



The Rev. Melchior M. Geser, S. D. S.

## Father Melchior Geser SDS

### - The First Salvatorian Martyr -

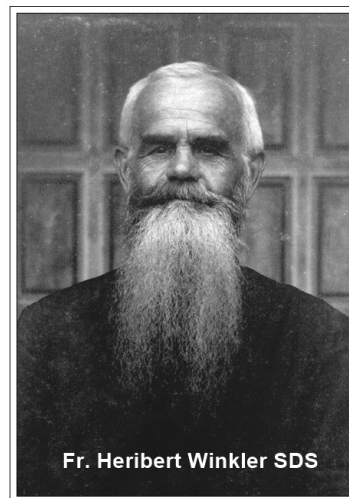
When the Salvatorian priests and Brothers from Germany began their mission in the Fukien District of mainland China in 1923, they knew it would be no easy task. They were foreigners – “outsiders” – who were viewed with suspicion by the people, and in particular by the Chinese government. The faith they had to offer – Catholic Christianity – was also looked upon with suspicion, even fear. The culture of China was vastly different from their native Germany, but the missionaries

vowed to begin simply. They lived among the people, learned their language and customs, shopped in their markets, and pretty much kept to themselves. The people could hear them chanting and singing in their little churches, and they were curious. Eventually, many of them befriended their new neighbors, and some grew interested in the Catholic faith and were baptized. The Salvatorian Sisters also came to minister in the China Missions and opened schools for the children.



The missionaries and their faith, however, were not always accepted by everyone. Undeterred by the admiration given to the missionaries by the simple people of the villages, vigilante soldiers – mostly Communist in ideology – often subjected the missionaries to random searches, questioning, beatings and even jailing. But the Salvatorians stayed the course, refusing to break under the constraints.

The area was a place of constant unrest, not just for the Salvatorians and other missionaries, but for the Chinese people as well. As early as June 1923, just months after their arrival in China, Fr. Heribert Winkler SDS, the superior of the missions, wrote: “The province of Fukien has been the battle ground of the troops coming from the north and the south for a considerable time. People hastily carry boxes and baskets to places of security. The house boats and sampans rush down the river, trying to hide in some arm of the Ming River where they can find shelter near houses and behind trees.” Chinese Communists were taking over villages and districts throughout the country. Little by little, few areas were safe from being under Communist influence or control. Members of the “Red Army” were very close to the Fukien district by the end of 1930.



Fr. Heribert Winkler SDS

**Fr. Melchior Geser SDS** was one of the earliest of the Salvatorian missionaries to go to China. He was assigned to the mission station in Kienning. But in early June 1931, Fr. Melchior was reported missing by people in the parish. The missionary priests, Brothers and Sisters feared that he had likely been killed and they searched for his body, but they couldn't find it. Several of them were arrested and imprisoned for short periods of time simply for trying to find the body. It was only five years later – in 1936 – that the details of Fr. Melchior's death were made known by a witness from the village who had remained silent out of fear for his own life and safety. On May 31, 1931, two days before his death on June 2, Fr. Melchior had managed to flee from the mission before soldiers arrived there. He stayed with a family and finally escaped from Kienning just two hours before the Communists fully occupied the town. But during his flight

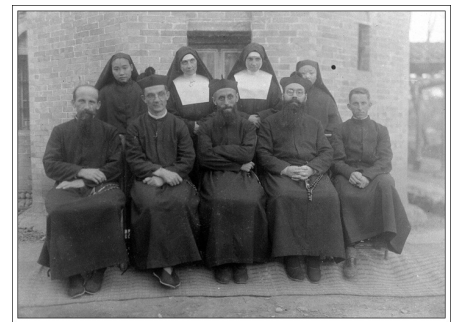


into the nearby hills, he ran into a group of the bandit-soldiers who robbed him and murdered him and then buried him in a shallow ditch. The villager told the missionaries where the body of Fr. Melchior could be found. By that time, all that was left of his remains were bones. The remains were placed in an ossuary and transported to the main mission church in Shaowu. A Solemn Requiem Mass was held on February 5, 1936, and he was finally laid to rest properly in the mission cemetery.



Fr. Melchior had come from a family that was blessed with Salvatorian vocations. Three of his brothers were also members of the Society: Brother Laurentius and Brother Cyriacus, who were both back in Germany, and Brother Wolfgang (“Jimmy”) who ministered for many years in the USA Province. Fr. Melchior was only 35-years-old at the time of his death.

Throughout all its years, the Salvatorian missions suffered great hardships. Nearly every one of the mission stations were looted, robbed, and subjected to damage. For a few months in the Fall of 1934, all the missionaries were exiled and jailed in Foochow. Financial support for the missions which had been coming from Germany was halted by the Nazis in their homeland, and the missionaries now had to rely solely on support that came from the Salvatorian Mission House in Elkton, Maryland.



The Communist takeover of towns and villages continued through the years following the discovery of Fr. Melchior's remains. By 1949, the takeover was complete and Mao Tse Tung assumed the leadership of the entire country. All foreign Christian missionaries were told to disband their missions and leave the country by a certain date. Those who remained even one day later – including several Salvatorians who were trying to “tie up all the loose ends” before leaving the missions – were imprisoned for five years. The Salvatorian priests and Brothers who managed to escape the mainland in time – along with their Chinese seminarians – went to the peninsula of Macao, where they remained until 1955. But even their time there was never truly regarded as “safe.” The Salvatorian Sisters from the missions left the country altogether – along with several of their new Chinese Sisters – and headed for the United States.

While Fr. Melchior is the First Salvatorian Martyr, sadly, others would follow him in martyrdom.

## Six Other Salvatorian Martyrs

**Fr. Reinhold Unterberg SDS - Age 46** ( + May 23, 1940 )

*German Province*

- Beaten to death in a Nazi concentration camp for refusing to divulge the names of young people who had attended his retreat house.



**Fr. Methodius Miçola SDS - Age 31** ( + July 3, 1942 ) *Czech Province*

- Shot by a Gestapo death-squad for preaching against the Nazi regime and for ministering to those who had lost family members in the camps.

**Sr. Stanisława Falkus SDS** and **Sr. Leopolda Ludwig SDS**

( + January 27, 1945 ) *Polish Province*

- Shot by Russian soldiers as they tried to protect the members of the community.



**Fr. Titus Helde SDS - Age 39** ( + April 22, 1945 ) *Austrian Province*

- Shot by a Russian soldier for protecting a group of women and girls who were hidden in the church buildings. Many women and girls of the town had been attacked and raped by soldiers in the days prior.

**Fr. Pawel Weinschrott SDS - Age 41** ( + June 2, 1960 ) *Romanian Province*

- Died in prison after having been arrested for speaking out against the Communist government. Despite being beaten many times in prison, the prison doctors were forbidden to give him any medical care.