

## **Father Emmanuel Robial.**

“One day you will get the message, that I have died in China”, the young André Robial told some of his very surprised relatives, when they came to visit him, during the time that he was still a student at the minor seminary at Rouen. Was it only an ardent wish or a foreboding? On 9 October 1937, Msgr. Schraven and his Companions were murdered in Zhending, and Father Emmanuel Robial was one of them.

### **Childhood.**

André was born on the 25<sup>th</sup> of October 1884, in Colmery (Nièvre), the village where his mother had been born as well. He was the oldest of a family with 13 children, where the eldest and the youngest became religious. On the 1<sup>st</sup> of November he was baptised, and then André and his mother moved back to Rouen in Normandy, where his father was a clockmaker. Here, André passed the first years of his childhood. The family settled in Mont-aux-Malades, a suburb of Rouen. He went to school at the brothers of St.Gervais in Rouen.

*Picture: Jeanne, Robert and André around 1894*



### **The seminary and the army.**

He went to the seminary in October 1895, which was located 200 meters from his parental home. He followed the classes there, and attracted attention by his religiosity. From there, he went to the major seminary and received the tonsure and the minor orders in the cathedral of Rouen, in 1902 and 1904. During holidays, he dedicated himself to youth work. Military service waited for him. He first served in the 39<sup>th</sup> regiment of the infantry at Rouen, and later in the 154<sup>th</sup> regiment of the infantry at Saint Michel. In March 1907, he returned to the seminary. In the meantime, he had felt a desire for the contemplative life. In his notes he wrote: “Since June 1907, I feel a real need for this life of solitude, silence, of prayer, of penance, work and brotherly love..”. The superior of the seminary tested this vocation during a few months, and in October 1907, the decision was made to enter the Trappists of la Trappe de Soligny.

### **Religious life.**



On the 2<sup>nd</sup> of November, André arrived, and asked to be accepted as a brother, but this was refused, and a few weeks later he received the monk's habit of a novice, to become a choir monk and was named Emmanuel. From the beginning, his devotion attracted attention. He was ambitious and wanted to become a holy religious. He took the minor vows on 21 November 1909 and started his theology studies with punctuality and perseverance. The final vows followed on 21 November 1912, and a few weeks later his ordination to the subdiaconate in the cathedral of Sées. The ordination to the diaconate he received at Countances, and finally he was ordained a priest at Sées on the 17<sup>th</sup> of May 1913. He then was appointed assistant novice master. The fact that he was

somehow too strict for others was forgiven him, because it was known that he was more strict for himself.

### **The First World War.**

War broke out, and on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of August, Emmanuel had to report to the 4<sup>th</sup> section of nurses, and on the 22<sup>nd</sup>, he replaced a father of a family, at his own request, and left for the front.

He took part in the battles of Champagne. In August 1915, he became a stretcher-bearer, which was a dangerous post, because he had to fetch the wounded at the firing line. He helped the dying wherever he could do so. He became a corporal nurse, and a voluntary army chaplain as well, of the 103<sup>rd</sup> infantry regiment till June 1918. He survived many dangers, but on the 21<sup>st</sup> of March 1918 he was poisoned by gas and was evacuated. On 17 April, he received the English military medal. On the 21<sup>st</sup> of May, he returned to the front in Flanders near Mont Kemmel. When he had a chance, he visited the Trappists of the Katsberg, who lived in that neighbourhood. During one of those visits, the Abbey was bombarded, and Emmanuel was a cool-headed rescue worker then.. When he became a victim of a gas attack, for the second time, he was not sent to the front anymore.

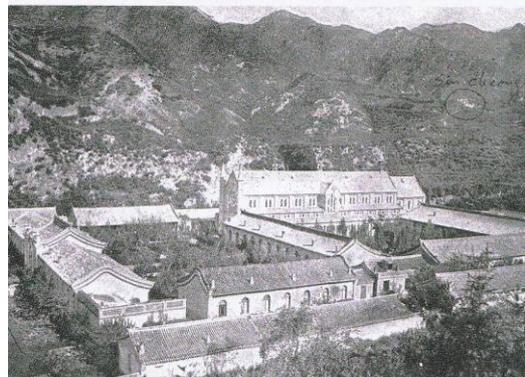
In all situations, Father Emmanuel remained a monk and a priest. His white monk habit was with him in all places he moved to, and he wore it during church celebrations. His apostolic zeal was visible under his military. His double function of stretcher bearer and army-chaplain did not let him forget the monastery of the Trappists. When he received permission, he went back there, and in March 1919, he was allowed to return definitively. How excellently he fulfilled his function in the army was made clear by the four army medals he received, by which he was praised for his courage, with which he fetched the wounded soldiers and buried those who were killed in action, sometimes under a rain of bombs.

### **Novice master.**

Back in the monastery, he was appointed as a Novice Master. He saw this himself as a function beyond his capacities, but started the heavy task obediently. The noviciate counted 19 persons at that moment. He saw to it, that the hard and strict life of the noviciate took place in a sphere of peace and serenity. He was not very eloquent, but won hearts by the power of his own example. He showed great humility, and his love and dedication never left him.

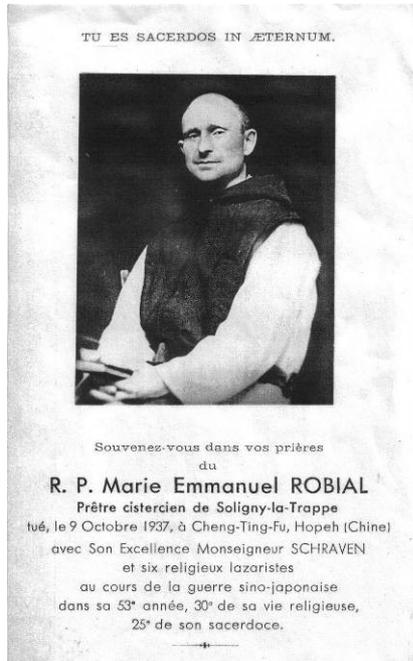
### **The missionary.**

During the summer of 1923, Dom Louis Brun, from the Abbey of Our Lady of Consolation, in China, visited his Abbey. At the chapter he gave a conference about his monastery and made a plea for contemplative monasteries in mission countries. Father Emmanuel was won and received permission from his superiors to leave. On the 18<sup>th</sup> of September, he left la Trappe to go to China. For a second time he also left his family, knowing that he would never see them again. Arrived in China, he



*Picture: Abbey Our Lady of Comfort in China*

proved to be the monk his abbot desired: ready for all sacrifices, a monk of silence and prayer, of work and penance. The first years he passed in the abbey of Our Lady of Consolation, to be sent later to the new foundation of Our Lady of Joy (Liesse) in Zhending. Right from his arrival in the Far East, he suffered from poor health. Therefore, the process of adaptation took a longer time and was more difficult for him. Besides, there were in Zhending the inconveniences that always go with new foundations. But in spite of all this, he remained a model religious and an example for others.



### **Martyr with Msgr. Schraven and Companions.**

When the Japanese troops advanced on Zhending, the abbot of Our Lady of Consolation ordered the Trappist community, to seek refuge in town, at the mission of Msgr. Schraven. The Bishop doubted if the town would be safer than the countryside, but they were welcome. On 29 September, the superior of the monastery sent father Emmanuel with two ill confreres to town, where they were installed in Our Lady of Refuge, an outbuilding of the mission of the Lazarists. When, with the advance of the Japanese, the whole community wanted to move to the town, all the town gates proved to be closed. After the occupation of the town, on the 9<sup>th</sup> of October, Father Emmanuel went to the residence of Msgr. Schraven. That same evening he was in the dining room with Msgr. Schraven, when the Japanese captured all the Europeans present and led them away. ( see 'The drama of Zhending' )

Again a victim fell in this new Trappist community, which in 1933, during an extremely hot summer, lost 5 members due to sunstroke.

### **A miracle ascribed to Father Robial.**

In the archives of the Trappist abbey La Trappe, where André Robial entered, a letter is found from a lady, Mrs. Lucien Farcy of 25 September 1946, who told the abbot about the miracle that happened to her child, and that she saw as an answer to her prayer to Father Emmanuel. Her two years old son had measles, and on top of it got serious pneumonia. His heart was very weak. The visiting doctor gave the mother not much hope for healing. In the evening, at about nine o'clock, he had a nightmare and remained nearly lifeless after that till 3 o'clock in the morning. The mother decided to pray to Father Robial and asked him for his intercession, either to heal her son, or to give her the courage and power to endure the hardship. After a quarter of an hour, her son Gerard started to breath weakly and his little eyes opened. A smile followed, and the mother heard him saying: "My dear mama". The favour was received.

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