sup> This refers to the Congregation of the Missionary Sister Oblates of the Holy Family (OHF), who actually continue in Pingliang and are also present in 7 other Provinces of China, in Taiwan, in the Philippines, in Australia, in America, and in Rome. The cornerstone of this foundation is attributed to Fr. Joseph Freinademetz, but when he died in 1908, its official setting up of the institute –on October 2, 1910– fell on Monsignor Augustinus Henninghaus SVD who likewise died in 1939, on the eve of the nuns settling down in Pingliang. Cfr further on, *The dream that could not be realized*, pp. 123-126.

*everything that we had and we left for Paishui under 28 degrees below zero.*

*The arrival of the new religious –they say—was something tremendous.*

*The whole College resisted accepting them and some teachers resigned in disgust.*

*The Capuchin friars, for their part, remained with a feeling of great displeasure and annoyance.*

*And even the Chinese themselves asked: “Why did the Capuchin Tertiary Sisters have to go to Paishui and not these?”*

*I came to know much later, from the newly professed –who were once our students- how everything happened.*

*The Lord does all things well, we only have to be faithful to Him!*<sup>103</sup>

### ***Sifengchen continues its progress***

In July, 1935, the community of Sifengchen was composed of *Srs. Guadalupe of Meliana, Agustina of Sesma, Imelda of Yeltz, Catalina of Sesma, and Leontina of Pamplona.*

When Sr. Leontina was transferred to Pingliang, Sr. Marina of Iturmendi later became a member of the community of Sifengchen.

Life in this Mission Station went on with its rhythm, with the economic moments that the whole Apostolic Prefecture was undergoing, coupled with scary events, in the midst of leaving and returning constantly provoked by the raids of some communist groups and also the alarm caused by the attacks of Japanese bombers.

As for the rest –and within their economic possibilities that were becoming more and more limited—the Sisters continued attending to the Dispensary, to the home visits to the sick, the Holy Infancy, the Home for

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<sup>103</sup> Cfr. Noain, Modesta, *op. cit.*, p. 37.

the Aged, the laundry of clothes, and if it was the case and the possibility, we attended also the diminished catechumenate, the meager meals, and lack of money.

If there was anything significative in Sifengchen during the decade 1935-1945, on September 1, 1945, was the demise of Sr. Guadalupe of Meliana, who was Superior of the community since 1935.<sup>104</sup>

### ***Paishui: The mission that others did not accept***

As noted by Sr. Eugenia in her *Narration of China*: “*This house was constructed for native religious Sisters, but they did not want to go there... And as always, we Capuchin Tertiaries had to go instead.*”<sup>105</sup>

The founders of this new presence were Srs. Modesta –or Amelia-, Liberata, Milagro, and Marina.

The description of the living quarters they found there and the daily activities they performed in this new Mission was told by the protagonists themselves in this way:

- *Upon arriving Paishui –wrote Sr. Modesta in her Diary- we found a one floor small house with walls dripping water on account of the humidity.*

*The town wherein the Mission was located was so small and miserable and without a surrounding wall (in contrast to almost all cities of Kansu that had it).*

*Here, in the inclemency of the weather, we experienced the real depths of Only God Suffices!*

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<sup>104</sup> The fact that Sr. Guadalupe remained here for many years was the reality of the isolation from the General Government of the Congregation, lived by the Sisters in China since 1936 was due, firstly to the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939), then immediately the World War II (1939-1945). About the death of Sr. Guadalupe, see farther on in the section, *Other two remain in China forever*, pp. 101-104.

<sup>105</sup> Cfr. Galarza, Eugenia, *op. cit.*, p. 6.

*After only a few days, three of the Sisters (only I, the weakest, was spared) had to keep to their beds because they were hit by the cold. It was my turn to care for them and encourage them, something that was not so difficult for me to do, because as they were so good that were amenable to whatever the Lord let them undergo!*

*When the days passed and we were getting more heartened, because although we were poor religious sisters, we were available to do everything for the sake of God and, in truth, only in Him since we had absolutely no news from Spain, neither from religious or relatives... The truth is that “God gives us the strength when we simply abandon ourselves in Him.”*

*On the other hand, little by little, we valued our small house better, which was much better built than the previous foundations at the beginning, and which moreover had one room, albeit very small, for each of us. The only thing we requested was that the friars install the Tabernacle and the Stations of the Cross as soon as possible, and this was promptly granted and this so pleased us for the moment.*

*Between the house and the Dispensary, we had a courtyard which we immediately converted into a beautiful flower garden. On one side of the courtyard, there stretched a thick solid wall—I think a historical one—and so we carved a grotto and placed a statue of our Blessed Mother that filled it completely. And, thanks to her, our loneliness turned into peace and joy.*

*The kitchen was also small but sufficient for us and the few personnel that we had under our care.*

*Before we arrived into this Mission Station, there was only one priest—a holy Capuchin friar<sup>106</sup>—who really worked hard. His dwelling was poor and there he slept and made treatments, prepared meals, and celebrated the Eucharist.*

*We reaped the fruits of what this priest had sown with much sorrow. How right was St. Therese of the Child Jesus when she said that many pages will be read only in heaven!*

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<sup>106</sup> He was brought sick from Paishui to Pingliang where he died at 34 years of age.

*We prepared meals for everybody, we cleaned the two chapels of the Mission, we laundered the clothes of the priest and those of the two chapels, produced the hosts for communion, the candles and the ointments for the Dispensary. We did many visits to the sick and treated so many people in the Dispensary.<sup>107</sup>*

*Here –adds Sr. Eugenia- as the Dispensary depended solely on us,<sup>108</sup> we took into account of the fact that we certainly could live from our work. We charge the poor people nothing, but yes to businessmen, military personnel, and paid workers. With what we earned we could sustain ourselves, able to buy new medicines as well as spend for improvements on the Mission, such as, for example, adapting it to be able to care for newly born infants whom we welcomed.<sup>109</sup>*

- *In a short time –continued recording Sr. Modesta– we accustomed ourselves to the people who loved us very much, and every time we went to our rounds for treatments, we had numerous poor people who put their full trust in us and our medicines.<sup>110</sup>*

*The only thing left were the scary threats of the communists and of the robbers, since our house stood beside the road and with no protection. But the Lord protected us!*

*During the year, Fr. Fernando of Dima was giving us conferences on the Bible every week, also on ascetics, mysticism, life of the saints –most of all of the Third Order- forms of prayer and contemplation, etc. This priest’s appreciation for us was something really great, since he used to say that “a missionary should never be alone” and we safeguarded him from loneliness. How much thanks we should give to God for this priest and for the others who helped us very much to be familiar with the ways towards holiness, which cannot be forgotten.<sup>111</sup>*

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<sup>107</sup> Cfr. Noain, Modesta, *op. cit.*, p. 38.

<sup>108</sup> In Pingliang, for example, a Capuchin brother worked in the Dispensary and Sr. Eugenia added- “this guy managed everything.”

<sup>109</sup> Cfr. Galarza, Eugenia, *op. cit.*, pp. 6-7.

<sup>110</sup> Cfr. Above, p. 67 and, especially, note 69.

<sup>111</sup> Cfr. Noain, Modesta, *op. cit.*, pp. 38-40.

## *To Pingliang, On a visit*

When we were already settled in Paishui, one day, Sr. Modesta told her Sisters that she needed to go to Pingliang and they did not look kindly on the idea, because it supposed meeting with the Sisters who occupied the house which the Capuchin Tertiary Sisters had previously. Nevertheless, although the meeting with those religious could happen to be violent, Sr. Modesta decided to go to the city where the seat of the Prefect was. And she herself told it, over time, this experience:

- *I arrived at the house of the priests, and the first person I encountered was the priest who was in-charge of the Chinese Sisters. When he saw me, he turned rigidly still (like a stone) and I, as though nothing happened, although inside me it was terrible and I, having to do violence to myself, remained impassive.*
- *“Why are you here?” he asked me.*
- *“I have to talk with the Prefect and besides I want to see my girls whom it cost me so much to take care,” I responded.*
- *So, he brought me to where they were (the residence of the Chinese nuns) and what happened there next could not be described. Even she who acted as Superior –as she was the eldest- did not know what to do, because she had a high opinion of us, because our former student informed her about us*

*They did not let me go and entertained me for nine days, how much they cared for me and how open and frank they were!*

*They told me how much they suffered when they were told that it was the General who required the College of Pingliang for them and that the General herself who did not want them to go to Paishui. They told me also that all of them were made to sign a petition to go to Pingliang instead.*

*When I was about to go, the priest who was directing them, asked me:*

- *“What did they tell you all these days? Because they told me that they experienced a greater spiritual comfort than when we give them Spiritual Retreats.*



- *I answered, “They told me that they are well with less work than we ourselves... but that, if they were sick or on the point of death, they would prefer to be with us, Capuchin Tertiary Sisters.”*

*The girls who studied with us, knew very well how we lived, since they saw with their own eyes. And now that they were religious, they appreciated it much more.*<sup>112</sup>

The situation in Paishui, however, was becoming difficult daily, as well as in the rest of the Prefecture, on its part. The Prefect himself reached the decision to tell all the Mission Stations that each one should make arrangements themselves as they could, because the Prefecture could no longer shoulder their expenses. So then, it was necessary to close schools and other projects of charity, because there had no more funds even for the maintenance of the missionaries.

Apart from that alarming economic scarcity, the frightening events in Paishui did not help.

- *To us –Sr. Modesta would record her recollections in her Diary- the only thing we were not lacking of were the scares. We never complained, however. We became so familiar with these that they no longer seemed to amount to anything. It seemed unreal for us to become so, but it was so.*

*One of the last nights we spent in Paishui –when we celebrated the last day of the year(Roman Calendar) and deeply remembered our Motherland and family and how we spent the day such as this in our homes- we prepared a dinner for the three of us<sup>113</sup> and so passed the day so pleasantly. We did hear –for certain- some very strange noise but no one came around and we remained calm and undisturbed. Since the light of the candle we*

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<sup>112</sup> Cfr. Noain, Modesta, *op. cit.*, p. 39.

<sup>113</sup> By this time, the fourth member of the community, *Sr. Milagro of Ororbia*, had already died on January 6, 1943.

*were using was so weak, I think that they even did not notice that we were at home. How were we cared for by the Lord!*<sup>114</sup>

However, a scary event and a huge one at that, they endured when—in 1945—they were going to Sifengchen to make their Retreat together with the Sisters of that community, and they were assaulted by robbers while spending the night in an inn. By then, having endured so many raids and assaults, they had become experts in hiding whatever robbers might fancy robbing. Thanks be to God, nothing happened to them except the fright and the bad memory of what happened that night.<sup>115</sup>

### ***Their fortress, the Lord***

Embedded in the stories of the Mission that the Sisters kept, powerfully noticeable, together with the apostolic zeal that accompanied all of them, was the robust wholeness with which they endured the numerous difficulties, setbacks, scarcity and raids by evil-doers and robbers that they went through without crumbling—like the Virgin at the foot of the Cross.

The fundamental reason for this integrity, gallantry, vigor, and strength of soul, they themselves explained thus:

- *Thanks to God and the Virgin Mary*—Sr. Marina would later write—*we did not have or in other words we were never a cause for any scandal of bad taste. Because in that wide expanse of China, we experienced everything ...*

*From how many dangers did the Lord spare us from! He performed miracles in our favor! To Him be glory forever and ever!*<sup>116</sup>

- *When the Japanese invaded the eastern part of China*—as Sr. Modesta, in her turn, tells it—*so many people of all kinds came up to our house: the rich, the poor ... We had people in our house*

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<sup>114</sup> Cfr. Noain, Modesta, *op. cit.*, p. 41.

<sup>115</sup> Cfr. Iriarte, Lázaro, *op. cit.*, pp. 252-154.

<sup>116</sup> Cfr. Galarza, Eugenia, *op. cit.*, p. 5.

*every day and all of them were bewildered seeing our poverty, but at the same time, our cleanliness ...*

*What misery! I really admire the Lord for the strength He gave us! Amidst such misery, we neither were conscious of ourselves; we were moved only by the desire to do good especially to the poor and those in misery...*

*We had five girls in the Mission who were sick of syphilis who exuded an unbearably fetid smell. We had to isolate them in order to prevent infecting others, and I myself cared for them and kept them clean. Some distinguished matrons visited us and, upon knowing of the case, marveled at, precisely, the fact that the Superior herself was caring for those most in need... The Lord gave us such tremendous strength!<sup>117</sup>*

### ***Other two remain in China forever***

On the wake of Sr. Pacifica's death—that happened in 1934—other two deaths—between 1936 and 1945—were added.

The first of these was that of Sr. Milagro of Ororbia who went back to the Father from Paishui on January 6, 1943.

- *On the feast day of the Immaculate*—writes Sr. Modesta about the event- *Sr. Milagro suffered an attack that left her half body all purple and she almost fell. For many days she stayed that way until the day of the Three Kings and at 11 in the morning she died. It was the death of a saint and she was so throughout her life.*

*The morning that she died she told me: "Come beside me in the bed since you are freezing." And it was true, but she was even colder, and she was on her last agony as reflected on her face.*

*Her death was an event for the people. Countless people passed to view her and marveled how beautiful she was. And*

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<sup>117</sup> Cfr. Noain, Modesta, *op. cit.*, pp. 27 and 40.

*because she treated and cured so many, many loved her very much.*

*When the Sisters were about to enshroud her, I told them: "Do not forget to put long trousers on her, because every time they passed beside the corpse, they raised her habit to verify what she was wearing." And so it was. The women were pleased to see her because they saw that she was like them, and they were saying: "How beautiful she is with trousers."*

*What a sadness we felt on our separating from her but also what a joy knowing that from where she is in heaven, she would be helping us!*

*And that nothing would be missing from the Chinese customary rituals, the men, asking themselves where the "evil spirits" of the Sister might be since her "good spirits" went down to the grave with her, went, and set fire to the Capuchin priests' house. The house burnt, but was put out quickly. For the Chinese everything was completed.*

*To us, in the midst of our pain, it gave us cause for laughter to experience how this poor people improvised.<sup>118</sup>*

The remains of Sr. Milagro were brought to Pingliang where she was interred beside the tomb of Sr. Pacifica. The transfer was not difficult since the body, under the temperature of 25 degrees below zero, was literally frozen. Her burial took place on January 11, feast day of the Holy Family for that year.<sup>119</sup>

Almost three years after, Sr. Guadalupe of Meliana died in Sifengchen –of which community she was serving as Superior. It was September 1, 1945.

By the end of August, her health suffered in such a way that she had to stay in bed. At the outset, the Sisters thought that it was simply a case of flu and she herself, even before she died, refused the Sisters' attempts to call a doctor since her cough was slowly disappearing and her fever was

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<sup>118</sup> Cfr. Noain, Modesta, *op. cit.*, p. 40.

<sup>119</sup> Cfr. Vives, Juan Antonio, *op. cit.*, vol I, pp. 19-23.

decreasing. But precisely when everything seemed to be under control and eight days of sickness were getting completed, the fatal ending rushed and in a way that was totally unexpected, and in the midst of a copious vomiting of blood, she departed to her definitive encounter with her Spouse.

Fr. Fernando of Dima presided at her funeral mass on the fourth day. In the same and in the midst of the retinue that accompanied the coffin, two huge banners dedicated to her held up by a non-Christian employee from the authorities were waving on which were written:

- *“From her youth, she took an oath to keep perfect chastity until death and preserve the innocence of childhood, renouncing even herself. Full of mercy and charity she merited to return to her Savior.”*
- *The example of her virtues will stand forever. Her voice and her figure, forever separated from us, remain deeply ingrained in our minds. Her soul pure as the snow, has rendered her worthy to enter Paradise.*<sup>120</sup>

Sr. Guadalupe’s death –who was buried in Sifengchen- followed another reason for pain in the Mission of Sifengchen.

The sentiment caused by her death among the girls in the boarding school was so deep, “that three or four of the girls fell sick. Such was the affection they had for her, and particularly to one who bore the same name. The girl had thirteen years. She was bought by the Sisters when she was just eight months old, because her father sold her together with the whole family, in order to satisfy his vices. *Guadalupe Tsang* –that was the girl’s name- studied first in Pingliang and from here passed on to the College in Sifengchen. She was very charming and of very fine and delicate sentiments. She felt an intense affection for the Sisters and all her desire was to travel to Spain in order to become a Capuchin Tertiary.

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<sup>120</sup> Cfr. Vives, Juan Antonio, *op. cit.*, vol I, pp. 273-280. Here, however, it says unequivocally that she was interred in Pingliang, when in reality it was exactly in Sifengchen.

When she realized that she was bereft of her beloved *Male*, as she called Sr. Guadalupe everytime she addressed her as *Madre* in accordance with the characteristic Chinese was of pronouncing the letter “r”- there was absolutely no way to console her. She wept and wept, always sad. Consequently, she fell sick in an alarming manner with a mysterious sickness, that the doctor diagnosed it an acute appendicitis. When it became obvious that her life was about to end, the priest clothed her with the scapular and cord of the Third Order, a dream that she nurtured for many years waiting for reaching the required age. With this the girl felt very happy and spoke of nothing else but of quickly flying to heaven. Between joyful delirium or true visions of surprising contents, she endured until October 8, when she sweetly passed away. Only a month and seven days had passed since Sr. Guadalupe’s passing away. The little girl was enshrouded with the habit of the Capuchin Tertiary Sisters and interred close to her *Male*.<sup>121</sup>

With the death of Sr. Guadalupe, only six Sisters remained in the Missions of Pingliang. Three –Liberata, Marina, and Modesta- in Paishui, and the other three –Leontina, Imelda, and Agustina- in Sifengchen.

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<sup>121</sup> Cfr. Iriarte, Lázaro, *op. cit.*, pp. 257-258.

# The Retreat of Forces (1945-1948)

## chapter

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Despite the reduction in number –because they saw that of the original eleven who came to China in the expeditions of 1929 and 1931- only six remained, the Sisters opted to maintain open the two missionary fronts: Paishui and Sifengchen.

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## *From Paishui to Kingchow*

Despite the reverses they were subjected to, such as the economic scarcity and the almost unending scary events, the Sisters continued in Paishui until 1947.<sup>122</sup> During this year, the Prefect, considering the situation of the Mission Station of Paishui to be very delicate and the Sisters there exposed to much insecurity and dangers, invited them to change residence and transfer to the Mission Station of Kingchow where the priest in-charge had insistently asked for the presence of the Sisters in order to render attention especially to the Dispensary.

- *With deep sorrow –Sr. Modesta remembered- we bade goodbye to Paishui, because we were doing much good to poor people who really appreciated us very much. How the atmosphere changed from the time they witnessed our abnegation, service, and charity!*

*We gathered the four junks that we had and in two carts we left for Kingchow, accompanied by the young men who took care of the carts. The three of us –Liberata, Marina, and myself- went.*

*On arriving Kingchow, we heard that they were speaking through loud-speakers, which we have not heard in eighteen years, and we became aware that it was of the Protestants who must be having a mission there.*

*Here, the authorities together with the priest were waiting for us. They have been called to retire the Protestants saying that we, the Sisters, were arriving to take charge of the Dispensary...*

*We were given a plaque written with Chinese characters in which they were giving us a welcome.*

*We did no changes or reforms in the house of Kingchow while we accommodated ourselves to what was already there.*

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<sup>122</sup> In this same year -1947- the Prefecture of Pingliang had the great joy -despite being in the midst of poverty and penury- of celebrating the ordination of the first Chinese priests who were formed in the Mission. To them others were soon added, until their number reached 15, and this fact, naturally, filled the missionaries with hope and encouragement (Cfr. Iriarte, Lázaro, *op. cit.*, p. 252)



*We were so pleased because we could continue our apostolate, although in the midst of the usual scares and fears, in case the communists arrived.*<sup>123</sup>

### ***Return to the first house***

When more or less a year had passed since the Sisters' arrival in Kingchow, they had to transfer to Pingliang urgently, as required by the Prefect, because the communists<sup>124</sup> lurked in ambush around and the city of Pingliang, which offered a little more security for being walled.

Sr. Modesta narrated in this way their stay in Kingchow and their accommodation, together with the rest of her Sisters, in their former house of Pingliang.

- *It took two days delay for us to reach Pingliang. Here we accommodated ourselves in our house, with our girls that were now religious.*

*They received us very well and they did not know what to do with us. They placed us with them in the cloister; in the refectory... We did everything with them.*

*In the meantime, the communists, surrounding the city and were trying to enter, although they were prevented by the great walls.*

*When those who were inside could no longer resist, the communists succeeded in opening the gates and entered the city. And while they were entering through one gate, we, in the company of the people, escaped through another gate.*<sup>125</sup>

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<sup>123</sup> Cfr. Noain, Modesta, *op. cit.*, p. 44.

<sup>124</sup> When World War II officially ended in the Pacific on August 15, 1945, the weak alliance between the army of the National Government of China and the army of the communists was quickly broken. The nationalists were slowly cornered until they escaped to Taiwan and the communists very quickly made itself the power in all provinces.

<sup>125</sup> Cfr. Noain, Modesta, *op. cit.*, p. 44.

## *Refugees in Mongolia*

- We<sup>126</sup> –continued narrating Sr. Modesta- *had the good fortune to find lodging, together with some Chinese, in an old truck that will bring us to Mongolia.*<sup>127</sup> *We were tightly packed “like sardines in a can.” Part of the night we spent parked in the highest peak of the tallest mountain in those parts, without eating and frozen by the cold. What a night! And during the day, the same, not eating and fearful because they told us that even there the communists had arrived and between us only a few kilometers away.*

*Finally, we arrived at a small village of Mongolia, with very few inhabitants, tiny one-storey houses and caves.*

*We seemed like the Holy Family looking for an inn. Finally, we found a tiny house that had only one room that looked like the stables back home, where the cows were. The people looked at us with resentment and the majority was saying: “Foreign devils!”*

*In the house where we were lodged, they treated us very well. The room had two “kan”. On one side, the priest and seminarians arranged themselves while on the other, we and the girls –some twenty of them- and almost nothing to appease our hunger.*

*We brought along with us few medicines, despite being told by the Prefect that it was useless to bring them, because we had to leave for Spain by Hanoi (Vietnam). What was the pain we felt! The medicines were few, although, for sure, we brought the best.*

*The meals we prepared were noodles, with wheat flour or of barley, that were made by the Chinese religious and were cooked with a little vinegar; it was easy to do.*

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<sup>126</sup> Sr. Marina concretely pointed out that four Capuchin priests, seminarians, and four local religious went with them (Galarza, Eugenia, *op. cit.*, p.9).

<sup>127</sup> It really was *Inner Mongolia* –the autonomous region of China- whose capital Hohhot is situated at 1000 kilometers from Pingliang. In the beginning, the Prefect had planned for them to transfer to this capital city (Galarza, Eugenia, *op. cit.*, p. 9) but they remained in a small village as soon as they crossed the frontier of this Autonomous Region.

*During the first days we went outside only when absolutely necessary and we were behind the house because there was no space for relaxation.*

*Then one day it just occurred to me to go to visit an old man who was nearby and that is when I saw an old woman come by carrying a bundle between her arms:*

- *What are you carrying; where are you going? I asked.*
- *I am carrying a baby boy who is sick and we have no medicine, she replied.*

*And we knew that it was their custom to throw children who were considered hopelessly sick to the dogs so that their evil spirits will not transfer to themselves, I told her to show me, and I took advantage of the while to pour water on a piece of cotton and –telling her that I was carrying a kind of an excellent medicine that will allow me to cure him. I baptized him.*

*I felt great joy and when I returned to the “kan” they noticed it so I told them what happened and told them that we better go out. And so, we did. Liberata, Marina, myself, and some seminarians went out... And the people came in a caravan following us. And while we treated them, the seminarians spoke to them, mixing their conversations with something about our religion.*

*As the days went by, zeal among us increased. The life of sacrifice, of poverty and of charity made us strong in our fraternity, because, despite what we were going through, no sad faces were ever seen. Thanks be to God that perfect joy reigned among us all!*

*Some days, we saw some selling meat –blacker than the color of our veils- but since the adage “for great hunger, there is no hard bread,” we ate it all the same and it tasted like ham to us. (This, however, was only for a few days).*

*One of the friars told the others: “Let not the Sisters go away, otherwise we will die of hunger.” (He was saying this because with the very little we earned from our treatments, we were bringing in something for everybody to be able to eat).*

*When we had already spent sixteen days there, we could no longer endure our clothes full of lice and we could not change. And when I saw Fr. Felix who came so contented, I told him:*

- *“What is happening? Why so happy?”*
- *“I threw away my shirt, it was not able to accommodate the lice anymore,” he answered.*

*We wore trousers like the Chinese women –but, of course, under our habits- and then Sr. Marina said to me:*

- *“Take your trousers off and give them to me, that I may deal with them a little.”*

*And the poor Sister did a real massacre on them, since there were not only lice but also nits.*

*When the days we spent there since our arrival reached seventeen, they informed us that we could now return to Pingliang. The joy we felt was indescribable!*

*We went very pleased for having been able to do something for the poor people there, including those we baptized that numbered around twelve and, among them, a muslim (something very difficult).*

*When we were already packing the four junks that each brought along, we asked each one whether they were ever hungry and all of them answered in the negative. Although the meals were very simple, all of us could satisfy our hunger.*

*We might add, so that it be seen how the Gospel truth was fulfilled, we still had 1,500 pesetas extra.<sup>128</sup> As the Gospel says, “If the Lord cares for so many things, how will He not care for us?”<sup>129</sup> He only wants us to love Him and have confidence in Him.<sup>130</sup>*

## ***In Pingliang once again***

On our return from Mongolia, the Sisters remained a little in Pingliang, but Sr. Modesta, restless by temperament and always disposed to initiate

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<sup>128</sup> Evidently, the *peseta* was equivalent to its value exchange in 1948.

<sup>129</sup> Cfr. Matthew 6:26.

<sup>130</sup> Cfr. Noain, Modesta, *op. cit.*, pp. 44-46.

new activities without being intimidated by the dangers that were rampant in the region, wanted to go immediately to Kingchow to retrieve some important papers that were left there and this decision could cost her serious unpleasantness, as she herself later would relate:

- *When I was already in Kingchow gathering the papers and other things, Fray Isidro called me and said:*

- *"Hurry up with utmost haste because the communists are already nearby. Go at once. As soon as I retrieve the chalices, I will be in hiding."*

*So, the first thing I did was to put on a Chinese dress for what may happen. The young man who accompanied me prepared the cart and we left. And as it was already late afternoon, we stayed at our old house in Paishui. Shortly after, they tell us that the communists were very close. As I was so tired, I told myself: "Let whatever be done according to the Lord's will," and laid down straightaway. About two hours after, shootings were heard and the priest of the Station told me: "We have to leave now. The young man is already outside with the cart ready."*

*We left, and when we have traversed 2 or 3 kilometers, we saw on the left side of the mountain a flock of goats and a scattering of sheep. And since in China sheep and goats never go together, I was filled with fear before such a strange situation. And so, I prayed then the rosary. The young man asked me:*

- *"Sister, it looks like you are afraid today."*
  - *"And what about you? I answered."*
  - *"I am too," -he answered- "but your lips are trembling, as I have never seen you before."*
  - *"It is because it seems to me" -I said- "that we are in deep dangerous trouble and anyone can just see us clearly from the road."*

*Some kilometers further, the priest reached us as he was going by bicycle, and he told us that what we saw what appeared*

*to us as a flock was really the communists who had attacked Paishui and Pingliang that night.*

*The priest, rounding the river, reached Pingliang ahead of us, because he was using a bicycle. And when I arrived, the Prefect said to me:*

- *"I cannot explain why they did not take you a prisoner yet."*

*We let a few days pass with our girls who were now nuns in Pingliang and afterwards the three of us returned to Kingchow.<sup>131</sup>*

## ***Two return to Spain***

Although, after those great and almost continuous scares that constrained them to take refuge in Mongolia, the Sisters were able to return to their respective Missions and continued their daily duties despite the prevailing insecurity, but this situation could not be extended much more time.

Before the imminent danger that threatened the Missions, some Sisters, aware of the worsening situation, established communication with the Superiors and, as Sr. Marina describes it:

- *They sent from Rome their passports to travel to all countries except Russia. And the General Superior, Sr. M<sup>a</sup> Luisa, ordered us to return to Spain.*

*We informed the Fr. Prefect and he answered that he had no money to buy our return-tickets. But, a little later, he informed us:*

- *"Sisters, I am not in a position to take responsibility for whatever may happen. Who wants to return to Spain, is free to do so."*

*The atmosphere turned tense among us. No one wanted to return. But I (Marina) was thinking:*

- *"I do not know whether I am doing good or not, but then I know that I obey my Superiors."*

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<sup>131</sup> Cfr. Noain, Modesta, *op. cit.*, pp. 46-47.

*Finally, Imelda and myself left for Shanghai, to retrieve the documentation necessary for our return.*

*We took the plane of the K.L.M. (Dutch) company which left us in Rome by the end of August, 1948.*

*When we arrived Massamagrell, Sr. M<sup>a</sup> Luisa asked me:*

- *“Where are the others? Why have they not come?”*

*I gave this answer:*

- *“Ask them themselves. They could have very well come with us.”<sup>132</sup>*

### ***Sifengchen, the last bastion***

On account of the Prefect's proposal to return to Spain that he made earlier –Sr. Modesta recounts- four Sisters –Leontina, Liberata, Agustina and I- wanted to remain and so we wrote the General to ask permission:

- *We were disposed to undergo whatever, instead of abandoning all these poor people and the General gave us the permission.*

Since those who returned –continued Sr. Modesta her narrative- were one from each community, we were left with only two in each Mission Station, to attend to the Dispensary, the people we had gathered (old men and women, children, the sick ...), in short, everyone whom no one wanted.

We continued working, then, one time in Sifengchen and another time in Kingchow alternately, but as everything was going from bad to worse, we decided to come together in only one house.

Those in Kingchow deemed that choosing our house was a better option, since we were just beside the road while that of Sifengchen was still a day's journey from the road and so in case of difficulty it would have been impossible to come out of that corner. But they talked with the friar and since he deemed it more convenient for him to have them there while they

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<sup>132</sup> Cfr. Galarza, Eugenia, *op. cit.*, pp. 9-10.

themselves did not have much liking to abandon the place, Liberata and I ceded to them, thinking:

- *Finally, we go to where they are although we were sure that it would not be long before we traverse the same road on our way back to Spain. And we said Spain because though Sr. Gloria was bent on bringing us to Venezuela, the friars made us give up and be against the idea saying that the priests and brothers have already stayed for twenty years without seeing us and that later we would go anywhere.*<sup>133</sup>

So, in Sifengchen –continued Sr. Modesta- one by one the works were being closed down, the schools, the catechumenate, and so forth ... There were no more resources to maintain even our very selves.

Thanks to the Dispensary, and the home medicine we were manufacturing and others that rendered something, we pulled along though we suffered very much, because whatever were seeing, we could no longer take in anybody since we no longer had resources to maintain them.

Moreover, in order to be able to go out and treat others we needed a special pass (safe conduct). In the end, everything was turning really very bad.

Sr. Agustina, corroborating how delicate and dangerous the situation in Sifengchen was becoming, wrote:

- *The boundary lines established by the communists was 20 lis – about forty kilometers- from our residence. Our lives were endangered. The government ordered the Muslim soldiers to protect the “good Sisters” as they called us. The sons of the Prophet had a high regard for us and were ready to die, before the communists could touch a fiber of our clothing.*

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<sup>133</sup> Cfr. Noain, Modesta, *op. cit.*, p. 47.



*The Muslim, in hand-to-hand combat, repulsed many communist assaults until completely destroying them by defeating them. But the danger did not disappear except temporarily.*"<sup>134</sup>

Despite such a very dark panorama, Sisters Leontina and Liberata still conducted a course on Pediatrics for a group of nurses from the Red Cross, which was highly praised by the super-Mandarin, who was present at the closing of the course.<sup>135</sup>

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<sup>134</sup> Cfr. Sesma, Agustina de, in *Surgam I* (1949), pp. 261-262.

<sup>135</sup> Cfr. Vives, Juan Antonio, *50 years of history. Province of the Holy Family*, p. 143.

# *Realities and Dreams*



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Before bidding goodbye to the four Sisters who still remained in China, for their journey back to Spain, it is important to gather here and now some of the realities they went through in the twenty years of the Congregation's presence in this great land of Asia, and also some of the ideals that impelled them to act and the dreams which, from the beginning until the end, accompany them, although they did not see them fulfilled.

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## *In defense of women*

Already during their trip going to China, the Sisters of the first expedition strongly felt impacted by noticing the treatment received by women in some of the ports where the steamship docked.

That impact, nevertheless, increased even more when they came to know up close the Chinese culture that they chanced to know. And, of course, they did everything they could to uplift the dignity of the women and their role in society. These following three testimonies that Sr. Modesta records in her Diary are proofs of this:

- *We were loved very much, both by Christians as well as pagans and even the Muslim who used to frequent our Dispensary.*

*The Muslim did not allow newly married women to go about until a year has passed (not even to the Dispensary) and so asked us for home visits. But we, on being aware of their situation, denied going to their homes and succeeded in letting them come to the Dispensary.*

*One time, I dared to go to the ghetto where the Muslim lived and they even showed me their mosque, the customs they followed and even until where women were allowed to join.*

*I entered a house and there I was with the 6 or 7 women who were there. The religious leader or chief saluted me with much reverence and afterwards blessed all of the family who knelt around him in great respect.*

*We established friendship. Then even the women asked me a model of our veils, since they admired the fact that our hair could not be seen. And this is what they wanted because for every hair that could be seen they received a beating.*

*What a slavery! Everybody against the poor unfortunate women.*<sup>136</sup>

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<sup>136</sup> Cfr. Noain, Modesta, *op. cit.*, pp. 26-27.

- *One day, we assisted at a childbirth. The woman in labor was kneeling on a kan and gave birth to a baby girl amid great hemorrhage.*

*Since the newly born was a girl, they left the mother in one corner of the kan abandoning her with the purpose of not preparing and giving her anything to eat.*

*The first thing we did was to give the mother an injection to stop the hemorrhage. The mother of the newborn had 15 years of age.*

*Everybody was against the newborn and, the mother shielded her in an attempt to protect her.*

*But if the newborn was a boy, everything seemed propitious.*

*We asked them to give us the baby, but they refused. Where would the poor baby end up? It was easy to think that she would end up as meat for the dogs.<sup>137</sup>*

Sr. Marina also left a testimony of how sad was the condition of the women there and how the Sisters struggled to defend them since childhood:

- *The girls, generally speaking, were meat for the dogs, hawks or of a fiery oven. It is something horrendous. And yet the Chinese considered it a normal and natural thing. Well, really frightening. But unfortunately, this was their culture, customs, and mentality. The woman is tremendously discriminated in relation to men. It is something terrifying.*

*If a boy is born, everything is feast, happiness, and noisy celebration. But if the newborn is a girl, they say: "A dead girl has been born." And it is not for the fact that she was stillborn, but as a sign of contempt and scorn they add the qualifying word "dead" and give her the minimum nourishment until she is sold. If they are small, for 20 kilograms of wheat and, if they are bigger and well, they exchanged her for a donkey or a horse.*

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<sup>137</sup> Cfr. Noain, Modesta, *op. cit.*, p. 26.

*Often they asked us:*

- *"How is it that your girls are so pretty?"*

*We give this answer:*

- *"They eat whatever they like, because they are growing."*

*But this fact never entered their thinking.*

*There (in China), a woman cannot go alone in the streets, not even when they are old. They hold a male child in their hand, not a girl by mistake.<sup>138</sup>*

### ***A dream that could not be realized***

On their trip going to China, the Sisters were already exclaiming more than once: "We have to found a Novitiate in Kansu. Why can't the Chinese put on our habit of the Capuchin Tertiary Sisters so that later, they will be sowers of good and of consolation together with us?"

And God wanted that, even before a month was over of their stay in Pingliang, the seed of the religious vocation would fall on the heart of a young Chinese girl. She was a girl rescued by the Sisters when she was about to be sold by her parents. Her name was Maria.

Of course, the Sisters were very pleased with this first vocation. And in the meanwhile, Maria played and entertained herself together with the other girls of the Holy Infancy; prayed, studied, and learned, but never left off dreaming always of the same, and the sisters took great care to encourage her spiritually and to give her an exquisite education in conformity with the ideal of her dreams."<sup>139</sup>

This hope and dream of the Missionary Sisters in China, of being able to open a Novitiate of the Congregation and to look forward to a future with native vocations, could not, however, be converted into a happy reality.

One historians of the Congregation summarized what happened:

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<sup>138</sup> Cfr. Galarza, Eugenia, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

<sup>139</sup> Cfr. *Verdad y Caridad*, 1930, pp. 281-282.

- *There was a plan for vocation promotion, since not a few girls in contact with the Sisters, manifested their desire to become Capuchin Tertiary Sister. But this seemed premature to the missionary friars, as well as to the Government of the Congregation, so that these candidates for the Novitiate were directed to the Novitiate of a Diocesan Institute founded by a German priest.*<sup>140</sup>

The protagonists –the Sisters who were in China- relate, in this way, the disillusionment that they experienced:

- *Fr. Peter –wrote Sr. Modesta- was in-charge of bringing girls to the Diocesan Novitiate, and like the previous Superior –Sr. Guadalupe- the girls did not trust, he was tranquil. In fact, Sr. Guadalupe told me that the girls will never be like us, that they must be of another category.<sup>141</sup> I could not stand listening to such commentaries. And I do know that she wrote something of this kind to the other Superiors.*

*The case is that, when I became Superior in 1935, the girls poured out to me and told me:*

- *“If we cannot be part of yours, you come with us, with the same things you do, and we will take care of you when you grow old.”*  
*Fr. Peter, on seeing that the girls were charmed how we were and how we worked and that they still wanted be one of us, said to me one day:*
- *“Do not speak to them of your Congregation.”*  
*And I answered him:*

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<sup>140</sup> Cfr. Iriarte, Lazaro, *op. cit.*, p. 180.

<sup>141</sup> This temptation to downgrade native vocations and to intend –against the will that Father Founder expressed - to make “class distinctions” among the sisters, unfortunately, was not new in the Congregation. Also, in Colombia –where, by chance, Sr Guadalupe also was- had a similar attempt. And this, sadly always happens that, missionaries, conceited in their own culture, are not capable of incarnating themselves truly in the culture of the people they go to evangelize, but never to colonize and much less to produce clones (Cfr. Vives, Juan Antonio, History of the Commissariat of Colombia, p. 129. Notes 16 and 17).

- “Look, Father, it is impossible for a good daughter to desist speaking of her mother.”

*But the priest continued making propaganda of the Diocesan Congregation, even to the point of placing photographs of this Congregation in the College.*<sup>142</sup>

- *In China* –Sr. Marina notes for her part- we had vocations and good ones too. With the blood of martyrs running through their veins. These girls were brought to us from another neighboring Province where it had not rained for some years and so that they will not die of hunger, they were interned in our Mission when they had 10 and 11 years of age. All of them were Catholic and the grandfathers of some of them were martyrs for their faith in Christ.

*The girls, naturally, wanted to be part of us since we were the first Sisters they knew.*

*It was useless, neither to them nor to us. Who commands, commands. As usual! And so, they were brought to another native Congregation and... there no more to say... But one has to pass them to value happened.*<sup>143</sup>

## ***Missionary little flowers***

In all circumstances of life, where people with simplicity and the heart of a child –not childish—act and who are impelled to do good, there will be always scenes of sublime enchantment of the *little flowers*, performed by the first followers of St. Francis of Assisi.

During their stay in China, the Capuchin Tertiary Sisters likewise, were protagonists or else were witnesses, of some -or if one prefers to call them, anecdotes- that by their nature, do not need to situate themselves necessarily into the coordinates of space and time, and for this reason are gathered here in unitary fashion.

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<sup>142</sup> Cfr. Noain, Modesta, *op. cit.*, p. 35. See also p.39.

<sup>143</sup> Cfr. Galarza, Eugenia, *op. cit.*, pp. 5-6.

## *Adventures, crossing rivers*

During their transfers the sister had to cross rivers that were swollen:

*In one occasion, we were going each on three horsebacks and one, on a small ass, and upon arriving the river, the ass broke away from the horses and went by the shore. Frightened, I thought that something would happen to the Sister, since the horses have already gone into the river and the water reached until mid-stomach and we got wet. Suddenly, we saw the ass in the distance wetting only its legs and that the Sister went ahead more peacefully than we were.*

*In another occasion, the men carried us on their shoulders, because the cart got stuck in the middle of the current, unable to extricate itself and the water up to the midsection of everything. And we laughed at the fat ones who caused the men who carried them to stoop down.*

*The third occasion was scary. It happened that we reached the middle of the river, almost near the current that was by the river bank and the young man who was guiding the cart told us: “Suniç –Sisters- we are facing a tremendous danger. We have to climb up to the plateau without road, and we cannot turn back. If we do not succeed to reach the top, there is danger that, sliding down, we will be swept away by the current.” What a difficulty! But we had so deep a devotion to St. Joseph, everything we asked help for, he would help us as he did so many times. The young man urged the horse strongly and the horse, really out of breath, could not reach the top. Suddenly, a Chinaman takes him by the bridle and sustained him, thus solving the difficult situation. It was a question of a few seconds. We wanted to thank him, but we saw him no more. Thank you, my God!*

*A fourth fluvial adventure we underwent on January 29, 1949, when the last four who stayed behind in China, left for Spain. Leontina and I were going in one cart and Liberata and Agustina on another. And, passing a totally frozen river, the cart on which Liberata and Agustina went rolled over an area that was less frozen and one wheel of the cart*



sank, and the cart remained lopsided on one side, and I said laughing: "It was because of the weight of Sr. Agustina that made this happen."<sup>144</sup>

### ***The miraculous water***

*The day when I was going alone to do some curative treatment in the jail for men, what misery! I have never seen something similar, it happened that they made me enter a house shaped like a pagoda. How could I ever imagine that a family of such high rank would be living in that house! What a house! Even the kan (bed) had fur coverings!*

*They made me sit beside a very elegant woman –completely Chinese in her style with much ceremony- they made me drink tea from a silver cup, and they left me alone with that woman and she told me: "Sister, would you look at what is happening to me. I have a furuncle that is not getting healed, we have had recourse to innumerable places and they all say that they cannot cure me and it is now seven years since I have this ..."*

*Within me, I was thinking: "Lord, what about if You and Your Mother do nothing ..." Then it just occurred to me: "Look," –I told the woman- "here I carry with me water in a flask that many times has had successes, if you wish, I cut your hair a little and pour this water over it (she had the furuncle on her head)."*

*And she, very happy, immediately answered: "Yes."*

*I took the flask of holy water and, with much faith, poured a little saying at the same time: "If He wills it, He will do it."*

*And He did so well that I no longer remembered about the furuncle the whole day.*

*Early the next morning the priest came over and asked me:*

*- "Whom did you cure yesterday?"*

*Almost made me tremble because I treated more than 150 patients in the Infirmary.*

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<sup>144</sup> Cfr. Noain, Modesta, *op. cit.*, p. 19.

- “No,” –he answered- “it is about a woman who had a furuncle on her head.”

*I looked out into the street and it was full of placards, praising what was done by the Christian physician.*

*When I read the caption about the doctor, I thought: “Yes, yes, a doctor but in donkeology.”*

*But God makes use of the most useless in countless times.*

*Three days later, they came with a huge difficulty, saying that a stick transfixes the stomach of a young boy and the stick made two holes, and that he was very ill because for sure it perforated his intestines. And they entreated me to, please; pour the same water because they believed that he was without remedy.*

*That gave me so much pain that I poured it on the wound. I could not tell what happened to that boy because I did not see him again, but what I can assure is that he was cured, thanks to God.<sup>145</sup>*

### ***Other miracles of faith***

*While I was treating a sick man, I noticed that an old woman was looking at me intently*

*and suddenly came towards me and holding her hand on my breast said: “What do you have in there?”*

*And I was momentarily taken aback and almost felt fright and she added: “You are not like other persons.” “I feel that you have something that I am not able to understand.”*

*I answered her: “The only thing is that I am a Christian and you not. This is what distinguishes me.”*

*Very early the next day, she showed up with a kind of small candles and told me:*

- “Light and burn these to your God, the God of Christians.”

*I added: “The God whom you think made the firmament and all other things in heaven, is the same God as our God.”<sup>146</sup>*

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<sup>145</sup> Cfr. Noain, Modesta, *op. cit.*, pp. 20-21.

*It did not take long before she came back and began to be catechized and became a Christian. But as she was already advanced in years, she could not assimilate the lessons of the catechism. The only thing she learned was loving the three Persons of the Blessed Trinity. And when the other catechumens –around 40 of them and everyone in his own style—made her suffer by their bullying, instead of complaining, she just entered the chapel and repeated the “Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit” as many times as possible and the “Hail Mary” (which were the only prayers she learned by memory) and returned from there so happy.*

*She was baptized in her great fervor and became a really good Christian. As I was then in a very precarious health-situation, she believed that I would die young and only asked to go to heaven together with me. She was a delightful old lady. Even at home, it was her lot to suffer alone because all of her family members were Buddhists.<sup>147</sup>*

*One day, we arranged a small and very poor room and set up our first Dispensary. The Chinese believed that we were medical doctors and so fully trusted us. Leontina, one of the nurses, knew very little Chinese when we began to treat patients and so many funny situations happened to her... It was really a miracle that for 20 years that we were doing the job of nurses and treated thousands, we never encountered a serious harmful accident. We did everything for free. How happy we were! We never expected recompense.<sup>148</sup>*

## ***A Baptism of Desire***

*One day a woman called us urgently because she was feeling very bad and wanted to be baptized. She had four sons and the four held their mother fast so that she would not be baptized by us. We could do nothing. She*

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<sup>146</sup> These words of Modesta spontaneously remind us of Paul’s discourse in the Arcopagus when he was preaching to Athenians about the Unknown God (Cfr. Acts 17:22-28)

<sup>147</sup> Cfr. Noain, Modesta, *op. cit.*, p. 21.

<sup>148</sup> Cfr. Noain, Modesta, *op. cit.*, p. 16

*remained weeping. When we met the priest, he told us: "Be at peace for that woman has already received the baptism of desire."<sup>149</sup>*

### ***Caring for a seven-month old***

*On one occasion, we took a seven-month old baby girl whose family wanted to strangle her because her mother almost died giving birth to her. We brought her with us and we had nothing to give her.*

*We bought a she-goat, whose udders were almost invisible. We milked her among the three of us who were in the house. The little we succeeded to extract, we put in a flask for a double boil and with that and broth from rice we slowly fed her. After a year, the child completely changed and was cured. We were getting up nights to give her sustenance*

*...*

*A priest of the Mission bought a heifer, so that the priest and the brothers would have milk. And since he bought it a little after we recovered the little girl..., we were able to have milk for her and for every one of us for a good length of time.<sup>150</sup>*

### ***From Bride to Novice***

*One day some Christians together with their daughter came for her wedding (here the custom is that the bride and groom did not see each other until the time of the wedding itself).*

*The girl, however, had no wish of getting married, because on seeing the Sisters, she felt the pull of the religious life.*

*This girl belonged to a Christian family with long roots. Their grandfathers have been martyred, like many other Christians.<sup>151</sup>*

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<sup>149</sup> Cfr. Noain, Modesta, *op. cit.*, p. 41.

<sup>150</sup> Cfr. Noain, Modesta, *op. cit.*, pp. 41-42.

<sup>151</sup> The time of the martyrs of Tianfu was probably during the 1900 persecution (see above, pp. 37-38).

*When the time for the wedding arrived, she –already dressed as a bride- did not move from her seat at the moment of being presented to the groom.*

*I told this to the missionary priest –who was pained by this-: “Since the bride and the groom do not know each other, leave the girl in peace and give the groom another of the girls we have here and who are tremendously eager to get married.” And so, it was done.*

*The girl remained with us and became a religious, although she had much to suffer because she wanted to be one of us yet our case was never resolved because, as the Congregation was under the jurisdiction of the Pope and not of the Diocesan bishop, there was a great difficulty in this.<sup>152</sup>*

### ***With Mao’s Sister***

*One day we attended to a wealthy woman who was a pagan. She had a diseased womb and exuding a foul odor. It was the feast day of the Immaculate. While we were treating her, we spoke to her of our religion and of baptism...*

*And in a certain moment, she confided to me: “I want to be baptized, but my family should never know.”*

*Afterwards she asked for a small medal and we gifted her one of St. Therèse of Lisieux.*

*Seeing her so happy and not complaining, the family did not know how to thank me enough.*

*After two days, she became worse and they called me. She was already in her last agony. We waited and arranged her a little and removed the medal. Shortly after, she expired and we were ready to enshroud her together with another of Mao’s sisters who was giving us what we had to put on her. Among other clothing, we put seven (7) trousers, same number of coats. It seemed that we will never get to the end.*

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<sup>152</sup> Cfr. Noain, Modesta, *op. cit.*, p. 25.

*The greatest event was that, as we were about to enshroud her, the whole room was suffused by a strong perfume of roses.*

*The fact made us understand that St. Therese was with us and, from heaven, continued to do her mission on earth...*<sup>153</sup>

### ***Tragedy in the family***

*On one occasion, I had to go to a far distant house and could not return to the Mission that night. I was going alone with a catechist.*

*In the house where we stayed, there were some thirty in the family and on entering I saw that on a small table they had written the short time that each generation lived.*

*I began to put the thermometer on each one and there was no one who was without fever. All of them were infected with tuberculosis. They looked like walking skeletons. What pain they gave me! Among them were four children whom I baptized and died. I cared for the mother until the break of dawn. Finally, I laid down for a while; in the meantime, the catechist spoke to them of our religion ... They were insistent that we take breakfast and I resisted because I wanted to arrive home early to assist at Mass and receive holy communion. At the end, I had to cede because, if I did not, it would look showing disdain or contempt. Breakfast consisted of a cup of cooked canary grass.*<sup>154</sup>

### ***In a very strange place***

*One day they called on us to attend to a woman who was feeling very badly ill, and it fell on me to go alone.*

*I found her sitting on the kan and two other women with fans, giving her air, but what really caught my attention was a rather very strange man, dressed scandalously, who was there. But what even strange*

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<sup>153</sup> Cfr. Noain, Modesta, *op. cit.* pp. 27-28.

<sup>154</sup> Cfr. Noain, Modesta, *op. cit.*, p. 23. The conclusion drawn from this history in which the sister left off her devotion in order to exercise charity, evokes those words of St. Vincent de Paul regarding the case of leaving one's prayer time to attend to the poor, saying: "leaving God for God" (cfr SVP IX, 1125).

*was to hear the sound of a small bell, which was used to call someone. I immediately felt something very strange that I was scared and managed to exit from there as quickly as possible.*

*I resolved not to return there anymore, but, since the missionary priest had commissioned me, I decided to return but choose as companion one Sister who was quite angelic... On entering the house, we heard the same noises as before... Having come out, the Sister told me: “Never bring me here again.” I spoke with the missionary priest and we never returned.<sup>155</sup>*

### ***The mystery of the veils***

*We suffered the cold of very low temperatures because we did not have adequate clothes or footwear. Moreover, with those veils, hardened with starch, so cold and hard, with which we had to wear even to bed many times, when we were among the families we were visiting. And since the women were so simple, they asked us:*

- *“Were you born already wearing those?”<sup>156</sup>*

### ***Houses that crumble***

*We had the house braced, because it was falling down. One day, while in prayer, the wall facing a ravine fell away from us leaving only the essential: the Lord in the Tabernacle.*

*We immediately restored the wall with clay and straw and... until next time!<sup>157</sup>*

*Another day, as we were going to change the ornaments in the church, we heard a very strong thunderous sound like that of an exploding bomb, and we verified that the roof –made of straw and paper- of the whole church crumbled because of the weight of countless doves that built their nests there. We gathered those poor frozen birds and preserved them*

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<sup>155</sup> Cfr. Noain, Modesta, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

<sup>156</sup> Cfr. Noain, Modesta, *op. cit.*, p. 48.

<sup>157</sup> Cfr. Noain, Modesta, *op. cit.*, p. 33.

with vinegar. Divine Providence thus provided us good food for the winter.<sup>158</sup>

### ***Sharing a meal with a dead***

*One time, I went out to treat the sick and it got very late and, on reaching near the city, it was surrounded by communists and I could not enter. So, I remained without eating the whole day, and as I was not feeling very well, had to stay in a house where there was a wake and so had to pass the night where the dead was. And there was abundance of food prepared for the journey of the dead, and I said to myself: "Despite their having done all their superstitious rituals over these foods, I will not let the night pass without getting a ration to satisfy my hunger and remedy my fainting." And so, I did. At a moment of distracting, I extended my arm, and took a piece of bread, peeled it of its hard crust with its decorations and ate it. How true is it that "for a good hunger, there is no hard bread!"*

*In the following morning, I arrived home and found the Sisters in fright for what might have happened to me. I said to them: "Do you not see how the Lord saves us from so much danger? It was like that every day and every moment in the long and hard winters."<sup>159</sup>*

### ***On the edge of a forced repatriation***

*China didn't go down well to me and many times suffering from fever... And in one of the crises, Sr. Catalina of Sesma came to me saying that she was going back to Spain, because she could not go well with the Superior. Finally, they brought me to Shanghai to a hospital owned by the T. T. Missionaries and I was recuperating there for a month (the Superior wanted to send me also back to Spain) but I could get back to the Mission.*

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<sup>158</sup> Cfr. Noain, Modesta, *op. cit.*, p. 32.

<sup>159</sup> Cfr. Noain, Modesta, *ibid.*, p. 32.



*This pleased me immensely, because I had the vocation of a missionary and my life was completely given to the Mission.*<sup>160</sup>

### ***Testimony of love***

*How much we loved one another! Our round table discussions were done during meal times. There we said things, we made plans, we told what each one underwent and, when a letter from Spain arrived –in four years we received nothing- whoever family it was from, everyone listened to its reading, as though it concerned our own family.*

*And the girls admired this, in seeing the love that we had for one another, they told us that one day they also wanted to be like us and so were very hopeful of becoming religious.*<sup>161</sup>

### ***Taming a little wild monster***<sup>162</sup>

*Among our girls, there was one who had a very difficult character and on one occasion, when Sr. Milagro brought her a bowl of meal, that she did not think was according to her taste and, taking it, threw it with all her might so that its contents ended up in Sister's habit.*

*The Sister, very disgusted, told me: "Look how Francisca did to me, what shall I do?"*

*I said to her: "Sister, what I would do, but which I do not command you to do, is the following: without cleaning myself, such as you are now, I will prepare another bowl of something else and bring it to her with much more kindness than before. I know that it will cost me much more..."*

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<sup>160</sup> Cfr. Noain, Modesta, *op. cit.*, p. 33.

<sup>161</sup> Cfr. Noain, Modesta, *op. cit.*, p. 25.

<sup>162</sup> This little flower reminds, with breathless spontaneity, the Franciscan story of the *conversion of the robbers* (cfr *Legend of Perugia*, 115 and the *Mirror of Perfection*, 66) or else, if so desired, the little flower of the *Taming of the wolf of Gubbio* (in *The Little Flowers*, 21).

*And Sister did as I said, she brought her another bowl with much kindness and won her over. The girl recognized her bad behavior at the moment and did not give any more trouble, and she told everyone how good the sister was in regards to her.*<sup>163</sup>

### ***The joys of Christmas and Easter***

*During greater feasts –Christmas and Easter- a multitude of families came to the Mission. The men and boys lodged in the priests' house while the women and girls in ours.*

*Those days entailed more tasks for us, but we enjoyed very much with those people who were the poorest among the population.*

*During these feasts the catechumens received baptism. How impressive it was for us to see so many people enter the church ranging from the 80 years old to young people. This made us forget our sacrifices and our fatigue.*

*When the families arrived, many of them travelled by donkeys and resembled the Holy Family, searching for lodgings.*<sup>164</sup>

### ***Adventures of Sr. Liberata***

*One time that she had to go to do treatments at home, they brought a mule for her to ride, but when they came to a river with deep water, she did not trust to go through but went through the bridge on foot. The young man, who was accompanying her, assumed airs of being a good horseman, mounted the mule and, in the middle of the bridge, the mule took fright and threw himself and the young man into the river. Everything ended up all right, as it provided a motive for holy mirth.*

*Another day she went out, it took her seven days to return and we feared that something could have happened to her, but what happened was that*

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<sup>163</sup> Cfr. Noain, Modesta, *op. cit.*, p. 30.

<sup>164</sup> Cfr. Noain, Modesta, *op. cit.*, pp. 22-23.

*they brought her from cave to cave, to do treatment, amid an affection and great respect, from the men as well as the rest of the family. She also performed many baptisms. And we, Sisters, felt great joy to see her appear very much “alive and kicking.”*

*On another occasion, another mule was brought to her and the boy who was driving it was careless, the mule was scared and she was left with her feet hooked on the mule and her head and part of her body on the ground. She, however, kept it to herself so that we would not scold the poor Chinese. That's why they loved her so much.*

*In another occasion, when Srs. Liberata and Marina went out to attend to our patients, they came back all drenched like “wet chickens.” We had them change clothes immediately, while they were trembling from the cold. But, despite everything, they were so pleased because they had climbed an embankment, making holes with their hands to put their foot because they slipped, but having succeeded to reach the top they found a baby boy there near death. With joy of having saved a soul, anything was bearable. The small glass of (wine) that I gave them also helped them warm up.”<sup>165</sup>*

### ***A baptism that became famous***

*That was the time I felt really pained and disappointed because the Capuchin friars did not put anything in their magazine about the Sisters. So taking the opportunity when one of them (Berardo) came over with a list of persons to be baptized by us “in article mortis,” I told him: “It is all right, we baptize them but it has never passed your mind to write or put something about the women missionaries, nor about our Congregation, in your magazine. We also want that young people to come to know our existence and so that we may have personnel who will take our place.”*

*And he answered me: “That would surely appear in more than 2,000 magazines.” The next day, he came bringing with him a camera and took*

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<sup>165</sup> Cfr. Noain, Modesta, *op. cit.*, p. 32.

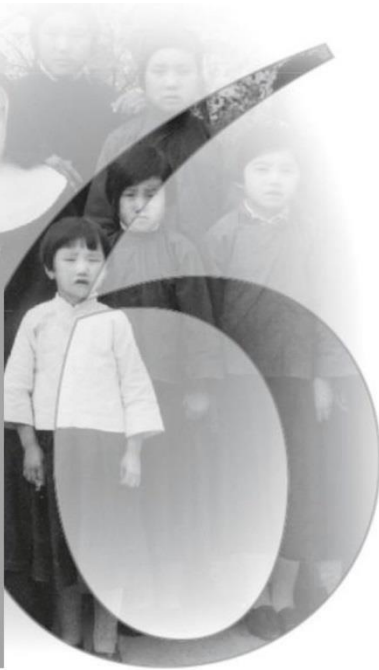
*some photographs. Among those photos, was a picture of me baptizing a baby girl who was dying? This picture came out so well that it won a prize in Rome and I think that they even put it in Castel Gandolfo. It came out in more than 2,000 magazines of the Propaganda Fide, in covers and in calendars. And thus, it caused not a few vocations, including in Spain.*<sup>166</sup>

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<sup>166</sup> Cfr. Noain, Modesta, *op. cit.*, p. 31. The photograph that Sr. Modesta refers to can be seen in the Album of Photographs Included as an Appendix to this book.

# *Intoning an “until next time”*

## Chapter



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With an accelerated crescendo, everything was turning so ugly that “from Rome came an order to retreat, although it was said that the friars will remain a little longer in order not to leave everything all of a sudden.”

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The last four Sisters who remained in China, heeding the order of Superiors, got ready to abandon Sifengchen, their last missionary bastion. The Superior of this community relates the moments of goodbye in this way:

- *Finally, we decided to leave. What a suffering so terrible at leaving those poor defenseless people!*

*Five of the children whom we saved at newborn and were now four or five years of age asked us:*

- *“Where are you going?”*

*We felt brokenhearted. It was a freezing January 23, 1949. They prepared for us two old carts with wheels very far apart so that they might not overturn in those roads covered with snow (with temperatures of 28 and 30 degrees below zero).*

*We placed two in each cart and when the people saw us take our places, they broke in tears and cried like children.*

*When we arrived to a plain area, we met the good Fr. Fernando of Dima who came out to bid us goodbye.*

*After a while from separating from Fr. Fernando, we got to a river that was completely frozen. And we felt very much afraid because the horses were slipping and upon reaching a part that was not totality frozen- that the ice was not thick enough- one of the wheels of the cart on which rode the heavier Sisters sank. And I, on seeing the cart tilting to one side and the frightened faces they had, felt laughing. These distressed ones were thinking who would be able to help in that deserted place and the weather. We did see only wolves and other hungry animals roaming around. What made the situation less sinister was that we were travelling in two*

*carts and accompanied by the two young men who took care of us.  
How kind they were towards us! Thank You, God!*<sup>167</sup>

From Sifengchen, they arrived in Pingliang where they gathered at the tomb of the two Sisters who will remain there forever as living witnesses of what had been the missionary adventure of the Congregation and as a sign of hope for an eventual return in the future.

From Pingliang, accompanied by Fr. Eduardo of Legaria, they began their journey back to Spain on the 27<sup>th</sup> day of the same year, 1949.

In the first stage, they arrived Kingchow, from where the four who remained left for Sifengchen some months before in order to consolidate forces. And from Kingchow they directed themselves to Sianfu, in the province of Sensi, by a bus liner.

On February 2, they left Sianfu by plane to Shanghai. Here they made a stopover of a few days and attended a celebration presided by the Papal Delegate and, at the end of the celebration of the Mass they spoke with him and, carried away by the pain of abandoning those poor people, told him:

- *Allow us to remain here, to return as soon as possible, to our beloved Mission, since the four of us are decidedly eager for that, with the help of God. Such was the affection we felt for those poor people ...*

*We answered, however, that it was impossible because the missionaries were already abandoning all the Provinces, before the unstoppable communist advance.*<sup>168</sup>

## ***Definitive exit from China***

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<sup>167</sup> Cfr. Noain, Modesta, *op. cit.*, p. 48.

<sup>168</sup> Cfr. Noain, Modesta, *ibid.*, p. 48.

From Shanghai, they travelled again by plane to Saigon (Vietnam):

- *On alighting from the plane in Saigon –narrates Sr. Modesta- we experienced a notable change of weather since we passed from 28 degrees below zero cold to a plainly summer temperature. And we were still wearing winter clothes!*

*We were shocked to see the local nuns in the house where we lodged going about barefoot and with habits with low necklines.<sup>169</sup>*

After a short stopover in Saigon, they arrived, with a very short stopover in Abyssinia (Ethiopia,) in Tripoli (Libya), where we were accommodated in a very elegant hotel, which caused a deep impression on the Sisters:

- *The walls of the dining hall of this hotel were all of mirrors. What difficulty we had in the midst of all those elegant people!*

*We were commenting about ourselves: “We have become truly Chinese because of our yellow color.” It seemed unreal, but it was so.*

*The stewardesses were very kind with us since they supported us by the arm so that we might not fall. And they were very attentive in everything. I think that we resembled the shepherds at the grotto of Bethlehem.*

*In the dining hall we were intently observing how the elegant people took their food and we saw that they ate more ordinarily than us. They served us soup with tomato (tomatoes with sparrows). We waited to see what those elegant people did and all of them held the birds in their hands. And they did the same with the lamb chops that they later gave us. They also served fruit and coffee.*

*How desirous were we to be alone in order to converse peacefully!*

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<sup>169</sup> Cfr. Noain, Modesta, *ibid.* p. 48.



*From the dining hall they brought us to another hall and close by, each one of us was given her own room.*

*We closed the door of the hall and said:*

- *“We are on our own now. Because we still carried with us “a numerous family” (lice, ticks, and so forth), we were simply eager to discharge them.”*

*We laid aside our habits, sat on the floor, and competed as to who would be the first to find any of the annoying beasts. We were counting them one after the other: “One, here; another, here” and thus... I believed we did not stop until we found all of them.*

*How comfortable did we feel after!*

*Thanks to God, no one aside from us noticed anything. On our part, we said:*

- *“If only the people knew what we were doing!”*

*It was already very late for us to go to sleep, but how relaxed we did it. We no longer saw any parasite during the rest of the trip. Thanks be to God!<sup>170</sup>*

Leaving Tripoli, they landed in Damascus where, during lunch they were served fine wine of high quality and they enjoyed a lot remembering Satin Paul.

The next stop was Syracuse where they visited the tomb of St. Lucy. The stopover here was further prolonged because the plane developed some malfunction:

- *In fact –wrote Sr. Modesta- the plane was making a tremendous racket and suddenly something broke and we saw it almost on the ground or on the water. But since the plane had two engines, we were saved, thanks to the fact that the plane was not destroyed. The scare was tremendous. We thought that we would not emerge alive. All this was happening while the priest slept like a log and when he awoke, we told him the story, he said: “Nuns’ tale.” But*

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<sup>170</sup> Cfr. Noain, Modesta, *op. cit.* p, 49.

*when he became aware of the real score, he was drained of color.*<sup>171</sup>

While they were in Syracuse, they were offered a choice to fly either to Rome or to Paris; and they, without the slightest hesitation, said: “Rome.” They boarded, therefore, an Alitalia plane towards the Eternal City.

### ***Stopover in Rome***

On February 22<sup>nd</sup>, they landed in the airport of Rome and were lodged in a Residence for girls that the Servants of Mary had there. “*Here*” –as Sr. Modesta records- “*they could not have treated us better.*”<sup>172</sup>

The next day –the 23<sup>rd</sup>- Fr. Joaquín Guillen –a Capuchin Tertiary Friar- and Capuchin friars Elías of Labiano and Pascual of Pamplona, presented themselves at the Residence. What happened next while in Rome, one of the protagonists recount:

- *Fr. Joaquín committed himself to give us Holy Communion in the Catacombs. Both he, as well as Fr. Elías, went out of their way to show us the principal areas of Rome and they did so complete with detailed explanations. What impressed us more were the Catacombs, the Basilica of St. Peter and, of course, the private audience with Pius XII (after which we also attended a general audience).*

*What desire had we to see the Pope before going to China and the Lord fulfilled that desire on our way back! How emotional it was to shake hands with the Pope and be with him in such confidence.*<sup>173</sup>

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<sup>171</sup> Cfr. Noain, Modesta, *ibid.*, p. 49.

<sup>172</sup> Cfr. Noain, Modesta, *ibid.*, p. 49.

<sup>173</sup> Sister Carmen Pagola adds in her Testimony in China, that the Pope, on greeting them, exclaimed: “*Oh, my China!*”

*We also visited the Cardinal Protector –Tedeschini- who knew our Father Founder. On entering his office, we knelt around him, and helping us to arise, he said:*

*- “I should be the one to kneel before these missionaries.”*

*This gesture made us remember the humility and goodness of our Father Founder.*

*We also spent a few moments with the Capuchin Tertiary friars who lived inside a building within a compound where each floor was occupied by different community of religious men. Scarcely had we entered, they did not know what do with us. They said:*

*- “Today cloister is suspended in this house. You are our sisters.”*

*We spent very pleasant moments, conversing about everything.*

*I do not remember whether we took a snack or lunch, but since we wanted to see more things, we could not stay very long.*

*We were excited and in really high spirits. Everything seemed like a dream.<sup>174</sup>*

## ***To Spain, passing by Lourdes***

On their way now to Spain, by rail, they stopped by Lourdes where, with deep emotion, they gave thanks to the Virgin for the safe return, because on their journey to China, they could not pass by this town.

After Lourdes, directly to Irún:

*- Arriving here, we felt a desire to embrace everybody and everything –recounts one of them- It was a colossal feeling. And already even before having seen our relatives or any religious sisters.<sup>175</sup>*

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<sup>174</sup> Cfr. Noain, Modesta, *op. cit.*, pp. 49-50.

<sup>175</sup> Cfr. Noain, Modesta, *op. cit.*, p. 50.

Subsequently, they arrived San Sebastian at 23hrs. By all appearances, the Sisters here were not aware of their arrival and so, when the doorbell rang, Sr. Julia who opened the door started shouting:

- *“The Sisters from China!”*

All the Sisters of the community arose, excited by the news and prepared a sumptuous dinner for them.

- *“They did not know what to do with us!”* Sr. Modesta remembers.<sup>176</sup>

Before departing for Massamagrell –the Mother House where the General Superior resided- Sr. Modesta wrote to the mentioned Superior reminding her that she promised that, if one day she returned from China, she would allow her and her sister M<sup>a</sup> Cruz –also a Capuchin Tertiary- to visit her parents. Something that was inexplicably denied<sup>177</sup> and so she had to visit her parents –whom she had not seen for twenty years- with another travelling companion.<sup>178</sup>

Passing through Madrid, they paused and stayed in the community of the Holy Family Home School –later called St. Maria Goretti School- where Modesta could find her sister M<sup>a</sup> Cruz. From here they visited also the community of the House of Our Lady of Perpetual Help Family. Here as well as in another place, they were given homage.

Finally, they reached Massamagrell. Here they were awaited to join the Spiritual Exercises and in order that, subsequently, be assigned to different communities because according to what others were saying: *“They had not yet done anything for the Congregation.”*

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<sup>176</sup> Cfr. Noain, Modesta, *ibid.*, p. 50.

<sup>177</sup> Cfr. Noain, Modesta, *ibid.*, p. 50.

<sup>178</sup> As is natural, it was a motive for Sr. Modesta’s disgust for which she felt very deeply for her parents who were in very precarious health and that, perhaps, that was to be the last opportunity to be with her family.

As one may naturally suppose, these heartless remarks –pronounced by those who should have welcomed them with open arms, as on the day the Merciful Father in the parable about the retuning son- caused great displeasure and resentment in those who just arrived hoping to be able to embrace their Major Superiors after long years of non-communication.

Sister Modesta, recalling those words addressed to them –by all counts unjust and devoid of sentiments of piety and love- would end her *Diary* thus:

- *Although we felt deep heartache from those words, we accepted them with perfect Franciscan joy.*

*Now we very well know how much we love the Church and how much we are indebted to Her because she has nurtured us with a solid faith that allowed us never to falter and sustained us in fidelity to the Congregation.*

*If it was not so, we would have found it very difficult to maintain the grace of the novitiate that accompanied us until the end.*

*Blessed be God for everything. And thanks to everyone who aided us!*<sup>179</sup>

Some months later after the arrival of the sisters in Spain, the total communist victory in China was declared -within that year of 1949. And a little later, the Holy See raised the Apostolic Prefecture of Pingliang into a Diocese and, in September of the same year, the first bishop in the person of Ignacio Larrañaga was consecrated in Shanghai.

Immediately began, in Pingliang –as what was happening in the rest of China- a persecution that was methodically planned, Marxist indoctrination of Christians, kangaroo courts against missionaries, imprisonment of the bishop with his seminarians acting as jailers, and, finally expulsion of all foreign missionaries.<sup>180</sup>

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<sup>179</sup> Cfr. Noain, Modesta, *op. cit.*, pp. 50-51.

<sup>180</sup> Cfr. Iriarte, Lazaro, *op. cit.*, p. 252.

When she got the news about all these, Sister Modesta exclaimed:

- *How much they made those priests suffer! What could have happened to us if they captured us together with them?*<sup>181</sup>

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<sup>181</sup> Cfr. Noain, Modesta, *op. cit.*, p. 47.

*Epilogue*

*Preparing for the Return*



At the death (in 1934) of Fr. Luis Amigó, the Founder of the Congregation, the Capuchin Tertiary Sisters were present in *Spain* (since its founding in 1885), in *Colombia* (since 1905), in *Venezuela* (since 1928), in *China* itself where they made their presence in 1929.

During the succeeding years, they were unable to establish new foundations because of, first the Spanish Civil War (1936-1939), then immediately followed by the Second World War (1939-1945).

Already, however, on the eve of the exit of the Sisters from China on January 27, 1949, the Congregation extended to two other countries in 1948: *Panama* and *Brazil*. And in the same year of 1949 as the presence in China ceased, the Capuchin Tertiary Sisters made their presence in *Argentina*.

Subsequently, a string of foundations in a kind of a rosary - the Congregation opened houses in: *Costa Rica* (1950), *Ecuador* (1952), *Belgium* (1956), *Italy* (1959), *Germany* (1961), *Guatemala* (1961), *Switzerland* (1962), *Zaire* -later the name changed to the Democratic Republic of Congo (1971), *Puerto Rico* (1979), *Bolivia* (1980), *Peru* (1982) and *Paraguay* (1982).

With these foundations -carried out since 1948 and especially in 1949- the Sisters had consolidated and notably expanded their presence in *South* and *Central America*, likewise in Europe and even opened their first house in the *African Continent*.

However, the fact that in 1982 fifty-three years have passed since its exit from China caught their attention and the Congregation has not opened any house in Asia. This lack was solved, finally, when a presence was established in the *Philippines* on March 24, 1982, by the initiative of the Province of the Immaculate.



Later, houses were opened in: *Chile* (1984), *Central Africa* (1988), *Mexico* (1989), *Tanzania* (1990), *Benin* (1990), *Nicaragua* (1992), *Dominican Republic* (1992), *Equatorial Guinea* (1993), and *Slovakia* (1995).

When fourteen years were completed after the first foundation in the Philippines, the Congregation established itself officially on March 25, 1996, in a second Asiatic country –this time within the land mass of the continent of Asia- with the opening of a house in *South Korea*.

Almost simultaneously with this foundation in South Korea, -also in 1996- a house in *Poland* became a reality, and followed by *Cuba* (1998) and *Honduras* (2001).

It was, nonetheless, more or less by 2006, that the Sisters strongly and decisively bet for a more extensive expansion of the Congregation in Asia. Thus, stemming from this bet and commitment, by June 12, 2008, they made their presence in Rameswaram (India)<sup>182</sup>; in December 11, 2011, they began being present in Madampela (*Sri Lanka*) and in March 25, 2015, they founded a house in *Ho Chi Min City* (Vietnam).

At the same time that these latter foundations were being established in India, Sri Lanka and Vietnam, the Sisters, with growing hope and decisiveness, were eyeing their return to China.

One of the precipitating facts that influenced more significantly the rebirth of the Dream of China—if we are allowed to speak of a rebirth of something that was always alive in the spirit of the sisters- was the arrival of Teresa Lan Hong Yan, the first Chinese Vocation, to the Philippines.<sup>183</sup>

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<sup>182</sup> This initial presence in India was expanded –on November 26, 2013- through a second house opened in Trichy,

<sup>183</sup> It is meaningful enough that two of the bigger missionary foundations of the Congregation –that of *Colombia* and that of *Venezuela*- were preceded by the arrival of two native vocations to the Novitiate: the Colombian Gregoria Armenta Calvo and the other one in the person of M<sup>a</sup> Angèlica Pérez Marmol of Venezuela. And that these two cases, the sisters will interpret as a sign that Providence wants them there in those countries. Now then, with the arrival of Teresa Lan Hong

A little later after the arrival of that first vocation, Sr. Ma. Elena Echavarren, General Delegate for the Philippines, accompanied by Sister Dora Maria Vargas\*, made a visit to China from October 16 to 24, 2006, accompanied by Fr. Mateo Goldaraz, OFM Cap\*. They especially visited the areas where the missionary Capuchin Friars and\* Sisters ministered. It was the first time that some Capuchin Tertiary Sisters set foot on Chinese soil since the last remaining four Sisters finally left China at the beginning of the month of February in the year 1949.

In view of the Congregation's taking root and expansion being experienced within the Continent of Asia, on March 11, 2008, the General Government erected the St. Clare General Vice province of Asia, comprising the five existing houses in the Philippines, the two in South Korea, and the house to be established in India. In the message accompanying the Decree of Erection of this Vice-province, the Superior General said, among many other things: *"Philippines, South Korea, India, and China in a not so far-off future, is the vine which the Lord entrusted to you in order to care for."*<sup>184</sup>

Five years since the Vice-province was erected, the Sisters assembled in the II Vice-provincial Chapter –celebrated between the 21st and the 24th of February, 2014-<sup>185</sup> adopted the resolution on the commitment to return to China.

In accordance with this Chapter commitment, Sr. Angela Ma. Martínez\*, together with Sr. Clara (Assunta) Yanyan\* Chen, visited also the places of China that are more closely attached to the Congregation.

At the end of the trip, Sr. Angela Ma. expressed, among other things, these *challenges* and *possibilities*:

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Yan, somehow awoke similar sentiments among the sisters and so they began to pose the question whether the time has come to return to China.

<sup>184</sup> Cf. *Informative Newsletter. General Curia*, no.13, June 2008.

<sup>185</sup> The First Chapter of this Vice province was held from April 7-11, 2010.

- *The Pope calls us to urge forward the mission in Asia, and the time to return to China is already a challenge because if we postpone it longer, we will arrive too late ...*
- *It is urgent to maintain contacts through e-mail with persons – bishops, priests, religious men, religious women and lay people- whom we came to know in China and return there regularly (at least three times a year) and in a special way in summer to help in the catechesis and to participate in youth camps ...*
- *Regarding the foundation in China, it is, moreover, pressing that we plan beforehand and to define the situation of the Chinese Sisters. They should not be assigned to other places not their own. Doing otherwise would be like taking away from the poor the only lamb that they have (cfr. 2 Sam 12:1-4). Their studies must be defined, their hopes be nourished, and to be practical, consequent, and clear with them. Because as we know, that owing to their language, they are not in a position to perform the apostolate more efficiently other than in their own milieu.*
- *Furthermore, the possibilities for evangelization are abundant ... We have the acceptance of the Bishop of Xi'an; we can count on the four Chinese Sisters who are already professed –gifts from God, fruit of the vision for the future which the Sisters bet on accepting them-; we count on the anticipated blessing of our Father Founder and the intercession of our Sisters who were missionaries in China; we have the support of the Congregation and of the missionary Church; and we count also on –why not?- the Holy Spirit who is the impeller of the mission, with Divine Providence that has never failed us, also on the many poor and believers who are not attended to nor accompanied and many other non-believers who still are waiting for the proclamation of the Gospel.*

When the three years since Srs. Angela Ma. and Clara made a trip to China were about to come to an end, in the III Vice-Provincial Chapter celebrated on May, 2017, presided over by the General Superior, Sr. Tulia López, the decision to return to China was assumed in consideration of the two perpetually professed Sisters born in that great Asian country.

A little after the said Chapter ended, Srs. Martha Patricia\* Ramirez, Vice Provincial Superior, Lan Hong Yan (Teresa) and Chen Yanyan (Clara Assunta) traveled to China and made a visit to Xi'an in order to get to know the real situation.

On February 24, 2018, the three Sisters designated for the foundation in China, Srs. Ma. Elena Echavarren, Lan Hong Yan, and Chen Yanyan, met in Xi'an after travelling separately on the precedent days\*.

On March 3, a Saturday, the Eucharist was celebrated for the first time and the Blessed Sacrament was reserved at home, and the next day the founders of this new presence in China attended Mass at the Cathedral of Xi'an and met with the bishop, Msgr. Anthony Dang.

Finally, on March 25, 2018, anniversary of the Pontifical Approval of the Congregation in 1902 –which coincided this year with Palm Sunday- the Vice provincial Vicar, Sr. Angela Ma. Martinez S\*. visited the Community of Xi'an and read the Decree of the General Superior, dated January 17 –Prot. 435/19- establishing the Community in Xi'an, China, dependent on the Vice province of St Clare, Asia, while appointing the one to be in-charge of the same to Sr. Ma. Elena Echavarren S.\* And thus, the new presence of the Congregation in China officially began, after 89 years since the first presence and 69 years of its closing.

The background image is a sepia-toned photograph of a traditional Chinese architectural complex. On the left, a tall, multi-tiered pagoda with a conical roof rises. In the foreground, a large, dark wooden hall with a tiled roof and a white wall on the left side is visible. The overall scene is set in a courtyard with some trees in the background.

# Album of Photographs



Pioneers in China (1929): 1. Guadalupe of Meliana. 2. Pilar of Altura. 3. Modesta of Oroz-Betelu. 4. Leontina of Pamplona. 5. Pacifica of Anna.

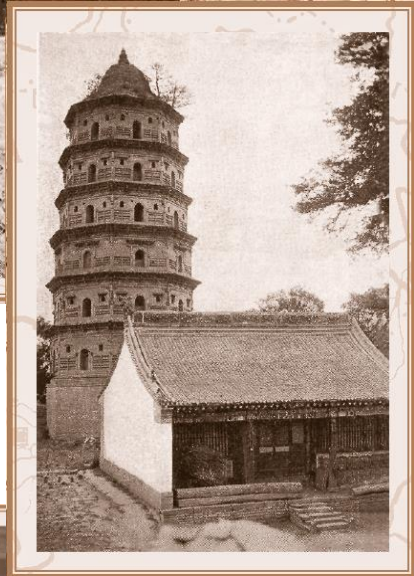


The first expedition on board the ship Saarbruchen: 1. Leontina of Pamplona. 2. Catalina of Sesma. 3. Amelia of Oroz-Betelu. 4. Pacifica of Anna. 5. Guadalupe of Meliana. 6. Pilar of Altura.



One of the entrance gates to Pingliang upon the arrival of the sisters. The Pagoda towering over the other buildings.

*On the right:* a close-up of the Pagoda.



The boat on which the 1<sup>st</sup> expedition traveled from Shanghai to Tientsin. Despite its poor quality, the photo still shows: 1. Guadalupe of Meliana. 2. Pilar of Altura. 3. Amelia of Oroz-Betelu. 4. Catalina of Sesma. 5. Might be Leontina of Pamplona and 6. May be Pacifica of Anna.





Sisters of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Expedition: 1. Marina of Iturmendi. 2. Agustina of Sesma. 3. Liberata of Azcona. 4. Imelda of Yelz. 5. Milagro of Ororbia



The 2<sup>nd</sup> expedition to board the ship *Coblenz*. Are distinguished: 1. Imelda of Yelz. 2. Milagro of Ororbia. 3. Marina of Iturmendi. 4. Liberata of Azcona. 5. Agustina of Sesma

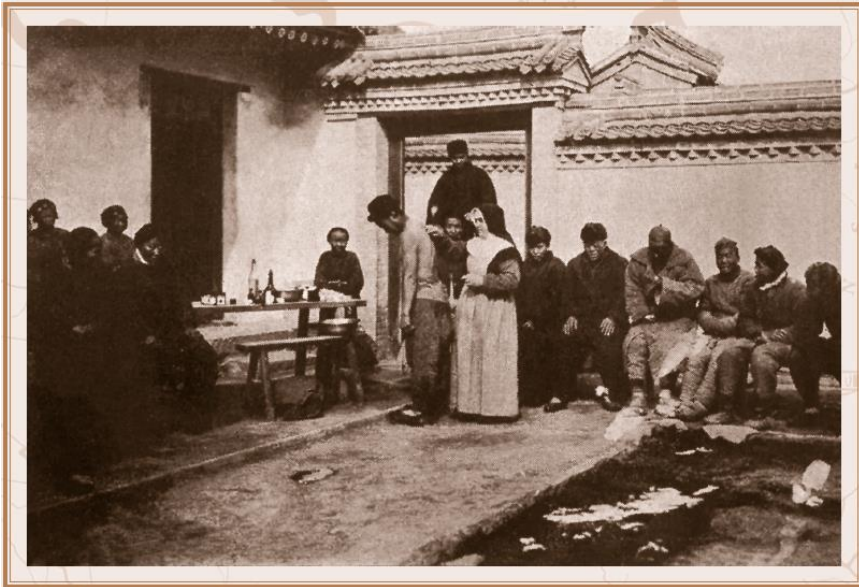




Sisters of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Expedition, together with the other missionaries who accompanied them, upon arrival in Pingliang: 1. Marina of Iturmendi. 2. Imelda of Yelz. 3. Liberata of Azcona. 4. Agustina de Sesma. 5. Milagro de Ororbía



The Sisters in Pingliang, after the arrival of the 2<sup>nd</sup> expedition and before the founding of Sifengchen: 1. Milagro of Ororbía. 2. Agustina of Sesma. 3. Marina of Iturmendi. 4. Imelda of Yelz. 5. Liberata of Azcona. 6. Leontina of Pamplona. 7. Catalina of Sesma. 8. Guadalupe of Meliana. 9. Pacifica of Anna. 10. Amelia of Oroz-Betelu.



*From left to right: Sisters Leontina of Pamplona and Amelia (Modesta) of Oroz-Betelu, together with two Chinese on the day of their Perpetual Profession in Pingliang, May 1, 1932.*



Temporary dispensary clinic during the initial years in Pingliang.



Group of the Holy Infancy in Pingliang with the Capuchin Sisters and Capuchin friars.



A girl of the Holy Infancy together with the two babies gathered in the mission of Pingliang.



A boy of the Holy Infancy praying before the Child Jesus on the Cross, brought by the sisters.





The sisters welcome the abandoned girls, brought by a man to the Mission. In the photograph are shown also: 1. Liberata of Azcona. 2. Amelia of Oroz-Betelu and 3. Catalina of Sesma (the other sister cannot be identified).



The sisters and assistants ironing and mending clothes.



*Above:* The sisters running for refuge because of the Japanese bombardment on Pingliang, from 1937. (cfr. Text on pages. 72-73)

*From left to right:* Liberata of Azcona, Marina of Iturmendi (way ahead) Leontina of Pamplona, Amelia of Oroz-Betelu, and Milagro of Ororbia.

Sister Liberata of Azcona with the children of the Holy Infancy.



Playground of the schools of the Mission of Pingliang. Seen also is the basketball court and the swing. This photograph must have been taken before the foundation of Sifengchen, since we can see here a total of six sisters. After the founding of the Sifengchen, there were only five sisters in each house.



Children of the Holy Infancy taking meal in the open.





Picture of the funeral in one of the Missions where the sisters resided. We can very well appreciate the Typical Chinese elements. The funeral might have been one of the friars there, or maybe of one of the three Sisters who are buried in China.



Sister Amelia (Modesta) baptizing a dying Child. This photograph appeared in many magazines of the *Propaganda Fide*. Many other prints were made into stamps, calendars, and was placed even in one of the corridors in the papal Palace in Castelgandolfo (cfr. Above, p.116)





#### ITINERARY FOLLOWED FOR THE 1ST EXPEDITION – From Barcelona to Shanghai

##### Ports that they entered on the way to China:

10-11-1929	Departed from Barcelona	25-11-1929	Passed the great island of Dahlak (12:30hrs) and after to the place where there were 10 or 12 small islands (16hrs.)
11-11-1929	Arrived in Genova	26-11-1929	Passed the Strait of Bab el Mandeb (8a.m.)
15-11-1929	Departed from Genova		Border Perim Islands
17-11-1929	Passed the Strait of Messina	27-11-1929	Passed five islands (Sawabi Island)
20-11-1929	Arrived in Port-Said	28-11-1929	Passed a group of islands,
21-11-1929	Departed from Port-Said to pass the Suez Canal		
22-11-1929	Passed the Red Sea		

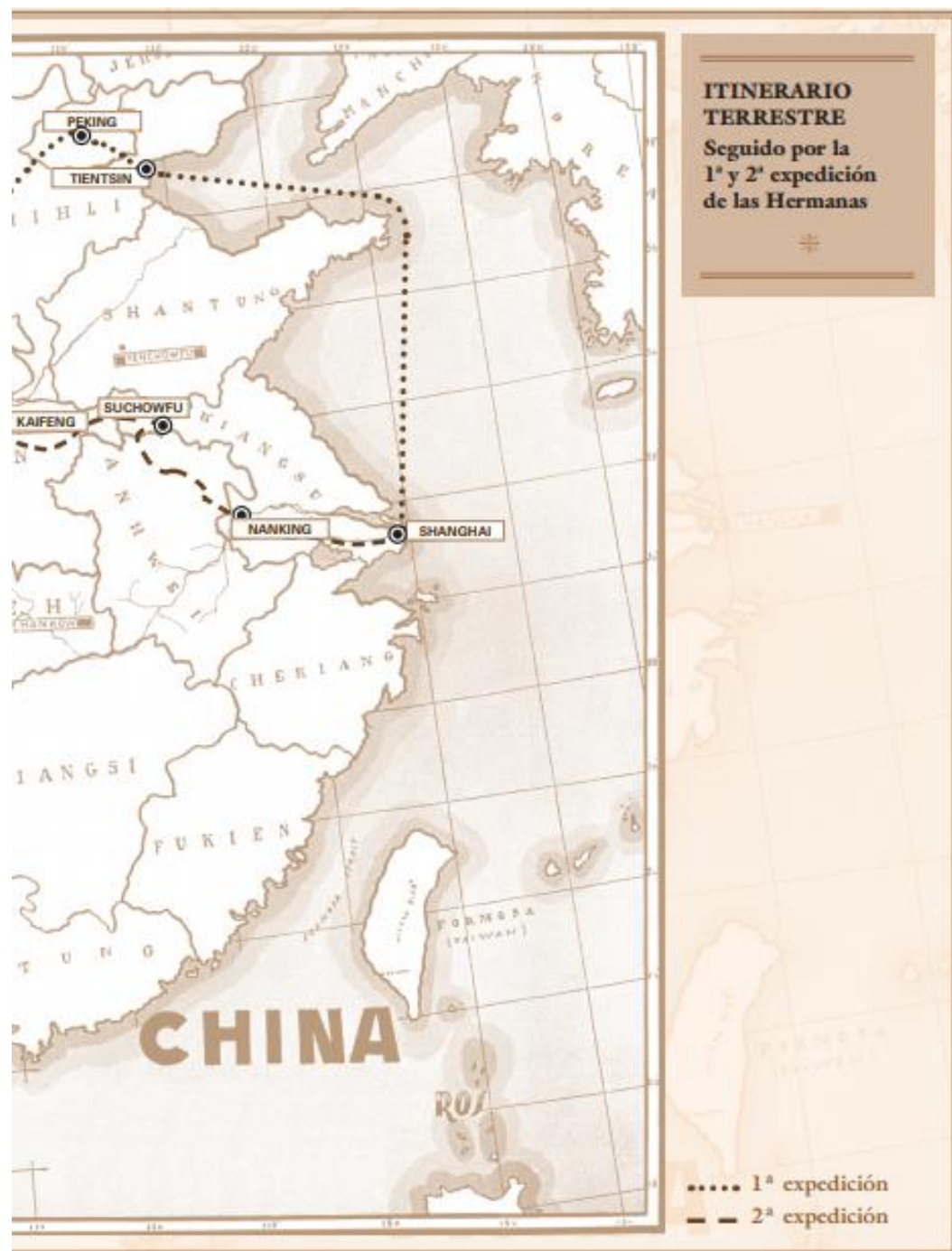


(The 2nd. Expedition did basically the same)

Socotra and archipelago of Yemen and goes out of the Gulf of the Indian Sea Gulf of Aden (10 a.m.)  
**4-12-1929** Arrived in Colombo Port (6.30 a.m.)  
 At 15h. depart from this port.  
**9-12-1929** Arrived in Belawan (8 a.m.). At 00 h. Depart from this port.  
**10-12-1929** Strait of Malacca  
**11-12-1929** Arrived in Singapore(7 a.m.)

At 18h. depart from this port  
**12-12-1929** Entered in China Sea  
**16-12-1929** Arrived in Manila (12 Meridiem)  
**17-12-1929** Departed from Manila at 17 h.  
**19-12-1929** Arrived in Hong Kong (19h)  
**21-12-1929** Departed from Hong Kong  
**23-12-1929** Arrived in Formosa (8 a.m.)  
 Depart from here at 17h  
**25-12-1929** Arrived in Shanghai.









1935 or 1936 in Pingliang. This photograph was taken in front of the house built for the sisters in 1933 in a Pagoda style. The sisters here are: 1. Amelia of Oroz-Betelu. 2. Marina of Iturmendi. 3. Milagro of Ororbia. 4. Leontina of Pamplona. 5. Liberata of Azcona. Among the guests are surely Doctor Mei with his wife and children.



Chapel of the Sisters' new house in Pingliang, built in 1933. Together with the painting of the *Sacred Heart*, at the center, is that of the Mother of Perpetual Help (to the left) and of the Holy Family (to the right). The Statues are that of St. Francis (to the left) and that of St. Therese of Lisieux (to the right).



The Holy Infancy of Sifengchen in 1940. The sister in the photograph is Sr. Liberata of Azcona.



Alumni of one of the schools of Pingliang around the year 1936. Sisters in the photograph: 1. Marina of Iturmendi. 2. Liberata of Azcona. 3. Modesta of Oroz-Betelu. 4. Leontina of Pamplona. 6. Agustina of Sesma.



Photograph of the alumni of another School of Pingliang, taken on the same day as the above. The arrangement of the Sisters is the same as the upper photograph.





A photograph taken in Sifengchen on 12<sup>th</sup> September, 1939. Sisters in the photo are: 1. Guadalupe of Meliana. 2. Leontina of Pamplona. 3. Agustina of Sesma.



One of the courtyards of the mission in Sifengchen.





Entrance to the field hospital in Sanshelipu. Seated in front *from left to right*: Milagro of Ororbia, Muslim General Manjongping, and Sister Liberata of Azcona (cfr. pp. 58-59).



*Above*: Chinese Identity document for Sr. Amelia of Oroz-Betelu

Left: Picture probably taken in December 1940, when the two communities of sisters gathered in Pingliang for their retreat or spiritual exercises. In the picture are:

1. Milagro of Ororbia
2. Amelia of Oroz-Betelu
3. Guadalupe of Meliana
4. Leontina of Pamplona
5. Agustina of Sesma
6. Liberata of Azcona
7. Marina of Iturmendi
8. Imelda of Yelz





*Above left:* Sister Milagro of Ororbia, died in Paishui on January 6, 1943 (cfr. above p. 84)

*Above right:* The young girl Guadalupe Tsang, who died in Sifengchen on October 8, 1945 and interred there beside her beloved Male, Sister Guadalupe of Meliana who also died on September 1, of the same year (cfr. p. 85).



A photograph taken in Pingliang, on January 1943, when the sisters of Sifengchen arrived in this city, accompanying the remains of Sr. Milagro of Ororbia. In the picture, together with various Chinese Religious in the house of Pingliang, the sisters are:

1. Leontina of Pamplona
2. Agustina of Sesma
3. Marina of Iturmendi
4. Amelia of Oroz-Betelu



*Above:* Photograph taken on January 22, 1949, the day when the four sisters who remained in China, bade goodbye to the mission of Sifengchen. The four are, *from left to right:* Leontina of Pamplona, Agustina of Sesma, Amelia of Oroz-Betelu, Liberata of Azcona.



At the base of Michael Angelo's dome in Vatican on February 26, 1949.

*From left to right:* Leontina of Pamplona, Amelia of Oroz-Betelu, Liberata of Azcona, Agustina of Sesma.

Accompanying them are the Capuchin friars in the person of either Elias of Labiano or Pascual of Pamplona (left) and Fr. Urbano Lapuente(right), a Capuchin Tertiary.

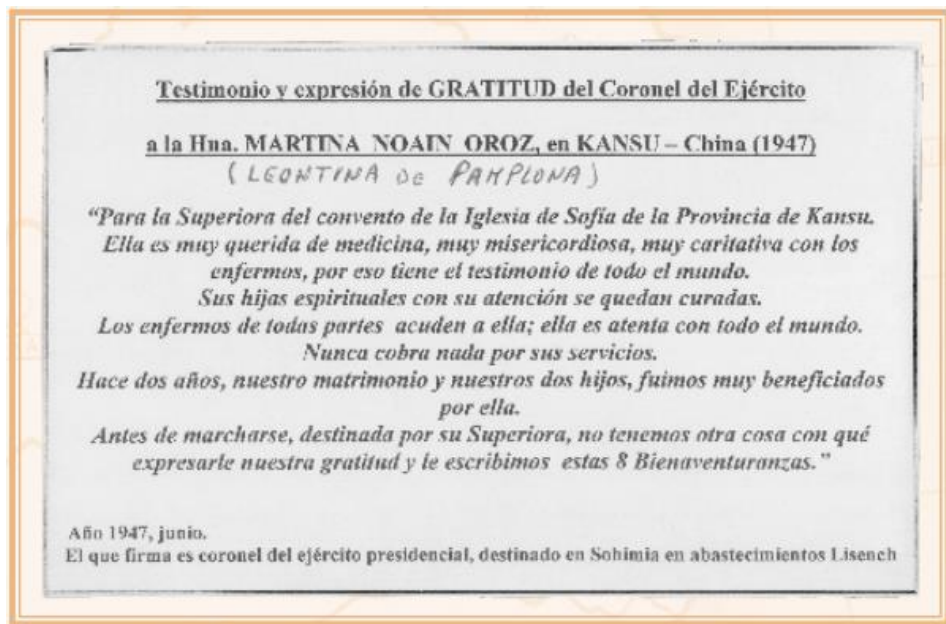
甘肅省立第一女子中學 校長 趙君 敬啟者 本校自創辦以來 承蒙各界人士之愛護 不勝感荷 茲因本校校舍狹窄 經向省府申請 遷往新址 現已遷竣 特此公告 敬請各界人士 繼續愛護 此佈

虛心的人有福了因為天國是他們的  
哀慟的人有福了因為他們必承受  
地土飢渴慕義的人有福了因為他們  
必得飽足  
憐恤的人有福了因為他們必蒙憐恤  
清心的人有福了因為他們必稱  
為上帝的兒子  
為義受逼迫的人有福了因為天國是他們的

主曆一九四五年四月

中華民國二十六年九月廿五日 趙君 敬啟者 本校自創辦以來 承蒙各界人士之愛護 不勝感荷 茲因本校校舍狹窄 經向省府申請 遷往新址 現已遷竣 特此公告 敬請各界人士 繼續愛護 此佈





Testimony and expression of GRATITUDE from an Army Colonel

To Sr. MARINA NOAIN OROZ (Leontina of Pamplona),  
in KANSU-CHINA (1947)

“For the superior of the convent of the Church of Sophia in the Province of Kansu. She is enamored by medicines, is merciful, very charitable towards the sick, therefore she has the esteem of all. Her spiritual daughters are cured by her attentive care. The sick from many parts flock to her; for she attends to everyone. She never charges for her services. Two years ago, our marriage and two children, benefited from her. Before departing, assigned elsewhere by her superior, we don't have other thing to express our gratitude and so we write these Beatitudes.

June of the year 1947

The signature is of Colonel of the Presidential Army, headquartered at Sohimia in Base of Lisench.

