



Chronicle of a Missioner

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Fr. Francis Elsinger

Tribute to Father Francis Elsinger on his 50th Anniversary of Ordination

As Father Francis Elsinger was ordained as a Maryknoll missionary priest in June 1961, this year is his 50th anniversary of ordination. Being assigned to Hong Kong, he arrived here in September 1961. I am very pleased to write this tribute to him because he has given his whole priestly life to the Catholic Diocese of Hong Kong, and to the work of building up the church community here, and in China.

After a year of studying Cantonese, Father Elsinger's superiors assigned him to teach English in one of the Maryknoll high schools. On weekends, he also helped a parish. In those days, Hong Kong was developing into a manufacturing centre for clothing and electronic goods. Members of the poor refugee families arriving from mainland China took up work in the textile or electronic factories. As Father Elsinger saw the need for the Church to get involved in the lives of the workers, he himself became a worker-priest. He spent several years working side by side with the laborers in the factories. He was also a chaplain for several Young Christian Worker groups.

Later, Father Elsinger realized the need for Christians to develop and deepen their spiritual lives. Thus, combining his worker skills with his growing interest in spiritual formation, Father Elsinger moved to a farm on Lamma Island, where he both grew vegetables and prayed for many hours a day. Soon many people

joined him to spend a few days praying and working on Father Elsinger's farm. As more and more people realized the need to develop their spiritual lives, Father Elsinger came to be called upon to give longer retreats to them. Soon, giving retreats took up the major portion of his time. He even served for a number of years as a spiritual director for the seminarians at Holy Spirit Seminary. In fact, from time to time, Father Elsinger is still called upon to give a retreat to the seminarians.

As 1997 approached, and Hong Kong was about to return to the sovereignty of China, many of the citizens of Hong Kong became worried about the future of the city. Would Hong Kong society enjoy the same freedoms, like freedom of the press, freedom of speech and freedom of religion that it enjoyed before the changeover, they asked? So, in a gesture of unity with the people, Father Elsinger gave up his American passport, and became a citizen of Hong Kong. He also left his beloved Maryknoll Society, and became a priest of the Hong Kong Diocese. Thus, he felt that he would become one with the people of Hong Kong, and suffer the same consequences with them of any social changes which might take place after the changeover.

Neither Father Elsinger nor the people need have worried. China honored Deng Xiaoping's promises of one country-two systems, and no change for 50 years. In fact, ever the missionary because of his Maryknoll experience, Father Elsinger has now expanded his spiritual formation apostolate to include mainland China. And he spends much of his time these days in Mainland China giving retreats to groups of young priests and Sisters. The Church in China, as in other parts of the

world, sees the need for its priests and Sisters to develop the practice of prayer and a solid spiritual life. So, Father Elsinger is no doubt warmly welcomed to carry out this apostolate among the young priests and sisters of China.

With such a wealth of experience in many aspects of the apostolate during his years as a priest, we first of all congratulate Father Elsinger on his 50th anniversary. Secondly, we thank him for his many years of service to the Catholic Diocese of Hong Kong and to the Church in China. And lastly we keep him in our prayers, calling upon God to bless him, and to give him many more years of fruitful service in His vineyard.

**The Most Reverend John Tong Hon,
Bishop of Hong Kong**