

Father Rigney Tells How Freedom Feels

By The Very Rev. Harold W. Rigney, S.V.D. Divine Word Missionary

After my release from prison in Peiping, I entrusted for Canton, accompanied by two Chinese policemen whom I called Junior and Senior.

We arrived in Canton on Sept. 15, 1955, where we were joined by two local policemen.

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RAGING FIRE All those in Eshelua in of very sacred memory. The Blessed St. Joseph (brother) the Catholic Church there and the Blessed Gebre Michael was ordained in it. The same church was burned in the religious persecution of 1931.

BRING FLOWERS OF THE FAIREST Let's not forget the Queen of the Angels, the Queen of the May, during this month of Mother Mary. Perhaps you could donate a \$30 STATUE or \$15 PICTURE in her honor or help to equip one of her Chapels, in thanksgiving for a favor received or in memory of the deceased.

DO NOT FORSAKE ME. "Hoping and praying through the Holy Sacrifices of the Masses my brother's soul is resting in peace." Please arrange to have our missionaries and offer a Mass for your intentions. We have beautiful MASS CARDS for the LIVING and DEAD.

INMOST BEINGS FILL "Give them virtue's sure reward, Give them Thy salvation, Lord, Give them joys that never end." In Spring, the beauty of nature blossoms forth. This is true of the supernatural also, as we are now preparing our little ones, in their Baptismal Innocence, to blossom forth spiritually through FIRST HOLY COMMUNION. THE DIVINE LIFE will be their SOLACE IN THE MIDST OF WORLDS.

WARM THE CHILL. "Heal our wounds; our strength renew; On our knees pour forth thy dew." Daily at our REFUGEES IN THE HOLY LAND search hearts and minds. A \$15 FOOD PACKAGE will relieve some of their misery. In appreciation, we will send you a FREE OLIVE-WOOD ROSARY and FLOWERS from JERUSALEM.

RENEW THE FACE OF THE EARTH "They were all together in one place and they were all filled with the Holy Ghost." The first descent of the Holy Spirit was made in our Middle East Mission territory. But the same scene is re-created in each of our Seminaries and Novitiates, as Seminary students and Novices, together with Mary, await the Pentecostal coming in their own dedicated lives. Help "Send forth the spirit and warm their hearts," through educating SAHIB of CAIRO, in Egypt, to the priesthood. \$400 in full, or \$100 a year for 6 years. Sisters MARIE-PIERRE and PAUL-MARIE of the Congregation of St. Isala will also bless you. Each needs \$300 in full, or \$150 a year, for her two-year training. "O most blessed Light divine, Shine within these hearts of thine."

CASSOCK or HABIT? "I hope and pray that as hard as it was for me to put this money together, that so much more God will be glorified by it." \$25 will buy a CASSOCK for a Poor Missionary Priest or a HABIT for a Religious Brother or Sister.

WONDERFUL SEVEN "Please find enclosed my contribution for yearly membership in the 'Wonderful Seven.'" The Chrysothems; Mary's Bank; Orphan's Bread; Monica Gault; Bullians; Leper Fund; and Palace of Gold are our seven ONE DOLLAR-A-MONTH Mission Clubs to help in strategic areas. Will you join one or all like the above benefactors? Or just make a STRINGLESS GIFT.

ARRANGE NOW FOR GREGORIAN MASSES AFTER DEATH. Near East Missions. Catholic Near East Welfare Association. 480 Lexington Ave. at 46th St. New York 17, N. Y.

kept me under close surveillance since my release. Perhaps they were afraid lest I get in touch with someone through a window or that I would sneak out of my room.

Driven to Station The following morning was Sept. 16, 1955. My four guards drove me to the Canton rail station where I was to get the train for Hong Kong.

This is the final installment in the gripping story of the 44 months spent in Communist prisons in China by the Very Rev. Harold W. Rigney, S.V.D. His story appears in the Courier Journal through courtesy of the Chicago Sun-Times.

the "light" of Marxist reasoning. He then glanced at me curiously and said: "You do not like to argue, do you?"

"No," I replied. "I do not like to argue. If anyone is interested in my religion, I am very willing to explain my beliefs. But I will not argue with him or press him to accept my beliefs."

During our casual talk, I explained to Junior that the "People's" government of China had no reason to fear the Chinese Roman Catholic clergy. I expressed the opinion that China's Catholic clerics would be willing to get along with any government and would ask only in return that they be given religious freedom.

Our conversation dwindled as I realized, with a mounting sense of excitement, that the train was slowing down for the station at Lo Wu on China's border with Hong Kong.

Signs Statement On reaching Lo Wu at noon, I was herded to an empty room in the station and Senior asked me to sign a statement that I had made the journey from Peiping to the Hong Kong border without losing any of my personal belongings. As this was true, I signed it.

Then, Chinese customs officers approached and examined my luggage. I carried my handbag. The rest of my effects were lugged by a porter. As we walked out of the station, Junior and Senior shook hands with me and said good-bye.

Fearful Again As I trudged toward the border, I became fearful again. Having spent more than four years in Red China's hell, isolated from currents of freedom, I did not know what to expect of the British authorities in Hong Kong. Would they expect me to leave their territory as soon as possible or would I be permitted time to have my teeth looked after? Where would I stay in the Crown Colony? Would I be welcome at the Catholic Cathedral, who would help me arrange for transportation back to the United States?

My heart pounded and my pace quickened as I approached the bridge over the Lo Wu River. The bridge to freedom.

Then I turned my head to look back and an ineffable sadness overtook me. I saw not the China ruled, regulated and racked by the iron disciples of Marx, but the ancient, wonderful China which had endured and survived agonies of countless centuries that I had loved so well.

Whispers Farewell I took a last fleeting glimpse and whispered: "Tasi Chien Chung Kuo" (Farewell, China, till we meet again). Resolutely, I turned my back to memories, poignant and bitter, and began to walk across the bridge. As I reached the Hong Kong side, a British officer walked up to me smartly and asked: "Are you Father Rigney?"

A simple question - but phrased gently. I was bewildered by this Scot; here he was, a public official and he had spoken kindly to me. I had been so warped by my experiences at the hands of Communist officials that it was hard for me to believe that a public official of any kind could be human!

"Yes," I replied, "I'm Father Rigney."

Vigorous Handshake The uniformed official introduced himself as A. L. Gordon, superintendent of police in Hong Kong.

He said, "Welcome," and he extended his hand. I gripped it and shook it vigorously. Two more British officers also came up to greet me and then Father Poletti, the pastor of Tai-po, rushed up to welcome me. This zealous priest keeps watch at the border for missionaries arriving from China.

Soon I was surrounded by a multitude of Britons and Americans who beamed as they bade me warm welcome. I was overwhelmed at the reception they gave me.

Asked For Statement The police guided me down the road where we were met by newspaper and television men. Asked for a statement, I said: "I have waited four years and two months for this day. I wish to thank the Almighty God, the American and British governments and all those who have helped me realize my freedom."

It was then I learned that on April 14, The Chicago Sun-Times sent cables respectively to Mao Tze-tung and Chou En-lai, urging my release in the interests of international amity.

Deeply Moved I also was deeply moved to discover that 73,000 Catholic school children in Chicago wrote to President Eisenhower, asking him to use his good offices on my behalf; that Mayor Daley and the Illinois Senate made similar appeals to the President and to the State Department; that the President himself wrote a letter to my stepmother, Mrs. Addie Rigney, on April 26.

And I am especially grateful to the following for their indefatigable efforts in my behalf: My stepmother; my brother and four sisters; the Rev. Ralph M. Wiltgen, S.V.D. who had been assigned by the Divine Word missionaries to work for my release; Thomas F. Reynolds, managing editor of The Sun-Times; Joseph B. Meegan, executive secretary of the Back of the Yards Neighborhood Council; the Very Rev. Thomas A. Meahan, editor of the New World a Catholic weekly; and a host of others.

After the round of receptions was finished, I asked myself:

What have I profited from 50 months of imprisonment? Spiritually and educationally, I made gains. Physically, my health deteriorated, but this is the price one pays for the gains.

While my captors prevented me from celebrating my religious offices and persecuted me, they helped me spiritually by giving me a deeper insight into the sufferings of Jesus.

Educationally, I learned a great deal. I was able to get a practical insight into the workings of applied communism.

Before my arrest, I had some acquaintance with communism, particularly the brand espoused by Mao Tze-tung.

But my incarceration taught me more. I learned that Communists are not to be trusted. I learned, from first-hand and unwanted experience, that communism threatens to destroy the liberties of the self-satisfied and overconfident Free World.

I learned also that the Communists who tortured and persecuted me do not mirror the Chinese people, whom I love more deeply than ever.

I have learned also not to judge too harshly those who betrayed me, those who persecuted me.

During the critical days preceding my arrest on July 25, 1951, I was deeply hurt by the fact that some members of the staff of Fu Jen Catholic University, where I was rector, turned against me.

Also, I was subsequently offended and outraged by the actions of my cellmates, who persecuted and tortured me mercilessly.

But since my release I have come to ponder the matter and I understand the motivation for their aggressiveness. I realize now what great pressure was brought to bear on these poor Chinese prisoners. Perhaps they must be persecuted in turn by a ruthless government.

Looks Back Objectively I can look back now on that nightmare with more serenity, more objectivity. True, I made

confessions, but they were false confessions made under duress. I am frankly ashamed at having made these admissions, but in spite of torture and cajolery, I subsequently corrected them, given under the threat of execution.

For three years, the Chinese Communist courts tried to induce me to confess that I was an agent of the U.S. government, that the American branch of the Divine Word Missionary organization was under control of the U.S. government.

I was subjected to violent tortures to bring about the confessions, and on one occasion, I was shot unless I made "suitable" confessions, and on one occasion, I thought the court's aids were ready to tear me to shreds unless I yielded to the judge's dicta.

Reputed 'Confessions' Tortured until I could stand it no more I would yield and confess falsely. But when I received some respite, I would repudiate the false confession and the questioning would begin again.

Had I been shot, as the court often threatened, I would have become a martyr. But it now becomes obvious, the Chinese Communists do not want to create martyrs. They prefer to keep their victims alive and degrade them to subhuman, nonvolitional levels.

When a human has been forced down to this animal level they find it easier to extract confessions from him.

The prisoners thus compromised lead lives constantly marked by the shadow of disgrace. They will ever reproach themselves and if released they are reproached or shunned by others. Such prisoners become mental as well as physical cripples.

'Worse Than Dead' After arriving in Hong Kong, I related some of my experiences to a Russian emigre who had fled his homeland in 1923. Astounded by my story, he observed that not even the Russian Communists were capable of the subtlety in the art of torture employed by their Chinese counterparts.

grade them and this is worse than death.

Somehow, my ordeal recalls the following words of St. Paul: "I preach the Gospel, and in its service I suffer hardship like a criminal, yes, even imprisonment. . . . What persecutions I underwent! And yet the Lord brought me through them all safely." (2 Timothy 2:3-9; 3:11).

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