# Instructors in the Faith

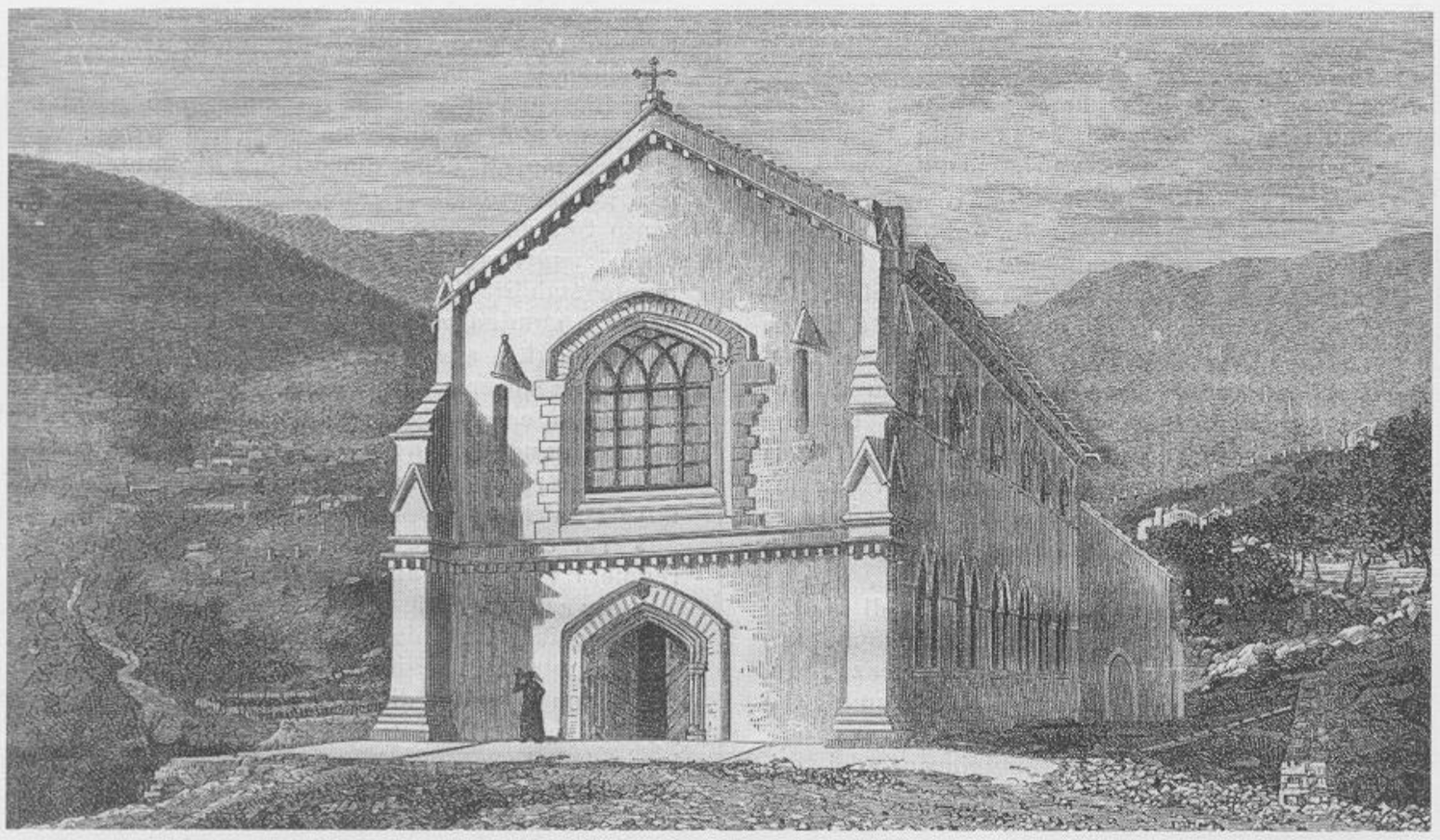
Reports and letters written by the missionaries frequently mentioned their catechists, who played a crucial role in the evangelization endeavor. The success of a mission depended greatly on them. In 1874, Bishop Timoleone Raimondi wrote:

> *The catechist is a powerful tool in the conversion of non-Christians' because a good catechist can accomplish more than any European missionary in drawing souls to God.*

The main task of the catechist was to instruct the faithful in Catholic doctrine, sacraments and Church law. Male catechists instructed the men preparing for baptism. The instructions were generally given in the evening, when the catechumens were back from working in the fields or at sea. The missionary would usually intervene only at the moment of the candidates' scrutiny before receiving baptism.

Very important was the service rendered by nuns, mostly ethnic Chinese. They regularly visited far-away villages, where they stayed for a few weeks at a time. The Catholics provided them with food and lodging while they instructed the women and children on baptism and the other sacraments. The nuns helped the villagers in many other ways, such as doing domestic work, mending clothes, taking care of children and women, assisting the sick and elderly.

After baptism, it was necessary to give the new communities a good formation in Catholic living. This was considered extremely important not only because of pastoral and sacramental care had to be assured, but also because of the Christian communities, called back then Christian communities (*Cristianità*) were themselves a powerful missionary force in the spreading of the faith.



*St. Joseph Church in Garden Road. This image, printed in 1873, portrays the first Church, which was blessed in 1872 and completely destroyed by a typhoon on September 22, 1874.*

## The traveling catechists

The catechists, being employed full-time by the mission, received a salary, although rather low. In this matter, the Protestant missionaries acted differently by paying their catechists much more. The Protestants thought

that the monetary incentive helped considerably with the dissemination of their teachings.

In the first decades of the mission, Catholic catechists were generally single men. At times, men who for one reason or another could not continue on the path to the priesthood, would opt to serve as catechists. In other cases, a few of them, later on entered the seminary and were ordained to the priesthood.

Although without formal training, hands-on experience and practical necessities made catechists versed in many fields of service. They were personal attendants of the missionaries, their language teachers, interpreters, guides and companions on their journeys, sacristans, schoolteachers and heads of Catholic villages. They would play a major role assisting the priests during liturgical celebrations and in conducting religious services in their absence.

As the mission grew, two types of catechists emerged: the itinerant and the residential. The "traveling catechists" called also "baptizers" would reach the village ahead of the missionary or take his place. They would crisscross the districts, especially during the hot months of the year. Whenever they would come across seriously ill children, they would baptize them. These itinerant catechists are described by the missiologist Fr. Gerardo Brambilla (1933) in this fashion:

> *They are powerful Gospel helpers, because they can make the good news enter wherever a foreign missionary would never be able to enter. How many Christian communities were opened through them!*



## The residential catechists

Residential catechists led Christian communities and acted as advisers to visiting missionaries. This type of catechist was required to meet a rather high religious and cultural standard. They were expected to be fluent in written and spoken Chinese. They were to possess adequate knowledge of Catholic doctrine, lead a life of piety, humility, patience and obedience to their superiors. They were instructed to refrain from trying to convert those who sought worldly advantages from joining the Church. They were not supposed to fine anyone, or be involved in litigations.

The missionaries themselves trained their catechists. From time to time, they were invited to the mission center for systematic courses in theology, spirituality and ethics. Periodically, they would also attend week-long retreats.

There were women catechists as well, usually chosen among those who had been trained at the catecumenate program run by the Canossian Sisters.

## Textbooks of religious instruction

The catechists were provided with textbooks for religious instruction. There were three most common booklets used in many China missions. First was the *Catholic Catechism*, an adaptation of the Catechism of the Council of Trent, presented in a question and answer form. The booklet was reprinted various times, including in 1921 by Bishop Domenico Pozzoni. In the 77-page edition, the text was synoptically presented in English, French, Chinese and in Romanized Cantonese. In 1912, Bishop Pozzoni printed a much-reduced (only nine pages)

edition and called it *Vernacular Catechism*. The second textbook was the *Classic Catholic Four Characters Book*, a 33-page summary of Salvation History patterned after *The Classic in Three Characters*, a book used during the Song dynasty to teach Chinese ideographs to children. The *Classic Catholic Four Characters Book* has had a long and glorious history. It was written in 1642 by the Jesuit missionary Fr. Giulio Aleni, known as the 'Confucius from the West', one of the most important missionaries in China of all time. At least 16 editions were printed. Four editions were printed in Hong Kong: in 1886, 1912 and twice in 1929.

The third commonly used textbook was the *Abridgement of Catholic Doctrine*, written by Augustinian Tomas Ortiz, who was a missionary among the Chinese in the Philippines. It was a guidebook to Christian life that included an explanation of the Church's official position on the Chinese Rites controversy. This booklet too, was reprinted in China on various occasions since 1842. In Hong Kong it was reprinted twice, in 1889 and in 1931.

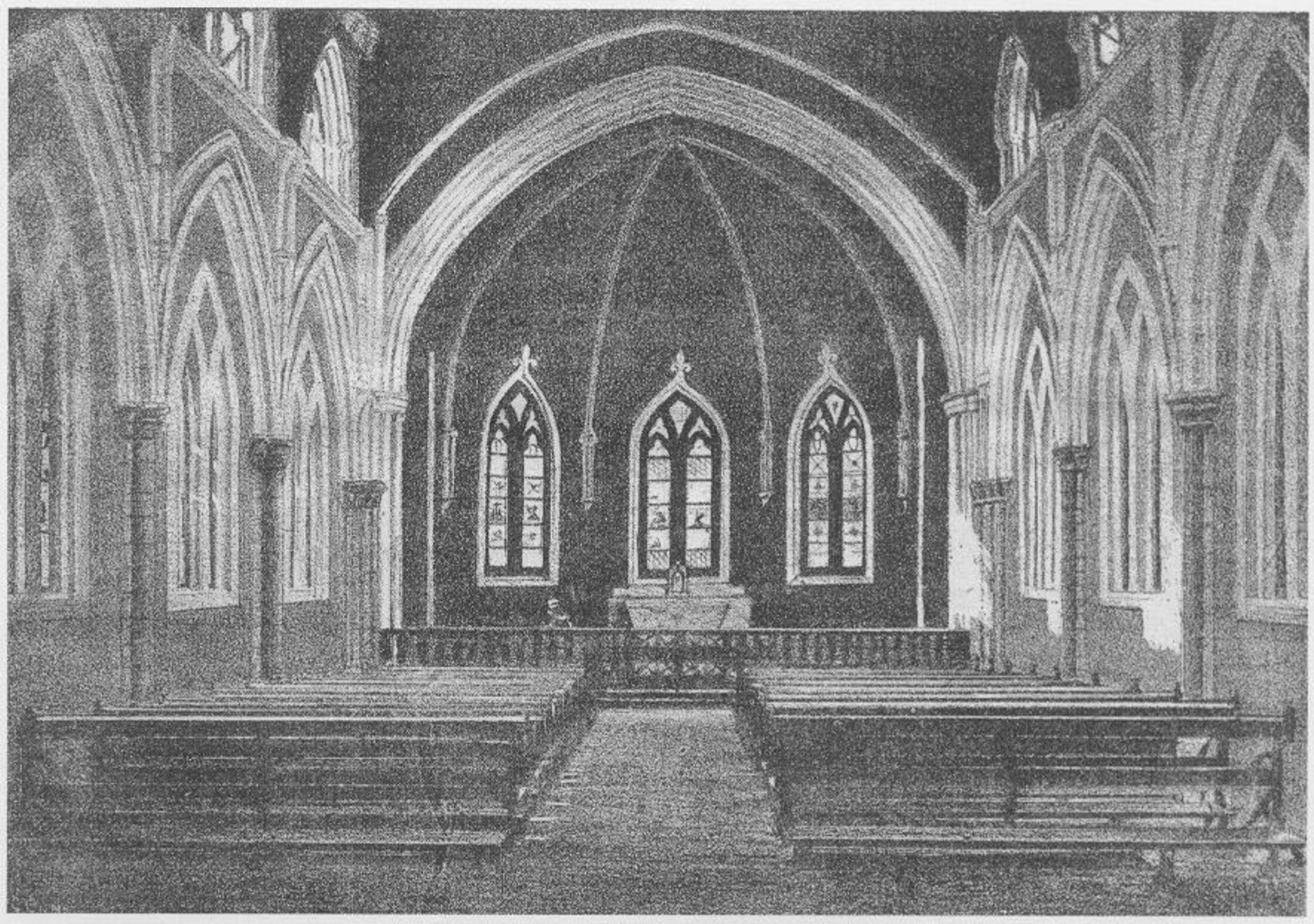
## The 'three – six'

Catholic religious teachings were laid out in three groups of six: six principal truths; six requisites for baptism; six principal prayers.

The six principal truths were: 1. There is one God who created heaven and earth. 2. God will reward the good and punish the wicked. 3. There is one God in three divine persons. 4. Jesus Christ, the second person of the Holy Trinity, suffered, died and rose again. 5. The souls of those who embrace the Catholic faith and obey God's commandments will enjoy eternal happiness in Heaven; the others will endure eternal damnation. 6. The Catholic faith alone is universal and true.

The six requisites to receive baptism were: 1. One should renounce the devil and all heresies. 2. One should be reconciled with one's enemies, pay one's debts, seek to restore another's good reputation in case of libel, and return [illicitly appropriated] property to others. 3. One should show contrition for one's sins. 4. One should possess adequate understanding of the significance of baptism. 5. One should understand the six principal truths (mentioned above). 6. One should know by heart the six principal prayers.

The six main prayers were: 1. The sign of the Cross with the familiar words "in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit." This was recited before formal prayer and the liturgical celebrations. The faithful were



*The interior of the first St. Joseph Church. Printed in 1873.*

encouraged to make the sign of the Cross with those words also when waking up, before eating and before falling asleep. 2. The Lord's Prayer (Our Father), considered as the most important prayer because Jesus himself taught it. 3. The Angelic Salutation (Hail Mary) was particularly important because it makes up the bulk of the Rosary, an immensely popular prayer recited by devout Catholics the world over. 4. The Creed. 5. The Ten Commandments of God and the Five Precepts of the Church. Although not prayers in the strict sense of the word, they were recited by heart to remind Catholics of their obligations. 6. The Four Acts: of contrition, faith, hope and charity.

The *'three – six'* should be considered a simple compendium of the essential truths of the Catholic faith. Not withstanding their simplicity, they were demanding. They required a radical change of life and a clean break with traditional ways. For this reason, Christians needed a safe environment that would shield them from all forms of hostility that would arise on account of their conversion. This new environment also had to shelter them from occasional persecutions by the powerful, and harassments from criminal groups who roamed the land, such as secret societies and bands of brigands. The neophytes needed an ambiance designed to nurture their faith and that would keep them from falling back into their former way of life. If such a relapse were to occur, it would have been considered a grave sin and act of apostasy.

## Catholic villages

In order to protect the faith of the converts, wherever possible, the fathers aimed at the conversion of a whole village en masse. Strong bonds among Catholic families were enhanced through marriages between Catholics. Catholic families were supported by providing a good education in Catholic schools for their children. Whenever possible, Christian employers would favor hiring employees of the same faith. Catholic villages had separate cemeteries reserved for their deceased family members. Yim Tin Tsai, Chek Leng and Tai Long in Sai Kung, were examples of ideal Catholic villages. Life in these villages was somewhat comparable to life in traditional Christian villages in Europe: baptism, confession, daily prayer, weekly meetings, abstinence, annual feast days, pilgrimages, weddings and funerals. The communities gathered twice a day in the chapel to recite or sing their prayers in the local dialect. Attendance at Sunday Mass and Sunday rest were mandatory. In his historical writings, the current diocesan Archivist, Fr. Louis Ha, has written: "while not all the neophytes were devout to the same extent, some faithful practiced this observance of Sundays and feast days with heroic sacrifice" .

*Le Missioni Cattoliche'*, the missionary periodical of the Foreign Missions of Milan, reports the following episode that took place in the Sai Kung district in 1872:

> *The Catholics there were known for their faithful observance of Sundays and feast days. On All Souls' Day (November 2), their faith was put to the test. The rice was ready for harvesting when, suddenly, a furious wind started to blow. All (non-Catholic) farmers hurried to cut and thresh their rice. But the Christians ignored the serious threat and continued with their Mass in the chapel.*



# Mapping New Ground

The contribution of missionaries to science was one of the most prominent aspects of early modern evangelization in China (16th–18th centuries). Eminent above all were the Jesuit missionaries who doubled as scientists: from Frs. Matteo Ricci to Giulio Aleni, from Frs. Adam Von Schall to Ferdinand Verbiest, from Fr. Martino Martini to the French Jesuits named 'The Royal Mathematicians'.

There were other orders and missionary societies with missionaries who were also scientists, such as the missionary and naturalist of the Foreign Missions of Paris, Fr. Armand David. The scientific knowledge brought by missionaries to China was vast: from astronomy to cartography, from mathematics to the science of figurative arts.

The PIME missionaries, always dedicated first and foremost to spreading the Gospel and to the building up of local Church communities, save for a few exceptions, were not active in the scientific apostolate. One exception was Fr. Carlo Salerio, who conducted precious ethnographic and geographic studies in Papua




*Besides the San On map, Fr. Simeone Volonteri drew this map of Hong Kong Island and surroundings, published in* Le Missioni Cattoliche *in 1873.*



*Bishop Simeone Volonteri portrayed as Apostolic Vicar of Henan. Printed in 1882.*

New Guinea, where he collected over 250 artifacts to document the customs and traditions of the inhabitants of Woodlark in Melanesia.

In Hong Kong, at least two missionaries contributed to the scientific field, Fr. Simeone Volonteri and Fr. Raffaello Maglioni (see chapter 21).

Fr. Volonteri's interest in cartography enabled him to draw up an important and remarkably accurate map of the Hong Kong region for the needs of his apostolate. It is likely he had no particular training in cartography, although as a brilliant student, he had shown interest and talent in the field, as shown by his friendship with geography expert Cristoforo Negri, founder and president of the Geographic Society of Florence.

Fr. Volonteri, who was accompanied by diocesan priest Fr. Andrew Leong, described his own wanderings about the San On district as follows:

*By foot, he reconnoitered places, villages, the countryside and tall mountains for the purpose of acquiring knowledge of points, lines, accurate distances from one place to another, so that he could draw his map with accurate and adequate precision.*

Fr. Volonteri had his map printed in Leipzig, Germany, by the lithographer F. A. Brockhaus in 1866. Ten copies of it were sent to the headquarters of the Foreign Missions in Milan. A copy is now at the Italian Geographic Society (Società Geografica Italiana) in Rome. This copy had been sent to Cristoforo Negri. Other copies can be found at the Royal Geographic Society of London and the National Library of Australia in Canberra.

The map, in two separate sheets each 86.5cm x 69cm, is called "Map of the District of San-On (province of Kwangtung)". It is in Chinese and English. Fr. Leong contributed its Chinese characters and Fr. Volonteri added a side note stating that it was "the first and only map ever published up to that time".

It remained such or, at least, the most authoritative and most used for the next 40 years, until, in 1910, the colonial government of Hong Kong completed its own topographical survey. Exceeding the intent of Fr. Volonteri, the map played an historic role since it was used to set the boundaries of the "New Territories" entrusted to Great Britain in 1898.

On May 10, 1866, Fr. Volonteri made an appeal to the Hong Kong Government Gazette to have at least 120 subscriptions to defray the cost of producing and printing his map:

*The scope of this map embraces an area of about 45 miles from north to south, and of 60 miles from east to west - that is to say the district of San On whereof Nam Tau is the departmental town.[...]*

*The map is the result of four years of labor, and is made entirely from the personal observations of the author. The dangers, the difficulties and the hardships which the work has involved have been very great. The district is excessively mountainous and as ocular demonstration had exclusively in all cases to be relied on, by reason of the worthlessness of native information, the fatigue attending travel has been no light matter. The villagers entertain the idea that their mountains contain auriferous deposits, and are very jealous of foreigners examining them. The consequence was that there was much difficulty in procuring the services of guides and still more difficulty in obtaining correct information on any point. [...]*

*Under these circumstances, this map has been produced, and it has been suggested to the author that it is a pity the result of so much labor, danger and difficulty should in these days of progress be concealed from the world. Science, religion and commerce are now allied in the vast work of the dissemination of knowledge and of western civilization, and it cannot be doubted that geography is the pioneer of the movement.*

*From a local and a directly utilitarian point of view, the author is encouraged to believe that his work should not be placed as a candle under a bushel. This wealthy and most important colony stands in the midst of the San On district, and it seems (outdated) that the topography of the immediate neighborhood should be a matter of indifference.*

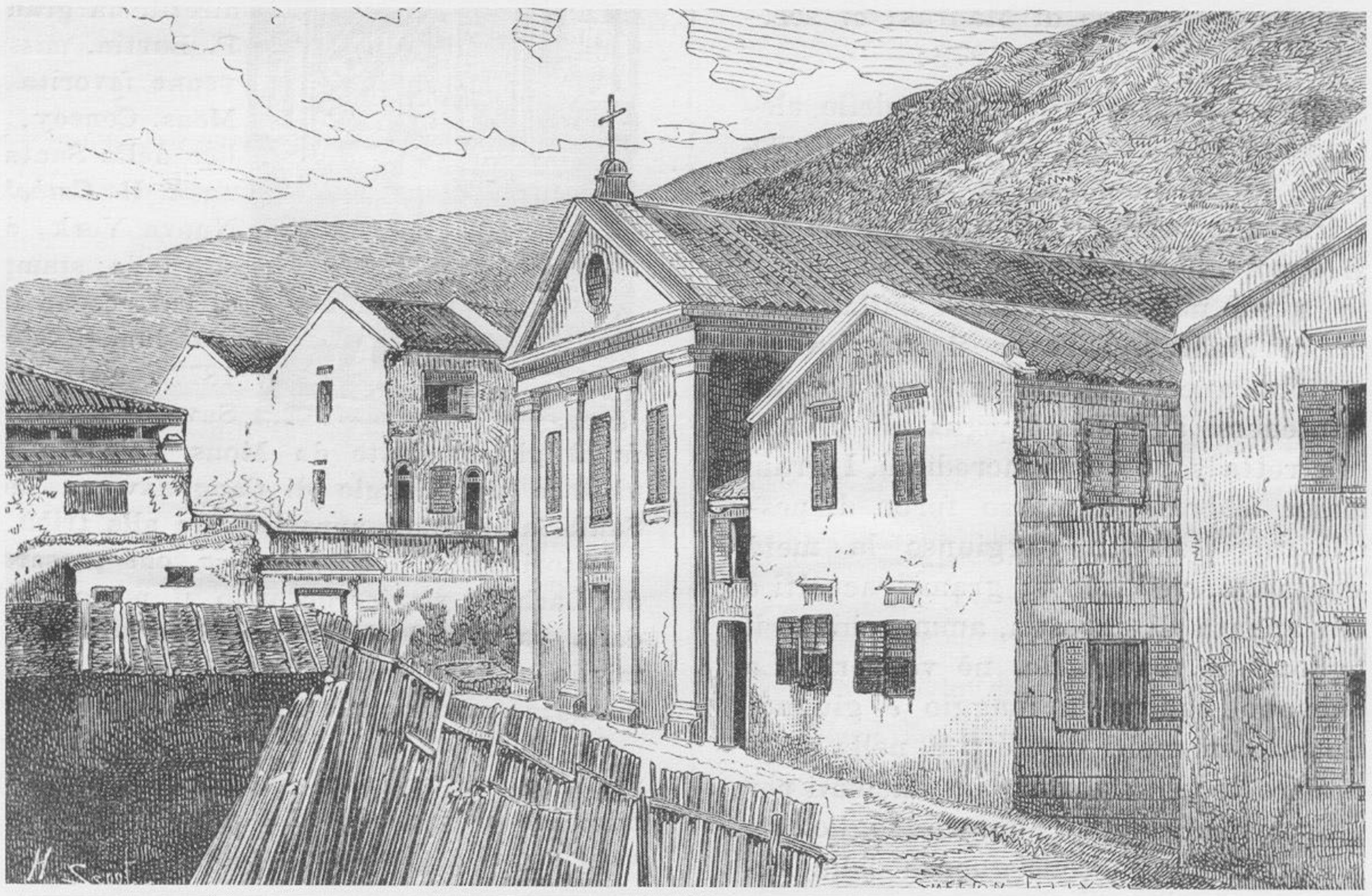
Prof. Ronald C. Y. Ng, professor of geography at the prestigious School of Oriental Studies in London, wrote an essay on Fr. Volonteri's map published in the Geographical Journal (n. 135, 1969) and the Journal of the Hong Kong Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society (n. 9, 1969). Prof. Ng wrote:

*Considering the difficulties presented by the rugged terrain and the unsettled times under which the observations were made, the map has a remarkable degree of accuracy and contains a wealth of information. [...] The map displays no sign of amateurism. [...] The fact that it is probably the first ever bilingual map of its kind must place it in a class of its own. [...] It is hoped that the information, the value of this magnificent piece of work as a fundamental document in the study of the history and geography of San On could be enhanced.*

Fr. Volonteri was appointed Apostolic Vicar of Henan, in central-northern China in 1869, and from 1883 of south Henan. There, with the cooperation of a student, Yang Ziming, he drew two additional maps: one of the Nanyang district (1894) and one of Henan province (1896). The second map is so elaborate that it gained esteem and admiration from high-ranking Chinese provincial officials and the Holy See.

# Dynamics of Adaptation

For years, historical research on mission work focused mostly on the missionaries, as if they were isolated heroes. Today, mission historiography, quite justifiably, has shifted its focus to incorporate themes of cross-cultural contamination, assimilation and adaptation. The reception of the faith by local communities has become central in mission studies. The missionaries were not islands and could not do anything alone. They received acceptance and help from the people to whom they preached the Gospel. It is therefore necessary to reconstruct the dynamics of the spontaneous adaptation enacted by the new converts for the purpose of keeping and living out the newly-embraced faith in an environment at times puzzling, other times hostile, towards them. At first sight, the liturgical life, the rituals, the hymns, the works of charity could give the impression of a mechanical transposition of European Catholicism into China. In reality, the Christian communities came up with forms of adaptation that stemmed not so much from theological expertise as from natural instinct and from the need to go on living in their original environments. The converts had to live their new Christian lives, not only whenever a missionary visited, but especially in his absence, and had to secure continuity in the expression of their faith in ways consistent with



*Church of St. Francis Xavier, in Wan Chai, served by Fr. Bernardo Viganò and Fr. Matthew Fu. Printed in 1878.*





*A market in a small town. Printed in 1885.*

their new convictions and the environment in which they lived.

Equally important is the reconstruction of the interaction among communities, families and villages. It was within this network of countless and various relationships among families, relatives and acquaintances that the Catholic faith spread, from place to place, from easily accessible villages to those deeper in the countryside. The progress of evangelization is due more to these dynamics than to the foreign missionaries' preaching. Outsiders never began to evangelize from scratch. Invariably, they always needed someone else to make the first move. That could take the form of a subtle invitation of help from a villager to accompany them, or from a person more versed than they were in the workings of social interaction to prepare the way for them. The foreign missionaries enjoyed partial success only whenever a link in this complex chain of human rapports, that constitutes a peculiarity truly essential to Chinese society, would blaze their trail or point out to them a new village or a new family showing interest in the faith.

## Reaction to preaching

The Chinese response to the preaching by foreign missionaries in the Hong Kong mission has yet to be studied satisfactorily. At the level of cultural impact, a first impression would indicate that there was not a significant reaction by the Chinese to the preaching of the Catholic faith. Hong Kong society has been slow to develop an intellectual elite. The territory is made up mostly of immigrants and refugees pouring in for a variety of reasons, from disparate backgrounds and without the intention of settling down for

good. This anomaly is more striking due to the fact that Hong Kong was ruled, until 1997, by a foreign power. Lacking a pronounced sense of identity and emotional attachment to the territory, public opinion has been often more concerned with survival than anything else and, consequently, until recent times, unable to take a critical stance on missionary activity. This, perhaps, might provide an explanation to why the Hong Kong colony had never witnessed the violent demonstrations and anti-Christian literature present in the rest of China. However, in the larger Hong Kong mission, there were some clashes, occasionally violent ones, with sectors of the Chinese imperial administration or with local governing bodies in peripheral districts outside of the colony and even with the communist movement.

## Culture shock

In everyday life, apparent differences between the missionaries, the Christian communities and the rest of the population stemmed from what was perceived as the upsetting of traditional village life, especially in regards to religious and ritual customs. Buildings used for Christian worship were seen as upsetting the Fengshui of an area. The disengagement of the new converts from the communal activities of a village, centered on the local temple with its theatrical shows, cult of the ancestors and of the village protective deities, gave rise to disdain and fear that misfortune would be befall the village.

Christians, who were asked to financially support the mission, would often refuse to pay the village taxes used to carry out traditional religious rituals that had become, in the eyes of the converts, superstitious acts. Besides, the imposing figure of the itinerant missionary and of the catechist seemed to shadow or, at least, to challenge the traditional authority of the village heads.



## Marginal minority

One should not picture the preaching of the Christian faith only in terms of the undermining of ancestral traditions. The Christians were always a small minority, often discriminated against, and often the victims of injustice and acts of violence. Many times converts came from the edge of society, from groups not well integrated into the framework of Confucianism, from the victims of injustice and oppression: in short, they were persons, families or clans looking for a fresh start. A sizable number of new converts were those who belonged to minorities, who faced daunting difficulties, such as the Hakkas, who belonged to impoverished families, who fished or produced salt for a living. Even pirates and members of secret societies and chronically ill people, such as lepers, were among their number.

Contact between Christians and their neighbors was not always confrontational. In most cases, when faced with everyday struggles, Christians lived as good neighbors, side by side with the rest of the population exercising mutual tolerance and adaptability, successful in finding the middle ground that would allow both groups to live together while respecting each other's needs and prerogatives.