

永懷台北市聖家堂兩位可敬的神父——艾伯祿與袁國慰

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**Cherishing the Memory of Fr. Pierre Laramée and Fr. Luke
Guo-wei Yuan –Two Venerable Priests at the Holy Family
Catholic Church, Taipei**

By Sylvia Chia

Located at Xin Sheng S. Rd., Taipei, the Holy Family Catholic Church (天主教聖家堂) is the largest Catholic Church in Taiwan. First built in 1954 and then expanded and remodeled in 1963-1964, it has a number of buildings on its compound. The biggest building is the sanctuary the area of its first floor being over 15,000 square feet.

Over the decades, there have always been more than 10 Jesuit priests and 1 or 2 Jesuit brothers living at this compound at any time; many of them missionaries from Canada.

In my early years, I had the good fortune of knowing well 2 venerable priests at the Church - Fr. Pierre Laramée (艾伯祿神父, 1912-1972) and Fr. Luke Guo-wei Yuan (袁國慰神父, 1932-1990). I have been influenced and benefited by them till this day.

Fr. Laramée came from a family of very strong Catholic faith in the Province of Quebec, Canada. His father was a judge and was very much involved in the retreat apostolate with the Jesuits. 2 of his mother's brothers were Jesuit priests, and 8 of his

12 siblings also became priests or nuns.

My sister and I first met Fr. Laramée in the summer of 1955. Our initial association with the father was rather interesting. We had just finished our freshman year at National Taiwan University then, and wanted to take English lessons during the vacation. Our family lived only one block away from the Holy Family Catholic Church, and we were aware that quite a number of Chinese college students were studying English at the Church, mostly in classes taught by the Canadian priests. So we asked our family friends Mr. and Mrs. Wen Fang (方聞) who were Catholics and parishioners of the Church to introduce us to a priest there as our English teacher. But the Fangs did not remember clearly our request, and they were too devout Catholics to imagine anyone could want to study under a priest anything other than catechism. So they introduced us to their good friend Fr. Laramée, the spiritual priest of the Holy Family Catholic Church.

We soon after met with the Father at the Church. He was then a middle-aged man of tall and slightly plump build. With a sunny smile on his face, he led us into one of the small classrooms at the back at the sanctuary. Here in his fluent Chinese with a French accent, he began teaching us catechism. My sister and I, accustomed to being meek and obedient in front of a respectable senior, although having immediately realized there was some misunderstanding, nevertheless sat quietly there and listened to him, without venturing to make a correction. And the monologue went on in the 4 hours per week catechism classes for the following 7 months.

Jesuit priests are highly educated individuals. After entering the Society of Jesuits following graduation from high school, they study literature for 2 years, philosophy for 3 years, and theology for 4 years, plus 2 years of practical training as teacher in high school or college.

Although a learned man and experienced teacher Fr. Laramée's teaching materials for our class of 2 contained no profound theology or philosophy, only the basics of the Catholic faith and many moving stories of the saints. However, simple as his lessons were, he was a charming, persuasive and humorous speaker. He also came across as an exemplary human being, which spoke for the Catholic faith as effectively as the lessons he taught us.

As he was about having finished with what he intended to teach us, and we were still sitting there from lesson to lesson without any response, he must have grown a little impatient and wondered whether we believed what he had told us at all. For one day he said to me: "I wish I could take an X-ray picture of your minds and see what is going on there. And remember: religious belief is a matter of the heart, not of the brain." And he must have soon after spoken to Uncle Fang about this, and the good uncle must have suddenly remembered our exact initial request for his introduction. For one week later, as the Father walked into our small classroom, he greeted us with the English words "Good Morning!" and then cheerfully explained to us that he was a spiritual priest and did not teach English, but his good friend Fr. Edward Laflèche (矢如直), also a Canadian priest at the Holy Family Catholic Church, had agreed to teach us English. Then he asked directly: whether we wanted to be baptized as Catholics?

My sister and I, although had come from an atheistic family and education background, were by then very much moved by his teachings and his noble character. We were soon after baptised by him. Later, we learned that he was a very successful and popular missionary, and many young Chinese had become Catholics because of him; two excellent coeds even became cloistered nuns due to his influence.

Yet Fr. Laramée was actually a man of reason and moderation. Never being impulsive or excessive. Newly baptized Catholics tend to be over-zealous, and my sister and I sometimes stayed at the Church after the Mass to help at miscellaneous projects there, perhaps only at busy bodies. After he sensed that, he had only this to say to us: “Do your duty as students first!”

I left Taiwan for advanced studies in the United States in 1961, and did not communicate with him during the more than 5 years I was abroad. After returning to Taiwan, I visited him at the Church. He was very happy to see me again, and said to me: “I am happy to see you in good health and spirits, for I have always been wondering how you would be after leaving home.” And then he proudly showed me around at the newly expanded and Holy Family Catholic Church remodeled compound. When we passed the small room at the back of the then enlarged and remodeled sanctuary, he said with his usual sense of humor: “This is where the brides shake.”

Born into a deeply Catholic family like his, his faith was absolute and his priesthood life was a perfect priesthood life, strictly abiding by the high principles of poverty, chastity, and obedience. But his stoic and hardworking life style eventually took a toll on his health. In the late 1960s he already had serious kidney disease, although he never complained about it and kept on working.

One day I invited him to a dinner. The chicken soup served at the restaurant was very salty, and I did not know salty foods were bad for his health. Yet he drank the whole bowl of soup without any hesitation. Always a fine and considerate gentleman, he just wanted to be a good and appreciative guest!

In late 1971, his kidneys were so deteriorated as to require dialysis. Unaware of this, I went to see him one day. As usual, the doorkeeper at the main entrance of the office-dormitory building of the priests rang his bell for him to come to the door. He looked distressed and even a little beside himself, and his originally white skin was yellowish. He was scheduled to return to Canada for treatment the very next day. So I quickly said “Goodbye and good luck” to him and started to leave. At that moment, I saw another guest step forward to shake hands with him, and he led the man into his office. He did not even tell the doorkeeper not to disturb him, although he badly needed to stay in bed at the time.

After returning to Canada, he had a kidney transplantation, with the new kidney donated by one of his brothers. But his body soon rejected that new kidney, and he passed away in July 1972.

In my later years, as I gradually get to know the world better, I have begun to realize that Fr. Laramée could be said as a real and rare holy man, his behavior was reminiscent of the saints whose stories he had so eloquently told my sister and me so long ago. I am now a devout Catholic, and think my faith a grace of God and one of the best things that have ever happened to me. Had there not been the misunderstanding in the summer of 1955 which led me to Fr. Laramée and to God, I would not have my precious religion today.

Upon my request, Fr. Marc Brousseau of the Society of Jesuits in Montreal kindly provided me some important information about Fr. Laramée a number of years ago. From such materials, I understand, among other things, that Fr. Laramée had lived in Mainland China and in Taiwan for a total of more than 27 years. He first went to Beijing in 1938 for studying Chinese, and after that taught school in Suzhou (蘇州) one of the

most historical and beautiful cities of China. He also completed his Jesuit education in China, and was ordained as a priest in 1943 at Zi-Ka-Wei (徐家匯), China by the Bishop of Shanghai. Then he preached extensively in rural China. In 1953-71, he served as a spiritual priest in Taiwan, for the most part at the Holy Family Catholic Church, where he taught Catholicism, organized activities for college and middle school female students, served as director of the legion of Mary, and presided over the retreats. He had left the impressions of his remarkable career in the history of the Catholic Church of Mainland China and of Taiwan, and in the memory of those who know him.

Fr. Luke Guo-wei Yuan was also a Jesuit priest at the Holy Family Catholic Church. While both he and Fr. Laramée were outstanding priests, they were nonetheless different in many other ways. For instance, Fr. Laramée abstained from involving in the practical aspects of his parishioners' life; Fr. Yuan was very enthusiastic about helping the parishioners solve their mundane problems. Fr. Laramée was from a large nucleus family of 15, and in his later years did not have to worry about his aged parents. Fr. Yuan's nucleus family had only 4 members: His father, his mother, himself, and his younger sister.

My initial encounter with Fr. Yuan was also an interesting episode. In late spring of 1978, I was obliged to resign from the Academia Sinica (中央研究院) in order to go through the immigration formalities for the United States which often would take months. No longer having regular employment, I had to look for some work to do. So one day I went to the Holy Family Catholic Church to see if I could have a chance to teach some Chinese students English in one way or another.

I saw a middle-aged Chinese priest sitting behind the desk in one of the offices of the Church, and walked in. He said he was Fr. Luke Yuan and asked me how could he

help me? I did not bring with me, my resumé or any recommendation letter, and without even self-introduction, bluntly asked him to introduce some students to me: Chinese students who came to the Church looking for an English teacher. Fr. Yuan said there were actually a few such students. He then asked me which priest at the Church did I know? With Fr. Laramée long gone, I said that the only priest there I know was Fr. Laflèche. And he told me to return in a few days.

Fr. Laflèche must have spoken highly of me, for when I saw Fr. Yuan for second time, he said to me cheerfully that the American student who was teaching English at the Church would soon return to the United States for the summer vacation, and I could have all his students. So, for the following 8 months I taught English at the Church. I had about 30 students, most of whom were college students in the fields of business or natural sciences.

In retrospect, that whole matter seemed quite unusual. Freshly emerged from my study at the Academia Sinica, I was a bookworm. I went to apply for work without bringing with me any credentials. Any other person would have turned me away under the circumstance, but Fr. Yuan went out of his way to help a stranger in a significant way.

Aside from my own experience, I was also impressed by the story of one of my students. She was then a girl in her early twenties, clever but also a little spoiled and willful. She told me she was once very ill while in high school, and stayed at the Taiwan University Hospital for weeks in a row. She refused to let her parents visit her at the Hospital, only wanted to see Fr. Yuan instead. So Fr. Yuan rode his motorcycle to visit her every day, under the blazing sun.

Later I learned from the other Catholics that this was just his style. Like the Mohists (墨家) of ancient China, he believed in all embracing love, and cared for the others as much as he cared for himself.

Fr. Yuan was born in Beijing into a family of scholarly and Catholic traditions. The great Qing Dynasty poet Mei Yuan (袁枚, 1716-1797) was a distant relative. And his father had served as the secretary of Cardinal Yu Bin (于斌樞機主教, 1901-1978). The senior Yuan died in 1949 in the notorious shipwreck incident of Taiping Steamer (太平輪) on her way from Mainland China to Taiwan. A year later, the then 18 year old Luke entered the Society of Jesuits and left China. His mother and younger sister remained in Mainland China, the latter was then 14 years old.

Fr. Yuan received his Jesuit education in the Philippines, and later also obtained a master's degree in Library Science from Columbia University, New York. After returning to Taiwan he had once served as the director of a Catholic university library, and then as the director of a Catholic publishing company. At the Holy Family Catholic Church, aside from his other pastoral duties, he established and directed The Marriage Encounter Association, did follow-up guidance and/or marriage counselling for Catholic students after their graduation from college, and worked part-time at the Office of Jesuit Province.

He had, as a young man entered the Society of Jesuits for the service of God, leaving behind his mother and his younger sister. But he was by nature a dutiful son and loving brother, and was deeply concerned about their well-being throughout the decades he was away from home, especially during the 30 years of non-communication between Mainland China and Taiwan. Although he was later able to visit them twice in

Shanghai in the early 1980s, as a priest, he could not do much to help improve their life either. This was his eternal inner hurt.

Life of priests was supposed to be stoic. While teaching at the Holy Family Catholic Church, I got to know well Fr. Yuan and another Chinese priest Fr. Simon Enrong Zhu (朱恩榮). Intelligent and industrious as they, they could have enjoyed a much better material life and other mundane amenities, had they not chosen to be priests. Their life style at the Holy Family Catholic Church was simple and crude. For instance, since most priests there were elderly Canadians, the kitchen only served plain, soft and fluffy western foods. For these 2 Chinese in their mid-forties, such day in and day out monotonous and tasteless diet was really hard to stand. When Fr. Yuan occasionally asked his assistant to buy him some Chinese foods, he would always add: “this is improper though.”

Priesthood certainly entails a great deal of self-sacrifice. One mid-August afternoon in 1978, while I was teaching at the Church, suddenly the phone in the next room rang. Then a lady walked into our classroom and said: “cardinal Yu Bin has passed away in Vatican.” A real great personality of the 20th Century China, Cardinal Yu was sent by the government to Vatican after the passing of Pope Paul II, for the election of a new Pope. He was critically ill when he received this order from the government. But he was the only cardinal in Taiwan at the time, and it would not be good if he did not participate in the election. So he went in despite of his health. He had literally sacrificed his life for the sake of his Church and his country. 94 cardinals attended his funeral.

I was saddened and awed by this sacrifice. Yet although I have always admired the Cardinal, I am a lay person and have only heard him talk once. As a priest who had

deep understanding of the great Cardinal as well as close ties with him, how Fr. Yuan must have felt can be imagined. I suppose the grievous phone call of that afternoon was made by Fr. Yuan. For all his sorrows, he had to make known of the Cardinal's heroic death.

After I moved to Denver in 1980, one day I received a phone call from Wen Ding Hsu (徐丁文) (Mrs. Tai-Den Hsu) (徐台誕太太), saying Fr. Yuan had written to her, asking her and her husband to take me to the meetings of the local Chinese Bible Study Group. The Hsus are outstanding and enthusiastic Catholics, and perhaps the organizers of the group. So for the next few years they picked me up from my home and took me to the monthly meetings. Here I also got to know many nice Chinese Catholics as well as 2 good Catholic nuns-Sister Marie (瑪麗修女) and Sister Carlos (卡羅絲修女). These meetings and the friendship of their participants have enriched my religious as well as secular life. *Yin Shui Si Yuan* (飲水思源, never forget where one's happiness comes from), this is one more thing I need to thank Fr. Yuan for.

After Fr. Yuan passed away in May 1990 of heart disease at the age of 58, his bosom friend Fr. Zhu (朱神父) wrote an essay mourning his untimely death. His essay ("Daonian (悼念) Yuan Guo-wei Shenfu "[mourning the passing of Father Guo-wei Yuan]", *Jiaoyou Shenghuo Zhoukan* (教友生活週刊) [*Christian Life Weekly*], no. 1862, 1990), has enabled me to better understand Fr. Yuan's life and work. And Fr. Zhu also forwarded to me a letter Fr. Yuan had written to me in his last days which he had found when sorting out the things Fr. Yuan left behind. Always a subtle man. Fr. Yuan knew this letter would be found after he passed away and forwarded to me.

The letter had only two lines which say "Dear Ms. Chia: Thank you for your assistance. I regret that there will be no way I can repay your kindness." I was saddened

but also surprised by these words. “Thank your for your assistance.” I searched my memory and could not think of anything that I had done for him worth mentioning. Always a generous man, he had forgotten what good things he had done for the others, and only remembered what good things the others had done for him.