About 2:00 a.m., September 1, 1962, Typhoon Wanda made it plain that this time Hong Kong lay directly in her path. The wind howled, and shrieked, and then the rains came. At 7:00 the next morning it really rained and howled in earnest. The number 10 typhoon signal which means “batten the hatches and be prepared for anything” was hoisted at 8:00 and we were supposed to be in the eye of the typhoon at 10:00 a.m. As you know, Mother, the hospital is surrounded by squatters in their makeshift huts that serve them as homes. Very soon these began to collapse. Throughout Mass, we could hear the tin of their roofs, which is held in place by rocks begin to blow and sail past the windows. Doors that were locked and bolted, were wrenched open by the wind, and the glass smashed. Putty was peeled away from the window frames by the wind and rain, and the panes of glass then just blew away and smashed. Electricity was off most of the day. Water just flows in around tightly closed windows and doors, so the mopping-up process is an unending one.

Maryknoll Sisters, Our Lady of Maryknoll Hospital, Wong Tai Sin, September 1962

In the 1960s, Hong Kong was struggling with poverty and developing its own industries. Working-class communities emerged, with families securing improved means of living. From a refugee community, Hong Kong gradually stood on its own feet. In the midst of poverty, there was always hope for a better tomorrow. Although people were poor, they realized they were becoming less poor; and that was where their confidence for the future lay. The provision of relief alone was no longer adequate to satisfy the growing desires of society. Apparently, newcomers were settling down and their families were looking for education, employment, and welfare opportunities. With expanding population, Hong Kong had become the fastest growing diocese in the world—by 1960 the number of Catholics increased steadily at between 10,000 and 15,000 every year. As society took its form, Maryknoll Sisters began to consider a long-term social service program. In 1961 they established Our Lady of Maryknoll Hospital in Wong Tai Sin, as a significant move in offering ongoing service to the needy. At the same time, they ventured into new fields of casework and social work training. Building on their work in the past decade, they continued their role as a third force in society, serving the needs of the local community.

Our Lady of Maryknoll Hospital

Maryknoll Sisters had long thought of setting up and running a general hospital in Hong Kong. The first record of such a proposal was in 1953, and the suggested
location was the Observatory Road in Tsimshatsui, Kowloon. At first, the government’s Medical Department was also interested in the project. Although the plan did not materialize, the Sisters knew that there were public demands for the hospital and that the authority was supportive of it. They continued to look for possibilities and sources of funding. In June 1957 the Sisters received the decision from the Far East Refugee Program (F.E.R.P.) of the American Foreign Service, “to make program funds available for the construction of a medical facility in Hong Kong.”

The F.E.R.P. was willing to pay for the hospital building and equipment, and asked that the government provide the land and site preparation. It made its promise with the understanding that the hospital served the poor who left China after 1949, and should be situated close to refugee communities. The F.E.R.P. was willing to sponsor the Maryknoll endeavor. Having secured financial support, the Sisters began negotiations with the F.E.R.P. on the size of the hospital, and with the government on the location.

Three months later, Maryknoll Sisters submitted their proposal to C. B. Burgess of the Colonial Secretariat. They planned to build a hospital with 50 beds, a large outpatient clinic and an extension in future that allowed for an expansion to 100 beds plus a training school for nurses. In the beginning, they estimated a yearly running cost of HK$300,000, which hopefully could depend on government subvention. Having discussed the matter with the Medical Department and Crown Lands Division of the Public Works Department, the Sisters reported that Wong Tai Sin was a suitable location. In 1958, the prospect of a general hospital for the poor was encouraging. The government was willing to grant land for construction of the hospital, and the F.E.R.P. allocated US$197,000 for the building and equipment. In the early stage, the Sisters needed 2 doctors, 9 nurses, a housekeeper, and a superior to serve in the hospital. They asked the Motherhouse for Sisters, who had taken the Canadian Medical Examinations and could practise locally, to be assigned to Hong Kong. The Sisters-personnel had to study Cantonese before opening the hospital.

In April, the government promised an annual subvention of HK$250,000 for the operation of the hospital, to be supplemented by an additional sum of HK$100,000 from the N.C.W.C.

In the latter part of 1958, there was a change in leadership—Sister Barbara Mersinger (Rose Victor) replaced Sister Mary Imelda as superior of the Maryknoll Sisters in the South China Region, which included both Hong Kong and Taiwan. In 1961 Sister Mary Ignatia became superior of the Sisters, as well as administrator, in Our Lady of Maryknoll Hospital on Shatin Pass Road, Wong Tai Sin. That year was World Refugee Year; and Mother Mary Colman Coleman, then mother general of the Maryknoll Sisters’ congregation, visited the hospital site. Finally, construction of the hospital building was completed. Construction was sluggish because the contractors had a few projects simultaneously in hand. This was typical of the growing Hong Kong society. With limited funding, the Sisters were careful how they spent. They had new furnishings, but they also received old furniture from the Motherhouse and American donors. The Sisters unpacked provisions and asked a steel company to repair and repaint the furniture. It saved a lot of money to use the old beds, tables, and cabinets. The front hall was “a show case for hospital equipment as truckloads of equipment arrived, but no matter how cluttered the front foyer became it was soon