

Monday, December 27, 1948

A Rainy Christmas in Tokyo

by Bertrand Roy, p.m.é.

On his way to his first mission in Manchuria in 1940, Évariste Parent had spent a few days in Japan. Eight years later, he finds himself back in Japan. He has just celebrated Christmas with the Franciscans in Tokyo, where he resides with Roland Boulé and Alphonse Dubé. Despite the rainy Christmas, the Masses at the Franciscan Chapel are full, both day and night.

Roland and Alphonse, veterans of the mission in Manchuria, have come to accompany Évariste and show him around. They are charged with the task to explore the places where the Japanese bishops sought the collaboration of foreign missionaries to assist in their ministry. The Foreign Mission Society thus begins a brand-new mission in Asia, following the missions in Manchuria (1929) and in the Philippines (1937).

On this day, Monday, December 27, the intermittent rain discourages anyone from going out. For his part, Évariste appreciates the serenity of this day after Christmas, so he could do some writing in peace and quiet. He takes advantage of the time to update his logbook, and answer some correspondence.

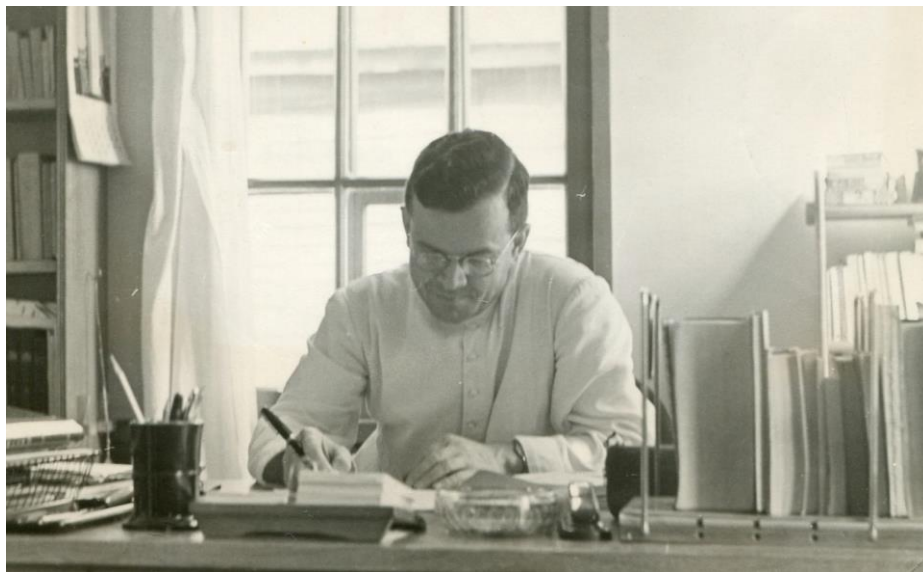


Photo 1 From Manchuria to Japan Évariste Parent, missionary in Manchuria (1940-1947) and in Japan (1948-1957) PHOTO SMÉ Archives

From Christmas to Christmas

Here are some of Évariste's memories, taken from his writings.

The Christmas seasons come and go, and are different from one year to the next. This year, it is a rainy Christmas. Last year, returning to Canada after a seven-year absence, it was a snowy Christmas reminiscent of the cold Quebec winters, but especially memorable because of the warmth of the St. Isidore family house.

Évariste also remembers Christmas celebrations in Manchuria, especially during his four years of internment in Szeping kai during the war. When he arrives in the mission in 1940, some fifty priests from the Society are already working in Szeping kai and Lintung. They are all in the prime of their lives.

For the past twelve years, their projects have been developing at a very fast pace in collaboration with other missionary institutions of men and women. These include the opening of new posts and services, schools and dispensaries, catechist formation schools, a Minor Seminary, etc.

When the Pacific War broke out in 1941, the priests of the Society are locked in the Minor Seminary in Szeping kai, together with other missionaries working in the region. They are 123 'residents,' comprising Canadians, Belgians, a few Americans and a Dutchman, confined to a building designed to accommodate only about sixty young men.



Photo 2 During the winter of 1942, the 123 "boarders" of the minor seminary of Szeping kai and their guardians (In the centre) Mgr Louis Lapierre, vicar apostolic of Szeping kai; (on his right) Mgr Emilien Masse, apostolic prefect of Lintung; (on his left) the Japanese officer in charge and Mgr Louis Janssens, CICM-Scheut (Belgium), vicar apostolic of Jehol. PHOTO SMÉ Archives

As nationals of countries that declared war on Japan, 'residents' are interned and isolated from the outside world, which is also the painful reality experienced by Japanese nationals living in North America. The religious women (sisters) from Canada, however, are not interned, remaining in and continuing their mission albeit in increasingly difficult circumstances.

Consequently, as of December 13, 1941, Évariste finds himself back in college, so to speak, without torture or hard labour, but in a precarious situation of discomfort, rationing and uncertainty about what will happen tomorrow.

To chase away the boredom, Évariste decides to write the history of the missions in Szepingkai and Lintung, gathering information and first-hand testimonials from the pioneers (the early missionaries) who were interned with him. On July 14, 1942, when the Japanese army decided to take over the Minor Seminary as a base, Évariste and the others are transferred to the Bishop's house in Szepingkai, where they would remain confined until the defeat of the Japanese army on August 15, 1945.

It was a long Advent – more than 1,300 days in isolation in cramped conditions, with zero contact with the Chinese parishioners who were left to themselves, with no foreign correspondence with one or two exceptions, thanks to pressure from the International Red Cross Society. Four Christmases celebrated 'between four walls' ("Entr'Quatr'Murailles), according to the title of a memoir published by Édouard Gilbert, a fellow interned inmate. After their liberation in 1945, several return to their mission and Évariste becomes the parish priest of Lishu, a village not far from Szepingkai. However, this return to the mission is short-lived.

The civil war between the Communist forces of Mao Zedong and the nationalist forces of Chiang Kai-Shek, results in the battle for Szepingkai in the spring of 1946, and most of the missionaries are forced to leave. A once-flourishing mission is now a field of ruins.

By the end of the year 1948, the Society has had no news of Monsignor Louis Lapierre and his six companions who were detained in Szepingkai. In what terrible conditions are they celebrating Christmas? It will be a long while before the Society will be able to send them new missionaries. There are some forty young men preparing for the mission at the Seminary in Pont-Viau and at the Formation House in Quebec. Where will we send them?

During the previous year, the possibility was discussed of working in the Diocese of Kunming in Yunnan Province, in Southwest China. Alphonse Dubé was to join the group that was formed to launch this mission, but the increasing Communist momentum led the Society to abandon that initiative. Last July the Third General Chapter of the Society met in Pont-Viau and confirmed that the next missionaries would be sent to the Philippines and Cuba. At the same time, Rome was making an urgent appeal to go to Japan, which invitation the Society warmly welcomed.

In fact, the day after the surrender of Japan in 1946, signalling the end of the Pacific War and the beginning of American occupation, the Japanese bishops request the assistance of the American, European and Australian churches for reconstruction. Pope Pius XII himself intervenes, urging the superiors of missionary societies to send more personnel to Japan. The burgeoning general interest in Catholicism foreshadows a unique opportunity for missionary activity. There is even talk about it being God's time in Japan.



Photo 3 Some members of the 3rd General Chapter of 1948 (From left to right: age, diocese, function) Gérard Baron, 42, Nicolet, missionary in Manchuria; Marcel Gérin, 35, Sherbrooke, missionary in Cuba; Louis Pageau, 40, Montreal, 1st assistant in the Central Council; Gérard Campagna, 36, Nicolet, 3rd assistant and Mgr Edgar Laroche, 52, Quebec, superior general. PHOTO SMÉ Archives

Several missionary groups answered the call to Japan, and sent out scouts, like our 'Manchurian' trio. Since their arrival in Yokohama in the evening of November 11, Évariste did not notice the time passing. Their initial contact with experienced people who knew Japan well increased in number, as did their hours of travelling by train.

In December, he and Roland go south, and return to Tokyo before Christmas, bringing interesting propositions for expanding the Society's missions in the Dioceses of Fukuoka and Nagoya. But their scouting expedition did not end there. Other invitations were received from the Tokyo region, and also from the north of Japan.

“Take the Time...”

Among all the correspondence to be addressed is one received on Christmas Eve from Monsignor Larochelle. This other former Manchurian missionary, re-elected as Superior General the previous July, wrote of his joy in hearing of their return to Japan. “This is a turning point in the life of our Society. You are opening a new field for apostolate work. You are laying the groundwork that will have significant repercussions in the life of many missionaries today and in the future. As for me, I place my entire trust in the three of you. Take the time to study the Japanese language well, and to become familiar with the different territories and all the proposals available to you.” (Edgar Larochelle, Letter to Évariste Parent, December 15, 1948.)

In his response, Évariste did not hide the many challenges that would face those who will be sent to Japan. “The method we used in Manchuria to learn the language will have to be modified here. Knowing a bit of Japanese will not be enough for them to fend for themselves. It is very important that those you are sending to Japan are not afraid to persevere in the learning of the language, and are in possession of a good memory, as it looks like the first few months require considerable memorization. (Évariste Parent, Letter to Edgar Larochelle, December 27, 1948.) Évariste will soon find that out for himself, since he begins his intensive language course, five times a week, right after Christmas. Happy New Year 1949!



THE FIRST TRIO

Pioneers of the mission in Japan in 1948

(From left to right) **Roland Boulé**, 38, born in Fall River (Massachusetts, United States), missionary in Manchuria (1934-43) and bursar at the Seminary of Pont-Viau (1946-48); **Évariste Parent**, 36, from Saint-Isidore de Dorchester (Quebec), missionary in Manchuria (1940-47); **Alphonse Dubé**, 39, born in Rivière-Ouelle (Ste-Anne-de-la-Pocatière), missionary in

Manchuria (1932-46), including six years as an administrator of the apostolic prefecture of Lintung.

THE CHOICE OF AOMORI

In July 1949, the Society took over from the Canadian Dominicans in the civil prefecture of Aomori, north of the central island of Honshu. This territory then had more than a million inhabitants, including around 1,000 Catholics in four parishes.

It is a district of the diocese of Sendai that Bishop Urakawa, local bishop, entrusted to the “Société des Missions-Étrangères du

Québec” for a first term of 25 years, renewable thereafter.’

According to Bishop de Furstenberg, then apostolic delegate in Japan, this new mission of the Society is located in "the poorest and most difficult corner of this Japan so ravaged (after the war)".

