

SISTER GERTRUDE KWAN  
(Sister Gertrude-de-la-Croix)  
October 16, 1919 – November 27, 2008

St. John says, “If everything Jesus did were written down, the world itself would not hold all the books that would have to be written.” We might almost say the same of Sister Gertrude. She ministered in several countries, started new works, lived in dramatic and dangerous circumstances, and did it all with energy, faith and determination.

Gertrude was born into a Buddhist family in Shanghai, China. Her mother, a life-long Buddhist who operated a place to provide the poor with what they needed, taught young Gertrude that first you take care of others—and after that you think of yourself. Gertrude attended a Catholic school, where she grew to love Jesus and wanted to follow Him. She became a Catholic at the age of ten, and in that also her mother taught her to be wholehearted, telling Gertrude, “If you want to be Catholic, be! Do all you’re supposed to do.”

Gertrude became a Little Sister of Purgatory at age 17. She was given the name “Sister Mary Peter” because in her warm heart and impetuous nature she was like St. Peter. Her motivation for entering religious life, she said, was “I always loved to help others, especially to serve the poor”. This was amply satisfied as she worked with the aged and poor and cooked in one of the institutions run by the Sisters.

Persecution by Communists forced the little religious community to disband. Sister Gertrude saw no future for herself as a religious in China, so putting her life in the hands of God, in 1948 she fled across the border, hearing bullets whistle around her as she ran for freedom. She went to Europe, where she attended college in Edinburgh, Scotland and worked with the aged there. She returned to China in 1955, not to her native Shanghai but to Hong Kong. Here she met the Sisters of the Immaculate Conception, who invited her to come to Montreal to work with their Chinese patients, most of whom spoke neither French nor English.

It was there in Montreal that Sister Gertrude became acquainted with the Sisters of Providence and their call to serve the poor, which resonated in her heart. She went to Vancouver, where again she encountered the Sisters of Providence and realized that she belonged in this community. She entered in 1962. When she was admitted to the novitiate, she wept with joy that she was called to be the Servant of the Poor. Sister Gertrude made vows in 1964 under the name Sister Gertrude-de-la-Croix.

The next fourteen years Sister Gertrude spent in ministry to the Chinese people of Montreal. She worked with the aged and poor, a work that she loved, and the people appreciated her. She was deeply rooted there; she expected to spend the rest of her life in Montreal. However, in 1976, at the request of her community, she went to Seattle,

Washington to meet with Sisters of Providence of Asian heritage, and on the way back to Montreal she visited the Canadian West again.

There she saw that the Chinese Catholics were alone, with no Chinese priest or Sisters to help them. They urged her to come and work with them, saying that many Chinese Catholics were turning to Protestant churches because at least they could hear God's Word spoken in their own tongue and in the context of their culture.

All the way back to Montreal, Sister Gertrude heard God saying, "We should help the needy ones." She knew that to leave Montreal would be a great sacrifice for her, but she also recognized that the Chinese people in Montreal were well established in the Church and had many sources of support in their faith. After long prayer, in 1977 she asked to come West to work with the Chinese people here. She had three objectives: to form a Chinese Catholic Community, to bring a Chinese priest to serve the community, and to establish a weekend school for the Chinese children where they could learn about their language and culture.

In Edmonton Sister Gertrude found energetic and faith-filled Chinese Catholics who just needed someone to bring them together to work toward these goals. She and the people achieved all three goals, for the glory of God. She never tired of thanking the Sisters of Providence and Archbishop MacNeil of Edmonton for their help and support in this work. In time the parish was able to conduct itself, and Sister Gertrude was glad to step back and devote herself entirely to the work that she loved—helping people. She visited the sick and elderly, helped young mothers, worked with troubled marriages and spoke of God to everyone.

Just ten days ago Sister Gertrude had the joy of being an honoured guest at the tenth anniversary celebrations of Mary Help of Christians Parish. She was surrounded by Chinese friends, greeted with affection, respect and smiles, and acknowledged from the altar as "the mother of this church".

Sister Gertrude revealed her life's motivation: "The Will of God comes first. Whoever He places on my way; it may be difficult but I am a risk-taker; I am confident in God and I trust in His grace. I dare not let occasions pass by—God gives; He provides me with the grace I need. ... We must always live in a state of research, always taking risks to bring God to others."

Sister Gertrude did everything quickly right to the end, including her death. She died in less than a day. We will miss her disarming simplicity, her forthrightness, her hearty laugh and so much more. May Sister Gertrude rest in peace and pray for us.

Sister Margaret McGovern