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André Sylvestre C.M.

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Théodoric Pedrini CM (1670-1747)

The Emperor's Musician

André Sylvestre, C.M.

During the latter part of the 18th century the Vincentians were asked by the Holy See to replace the Jesuits in various countries: Prussia, the Ottoman Empire, and especially China. However, even before this several of them had volunteered for this Chinese mission and had been sent there by The Congregation *de Propaganda Fide*.

The first examples of this were Fathers Appiani and Mullener. They were great missionaries constantly coping with difficulties, but we are not concerned here with the story of their apostolate.

In 1645 Pope Innocent X had condemned the Chinese Rites, but many missionaries, including the Jesuits, sought loopholes to avoid implementing the Holy Father's decree. A directive from a bishop, Mgr Maigrot, was no more successful. Pope Clement XI therefore decided to send a legate to investigate the question on the spot and find a solution. He chose a reputable priest, Charles de Tournon, aged 33, and consecrated him bishop and appointed him Patriarch of Antioch. He made his pre-consecration retreat with the Vincentians in Montecitorio and was consecrated by the Pope himself on 27 December 1702. The legate was to be accompanied by several missionaries sent by the Congregation *de Propaganda Fide*.

The legate was to go and deal directly with the Emperor Kangshi in the Court in Peking. The emperor had the reputation of being a shrewd melomaniac, so the Pope, thinking the emperor would be happy to welcome an experienced musician to his court, asked for a Vincentian priest who was already well-known as a talented musician to become a member of the expedition.

Fr Théodoric Pedrini eagerly accepted the suggestion put to him, and so was to leave with five other missionaries, including another Vincentian Fr Biasi.

Fr Pedrini was born in 1670 in Fermo, a small old village in the Ancona Marches. He studied law and had a doctorate *in utroque*. He joined the Vincentians in 1698 at the age of 28.

The expedition, made up of the legate and six missionaries sent by the Congregation *de Propaganda Fide*, was to leave Barcelona on 9 February 1703 on a French ship of the Compagnie des Indes.

A long-term voyage

Fr Pedrini asked permission from the legate to go to Paris first to visit the Maison-mère and greet the Superior General. He left Rome on 13 January 1702 and caught a boat for Toulon in Leghorn and went on to Paris.

He was supposed to join the legate in the Canaries in April 1703, but he stayed too long, perhaps, in Paris, and also decided that a journey though Spain would be too difficult, but, to cap it all, he missed his boat for the Canaries in St Malo. At Christmas 1703, though, he found a boat was leaving St Malo for China, via the Straits of Magellan and South America.

Voyage to the Americas

He went on board on 28 December. It was a rough voyage and they met several storms, for the passage round Cape Horn is no pleasure trip. They called in to Concepcion in Chile on 13 May 1704 and shortly afterwards arrived in Callao, the port for Lima. But on arrival in Peru the captain decided he was going no further, and made preparations for going back to France. So our candidate for China found himself stranded in Lima, the prestigious capital of the Spanish West Indies and residence of the Viceroy. Fr Pedrini had plenty of time to go and pray at the tomb of the holy bishop Turibio, who had died a century earlier, and to show his devotion in the house where St Rose had been born; she had been canonised more than thirty years earlier, in 1671.

Hearing that a ship was to leave Acapulco in Mexico for the Philippines, Fr Pedrini decide to take a chance on that. He found a ship which took him from Peru to Guatemala, but that left him with another 1,200 kilometres to cover. He covered them partly on foot and partly by boat. He eventually arrived in Acapulco and went on board the ship on 18 March 1707. He had a calm voyage and landed in Manila on 9 August 1707.

The last stage

But he wasn't yet at the end of his troubles. However, he found a ship which was supposed to take him to Macao, but at that time of the year the winds were so unfavourable that the ship had to change course three times and eventually return

to Manila. Just at that moment an edict from King Philip V of Spain arrived, forbidding all trade with China. But also just at that moment five missionaries for China from Propaganda arrived in Manila, entrusted by the Holy Father with the mission of bringing the cardinalatial biretta to the legate, Mgr de Tournon. This was a recognition by the Holy See of all its legate had done to bring peace to the burning issue of the Chinese Rites; up to then he had received nothing but affronts, insults, and an attempted poisoning.

Fr Pedrini, whose imagination had never yet been found wanting, went to the Spanish Governor and pointed out to him that it would be totally unacceptable to leave the envoys of the Holy Father stranded in Manila. They had to get to Mgr de Tournon as quickly as possible, the honour of the Holy See being at stake, not to mention that of the Most Catholic King of Spain. The governor allowed himself to be persuaded, and prepared a frigate. Fr Pedrini shaved off his beard, dressed in lay clothes with a sword at his side and, with the governor's agreement, presented himself as the captain in charge of the expedition. The envoys of the Holy Father were let in on the secret of their captain's identity, and kept it.

They set sail on 29 November 1709 but had a rough crossing, being battered by storms three more times, but they eventually landed in Macao on 1 January 1710. Fr Pedrini was on Chinese soil at last; he had needed a perseverance far from common.

A dying cardinal

He was able to give the cardinalatial biretta to Mgr de Tournon in a private ceremony on 8 January. The legate, whose embassy had been undermined by the intransigent partisans of the Rites, had been sent back from Peking to Macao by order of the Emperor, where he was kept under house arrest by soldiers, thanks to the intrigues and ill will of the upholders of the Rites. He died a few months later, on 8 June 1710, exhausted by the insults and the opposition. As for his interpreter, the Vincentian Fr Appiani, he also was a victim of the ill will of the Reverend Fathers: he spent 18 years in prison.

A musician at the Court

The Emperor Kangshi, who had been notified by Mgr de Tournon of Fr Pedrini's coming, sent word to him to come to the Court in Peking. Having stayed a short while in Macao to familiarise himself with the Chinese language Fr Pedrini set out for Peking with one of the Propaganda missionaries, Fr Ripa, a priest of the diocese of Naples, who was to remain a close friend. It is to him that we owe the account of all that happened subsequently to Fr Pedrini. They were welcomed very cordially by the Emperor, who assigned them accommodation and work, Fr

Pedrini as a musician and Fr Ripa as an artist. Fr Ripa notes in his diary: "Fr Pedrini, thanks to his talent in music, in managing workmen, in the making of various instruments and, even more so, to his friendliness, found more and more favour with this great monarch".

Fr Pedrini made various musical instruments, such as spinets, organ, violins, which were much admired by the Emperor. The partisans of the Rites, jealous of Pedrini's influence with the Emperor, wanted to make him lose face with the Emperor. They wanted to force him, along with some of the Propaganda missionaries, including Fr Ripa, to reject the Holy Father's decree about the Rites. Fr Pedrini made it clear to the Emperor that he could not do this, and Fr Ripa took the same attitude. The emperor did not insist, and he retained his esteem for Fr Pedrini. He even entrusted the musical education of two of his sons to him. These two princely pupils never lost their esteem for their former teacher, and always supported him. When Fr Pedrini got sick in 1714 the Sovereign heard that one of his sons had sent some medicine to him, and sent some of his own as well.

Fr Pedrini was led to make a written submission to the Emperor on the Holy Father's view of the Rites, a submission which could have been made only by Mgr de Tournon. The Sovereign was satisfied with this, but the partisans of the Rites, along with the mandarin Tchao Tchang, the protector of the Jesuits, kept up their animosity against Fr Pedrini. Fr Ripa and himself had bought a house, as a residence for the Propaganda missionaries. The chapel of this house was much frequented by the Christians in the city who did not want to disobey the instructions of the Holy Father. The success of this caused only more jealousy.

In 1717 Fr Pedrini was promoted to the rank of Protonotary Apostolic by the Holy Father, in recognition of his talents, but he never availed of this.

The time of trial

In 1720 the Emperor's mother died. Fr Pedrini was himself sick at the time and could not fulfil the duty of paying the visit of condolence to the Court. His opponents made much of this omission and turned it into an offence against the Sovereign. Fr Pedrini was imprisoned for a few days, then released.

Meanwhile the Pope had sent a new legate, Mgr Mezzabarba, to examine once again the question of the Rites and to bring the dissident missionaries back to obedience. He did not succeed in convincing the Emperor, nor in correcting those who up to then had availed of all the loopholes to get round the instructions of Rome and of several bishops in China. On the occasion of a final audience on 20 February 1721 the Emperor entrusted the legate with a memorandum for the Pope. This memorandum, called "The Diary of the Mandarins", was to give an account of the different imperial audiences granted to the Legate and the conclusions

drawn from them. It was drawn up by the Jesuits. Tchao Tchang their protector insisted that it be signed by all the missionaries present. The Jesuits, of course, signed it; Fr Ripa ended up by signing it under protest, not knowing what it contained. Fr Pedrini, for his part, refused absolutely to sign a document which he had not been able to read and treating of matters of which he had not been a witness. The Emperor was furious at this refusal and ordered him to receive one hundred strokes of a cane, and to be chained and imprisoned.

On the legate's departure on 1 March Fr Pedrini's chains were removed and he was transferred to a cell in the Jesuits' residence, and they became his jailers. He was released in May and recalled to join Court in Tartary for the six summer months. On returning to Peking, though, the Jesuit superior Fr Parennin insisted on his reincarceration in their house.

At the end of the following year the Emperor caught a cold while hunting and died on 30 December 1722, aged 69. Before his death he had nominated his fourth son Yountcheng to succeed him.

A new reign

The new Emperor had also been a pupil of Fr Pedrini, and as soon as he had assumed power he had him released. Fr Pedrini was once again free to come and go to the palace. On the other hand, having learnt of the intrigues of certain Jesuits to block his accession he had them expelled from Court and even had one of the most seriously involved arrested and executed. On the occasion of an audience the new Emperor made a point of showing publicly his esteem for and confidence in Fr Pedrini. The latter was able to intervene and get the Emperor to release Fr Appiani, who had been 20 years in prison in Canton because of the inflexible antipathy of the partisans of the Rites against him, as Mgr de Tournon's loyal interpreter.

The missionaries were generally expelled from China, though not from Peking or Canton. Fr Appiani stayed on in Canton and spent the rest of his days educating young Chinese in preparation for the priesthood, but he died in 1732 at the time of the expulsion of the missionaries from Canton.

On being released Fr Pedrini left the Jesuit residence, Pétang, because it held so many unpleasant memories for him. He bought a huge house to serve as a residence for the Propaganda missionaries and added on a church which served as a parish, in spite of lively opposition, still coming from the same source. Unfortunately on 30 September 1730 an earthquake partly destroyed house and church. Fr Pedrini was seriously short of money for having repairs carried out, as also for buying a site for a cemetery. He was even denounced to the Propaganda

Congregation for embezzlement. He was eventually cleared of these malicious accusations.

Accession of Kienlong

The Emperor Koutcheng died on 8 October 1735. For the succession he had availed of a system long in use in the Congregation for the appointment by the Superior General of a Vicar General who would take over after his death until a successor would be elected by a General Assembly. The Emperor had written on a sheet of paper the name of his designated successor. This sheet was enclosed in a sealed box hanging in a room in the palace. Keimlong, the fourth son, was the designated successor. He had all religious preaching stopped in all the parish churches in Peking. Fr Pedrini's, though, being considered a private residence, was exempt from this prohibition and it continued to be very well attended. In order to convey the point that a Christian was faithful to the decrees of Rome concerning the Rites it was said that "He goes to Pedrini's church" or even "He's a member of the Confraternity of the Seven Dolours!"

Fr Pedrini was even recalled to the palace to resume his position as musician, but he fell gravely ill in the autumn of 1741. He wrote in a letter to his brother: "The Jesuit Fathers [not his former persecutors] have helped me day and night with the greatest charity".

He died on 10 December 1746, aged 77. He was a man of extraordinary courage and constancy. During his life he had experienced both favours and sufferings. These latter, though, did not diminish his natural good spirits nor his optimism. He was loyal to the Holy See right to the end. The Emperor bore the expense of his funeral, on 27 February 1747

Final note: Fr Dulucq, a former missionary in China, gave me the following information: The Divine Word Fathers discovered in the archives of Fu Jen University (founded in Peking in 1924) a cantata, with the composer's name given as Nepridi; they easily deciphered this as an anagram of Pedrini, the Court musician. This cantata was then edited and performed.

(Translated by Thomas Davitt)