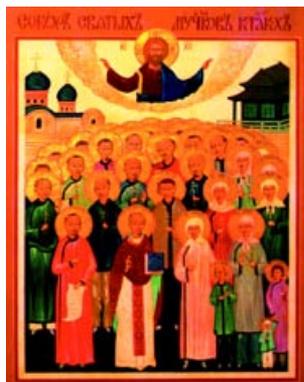




New Holy Martyrs of Our Faith* Orthodox China

IT IS THE WILL of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ for “all the nations” (St. Matthew 28:19) to believe, to share in His gifts, and to be saved in His Kingdom. Countless people, indeed since Apostolic times, have come to the light of the knowledge of God and have offered choice fruits of sanctification to “Jesus, the Author and Finisher of our Faith” (Hebrews 12:2). These fruits of the Faith are particularly wondrous and fragrant when dyed purple with the blood of sacrifice and martyrdom out of love for the First Martyr, Christ.

This year marks a hundred years since a vast and populous faraway country was drenched with the blood of its own Martyrs: China.



The seed of the Faith fell there a very long time ago. An Orthodox presence entered the country via Russia in the fourteenth and seventeenth centuries, but in a systematic and organized form only in the nineteenth century. The Holy Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church showed interest in this enterprise and sent capable laborers to China for the Vineyard of the Lord. Thus, after 1860, Holy Scripture and liturgical and spiritual books were translated into Chinese and the number of native Chinese Orthodox Christians began to increase.

In 1897, Archimandrite Innocent (Figurovsky) was sent to China, where he expanded the Mission with brilliant results.

During precisely that same period, however, the native Chinese reacted strongly not against only the economic, but also the “spiritual” infiltration of “foreigners” in their country. A rising tide of public discontent, initially with the toleration and later with the support of the state, assumed immense proportions and developed into a rebel movement. Westerners called these rebels “Boxers,” perhaps owing to their widespread preoccupation with their traditional martial arts and rituals, whereby—so they believed—they became invulnerable to their enemies.

They were, in fact, Chinese warriors who had passed from “defense” to “offense,” actuated by mysticism, extreme nationalism, xenophobia, and overt anti-Christianity, on account of the excesses and extremes of the Western merchants and “missionaries,” which were clearly offensive to the natives.

This revolt, known as the “Boxer Rebellion,” with its anti-Christian fury, began in 1899 and reached its climax in 1900. Assaults against all “foreigners”

reached an incredible degree of cruelty and brutality. The small, yet vigorous Orthodox Mission in Peking, which was directed by the Russians, was naturally not able to escape the notice of the rebels, even though it was unrelated to the “dangerous” Western versions of Christianity. In the mind of the “Boxers,” all of their Chinese countrymen who had become Christians had renounced their ancestral religion and had, consequently, become traitors, which is why it was necessary for them either to return to their former religion or be savagely murdered.

On 1 June 1900, the building belonging to the Orthodox Mission in Peking was burnt down along with all of its printing and other equipment, and also the Orthodox Church of the *Theotokos*. The same fate befell all but one of the Orthodox Churches in other parts of the country as well. The few Russian missionaries managed to escape in time.

On 11 June, the Orthodox Chinese in Peking were perfected in martyrdom. The frenzied rebels set fire to the houses of the Orthodox, assembled the inhabitants, and murdered them in a deplorable manner. A few lost heart, out of fear of torture and death, and sacrificed to idols. The majority, however, preferred glorious martyrdom.

Men, women, and children were ruthlessly tortured: they were dismembered; they were disemboweled; they were strangled; they were burnt; they were beheaded. Many were led out of the city to the temples of the idolaters, where they were ritually burnt to death.

Dramatic indeed was the attack on the family of the first and only Chinese Priest, Father Mitrophan Tsi-Chung. Many Orthodox Christians had fled to him to find solace and support. The idolaters seized Father Mitrophan, slew his twenty-three-year-old son, Isaiah, like a sheep and, before his very eyes, tortured his Presbytera, Tatiana, and his younger son, John, who was barely eight years old. Afterwards, they slaughtered the Priest as well, since they were unable to make him revert to idolatry.

“Do you deny Christ?” they asked the Priest’s son and child Martyr, John. When he boldly replied that he would never deny Him, they cut off his nose, ears, and toes. The eight-year-old child Martyr endured with astounding self-denial and calmness: “It is not difficult to suffer for Christ!” he confessed in exaltation, to the astonishment of the onlookers.

The next day, he was slain along with his mother, Presbytera Tatiana, and Maria, the nineteen-year-old fiancée of his brother, the Martyr Isaiah. Maria had been allowed to leave in order to save herself, but she preferred to remain in the house of her martyred father-in-law, Father Mitrophan, and of her martyred fiancé, Isaiah, in order to be glorified together with them: “I was born here, near the Church of the All-Holy *Theotokos*, and here I will die!” she replied, with courage and determination.

The small Orthodox Mission in Peking, which had numbered approximately one thousand members, offered to the Lord of Glory 222 brave and victorious

Martyrs: “*This is the glory of the Church, this the wealth of the Kingdom!*” Only a few of them are known by name; apart from those already mentioned, there are also: the catechist, Paul Wan, the Mission’s teacher, Ia Wen, Clement Kui-Kin, Matthew Hai-Tsuan, his brother Vitus, Anna Chui.... All, however, are written “in the book of life” (Philippians 4:3) and rejoice in the Church of the Firstborn, who are “written in Heaven” (Hebrews 12:23)!

A few months later, the rebellion was put down by troops from the Western powers. Bishop Innocent (Figurovsky) of Peking, who had been Consecrated in the meantime, built the Church of All the Holy Martyrs in 1902 on the site of the sacrifice of the Chinese New Martyrs, after gathering up and reverently placing their remaining holy Relics in the crypt of this Church.

The Saints immediately began to be honored locally, and in 1903 a special service to them was chanted and their holy Icon was painted.

The Mission in China continued its activities for nearly fifty more years, at which point it ceased to exist because of the Communist domination in the country. In 1956, the last Russian clergyman departed.

May the prayers of the Holy New Martyrs of China restore the light of Orthodoxy in their country and strengthen us on the path to salvation. Amen!

*Source: Άγιος Κυπριανός, No. 296 (May-June 2000), pp. 315-316, 318.