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FROM THE PURSUIT OF CONVERTS TO THE RELIEF OF REFUGEES: THE MARYKNOLL SISTERS IN TWENTIETH- CENTURY HONG KONG

CINDY YIK-YI CHU¹

IN 1921 the Maryknoll Sisters of St. Dominic (formally known as the Foreign Mission Sisters of St. Dominic) arrived in Hong Kong, then a British colony. Originally intending to use the colony only as a staging post to China, the Sisters soon changed their plans and established a base that over the course of the next eight decades became an integral part of Hong Kong society. Through an examination of the Sisters' work in Hong Kong, this article explores the changing role of missionaries in the twentieth century, suggesting that where once the pursuit of "pagans" for baptism was the missionaries' sole objective, by the end of the century, the Sisters had developed elaborate educational, social, and welfare services and were concerned less with conversion than with general well-being. A second aspect of this article builds upon the revisionist approach presented in Tak-Wing Ngo's edited volume *Hong Kong's History*, which challenges the traditional belief that the colonial government ran smoothly and competently.² On the contrary,

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1. This article is a revised version of a paper presented at the International Conference on "Reinterpreting Twentieth Century China: New Perspectives" (7–9 June 2001), held at the Hong Kong Baptist University. The author would like to express her appreciation to Sisters Rose Duchesne Debrecht, Mary Lou Martin, and Teresa Leung, who read the conference paper and provided valuable comments and suggestions. She is grateful to Sister Martha Bourne and the staff of the Maryknoll Mission Archives for their generous support. Also, she would like to thank Father Louis Ha for permission to use material at the Hong Kong Catholic Diocesan Archives.
2. Tak-Wing Ngo, ed., *Hong Kong's History: State and Society Under Colonial Rule* (London, 1999). Works presenting the "traditional" view include Jan Morris, *Hong Kong: Epilogue to an Empire*, reprint ed. (London, 1997); Frank Welsh, *A History of Hong Kong* (London, 1993).

assuming many of the social responsibilities that the government was incapable of handling, communities such as that created by the Maryknollers became a “third force” in Hong Kong, helping to stabilize society by playing a mediator role between the “first force” of the government and the “second force” of the general population. Finally, this article, as the first historical analysis of the Maryknoll Sisters in Hong Kong, contributes to an understanding of the local Catholic Church’s history—a subject that has not been thoroughly analyzed by scholars, but one that is worthy of investigation given the Church’s multivalent interactions with the general public.³ Relying on material kept at the Maryknoll Mission Archives in Maryknoll, New York as well as previously untapped sources—including information from the South China Region Records, the regional correspondence, and personal narratives of World War II—this article seeks both to elucidate the significant role played by the Maryknoll missionaries in Hong Kong and to demonstrate how this community of women both transformed and was transformed by the foreign culture in which they chose to serve.⁴

In 1908, the United States ceased to be the canonical mission territory of Rome. With this independence, the American Catholic Church considered

3. Several graduate works focus on the Catholic Church. They are: Suk-Kay Ng Li, “Mission Strategy of the Roman Catholic Church of Hong Kong, 1949 to 1974” (M. Phil. thesis, University of Hong Kong, 1978); Louis Ha, “The Foundation of the Catholic Mission in Hong Kong, 1841–1894” (Ph.D. diss., University of Hong Kong, 1998); and John Kang Tan, “Church, State and Education during Decolonization: Catholic Education in Hong Kong during the Pre-1997 Political Transition” (Ph.D. diss., University of Hong Kong, 2000). So far, there is only one piece of work entirely on the Maryknoll Sisters in Hong Kong. It is an unpublished account kept at the Maryknoll Mission Archives. Sister Miriam Xavier Mug wrote “Maryknoll Sisters, Hong Kong-Macau Region: A History—1921–1998,” a factual and ministry-oriented survey of the mission. Father Peter Barry’s seminar paper, “Maryknoll in Hong Kong, 1918 to the Present,” delivered at the seminar on “Church History of Hong Kong” of the Centre of Asian Studies, University of Hong Kong, 22–24 September 1993, outlines the service of both the Maryknoll Fathers and the Maryknoll Sisters. These two references provide some guidance for a basic understanding of the topic. Another work is Bill Surface and Jim Hart’s *Freedom Bridge: Maryknoll in China* (New York, 1963). This is somewhat outdated, however, and deals mainly with the Maryknoll Fathers, only occasionally touching on the Maryknoll Sisters.
4. The archival records described in detail the work of the Sisters, their religious life, the livelihood of the people they served, and Hong Kong society. This article also makes use of the publications of the local Catholic Church and the material at the Hong Kong Catholic Diocesan Archives in Hong Kong.

extending its missionary activities to include overseas work, for while there had been individual examples of American priests and nuns serving abroad, there were no U.S. Catholic missionary groups devoted exclusively to this purpose.⁵ This changed in 1911 with the founding of the Maryknoll Fathers, a U.S. missionary society for priests. It changed yet again a year later when Mother Mary Joseph Rogers founded the Maryknoll Sisters as the first American community of nuns in the United States dedicated to sending its missionaries to faraway lands. Mother Mary Joseph Rogers was born in a suburb of Boston in 1882 to a family of Irish descent; after obtaining a degree from Smith College, Northampton, she was inspired by her work as an assistant editor on what would become the Maryknoll missionary magazine, *The Field Afar*.⁶ As young congregation, the Maryknoll Sisters' willingness to venture into new areas, to eradicate excessive formalities, and to reach out to society contributed to the organization's move toward a more practical vision of missionary work. Initially Americans, mainly of Irish and German descent, the Maryknoll Sisters grew to encompass Portuguese, Chinese, Canadian, and Filipino members, and were sent from New York all over the world. Obtaining their first degrees from colleges such as Maryknoll Teachers' College, after which some Sisters went on to receive master's and doctoral degrees, the Maryknollers who served in Hong Kong, as elsewhere, were professionals who worked as teachers, social workers, doctors, and medical personnel. As a community consisting solely of women, the Sisters had the freedom to move into the "open fields" of education and social service in Hong Kong, enabling them both to make use of their expertise and to realize their own potential. Indeed, as much as the Sisters contributed to their host societies, Maryknoll also offered American Catholic women an opportunity

5. Angelyn Dries, *The Missionary Movement in American Catholic History* (Maryknoll, N.Y., 1998), 43–57.
6. Maryknoll actually refers to two missionary bodies, commonly known as the Maryknoll Fathers & Brothers and the Maryknoll Sisters. The official title for the Maryknoll Fathers & Brothers was the Catholic Foreign Mission Society of America, which was established in 1911 by Fathers James A. Walsh and Thomas F. Price. According to Jean-Paul Wiest, Maryknoll was the name they gave to "the large farm on Sunset Hill in Ossining that they purchased to launch their missionary enterprise." See Jean-Paul Wiest, *Maryknoll in China: A History, 1918–1955* (Armonk, N.Y., 1988), 25–27.

to be professional persons and to be of service distinctly as women, long before such an emphasis emerged in the women's liberation movement.⁷

The first group of six Maryknollers arrived in Hong Kong on 3 November 1921. Led by Sister Mary Paul McKenna, the group included Sisters Mary Lawrence Foley, Mary Barbara Froelich, Mary Rose Leifels, Mary Monica Moffat, and Mary Imelda Sheridan.⁸ Originally, they considered Hong Kong a point of transit, as their intended destination was Yangjiang in Guangdong Province, China, *the* place to go, to work for the evangelization of Chinese women, and to experience a “wonderful adventure”—and where the Maryknoll Fathers had already started the mission.⁹ Within a year, however, and following the arrival of additional missionaries, the Sisters had decided to set up a permanent center in Hong Kong that would serve both as a cultural and linguistic training facility, and as a base from which to send news, mail, and goods to the missions in China.¹⁰ Thus in November 1922, when the Maryknoll Sisters set up their mission house in Yangjiang, the first of the many to appear in China, they also established a house in Hong Kong that became both a service center for the houses in the interior and a place for newcomers to study Chinese language, culture, and customs, before heading off for Guangdong.¹¹

In these early days the Sisters found that adapting to the foreign culture and establishing themselves successfully enough to achieve their missionary pursuits were not easy tasks. Indeed the Maryknoll Sisters “found themselves,

7. Sister Rose Duchesne Debrecht, interview by Sister Virginia Unsworth, 19 July 1981, Maryknoll China History Project, Maryknoll Mission Archives, Maryknoll, New York.
8. As the Mother General, Mother Mary Joseph Rogers stayed behind in the Motherhouse in New York.
9. Penny Lernoux, *Hearts on Fire: The Story of the Maryknoll Sisters* (Maryknoll, N.Y., 1994), 46; Sisters Mary Lou Martin and Agnes Chou, interview by author, Maryknoll Convent, Boundary Street, Kowloon, Hong Kong, 12 August 2000; Sister Miriam Xavier, “Maryknoll Sisters, Hong Kong-Macau Region,” 1.
10. Sister Mary Paul McKenna to Mother Mary Joseph Rogers, 15 January 1923, Folder 2, Box 1, Regional Correspondence: South China, Maryknoll Mission Archives.
11. Sister Mary Imelda Sheridan, “A History of the South China Region 1921–1958,” 1959, Folder 1, Box 1, South China Region: Hong Kong/Macau Region, 1921–, Maryknoll Mission Archives.

if not welcome, certainly not sought after” when they arrived in Hong Kong. In her 1964 book *Maryknoll's First Lady*, Sister Jeanne Marie mused over the possible reasons for the early missionaries' difficulties in creating meaningful connections within the local community, asking: “Was it because they were occidental, or because they were American, or because they were Roman Catholic, or because they were new and untried, or because they were all these things together?”¹² Certainly they were a small group of foreigners in society: “socially unimportant” to the British colonial government and possibly a new experience to the European Catholic communities, most of whom were Portuguese.¹³ In light of this minority status, it is perhaps no surprise that the Sisters “felt like strangers” in Hong Kong, as Sister Mary Paul remarked.¹⁴

Over the course of their work in Hong Kong, however, the Sisters continually revised and reconsidered their work, objectives, and principles, gradually expanding the scope of their activities and deepening their involvement in the community and thus becoming closer to those with whom they worked.¹⁵ In addition to the work carried out, perhaps most reflective of this shift was the changing wording of the Order's constitution. In 1925, for example, the Maryknoll Sisters' Constitutions asked the Sisters to be “sent to pagans” in “heathen lands” for “personal sanctification” and for the conversion of others to Christianity.¹⁶ These objectives changed, however, when Vatican Council II (1962–1965), in a landmark decision in Roman Catholic history, chose to emphasize service for the poor, thereby not only validating the Sisters' already existing efforts to work closely with ordinary people, but

12. Sister Jeanne Marie, *Maryknoll's First Lady* (New York, 1964), 143–44.

13. Lernoux, *Hearts on Fire*, 46.

14. *Ibid.*, 47.

15. Sisters Mary Lou Martin and Agnes Chou, interview by author, Maryknoll Convent, Boundary Street, Kowloon, Hong Kong, 12 August 2000.

16. *Tentative Constitutions of the Foreign Mission Sisters of St. Dominic (Third Order), Congregation of the Immaculate Conception, at Maryknoll, Ossining, New York, U.S.A.* (drafted in 1917; First Constitutions in use after General Chapter of 1925), 1; Constitutions, Maryknoll Mission Archives; Lernoux, *Hearts on Fire*, 143.

also enabling them to further expand upon their work in the community.¹⁷ More importantly, from seeing conversion as the most important goal of missionary work, the Maryknoll Sisters came to believe that God was already present in the foreign places before the Christian missionaries arrived. Thenceforth, the Sisters placed greater emphasis on both improving the livelihood of the people and supporting individuals to better themselves. Reflecting these changes, the 1970 constitution urged them to identify “with the poor in the Gospel sense,” and to “develop human community through mutual sharing and deeper understanding of the ultimate meaning of life.”¹⁸ The 1978 constitution went even further by defining “Mission as a total way of life,” which focused on “Solidarity with the Poor,” “Inculturation,” “Mutual Evangelization,” “Christian Unity,” and “Witness of Christian Community.” In the 1990 constitution, the Sisters described their mission as “Cross Cultural” and put forth the idea of “Wholistic Evangelization,” meaning “Liberation, Inculturation, & Dialogue, Human Development and Reverence for Creation.”¹⁹ In short, over the course of seven decades’ work, the Maryknoll mission evolved to embrace a much broader definition of “mission” and “evangelization” than in the past. By the 1990s, missionaries’ work meant “showing Christ’s compassion to others,” not necessarily converting people to Christianity.²⁰ Likewise, evangelization meant the development of the whole person, and since the Sisters believed they also saw Christ in the people they served, this was a mutual experience. Thus the Sisters’ interpretation of relations between the foreign mission and the local com-

17. Lernoux, *Hearts on Fire*, 139–44. The Sisters also gradually changed to wearing ordinary clothes and could choose to return to their own baptismal names instead of using given religious names.

18. Sister Camilla Kennedy, “(Chart of the) Historical Perspective of the Nature and Scope of the Maryknoll Sisters,” June 1992; Constitutions, Maryknoll Mission Archives; Maryknoll Sisters, *Searching and Sharing: Mission Perspectives* (Maryknoll, N.Y., 1970), 10–11; Lernoux, *Hearts on Fire*, 143.

19. Sister Camilla, “Historical Perspective.”

20. Sisters Mary Lou Martin and Agnes Chou, interview by author, Maryknoll Convent, Boundary Street, Kowloon, Hong Kong, 12 August 2000.

munity underwent significant changes over the years—changes that prompted them to venture into many kinds of work, including relief, welfare, reform, education, and civil awareness.

Upon first arriving in Hong Kong, however, the Sisters' focus was upon conversion; although since, like all missionaries, they had to be self-supporting, they also developed a mail-order business that relied on the labor of local women to produce hand-embroidered silk vestments to be sold to priests in the United States. A successful enterprise, led by Teresa Yeung, the first Hong Kong Chinese woman to enter the Maryknoll Sisters, the industrial department also provided an opportunity both for the Sisters to learn about Chinese culture and to achieve the ultimate objective of the new mission—to convert Chinese women to Christianity.²¹ Indeed, in accordance with this mission, the industrial department's daily schedule included a variety of religious activities such as morning prayers, spiritual reading, explaining the gospel, rosary, and litany, and on a seasonal basis such celebrations as Easter and Christmas. The success of these endeavors may be measured by the report of the embroidery section that, referring to the Chinese workers, stated "all were pagans but many were converted."²²

With the profits of the industrial department, and responding to the desire of the Catholic Portuguese population for an English-language education for their children, the Sisters opened a coeducational kindergarten school in 1925. It too was profitable; by 1929 it was known as Maryknoll Convent School (MCS) and offered classes from kindergarten through Class 6. In 1937, in response to a request from the Vicar General to serve the growing Catholic population in Kowloon Peninsula, the school opened in new

21. She took the name Sister Maria Teresa. As for the mail-order business, it provided a reliable source of income and continued into the 1960s. Sister Miriam Xavier, "Maryknoll Sisters, Hong Kong-Macau Region," 16–17; Lernoux, *Hearts on Fire*, 48; Sister Mary Francis Louise, *Maryknoll Sisters: A Pictorial History* (New York, 1962), 26.

22. Sister Mary Ligouri Quinlan, "Embroidery and Vestments and Church Linens, Hong Kong, Kowloon Tong, Maryknoll," n.d., Folder 1, Box 2, South China Region: Hong Kong/Macau Region, 1921–, Maryknoll Mission Archives.

premises in Kowloon Tong.²³ In 1927 the Sisters opened a second school, Holy Spirit, that by accepting Chinese children who wanted to be taught in Chinese and English distinguished itself from MCS, “which was open to any nationality, where all subjects were taught in English.”²⁴ Three years later, Holy Spirit School moved to an old three-story building on Caine Road, and Sister Mary Paul subsequently bought the property that the school had temporarily leased.²⁵ Staffed by young, energetic, and well-educated nuns, both MCS and Holy Spirit were among the first schools to provide a respectable woman’s education. Comprised of individuals with post-high school and/or college qualifications, many of the staff had years of teaching experience prior to arriving in Hong Kong and were qualified to teach a wide range of subjects, including music, history, English, science, art, mathematics, and geography.²⁶ When necessary, Sister Mary Paul wrote to the Motherhouse in New York State, making specific requests for additional subject teachers as needed. The schools grew rapidly and, thanks to their highly qualified staff, garnered a reputation for providing an excellent education. Indeed, offering classes from kindergarten to matriculation, MCS soon received grant-in-aid status and government subsidies, indicative of the government’s recognition of the school’s high standards.²⁷ Further reflective of the Sisters’ achievements, the school’s first graduate, a woman, was accepted at the University of Hong

23. Sister Mary Lawrence Foley to Sister Mary Paul, 17 October 1929, Folder 5, Box 1, Regional Correspondence: South China, Maryknoll Mission Archives; Sister Mary Paul to Mother Mary Joseph, 9 May 1923, Folder 2, Box 1, Regional Correspondence: South China, Maryknoll Mission Archives; “No. 47: The Blessing of St. Teresa’s Church (1932),” in *Historical Documents of the Hong Kong Catholic Church*, ed. Father Sergio Ticozzi (Hong Kong, 1997), 151–53; Sister Mary Paul to Mother Mary Joseph, 7 January 1931, Folder 6, Box 1, Regional Correspondence: South China, Maryknoll Mission Archives.
24. Sister Mary Imelda, “A History of the South China Region 1921–1958,” 7.
25. Sister Mary Paul to Mother Mary Joseph, 17 April 1931, Folder 6, Box 1, Regional Correspondence: South China, Maryknoll Mission Archives.
26. Untitled list of qualifications and experience of the Maryknoll Sisters teaching at Maryknoll Convent School and Holy Spirit School, n.d. [1939], Folder 4, Box 2, Regional Correspondence: South China, Maryknoll Mission Archives.
27. The first annual grant came in 1937 and the amount was HK\$10,000, equivalent to HK\$2 or more per student per month. Sister Mary Paul to Mother Mary Joseph, 22 March 1934, and attached newspaper clipping, Folder 1, Box 2, Regional Correspondence: South China, Maryknoll Mission Archives.

Kong, which, as the only university in the colony, had an extremely competitive entrance examination.²⁸

The progress that the Maryknollers had made within the Chinese community, however, was stalled when the Sino-Japanese War broke out in Northeast China in July 1937, spreading the fear that the war would soon enter the British colony. Thus when Mother Mary Joseph Rogers arrived on a temporary visit in 1940, Hong Kong was in the midst of preparations for war that included “blackouts and mock battles.”²⁹ On the convent roof, for example, the Sisters watched the simulated attack: “invading planes, sweeping searchlights, and the *phoom-phoom-phoom* of anti-aircraft fire.”³⁰ At the same time, refugees flooded into the colony from China. Carrying babies on their backs, the refugees looked everywhere for accommodation and work. Tired and exhausted, some slept on the street while others lined up outside the convent gate eagerly waiting for food.³¹ With the possibility of invasion by the Japanese imminent, Mother Mary Joseph had to make the difficult decision of whether or not the Sisters should continue their work in Asia.³² It was not an easy decision, for while the American government urged its people to leave, the Roman Catholic Church requested pastors to stay in their mission areas unless the situation became extremely critical. Although the Sisters were not pastors, Mother Mary Joseph, receptive to the growing needs of the community, decided to follow the policy of the Church. In December 1941, however, Hong Kong fell to the Japanese, and the majority of the Maryknoll Sisters, as enemy nationals, were subsequently interned, though all were eventually repatriated.³³

28. *Maryknoll Convent School 1925–2000* (Hong Kong, 2000), 30–32, 45; Sister Miriam Xavier, “Maryknoll Sisters, Hong Kong-Macau Region,” 17; Wiest, *Maryknoll in China*, 61.

29. Lernoux, *Hearts on Fire*, 87.

30. Sister Jeanne Marie, *Maryknoll’s First Lady*, 235.

31. Lernoux, *Hearts on Fire*, 87; Sister Jeanne Marie, *Maryknoll’s First Lady*, 235–36.

32. Sister Jeanne Marie, *Maryknoll’s First Lady*, 240–41.

33. There were twenty-eight Maryknoll Sisters in Hong Kong when it fell to the Japanese on Christmas Day 1941, twenty-three Sisters—twenty-two Americans and one Canadian—were subsequently interned; the other five Sisters escaped internment because they were Asians or Third Nationals (one Chinese, one Filipino, and three Portuguese). Through repatriation for some and release for others, all twenty-eight Sisters eventually left Hong Kong. Bishop

In 1945, though, eager to resume their work, they returned to Hong Kong. Two Sisters arrived in September, three in October, and two more in November, by which time the British Military Authorities had taken the MCS building (still serving its wartime function as a hospital for Japanese soldiers) and later returned a part of it to the Sisters. As a result, the Sisters were able to reopen MCS in January 1946.³⁴ Holy Spirit School reopened in 1948 and in the process changed its name to Maryknoll School with grant-in-aid status. In addition to their formal teaching duties, the Sisters also took care of the Boys and Girls Clubs for school-age children who were unable to receive a formal education.³⁵

Despite their return to their prewar buildings, however, the Maryknoll Sisters did not return exclusively to a prewar role, a change attributable to the Communist victory in mainland China of 1949.³⁶ Creating an upsurge in population of perhaps two million, the flood of refugees from China both marked the early 1950s in Hong Kong as the beginning of the “years of the refugees,” and intensified the Sisters’ role as a third force in Hong Kong society. “Too big for the government to solve alone,” there was “a great need for religious groups to share the responsibility” of handling the refugee problem.³⁷ Indeed, faced with overwhelming demands, the government was

Henry Valtorta (the Vicar Apostolic of Hong Kong) to the director of medical services, Imperial Japanese Forces, Kowloon, 17 February 1942, Folder 1, Box 43—Religious Sisters Congregation: Maryknoll Sisters, Section V: Mission Personnel, Hong Kong Catholic Diocesan Archives, Hong Kong.

34. Nevertheless, the Sisters had to contend with six hundred Japanese soldiers in the building until May 1946. Sister Mary Francis Louise, *Maryknoll Sisters*, 113; *Maryknoll Convent School 1925–2000*, 37.
35. Sister Miriam Xavier, “Maryknoll Sisters, Hong Kong-Macau Region,” 26; *Maryknoll Convent School 1925–2000*, 39.
36. The Communists took over Yangjiang, Luoding, and Jiaying in Guangdong Province, and Wuzhou and Guilin in Guangxi Province, where the missions were situated. In December 1950, the Communists declared martial law in Wuzhou and occupied the Maryknoll Sisters’ convent and school. From 1950 to 1952, the Maryknoll Sisters in China were under confinement, some were jailed, and eventually all left. In early 1953, there were forty-three Sisters in Hong Kong with four mission houses. Sister Mary Francis Louise, *Maryknoll Sisters*, 138–42; Personnel List, 1 April 1953, Folder 4, Box 2, Lists—Sisters Personnel, Maryknoll Mission Archives.
37. Report on the Catholic Social Welfare Center in King’s Park, 12 July 1953, Folder 1, Box 8, South China Region: Hong Kong / Macau Region, 1921–, Maryknoll Mission Archives.

unprepared for the tremendous tasks ahead and came to rely on the Sisters, who acted as a third force, shouldering some of the government's burden by initiating their own social services. The influx of refugees placed enormous pressure on the colony, not least in the area of housing. Thus, as described by the Sisters, "in order to make some order out of what would eventually have been chaos," the government assigned certain areas on the hillside "in which people set up their matchbox-like wooden huts."³⁸ Made of wooden boards and tin plates, the hillside squatter huts in these resettlement areas were extremely susceptible to fire. Indeed, it was as a result of a devastating fire in Tung Tau Tsuen in 1951 that left seventeen thousand people homeless, that the Sisters' services to the refugee community, and indeed their role as a third force, really took off. This was already the second fire in the area that year, and the plight of the refugees made the Sisters realize the necessity of "organized relief work." The needs were "all-encompassing": food, clothing, shelter, medical facilities, and education.³⁹ The situation posed "a tremendous challenge" to the Sisters, who took every effort to provide the newcomers with practical and spiritual support.⁴⁰ In these relief efforts the Sisters frequently acted as a mediator between the government and the people, for while they offered assistance of their own, they also worked to secure assistance from government agencies. On the Kowloon side, the Sisters served in King's Park, Tung Tau Tsuen, and Kowloon Tsai, as well as in another refugee community, Chai Wan, established on Hong Kong Island. As Mary Imelda, then Regional Superior of the Sisters, wrote to the local Catholic Church in early 1952, the Maryknollers planned "to develop in King's Park first and later on . . . to have Primary Schools and Welfare Centres in Chai Wan and Tung Tau Villages."⁴¹ In their relief efforts and long-term goals, the Sisters

38. "A Brief History of the Maryknoll Sisters in Chai Waan, Hong Kong (Work Begun, 1952)," 1958, Folder 4, Box 8, South China Region: Hong Kong / Macau Region, 1921–, Maryknoll Mission Archives.

39. Father Barry, "Maryknoll in Hong Kong, 1918 to the Present," 9–10.

40. Sister Miriam Xavier, "Maryknoll Sisters, Hong Kong-Macau Region," 27.

41. Sister Mary Imelda to Reverend Anthony Riganti, Catholic Mission, Hong Kong, 15 March 1952, Folder 2, Box 43—Religious Sisters Congregation: Maryknoll Sisters, Section V: Mission Personnel, Hong Kong Catholic Diocesan Archives, Hong Kong.

were surely pioneers, a position emphasized by their moving with the refugees to these newly designated areas. The breadth and depth of the services offered by the Sisters underscored the lack of government-sponsored initiatives, which, in turn, forced the government to further consider its policies for the refugees.

King's Park, "mostly a grave yard with a few wooden shacks on one spot; no roads, no water, except from a few wells; all hills and just waste land,"⁴² was typical of the third-force type of work with which the Sisters were involved during the 1950s and 1960s. This work included relief, housing, social services, employment, education, evangelization, and medical and nursery care. As part of their "organized refugee work," and indicative of their role as a mediating force, Sister Mary Imelda decided to build stone cottages for the fire victims of Tung Tau Tsuen, and with the support of the local Catholic Church obtained government approval for a housing project in King's Park and the Homantin Villages. The government showed its support for the proposal—the first free public housing offered to refugees—by allocating an area of about one square mile for the resettlement of the homeless.⁴³ To help with the construction of the stone cottages, Sister Mary Imelda initiated a public fund-raising campaign, obtaining donations of over HK\$150,000.⁴⁴ Officially registered as the "Maryknoll Sisters' Scheme Cottages," the new stone housing offered a better chance of safety in the event of fire.⁴⁵ Although the government had granted the land for the Center, it did not offer any additional financial support, leaving the Sisters to rely on contributions from the Catholic Church, their Motherhouse in New York, and the charitable donations of American Catholics, the latter made available through the National Catholic Welfare Conference (NCWC) founded by the bishops in the United States and amounting to a monthly check of

42. Sister Moira Riehl, "History of King's Park," 3 May 1958, Folder 1, Box 8, South China Region: Hong Kong / Macau Region, 1921–, Maryknoll Mission Archives.

43. "Refugee Work," 1952, Folder 3, Box 8, South China Region: Hong Kong / Macau Region, 1921–, Maryknoll Mission Archives.

44. Report on the Catholic Social Welfare Center in King's Park.

45. Sister Moira, "History of King's Park."

HK\$500 for relief and welfare.⁴⁶ In the settlement area, a stone chapel served as both a Mass center and a catechetical center and was also the initial location of Maryknoll's Social Welfare Center, which operated "independently of, but in conjunction with, the Government Social Welfare Office." With its focus upon providing immediate relief to the community rather than conversion, the Center was a pioneer project of the Maryknoll Sisters. Reflecting these shifting priorities, the Sisters' time was now divided "about 50–50 between relief of physical sufferings and religion."⁴⁷ In 1955, the Center moved to a new building on Nairn Road that served both as a home for the convent and as a place for catechetical instruction and social welfare work. In addition to existing contributions, the Sisters' relief efforts were aided by the supply of flour and oil by the U.S.-based Catholic Relief Services.⁴⁸ By 1957 the Center registered 7,227 families in receipt of relief goods, which included milk, rice, clothing, and to families with infants under one year of age, the "Well Baby Project" distributing "condensed milk, rice flour, vitamins and multi-purpose food."⁴⁹ Table 1, compiled by the Sisters, lists the relief supplies for one year (1957). In addition to making clear the scale of the Sisters' efforts, the chart illustrates the dramatic shift in focus as the vision of missionary work broadened to include caring for the health and well-being of the people.

In addition to providing direct relief to the local community, the Center provided medical services and offered opportunities for education and employ-

46. Report on the Catholic Social Welfare Center in King's Park. The Catholic Church provided US\$5,000 towards the Center's cost, leaving the Motherhouse and charity to find the remaining US\$3,000.

47. Report on the Catholic Social Welfare Center in King's Park.

48. Upon the suggestion of Sister Moira Riehl, many people submitted their allocations to the "noodle factories" and received noodles in return, a measure designed to prevent the sale of supplies in the black market. According to Sister Miriam Xavier, "Nairn Road was a short dirt road that petered out a bit beyond the church." The King's Park area later underwent redevelopment and Nairn Road was renamed Princess Margaret Road. Sister Miriam Xavier, "Maryknoll Sisters, Hong Kong-Macau Region," 11–12.

49. "Report on Current Activities," 5 June 1959, Folder 1, Box 8, South China Region: Hong Kong / Macau Region, 1921–, Maryknoll Mission Archives.

Table 1. Relief Work of the Maryknoll Sisters' Social Welfare Center in King's Park, Kowloon (1957)⁵⁰

<i>Rice</i>	Each family received three distributions of rice: one of 20 lbs and two of 10 lbs. In addition, almost 6,000 families received a further 10 lbs. Total amount distributed: approximately 350,000 lbs.
<i>Flour</i>	Five distributions of 10 lbs each to every family, plus a further 10 lbs to 1,150 families. In addition, 40,000 lbs were converted into noodles, each family receiving over 2 lbs. 9,300 lbs were converted into 16,000 rolls, distributed over 8 days last September to typhoon victims and 15,000 rolls and 150 sponge cakes given to nursery and school children over a period of 15 days.
<i>Beans</i>	Two distributions of approx. 5 lbs to each family.
<i>Cornmeal</i>	Five distributions of over 5 lbs to each family.
<i>Vegetable oil</i>	A small quantity of vegetable oil was distributed to 60 families (1 gallon each).
<i>Powdered milk</i>	Not distributed as relief goods, but given mainly to large families with young children who received a fairly regular supply. Total for the year: 5,762 tins.
<i>Clothing</i>	110 bales of clothing were sorted and distributed to over 1,700 families, in addition to 200 bundles of babies' clothing and 117 blankets.
<i>Medical attention</i>	A total of 20,594 patients were treated at the Center through the I.C.A. (International Cooperation Administration) or the Mobile Clinic and provided with medicines, vitamins, etc.
<i>Home visits</i>	2,939 home visits were made by the staff during the year.

50. Source: "Maryknoll / Welfare Center, King's Park, Financial Report for the Year ended 31st December, 1957," n.d. [1957], Folder 1, Box 8, South China Region: Hong Kong / Macau Region, 1921-, Maryknoll Mission Archives.

ment, the latter by hiring local women for embroidery and handicraft work. Acting as mediators, and perhaps helping to quell any possible discontent, the Sisters also located jobs for the unemployed through the Resettlement Office and obtained peddlers' licenses for people through government offices. Recognizing the importance of education as a long-term tool in helping the poor, and building on their earlier work, the Sisters also ran Lok Tak School, a vernacular primary school, from 1953 to 1972. Critical to the success of Lok Tak, the first of its kind in a resettlement area, was its affordability for poor parents, made possible by its receipt of government subsidies.⁵¹ In addition to education the Sisters provided medical care, first via a mobile clinic, later in rented quarters, and by 1958, in a clinic housed on the ground floor of a newly constructed building that also housed a day nursery on the first and second floors. The clinic served the local residents for quite some time until a hospital opened nearby in 1972. A decade after they began their work in King's Park, the Sisters recorded some of their statistics, which again make plain the shift that was occurring in the Sisters' priorities (see Table 2).

The Sisters' work in King's Park was repeated elsewhere. In 1950, Tung Tau Tsuen had a population of seventy-eight thousand people living in squatter huts on the hillside. "With its dark, dirty alleys, drug and gambling dens," the area was "a hideout for criminals and vice."⁵² Called "the cradle of Maryknoll Sisters' effort in refugee relief work," Tung Tau Tsuen was also the site of continuing efforts at conversion.⁵³ In 1952, with a small rented shop as a base, two Sisters started to teach and work with the people. A year later, they rented a larger store and coped with six different dialects spoken by the local residents by teaching in Cantonese and Hakka on alternate days of the week. The Sisters moved into their new convent in Tung Tau Tsuen in 1954, and together with two other lay catechists, (and a Chinese woman for home visits) offered doctrinal instruction and prepared the catechumens for baptism.

51. Report on the Catholic Social Welfare Center in King's Park.

52. Sister Miriam Xavier, "Maryknoll Sisters, Hong Kong-Macau Region," 9.

53. "Maryknoll Sisters and Refugee Work in Kowloon and Hong Kong," 19 September 1954, (Tung Tau Tsuen) Folder 3, Box 8, South China Region: Hong Kong / Macau Region, 1921-, Maryknoll Mission Archives.

Table 2. Types of Work in the Maryknoll Sisters' Social Welfare Center, King's Park, Kowloon (1963)⁵⁴

Types of Work in the House	1963 Statistics
<i>Education</i>	
Preschool	91 students
Elementary	780 students
Industrial arts	50 women
Domestic science	13 women
English classes	131 students
Music	16 boys
<i>Catechetical</i>	
Catechumenate classes	99 children; 98 adults; 27 baptisms
Classes for already baptized	778 children; 93 adults
Training catechists	5 trainees
<i>Medical</i>	
Clinic	17,422 visits
Child care	1,825 visits
Public health services reached	903 persons
<i>Social Services</i>	
Counseling	2,809 visits
Home visits	1,380 visits
Casework	279 families; 526 individuals
Self-help	55 families
Material relief according to individual planning	215 families
Mass distribution	5,333 families

54. Source: Report on Types of Work, n.d. [1963], Folder 1, Box 8, South China Region: Hong Kong / Macau Region, 1921–, Maryknoll Mission Archives.



Sister Agnes Cazale in Tung Tau Tsuen c. 1955. (Source: Maryknoll Mission Archives)

By September 1954, after two years of work in Tung Tau Tsuen, the Sisters recorded a total number of 1,000 men, women, and children baptized.⁵⁵

On the eastern side of Hong Kong Island, Chai Wan was another refugee community that received the benefits of the third-force efforts of the Maryknoll Sisters. As elsewhere, the Sisters moved into the area with the refugees and immediately began their ministry. In 1952 the Government Urban Council raised the issue of children's education with the Sisters and through the Resettlement Office designated a lot on the hillside for the construction of a Maryknoll primary school. The result was the Meng Tak School in Chai Wan, a vernacular school that adopted the syllabus of the Education Department for its Chinese and English subjects.⁵⁶ The government paid for half of

55. "Maryknoll Sisters and Refugee Work in Kowloon and Hong Kong," 19 September 1954 (Tung Tau Tsuen).

56. "A Brief History of the Maryknoll Sisters in Chai Waan, Hong Kong (Work Begun, 1952)."

the HK\$144,000 construction and equipment costs leaving the Sisters to secure donations for the remaining outstanding sum, as well as the total cost of the convent and women's center.⁵⁷ By 1954, the school's enrollment was 649 with 2 girls for every 3 boys, expanding to 1,050 in 1957.⁵⁸

Along with education, the Sisters were also involved in catechetical work, benefiting from the fluency in Cantonese of missionaries such as Sister Mary Diggins and Sister Rose Bernadette Gallagher. Working with the Maryknoll Fathers, the Sisters visited homes, arranged movie shows, and planned evening classes. Partly as a result of these efforts, 182 women and children were baptized from September 1952 to September 1954.⁵⁹ At the same time, the Sisters organized an annual one-day retreat as an opportunity for women to be away from family work and to reflect on their own thoughts. Sixty-nine women attended in 1954, growing to 130 in 1957.⁶⁰ Even as they continued their work of conversion, however, the Sisters, with the aid of the NCWC, tried to ease the "terrible poverty of the people" by distributing relief items such as "butter, rice, milk-powder, oil, cornmeal, clothing, shoes, beans, flour, etc."⁶¹ In response to their request for donations from the United States, the Motherhouse shipped "sample medicines, special baby milk powder, baby vitamins, clothing" for the newborn.⁶² American drug companies also sent in shipments of vitamins, which were distributed to pregnant women, nursing mothers, and small children. Without these supplies, many would have suffered from acute malnutrition, if not died of starvation. Supplementing this direct relief, the Sisters also provided a number of services to the community such as writing letters for everything from blood transfusions to housing, hospital fees, and jobs.

57. "Maryknoll Sisters' Report of Maryknoll Primary School, Chai Wan," enclosed in the letter from Sister Mary Imelda to Mother Mary Columba Tarpey, 5 November 1953, Folder 5, Box 4, Regional Correspondence: South China, Maryknoll Mission Archives.

58. "A Brief History of the Maryknoll Sisters in Chai Waan, Hong Kong (Work Begun, 1952)."

59. "Maryknoll Sisters and Refugee Work in Kowloon and Hong Kong," 19 September 1954 (Chai Wan).

60. "A Brief History of the Maryknoll Sisters in Chai Waan, Hong Kong (Work Begun, 1952)."

61. *Ibid.*

62. *Ibid.*

In addition to their work with refugees, Maryknoll also played a third-force role in the working-class communities of Kwun Tong and Wong Tai Sin. Starting in the early 1960s, the Sisters were involved in clinics, nurseries, and catechetical work, and as early as 1960, opened two vernacular schools in the Kwun Tong resettlement estate. As elsewhere, the Sisters lived and worked with the ordinary people, initially living in a building used as dormitory for factory workers, and only later acquiring their own apartment.⁶³ In 1961, Maryknoll had seventy-three Sisters and seven houses in Hong Kong.⁶⁴ It is clear from their work that Maryknoll was indeed a church for the poor, with the Sisters living by the saying “You make your path by walking it.”⁶⁵ In fact, by the 1960s, the Sisters had come to look upon the poor as heralds who pointed to the light of their lives. As missionaries, the Sisters went outside their own environment into a foreign culture, worked with the working class, the deprived, and the disabled, and in the process developed their vision of social service. By assuming responsibilities normally reserved for government agencies, they became ever more of a third force in Hong Kong society.

Both the Sisters’ vision and their role as a third force grew more professional in the 1960s with the arrival of Sister Mary Heath at the Social Welfare Center at King’s Park. A professionally-trained social worker, Sister Mary supervised the Center, which provided fieldwork placement for the social work students of local colleges. From 1963 to 1965, she was also supervisor of the Caritas Social Service training courses, and, in the following two years, took charge of the Caritas Casework Service. Caritas–Hong Kong, the diocesan Catholic charities’ organization, began in 1957 and was a member of “Caritas Internationalis,” the International Conference of Catholic Charities.⁶⁶ Aiming “to plan and manage all social welfare institutions of the

63. Sister Miriam Xavier, “Maryknoll Sisters, Hong Kong-Macau Region,” 10–11.

64. Personnel, 1 November 1961, Folder 1, Box 3, Lists—Sisters Personnel, Maryknoll Mission Archives.

65. Lernoux, *Hearts on Fire*, xii.

66. “No. 54 Coordinating the Catholic Social Services (1957),” in *Historical Documents of the Hong Kong Catholic Church*, 175.

Catholic Bishop of Hong Kong,” Caritas established social centers, a hospital, schools, and feeding centers. Sister Mary’s work at Caritas and indeed her services on behalf of Maryknoll represented her effort to develop professional social work in Hong Kong through the centralized effort of the Diocese.⁶⁷ Recognized for her experience, Sister Mary occasionally spoke at the Hong Kong Council of Social Services and the Catholic Welfare Conference, and in 1971 entered Diocesan Social Services. Marking a shift within the interests of the Maryknoll Sisters, and reiterating the Order’s movement away from conversion as the perceived objective of missionary work, Sister Mary’s efforts were amplified by the work of others such as Sister Susan Gubbins, who worked with the Caritas Youth Center; Sister Jane Umberg, who concentrated on community development; Sister Mary Ellen Mertens, who joined the Young Christian Workers Movement in 1962; and in the late 1960s, Sister Moira Riehl, who established the Blind Study Center in the basement of the Region Center House on Flint Road.⁶⁸

In 1961, the Sisters further developed their role as a third force in Hong Kong society by opening a hospital, staffed in large part by Maryknoll Sisters.⁶⁹ Aimed at low-income families, Our Lady of Maryknoll Hospital in Wong Tai Sin was intended as a “pioneer” of sorts designed “to broaden the scope of comprehensive health care in the hospital and community.”⁷⁰ In line with this wider vision, Sister Dominic Marie Turner organized the Medical Social Work Department in 1962; in 1964 Sister Barbara Mersinger organized Our Lady of Maryknoll Medical and Welfare Association, which raised

67. “Maryknoll Sisters Cope with the Population Explosions in Hong Kong,” enclosed in the letter from Sister Anne Clements (Mary Famula) to Mother Mary Coleman, n.d. [1966], Folder 6, Box 2, South China Region: Hong Kong / Macau Region, 1921–; “Street Hawker: Maryknoll Sisters Social Service in Hong Kong 1960–1964,” n.d. [1964], Box 2A, South China Region: Hong Kong / Macau Region, 1921–, Maryknoll Mission Archives.

68. Sister Miriam Xavier, “Maryknoll Sisters, Hong Kong-Macau Region,” 27–28. Sister Moira Riehl received the MBE (Member of the British Empire) award in recognition of her contribution to the blind in 1981.

69. Father Barry, “Maryknoll in Hong Kong, 1918 to the Present,” 13; Sister Miriam Xavier, “Maryknoll Sisters, Hong Kong-Macau Region,” 23–24.

70. Sister Miriam Xavier, “Maryknoll Sisters, Hong Kong-Macau Region,” 24.

funds for the Hospital and the Sisters' welfare projects; in 1970 Sisters Mary Louise Higa and Marilyn Norris started the Community Nursing Program to provide ongoing care for discharged patients; and in 1971 the Sisters set up the School of Nursing for Enrolled Nurses. In addition to this outreach work, and the services of the hospital itself, the Sisters found other ways of promoting health consciousness in society. In 1969, for example, Sister Therese Howard was the first Catholic to sit on the Medical Committee of the Hong Kong Council of Christian Service, and further pressing her influence, also took part in the Hong Kong Catholic Marriage Advisory Council and the programs of Birthright and Natural Family Planning.⁷¹ Equally indicative of the Order's broader understanding of the Maryknoll mission was the work carried out by some Sisters on behalf of specific disadvantaged sectors of society. Sister Arlene Trant, for instance, taught at the School for the Deaf, Sister Alice Wengrezyk joined the International Assistance in Development program for the mentally retarded, and in the 1980s Sister Paulette Yeung took part in the planning of Harmony House, a refuge for abused women. In the 1990s, Sister Helene O'Sullivan reached out to the prostitutes in Mongkok district; Sister Kathleen Hughes fought for the interests of the low-income population by working with the Association for the Promotion of Public Justice; Sisters Ruth Evans and Miedal Stone were in charge of an elderly home; and, aware of the difficulties of the Vietnamese refugees in Hong Kong, Sister Martha Bourne visited their detention centers and provided necessary services.⁷²

In addition to providing direct relief of the kind outlined above, the Maryknoll Sisters were also involved in long-term projects to cultivate social awareness and sensitivity. In 1978, for example, Sister Helene started the Center for the Progress of Peoples, which focused on social issues, human rights, and peace concerns in Asia.⁷³ Pursuing a different interest, but still

71. *Ibid.*, 24–26.

72. *Ibid.*, 28–32.

73. *Ibid.*, 29–30. Gradually, the Center developed its hotline and the publication *Asia Link*. In 1990, it was known as the Asian Center for the Progress of Peoples.

reflective both of the Sisters' role as a third force in society, and of their recognized importance, in 1986 Sister Mary Lou Martin served as one of the three executive directors of the Catholic Institute for Religion and Society (CIRS), set up by the Hong Kong Diocese "to assist Catholics and other interested parties to prepare—attitudinally, pastorally, and culturally—for the political turnover of Hong Kong to China in 1997."⁷⁴

Even as they initiated their work in the community, the Sisters continued their endeavors in education, principally by developing and expanding their two prestigious girls' schools—MCS on Boundary Street and Maryknoll Sisters School (MSS) on Blue Pool Road (formerly Holy Spirit School / Maryknoll School on Caine Road)—while continuing with their vernacular schools in the King's Park area, Kwun Tong, and Chai Wan.⁷⁵ The Sisters' teaching philosophy was quite straightforward. As Sister Miriam Xavier Mug explained: "Their emphasis on the full development of their students . . . ran through their work. The students were encouraged to accept responsibility, to make thoughtful choices, and to be involved in society."⁷⁶ These goals were realized by a succession of principals: Sister Ann Mary Farrell, principal of MCS's Secondary Section until 1958, started the Student Council and worked hard to ensure that the school maintained the high moral and academic standards expected by the community.⁷⁷ When the Secondary Section moved to the new building on Ho Tung Road, Sister Mary de Ricci Cain became principal and encouraged students to take part in Christian services and extracurricular activities such as the Young Christian Student Movement. From 1965 to 1972, Sister Rose Duchesne Debrecht was instrumental in the creation of the Students' Association, while from 1972 to 1986, Sister Jeanne Houlihan,

74. *Ibid.*, 35. By the terms of a nineteenth century treaty, Hong Kong was due to be handed over by the British to Chinese control in 1997.

75. Holy Spirit School opened at 41 Robinson Road in 1927, and moved to 140 Caine Road in 1930. It was reopened under the name of Maryknoll School, with grant-in-aid status, on Caine Road in 1948. It was renamed Maryknoll Sisters School and moved to 123 Blue Pool Road in 1957. The Columban Sisters took over the Secondary Section in 1979, and the Primary Section in 1980. It was renamed Marymount Secondary School in 1983.

76. Sister Miriam Xavier, "Maryknoll Sisters, Hong Kong-Macau Region," 21.

77. *Maryknoll Convent School 1925–2000*, 46.



The Maryknoll Sisters in a ten-day retreat in the convent on Waterloo Road c. early 1970s. Also present were the Jesuits. (Source: Maryknoll Mission Archives)

the last Maryknoll Sister to serve as principal of the Secondary Section, called for a broadminded vision that asked students “to go beyond self in the service of others” and to develop “a fuller and more sympathetic understanding of the world at large.”⁷⁸ Though directed at schoolgirls, Houlihan’s words seemed to echo the mission of seven decades of Maryknoll missionary activity in Hong Kong.

Over the years of their service in Hong Kong, the objectives of the Maryknoll Sisters had shifted dramatically; at the same time they had come to be an integral and necessary third-force element in Hong Kong society. In the beginning, Maryknoll was “a foreign mission spirit,” “seek[ing] those lost sheep of the fold,” and at first, missionaries had spoken of seeking pagans

78. *Ibid.*, 46–48, 50.

and converting them to Christianity. As their missionary work gradually broadened, however, to include social work, the Sisters came to consider themselves as guests of a foreign place or government.⁷⁹ While the Maryknoll mission grew and matured as a part of Hong Kong society, it both expanded its objectives and definitions of evangelization and evolved into a valuable third force organization, providing services not offered by the government and helping to stabilize the developing colony. Thus in the 1930s the Maryknoll Sisters provided educational opportunities where there had been few previously; helped with the housing and social services needs of the refugee community of the 1940s and 1950s; helped quell local tensions created by the political and social disturbances in the 1960s; helped find work for individuals as Hong Kong developed its industrial economy in the 1970s; and in the 1980s, helped the society prepare for the most significant political transition of a generation—the handover to China. As this review suggests, the history of the Maryknoll Sisters in Hong Kong is closely linked to the development of local society. As the missionary Sisters saw the problems around them, so they took it upon themselves to shift from a mission of proselytization to a mission of relief, whether it be provided through food, education, health, or counseling. Winning the trust of both the first and second forces of the government and the people, the Maryknoll Sisters embarked on their efforts of relief and reform, and, as a result, transformed themselves from “strangers” in a foreign land to integral members of society. By shifting their focus from the pursuit of pagans to the relief of refugees and others, the Sisters had come to embrace that which was most important to their host society, and in so doing, made themselves both important and welcome members of that society.

79. Lernoux, *Hearts on Fire*, 143; Sister Mary Lou Martin, interview by author, Maryknoll Convent, Boundary Street, Kowloon, Hong Kong, 22 August 2000.