



# BEDROCK

At eighty, his pace outstrips that of a man only half his age.

BY MARK L. KENT, M.M.

■ "SISTER MATTHEW laughed out loud at that one," said Father Cotta. To get the full impact of that statement you have to realize Sister Matthew is almost completely paralyzed; her body has been racked with an agony of constant pain for five years.

Father Anthony Cotta has been the chaplain at the Maryknoll Sisters' Motherhouse for 28 years. His daily visits to the sick, his medicine of good cheer and sympathetic understanding, have become proverbial.

Concern for the sick is no recent development in the life of Father Cotta. He began his career as a missionary in 1898, on the island of Madagascar. The Malagasy tribesmen among whom he worked were grateful for his services in the dispensary.

However, while Father Cotta was busy with the corporal works of mercy, the Malagasy were getting so tired of foreign rule that, in 1904, they revolted. The natives assured Father Cotta that he had nothing to fear. But soon the rebels made no distinction. It was the black men

against the white men, even him.

On December 3, Father Cotta was vesting for Mass when Peter, his altar boy, came into the sacristy. In a frightened voice he said, "The rebels killed Father Coindard." (Father Cotta's nearest confrere.) Peter continued to stare but did not dare to say, "Your turn has come."

Father Cotta, without any apprehension, changed to black vestments and started a Requiem Mass for his friend. At the *Pater Noster*, he sensed a voice within him asking, "Will you be able to finish Mass?"

Suddenly a savage cry summoned him. "This is it," he thought. He consumed the Sacred Species and went to the door of the church. There he was confronted with a semicircle of seven or eight Malagasy.

Isivahoaky, the head of the tribe, broke the silence: "The country is unsafe, give me a letter to the bishop so my son can return home." (His son was a boarding student at the mission school.)

As the chieftain spoke, two Malagasy passed stealthily behind Father Cotta. One was a splendid specimen,

herculean in build. Father Cotta felt something touch his shoulder — he jumped four or five feet. He faced the two men and saw the hands of one still high and coming down. It was obvious that one of them had meant to choke him to death.

“What are you doing?” asked Father Cotta.

There was no answer. Then Father Cotta said to Peter in French, “They meant to kill me.”

Father Cotta turned to the chief and said: “You want a letter to recall your son. All right, but give me time to get a cup of coffee first.”

“Coffee? Coffee?” asked the chief.

“Yes,” said Father Cotta.

He patted the chief on the shoulder, and Isivahoaky led the others off to the village. By that time Father Cotta was really frightened. With Peter and Stephen, he ran down to the river, crossed over and sought safety in the primeval forest. Then followed three days of danger and narrow escapes, until Father Cotta arrived safely at Fort Dauphin.

Shortly after this escapade, Father Cotta’s eyesight began to fail. Doctors ordered him to France. What his fellow missionaries thought of Father Cotta is summed up in the message that followed him: “We want you back, even if you’re blind.”

However, the doctors advised against a tropical climate so Father Cotta’s next assignment was to

north China. His first memory of that country was a Pontifical Mass, in the Cathedral at Peking. He heard the full notes of the organ peal out in the beautiful music of Handel’s “Resurrection.” The clear voices of a large group of Chinese seminarians gave a faultless rendering of the chant during the Pontifical Mass.

“Am I really in China?”

Father Cotta asked himself. “This is as well done as music heard in a basilica in Rome.” Then and there a strong conviction came over him that the Church in China was no longer in its infancy.

After Mass, Father Cotta met Father Philip Chao, the organist whose rendering of sacred music had so surprised and delighted him. Father Cotta’s first impression was one of reverence. The young Chinese priest was neither solemn nor distant but his priestly personality had a sure dignity and a charming simplicity. Later Father Cotta was to understand better the reverence with which his Chinese friend had instinctively inspired him. Father Philip Chao was the son of a martyr. As a seminarian, he had suffered harrowing experiences during the Boxer Rebellion.

Throughout the Mass, Father Cotta was torn by conflicting feelings. He experienced joy in the visible fruit of the missionaries’ labors in China, but he was nettled by a question. Often the same query was to

destined to confront him in the years that followed: Why was there no Chinese bishop gracing this splendid function?

Little did Father Cotta then foresee that the first Chinese bishop to be nominated in 1926, after an interval of some two hundred and fifty years, would be Father Chao.

The theme that kept running through his mind during the ensuing years was what he had heard Father Pouget say in the seminary: “Missionary work can be successful only through the establishment of the native clergy in its fullness.”

This conviction came to a climax in 1916, when Father Cotta wrote a memorial to Rome, outlining the need and championing the right of the Chinese to become bishops and take command of the Church in China. What saddened Father Cotta was the complete divergence between the Pontifical directions and the tendencies prevailing throughout China. It is the will of the Holy See that all Christianities live their own lives. Yet the Chinese clergy were treated as minors; the Church in China, as a spiritual colony.

An intimate later told Father Cotta that when Cardinal Serafini, Prefect of Propaganda, read the memorial, work was started immediately on the encyclical *Maximum Illud*. The fact that this pathfinding encyclical quoted substantially from Father Cotta’s memorial proves the sureness of Father Cotta’s grasp of the subject.

This encyclical, written in 1919, had a direct bearing on the epoch-making consecration of six Chinese bishops in Rome in 1926. Among

those consecrated in Rome that day by Pius XI was Bishop Chao, whose organ playing had so delighted Father Cotta during the first solemn Mass he attended in China.

The consecration ceremony in St. Peter’s was impressive but Father Cotta was not there for this glad occasion. He celebrated this culmination of his dreams with his old friend, Father James A. Walsh, at Maryknoll. Father Cotta had first met the cofounder of Maryknoll in China in October 1917, when Father Walsh was looking for a field for his young Society.

This meeting eventually led to Father Cotta’s climbing Sunset Hill to Maryknoll in 1922, to give the young Society the benefit of his mature mission experience. Father Cotta became a Maryknoller. He is “very, very happy that things worked out so that he could become a part of Maryknoll.”

He brought to Sunset Hill a flock of oversized pipes, a camera, a keenly alert mind and a winning personality. Almost immediately his photographs began to spark the pages of Maryknoll’s magazine. Visitors to Maryknoll were delighted with his funny quips—used to throw them off guard as he clicked the shutter in an era long before candid shots became a fad. He became known to thousands over the country as Father Foto.

Father Foto’s effects on the Maryknoll magazine were good but his influence on the seminarians was even more important. The students learned from him how to take photos with lots of human interest. Father Cotta started the tradition that pro-

#### WE ANSWER ALL MAIL

directly we receive it. Sometimes, however, a letter does lack a name or return address. If you do not receive a quick answer, please let us know.



## We ALL Thank You

**Whatever Maryknoll has done, has been accomplished under God, by your support, both spiritual and material. We have counted on your prayers. We have used your money always — we have none of our own.**

**We are middlemen; we pass along to our missionaries and their needy people what we receive from you.**

**Your gifts to our work are like stones dropped into a pond. They cause ripples to rise and spread, and the effects are felt in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, even in years to come. We hardly need to mention you will receive a reward on Judgment Day, because your assistance to us helps the "least brethren" of Our Lord.**

**Like you, we are limited by our funds. But like you, also, we stretch our funds and our energies to every length. We put your money to work overtime where it will do the most good for God and souls.**

*Thank you. God bless you!*

**THE MARYKNOLL FATHERS**

duces the storytelling pictures you find in this magazine. Father Cotta was generous in passing on to the students his know-how.

Father Cotta's interest in photography dates back to the day in Madagascar when his bishop gave him a camera and told him to try his hand at taking pictures.

On ordination day at the seminary, the property is dotted with groups of relatives and friends who have come to Maryknoll to share this great day with the new priests. It's one of Father Foto's busiest days. He visits each group and captures on film precious souvenirs of this happy occasion. For days afterwards, Father Foto's darkroom is a beehive of activity. He's turning out prints which he will mail to the families and friends of the newly ordained priests. On profession day at the Motherhouse he performs a like service for relatives and friends of the newly professed Sisters. Grateful families treasure these souvenirs.

One of the hallmarks of a priest is his love for and intimacy with Sacred Scripture. Father Cotta's knowledge of the Bible, especially the New Testament, is phenomenal. He brought to the seminary in Paris as a young man an unusual appreciation of Saint Paul's writings. Even as a student he was able to quote freely and effectively from St. Paul. Father Cotta's love for the scripture goes far beyond mere rote. He can give the background, explanation and application of the texts he quotes. The grasp he has of the New Testament is factual evidence that he has devoted a lifetime to studying this record of

the life and words of Jesus Christ.

The other night at supper, Father John Ruppert (now a missionary in Hawaii) was telling me about an all-day hike he went on while he was a student. Father Cotta went along, too. After lunch, Father Ruppert, then a deacon, was talking to Father Cotta. Seeing that it was getting late, he asked Father Cotta to excuse him; he and some other deacons had to get back to the seminary to finish the breviary.

"Why go back to the seminary?" asked Father Cotta. "Why not say your Office here?"

"What will we use for books?"

"Where are you in the Office?" asked Father Cotta.

"We're up to Prime," said the deacons.

"O.K." said Father Cotta. "We can say it here. I've got the book in my head." Father Cotta recited the Office for the feast of St. Joseph from Prime right through Compline, proper parts and all. He recited from memory about twenty pages of Latin, thus illustrating something typical of his generous nature. Sharing any talent he has, is a must with this man who has devoted all of his adult life to serving his neighbor.

Several generations of Maryknollers have been privileged to come under the influence of the kindly, genial personality of Father Cotta. His attitude towards the men and women of the various races of the world is closely patterned after Christ's. His love for all men regardless of their color is deep in the bedrock of his soul. This Cairo-born priest has traveled widely and met a generous cross-section of the human

race. His mission work in various parts of the world has served to deepen his conviction that all men are brothers.

Often memories come crowding in on a man who has spent a lifetime serving his neighbor. The memory of his mother is her favorite saying: "My heart is warm."

He remembers the time he and his brothers and sisters (there were fifteen children in the family) had quite a discussion over the fact that grownups were so serious. The youngsters asked each other, "How is it that grownups seldom laugh?" and assured themselves that they would never be like that.

He remembers his seminary professor, Father Pouget. At the age of 73, Father Pouget memorized the whole of Isaias in Hebrew, despite the fact that he had only 1/300th of normal vision and could read only with the aid of two magnifying glasses. Father Pouget habitually recited the entire Divine Office completely from memory. Yet he was kindness itself to slow students.

But the outstanding memory is his friendship with Father Vincent Lebbe, the kindly Belgian missionary who is revered as the modern apostle of China. The friendship was, in Father Cotta's own words, "a warm one that lasted over 40 years in good days and bad days, without a cloud and without a wrinkle."

Father Cotta is now over 80, and he walks at a pace that's hard for me (less than half his age) to keep up to. Once he passed me on a path and said with a grin, "I hate to think that when I get old like you I'll have to walk that slowly." ■■