The history of the Salvatorian Missions in China is a story filled with triumph and tragedy, life and death. The selfless and brave Salvatorian missionaries sought to bring the Gospel to a people with a very different language and culture. Thousands heard and accepted that message. But in time an intolerant government forced them to leave, along with several Chinese Salvatorians who also had to leave their families and their homeland behind in order to live their faith and their religious vocation.

To tell this story, we use the words that come directly from people at the time, condensed from letters and reports to the Salvatorian Generalate in Rome.

(From the 1940 report to the Generalate - Author unknown) - “It was the Fall of 1922 that the first Salvatorian Fathers arrived in China. They were assigned to the western part of the province of Fukien by the Holy See after they had lost their former mission in the province of Assam in India. The name of the new mission in China was ‘Catholic Mission of Shaowu’ and prior to the arrival of the Salvatorians it was under the direction of the Spanish Dominicans. It belongs to the Apostolic Prefecture of Foochow. The Spanish Fathers had had two mission stations with resident priests in that far-off region of Fukien, and there were about 800 Catholics to care for.

Sometime after the arrival of the Salvatorians, two new stations were established. Due to political unrest and banditry, mission activity and progress were hampered and slow. In 1927, Protestant missionaries fled Fukien to places of greater safety, but the Salvatorians remained at their posts. However, in 1931 they also were forced to leave their beloved mission field, but only after they suffered numerous trials and hardships. One of the Fathers (Fr. Melchior Geser SDS – far left in the photo above) was killed and a few days later all of the missionaries except one were captured by outlaws and held as prisoners until ransom was paid. After their release they sought refuge in the capital of Fukien and they remained exiled there for a time. In 1934, three missionaries returned to the mission, and in 1935 the rest followed suit.

Even though the mission suffered much from a material point of view during those trying years, the Christians marvelously persevered in their faith. Since then, our mission has made satisfactory progress. The number now lists a total of 3406 Christians and 4453 catechumens under instruction. 769 children are taught in the schools.”

(Photo on right: Fr. Geser with altar servers)
(From the 1946 report to the Generalate by Fr. Peter Huentemann SDS) – “Our newly-appointed Superior, Fr. Matthew Laser SDS, is a missionary who has served nearly twenty years in China and is well-known in the whole of western Fukien, is beloved and popular, very learned, especially in the Chinese language, and the joy among the Christians on his appointment was extraordinarily great, as the many letters he received would prove that. Sister Adolphina SDS, who has worked very successfully for about twenty years in Kwangtseh as a nurse and catechist, just celebrated her Silver Jubilee of Profession. The whole city sent congratulations and gifts - the pagans as well as the Christians - as Sister Adolphina has done so much charitable work for everyone without any distinctions. She is an angel of charity!

In September we received great news from Rome. Our two Chinese students for the priesthood were permitted to enter the Novitiate - they are our first Chinese Salvatorians! The day they entered Novitiate was a great event for us Salvatorians - a satisfaction and consolation after all the troublesome years in the Mission.”

(From the 1947 report to the Generalate by Fr. Ludwig Heitfeld SDS) - “In the summer of 1940, we were thinking of building a beautiful new church. Msgr. Inigo Koenig SDS, the Apostolic Prefect of our Shaowu Mission, gave his permission and blessing to the new enterprise. But then came a combination of hindrances, influenced by the ruthlessness of war, and it put a delay in all our efforts.

But in July 1944, our lucky star shined brightly again. All the Christians in the mission knew that July 30 would be the 40th anniversary of the Apostolic Prefecture and it was also close to the birthday of Msgr. Inigo Koenig. He came here to celebrate his birthday among these first Catholics in the region and he was struck speechless by their generosity. A nice little piece of property was presented to him for the building of a new church by Mrs. Andrew Fan and her son John, descendants of Jacob Fan, the first Catholic here. A “Golden Book” was handed to him, in which were written all the names of the Christians and their pledges for the new building foundation. We all were wiping tears from our eyes when we saw and heard what was taking place - it completely surpassed our comprehension. We all went over to the new property which Msgr. Koenig blessed and we erected a wooden cross as a sign of triumph. Here we would build the new church with the name of St. Andrew.

In the weeks that followed, the plot of land was developed and the digging began for the new church. But suddenly there came a halt - we were forbidden by the local government, and the missionaries were to be imprisoned again! It came like a bombshell in our midst. Fr. Ludwig went to meet with the local Christians to console them and he begged them to carry that cross with him until they could meet again. It was a severe blow to have to give up on this lovely station.
But the missionaries are always pioneers of hope. After a year of imprisonment, we were once again in Shaowu. It was January of 1946. The new church could once again be built and in April the cornerstone was laid for the new St. Andrew’s Church. Rain hampered the construction over the coming months, but finally on October 28, the church building was finally finished. A month later, on the Feast of St. Andrew itself, the church was formally dedicated.”

But the takeover of China by the Communists in 1949 was a threat to every Christian mission and the foreign missionaries as well as the new Chinese Salvatorians were compelled to leave the country.

(From an April 1949 letter to the Generalate by Msgr. Inigo Koenig SDS - Apostolic Prefect of the Fukien District) - “Since Peking and Tiensin have fallen and the Yangtseh River, the last natural defense against the Red Army in the south, has been crossed, all China has been seized with a great panic. For now, all the pastors will remain at their stations. We will try to save our most important mission institutions and reduce the mission personnel to those absolutely needed, while evacuating the others in time. Our missionaries may be forced to leave their posts later. I have given permission for Mass to be said at any time of the day, without anyone being bound by the Eucharistic fast. Mass may be said without vestments or sacred vessels, using only a simple glass chalice and plate, and using any kind of wheat bread. The three American Sisters went back, along with the three Chinese candidates, at the beginning of February and we have been notified of their safe arrival. Fr. Coloman and two of the Brothers have left for America.”

In the photo above, Sister Katharina Tang (standing, second from left) who was a Candidate at the time, and Sister Anna Yu (standing far right) were among those who fled to the United States. Sister Anna died in 2004. Sister Katharina died in 2014. She had returned to Asia to minister in Taiwan for a number of years. Sister Anna had remained in the USA.

They are both pictured here later in life - Sr. Katharina (left) and Sr. Anna (right).

“The second group left later by boat in the direction of Foochow. Fr. Leonard left with the two Chinese scholastics in order to bring them eventually to Manila to continue their studies. Many of the Sisters left at the same time.

The third group leaves tomorrow. The remainder of the Sisters will leave, including Sister Norbertine, and she will be missed terribly by all the people, as she was their only dentist.
A few of us, including myself, will remain here for now. We will try to send information by every ways and means, especially to Rome. We fear, however, that our communications will be cut off. I have sent them word as to how to interpret my messages, as I doubt we will be able to write freely. Try to tell relatives of the missionaries and the Sisters not to fear too much for us, as long as there is no negative news. The important thing to do is to please pray for us.

For now, everyone waits and listens for what the radio brings. Nanking fell last Saturday. Shanghai is surrounded and now the Reds are advancing towards Nanchow. No doubt Foochow and Nanchang will soon have their turn and then we will be within their reach.

If it is possible, I will soon write again. If not, console yourselves with the hope that we shall meet again, either here or in the better world to come. ~ Msgr. Inigo Koenig SDS / Written in great haste.”

Msgr. Koenig and several other Salvatorian priests were later detained (under “house arrest”) for not leaving the country by a specific date. Two years later, he managed to get a letter out.

*(Msgr. Inigo Koenig SDS - in a letter dated May 15, 1951, from detainment in Shaowu)* - “For a long time I had wished to write to you as I am aware of your concern for us. Our situation is unpredictable; each day can bring about an essential change. We received news from Foochow that the Chinese priests and Christians held a three-day meeting, with the result that they elected a Bishop. It was decided that the foreign missionaries should be entirely separated from the Chinese Christians and that they should refrain from any official function, such as no longer saying Mass in church. The money in the banks is frozen so we are penniless and now without work. We received from the neighboring mission a Chinese priest, a pious and zealous pastor of souls who can be of great help. The faithful will not be entirely abandoned. In the meantime we are like captives in our own house. People are very accommodating insofar as no one disturbs us. We were told that there is no problem for us foreigners to render a kind of menial service to the native priests in their mission work. It is but natural that our people ask themselves again and again how all this is to continue. Our greatest consolation and peace come from our consciences, knowing that we come with the best and most unselfish of intentions to spend ourselves for the sake of the people. They are told that we are emissaries of the capitalists, but they know that this is either a wicked calumny or gross ignorance of the facts. Up to now, our good Father in heaven has watched over us. To his fatherly care and providence we entrust also our future. The most they can do to us is to take our lives. They can never hurt our souls.”

That was the last communication from Msgr. Koenig in China. The next word about them would come two years later from a Dominican priest - Fr. Louis Scheerer OP - in Hong Kong.

*Photo: Jailhouse in Kienyang (Kienning) - where Msgr. Koenig was detained.*
(In a letter to the Salvatorian community dated June 1, 1953, Fr. Sheerer writes:) - “I welcomed to safety on May 17th our missionary neighbor, Rt. Rev. Msgr. Inigo Koenig SDS. He is the Apostolic Prefect of Shaowu, Fukien, which district is under the Salvatorian Fathers. Fr. Leonard Gerke SDS, present superior of their house in Macao, came to welcome his superior. Here are a few facts related by Msgr. Koenig: On May 14, 1952, he was taken to prison to serve his sentence. The judge had showed him that his crimes merited at least 23 years of imprisonment, or possibly death. For two weeks he was in prison in Shaowu city, then he was transferred to spend the rest of one year’s term in the jail in Kienyang city. For six months, Msgr. Koenig was in one small room, 15 square feet, with six other prisoners. There was one bed for the six of them; they had to lie one with his head at the top and the next at the foot of the bed in order to squeeze all six men onto the one bed. Next to Msgr. Koenig was a man with manacled hands and feet, who could not change his clothes and was the center of swarms of body lice. When they were ready to expel Msgr. Koenig on May 14, 1953, the Communist officials announced that due to the great leniency of Mao Tse-Tung’s Communist government, the rest of the sentence was remitted and he was being exiled from China forever. Armed guards accompanied him from Kienyang to the border of Hong Kong, and he was released to the freedom of Hong Kong on May 17th. He says he has difficulty with his memory after the incessant trials and questionings. His eye sight is dim due to malnutrition. However, great improvement has been made during his short stay here.”

Msgr. Inigo Koenig SDS would eventually regain his health and stamina after leaving China in 1953 and returning to Germany. The other Salvatorian priests who had been detained under house-arrest in Shaowu were allowed to leave the country by the end of 1954. The Salvatorian missionary Fathers, Brothers, and Sisters who had served in the Fukien district, along with the Chinese Salvatorians who had entered the community there, eventually made their way to one of several places: the island of Macao (near Hong Kong), the island of Formosa (Taiwan), the United States, and Germany. They all continued to minister in other capacities, many as missionaries elsewhere.

The story of the first Salvatorian Mission in China is a fascinating tale. The dedication and fearlessness that these missionaries showed in the face of danger and even death is a story of faith-filled heroism.
Photos from the Salvatorian Mission in the Fukien District of China.

The burial of the ossuary containing the bones of Father Melchior Geser SDS
A Chinese woman
Chinese boat

Teaching the children to pray
Salvatorian Sisters
A Chinese man

The Salvatorian community in Fukien December 1944
An altar in a Chinese Catholic church
The Catholic community in Shaowu
| It snows in China! | Learning to write in Chinese | The Salvatorian Fathers’ home in Shaowu |