

FORCED LABOUR IN KOREA

THIS IS not a horror story, though the grim facts might give it that appearance. It is rather a story of the beatitudes: of the wonderful way in which God reveals his presence to his servants at the very moment when all human help fails, and their endurance is tested to the utmost. 'Blessed are you when men hate you, reject you, abuse and calumniate you on account of the Son of Man', has been called the summit of the beatitudes (cf Lk 6, 22).

In May 1949, sixty-seven German Benedictine missionaries — Ottilien monks and Tutzing sisters, all working in North Korea — were arrested and imprisoned at Pyengyang. Some years previously, under Japanese rule, life was already becoming increasingly difficult for them. But when Japan capitulated in August 1945, and the Russian army advanced, the situation became perilous indeed. One of the fathers working on a parish was brutally killed. However, as long as the Russian army occupied the district, it acted in some measure as a protection; and it was not until after the troops had vacated the area that this wholesale arrest was made by Korean communists.

In the Pyengyang prison, eighteen monks were crowded into one cell. At night there was only just room for them to lie on one side, packed like sardines, so that if one turned over, the rest were forced to do likewise. During the day, they were made to squat in silence on the floor. The sisters were housed five in a cell and they managed to communicate with each other from cell to cell. Eventually they even softened the hearts of the wardresses, so they perhaps fared slightly better. The prisoners were fed three times a day with a mash of millet and beans, and soup consisting of warm salted water with potato peelings or a few vegetable leaves sometimes floating about in it. Thirst was one of the worst torments the monks endured; three or four ladlefuls of water each meal had to be divided amongst the eighteen inmates of their cell.

Inevitably, all were stricken by various kinds of disease; yet it was only with great reluctance, and when there was already danger of death, that the guards consented to transfer patients to a separate cell. The elderly abbot had from the first been confined to a separate cell with one companion; and his condition rapidly deteriorated. It was especially hard for his community to realize how much he was suffering, and to be unable to do anything for him.

Though in retrospect the period of confinement seemed endless, time did not hang heavy on their hands. For most of the day they prayed in silence;

but when they were sure that the guards were at a safe distance, they would whisper a rosary together, or make the stations of the Cross. On Sundays, when they heard the Mass-bell sounding from a nearby mission station, in defiance of orders they celebrated a whispered dry Mass — homily and all, whilst one of them stood guard at the slit in the door, watching for the approach of a warder.

At first the captives had no idea what their ultimate fate was to be: were they going to be shot or would they be sent home? Within a month it became evident that they were to be transported to a labour camp. The brothers were separated from the priests and sent ahead to construct living quarters for captives and guards. Finally, in August, came the day for general transportation. They had longed for it as a means of release at least from prison, but in fact it brought them great sorrow. Their abbot and seven of the monks were to be left behind as 'criminals'. It was not until several years later that they learnt that the abbot and one of the fathers died in prison as a result of the harsh treatment. Of the fate of the other six no definite information was ever obtained. The presumption is that they were shot in October 1950, when the North Korean troops withdrew.

Transportation to the labour camp was a secretive business. Curtains were hung round the truck in which the monks were driven to the railway terminus and backed up against the train. To their surprise and mutual joy they found the sisters already installed in the same carriage. Shortly after midday on 6 August they arrived at their destination. They were ordered to run straight down the railway embankment and lie flat in the long grass, in case they should be observed by anyone else in the train. Ahead of them was a long, steep climb through a narrow pass. Police went ahead to make sure that no one saw the European captives; soldiers marched in front and behind. As evening drew on, they caught their first glimpse of the camp. Some of the brothers were hurrying down to welcome them. Once again there was sad news to temper the joy of their reunion. Two of the brothers had already collapsed and died from exhaustion, under-nourishment and heat. Oksadok, the site of the camp, lay in a natural hollow high up in the hills. To the north it was bordered by virgin forest and, apart from the narrow defile leading down to the plain, closed in by steep, rocky cliffs. On that first evening after dusk they gathered together out of doors for Compline. The next day was Sunday, and the former prior, now their superior, celebrated their first Mass for three months. The previous day had been the feast of the Transfiguration. They had now ascended their own Tabor, to a transformation through suffering, renunciation and exile.

On the following day work began in earnest. There was still a considerable amount of building to be done before the winter set in: beams to be salvaged from abandoned huts, rocks to be rolled away, loamy soil to be found, sieved and kneaded, then smeared over walls of plaited twigs. Throughout the weary years of captivity they were sustained by the musical and poetic gifts of the sisters' prioress, Gertrud Link, who composed and

taught them about eighty songs. When they were finally released, they were not allowed to take away a single scrap of paper; so that many of the songs would have been lost, had they not divided them up between them and got them by heart. (Forty-one of them have since been published, and a few of these are given here in translation. The metre and rhyme scheme of the originals have been retained as far as possible.)

It was intended that the prisoners should earn their own living by agricultural labour. One of the poems gives a heart-rending picture of what this work entailed. Police conducted them to the so-called fields — patches of stony ground and rocks and tree-stumps. They had to follow the plough with boxes or bags of seed and manure on their backs, stooping to sow the seed and fill in the earth. Working in this bent position for hours, days and weeks on end was a prolonged torture:

PLOUGHING SONG

The plough tears furrows in the soil,
Black stony ground gapes wide;
Backs doubled up, along we toil
To scatter seed inside.

While hunger gnaws and grief reminds
Of fair fields, once our hope,
Exhaustion from forced labour binds
Our limbs as though with rope. . . .

Our eyes perceive in distant light
God's harvest thrive indeed,
Where now the red plough plies with might,
And we are scattered seed.

Missionary enthusiasm had brought them to Korea. At the liturgical ceremony on the eve of their departure for the missions, they had all declared themselves ready to give their life's blood for the faith. It had sounded abstract enough then, but now they were faced with the reality. All had to say a determined 'yes' to the manifold painful circumstances of their situation.

Within a year, six of the inmates of the camp were dead, and during the next, six more followed them. In all, seventeen of them died before they were eventually released.

HARVEST OBLATION

From what were once but barren fields
Stream blessings for us all;
Your mercy still this bounty yields,
Despite oppression's pall.

You gave the shoots and made them grow,
Sent rain and sunshine clear;
By this you plainly let us know
We are your children dear.

The choicest harvest crowns a mound,
Six golden sheaves this year;
Six sheaves, which Death itself has bound,
Without a blemished ear.

Six graves have opened up the sward
For those Death reaped for you;
Accept this sacrifice, O Lord,
As harvest tithe your due.

When war broke out between North and South Korea, there was a still worse nightmare in store for them. One morning, in October 1950, they were suddenly informed that they must leave the camp that day. Two days later, after travelling always under cover of darkness, the missionaries arrived at the small frontier town of Manpo where they spent two nights in prison. After that they were again moved on. Three days and three nights had to be spent motionless on the ground out of doors at a railway station. By morning they were covered with thick, white frost. They had practically nothing to eat and were exposed to the taunts of the crowds around. After this experience, it was a relief to be returned to the prison at Manpo, even though it meant that the sisters had to work in the kitchen from 3 a.m. to 10 p.m. Yet another of the fathers collapsed and died. Korean prisoners carried his body away, and it was impossible to find out where he was buried. Not long afterwards, the prison was destroyed in an air-raid. The missionaries were next housed for a month in a cold, dark shed with a leaking roof, where three more of the brethren died. This time some of the monks were allowed out under police escort to bury the bodies, but the ground was so hard that they could only cover them over with snow.

On Christmas Eve they begged the guard on duty to let them hum a few carols; he agreed, provided that no one outside could hear them. So they kindled a few chips of wood, sat round the fire and sang 'Silent Night' and other favourites. As soon as a ray of morning light shone through the paper window, Fr Prior sat down on the floor in front of their Mass-box, put a stole on under his jacket, and began to celebrate Mass. The sisters working in the kitchen missed Mass but were not deprived of Holy Communion. One of the fathers, who always had to be present when food was doled out, took some consecrated hosts with him to the kitchen, and as he stood in a corner, each sister in turn received Holy Communion and quickly returned to her work. None of the police spotted what was happening. It was truly a wonderful Christmas.

Again and again the missionaries had begged their captors to allow them

to return to the camp at Oksadok; at last their petition was granted. On the evening of 17 January 1951, they climbed back up the pass to their mountain home. The few possessions and the provisions they had left in store there had been rifled and consumed. Worst of all, a reign of terror was inaugurated by a new commandant, who was to remain in charge of the camp for three-and-a-half years. He not only insulted and maltreated the missionaries himself, but incited the guards to do the same.

From their first arrival in Oksadok, daily Mass had been the sustaining joy of the exiled Benedictines. They had managed to bring some wheat with them, which they ground into flour for very small hosts. To their delight they also found wild grapes growing in the neighbourhood; they squeezed these out by hand, left the juice to ferment, and used just a few drops at each Mass. On their return, they had to reduce their daily Mass to two or three times a week, because their store of wheat had vanished in their absence. Their only hope was a plot of ground they had sown before their departure; but the commandant gave orders that the whole area should be ploughed up and planted with maize. The brother assigned to the ploughing and sowing worked with great care, leaving tufts of wheat here and there to survive amongst the maize. The ears they gleaned tided them over the critical period; and later they managed to sow hidden lines of wheat between the rows of maize. Never during all their time at Oksadok were they deprived of the sacramental presence of their Lord.

One of the sisters was a doctor, who worked and pleaded valiantly for the sick. It was heart-breaking for her to watch them fading away when she knew that, given the necessary remedies, she could save their lives. The guards sneered at her concern. They were relentless in insisting that her invalids should go out to work — they were only shamming. If they could not go, their rations were reduced. It was pitiful too when they had to leave a dying monk alone, after banking him up in sweet-smelling shrubs, and not knowing whether they would find him dead or alive when they got back from work in the evening.

So things continued at Oksadok until Autumn 1952, when a new commandant arrived. Conditions immediately began to improve. The guards behaved like human beings, better clothing was provided and even a few medicinal supplies appeared; but the hard work still went on. The complete change of fortune came in the following November, when an important official arrived to inform them that they were now to be honoured guests of the government of North Korea and were invited to Pyengyang. Four days later they celebrated a Mass of thanksgiving with a heartfelt *Te Deum*, then went in procession to the cemetery to take leave of their beloved dead.

There they sang the *Libera me, Domine*, and every one of them sprinkled each grave with holy water. They also prayed for those buried at Manpo. In the afternoon they sang the prayers for travellers, and started down to the valley. From Pyengyang they were sent on to a rehabilitation camp.

What had happened was that rumour had reached the outside world, in spite of all precautions, that all these religious were being detained somewhere in North Korea; protests had proved effective and the international reputation of the State was at stake. Monastic life could be lived more fully in the rehabilitation camp: Mass was of course celebrated daily and, except for Matins, the whole office was said in common. So the weeks went by until in January they were asked to sign a paper stating that they had been well treated in the last two months; this they were ready to do, but they were next asked to omit the clause 'in the last two months' and this they refused to do. After a lot of discussion in which the atmosphere grew more menacing, a formula was at last agreed upon and the document signed. Everything was then arranged for their transportation back to Germany. With what mixed feelings they left Korea can be gathered in this final poem:

FAREWELL

One step on the way — just a short one —
And then we are free and released;
Oppression, sly cunning and lying,
They all at long last will have ceased.

One step on the way — but a sad one —
Which heavily weighs on the heart;
No one who has not tasted exile
Can guess what it costs to depart.

One step on the way — what a hard one —
Which tortures a sensitive nerve:
We have to abandon the people
Whom love has allowed us to serve.

One step on the way — with a last look,
Tears scarcely permit to discern;
Korea, you land of our mission,
O when will you bid us return?

Perhaps not even this poem expresses all the nostalgia that was in their hearts: never in all their lives had God seemed so near to them as in the years of their captivity.

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