

## Thomas Ceska: 1872- 1937 Tchaj Chen-Tchéng.



This co-martyr of Msgr. Frans Schraven was born on the 17<sup>th</sup> of May 1872 at Brodovac in Croatia. His father was a foreman at the railways in the empire of Austria-Hungary that still encloses Croatia.

*Parish church of Brodovac (anno 2007) where Thomas was baptized.*

Thomas attended the primary school in Frohnleiten at the Mur. He was a fervent altar boy and helped to ring the bells. At one time, a rope happened to wind around his neck. Just in time he was saved from

death by suffocation, but the stripes in his neck remained visible for a long time. His father received a moderate income that had to provide for a family with twelve children. But still, Thomas got the chance to follow grammar school at the Franciscan fathers in Bosen. He did not need much for himself. The payment for school and for housing by a particular family, he received from his parents. For further needs, benefactors took care. And so, Thomas obtained every day a warm meal at the table of a different guest family. His study he took very seriously and when his brother Antony also came to live with him, he took a strict watch on his brother. When later on he was reproached with the remark that he had been too strict with him, he answered : “I was not yet an educationalist at that time”. This Antony also became a missionary and was consecrated a Bishop in Japan.

To earn some additional income, Thomas did a bit of coaching and gave the money to his mother. The story of his vocation to be a missionary is striking. Every Wednesday he had his dinner with the same family and received bacon with his meal. The steaming dish was placed on the table and prayer was said. Suddenly, Thomas feels somebody taking him at his arm and saying: “Go to Gries ( a place of pilgrimage). There you will receive your vocation”. Thomas went straight away to Gries and knelt before the tabernacle. He heard a voice saying: “You will have to become a missionary”. He kept this occurrence further with him as a secret. His choice fell on the Lazarists, but this is a French Congregation with a French General Superior in Paris. Thomas hesitated. Then the owner of the house Thomas lived in, passed away and his books were divided among the students. Thomas received two books. One was about the life of St. Vincent, founder of the Lazarists. Thomas understood it as a sign from above.

After the final exams, he went home with a heavy heart. He knew that his father would count on him for the care of the family. Father appeared to be unpleasantly surprised about the choice of profession of his son, and he did not want to give in. When he finally did give in, he was against Thomas’ choice for the Lazarists. Because of it, Thomas could not sleep at night. At last he took leave of his family and travelled to Graz, where the Lazarists had their convent. When he arrived there, he experienced a terrible fear to ring the bell and to ask for admission. He neither dared to return home, because of the anger of his father. He had no money with him. At daytime he walked around in the township of Graz. Evening and night came and were also spent with walking around and sometimes sitting on a bench. At home, his mother felt inner unrest for her son and she sent Antony to Graz. Walking through the town Antony met Thomas who felt hungry. He told Antony everything. After that Thomas felt enough courage to ring the bell.

### **Thomas as a seminarian and student.**

After a free student life, it took Thomas quite some self conquest to adapt to the regularity and the customs of a convent. He was tending towards a strict philosophy of life and took it all very precisely. It made him suffer from headaches for the rest of his life. He asked much of himself in order to reach his goal. On the 19<sup>th</sup> of July 1897 he celebrated his first Holy Mass at a side altar, for because of restoration the church was full of scaffolds. Thomas was a real



*The Major Seminary of the Vincentians at Graz*

patriot, but he did want to become a missionary and to leave his beloved homeland. He always had a great love for nature, and namely botany. His sisters tell: "He knows every brooklet and little village in Austria". How much will the victory over Austria after the First World war have hurt him. He wrote then: "A nation can better endure a defeat than a victory".

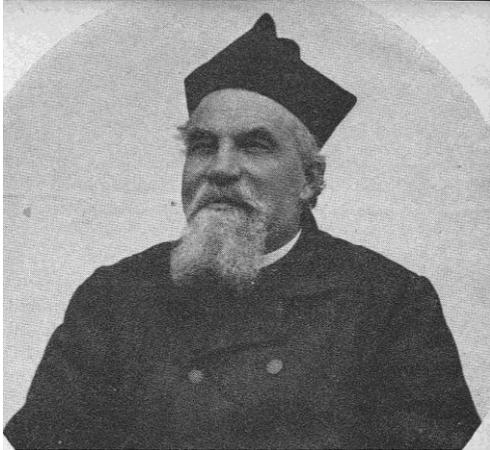
In August 1897 he travelled to Paris for the preparation of his journey to China, on the 26<sup>th</sup> of September. In letters to his relatives, he gave report of this journey and arrived 30 October in Shanghai, where he received the appointment for the Vicarage of Chengtingfu.

### **Thomas as a missionary.**

The largest part of his life, Thomas lived in the residence of Chengtingfu. From there he served the surrounding communities. Here he learned to understand the language, the country, the people and the culture. He did not find it difficult to adapt to the Chinese life and all the inconveniences such as the hot climate in summer and the very cold winters. In 1900 he was given already the responsibility for a whole district. There he experienced the infamous Boxer Revolt. He went through a terrible half year, with 3 to 4000 Christians locked up in walled in villages where one tried to defend oneself against the Boxers. Everywhere chapels and churches were destroyed, and Christians were murdered. In his own district, only a few villages were plundered and burned down. One time, he undertook a campaign with 500 armed Christians, against the Boxers and they burned three of their settlements. The letter to his relatives, he ended with the words: "We are not found worthy to be counted among the martyrs". Austria also paid a price then: the Austrian Embassy building in Peking was destroyed completely, and the captain of a ship with some marines was killed. After this difficult time, he continued zealously with his work in the district, on foot or by cart for months on his way from one village to another. His parish was spread out over 40 villages. He knew all his parishioners by name. In 1909 he wrote that he had to care for 2000 persons. He started training schools for catechumens. Lack of money worried him: "We could have more baptisms if we had more money". In the mean time, large railways were built and many foreigners worked on it. Thomas is not enthusiastic about them. They could not convince his Christians that they were Christians as well. In 1910, after 13 years, Thomas takes a short leave to his homeland, and returns to China with an Austrian Brother. One year later, there follows a large political revolution at the abolition of the empire. Government troops fought against rebels. Thomas carried on with his work as usual. The change caused him to cut his long Chinese tail and send it to his sister as a souvenir. In his district he started a popular school and received recognition for it from the government.

The First World war and the consequences of it for his homeland made him suffer: “What a misery did the war cause over the whole world. And my homeland, that I love so much, lies there crushed in terrible spiritual and material misery”. Floods and famine formed the transfer to the twenties. As a result, gangs of robbers turned up.

Thomas was appointed by Msgr. Schraven to the Minor Seminary, to replace the headmaster. To him, it meant more work and many worries. He had to care for 150 persons. He was also the spiritual counsellor of the Chinese secular priests, whom he gave spiritual exercises. And moreover he became the confessor of the sisters of Chengtingfu.



He was present at the inauguration of the new Trappist convent by Msgr. Schraven on the 8<sup>th</sup> of May 1928. The day after, the railway bridges in the neighbourhood were blown up. The Northern troops started their retreat, plundering and stealing beasts of burden. They were replaced by Southern troops, who were kind to the people but ruthless to the missionaries. They took quarter at the Chengtingfu residence, and the commander and his staff lived in the bishop’s house of Msgr. Schraven. The Seminary of Thomas was not taken, but the students were not

sent for holidays, because of fear for quartering by the soldiers. After two months, the troops retreated and left their 100 wounded to the care of the sisters.

Thomas also became the confessor of the Trappists and preached the retreats for two communities of Sisters in the residence of Msgr. Schraven. Also for the women and girls, for the Brothers of St. Paul, for 8 days two times a day an introduction, either in the French or Chinese language.

In 1929, Thomas again became the Director of a district with 40 villages in the surroundings of Chengtingfu. Again it was a year of disasters for China. Because of large floods, 80 million people were being reduced to beggary. Thomas organised a collection to somehow relieve the need.

### **The last years of his life.**

For health reasons, Thomas paid a second visit to his homeland in 1933. He wanted almost to embrace every countryman and every tree in that beloved country. At the end of that year, he returned to China. He travels by train from Shanghai to Peking, as the train can be transferred by ferry in Nanking. With renewed courage and trust in God he started again his work, with all its difficulties, sacrifices and sufferings. Near the Trappist Convent, a village is formed, named “Benedictus village”. Thomas said Holy Mass there, taught religion, preached, and heard confessions, as was done in many other places. At springtime 1934, the Superior of the mission of Chengtingfu became ill, and Thomas, being his assistant, had to replace him. He was a good host and entertainer of his guests. He was always cheerful. His love for God lived deep in his heart, and all his activities for God’s glory made him happy and cheerful. He was also the Pastor of the parishioners of Chengtingfu and was often on his way, from week to week staying in an other place and spending the night somewhere else.

In August 1937, the hostilities between China and Japan started in Peking. Chengtingfu is situated in the third line of defence of the northern Chinese armies. Guns are erected. Trenches are made in the villages around, and a kind of village army is organised. All this

because the Japanese are expected to come. In the surroundings, some 3.000 well organised robbers are living, coming out of poverty and misery. They also posed a threat.



On the 9<sup>th</sup> of October, Chengtingfu, the town where Thomas felt safe, was captured by the Japanese army. In the morning, a Chinese priest came to warn Thomas that they wanted to kill Europeans. Ceska answered reassuringly: “But we won’t hurt the soldiers”, though he did tell this message to the others. The same evening, the warning appeared to be correct. A tragedy occurred. At evening time, he was in the refectory, when a troop of soldiers broke into the room, blindfolded the present Europeans, and tied the hands on their backs. They are moved outside in the night. After more than four weeks, the remains of the 9 Europeans were found.

It appeared that they had been killed on that same evening. Therewith ended 40 years of missionary life of Thomas Ceska.

*The remains, found after the massacre.*

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