



A barber, Father Cotta, and future Bishop Peter Tsheng.

By Jeanne Marie Lyons, M.M.

## Missioners extraordinary

### Campaign for indigenization of the Church in China becomes basis for a papal encyclical in 1919

The foreignness of the Church in China in 1901 grieved the young seminarian, Vincent Lebbe, and he wrote of his distress to his close friend, Father Anthony Cotta, in far-off Madagascar:

“From a pretty imperial kiosk at the top (of the hill) you can see all of Peking, an entrancing sight. Towers, pagodas, roofs with up-

turned corners . . . and then to the west in the midst of this, a big white block, not pretty, out of tune with the landscape—Peitang Catholic mission, intentionally foreign. This view struck me like a vision and gave me such sorrow that I felt as if I would suffocate.”

That vision was crucial in his missionary life as Lebbe set about the lonely business of trying to make the Church at home in China and China at home in the Church. It was to become equally as crucial for Cotta.

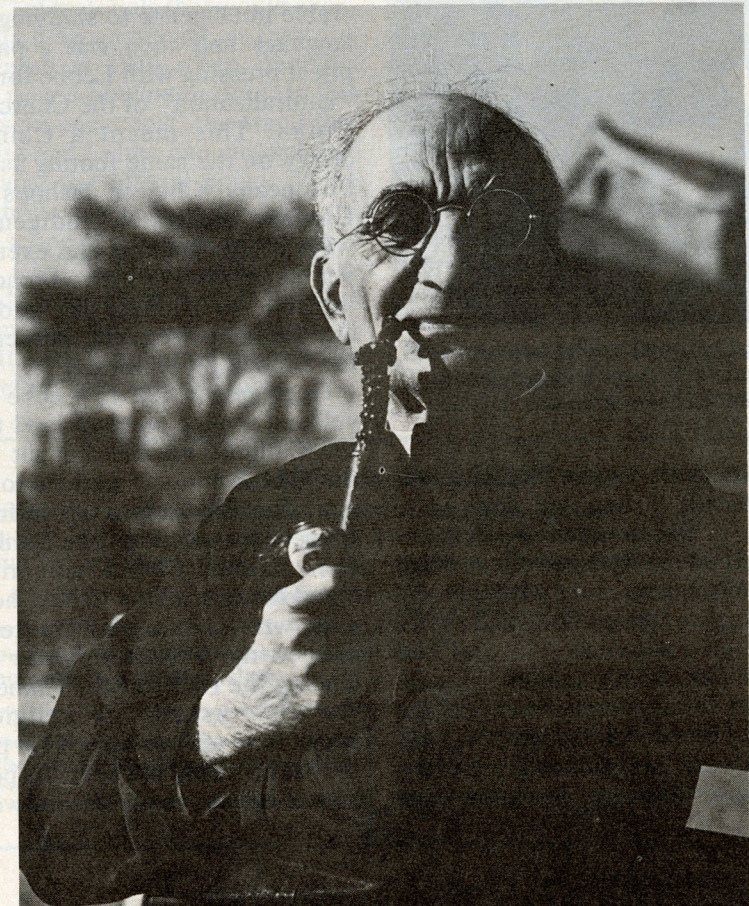
The two had become close friends in the Paris Lazarist Seminary in the mid-1890s. Vincent Lebbe was the slight, fair and lively eldest son of a close-knit Belgian family and Anthony Cotta, five years his senior, a tall, spare Egyptian of an old Catholic family.

The friends separated and began their missionary work far apart, Cotta going as a newly ordained priest to Madagascar in 1898 and Lebbe arriving in North China as a seminarian in 1901.

In China, the influence of the 19th century “isms” (imperialism, nationalism, colonialism) on the Church there struck Lebbe like a series of blows. Everywhere he turned he saw their effects. The day before his ordination on October 28, 1901, he disclosed his thoughts to his bishop on the way China was being, and not being, evangelized.

A surprised and increasingly annoyed bishop heard him describe his anguish that day on the

Father Cotta, an Egyptian, came to the U.S. and Maryknoll after leaving China in 1920.



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hill overlooking Peking as he viewed the city and the Peitang Catholic mission. The bishop and others who held the reins of ecclesiastical authority could hardly remain undisturbed by Lebbe's judgment that the mission



Frs. Cotta and Lebbe became close friends in a Paris seminary and combined their strengths in China.

approach they were following was "radically wrong and doomed to fail . . . ran counter to what our Lord and the Apostles did . . . that the missionaries were wittingly and willingly a foreign body and even a foreign influence . . . and our Christians half-colonials."

Yet the accomplishments of the young priest won recognition—his hard work, his brilliant grasp of the Chinese language, his knowledge

of Chinese culture, courtesies and classics, the many conversions he made, his entree with all sorts and classes of people, and his ability to make long range plans and at the same time attend to the daily needs of individuals.

In 1906 he was put in charge of the mission in Tientsin, the second largest city in North China with a Catholic population of 15,000. It was a busy and happy man who welcomed Cotta out of Madagascar that same year after his mission had been destroyed in an uprising.

The older man followed Lebbe's lead in his adoption of Chinese clothes and customs, applied his phenomenal memory and considerable intelligence to studying the language and soon was a parish priest pressing with Lebbe for the "naturalization" of the Church in China. This meant a Chinese clergy on the same footing as the Europeans, Chinese bishops for Chinese vicariates, indigenous ways of approaching and exercising the apostolate with a broadening role for Chinese lay people, and freedom from the burden of the French protectorate.

Open opposition to Lebbe developed over a piece of land that the Catholic mission bought and the French minister decided to annex, forcibly removing it from Chinese jurisdiction. The Chinese were furious; Church authorities opted for neutrality. Lebbe, however, wrote a strong but courteous note to the French minister defending the rights of the Chinese. He also asked his religious superior to relieve him of his post so that he would not be in the position of having to choose between

his bishop and his conscience. However, the angered French minister pressured Lebbe's superiors to send him away. Suspicion clouded the great things he had been doing and the men associated with him.

Lebbe was sent to a province 1,500 kilometers to the south where he could neither speak nor understand the language. Cotta was assigned to Ecuador but he appealed the order and delayed going, finding himself soon isolated from his community and barred from ministering to his people.

Lebbe and Cotta wrote to one another and to Rome, Cotta carefully building up a "Roman dossier" of materials that would eventually have an impact, as they discovered in 1919 when Benedict XV issued *Maximum Illud*. In this mission encyclical, the stand that Cotta and Lebbe had championed became the official policy of the Catholic Church. It covered the full scope of the "naturalization of the Church" in so-called foreign lands and its phrasing sounded familiar—like the memoranda Cotta and Lebbe had prepared so carefully and sent to Rome.

By 1920, for the sake of peace, both men were assigned out of China and early in the decade Cotta came to the U.S. and made Maryknoll his home. Lebbe's work with Chinese students in France made it possible for him, through Cardinal Mercier, to go to Rome and press both Cardinal Van Rossum, Prefect of Propaganda, and Benedict XV for the creation of Chinese bishops.

On October 28, 1926, Lebbe saw Pius XI consecrate six Chinese bishops in St. Peter's. He and Cotta viewed the event not as a crowning achievement but as just the beginning of what they had prayed and worked and longed for.

The two never saw each other again. Lebbe died in China in 1940. Cotta, until his death in 1957 at age 85, was chaplain to the Maryknoll Sisters, teacher of Chinese, advisor to many and friend to all. He was also "Father Photo," unofficial photographer of Maryknollers. If he made them seem the happiest people on earth, it was partly because their pictures reflected the laughter of the cheerful old priest who squinted at them above his camera lens. □

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