

Mass in Beijing: Palm and Easter Sundays, 1998

I went to Beijing, China, on business for Microsoft for nine days in 1998 (April 4 –12). Arriving at my hotel on Saturday, I unpack and go downstairs to the concierge to find out about Mass for Palm Sunday. They write a note for the taxi driver in Chinese characters that says where the church is located and tell me there is a Chinese Mass at 7:00am. Next morning, I go downstairs for my first adventure — taxi ride to church. I am not reassured when I give the note to the driver showing the location and he stares at it a while. Off we go. After driving a fair distance, he pulls over where two old Chinese woman with white scarves around their heads are sweeping the street. Driver gets out and asks one of them a question. Much gesticulation and talking follow. Driver gets back in and off we go again. Not too much further down the street, he spots the church on the left. We turn left at the street corner before getting to the church (which appears to sit back behind some buildings that front the street we were on). The driver stops at an alley and points up it. OK. I pay him the meter amount and start up the alley. Real primitive. Some “residences” have their front doors on the alley. I walk past the back of the church and determine I can’t get there from here, so, I walk back down the alley and back towards the main street where we made the left turn. I find a little archway, walk back a ways, turn right, and am in a small courtyard in front of the church. Many people are standing in the courtyard. I walk past them and into the church.

An earlier Mass is in progress. Chanting is going on and people are receiving Communion. I am surprised to see that they are kneeling at a communion rail receiving Communion on the tongue. I am the only non-Chinese person in the building. I find a pew and kneel down. The church is old, dirty, and badly worn. During Mao’s regime they were used for just about anything but church services. Still, there is a main altar with the Novus Ordo table out front, looking unused. The tabernacle is open. When the priest returns to the altar to replace the ciborium in the tabernacle, it finally hits me. This is a Latin Mass! I wrestle with emotion. The sense of the Mass transcending time and space hits me like a baseball bat. I’m thousands of miles from home, a stranger in a strange land, and yet I am very much at home. The place is packed. A chanter somewhere seems to be leading a rather eerie (to me) Chinese litany of sorts. The priest concludes the Mass in the usual way (with the Last Gospel) and the people file out. I stay for the 7:00am Mass which is just about immediately after the old priest’s exit. A Palm Sunday procession precedes the Mass with little Chinese children dressed in white gowns as angels, I think. The Mass is a Novus Ordo Mass at the table in front of the altar. But, it is very reverently performed by a young priest. Incense is used, the congregation sings the hymns rather robustly, I am impressed. I also feel very conspicuous, since I cannot speak the language (the absence of universal Latin is keenly felt), and stand about a head taller than most of the people in the church, which is packed for this Mass, too. Communion is a zoo. There seems to be little concept of lines or order. A large crowd just sort of gathers at the front where a priest and deacon are distributing Communion. A large number of the recipients, perhaps half, receive Communion on the tongue. The hymn after Communion is Amazing Grace in Chinese. Another baseball bat.

(Next)Sunday, I’m off for my 6:00am Latin Mass on Easter. I should mention that the “Catholic” church I am attending was restored after Mao by the state. The cardinal was appointed by the state. Consequently, Rome has a problem with this arrangement. There is an underground Catholic church in the country, that is repressed by the state. If it exists in Beijing, the hotel does not know about it (and probably would not tell you anyway). It’s interesting because to all appearances both the Latin Mass and the Novus Ordo of the state-run church are very precise in their rubrics. In one way I feel sorry for the bulk of the people who have little choice in the matter, having no access to the “real” Church. On the other hand, I think it is fortunate for them that the state-run church does not seem to have any problem with the Latin Mass and offers that every Sunday alongside the Novus Ordo. Pretty smart, the state seems to be saying “We don’t care how you worship, just understand that any worship is at our pleasure.” Many U.S. bishops seem to have a “My way or no way” attitude that is more totalitarian than the Communist Chinese!