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THE DISCIPLES OF THE LORD: AN UPDATE

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INTRODUCTION.

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INTRODUCTION

Redemptorists have influenced the rise and development of a surprising number of religious institutes. If they should be listed, the tally would certainly be quite impressive. It is with one of them that the present note is concerned. The Congregation of the Disciples of the Lord (C.D.D.) has been in existence now for seventy years, and in its origins Spanish Redemptorists made a valuable contribution.¹ Among religious institutes the Disciples are possibly unique. They were founded among the Chinese for pastoral work among their co-nationals. That fact ought to occasion a particular interest in them among the sons of St. Alphonsus, who was so strongly attracted to the missions among the unbelievers and was especially drawn towards China.² Information about the Disciples was meagre enough in their earliest years, and in the fifty years since they were expelled from China by the Maoists there has been practically

¹ On the Disciples of the Lord see *Dizionario degli istituti di perfezione*, diretto da Giovanni PELLICCIA (1962-1968) e da Giancarlo ROCCA (1969 -), III (1976) 704-705; S. J. BOLAND, *A Dictionary of the Redemptorists*, Rome (1987) 111-112.

² Cf Th. REY-MERMET, *St. Alphonsus Liguori, Tireless Worker for the Most Abandoned*, Brooklyn (1987) 185-191; F. M. JONES, *Alphonsus de Liguori, the Saint of Bourbon Naples, 1696 -1787*, Dublin (1992) 90-91.

none outside their own circle. Maybe that was to be expected. Their vocation directs them to care for the Chinese people in various parts of the world. Just the same, it would be a pity if their relationship with the Redemptorists should be forgotten.

The help given to the Congregation at its beginning came from Spain, and it gave rise to the establishment of the vice-province of China, which in its short existence offered so much promise. For that reason the best, even though brief account of Redemptorist association with the Disciples comes from the pen of that indefatigable historian, Father Tellería.³ He wrote at a time when the new Institute had been in existence only a matter of half a dozen or so years, but he describes well the excitement aroused among the Redemptorists at the venture and in the courageous steps taken by the Spanish province in their own mission to China. Both received some enthusiastic coverage in the *Analecta* of the time.⁴ These sources, however, take the story only as far as the 1930s, leaving largely unreported the stormy years that followed the civil war, Japanese invasion and finally the coming of the Communist regime.

It has been only recently that the long silence has been broken. Foundations of the Disciples in Malaysia have brought them into some contact with the Australian vice-province of Ipoh. It is due to that meeting that it has now become possible to offer a small update to this forgotten part of Redemptorist history.

The Fathers in Malaysia have kindly guided me to their Superior General, Very Reverend Father John Liu C.D.D., resident in Taipei, Taiwan. Father Liu has been most generous with his time in his courteous and informative reply to my queries. In a Congregation founded among Chinese for work among Chinese it is to be expected that information in a European language must be extremely meagre. Father Liu has been so kind as to make available what he had to hand, and that has provided the basis of what we have been able to offer of the more recent history of the Disciples.

³ R. TELLERÍA, *Un instituto misionero*, Madrid (1932) 557-560.

⁴ *Analecta C.Ss.R.*, Rome V (1926) 317-320; VII (1928) 44; 222-223.

While that is our principal concern, namely the fortunes of the Disciples since their expulsion from China, it seems necessary to refresh Redemptorist memories as to their association with the beginning of the new Congregation. Our memories, no doubt, have grown quite stale in the course of seventy years. If the Redemptorist element should appear to predominate too much, seeming to outweigh the main concern, let it be pleaded by way of excuse that available information is rather limited, as has been said. We have tried to make the best of what we have.

1. – *The Disciples of the Lord*

The Congregation of the Disciples of the Lord can scarcely be better introduced than in the words of their Superior General, Father John Liu C.D.D.,⁵

«The Congregation of the Disciples of the Lord (Congregatio Discipulorum Domini, C.D.D.) was established by the Apostolic Delegate to China, Monsignor Celso Costantini. The Congregation is a community which is composed of Chinese priests dedicated solely to propagating the gospel to the Chinese people and to their descendants abroad as well».⁶

Archbishop Costantini, named as the founder of the Institute, was evidently most energetic in his office from the time of his arrival in China in 1922. The first Plenary Council of the Chinese Church and his own investigations gave him a clear view of the condition of the Catholics. They numbered some 2,200,000 served by 1100 Chinese priests and 1500 foreign missionaries.⁷ With many Catholic organisations in the hands of

⁵ The quotation is from a most informative letter written to myself on 25th April 1998.

⁶ Celso Costantini, born in 1876, died in Rome in 1958. After serving as a military chaplain in World War I he was appointed Apostolic Delegate to China, the first to hold that post, in 1921, arriving there in the following year. After the first Plenary Council of the Chinese Church in 1924 six Chinese bishops (Vicars Apostolic) were named. Returning to Italy in 1933 Costantini was appointed secretary of the Sacred Congregation of Propaganda (now Evangelisation of the Peoples) and rector of Propaganda College. He was created cardinal in 1953. His interest in the missions, especially in China, was shown in his writings. See *National Catholic Encyclopaedia*, New York, IV (1967) 366-367.

⁷ Information supplied by Father Liu in the letter quoted.

non-Chinese authorities the Church was seen as a «foreign religion», and that name was often heard. In spite of its long history Christianity in China has produced a Church which at the beginning of the twentieth century was still seen as immature. To remedy such an unsatisfactory state of affairs Pius XI, the «Pope of the missions», and his Cardinal prefect of Propaganda, Willem van Rossum C.Ss.R., were totally dedicated. They were well served in China. In 1924 the Plenary council recommended that Chinese priests be chosen as Vicars Apostolic with episcopal orders. As a consequence, after consultation Archbishop Costantini accompanied six candidates to Rome to receive consecration at the hands of the Holy Father.⁸ It was this condition of the Church that occasioned the foundation of the new Institute of Chinese priests for the Chinese people. This inspiration and its fulfilment have been described by Costantini.⁹

He was moved, he said, by the encyclical «*Rerum Ecclesiae*» of Pius XI in 1925. The Pope's recommendations corresponded so clearly to his own observation on the state of the Chinese Church. He included this conviction as the «foundation stone» in the statutes of the new Institute. «According to the desire expressed by His Holiness Pius XI in the encyclical *Rerum Ecclesiae* that there should be established more communities that would agree with the character and training of the indigenous peoples and local conditions, a Congregation of Chinese Religious men is established».

That was a statement that Costantini saw as a clear answer to the common charge that the Catholic Church was a foreign religion. It was necessary, he considered, to have religious different from Jesuits, Franciscans or Lazarists and the rest, who depended on superiors outside the country. It was not in order to rival the venerable Orders which over the past centuries had built up the Church in China. The new religious aimed at supplying the sorts of values envisaged by the Pope of the missions.

⁸ On Cardinal van Rossum see BOLAND, *A Dictionary*, 403.

⁹ Celso COSTANTINI, *Con i missionari in Cina*, II, Roma (1946) 175-178. He also left instructions to his Congregation, *Induite vos armatura Dei. Ricordi, pensieri, raccomandazioni ai Discepoli del Signore*, Rome, 1942.

A further thought inspired Costantini, and it is reminiscent of the splendid venture of Matteo Ricci three centuries earlier. The Apostolic Delegate had been made aware of the high regard in which the learned men of letters were held in Chinese society. That meant, he realised, the culture which was Chinese and for which Western standards would not suffice. This created a basic problem for evangelisation. Seminary studies entailed considerable expenditure of time and effort in order to master the ecclesiastical disciplines, often in Latin, and that left a serious gap in the development of the culture proper to the land. He had been dismayed to find that many priests were unable to take part in conversation with people of the educated class. It seemed to Costantini that preparation for preaching the Gospel among the Chinese demanded something more than was usually to hand in the existing seminaries. It was necessary that the priest be able to speak in the language and with the thinking of the more cultured. That called for courses in the language and the sciences traditional in China in addition to the normal theological formation. And that was a further indication that a distinct religious institute was needed.

During the few years he had been in China Costantini had already become convinced of what was demanded for the missions and how that need should be met by means of a religious institute with special characteristics. It remained simply to bring the projected body into existence.

The opportune moment came in 1926. Six priests had been nominated Vicars Apostolic, and Costantini travelled with them to Rome, where they were to be consecrated by Pius XI. During the voyage he began to elaborate what he already called the statutes of the new Congregation. He discussed his work with at least two of his companions, Philip Tchao and Melchior Souen.¹⁰ Father Tchao was the only secular priest of the group: Father Souen was a Vincentian. The fruit of his work and discussion was ready to be shown to the Cardinal prefect of propaganda, van Rossum, as soon as the party reached Rome. The Cardinal was reported to be delighted at the news of the proposed Congregation. Formal permission to proceed with the foundation was dated 4th January 1927.

By that time the new bishops had already been consecrated. The day so earnestly desired by Pius XI and his Cardinal prefect of Propa-

¹⁰ There is an account of the Chinese bishops in *Analecta*, V (1926) 317-320.

ganda was in October 1926. That was one goal achieved by Costantini. It remained to develop the Chinese religious institute. The title, Congregation of the Disciples of the Lord, had already been decided. The members were to be like those first disciples of the Lord mentioned in the Gospel, chosen by Christ and sent out two by two to the places where He was to follow.¹¹ Their mission was to prepare the people's minds to receive the Good News.

The venture moved quickly. The Apostolic Delegate saw the hand of God in a providential (and substantial) donation from the United States. Some devout women of Milwaukee had sent to the holy Father a gift of money to be used for the clergy of China. It is hardly surprising that the funds so happily on hand should come to the Disciples of the Lord. This gift from heaven, as Costantini saw it, went towards the purchase of land on which was to be built the mother house of the Congregation. It was just outside the small country town of Suanhwafu about 150 kilometres from Beijing. The site was chosen by Bishop Philip Tchao, who had also arranged the purchase. He was Vicar Apostolic of Suanhwafu and a supporter of the Congregation from the beginning.

Bishop Tchao is described by Father Tellería as «the soul of the new institute».¹² In Tellería's view he was the embodiment of the motto on his episcopal shield, «*Impendam et superimpendam*». In August of 1927 Costantini visited the vicarate, and he confessed himself as particularly gratified by the clergy's reply to his question as to whether they agreed with a common saying among Chinese Catholics at the time, that Chinese priests would never obey a Chinese superior. Their spokesman replied. «We don't obey our bishop because he is either Chinese or foreign, but because his authority is from God». With the Delegate on this occasion there was a priest of the Foreign Missions of Parma, who declared himself delighted and edified at the easy familiarity and mutual respect he had found between the clergy and their sincerely loved bishop in Suanhwafu.¹³ Just two months later Bishop Tchao was dead, and in tragic circumstances. The region had for same time been sadly acquainted with the frequent clashes between the war lords who had for too long made

¹¹ Cf Luke 10,1.

¹² TELLERÍA, 561.

¹³ COSTANTINI, 450.

the country a scene of what amounted to civil war. One encounter late in 1927 sent crowds of refugees wandering in search of shelter and a little security. Suanhwafu found itself offering accommodation to a succession of those escaping the violence. In October the bishop's house being filled, the large overflow was bedded down in the cathedral. On the 13th of the month towards midnight Bishop Tchao was going among the refugees when he came across a woman with small children who seemed to be suffering from the cold. He gave her his own warm overcoat and made his way back to his house and his own room. From there he called his servant, who hastened to the room, only to find the bishop already dead.¹⁴ He had truly spent himself for his people, comments Tellería. Having given even his own clothes to one in need, he died of fatigue and cold.¹⁵

In contrast to the fate of their generous supporter the Disciples had a beginning bright with promise. The mother house was built on land bought with the help of the American ladies, and soon candidates began to present themselves. Father Liu, Superior General, writes, «In the beginning the Congregation received a warm welcome from the Chinese people, with many young aspirants». It was to guide this initial development that the Redemptorists were summoned to lend their assistance.

2. – *The Redemptorist Contribution*

When the Apostolic Delegate brought the six bishops elect to Rome in 1926, Cardinal van Rossum arranged that they should prepare for consecration by spiritual exercises under the direction of his Redemptorist confrères. Consequently, in October the retreatants came to S. Alfonso, to the great edification of the community.¹⁶ Their guide in their preparation was the Dutch theologian, Father Johan Jansen,¹⁷ who preached in Latin. Archbishop Costantini joined the retreatants each day and addressed them himself, on what was to be expected of a bishop in China. The consecration of the new bishops in St. Peter's on 28th October was the occa-

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ TELLERÍA, 561.

¹⁶ *Analecta*, V, 317-320.

¹⁷ BOLAND, *A Dictionary*, 175.

sion for much jubilation among the Chinese residents in Rome and of a typically enthusiastic exhortation by Pius XI on the task of evangelising the immense country entrusted to the new bishops.

Possibly at the suggestion of van Rossum, who had interested himself in the project from the beginning, Costantini and Bishop Tchao, the two initiators of the Congregation, as Tellería called them, sought the help of the Redemptorists in guiding the first steps of the Institute.¹⁸ The Cardinal prefect himself made the request to the Superior General, Father Patrick Murray, and he in turn entrusted the work to the Spanish province. There the charge was accepted with eagerness.

The project having received the blessing of Propaganda at the beginning of 1927, the rest of the year was devoted to preparing the mother house under the watchful eye of Bishop Tchao. Unhappily, he did not live to see the inauguration of the work he had so zealously promoted. The Spanish collaborators arrived in Beijing in April 1928. They were three in number, led by Father Segundo Rodríguez, who had been teaching philosophy to the students of the province and enjoyed the reputation of being an accomplished Hebrew scholar. With him was Father José Morán Pan, a young and energetic missionary who had been expelled from Mexico by the persecuting Calles laws in 1926 and was to end a long and extraordinarily eventful life after introducing the Redemptorists into Nicaragua. The third member of the party was the young Father Segundo Velasco. Ordained in 1923, he was appointed to teach in the juvenile (minor seminary) of the province. He had apparently been destined for a similar charge among the Disciples. It was not to be so. Arriving in Beijing with his two companions, he set himself at once to study the language, but within a few months he was struck down by typhus and died on 1st September.

The mother house of the Disciples had been designed by the Dutch Benedictine, Adalbert Gresnigt, and had been begun on 19th February 1928. Fathers Rodríguez and Morán Pan arrived in Suanhwafu on 9th November, the anniversary of the foundation of the Redemptorists in 1732. They were warmly received by the new Vicar Apostolic, who asked them to assist his own seminarians and those of the neighbouring vicari-

¹⁸ TELLERÍA, 558-559.

ate of Lishien, who were to be withdrawn from the seminary in Beijing. The two Fathers agreed and commenced classes on 8th December.¹⁹

Their real task began with the formal inauguration of the Congregation of the Disciples of the Lord, as Father Tellería puts it, on 19th February 1929. The first candidates were two major seminarians from Beijing. The novitiate began canonically on 31st March. It was not preceded by a ceremony of clothing, because it had been decided that the Disciples should not be distinguished in their garb from other Chinese clergy.²⁰

With the men who came to replace Father Velasco and to assist the first two, it was possible to organise the formation of the candidates. Not surprisingly, it was decided to follow the programme favoured by the Redemptorists in Europe, with at first little modification. It was seen as particularly important to open a juvenate. One was established on 8th September 1929 with regulations corresponding to those of Spain. It had been a matter of serious concern for Costantini that the Disciples be well trained in the culture of the Chinese people. The juvenate was aimed at providing some education of this kind, and it seems to have had some success at the beginning. Within a short time the number of candidates had risen to sixty. Their teaching was in the hands of trusted secular masters. Bishop Peter Tcheng himself lent a hand with the classes. Growth in these early stages was slow but regular, so that within a few years the mother house sheltered juvenists, novices and clerical students as well as an increasing number of Fathers and Brothers.²¹

The building on the pleasant site of Suanhwafu had to be extended in order to accommodate the increasingly varied community. Most of the work was supervised by Father Rodríguez. It fell to Father Morán Pan to see to the building of the church described by Father Tellería as of «modest but beautiful proportions». The complex was given the name of Emmaus. The Disciples, who were to prepare the way of the Lord were reminded that they should find Him as their Companion on the way.

The small group of Redemptorists were far from idle, with their teaching in the juvenate and seminary as well as acting as novice master. Much credit is due to Father Rodríguez, the superior, who carried the

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 562-563.

²¹ *Ibid.*

lion's share of the work. The community was small but constantly occupied. It is due to their memory that it be noted that their association with the Disciples lasted only five years. By 1934 they were able to leave the new Congregation to take responsibility for itself, while they joined their own Spanish confrères in laying the foundations of the Redemptorist vice-province of China.²² Their success in discharging the task given them is to be seen in the development of the new Congregation. The Disciples had become in that short time self-reliant. Even their founder, Archbishop Costantini had left them in the previous year on his recall to Rome. It was left to them to look to their own future. And that they have succeeded in doing to excellent effect.

3. – *The Later Story of the Disciples*

The way of the new Institute was far from easy. There was a most promising flow of vocations from the beginning, but China in the thirties was a very troubled country. A republic since 1912 after many centuries of imperial rule, the vast land was in a state of chaos. The people were at the mercy of the marauders variously called brigands or war lords or something similar. The leader of the republican party, Dr. Sun Yat-sen, had some success in imposing order, especially in the south, but there remained much work to be done by his successors when he died in 1925. The party, the Kuomintang, now led by Chiang Kai-shek, found itself threatened by the growing power of the Chinese Communist Party. It was more than political rivalry, really from the beginning a fierce civil war. Even that unhappy situation was made worse after 1937, when the Japanese, already occupying Manchuria, began to expand southwards. The coming of World War II added to China's already intolerable woes. It was in that most unfavourable climate that the Disciples of the Lord put down their roots. It is surely remarkable that Father Liu was able to say of the first twenty years of the Congregation that the numbers grew to more than a hundred priests and seminarians, and that in a time of «civil conflict and eight years of war against Japan».²³

²² Letter of Father Liu C.D.D.

²³ *Ibid.*

Some picture of the extreme difficulties of the time can be seen from a report sent by the first Spanish Redemptorist foundations in China. It is published in *Analecta*.²⁴ The house of Our Lady of Perpetual Help was established in Siping, a three days' journey from Beijing.²⁵ The little community of three Fathers and a Brother had been in residence only a matter of months when it was faced by grave danger. In December 1929 a government army occupied the town of some 30,000 inhabitants and then decided to seek its fortunes by the more lucrative course of banditry. The Redemptorist community found itself giving hospitality to the officers. Within a few days the unwelcome guests had to leave to fight a desperate battle in the freezing conditions of midwinter. Their casualties were heavy, and in their absence from Siping the Redemptorists were prey to robbers and roaming militia men. Scarcely a day passed without rude intrusions into their privacy, usually with firearms. Early in January another army of 10,000 occupied the town, only to find itself besieged almost at once by government troops. The community gave shelter to terrified civilians, who gathered for consolation at Our Lady's altar.

The report of that series of alarms concludes by saying that this experience of no more than a couple of months showed what strange things were happening in China. This was, of course, just the beginning of the twenty years in which the infant Congregation was establishing itself.

In spite of the grave problems of those early years the Disciples were able to make remarkable progress. To the mother house was added the Heng Yee high school and seminary, and a community was established in Beijing, where priests were to attend Fu Jen Catholic University.²⁶ This was a foundation that was particularly fitting. As Apostolic Delegate Archbishop Costantini had interested himself in the beginning of Fu Jen, and it was his vision of the Disciples that they should become accomplished scholars of traditional Chinese culture.

The bright future that appeared so assured was dealt a cruel blow with the coming of the Communist regime in 1949. The Spanish Redemptorists were expelled from the country as foreigners, and the Disci-

²⁴ *Analecta*, IX (1930) 157-159.

²⁵ TELLERÍA, 566.

²⁶ Letter of Father Liu C.D.D.

ples found themselves in a situation of crisis. They had to choose one of three possibilities. They could remain in China and do what they could in the hostile environment, or they could go to Taiwan or Indonesia, in both of which places there were openings for them.²⁷

Those who remained in mainland China had to contend with life under the Maoists, sharing in the sufferings of the Churches, a real and most painful persecution. Among those who found refuge in Taiwan were the Superior General and the seminarians, together with a number of priests, who found their services welcomed by the many refugees who had escaped like themselves from the mainland. Taiwan remained very much like the old China, and that meant that Catholics and other Christians were a minority. For the Disciples themselves that meant that their increase in numbers was slow. In spite of that, however, they soon gained some distinction. One of their number, Father Joseph Kuo C.D.D., was appointed Archbishop of Taipei, and in 1958 the Congregation established the Heng Yee Catholic High School, a reminder of the mother house at Suanhwafu. The school is now attended by three thousand students, who with their secular studies are given knowledge of Christian Doctrine.²⁸

Those who went to Indonesia established themselves in Pontianak in the province of Kalimantan on the island of Borneo. There they provided schools and kindergartens as well as pastoral care. In the same year, 1949, the Congregation came to Java, where it established in Malang St Joseph's primary and secondary school. In more recent years the Disciples have taken charge of a parish in Jakarta and have opened a retreat house in Bali.²⁹

In 1957 the Congregation moved into Malaysia, which is now described by the Superior General as its «most prosperous area».³⁰ The Fathers came to the diocese of Kuala Lumpur, where they had charge of a parish and school in Bentong. From there they spread to Pataling Jaya and Malacca. Father Liu is clearly delighted that they should be in Malacca, «the cradle of the Catholic Church», as he puts it. No doubt St.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ *Ibid.*

Francis Xavier shares his gratification. Malaysia has been good to the Disciples of the Lord. There are many seminarians, who complete their formation in Taiwan. The growing number of young priests offers promise of further blessings.³¹

The vision of Archbishop Costantini in the 1920s of an institute of Chinese priests to work among their co-nationals has been realised to an extent that would surely have pleased him. The original members so rudely exiled from China have carried his inspiration to wherever Chinese are to be found. In addition to their larger foundations they have become known in the Philippines and the United States, where there is a residence in Chicago; and they have also been established in Rome.

It would not be too fanciful to see the Disciples of the Lord as fulfilling a cherished dream of St. Alphonsus. His spiritual directors had turned him from the missions in China and he discovered God's will in his own Redemptorist Congregation. Just the same, there is evidence of his being strongly drawn by his zeal towards the missions among unbelievers, a concern shown most of all in the vow taken by the early members of his Congregation to offer themselves for that work should they be asked. The Disciples of the Lord owe their existence and their growth to the inspiration of another man of apostolic zeal. Archbishop Costantini was in complete agreement with the aims of Pius XI and van Rossum, the Redemptorist Prefect of Propaganda. It was also to the Redemptorists that the founder turned for help in the earliest organisation of the institute, and he was well served by the Spanish province. Worthy of special remembrance is Father Segundo Rodríguez, who bore the greatest burden of the foundation years. And it should not be forgotten that he was ably assisted by his confrères, especially by the tireless missionary, Father José Morán Pan. Giving that credit to the Redemptorists does not in the least take anything away from the energy and dedication of the first members of the new institute. As visualised by Costantini they formed a body of religious very different from others. The Congregation was so restricted in its orientation as to be seen as probably quite unique in the Church. It was in every respect a new venture, and it is highly creditable that it has been successful to the extent it has now achieved. The first

³¹ *Ibid.*

members and their successors have proved themselves capable of giving reality to the vision of their founder. For Redemptorists the part they have been able to play in such a work is surely reason for pride.

Résumé

Les *Disciples of Christ* est le nom d'un Institut religieux qui existe depuis 70 ans. Il s'agit d'une congrégation chinoise en vue du travail pastoral parmi les Chinois. Son origine et son développement doivent beaucoup aux Rédemptoristes, spécialement aux confrères de la Province espagnole qui furent jadis en Chine. Ses membres furent expulsés de Chine sous les Maoïstes, mais l'Institut subsiste à Taiwan, en Indonésie, en Malaisie, aux Philippines et aux Etats-Unis, oeuvrant là où se trouvent des Chinois. On se doit de souligner l'influence des Rédemptoristes sur cet Institut et de s'en souvenir avec fierté.