

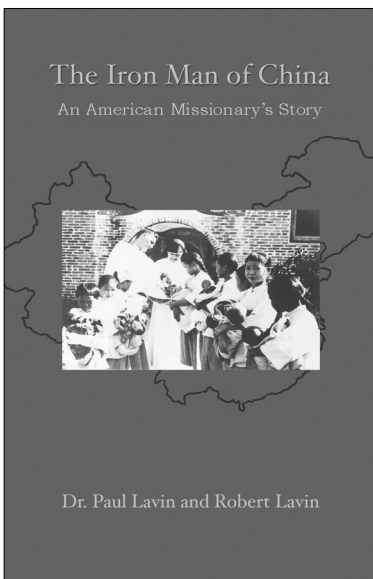
Loreto Publications

loretopubs.org

The Iron Man of China - Book Review

Dr. Paul Lavin and Robert Lavin

Sewn Softcover — 408 Pages — \$24.95



Review by
Robert Schroder
GUEST COLUMNIST,
Reprinted from:
The Remnant
P. O. Box 1117
Forest Lake, MN 55025

One of the delightful aspects of the Catholic doctrine of the communion of saints is the relationships that we can forge with souls who have gone on to eternal life, whether

they are members of the Church Triumphant or the Church Suffering. This not only offers great consolation to those whose loved ones have preceded them in death, but also makes possible the forging of friendships between the Church Militant and those who have already fought the good fight and who have won the race; those that can offer their example, their prayers, their inspiration.

My newly found friend is Fr. Joseph Lavin, one of the early Maryknoll missionaries to China, back in the days when Maryknollers were Catholic. I have learned about this devout and fearless priest from his biography, "The Iron Man of China," lovingly written by one of his nephews, Paul Lavin. Making abundant use of letters and eye-witness accounts, Dr. Lavin paints an exquisite portrait of the incendiary personality of a priest on fire with the love of God and his subsequent desire to save souls. The obstacles arrayed against him were most formidable: Japanese invaders, river pirates, Chinese bandits, hostile terrain, foreign language, and, finally, the Communists who ended the

days of missionary activity in China. Throughout it all, however, this priest remained confident, joyful and steadfast in the knowledge that God would always provide the where-with-all to continue the fight.

Joseph Patrick Lavin was born on January 12, 1907 in Woburn, Massachusetts and from there moved to the east side of Framingham. One of ten children in a very devout Irish, Catholic family, they lived on Beaver Street; and in the words of the author, this was "... no street for wimps." In order to heat their home in the bitter winters, the elder of the Lavin boys would go down to the railroad tracks to scrounge up pieces of coal that had been dropped by the trains. This was their plan; coincidentally, it was the plan of other homes and of other neighborhoods. There was not enough coal to supply everyone's needs, so it went to the families whose sons were victorious in battle; it was literally the survival of the fittest. Led by their large and powerful eldest brother, Edward, the Lavins usually got their share. Even though Joseph was one of the younger and smaller ones, he always went along, usually to absorb punishment from the older and stronger of the pugnacious youths.

His older brother George is quoted in describing his courageous nature, even as a youth: "He would always come with us to the tracks," George recalled, "always ready to back us up...Like us, he would get into a fight, but he would get the short end of the stick. But Joe could always take it. No matter what; he never gave up. Even when someone had him down and could have beaten him to a pulp, he would keep on fighting. He would just never give up."

While contemplating the gilded cages in which children are now being raised and the fact that no effort is spared in shielding them from adversities, can anyone imagine a mother in our era, sending her boys off in the morning to fight their way to a supply of heating coal? I may be reading too much into this incident, but it does not appear to me that the Lavin children were withering reeds blown

about by winds and peer pressure. Courageous would be the word use to describe them; and, today, this virtue is sadly ignored by the majority. I submit, however, that it was this toughness that was inbred into Joseph at an early age that imbued him with the tenacity which would stand him in good stead, when facing the forces of Satan in hostile China.

As the years passed, Joseph was influenced by all of the trappings of Catholic devotions that gave such security and peace to children growing up in that generation. Their lives revolved around the Mass, Confession, the sacraments, the Holy Rosary, family prayer, the liturgical seasons with their alternating fasts and feasts, and numerous charitable works. It was when Joseph was helping his father distribute food to the poor that he first became aware of their needs, and there arose in his soul the stirrings of God's call to help the unfortunates of the world.

Our young priest-to-be also came under the influence of Monsignor Thomas Garrahan.

He was a "...highly energetic priest with an irrepressible dream for bringing the Catholic Faith to the far corners of the globe." The young men under his tutelage began to share his enthusiasm and two other of his charges, besides Joseph, took up the challenge and were ordained to the order of Maryknoll.

One must keep in mind that ecumenism, at this time, was a Protestant ideal... foreign to Catholic thought. If anything, popes had not only failed to embrace it, but actually issued warnings against it. With this in mind, a stanza from the Maryknoll "Departure Hymn" is very significant:

Dear brothers, hasten then to save the heathen,
Engulfed deep in death's cold, dark abyss.
Without true God, without a hope to soothe him,
Shall he forever be a child of wrath?
Brave soldiers, rise, destroy the throne of Satan,
Deliver from his grasp the groaning slave;
Bring souls the freedom which by Christ was given
And plant the Cross in every land.

With these words ringing in his ears Joseph, now Father Joseph Lavin, sailed for mysterious, dangerous, forbidding and foreboding China. It was 1932. His job, as he viewed it, was to bring the saving power of Jesus Christ to heathen people who, for centuries, had remained under the power of the Evil One. How strange the word "heathen" sounds to ears that have heard no Catholic teaching other than that of the post-Vatican II variety. "Child of wrath?" "Throne of Satan?" "Groaning slave?" While this would be most confusing to Catholics today, it was crystal clear to Fr. Lavin and his generation of priests who went like lightening bolts into the devil's lair. It was their conviction (and of the Church) that when the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity said that unless we eat His Body and drink His Blood we

would not have life everlasting, that He meant that unless we eat His Body and drink His Blood we will not have life everlasting. This was their inspiration and if the end result was to be martyrdom, then so be it. It was going to be a battle to the death. Satan, on his side, would have ignorance, superstition and sin as his weapons. Against this supernatural arsenal of evil, the missionaries brought Jesus Christ...

Father arrived in China in 1932 and served its people for fifteen straight years; following a year's furlough in which he spent back home, he returned again and remained until the Communists drove him out in 1953. Upon his initial arrival, he immediately acclimated himself to the language, cuisine and customs of the Chinese. He literally became "Chinese Joe," by which he referred to himself in his letters to his family. "It did not take long before he became fluent in Cantonese Chinese. He smoked the strongest Chinese tobacco and ate black beetles by the handful, a treat the Chinamen relished...The missionary accepted an invitation to eat in some remote village in which his host produced a LIVE lizard-like creature as the main course. The chef then placed it in a frying pan searing it quickly on both sides right before his guest's eyes. Father Joe devoured the reptile as if it was a Thanksgiving turkey."

Theodore White, writing in "Life" magazine dubbed him the "Iron Man," for his feats of endurance were legendary. "...He could out-walk anyone and ride a bicycle further and faster than anyone whom they had ever known. And when anyone of his parishioners happened to be on the wrong side of virtue, Father Joe could be fearsome, if that is what it took to bring the obstinate back into the fold."

An incident related in the book refers to a time that a group of orphans were starving and Fr. Lavin walked for twenty-four hours straight over mountainous terrain to bring food and nourishment to his little charges. His errands of mercy quite often brought him into face to face confrontation with bandits, or Japanese soldiers, or Communists during their reign of terror. He met them all with the same determination with which he faced his childhood tormentors.

One of the many problems facing the missionaries was the hold that gambling had on the people, and the havoc that it caused among families that were already destitute. Laws were passed against it but were mostly ignored. The village of Taan On was under the grip of the town bully who ran a very lucrative gambling establishment. Fr. Lavin informed the people that he would come and personally shut it down. The neighborhood "tough guy" sent the priest a letter with forty signatures that he would be killed if he set one foot into Taan On. Father marched into town the next day with his familiar pipe and a not so familiar club, much like a baseball bat. As he made his way down the long street, what started out to be a lone warrior grew into

an army: peasants from the rice paddies, merchants who closed their shops all fell in behind him. When he got to the door of the gambling hall, he did not knock; what he did was smash it in with his club as the gang fled out of the back. The villagers watched in awe as he dragged all of the equipment out onto the street and burned it. He then went back into the building and destroyed the furniture. Make no mistake – this priest was a man’s man. (As an interesting footnote, the bully actually became a friend of Father Joe; and when Father was arrested by the Communists, this former adversary refused to give testimony against him. No one knows if this bravery resulted in his death or not, but it is a testament to the devotion of the Chinese people to this courageous American priest.)

Throughout the intervening years the Catholic Church in China experienced phenomenal growth. Heroic priests and nuns were faithful witnesses to the gospel and the Chinese people responded accordingly. While harassed on every side by World War II, sadistic bandits and then lastly by the Communists, these religious were faithful to their vocations and never wavered in their care for their people; it was a mutual love affair. It all came to an end with the victory of the forces of Mao Tse Tung. In 1949 the situation became progressively worse for the Maryknollers. Their fate was to be imprisonment, followed by either death or expulsion. The latter was the case for Fr. Lavin and on April 1, 1953 he crossed on foot the bridge that separated Shunchun (Communist China) from Hong Kong. Sad to leave his beloved Chinese people, but happy to be alive, he was as yet unaware of the changes that had taken place in the spirit of Maryknoll, and the disaster looming on the horizon: The Second Vatican Council.

The new generation of Maryknoll missionaries were being taught that it was wrong to proselytize, that they should merely perform the corporal works of mercy and to respect what was good in all of the various religions with which they would come into contact. No longer were they mandated to bring Jesus Christ to the world. What a blow this must have been to the missionary who gave his life to do precisely that.

In the introduction to this marvelous book, Dr. Lavin laments: “To confuse matters even more for Catholics, on October 25, 2001, Pope John Paul II apologized to non-Catholic Chinese (and all Christian people) for the ‘errors’ of those missionaries who might not have sufficiently valued their culture. Perhaps there were some missionaries who could have done a lot better in that regard. But for those bishops, priests and sisters who suffered and died during the Red Chinese carnage this ‘apology’ came without their endorsement...Apologies for any abuses should have included praise for all selfless missionaries who brought the true Faith to people ignorant of Jesus Christ.” Fr. Lavin did not live to witness this and all subsequent apologies, but I would surmise that he would have been less than enthusias-

tic; he knew so many brave priests and nuns who were tortured and killed in order to give witness to the fact that the Holy Catholic Church is the means given to us by God Himself, whereby we are to be saved. Ecumenism was happily not in their vocabulary.

Fr. Joseph retired from Maryknoll in 1961 and, while he continued to function as a priest, he no longer performed his duties under their auspices. By 1970 “...the malnutrition inflicted upon him by the Red Chinese led to gradual progressive heart failure, a pulmonary embolism, necrosis of the liver and hemorrhagic enterocolitis.” In short, Father could barely rise from his bed and was dying.

On Christmas day of that same year, he informed his sister Elizabeth that he was allowed to say three masses that day and that he wanted to do so at St. Stephen’s. She said that he was too ill and that it was out of the question. He replied that he would. Knowing that she could never succeed in altering his course once he had decided upon it, she brought him to the empty church, drove up to the door, believing that he would surely die if he so much as walked across the parking lot. She intended to let him out, park the car and then return for his Masses. He informed her that these three Masses (traditional, Tridentine ones I might add) were to be between God and him. He told her to return in three hours... she obeyed, even though she was not at all certain that he was even going to be alive in three hours.

No one can give testimony as to what transpired on that Christmas day – it was something only angels were privileged to witness. But surely God used the occasion to shower graces and love upon this faithful, courageous, dying priest. The love between Joseph Lavin and his Savior must have been palpable. Those three Masses would surely have been the culmination of his priestly life and service.

Father Joseph Patrick Lavin died shortly afterward on January 28, 1971 at the age of sixty-four. He had previously made the arrangements for his funeral: traditional Latin Requiem Mass, black vestments and prayers for the repose of his soul, beseeching God for his speedy entrance into the Beatific Vision. Father Joe, “The Iron Man of China,” had gone to his reward.

As part of the “Remnant,” we are by definition a minority; we can expect nothing but trouble and turmoil from the world because its prince wants to drag us down with him into the abyss. But in our daily fight for survival, it would behoove us to call upon our friends that are residents of eternity, asking them for their help and assistance; begging them for their prayerful intercession that, like them, we may be faithful to the end. Let us pray FOR the repose of the soul of Father Lavin and let us pray TO him that he will intercede for us and that we can all have a rollicking rendezvous in heaven.

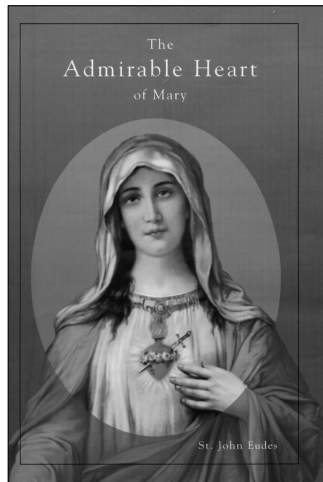
The Iron Man of China

408 pages Sewn Softbound \$24.95

Don't miss out on these three new titles from Loreto Publications

The Admirable Heart of Mary

Saint John Eudes



One of the most prolific ascetical writers of the seventeenth century, St. John Eudes was a reservoir of holy wisdom and fervor. Perhaps no book of our author better exemplifies his profoundly incarnational doctrine than *The Admirable Heart of Mary*. Eudes reveals to his disciples this most pure and maternal of all hearts in its corporal and spiritual pulsations, while demonstrating how this human heart was divinized by the one Divine Heart of God the Father, Son and Holy Ghost. The Admirable Heart of Mary, was given to us from the Cross by Jesus Christ. Truly this heart was the first-fruit of His Passion, given to all of Mary's children, that it might be honored, cherished, invoked and, with that of her Son, reproduced in them.

Sewn hardbound — 402 pages
\$25.95

The Intimate Life of Saint Therese

Fr. Albert Dolan O. Carm.

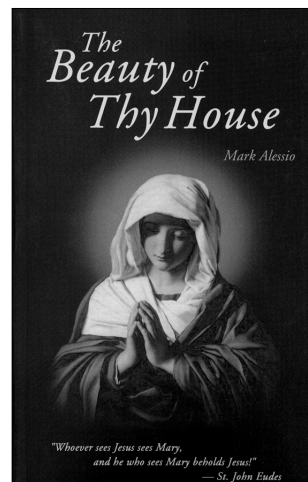


In order to compose his octave of devotion, Father Dolan traveled, in 1924, to France: to Normandy's Alençon, where Saint Thérèse was born, to her family home in Buissonnets, to the Carmel at Lisieux, and to other French towns. Then he went to Rome, where he and Pope Pius XI had a mutually productive discussion of his apostolate to make the "Little Way" of the Little Flower better known in homes and monasteries in America. At the Carmelite convent he was blessed by priceless interviews with Saint Thérèse's three sisters (who were nuns there), and one of her teachers. At Caen, he visited a fourth sister, who had joined the Visitation order. One third of this book is dedicated to these precious recollections gathered from her living siblings. In fact, one of the eight monographs, "Book Five," is completely devoted to the Little Flower's saintly mother Zelie, who died when Thérèse was only four years old.

Hardcover — 400 Pages — \$29.95

The Beauty of Thy House

Mark Alessio



"I have loved the beauty of thy house and the place where thy glory dwells." (Psalm 25:8) This verse, rich in content, is an appropriate choice by our author as a title for a book written in praise of the glories of the Mother of God. Throughout this magnificent production, the scholarly writer demonstrates that figuratively, and in its highest moral sense, the object of this ecstatic exclamation of the Psalmist is not a structure of stone but of virtue. This book provides the reader with ready access to a complete Marian theology. More than that, it is a perfect combination of dogmatics, apologetics and devotion presented in an exciting, even fervid, literary ambiance.

Softcover — 384 Pages — \$19.95

Loreto Publications

P. O. Box 603 Fitzwilliam, N.H. 03447

Tel: 603-239-6671 Fax: 603-239-6127

www.loretopubs.org

