Sister Elizabeth Ann, of Maryknoll, faced up to the problem of getting food in South China

World Hunger and One Nun

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When Sister Elizabeth Ann came back to the United States after twenty-eight years in China, she found herself a stranger and an alien in her own country. Amazed, she saw workmen driving to work in automobiles—their own. Still more amazed, she noted quantities of wood lying at roadsides and in vacant lots. There were old railway ties, fallen trees, scraps of lumber, just resting in piles; nobody to take them away furtively, quickly, as something precious, to be hoarded and used meagerly to boil up the daily rice.

As the train carried the missionary Sister from the Pacific Coast across the continent she watched the skittering lanscape in growing amazement. Here were hillsides growing no millet or beans; swamps growing no rice. There were acres and acres, miles upon miles of land, filled with grass and dandelions, or brush and trees, or weeds and sunflowers. She was looking upon her own country with Asiatic eyes, and it would take a long time to get back an American point of view. Perhaps no one who has lived in the Orient ever becomes wholly Americanized again. Like the risen Lazarus she has looked on life from the other side of the world, and something has burned deep into the soul which can never be erased.

Sister Elizabeth Ann had been busy during the quarter of a century she had spent in China—too busy to read many American periodicals. Indeed she was more accustomed to reading and speaking Chinese than English. She was therefore ignorant of the widespread controversy on world hunger. She had not heard the cry of those labeled experts that available agricultural land is all used up and producing to capacity; that it takes two acres of land to feed one person; that future generations face starvation.

Famines in India and China she knew, but American population planners and their demand for worldwide birth-control had not penetrated her little corner of South China. If they had, her jolly, sun-browned face would have broken into a broad smile. For Sister Elizabeth Ann had been managing a farm in South China for the past twenty years. Nothing points the way like a concrete example. Statisticians and enthusiasts can

plan and plan; "figgers don't lie, but liars do figger." And no number of written pages on world hunger and overpopulation can be taken seriously when a sane, sunburned and dynamic little person says, smiling, "Here is what we did, and the results were so-and-so."

Sister Elizabeth Ann (this is not her real name) is a Maryknoll missionary who was assigned to South China in 1923. After a few years in a port city learning to speak, read, and write Cantonese, she was sent to a village in the interior to build up a community of native Chinese nuns. With her were only two other American Sisters. A number of fine young Catholic Chinese girls, aspirants to the native sisterhood, were waiting, and the Sisters immediately began to train them. They were given the equivalent of a Normal School education with special training in the teaching of Christian Doctrine and in dispensary work. They were also trained in the religious life, over a number of years, before vows of any kind were taken.

When permission came from Rome to establish the native community, the Holy See requested that the Chinese nuns be trained and set up in some kind of remunerative work so that they would be self-supporting. Happily, Sister Elizabeth Ann herself had a rural background, having been brought up on a New England farm. The Chinese aspirants were nearly all farmers' daughters from little inland villages and used to heavy field work. Unless some sort of farm work was kept up there was danger that they might grow to consider themselves lily-fingered ladies and look upon the religious life as one of comparative ease and elegance. They would then be of little use when sent back to the villages to work among their own people.

The Bishop had assigned the Sisters a plot of land to go with their convent. Across the way stood his native seminary of Chinese candidates for the priesthood. The Sisters were to do the cooking for these boys, as well as the work of their own household. In addition, Sister Elizabeth Ann arranged for each native girl to spend one hour daily working outside on the "farm."

The "farm" consisted of two acres. That was all. The soil was poor and sandy, leached by the monsoon rains. Over a period of twenty years the Sisters built it up into high production, raising all the produce needed (except wheat and rice) for a group of from twenty to forty native Sisters, as well as for over twenty boys in the seminary. They also furnished produce for the poor and refugees, and occasional vegetables and fruit for the seven American priests in the neighboring compound who taught in the seminary and were occupied with administrative duties.

The Sisters could easily have raised enough rice and wheat, too, by planting a little more land, but they decided against it, since grain has to be tended continually by watchmen who stay in the fields and scare away the voracious birds. Mass and religious exercises at regular times would have made such a program in-

convenient, so the Sisters bought their grain.

Sister Elizabeth Ann's idea was to keep mostly to local products and to sell or trade them locally. The Sisters, who never had much money, began by buying a freshly weaned gilt (to city-bred readers, a female pig or young sow). They kept her and bred her to raise pigs. Some of the pigs were then fattened and slaughtered, and from them the Sisters made Chinese sausage, ham, and bacon, cured in soy sauce and wine, the native way.

Those pigs not needed for food were sold at a good profit. There was always a long waiting list for convent pigs because they were healthier than the other local pigs. The Chinese farmers skimp on feed for their sows and their pigs are likely to be weakly. The Sisters fed theirs plenty of mash made of kitchen scraps, greens, and rice bran, so the sows were always in fine condition. In time they kept two or three.

Later on they had a chance to get some fine Australian sows with straight backs. These made firmer bacon than the Chinese pigs, which are hardy but flabby, with concave backs and bellies that drag on the ground. The Sisters crossed their Australian sows with the local swine and produced a hybrid pig with Chinese hardiness but with straight back and firm bacon like the Australian type. Chinese farmers come from miles away to see the pigs with straight backs, and the newly weaned pigs sold well, bringing a good income.

The Sisters also bought some Chinese chickens. They fed the fowl on rice bran and garden vegetables. The flock, which varied in numbers, kept sixty to ninety people in eggs and provided frequent meals of fried, boiled, or roast chicken.

There was a pond in one corner of the farm. The Sisters began to raise ducks—the Muscovy kind that do not quack. The ducks got a great deal of their living from the pond and the mud along its shores, eating frogs, pollywogs, slugs and snails. The Sisters also fed them rice bran. In three months a duckling would grow to weigh eight pounds—fine, fat and tender, ready for the pot.

When the sows began to farrow, a local Chinese woman was engaged to sit beside them and play midwife. She kept a basket of bran at her side and as soon as a piglet was born she put it in the basket. Thus losses from chilling or crushing were prevented and all the pigs usually lived. In America many pigs are lost, a litter averaging about eight sound pigs.

One of the young American Sisters assigned to help Sister Elizabeth Ann was in a state of hectic excitement when, for the first time after her arrival, one of the sows began to farrow. She took her knitting and a little stool and sat beside the Chinese woman helper in the sow's pen. Every few minutes she would speed to the convent, grasp Sister Elizabeth Ann by the arm and in a shrill voice shaking with emotion: "Now don't get excited, Sister—

there's another one!''" In all, fourteen pigs were born, and the young Sister, city-bred, was breathless from this contact with life and its mysteries, her first encounter with God's blessing on all creation, making it increase and multiply.

Soon the Sisters had a chance to get some turkey eggs from foreign sources. They hatched these under a sitting hen and raised them on bean-curd and chopped chives, cooked rice and greens and bran. The birds did well, and were a curiosity in the countryside; people came from miles around to have their pictures taken with the Sisters' turkeys.

This flock, together with the hybrid pigs, made a kind of drawing card to get people interested in the Church. Conversations that began with pigs and turkeys sometimes ended with the Redemption and the Blessed Trinity, not unlike the parables of Christ, Who spoke of hens and chickens, of fish, of nets and vines and pruning, and of putting dung around the roots of trees. The turkeys brought in some income and were a welcome treat on feast days, roasted with chestnuts and dressing, or cooked shredded, with vegetables, in Chinese style.

The entire compound was used for production of some kind. The Sisters made compost from leaves, grass, weeds, every bit of kitchen waste that did not go to their livestock. This material, piled up in layers with manure from the pigs, chickens, turkeys and ducks, took only three months in the hot, humid South China climate to turn into well-processed compost. When finished it was black and spongy and had no odor except a woodsy smell as of mushrooms.

The Sisters kept two heaps going—one to pile fresh material on as gathered, one finished heap to put on the vegetables as crops were planted. A tank was kept full of liquid manure to spread on the garden. This, with the compost, and excellent care, prodded crops into huge productivity. Of course, every possible inch was dug and planted in neat rows, and, of course, no weed was allowed to grow. Chinese farmers are like that, and this was a Chinese farm; Chinese know-how and American enterprise made a good combination.

Many a basket of fresh vegetables from this garden brought stars to the eyes of hungry Chinese children. Refugees, victims of war, flood, banditry and famine, the thin and ragged youngsters often came carrying baskets, asking to help the Sisters with the garden work, and went home loaded with provisions. The Chinese seminarians formerly suffered from beri-beri, but that trouble ceased when the Sisters began to provide for them.

Rope is a commodity often needed on a farm-garden-and-livestock enterprise, and since it always seemed to be expensive and hard to get, the Sisters raised a few bushes of hemp and made their own rope on a native spinning wheel. They bought beeswax from farmers and made wax candles for use in the churches. They also made vestments for the

diocese. Such enterprises kept the native nuns busy during the wet season when outdoor work could not be done, and since the pastors in the diocese paid a nominal sum for these products, the convent was enabled to gain a little more self-support, necessary because the cost of hiring native teachers and educating the native girls over a period of many years was a great strain on their resources.

Throughout the years the productivity of the little farm grew, and the Sisters became more and more self-sufficient. Had not the cost of educating the native girls been high, their entire support might have been covered.

Finally Sister Elizabeth Ann had her duck pond enlarged a bit and stocked it with fish. She doesn't know what these fish would be called in English—some kind of Chinese fish that the natives raise in ponds. In China manure is dumped into the water to encourage growth among the small organisms which fish eat, and the fish thrive there mightily. The Sisters used to hire an old woman to pick up buffalo manure in a basket and dump it into the pond at intervals. Fine fat fish could be scooped up with a net and sold or used for food.

This fish venture was the last link in the series of enterprises to make the Sisters completely self-supporting, and Sister Elizabeth Ann took great pride and interest in it. Every morning after breakfast the small dynamic figure made the rounds of the two acre farm; the vegetable garden, the fruit trees, the pigs, the turkeys, the chickens. All were healthy and thriving with good care; greenness and growth and high fertility were everywhere in the dawn freshness under the morning sun. She always finished up at the pond, watching the antics of the busy ducks, and the darting, thriving fish. It was just coming into full production when the Reds took over the compound and put Sisters and priests in prison.

All is changed now. The native nuns move about secretly, keeping the Faith alive among the people, as do many of the students from the seminary, now ordained priests. Some suffer in Red prisons. Some have been martyred. It was not a very long time — twenty-eight years — in which to make a foundation and sow a seed, but there was happiness in the work itself.

During the months before her release and exile to America, Sister Elizabeth Ann prayed much for those boys and girls. But when she slept, she dreamed often of her farm. Most often, and with the biggest ache in her heart, of the fish pond and those fat, darting fish in the clear water. It never occurred to her that she had taken the figures and the plans of some hundreds of agricultural experts and population planners, and had knocked them neatly into the limbo of the meaningless. That was only an unnoticed by-product of those years of amazing fruitfulness.