

The Spirit in the World—V: The International Catholic Auxiliaries

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'Come over here, Secunda! Ma-the-lawyer's son wants to take a photo of everyone'—it was Prima at my elbow. Of everyone present? That seemed to me optimistic. The old Japanese-style house we occupy in Taipei, capital of Taiwan, is not large, even when we take down the sliding paper-covered doors and make a single room of it; but that afternoon, after the ceremony at the church nearby, the one room was certainly crowded. As we are a team of four Auxiliaries each working in a different profession we have a variety of friends and acquaintances. Nearly all the people in the room were Chinese—natives of Taiwan itself and of all parts of the mainland—and for the photo we were gathering round our own Chinese bishop, Mgr Cheng, consecrated a few months earlier.

That day it was not Prima, the team leader, who was standing beside him, it was me, Secunda, holding the chrysanthemums someone had just given me. 'Just like bridegroom and bride!' I thought frivolously, then, more soberly: 'And why not? Since the Bishop is Christ for us, and you have just renewed the oath that consecrates you to Christ . . . You chose to be a lay missionary—here is your Church'. I looked around at the mixed gathering. There were fellow parishioners—Ma the lawyer, exemplary Catholic lawyer and paterfamilias, who for eight years has helped us in our encounters with official red tape of many kinds; the Mengs with their toddler daughter—the only one of my 13 Chinese goddaughters who was baptized in infancy; some of 'Tertia's ladies' . . . Tertia is the Chinese member of the team; though working as a nurse in the city's principal hospital she still finds time to look after a sewing circle of Catholic women who make and repair vestments and altar linen for the Taipei churches. This not only helps the priests, it also gives the women an opportunity of learning to know and understand each other as Catholics in the service of the Church: an oppor-

tunity which is valuable both because Catholic Action groups and parish associations, etc., are still so few in Taiwan, and because differences of language and custom, caused by the island's change from Japanese to Chinese rule, still tend to cause difficulties among the older people that are almost unknown to their children. Tertia's ladies, however, have shown us that when Catholics are working together in a supernatural spirit the difficulties either fade away—or turn into jokes.

There were none of Tertia's patients with us, but there were people representative of many facets of our work. There were a few students from the university where Prima teaches French, some schoolboys who come to my English classes—Buddhists, Presbyterians, seekers and sleepers: few of our students are Catholics. There were some of the catechumens whom Prima instructs in Chinese or I in Chinese and English together; there were our godchildren, most of them girls in their early twenties and the only Catholics in their family. I could see Theresa, who is preparing to become an Auxiliary herself, and Wei who would like to, though her non-Christian father has so far forbidden it. Most of these girls are often in and out of our house, to discuss their problems, or borrow a book or an umbrella, or bring us some flowers. From time to time we invite a group of them to join us for our monthly day of recollection; and whenever we organize some bigger function they come to help: we plan the day with them and they share the work and responsibility with us, as they had on this occasion. Now they were waiting on the other guests, assisted by two members of the choir at the cathedral of Taipei, where Prima and I in turn play the old harmonium.

When the photo had been taken we tried, rather unsuccessfully, to persuade our shy schoolboy pupils to practice their English on three American women who were there with their children. As we live and work almost entirely with the Chinese we have few contacts with the foreign community of the city; but one of us goes to the American parish each Sunday, to supervise the catechism classes held there for the children of the U.S.A. forces personnel. These three ladies are housewives who act as voluntary teachers at the classes. Such American visitors, coming to the island for one or two years only, and unable to speak the language, have little direct contact with the Chinese in social life; but these women take a very kindly interest in our work, and sometimes bring gifts of food, books or used clothing for ourselves and those we know in need. We are always proud to introduce them to our

Chinese friends, thus sharing our spiritual riches with them as they share their material wealth with us.

Other foreigners were also in the room with us—the French girl whom Quarta, our latest arrival, met at the school where they study Chinese; and missionary priests and sisters from various countries. What good friends these missionaries are to us! They encourage us, and do their best to understand our vocation—which, as there are no other lay people in Taiwan dedicated to the Church, seems to fit into no category. And on such an occasion as this they turn up loyally and support us. If they and the Chinese priests had not been at the ceremony that afternoon, to sing and pray so stoutly, what would we have done?

The ceremony had been something of an innovation. The statutes of our Society, the International Catholic Auxiliaries, state that when an Auxiliary takes her oath at the end of her training, or renews it five years later, she does so in the presence of representatives of the hierarchy and of the Society. Nothing, however, is laid down about the details of the ceremony, except the text of the oath itself, in which we consecrate ourselves 'in the missionary apostolate in accordance with the statutes of the Society,' swearing to become as profoundly rooted as possible in the Church of our new country, and to help train Catholic leaders at all levels of society. (The statutes prescribe, among other things, the practice of poverty, chastity, obedience and apostolic zeal, and the life in common). Auxiliaries who take their oath in Brussels or Chicago, where our training centres are, usually do so at the offertory of a mass celebrated in the parish church and attended by our parents and the parishioners. But when Prima had called a team meeting to plan this occasion, we had decided against asking for a mass . . . we wanted to invite many non-Catholic students and friends, and we know that, especially in Taiwan where dialogue masses are still almost unknown, hopeful investigators are often disheartened and repelled when they first attend mass, and understand nothing of it.

So we arranged a simple ceremony in which we hoped everyone could and would take part: psalms and the *Our Father* to recite in Chinese, the few hymns that all Catholics know by heart, the bishop's short address, and Benediction. Our girl friends helped us prepare mimeographed copies of the texts for recitation. So far as I know it is the first time psalms have been recited in Chinese in a Taipei Catholic Church, and the first ceremony devised here with the intention of enabling non-Catholics, especially other Christians, to participate more easily. I do not know how far it was useful—anyhow the missionary

priests liked it! It would be good to repeat the experiment, if only to accustom the Catholics to the novelty of public praying with the psalms. We ought to have remembered to tell the people to stand or sit rather than kneel; this would have prevented the discomfort and embarrassment felt by some of the non-Catholics in kneeling. The Chinese on Taiwan today are accustomed to bow deeply as a sign of respect on many occasions: would it not be more appropriate for Chinese Catholics to bow than to genuflect, to stand than to kneel?

This little problem is not easy to answer; but then the whole question of missionary adaptation is a difficult one. We Auxiliaries believe and teach that Christ's truth is meant to be accessible to all, and that moreover the Catholic faith needs to be expressed in the different forms of human culture in order to make mankind's witness to Christ complete in all its variety. If a given country's culture is progressing confidently, learning to express new ideas and needs in a development from traditional forms, then it may be supposed that as the people become Catholic, a truly native Catholic culture will develop—source of grace for them and for the whole Church. But in Taiwan today the political uncertainty is reflected in a fluid and complex cultural situation. In every sphere—social and family life, education, the arts, and religion too—an undiscerning imitation of the West may be found intermingled with a nostalgic clinging to rigidly unchanged forms from China's great past. The true new Taiwan has not yet taken shape. This makes difficulties for the missionary, who has to avoid the two errors of westernizing all he baptizes, and of Chinesifying—"That's the style we reserve for foreign tourists", comment the Chinese, who in Taiwan today tend to like American films and western style houses—and who, if they are Catholic, seem to feel that Spanish hymn tunes, mock Gothic buildings, Latin at mass and genuflections are more reliably 'Catholic' than anything savouring especially of China. Those who have been Catholic for a long time were taught their religion that way; those who have been baptized only some 1-5 years (i.e., the vast majority) are still in many respects immature in the Faith, and passive rather than active and creative.

What is the Auxiliary to do to further the emergence of a really characteristic and vigorous indigenous Catholic Church? The name 'auxiliary' gives us a partial answer: an auxiliary is a helper, not a managing director. Just as in our contacts with each individual we cannot pull or push him to God; only help him search and listen, let him grow as God's grace gives him to grow; so we by ourselves cannot

make a blueprint for the development of the Church in Taiwan: our task is to suggest, encourage, describe what is done elsewhere, define the essentials and to pray and hope without ceasing. We must learn when to take the lead, stimulating and proposing, and when to stand back and hand over to the people of the place another bit of their responsibility as Catholics. Nor can we learn it without fidelity to Christ and His Spirit, and attention to the advice of those around us, those over us, and our companions in the team.

Our ceremony that day did not close with the *Te Deum*—but that was for practical reasons, not for lack of thankfulness. Each time one renews one's offering to God doesn't thankfulness increase? The Auxiliary's vocation, like any vocation, is an invitation to return God's love. He gives first generously, rashly; and to give him in return even all we have and are seems very inadequate: to have the return gift accepted, by the bishop, in his name approving it, fills us with humble and happy gratitude. During the first stages of an Auxiliary's three-year training her gratitude is mainly on her own account, as she learns to discern God's loving hold on her life, and discovers that the ideals and aims of her new family express what she has already felt as an inward personal truth. Later, as she learns the story of the Society's growth, and sees how its role fits into God's plan for the Church and the world, her gratitude widens out till it becomes an all-embracing *Magnificat*.

The Society may be said to owe its beginning to the providential meeting in 1935 of Yvonne Poncelet, a young Belgian woman with wide experience in Catholic Action, and Fr André Boland, friend and disciple of that great missionary figure, Vincent Lebbe.

Fr Lebbe was a Belgian Lazarist who began work in China in 1901, and who aroused the disagreement and disapproval of many of his fellow missionaries, and of his superiors, by his energetic support of the Chinese. At a time when many believed that the Chinese were necessarily inferior to the white men, and could never be given any but subordinate positions in the Church, Fr Lebbe claimed that the Church in China should be Chinese, with Chinese bishops and priests, and that therefore the missionary should approach the civilisation of China with humility and love and adapt himself to it generously, and not take advantage of the special privileges and protections obtained, sometimes unjustly, by foreign powers for their nationals in China. Fr Lebbe's outspokenness earned him disgrace and temporary exile from China, but his reports and suggestions gradually met with sympathy at Rome, and contributed to the change of emphasis shown in

the publication in 1919 of the great missionary encyclical *Maximum Illud*, and the consecration in 1926 of the first six Chinese bishops. The strength of Vincent Lebbe's influence is due to his being not only a clear-sighted thinker on mission problems, but also a man of perfect obedience to the Church, and wholehearted self sacrifice in the service of God and man. He had the gift of communicating his joyful generosity to others, and had sent from China a spiritual programme for those who, like Fr Boland, wished to follow him as missionaries: 'The one and only programme: to live the gospel, which can be summed up in outline as

Total renunciation—hold on to nothing outside of God;

True supernatural love of men;

Constant joy—because of, not in spite of all things'.

Yvonne Poncelet was eager to do more for God, and Fr Boland encouraged her in her desire to go to China as a missionary; he told her to prepare by study and prayer, and gave her Fr Lebbe's programme as a guide for herself and the companions who gradually joined her.

The idea of Catholic lay women going to work on the missions was then a novel one, and the little group met with difficulties and opposition, though bishops in China, and the Sacred Congregation of Propaganda in Rome, were in favour of the initiative. In 1940 the coming of war to Belgium made it temporarily impossible to send girls overseas, and it was not till 1946 that the first Auxiliaries were able to leave: two teams going to the Congo and two to China, with further departures in the next and subsequent years. The first statutes were approved by the S.C. of Propaganda in 1947, and final recognition was granted ten years later.

Today there are more than 200 Auxiliaries, of some 23 different nationalities and four continents. They live and work in teams of three-seven members under the authority of a team leader, who is responsible for their relations with their bishop, the secular authorities and the Council of the Society at headquarters in Brussels. The teams are mostly at work in mission territory in the Near and Far East, and in Africa, carrying on medical, social, educational and catechetical work; but there are several teams in Europe and the U.S.A. engaged in the apostolate to students from Asia and Africa studying in the West. Thus in Paris the Auxiliaries manage a centre where 70 women students from overseas, of every race and creed, live together; in Chicago and Montreal they have opened non-residential centres, to which students

of both sexes come for social gatherings, study groups and meetings of various kinds, and where they can always be sure of a friendly welcome and sympathetic advice and help when needed. The aim of these centres is not only to sustain the faith of those already baptized and introduce the others to the Catholic way of life—to prevent the disillusionment that attacks so many foreign students when they contact our so-called Christian civilization; in addition the Auxiliaries try to encourage in each student a sense of personal responsibility for his country and for the world's future, and to develop his natural and supernatural capacities for bearing that responsibility.

Similar work is also carried on at the student centres the Auxiliaries run in Korea and Vietnam; but a variety of other activities are also performed by these and the other teams in the missions. In South India a medical team is working on a regional anti-leprosy project sponsored by the Indian government; in the desert country of the Upper Volta in Africa a team of teachers are building up from the bottom a much needed primary school in the wilds. The several teams in the Congo are mostly working in social centres for the education of African women, helping the women learn the domestic skills and obtain the sense of social and civic responsibility that they need, in order to be fitting partners for their husbands in the rapidly evolving Africa of today. In the Near Eastern countries the Auxiliaries, who are running dispensaries and craft schools, working in Catholic Action and collaborating in local activities for social reform, have changed to the Greek Catholic rite of the people around them: a hard sacrifice at first, but richly rewarding in understanding, unity and love.

Among the graces God has given the Society is the repeated insistence of its different advisers, right from the start, that every Auxiliary should receive a thorough spiritual and professional training before being sent to the missions. The importance of this has been well proved by practice. The training of an Auxiliary takes three years, or may require longer, especially for those whose professional studies were not completed before they joined. Candidates for training must be between 18 and 30 years of age, of good health and education (G.C.E. Higher level or equivalent) and, most important of all, must have a genuine vocation to this form of dedicated service.

During the first year of training the newcomer is formed in the spiritual life and in the spirit of the Society, and studies some of the missionary and social problems facing the Church today. She attends courses in scripture, theology, missiology, liturgy, etc., and learns to

keep and value the Auxiliaries' spiritual rule (daily mass, meditation, spiritual reading, rosary, visit to the Blessed Sacrament, regular confession and a monthly day of recollection. An annual week of retreat is also prescribed). Her character is trained through the joys and trials of the life in common, and through a system of guidance based on mutual trust and aimed at developing generosity and initiative in obedience.

At the end of the year the girl makes a first promise binding herself to the Auxiliary life, and this promise is renewed annually during training. In the next year or years she begins or continues professional studies, or gains experience in one of the centres, or with a team in the missions. The final year's training is designed to deepen her knowledge of her vocation and her power to respond; it prepares her for the oath she will take at the end of the year, and for her future service in a mission country. Which mission country it will be, she may already know, but more often does not. We are allowed, or even encouraged to express our preferences, if any; but obviously there can be no guarantee that our wishes will be granted; it depends on the needs of each country and the aptitudes of each girl. An Auxiliary must be ready to go wherever she is sent. When sent, she gives herself completely to her new country, and for good; in her prayer and, as far as possible, in her daily life, she becomes one of its people.

When I first took the oath, in Chicago five years ago, I already knew I was coming to Taiwan, and gave myself joyfully . . . but blindly. Now I know something more of my country, and its wonderful people and difficult language, the work I must do there, the sometimes disconcerting, always lovable team that is my new four-national family—and of my own shortcomings. The days before renewing the oath were painful; for one trembles to renew the offering of a service that has proved so faulty, in face of needs now seen so much more clearly. But my joy after the ceremony was doubled; for (thanks surely to the prayers of the other Auxiliaries and of all those who pray with a missionary heart) God, through his bishop's blessing, through these friendly guests in our house and my smiling and kindly companions in the team, and through his peace in my heart, had shown it was nevertheless that poor offering he had wanted. May he increase and accept our desires for the fruitful increase of his Church all over the world, and may others come to share our desires, and our joy in the work.