

Ora et Labora: Six Benedictine Sisters in Peking from 1930 to 1935

by Nicholas Koss, O.S.B.

In 1857, four Sisters and two candidates from St. Joseph Convent in St. Marys, PA, arrived at St. Cloud convent to begin a Benedictine community. After six years, they moved to what is now known as St. Joseph, MN. The community prospered and by 1930 had approximately 1,000 Sisters, making it the largest community of Benedictine Sisters in the world. It was from this community that six Benedictine Sisters were sent to Peking in 1930 to set up the Women's College of the Catholic University of Peking. The idea of sending these Benedictine Sisters to Peking had come from Pope Pius XI because of the large size of St. Benedict's Convent (Wibora draft 5). At this time, the convent was not yet under Pontifical Jurisdiction but was under the bishop of St. Cloud, Bishop Joseph Busch (1866-1953). He had to approve of any major decisions that the Sisters made. The Prioress of St. Benedict's Convent then was Mother Louise Walz, OSB (1864-1944). She was Prioress from 1919 to 1937. The sending of Sisters to Beijing was the first foreign mission that St. Benedict's Convent undertook.

Fr. Francis Clougherty, O.S.B. was the Benedictine who invited the Sisters to go to Peking to work at the Catholic University of Peking, which Benedictines from St. Vincent Archabbey and other abbeys in the American Cassinese Congregation had established in 1925 under the leadership of Archabbot Aurelius Stehle, O.S.B. Fr. Francis had gone to China in 1920 as a diocesan missionary to work in the Kaifeng diocese. When he learned of the Benedictines establishing a university in Peking he went there and joined the Benedictines.

Fr. Francis and Bishop Busch spoke to the Benedictine Sisters on August 26, 1929. (*Lamps Burning* 269). At the start of his long presentation in the morning, Fr. Francis spoke of the history of Benedictines as missionaries and then went through the history of Christianity and China. Next, he lamented the lack of educated Catholics in China (Letter 2-3). Fr. Francis also stated: "We in Pekin felt that the work would be incomplete unless we could take care of the Catholic girls and Pagan girls who would be well disposed toward the Church. For this reason the Apostolic Delegate said—"Why don't you bring the Benedictine Sisters to Pekin?" (Letter 3). The Apostolic Delegate was the Italian Archbishop Celso Costantini, who had been appointed in 1922 by Pope Pius XI,

Bishop Busch, who had approved of the Benedictine Sisters going to China, spoke next and "gave his consent for the undertaking, but only on the condition that the necessary funds be raised by the diocesan Propagation of the Faith, and that the motherhouse be in no way held responsible. This was done as a matter of precaution; for he knew that St. Benedict's had lately incurred a two-million dollar debt in erecting a hospital in St.

Cloud and hard times were already threatening this country.” (“Benedictines in China before 1949”).

In the afternoon session, Fr. Francis asked for six Sisters to be sent to China and explained much about the university and life in Peking. On September 1, 1929, the Sisters had a chapter meeting and approved sending Sisters to Peking. This approval to send Sisters to Beijing was done even though “St. Benedict’s had lately incurred a two-million dollar debt in erecting a hospital in St. Cloud” (*Lamps Burning* 269).

Of the 109 Sisters who volunteered to go to China, six were selected. Sr. Francetta Vetter, O.S.B. (1896-1966), who was “the head of the Home Economics Department of the College of St. Benedict” (*Mission to China* 1), was appointed the superior. The other five Sisters were Sr. Regia Zens, O.S.B., Sr. Ronayne Gergen, O.S.B., Sr. Rachel Loulan, O.S.B., Sr. Donald Terhaar, O.S.B., and Sr. Wibora Muehlenbein, O.S.B.

The sisters received their mission crosses from Bishop Busch at the Holy Angels Cathedral of St Cloud and departed from the St. Benedict’s Convent on Sunday, August 31, 1930. They arrived at Tientsin, China on September 24, 1930 (*Mission to China* 3-4). They were met by Prior Ildephone Brandstetter, O.S.B., originally from St. Vincent Archabbey, who was in charge of the Benedictines at the Catholic University of Peking. The next day, they took the three-hour train ride to Peking. Arriving at Peking, they were met by Benedictines, faculty members and students from the university and taken to their courtyard home.

Once the Sisters were in Peking, Sr. Francetta, the superior of the community, would write every two weeks or so to Mother Louise about what was happening in Peking. It could take up to four weeks for her letters to arrive in Minnesota. The other Sisters would also write to Mother Louise. Many of these letters and the responses of Mother Louise are in the archives at St. Benedict Monastery. The rest of this presentation will mainly be based on the letters of Sr. Francetta.

Other than settling into their new home, the main work of the Sisters was learning Mandarin. Their teacher was a Mr. Hsu from the Protestant Language School (*Mission to China* 5). Sr. Wibora has described their studies: “Mr. Hsu was to prove himself an excellent teacher, but our arrangements left much to be desired. Instead of five hours a day students at the language school received, we had only the one hour a day with Mr. Hsu. We each had another hour a day with a girl, who, though well meaning, had no idea of how to go about teaching foreigners” (Wibora draft 33). Sr. Ronayne has this to say on their Chinese lessons: “Our teacher refuses to tell us a thing in English so we either sink or swim” (October 7, 1930).

Five days after their arrival in Beijing, Sr. Ronayne writes to the Sisters at St. Benedict’s Convent on September 30, 1930. She describes Fr. Ildephonse who had met them in Tientsin in this way: “Fr. Ildephonse is absolutely the dearest old priest I ever met—he has such pleasant

twinkly eyes. the gentlest voice, the most courteous manners, and a nice long beard like St. Benedict's." As for their first night in Peking, twenty priests from the university came over for Benediction in their chapel.

Almost two weeks later, on October 12, 1930, Sr. Francetta writes about the spiritual lives of the Sisters, "Once a week Father Ildephonse gives us a little sermon and hears confessions." He is also helpful in other ways, too, as Sr. Ronayne writes that after Mass for Christ the King, "kind Father Ildephonse took us all thru their lovely, lovely garden" (October 26, 1930). Among their problems is getting food and other needed items; it "is so very difficult." The Sisters were well aware of the momentous task ahead of them. Sr. Ronayne writes: "When we look about and view the vast field of labor with the comparatively few laborers, it looks like a hopeless task, and we feel unspeakably impotent and unworthy" (October 26, 1930).

In her letter of October 21, 1930 to Mother Louise, Sr. Francetta reports on the visit of the Apostolic Delegate Constantini: "[He] said he would tell the Holy Father all about us and how happy he would be to know that we are here. The Delegate is such a kind man and most solicitous for our welfare."

The actual problems they are facing include mice and rats. They do, however, work for the Fathers: their laundry and helping to catalogue the university library as well as proofreading (Wibora draft 50).

In the November [day not given] 1930 letter, Sr. Francetta mentions the cold weather and that special fur clothing is being made for the Sisters to keep them warm. This letter also expresses the importance of prayer being done by the Sisters: "We all pray a great deal—our chapel is our refuge—we feel very strongly united with each other and the dear Lord. The Sisters are so kind to each other and we are a real family of six." The Sisters are also starting to teach as they need the income.

On November 19, 1930, Sr. Ronayne writes to her former students at Cathedral High School first talking about their new home: "We live in a typical Chinese house—a spacious rambling affair of log narrow one-story buildings opening into passages." As for the Chinese people, they "are very pleasant, they could give us Americans many lessons in politeness." She mentions too older women have bound feet and explains how important it is for the Chinese not to lose face.

As for the political situation, Sr. Wibora has recorded: The day of our arrival, coming up by train from Tientsin to Peking, we noticed large troop movements and were told that there was trouble in the north, in Manchuria. All through the year there was unrest due to the Japanese encroachment in Manchuria" (draft 71). From 1929 to 1930, there was a military conflict between Chiang Kai-shek's Kuomintang government in Nanking against various warlords. Peking at that time was under the control of the warlord Yan Xishan but there was no fighting in Peking itself. In a letter to Mother Louise in November [day not given] 1930, Sr. Francetta

mentions the possibility of another war in Peking but adds: “We do not fear tho, for our trust is in Him who guides us and who sent us here.”

The year 1931

In the letter of January 9, 1931, Sr. Francetta presents the schedule the Sisters have in Peking:

6:00 rise

6:30 Holy Mass and Communion

7:10 Breakfast

7:45 Prayers

8:15 Mandarin class

9:15 Common meditation

9:15 – 12:15 Mandarin class (in private)

12:15 Dinner and visit and particular examination

1:30 – 4:00 Mandarin class (in groups)

4:00 Tea and recreation

4:15 – 6:00 Study and extra duties to tend to

6:00 Prayers

6:35 Supper

8:00 Night prayers

Obviously, a great deal of their time was spent studying Mandarin and in prayer. The Sisters are “all well and happy, working hard” according to an April 17, 1931 letter to Mother Louise. The Sisters spend their time studying Chinese and teaching English to private students (September 22, 1931). One problem however are insects: “We’ve killed some more scorpions. They are such horrible things and poisonous.” Sr. Francetta also reflects on her first six months in Peking: “God has so much for me to do in ways that I cannot begin to write about. So far He has given me wonderful graces, and at the end of my six months, I can give you a report of us all that is the best we can do and it is only possible due to all your prayers.”

As the anniversary of their arrival in China approaches, Sr. Francetta writes: “By the time this letter reaches you it will be long past the anniversary of our leaving home. That day will always hold such sad memories for us. A year with its up and downs. A year with its earnings

and losses for Heaven. We hope our coming year will pass as quickly as has this past one” (August 16, 1931). Sr. Wibora has clear aspirations for their second year: “Tomorrow we shall celebrate our first anniversary in China. I’m looking ahead to another year and hoping that our second anniversary will see the opening of our school a reality” (September 23, 1931).

The purpose of the Sisters to come to Peking was to opening the Women’s College for the Catholic University of Peking. The University had already assured the Nanking Government in 1929 and 1930 that a Women’s College would be set up (April 17, 1931). Sr. Francetta received many requests as to when the Women’s College would open. The Sisters had to decide when to open the school: “Shall we or shall we not—open school next year?” (January 29, 1931). “Next year” means the fall semester of the 1932-1933 academic year. It also had to be decided whether they should start with a “middle school or university” (Wibora draft 55). “Finally the university authorities reluctantly agreed to post-pone the opening of the women’s section until September 1932” (Wibora draft 55).

During this time, the Sisters were also looking for a new place to live: “Our present quarters are too small to serve for (even a small group of students) a school and for living quarters, and as the University authorities want to use our quarters for a middle school dormitory, we have been looking for an opportunity to rent new quarters” (April 17, 1931).

Another problem the Sisters needed to deal with was their relationship with Fr. Francis and Prior Ildephonse. Fr. Francis oversaw matters related to the University and Prior Ildephonse to the Sisters’ spiritual and physical life. Sr. Francetta wants Mother Louise to write to Fr. Francis and Prior Ildephonse to remind them of their particular areas of authority (August 16, 1931).

As for the political situation, the Japanese invaded Manchuria on September 18, 1931. In her letter of September 22, 1931, Sr. Francetta first communicates: “Manchuria was taken by the Japs—the city is in sorrow and in excitement.” She next mentions the 1931 floods devastating large sections of China. As for the Sisters, “We are safe here—at least now.” The only specific problem they face is that the mail to Peking from abroad can no longer come through Mukden. The following day, Sr. Wibora writes to Mother Louise: “I can imagine how eagerly you look for the latest news about the Japanese invasion of Manchuria. Poor China, as though she didn’t have trouble enough with Japan coming in. Japan has had her eye on Manchuria for a long time, but I can’t believe that the other nations of the world will stand by and let her take it.”

The next political event is the December 9th Movement that began in Peking. It was a huge protest by Peking students to urge the Chinese government to counter Japanese aggression. According to Sr. Francetta, “For four days no trains have come into Peking nor have any gone out due to students who are demanding free passage to Nanking At first thousands of students rushed to Nanking and then an issue came requesting students to stay at home—however many had not been to Nanking—so the remaining students decided they would also go—so when the trains refused to take them, they in turn took over the trains then on the

tracks—incoming trains had to stop service likewise. The students are very persistent in their demands—when the train was going to pull out—the Law students from the Peking University stretched themselves on the tracks—they have done that before too. The Fu Jen University boys—even in the last group—and they have been waiting in cars (not heated and we have snow now) to be taken to Nanking. The government will eventually give in and give them all free rides. The Chinese government is indeed very weak and Japan knows it” (December 4, 1931). One of her concerns was: “We still have Martial law at night—as yet we do not know whether we will be able to attend Mid. Night Mass—if the law is still in force it will be difficult to go.”

The Year of 1932

In 1932, the health of the Sisters was a major concern to Sr. Francetta. Sr. Donalda was seriously ill (March 2, 1932). All had been vaccinated for cholera (July 1, 1932). The Sisters all had been sick with colds (Oct 29, 1932). Sr. Rachel had typhoid fever but was not anointed as she was getting a little better (Dec 3, 1932).

Regarding the Sisters’ spiritual life, their annual retreat started August 17 and was given by Fr. Norris, a Passionist from South China (August 15, 1932). Sr. Francetta further unfolds: “We say all our prayers in common and also have Rosary devotions every night during October. So far we have been having only one holy hour a month. We have Benediction, confession and an English sermon every Friday night. At our Sunday Mass we have a Chinese sermon” (Nov 10, 1932).

Their chaplain is Fr. Carl Hensler (1898-1984), a priest of the Pittsburgh diocese who studied at St. Vincent College and Seminary. In 1930 he went to Peking to serve at the University and taught sociology and ethics (*Mission to America* 338). He returned to the States at the end of 1933 when the Benedictines were no longer in charge of the University.

By the end of the year, Sr. Francetta reflected on their current situation: “I’m not so completely discouraged tho—and still like China—it affords one many a jewel if it can possibly be borne in the right spirit. I almost did weep out my heart and eyes last night—because everything seems utterly hopeless. We have no money—the Fathers have none—they are also desperate. . . . [A]nd yet we gladly suffer if it will mean help and salvation” (December 3, 1932).

It was also at this time that Father Ildephonse was removed as Prior of the Peking Benedictine community: “Father Ildephonse is still here—he doesn’t know what is in store for him—he hasn’t had word from the Archabbot—but he and we did read in the paper about Fr. Basil coming to be the Prior. It was an awful shock to poor Father I because the Archabbot [Archabbot Alred] didn’t tell him so when he was here—nor did he write to him about it.”

Plans continued for opening the Women's College. Raising funds for the school was essential. At the beginning of 1932, Dr. O'Toole and Dom Adelbert went to the States for a year to do fundraising for the Women's College and new Science Hall at the University. They were also to travel to Rome and report to Pope Pius XI (Jan 22, 1932).

The Sisters were fortunate, however, in having Fr. Francis help them to deal with their problems. In a letter to Bishop Busch (January 24, 1932), Sr. Francetta writes: "Each day brings its own difficult problems—and the Chinese are anything but easy to handle—one has to wear extra fine gloves all the time—handling their affairs! Dom Francis has a way with them—and he usually wins out when he gets at a problem." The Apostolic Delegate "is determined that we get started this fall" (February 10, 1932). The Sisters were not without concern regarding the delay in opening the Women's College. Sr. Ronayne writes: "You can easily see, dear Mother Louise, how much we feel the prolonged delay in the opening of our school, not only because of the precious time lost, but also because of the promise made to the government and because of the many girls who are waiting anxiously for our school to open" (February 14, 1932).

The leading Protestant university in China at that time was Yenching University in Peking, which was also one of the top universities in China. Sr. Ronayne visited the Women's division in February 1932 and wrote that she went "to make a little study of the organization and system of their Women's division. It was most interesting (and almost as discouraging) to see the wonderful progress they have made. . . . [They] seem to have an almost unlimited supply of money so they should accomplish something. I wonder why it is that the American protestants seem to give so much more liberally to their foreign missions than do the Catholics" (February 14, 1932).

In the middle of May of 1932, Archabbot Alfred, who had succeeded Archabbot Aurelius, visited Peking for two weeks. The Benedictines in Peking were under the impression that Archabbot Alfred was against the mission there, but much to their surprise once in Peking and seeing what the Fathers had done, he changed his mind. Sr. Francetta reports:

The Archabbot was well pleased with affairs here and he admitted many times that he had harbored false impressions and was directly opposed to the going on of this place. He has changed on that and would have been more than happy and willing to stay. It is a great pity—a loss for the Order and a still more serious loss to the Church that the Abbots do not take the active interest they should"

July 1, 1932

After their arrival in Peking, the Sisters arranged for promising young women to go to the States to study and then assist with the Women's College upon their return to China. These included Florence Chi, Theresa Ching and Ina Chang (Wibora draft 56). Sr. Francetta alludes to the value of these young women: "Catholic trained teachers and better still Catholic themselves will be able to do a great deal of good in our school" (April 10, 1932).

It was in the fall of 1932 that the Sisters' school was finally to open: "In September, 1932, a large compound was rented and young women were accepted for the first class of Senior Middle School (equivalent to a sophomore class in high school in the States). The plan was to add a class each year and then in the fall of 1935 accept the first class of university women" (*Mission to China* 6). Father Francis gave an account of what was to occur to Bishop Busch:

We hope to open the Sisters' School next month with but one class of Higher Middle School girls. The expenditure will be very insignificant. The following year we can add another class so that after four years we will be ready for college work proper. This is a very conservative program which does not involve an expenditure beyond the means of the Benedictine Motherhouse. Your Excellency may rest assured that I am leaving nothing undone to make the life of the Sisters as pleasant as possible and to provide enthusiastic work for them. Naturally after two years of language study they desire to begin the work assigned to them by the Holy See. July 20, 1932

In the same letter, Fr. Francis first praised the Sisters: "I feel positive that the Sisters will be more successful than the Fathers have been, for they have a much better spirit than the first group that came to found the University." He next suggested that Rome is closely following the financial problems of the University:

The Holy See is quite disappointed over the lack of financial support for the University from the American headquarters and most likely the Archabbot has been given an ultimatum in Rome. The Holy See has decided that the University and the Women's College cannot fail, and if those responsible for maintenance default, some drastic measures will be resorted to by the Holy See. I have absolute knowledge of this decision of Rome.

In September of 1932, the school began with the first class of the senior middle school, which had 27 students who had passed the entrance examinations (Wibora draft 56). Over 300 had applied but Sr. Francetta explains why it was necessary to keep the number of students low: "We are purposely keeping the number low—so as to save our Teachers salaries—here they are paid by the hours they teach—and not by the month . . ." As for what will be taught, she writes: "Our Chinese School Program includes the following subjects. English, Chinese, History, Biology, Geography, Mathematics, Tang Yi (3 principles of Sun Yat Sen) Athletics and Religion. We begin at 8:00 A.M. and are finished at four O'clock—during free hours after four o'clock Religion will be taught" (September 10, 1932). As for the Sisters, during the rest period from noon to 2, they have time for Vespers and Compline. In the same letter she discloses that a delegate visited and said "I know how happy the Holy Father will be with the news, because no other work is so near his heart as the Catholic Higher Education of Women in China."

In a subsequent letter written in November, Sr. Francetta explained that, according to government regulations, religion cannot be taught during regular class time, so it is offered "5:00

to 6:00 several times a week.” As for what the Sisters do and teach: Sr. Wibora teaches mathematics; Sr. Donalda is a prefect and teaches singing and English; Sr. Rachel is a prefect and looks after the boarders at night; Sr. Ronayne is prefect of studies and teaches English; Sr. Francetta is an administrator. It is also in this letter that Sr. Francetta laments the criticisms given against their community regarding finances and their being too great a burden on St. Benedict’s Convent and the diocese of St. Cloud so that in the future they will only be given funds “to feed and clothe the six of us” (November 10, 1932)

An interesting comment on their Chinese students was given by Sr. Francetta: “We find the Chinese girls very obedient and respectful to the Sisters—atho to their own teachers (Chinese) they often lack all good manners” (to Sister Pacifica, Christmas 1932).

Throughout 1932 efforts were being made, mainly by Fr. Francis, to find a new place for the Sisters to live (February 10, 1932). Their current place was under the control of the Congregation of the Disciples of the Lord (CDD), a Chinese religious congregation founded by Apostolic Delegate Constantini. The C.D.D. wanted them to move out by August 1 (May 1, 1932).

Finally, a place was found. Sr. Francetta described it in this way:

The grounds are large enough to supply our needs for many years, and for the present there are buildings sufficient for several years. . . . The price of the place at the present rate of exchange is Fifty Thousand, which very reasonable A Mongolian Prince owns the place. . . . This place , “Kun Wang Fu” is about a mile from the Fathers The Fu in question is so laid out that the Sisters would have a section, the school a section and finally the students living quarters with play ground. May 8, 1932

This mansion was originally built for the Manchu Chinese official Heshen (1750 – 1799), who is known as the most corrupt and richest Chinese official ever. After he was removed from office, the mansion eventually became the home of Manchu Chinese official Yixin (1833-1898), an imperial prince also known as Prince Gong. Prince Gong's grandson, Puwei (1880-1936) inherited the mansion and was one who arranged for it be sold to the Benedictines. Today the mansion is an important historical site and visited daily by thousands of tourists.

The Sisters moved to the new place the middle of August (August 15, 1932) and began to do the many repairs needed (September 10, 1932). Sr. Wibora wrote about the chapel that was created: “The central building of one of the courts was converted into a chapel, Chinese style, and now we too had a Chinese altar” (draft 59).

Regarding the political situation, Sr. Francetta at the start of the year, writes: “Manchuria was taken by the Japs. We hope that all is settled now. It seems there was an agreement between

the Japs and Chang Hsueh Liang that it would take place very calmly.” (Jan 1, 1932). Chang Hsueh Liang [Zhang Xueliang] (1901-2001) was the Chinese warlord in charge of Manchuria before it was taken over by the Japanese. Once consequence of the Japanese controlling Manchuria was the mail to China was delayed because it could no longer pass through Manchuria and must go through Shanghai now (to Bishop Busch, January 24, 1932).

It was the Mukden incident which the Japanese used as a reason to invade Manchuria and set up the puppet state of Manchukuo. Afterwards there were various skirmishes between Chinese forces and those of the Japanese. On February 10, 1932, Sr. Francetta writes: “Times are troublesome but so far Peking has been spared any attacks. They are very cautious. We still have martial law—and the streets are extra well guarded at all times. The government centre had been moved to Kaifeng.” The next month she writes to Sr. Rosamond: “We hear a great deal these days about the Japs coming to Peiping [Peking]—if they do—everyone says there will be no trouble—only a matter of Japan taking over the right of way. The Chinese warlords are awful people—usually unqualified and the army is made up of all the unwanted” (March 8, 1932).

In October, four of Women’s College students went to Tientsin for safety: “The American Legation has sent notices around giving us ‘points of concentration’ by that they mean places for us to go to in time of danger” (October 29, 1932). By Christmas, Sr. Francetta wrote: “We are on the verge of war. Everything is very tense and we may have to close school for a while until the situation clears up” (a few days after Christmas 1932).

The Year of 1933

The life of the Sisters in the first part of 1933 continued much as it was in 1932. It was in Rome in the spring that a decision was being made about the future of the University (*Mission to America* 344-346). Sr. Francetta learned that Abbot Alcuin Deutsch (1877-1951), the President of the American Cassinese Congregation (1932-1944) had been called to Rome, along with Apostolic Delegate Constantini (March 24, 1933). Fr. O’Toole would be there too as well as the new Cardinal of Propaganda (1933-1960) Pietro Biondi (1872-1960). The decision was that the Society of the Divine Word, a German missionary congregation, at the suggestion of Apostolic Constantini, was to take over the running of the University, which would mean that the Society of the Divine Word would be in charge of the upcoming fall semester. Sr. Wibora explained: “Before the school year was up we knew that the Benedictine Fathers were to lose (or give up—which was it?) the university and that the Society of the Divine Word would take over during the summer of 1933” (draft 60). Furthermore, “The Benedictines in Peking learned of the transfer from the Apostolic Delegate. It came as a complete surprise, as a shock” (draft 66).

This was a most difficult time for Sr. Francetta: “We have been living under such stress and tension for the past few weeks that I find writing impossible, so I’m hoping that you will

forgive me for this apparent neglect” (March 24, 1933). Now it would have to be decided if the Benedictine Sisters should continue their work in setting up the Women’s College.

That the Benedictines would no longer be in charge was not surprising to Sr. Francetta: the University had gotten little money from the American Cassinese abbeys in the States; and most of the Benedictines at the University were still in training and not yet university teachers (May 29, 1933). By the end of May, it was still not determined if the Sisters would be asked to stay in Peking by the Society of the Divine Word.

In her letter of June 7, 1933, Sr. Francetta explained that she learned from Dr. O’Toole who had returned from Rome that Cardinal Biondi at Propaganda decided that the Sisters should stay in Peking and that the SVD superior general Joseph Grendel, SVD agreed with this decision. It was therefore not necessary for the Sisters to use the funds that Fr. Basil had for their return to the States. In August, Msgr. Ildebrando Antonuitti (1898-1974), *chargé d'affaires ad interim* in China in 1933, had insisted that the Sisters in Peking get permission from Mother Louise and Bishop Busch to stay here since they were a diocesan organization (August 20, 1933). The Sisters also agreed to stay in Peking for 1934-1935 academic year. They had learned too that all decisions related to the University were to be made by Rome not by Techny, the headquarters of the SVDs in the United States

At this time, Sr. Ronayne wrote to Mother Louise of the importance of their work:

I certainly do think that your mission in Peking should keep us. After all the trouble. Expense, worry, and heartache that this enterprise has cost all concerned, and since God has blessed our efforts with some measure of success, and also because a Catholic high school and college for girls is so badly needed in Peking, it would seem a pity if the work were abandoned. Aug 22, 1933

Towards the end of the year, it was clear that the Sisters would not continue to work for the Society of the Divine Word after the 1934-1935 academic year. One possibility if the Sisters were to stay in China was to go to the city of Kaifeng, where Fr. Francis had first set up a high school. According to Sr. Francetta, “Since we are so hard pressed for money and since the situation in Peking is so precarious to say the least—the proposition of the Sisters of Providence and their good Bishop seems like a good solution to our many difficulties if we are to continue our Mission work in China—and we earnestly desire to continue . . . ” (September 23, 1933). In December, however, they were waiting to hear if they could go to Kaifeng (December 7, 1933). It was also not certain if all the six Sisters would go to Kaifeng if such a move was approved (December 18, 1933).

The previous month, Sr. Ronayne had written to Mother Louise that there is “more harmony in our community now. But if we go to Kaifeng, we will have same problem since Fr. Francis is there” (November 23, 1933). The problem mentioned here is that half of the Sisters were against listening to Fr Francis while the other half wanted to follow what he said. In

September, Sr. Francetta had illustrated this problem when it was connected with the University and the Women's College (September 9, 1933) and how she was criticized by some of the Sisters (Sisters Ronayne, Rachel, and Donalda) for listening to Fr. Francis. Should the Women's College be independent of the University or should it be under it. Sr. Francetta favored it being under the University with Fr. Francis being in charge. Regarding the Sisters opposed to such cooperation, Sr. Francetta expressed her view of the "gross ingratitude" on their part and asked Mother Louise to write to them "that any Sister who shows a critical and unwholesome spirit and lack of cooperation with those in authority will be recalled to America."

The Sisters continued their efforts to open the Women's College. The place that they had found in the summer of 1932 would now be the location for both the Women's College and their residence. The first floor of one of the two-storied buildings will have a study hall for forty students, a recitation room for thirty students, and a science room (January 29/30, 1933). The second floor of this building will be the library. A five-year loan was suggested as a way to buy the place (Feb 22, 1933).

For the first class of the 1934-1935 academic year, "All subjects had to be taught in Chinese (except English) for the first year" (January 29/30, 1933). This regulation would be a problem since the Sisters did not speak Chinese. According to Sr. Wibora, in the summer of 1933 science laboratories were "planned and prepared" (draft 68). The Sisters were also praised for how they approached their work: "Again and again the professors at the university and the teachers of the boys' middle school marveled at our attitude of neglecting nothing, of continuing as though we were in truth preparing for a long future in this work." News of their school was getting around and the applications for attendance are many (July 6, 1933). Registration day was July 20th and followed by examinations for new students. There would be 75-80 in each class with about 40 in English classes. Still needed was a "good Music, singing and art teacher." School would begin September 4 (August 10, 1933). After classes began, Sr. Francetta revealed that for them to finish this academic year more funds would be needed (October 9, 1933). She also pointed out that the Society of the Divine Word was looking for other Sisters to take over the school.

Sr. Francetta later disclosed how upset the Chinese were that the Benedictine monks had left and also were apprehensive the Sister will leave too: "They have lost confidence in Catholics in general" (July 31, 1933). After acknowledging all that Fr. Francis, Prior Ildephone, and Fr. Oswald had done for them, Sr. Francetta explained: "It is our sincere hope that if the Benedictine Fathers have a foundation or school else where [sic] in China that it will be also a place for a Benedictine girls school" (August 10, 1933).

After it was determined that the Society of the Divine Word would be given control of the University, Fr. Franz Xaver Biallas (1878-1936), a German Sinologist, and Fr. Theodor Schu, the regional superior for China, were the first members of the Society of the Divine Word to visit the Sisters (June 7, 1933). (Hereafter the Society of the Divine Word will be referred to as

S.V.D., which is based on their Latin name: *Societas Verbi Divini*.) The new rector, Rev. Dr. Joseph Murphy, S.V.D. would visit them soon (July 15, 1933). The Chancellor of the University was Joseph Grendel, S.V.D., Superior General.

As to where the Sisters would live, Msgr. Antonuitti informed them that they were to stay where they were (August 10, 1933). Mass for the Sisters was provided by the S.V.D.s. Later in the month, Sr. Francetta explained more about the S.V.D.s: “The S.V.D. Fathers offer us help and from every indication they are not so anxious for us to remain in Peking” (September 23, 1933). Regarding the S.V.D.s, Sr Wibora indicated: “No matter how nice the S.V.D. Fathers would be and how helpful, after all they were not Benedictines and could not be expected to understand our position, our view points, and above all give us the Benedictine spiritual help we would need” (draft 67-68).

Regarding the political situation in 1933, in January, the Japanese invaded the then province of Jehol (now a part of Hebei Province). The effect on the Sisters’ school was that only 15 students took their mid-semester examinations because of fear of the Japanese coming to Peking. Parents had taken the others home (January 29/30, 1933).

The Battle of Jehol was fought from February 21 to March 1, 1933, against Chang Hsueh Liang [Zhang Xueliang], the Chinese warlord. Sr Francetta reported: “We are still in the waring region and never can tell what may arrive however we are quite safe in Peking—if the Japs come here most of the fighting will be done outside of the city. The only thing that most people fear is looting—but we have so little to loot that I’m sure we’ll be spared . . . ” (February 22, 1933).

The Sisters continued to be aware of the Japanese invasion. Sr. Fracetta recounted: “The war? – well the Japs are still pestering China, but they’ve done that for so long that now we are getting used to hearing ‘The Japs are coming.’ If they did come it would not harm us . . . ” (May 1, 1933). In May 22, 1933, Japan and China agreed to the Tangu Truce which put the Great Wall under Japanese control. Sr. Francetta explained their situation:

[W]e are still here and all’s well and safe in Peiping. We have been having a great deal of excitement—planes carrying bombs hanging over the city. Many soldiers here from the Southern provinces—Japanese soldiers also coming in to protect their legation here. The streets have piles of sand bags for defense at each corner and in between—thru these are dug out ???—machine guns etc—and thru it all we are not afraid. . . . Every night I carry our cash and bank book to bed . . . for fear of looters. . . . Thousands of people have left the city—and many are living at French convents—just to be on foreigners’ grounds gives the Chinese a sense of safety. It is our flag that has kept the Prince from putting us out. May 29, 1933

The Year 1934

The Sisters were relieved to learn that they could stay in China: “Your assuring message, that we are to remain in China arrived the last day of the year. It made us very happy to know that we may stay” (January 2, 1934). The Sisters were able to continue their study of Mandarin through the help of their students: “Then there are several private students who in return for an English lesson teach the Sisters Chinese” (February 10, 1934). The Sisters were also deciding if they wanted to remain in China. Sr. Francetta clearly did: “I like the Chinese people. The climate and food are likewise agreeable to me. On every side I see the many things we can do to further the cause of our holy religion—and that is the chief intention for my wishing most earnestly to remain in China” (March 12, 1934).

The health of the Sisters was another concern (June 25, 1934). And the Peking weather continued to be a worry, especially the dust storms (April 2, 1934), the rainy season (August 6, 1934), and the weather getting cold (October 12, 1934).

The Sisters kept receiving visitors of all types. One visitor was the “famous” Catholic businessman, Lo Pa Hong, from Shanghai (April 2, 1934). Another visitor was the forty-four year-old new Apostolic Delegate. He was “admirably impressed with the size of our compound” (June 25, 1934). He also told the Sisters that their affairs “had to definitely arranged in the near future” and asked Monsignor Antoniutti, his secretary, to look for a solution.

As for the hope of the Sisters to go to Kaifeng, the Benedictine monks’ Kaifeng community would be “canonically established” with the visit of the Apostolic Delegate on December 8 (Nov 22, 1934). The Sisters were waiting for Mother Louise and Bishop Busch’s decision about their going to Kaifeng (November 27, 1934).

Already at the start of the year, the Sisters had financial problems (Jan 21, 1934). It seemed, however, that Mother Louise had decided that the Sisters should buy the compound where they were living and would provide the money--“30,000 Gold Dollars”-- to do so (Jan 24, 1934). The Sisters would try to save money, but dental expenses were high (February 10, 1934). Fr. Murphy wanted them to stay where they were despite the high rent (May 14, 1934). He would also lend them money to take care of the school’s needs for May and June. The expenses to run the Women’s College for the 1934-1935 academic year would be in total 24,310 Chinese dollars but there would be only 6,600 in income. In November, Sr. Francetta wrote that 5,980 US dollars would be needed for the present school year (November 27, 1934). At the end of the year, Fr. Oswald and Fr. Ildephonse were in the States fundraising for them (Dec 22, 1934).

Efforts continued to be made in the running of the Women’s College. Sr. Francetta explained to Mother Louis the Chinese school system and how it’s different from that in the United States:

For instance, at home it takes four or five Sisters or teachers to staff a high school, but here it takes a different teacher for almost every subject that is taught. . . . In this little school of ours alone we need 18 teachers and the next semester one more will be

added. . . . The teachers are paid by the number of hours they teach. The rates for last year and this year are \$ [Chinese dollars] 2.50 per hour. . . . Sister Wibora was very brave and attempted the teaching of mathematics and chemistry. She is getting along splendidly and is a big saving to us. (Feb 10, 1934)

She also provided a list of the fees charged for their school.

At the end of the second semester of the 1934-1935 academic year, a cable was sent to Mother Louise:

Delegate wants decision by June 28 Do we continue school? Rent at 500 or move?

(Cable late June before June 28 1934)

Here is the cable response of Mother Louise:

Response

No new students Purchase no equipment. Letter follows. M Louise

Then, Sr Francetta wrote to Mother Louise that the Apostolic Delegate insisted that they must take in new students. He also told the S.V.D. Fathers to help the Sisters. They could use their physics equipment, and they would give them classroom furniture (July 10, 1934). With the new semester of the 1934-1935 academic year, the Sisters now had their third class. Sr. Wibora observed: “We now had a complete senior middle school . . .” (draft 68).

At the start of the 1934-1935 academic year there were 61 students for the new semester (Sept 16, 1934). 25 students were

in our graduating class but that does not mean twenty five who will really graduate. The government is getting very strict—and all graduates must pass a government examination before receiving a diploma. We expect that 10 or 12 of ours will be able to take these examinations. . . . The University Middle School ranked only about 14th because so many poor students were allowed to take the examinations. . . . Sisters Ronayne, Donalda and Rachel teach the three English classes and Sister Wibora has two Mathematics classes and the Chemistry class. . . . [Sister Donalda] teaches two hours of singing a week.

The compound where Sisters lived and where the school was had its problems. The wall fell down “between the school section and the dining room” (October 12, 1934). Fortunately, it was at night and no one was in the dining room.

In November, Sr. Odilia Fassett, SSpS, the regional superior in China of the Servants of the Holy Ghost, and another one of their Sisters visited the Benedictine Sisters along with Fr. Murphy and Fr. Schuh, S.V.D., the regional superior (Nov 27, 1934). (SSpS stands for the Latin *Congregatio Missionalis Servarum Spiritus Sancti*, which is translated as The Missionary Sisters

Servants of the Holy Spirit, or Holy Spirit Missionary Sisters, or simply Holy Spirit Sisters.) When Sr. Francetta asked if the Sisters would take over the Women's College, she was told a report would be sent to the S.V.D. Superior General to see if they could handle the finances. She was also asked if two of their Sisters could spend the spring semester with them.

In the letters of 1934, there is only one reference to the political situation. Sr. Francetta wrote: "Rumors say the new Apostolic Delegate will reside in Nanking. Japan might take over Peking and Tientsin" (April 18, 1934). In April 1934, the Japanese had become the protector of China with the Amau Statement.

The Year 1935

The letters of January 1935 are like those of earlier years: the Sisters' Christmas celebrations (January 2, 1935), their annual retreat and the Sisters' health (January 28, 1935). In February, however, attention was being paid as to whether Bishop Busch would approve their going to Kaifeng to set up a community (February 11, 1935). The Holy See and Mother Louise had already given permission for them to transfer to Kaifeng (February 27, 1935). The final approval by Bishop Busch came by cable (March 28, 1935). The Bishop of Kaifeng expected the Sisters to arrive in the middle of July (May 30, 1935).

The Sisters continued to have important visitors. Abbot Theodore Neve, O.S.B.(1879-1963), the abbot of Saint Andre, Belgium visited when he was in China for the visitation of their foundation in Sichuan (May 16, 1935).

Fr. Murphy continued to have health problems and was again in the hospital (January 28, 1935). Later, in February, he told the Sisters that "he had word from their General that the Sisters of the Servants of the Holy Ghost are coming to take over [their] school" (February 11, 1935). It was now clear that the Women's College would be under the direction of the SSps Sisters. On May 25, two SSps Sisters arrived, the Sister Superior, Sr. Otgerina Lutens, SSps, and a teacher (May 30, 1935). The SSps Sisters were buying most of the Benedictine Sisters' things (June 17, 1935). Three more SSps Sisters—Sr. Dulcissima Bette, Sr. Ellen Marchner, and Sr. Gemma Ryba-- would arrive soon; they were coming from Techny, the SSps headquarters in the States, via Europe. Sr. Francetta also learned of the death on many SSps sisters in China and observes how fortunate the Benedictine Sisters have been that none of their six Sisters had in these five years.

A final request from Fr. Murphy and the SSps Sisters was to ask if two Benedictine Sisters could "return from Kaifeng--and help out for six weeks at the Girls Middle School Catholic University" (July no day 1935). The American SSps Sisters would only arrive in October and English teachers were needed before then. It was decided that Srs. Ronayne and Wibora could do this. Unfortunately, Fr. Murphy, who had often been ill, died on September 5, 1935

As for the political situation, on June 10, 1935, the secret He-Umezu Agreement was signed which gave Japan even more control over northern China. Sr. Francetta communicated:

Peiping [Peking] is now under Japanese rule—there was no fighting or fuss. The Chinese military officials—and soldiers were requested by the Japanese to leave the Province—and the Chinese who rule here—are doing so with instructions from the Japanese. . . . There is much talk of moving the Chinese Universities to other parts of China. . . . The Chinese Minister of War left Peiping this past week—not to return of course. The American Embassy will no doubt be moved to Nanking. . . . The students will not even miss a day of school on account of the trouble—so they are not so happy! June 17, 1935

In July, she further explained: “The Japanese affair is all settled Peiping [Peking] is entirely under Japanese rule—with Chinese in the big positions—but working for the new Japanese” (July no day 1935).

During the Sisters last days in Peking, there was graduation from their school, but it was not a happy day: “It so happened that the day set for the exercises turned out to be the one when martial law was in effect all day—that is the main gates in the city were closed—and a great deal of trouble was expected. So only nine of our girls and very few of the Boy graduates were present for the big event.” (July no day 1935).

And so concluded the almost five years of the six Benedictine Sisters from St. Benedict Convent of their *ora et labora* in Peking. Their dedication and enthusiasm for work in China was impressive and they liked serving in Peking so much that when it was no longer possible to be of assistance there, they decided to continue their efforts in China by going to Kaifeng where some of the Benedictines who had been at the Fu Jen University in Peking had gone to set up a priory (*Mission to China* 7). The Sisters too would establish a community there. They were there until the Japanese who had invaded China took them to a concentration camp in December 1941 and they were in a concentration camp until August 1945. After the end of World War II, three of the six original Sisters in Peking—Sr. Francetta, Sr. Regia, and Sr. Ronayne—returned to Kaifeng. Other Sisters were sent from St. Benedict Convent too. The civil war, however, between the Chinese Communists and the forces of Chiang Kai-shek forced the Sisters to leave Kaifeng in April 1948. Their first stop was Shanghai and from there they went to Taiwan. Not long afterwards Sr. Francetta and Sr. Regia traveled to Japan to set up a community there. To this day, there remains a prospering community of Benedictine Sisters in Tamsui, Taiwan that developed from the foundation started by the Sisters who were in China.

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