



Father W. Aedan McGrath SSC in China and Elsewhere

No story of the many Legion of Mary heroes is more compelling than that of Father W. Aedan McGrath SSC (pronounced McGraw). He was born in Drumcondra, near Dublin, Ireland, January 22, 1906, the son of William McGrath, a crown counsel and county court judge who was reputedly shot to death by the Black and Tans in 1920. The family moved to England, and the future priest attended King's College in London before entering the Missionary Society of Saint Columban. He was ordained on December 21, 1929. Two brothers also became Columban Missionaries.¹

In 1930 he was sent as a missionary to North China. There was no church, no presbytery, and he lived for a time with a Chinese family². In 1939, when 4,000 Japanese entered Nanking (Nanjing), he was able to provide shelter for some Chinese women in his compound for six months thanks to an acquaintance he made with the actress Loretta Young while on a visit to Hollywood in his earlier years. A Japanese officer who liked Miss Young placed the priest's residence off limits.³

Fr. Aedan was responsible for 24 missions, each of which he visited for three days at a time. "I asked for another priest to help" he said, "and instead I was sent a copy of the Handbook of the Legion of Mary." He did not think starting a praesidium (parish unit) would help but to keep his bishop happy, he recruited six Men of different nationalities. When he was forced by the political situation to be away from his parish for two years, he returned to find to his utter amazement these men were excellent evangelists. By 1946 there were already five praesidia, teaching the Faith, organizing devotions, and performing Baptisms. The newly-appointed Internuncio in China, Archbishop Antonio Riberi, asked Fr. Aedan to further the spread of the legion in China.

Fr. Aedan returned to Dublin in 1946 to meet Frank Duff, Legion of Mary founder. They became life-long friends. On his return he began to start the Legion all over China. "Within half an hour, the first praesidium was formed in the university in Shanghai." From Shanghai, he went to Hankow in central China and then up to Beijing where he did the same. The success of the Legion was not lost on the Chinese authorities.⁴

Within one year, by the grace of God and through Our Lady's intercession, there were one thousand praesidia with members from all walks of life. When the communist persecution of the church broke out, the Legionaries of Mary were the first who had to give testimony for their faith. The Reds declared

1 <https://columban.org/content/100-points-light-1954>

2 http://www.legionofmary-ikeja.org/2_magrathbio.html

3 <http://www.southcoasttoday.com/article/20010217/News/302179926>

4 <https://archives.catholic.org.hk/In%20Memoriam/Clergy-Brother/WA-McGrath.html>

the Legion of Mary “Public Enemy Number One” because of their great evangelistic zeal. Fr. McGrath reported thousands gave their lives.⁵

His work with the Missionary Society of Saint Columban priests in Shanghai, and for the Legion of Mary, brought many young Chinese into the Faith. Because of this he came to the attention of the Communist authorities. He managed to keep one step ahead of the authorities until the evening of September 6, 1951. Then the Chinese police knocked at the door of his order’s residence and demanded to see the priest McGrath. After ransacking his room and finding only religious books and other religious items to implicate him, he was arrested “under suspicion.” He was never accused of any crime, nor was he allowed to see an attorney or speak to his superiors. But pictures taken of him that night holding just the Legion Handbook showed weapons on the table in front of him when published in the party press. ⁶

Utilizing the strength he gained through study of St. Louis Marie DeMontfort's True Devotion, he managed to survive torture and solitary confinement for two years and eight months. His only “companion” was a bird who visited his cell window. The prisoners were never allowed to sleep during the day even if they had been interrogated all night. They were watched at all times by guards whom they could not see. But Father knew when his guard was watching because his “friend,” the bird, would fly away when the guard approached. Father was in the habit of sharing his meager rice portion with his friend, and he saw this as God’s way of protecting him from the cruel guards. Even when he was moved from cell to cell, his friend followed him and stayed near. ([Father Aedan tells the story of the miracle bird on You Tube](#))

Finally, on April 28, 1954 (the Feast of Saint Louis DeMontfort), he was brought before a tribunal. He expected to be sentenced to a firing squad, but because he was Irish, the Red Chinese released him and told him never to return to China. However his great love for China and Asia remained.

One might think that this was enough of an exciting and dangerous life for one man, but not for Fr. Aedan. After he was expelled from China, he returned briefly to Dublin, and subsequently worked tirelessly for the Legion for ten years in England and another 12 years in the US and Canada. In 1979, at the age of 70, Frank Duff asked him to return to Asia. He made his base in the Philippines where he was successful in establishing many Praesidia. He never returned to China for fear of endangering his friends. He developed a large circle of friends in Manila, and from there visited Japan, Korea, and Taiwan. In 2000 He returned to Dublin to make a TV show that aired on November 14. On December 17, he attended his last Legion of Mary council meeting. Father Aedan McGrath died on Christmas Day 2000 a month short of his 95th birthday.

It was one of the great privileges of my life to meet Fr. McGrath at a Philadelphia Senatus conference around 1965, and invite him to our diocese of Altoona-Johnstown. My late wife and I spent many days listening to his stories as he shared them with us, our bishop, priests, media, and, of course our Legionaries. Among other things he conducted a weekend retreat and keynoted our first congress as a new curia. He was scheduled to return to us for a second retreat when he got the commission from Dublin to return to Asia. But we kept in touch with his travels through correspondence. The Irish Times obituary called him a “luminary of the missionary Columban Fathers,”⁷ and he is listed in a Wikipedia article.

I am not aware if his cause for sainthood has been introduced. If not, it should be.
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⁵ Fr. McGrath personal account to author.

⁶ <http://catholicism.org/an-army-for-our-lady-the-legion-of-mary.html>

⁷ <http://www.irishtimes.com/news/legion-of-mary-missionary-dies-1.1122604>