

A NEW SERIES FOR THE NEWSLETTER (succeeding Benignus O'Rourke) - 'SAINT' OF THE WEEK

We intend each week to focus on a 'Saint', some canonised, some not (mainly taken from Robert Ellsberg's wonderful book, 'All Saints') whose 'feastday' is the following week. We will offer a 'pen picture' of a remarkable life, often known about by only a few, which can give hope and encouragement as to how a person truly living the Christian faith can be a real inspiration for each of us as we seek to follow Christ.

APRIL 30 - Bishop James E. Walsh - Confessor to the Chinese (1891-1981)

"Prayer is so powerful, I am a living example of what prayer can do"

On July 10, 1970, a frail and elderly man left the company of the Red Guards and walked across the bridge linking China and the island of Hong Kong. On the other side he was embraced by a crowd of friends and fellow Maryknoll missionaries who, forewarned of his arrival, had gathered to welcome him to freedom. After twelve years in prison, Bishop James E Walsh, the last foreign missionary in communist China, was on his way home.

Walsh was born on April 30, 1891, in Cumberland, Maryland, USA. After graduating from college he became one of the original pioneers of Maryknoll the Catholic Foreign Mission Society of America, established in 1912. Maryknoll had been founded with the grand vision of sending American missionary priests to China, and Father Walsh was among the first departing team. He worked for eighteen years in Yeungkong in southern China, where he quickly developed a deep respect for the culture of China and a love for its people. In 1927 he was named a bishop.

For ten years (1936–1946) Walsh was recalled to the United States to serve as the second superior general of Maryknoll. During that time he worked hard to instill in the Maryknollers a keen sense of the spirituality of mission and a willingness to "give everything for Christ. But in 1948 he was back in Shanghai, serving as director of a board overseeing the work of Catholic foreign missionaries in China. Two years later the communist Revolution reached Shanghai. Walsh's activities were increasingly restricted and he experienced various forms of harassment, but he continued for some years to operate in relative freedom. In the meantime, many other foreigners were either expelled or detained, if they did not leave voluntarily. His classmate from Maryknoll, Bishop Francis Ford, died in Communist prison in 1952.

Walsh, however, insisted that he would never voluntarily leave his signed field of mission. In a moving article written in 1951 he explained his reasons: *'At a time when the Catholic Religion is being traduced and persecuted with the design of eliminating it from China, I think it is the plain duty of all Catholic missionaries... to remain where they are until prevented from doing so by physical force. If internment should intervene in the case of some, or even death. I think it should simply be regarded as a normal risk that is inherent in our state of life ... In our particular case I think that such an eventuality would be a privilege, too, because it would associate us a little more intimately in the Cross of Christ.'*

Walsh believed that the vocation of a priest was not simply represented in his occupational work – whether teaching, preaching or performing pastoral duties. The vocation remained the same, even when all these activities were stripped away. Part of it was a matter of remaining at all times open to divine providence. *"If we start to pick and choose for our vocation, it is very hard to tell if we are carrying our cross or running away from it".*

As for the danger that arrest would mean "enforced inactivity" and thus a waste of one's gift, he observed that *"suffering patiently borne is activity, so is prayer, so is any kind of mental work – things which can be done, one would think, in prison as well as anywhere. A priest and a father does as much for his flock by suffering for them and maybe he does even more".*

Walsh eventually had occasion to test these convictions. He was finally arrested in 1958 and charged with conspiracy and espionage. For the first two years he was held in solitary confinement and subjected to endless interrogation sessions. He was finally "convicted" and sentenced to twenty years in prison.

Walsh accepted his situation with remarkable serenity. He later observed. *"My twelve years of prison life went by without too much difficulty. The experience was not pleasant. Life seemed rather wearisome at times. But I was not despondent at all nor even unhappy."* He spent much of the time saying the rosary and studying a Chinese dictionary, convinced that by such quiet witness he was serving the gospel as faithfully as he could. Finally in 1970, at the age of seventy-nine, he was taken to the border and freed.

Walsh returned to Maryknoll, where he lived on for more than a decade. He rarely spoke of his ordeal and never expressed bitterness or resentment toward his captors. He spent much of his remaining time in prayer, though he was always eager to encourage young missionaries and to share with them his own sense of the spirit of Maryknoll. As he once said, *"That spirit is charity, and if there is any other spirit. Maryknoll does not want it and could not conceivably profit by it."*

He was revered by Maryknollers and others around the world as a heroic and holy confessor. But he always disclaimed any special recognition. When he was awarded the prestigious Cardinal Gibbons Award from Catholic University in Washington he said: *'I am not aware that I ever did anything to deserve such an honour. True. I did spend twelve years in prison in China, and that is something unusual, no doubt. But in my case, the experience was just a routine part of my profession, and therefore, I consider it no great credit to myself. I was a Catholic priest and my people were in trouble. So, I simply stayed with them as all priests should at such times.'*

Bishop Walsh died at Maryknoll on July 29, 1981, at the age of ninety.

What is Easter?

'What is Easter?' they ask.

It belongs to the life and love;
it follows the healing and welcome;
it echoes the upturning of tables
and the peacemaking.

It summarises the blessing
on the mount and the breaking
of bread.

Love becomes the cross and its agony;
three days later an empty tomb;
broken bread and fish on the shore;
the mystery of the resurrection
and the turning from despair
to the joy of new beginnings,
new beginnings that we share today.

"What is Easter?" they ask.

It's about the collapse of a wall,
the building of a clinic,

It leads the way to the child
who now walks, the old woman
who can see again,

the bomb that didn't fall,
the clasp of hands, black and brown.

It spells the hope in our hearts,
the glory of reds and yellows in spring,
a gift exploding into a new day,
a gong sounding over and over in ecstasy.
the past crashing into the present,
the present opening doors to eternity.

Judy Dinnen