

# As I Saw Red China

This is the fourth of five N.C.W.C. Feature articles by Father Joseph P. McCormack, Maryknoll missionary just released this June after five years imprisonment in a Communist China jail. Father McCormack celebrated his first Mass thirty-four years ago in St. Dominic's Church, Shortsville; his brother Edward McCormack lives in Palmyra.

By FR. JOSEPH P. McCORMACK, M.M.

Degradation is a tool of communism. The Reds try to destroy a man's dignity.

This is particularly true in the communist prison. There they really degrade man to the level of an animal.

All men, even prisoners, wish to establish some pattern of order in their daily lives. We all try to set a simple routine for our personal habits of washing, eating, working, etc. But the communists delight in sowing disorder.

IN PRISON we were never to know the time of day. We would eat breakfast in a handful of fifth grade rice one day at six in the morning, the next day at nine and the next maybe at eleven. The other meal would follow the same pattern. We would never know at what time they would feed us. They would change the feeding time each day.

We would wash at different times—be taken to trials at different times—sleep at different times—and, even for the simple calls of nature, the Reds couldn't be human. They would call us out only once a day and each day at a different time.

Naturally, this system is very

effective. We were reduced to mere beggars who, when shown even the slightest favor such as a drink of water, would respond with grateful appreciation. This is an effective form of brainwashing.

Of course, simply describing the horrible conditions of life in a Red prison is not enough. No one, not even with the most vivid imagination, could picture the wretched existence millions of Chinese are undergoing in the "Peoples' republic today."

To say the prison food was mere garbage is simple. But to eat it for five years is something else again. The Chinese prisoners told me themselves that the rice we were given to eat was fifth grade and poorly cooked at that. Even the prison guards, who were iron men in most respects, couldn't stand the stench of it.

But I was hungry. And I ate it—at times with an appetite. In the cell we were not to talk or move our lips. We had to ask

permission of the guard who was constantly in attendance for each move we made. And every movement required a new permission.

But even in these depraved conditions where hunger, thirst, fatigue and misery walked hand in hand with death, the Reds could not wipe out man's innate sense of humor and ingenuity.

NOT PERMITTED to move or talk we soon learned that by wetting a finger we could write notes to each other on the dust-covered floor.

Annoyed for months at the weird looking shapes that seemed to appear on the peeling white-washed walls we found that by turning them into a game like inkblots it helped pass the time away. We spent hours trying to identify as many images as we could out of the uncanny forms on the walls.

A simple coat button provided us with weeks of amusement before the Reds discovered our sport and hysterically trampled the button to pieces.

Bets made in fun among the prisoners on the button game reached astronomical figures. My fellow prisoners jokingly referred to me as "the American capitalist" and we always bet in American thousand dollar figures.

The only papers I saw during the five years in jail were communist propaganda sheets.

The Chinese papers were bad enough, but the most annoying tome was the New York Daily Worker. Every week we were made to read the Daily Worker and my poor fellow Chinese prisoners were outraged that America would allow the communists to flaunt their big lies openly right from New York.

When it had gone out of business and suddenly stopped coming into the cells I asked the guard for it and he said, "We don't allow that paper in China anymore. It was never any good anyway."



Father McCormack shows how he said Mass having breakfast at window sill. (Courier secretly in China jail pretending he was Journal photo by Paul Contestable)

All in all I was in four prisons during my first year's sentence. One was as bad as the other. Late in 1953 they moved me to the Ward Road prison—the motherhouse of the pig pens scattered around Shanghai.

I figured from the number of buildings, 13, and number of prisoners in each, 2,500, that there were over 30,000 prisoners incarcerated at Ward Road. An

other fact to substantiate my estimate was the number I was given on entering—No. 28,198. This was what I was to answer to at all times—"Prisoner 28,198."

One point I'd like to emphasize strongly is that despite the severe treatment we foreigners received in jail, the Chinese prisoners are much worse off.

While we foreigners had some hope that our governments were working toward our eventual release, the Chinese prisoners have no one looking out for their welfare. Once arrested and imprisoned a Chinese either goes over to communism or remains to rot in a Red dungeon.

The Chinese Red Cross is merely another agency of the state. Up until the time of the Geneva Conference I didn't receive a single package of clothing or food sent to me by friends, relatives and Maryknoll through the Chinese Red Cross.

After they told us of the conferences going on for our release I was allowed one opened food parcel containing three cans—one of peaches, one of apricots and one of potatoes. Well, I thought that was the greatest gift I ever received in my whole life. My fellow prisoners and I relished those three cans as if they were food for the kings. From the Geneva Conference on

we began to receive food parcels.

A FEW MONTHS later, about the beginning of 1956, I asked for an interview with the prison officials. Then I explained to them that I was a sick stupid old man. Which was partly true. I was actually very sick. My entire body was swollen and distended because of the prison diet. Lack of vitamins, I suppose.

I'd wake up in the morning in fairly good shape, but as the day wore on, my arms, feet and stomach would begin to swell up. By the time I was ready to sleep I looked like some kind of monster. My feet and hands were a mass of chilblains.

The judge took one look at my emaciated condition and ordered me to the prison hospital immediately. That meant I'd sleep in a bed for the first time in three years. Of course, the big reason for allowing me to go to the hospital was obvious: Too many priests had already died in the jails and prisons of China. They didn't want that to happen to me.

The injections and treatment at the hospital improved my condition somewhat, but the swelling of my body and limbs still continued. Even now, my stomach still expands about a couple of inches every day.

In June of 1956 my health im-

proved considerably, so I was moved into a small jail on the other side of Shanghai, where I lived with other American priest-prisoners. It was my first contact with foreigners since my arrest. One of the priests there was Father Cyril Wagner, the Franciscan from Pittsburgh, who had been framed on charges similar to mine. We were scheduled to be released together. One by one all the other priests were released until only Father Wagner and myself remained.

During this period the food was terrible. We would have all died had it not been for the food parcels sent in to us by friends and relatives. But it was the communist relaxing of the ban on food parcels that provided me with the greatest consolation of my entire five-year sentence—ability to say Mass, secretly.

The wine and hosts were smuggled in but I can't say how because it would incriminate others. I would rise at the crack of dawn, place a piece of cardboard over the radiator, and on this put a fragment of host and a thimble full of wine. With my left elbow resting on the radiator and my left hand against my forehead, I celebrated Mass.

I usually put a cup of coffee on the other end of the cardboard and held a lighted cigarette in my hand so that it would look as if I were eating breakfast in case a guard came in the room.

The weeks rolled by pretty quickly after that. We were over the hump, and we knew we were due to be released in June of 1958. A propaganda tour of government paid redevelopment projects broke up the winter months, and in no time at all, June was here.

WE WERE released on the 14th of June and the first thing

we did was to report to the Franciscan church in Shanghai. But Father Wagner and I had a surprise waiting for us there. A small crowd of people who claimed to be progressive Catholics—the name given to those who joined the communist-controlled "Independent Church"—were waiting for us, and when we tried to go in to say Mass, they blocked the doorway, screaming and shouting violent invectives against us.

They obstructed the way into the church and wouldn't move. They started pushing and shoving and screaming all the louder. So we left, and walked 15 blocks to another church, Christ the King. And the same thing was repeated with the same ring leaders. So we knew that these weren't spontaneous demonstrations.

Most of the people weren't even Catholics and at least three of the women were party members, we found out later.

So we hightailed it over to the British consulate then, and when I saw the British flag hanging there over the entrance, I cheered, "Hooray!"—most unusual for an Irishman! But it was good to see the Union Jack flapping there in the morning breeze.

We rushed inside, like beggars, dumping all our rags and junk from the prison right there on the clean floor of the consulate, but no one seemed to mind. They gave us a wonderful welcome, and we sat down with the vicar, drinking coffee and talking, talking, for what seemed hours.

Five days later the British ship S.S. Changsha steamed into Hong Kong, and Father Wagner and I were aboard her—absolutely free, and very thankful.

NEXT WEEK—China's future.

## 'Soft-Hearted' Parents Said Vocation Block

Los Angeles—(NC)—"Soft-hearted" parents can seriously hinder vocations to the priesthood, vocational directors of the Franciscan Fathers' Pacific Coast province concluded at a meeting here.

THE VOCATION directors declared that soft-hearted parents impede vocations by trying to delay their sons' entrance into the seminary and sometimes by coddling them even after they have entered.

The Franciscan vocation heads also replied to those who attack minor seminaries on the grounds that "every boy should be exposed to the world before a permanent decision to enter the seminary."

They recalled recent praise for minor seminaries by Pope Pius XII, who referred to them as "useful and effective" and declared that it is "rash to expose the young boy to supplementary temptations."

## Crusade Seeks Return Of Lapsed

Oakland—(RNS)—The Italian Catholic Federation, at its annual convention here, undertook a crusade to bring back to the practice of their religion the Italian-Americans who have fallen away.

A crusade aim will be the development of the lay apostolate in the Italian-American communities.

The organization laid out a program of talks and meetings throughout its branches to carry out the crusade.



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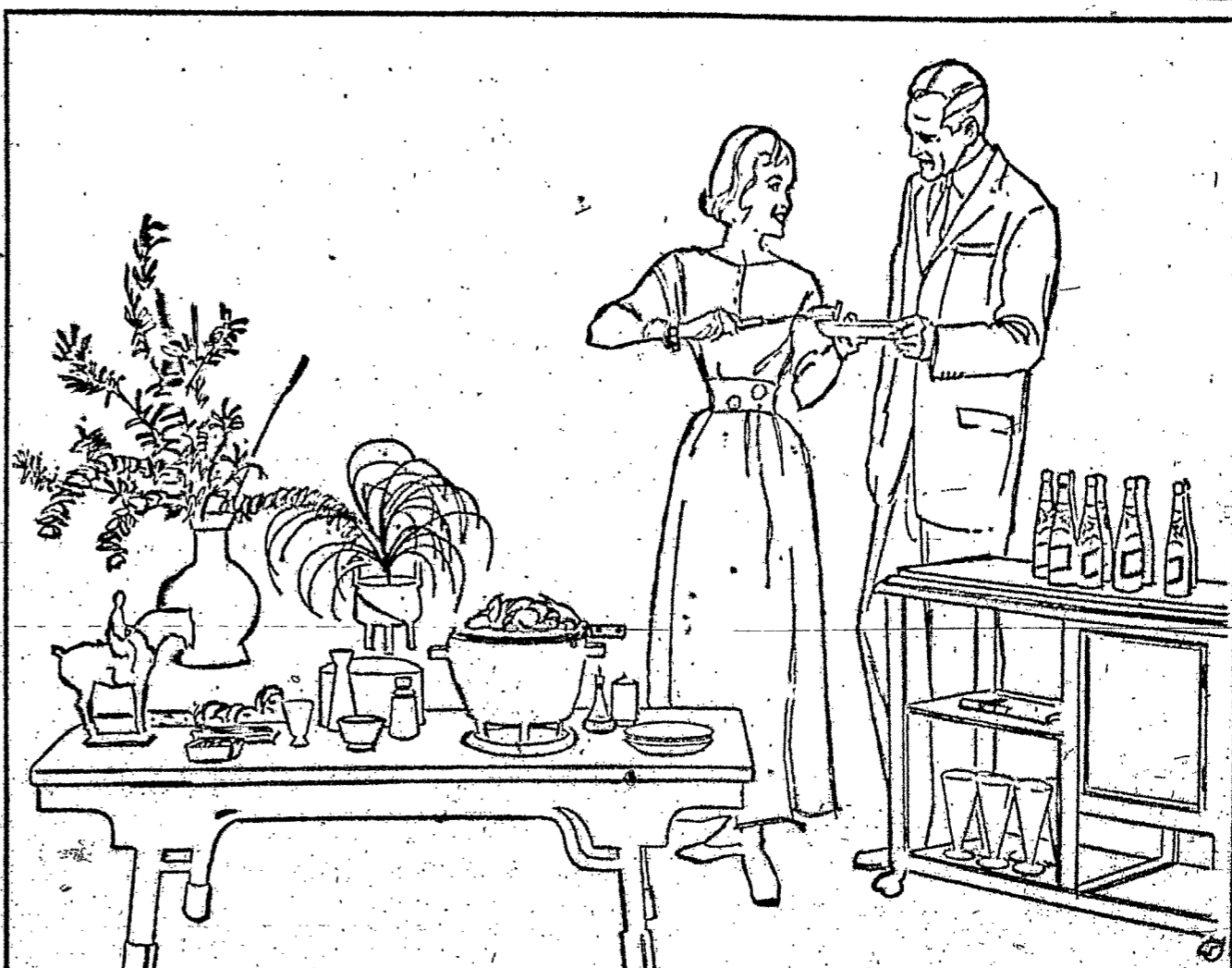
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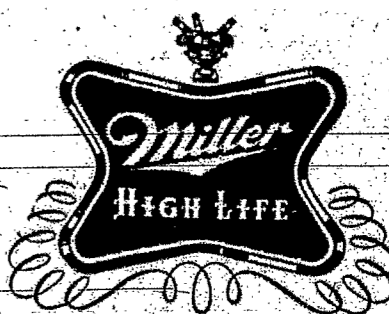
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