CHAPTER XI

THE INDO-CHINA MISSIONS

Under the reign of Gia-Long (Mgr Pigneau de Béhaine's protégé), the flourishing Christianity of Annam had only one difficulty, the shortage of missionaries. Everything changed when Minh-Mang came to the throne in 1820. His hatred of Catholicism was kept in check at first by the viceroy of Lower Indo-China, who had been one of Gia-Long's officers. After this man's death, it knew no bounds. The edict of 1825 forbade missionaries to enter the country and condemned the "perverted religion of the Europeans". The edict of 1833 called on all Christians from the mandarins down to those in the most humble circumstances to abandon it in all sincerity. Those who trampled the cross underfoot would be pardoned but once only. The edict ordered also that the churches and the priests' houses should be destroyed. In 1836, a fresh edict brought in the death penalty for every European priest "captured on a European ship in the act of landing in the kingdom; every priest seized in the interior of the country; those who hid them in their houses; and all public officials in whose territories one of these priests was seen, on the grounds that they would be guilty of failing to make the necessary searches in order to take him into custody". The Christian communities were forced to go underground and the missionaries into hiding. There were many victims of this persecution between 1833 and 1840. Fr Gagelin, who had given himself up in order not to compromise the faithful among whom he was hidden, was put to death by strangling. Fr Odorico and Mgr Delgado died in prison. Fr Marchand suffered the frightful torture of

the hundred wounds. Two vicars apostolic, Hernandez and Dumoulin-Borie and Frs Cornay and Fernandez were beheaded and Fr Jaccard strangled.

A few years of respite followed the accession of Thieu-Tri, Minh-Mang's son (1841). Not that he revoked the edicts, he merely applied them less rigorously. Exile or imprisonment took the place of the death penalty. One great missionary belonging to the Paris Foreign Missions, Mgr Retord, without further ado acted as though liberty had already been restored. He invited his clergy to celebrate public worship once more in the open. He himself, in company with several of his subordinates, undertook pastoral journeys. He officiated in makeshift churches, administered the sacraments in them and then summoned his congregation to join in processions at which public prayers were recited. Nothing hindered this movement, not even obstructions in the villages or the imprisonment of some of his priests on the instigation of zealous governors. And the bishop wrote: "our little boat, which was letting in water on all sides and seemed doomed to shipwreck, is now repaired."

After the death of Thieu-Tri (1847) his successor, Tu-Duc, promulgated three edicts whose aim was the extermination of the European and Vietnamese priests.

Every village suspected of giving hiding to any of them was surrounded and every house in it searched. So as not to compromise the faithful, the missionaries sought refuge in the mountains and the forests. In his successive hiding-places, Mgr Retord—the bishop of the *maquis*, as one of his biographers calls him—received news of the worst kind: churches demolished or burned, Christians tortured, condemned to exile, hard labour, beheading and, alas, sometimes when under torture, denouncing priests. Nothing could break his spirit. In his last hiding-place, a hut made of branches and leaves, he was drawing up a programme of restoration when he died on October 22nd, 1858.

After a Spanish bishop, Mgr Diaz, had been beheaded (July 20th, 1857), Spain and France organized an expedition

commanded by Admiral Rigoult de Genouilly. Turan was taken. The expeditionary force occupied Saigon (1859), then, in the absence of sufficient intelligence, dug itself in there. The outburst of violence which followed caused the year 1861 to be given the name Phan-Tap (dispersion). All the Christians were scattered among the pagan villages, while their own were sacked. The land they owned was shared out among the neighbouring pagan villages and their families broken up. The most barbarous clause in the edicts placed Christians on a par with mere cattle, and ordered that the two characters *Ta Dao* (perverted religion) should be cut into their left cheek, and into their right the name of the canton or the prefecture where they were to live. Amongst the martyrs of this period was one of outstanding character, a young priest of the Paris Foreign Missions, Théophane Vénard, who kept up his spirits even before his executioner. His exemplary submission to his fate, clearly expressed in his letters written in prison and later published, gave birth to large numbers of missionary vocations especially in the United States. The expeditionary force set out once more and in 1862 France and Tu-Duc signed the treaty of Saigon which ceded to France three provinces of Cochin-China and guaranteed religious freedom. In 1867, the whole of Cochin-China became a French possession.

When peace was restored, the nursing Sisters of the order of Saint Paul de Chartres arrived and then the Brothers of the Christian Schools. The nuns of the Lisieux Carmel had founded a convent in Saigon as early as 1861. It was the first Carmel in the Far East.

On the other hand, throughout the whole of Annam, the Christians continued to be ill-treated by the lettered classes with the support of Tu-Duc. Then again, bands of Chinese pirates were constantly playing havoc with Tonkin; France led two new expeditions there which finally brought about the establishment of her protectorate (the treaty of Hué, 1883).

What, we may ask, was the mental reaction at the time to this series of interventions in China and Indo-China? An article

in *L'Ami du clergé et du roi* (February 3rd, 1842) informs us. The Opium War had just begun and two missionaries had been arrested in Tonkin when the review wrote:

> France has a few ships stationed in the China seas; they are insufficient to engage in hostilities against an organized power, but they would be adequate to make our name known among the barbarians and to save the lives of those Frenchmen who have marched forward with the advance guard of civilization.... And when Asia hears the sound of British cannon would it not surely be worth while for France to let the 400,000 Christians of these new missions know that they have found a protector?

Should the missionaries receive less consideration than the British business men who were selling the drug? It would have been a sorry affair to allow opium to go in and the Gospel to be rejected. This was the way Catholic circles reasoned. And the others, even though hostile to Catholicism, considered that the State had an inalienable right to avenge its nationals when they were ill-treated. But once the Western States had entered on this path, they were to find themselves caught up in a web of circumstance from which there could be no escape.

Meanwhile what of the missions? During the periods of warfare, the Christians, since they were accused of being in sympathy with the invaders, could not fail to be treated even worse than before. In Annam, the most deadly persecutions took place at the same time as the 1883 expedition. In the half century of persecution dating from Minh-Mang down to the treaty of Hué, 115 Annamite priests suffered martyrdom, and 100,000 Christians died for their faith. St Pius X and Pius XII beatified more than a hundred of them. Such was the quality of these Vietnam Christian communities that at the height of the final persecution they continued to grow. In the year 1885, the vicariates depending on the Paris Foreign Missions registered 19,705 baptisms.

When peace was restored it lasted for fifty years. This was the *pax gallica*, as Fr Brou had written, and it made possible the expansion of the work begun by sacrifice. The Sulpicians

took charge of the international seminary at Hanoi; the Canadian Redemptorists and the Franciscans devoted themselves to giving parish missions and retreats and to youth work. The Brothers of the Christian Schools and the Sisters of Saint Paul de Chartres developed their own foundations. Other congregations devoted themselves to teaching and social work—the Sisters of St Vincent de Paul, the Franciscan Missionaries of Mary, the Canonesses of St Augustine, the Sisters of Providence of Portieux, the Sisters of Our Lady of the Missions. The centres of the contemplative life made their appearance. These were founded by the Trappists at Phuoc-Son, by the monks of Lérins and of La Pierre-qui-Vire throughout Vietnam, by the Carmelites at Hanoi, Hué, Phat-Diem and Tranh-Hoa, and by the Poor Clares at Vinh. Native vocations were developed in these houses. Finally, purely Vietnamese congregations were founded by the already existing European Votaries of the Cross, the Sisters of the Third Order of St Dominic, the Brothers of the Holy Family, the Catechist Brothers of Christian Doctrine.

The evangelization of the other territories of the Indo-Chinese peninsula—the plateaux to the west of the Annamite mountain chain, Cambodia, Siam (now Thailand), Burma—followed a parallel course to that of Vietnam. The first priests from the Paris Foreign Missions arrived in 1842 among the Banhars, one of the savage tribes of western Vietnam. They had much to suffer from the climate and the insalubrious nature of the country, and still more from the fickleness and superstition of the natives. A rebellion drove them out in 1867. They came back and by their pertinacity succeeded in founding a permanent mission.

The first mission to the Tais, the people of the mountainous regions of Tonkin, dates from 1878. After satisfactory beginnings, sickness carried away several of the missionaries and, in 1883 and 1884, an outburst of xenophobia, parallel with that in Vietnam, brought about the massacre of missionaries,

native priests and 2,000 Tai converts. Evangelization began again under Mgr Gendreau's direction but it achieved only slight successes during the nineteenth century. The same is true of Cambodia, Thailand and Laos, where Buddhism remained in a strong position.

In Burma, the vicariates of Pegu and Ava, which were entrusted to the Barnabites, numbered some 3,000 converts at the end of the eighteenth century. After half a century of virtual neglect, due to the shortage of missionaries, the mission was handed over, from 1839 to 1856, to the Oblates of Turin who were later succeeded by the priests of the Paris Foreign Missions.

One of these, Fr Bigandet, completely mastered the Burmese language. He was appointed vicar apostolic in 1858 and won the favour of the king of North Burma. He was then able to appeal for help to medical, nursing and teaching institutes: the Good Shepherd Sisters of Angers, the Little Sisters of the Poor, the Brothers of the Christian Schools. With their collaboration and in the course of a large number of pastoral journeys, he developed the former mission posts, established new ones and ordained fourteen Burmese priests.

The Church of Burma had been founded. In 1868, the initial vicariate was divided into three sections: East Burma, Central and South-west Burma. The Milan Foreign Missions were allotted the eastern region, the two others were left under the care of the Paris Foreign Missions. New districts were to be formed after 1914.