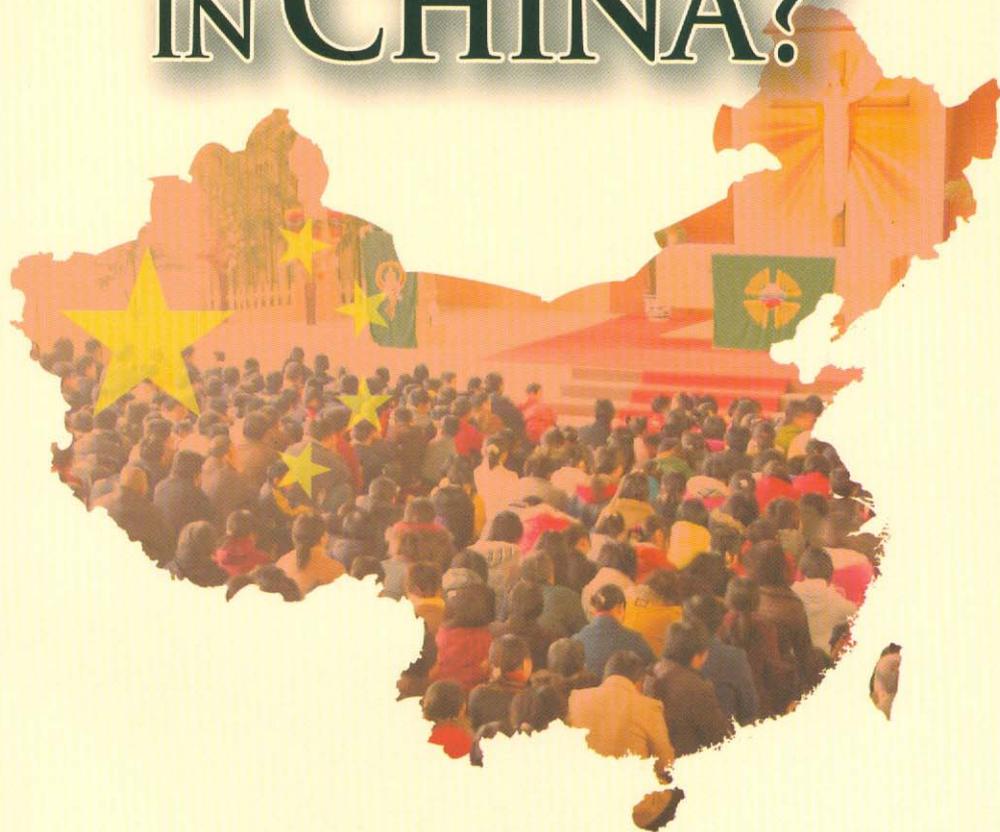


What Future for the CHURCH IN CHINA?



Angelo S. Lazzarotto

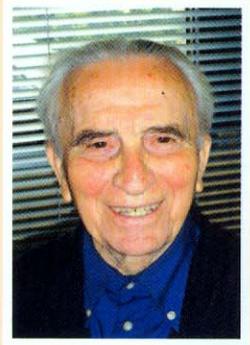
Holy Spirit Study Centre, Hong Kong

The Book

The future of Catholic Christianity in China has often aroused concern throughout the centuries. But today, as this book reveals, a situation of unprecedented gravity is threatening the very nature of the Church. The State structures responsible for “managing” the Catholic minority, along with four other officially recognized religions, have in fact gone so far as to impose by physical force the ordination of some bishops against a clear papal prohibition. While legitimate bishops were pressured to perform such ceremonies, the presence of excommunicated ones was also imposed, causing suffering and division in the Catholic communities. Moreover, since July 2012, the authorities have detained and stripped Bishop Thaddeus Ma Daqin, the new auxiliary bishop of Shanghai, of his episcopal ministry for having declared his decision to disassociate himself from the Patriotic Association. Pope Benedict already in 2007 had invited all Catholics to especially pray for the Church in China. This need, confirmed by Pope Francis, appears even more urgent today.

The Author

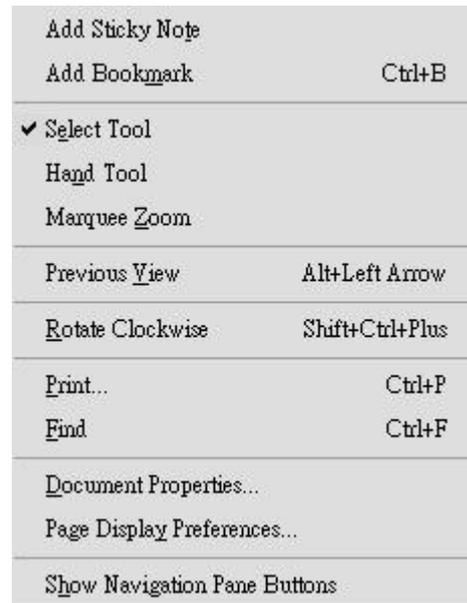
Angelo S. Lazzarotto (born in 1925) first arrived in Hong Kong in 1956. Called to Rome in 1965, he spent 12 years in the central administration of his mission society, the Pontifical Institute for Foreign Missions (PIME). When he could return to Hong Kong in 1979, with the blessing of Bishop John B. Wu he dedicated himself to fostering contacts and collaboration with cultural institutions and Catholic communities tentatively re-appearing in Mainland China. In 1980, he was one of the founders of the Holy Spirit Study Centre in Hong Kong and of its bilingual journal “Tripod,” to which he often contributed articles. In 1982 he published in Hong Kong “The Catholic Church in Post-Mao China,” of which there was a Chinese edition also. Throughout the following decades, Lazzarotto continued to foster friendship with social and religious groups in China. His numerous essays comprised historical research, personal experiences and comments on the special realities of the Chinese religious situation.



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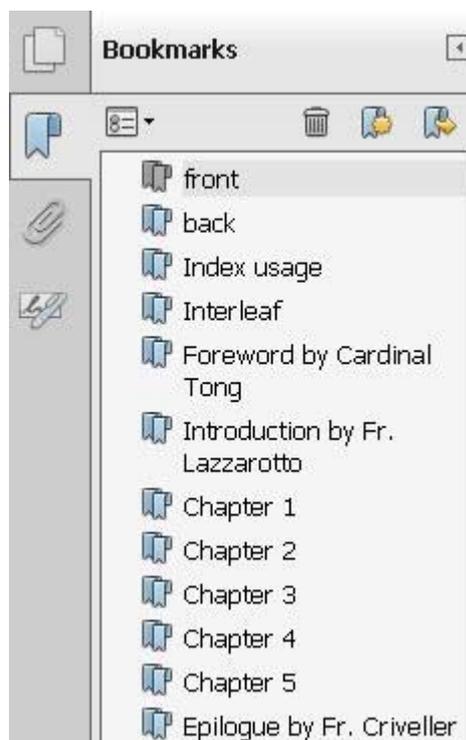
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*What Future
for the Church
in China ?*

by Fr. Angelo S. Lazzarotto, PIME
Edited by Fr. Peter Barry, MM, and
Dr. Anthony Lam

Published by
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FOREWORD

Fr. Angelo Lazzarotto is an old friend of the Diocese of Hong Kong, of the Holy Spirit Study Centre and of me personally. Since 1980, when Card. J.B. Wu of blessed memory, asked me to start the Holy Spirit Study Centre, I have been working in close collaboration with Fr. Lazzarotto. Before that, Fr. Lazzarotto had served the Diocese of Hong Kong for many years. Thus we can say that Fr. Lazzarotto's loving relationship with China dates back for a long time.

Since the reform and opening up of China more than thirty years ago, Fr. Lazzarotto has continued his concern with developments in the Church in China. In the early 80's, his book, *The Catholic Church in Post-Mao China*, helped people overseas to understand the revitalized Church that was starting up again in China.

Fr. Lazzarotto practices what he preaches. Although he is now quite old, he never tires of bringing groups of Catholics of various nationalities to visit China, and to promote dialogue and mutual knowledge, so as to clear up misunderstandings and remove prejudices. But after the illegal ordinations of Chinese Bishops, which started again in 2010, and relations between China and the Holy See became tense again because of this, Fr. Lazzarotto began to feel uncomfortable. Therefore, even though he was quite elderly, he deliberately wrote this book to show his concern about the current situation of the Church in China, and to offer suggestions to help resolve its difficulties. He hopes it will be a contribution to the Church in that country.

This new book covering the most recent years of the history of the Church in China, is one of the best Fr. Lazzarotto has ever written. It represents the results of his careful observation of developments in the Church there. Perhaps not all observers of the Church in China will agree with his point of view, but his description of the facts, and of their assessment, are matters that concerned persons cannot indeed overlook.

The original edition of Fr. Lazzarotto's new book is in Italian, and now, after much effort, the English version is coming off the press. For those both inside and outside of China, who care about the Church there, its publication is a cause for rejoicing.

I take this opportunity to offer my old friend, Fr. Lazzarotto my most cordial congratulations on the publication of his new book. I highly recommend the book to a wider audience of readers. From it, I hope that

many more people can share the clear vision and enthusiasm that Fr. Lazzarotto has for China and for the Church in China.

Cardinal John Tong
Bishop of the Catholic Diocese of Hong Kong, and
Director of the Holy Spirit Study Centre
July 10, 2014

INTRODUCTION

The election of Jorge Mario Bergoglio to succeed Benedict XVI as Bishop of Rome and supreme Pastor of the Church took everybody by surprise. Yet, the man called by divine Providence to the helm of the Church “from the end of the world,” is giving new hope also to the small communities living away from the “Centre.” The name Francis, which he chose, was especially welcomed as a good omen by the “little flock” scattered in China. Also some observers saw the fortuitous coincidence of Pope Francis’ election with the beginning of Xi Jinping’s reign as President of the People’s Republic of China as an encouragement to be patient and hopeful, waiting for a favourable time for discussions to start at an official level on the longstanding grave problems beleaguering the Church in China.

One cannot forget that, until the middle of last century, the universal Church’s greatest missionary effort was concentrated on China. Today we are caught between two feelings: on the one hand, the hope that the dream that animated generations of preachers of the Gospel may at last come true, and on the other, the bitter reality of a contrast that is leading that Church to the brink of a schism with unforeseeable consequences.

Seven years ago, Pope Benedict XVI addressed an important *Letter to all the Catholics in the People’s Republic of China*. While encouraging the Chinese Church to safeguard its identity, and to contribute generously to the development of society, he also credited it with a faithful witness and continued growth. Pope Benedict’s words retain their validity in the present difficult circumstances. Catholics all over the world should feel it their duty to join in prayer with their Chinese brothers and sisters, seeking the intercession of Our Lady Help of Christians to overcome their difficulties. Pope Francis, who confessed that being a missionary in Japan was among the dreams of his youth, has already expressed his intention to make Asia the destination for his next intercontinental trip. He surely shares Pope Benedict’s admiration for the commitment and courage of Asian Catholics, who bear “a transparent witness to the importance of the question of God in every field of thought and action,” as Pope Benedict said to the assembly of the Pontifical Council for the Laity in November, 2011. He also added: “Thanks to their faith, vast scenarios of evangelization are unfolding for the Church in the third millennium.” Yet, he cautioned, “In that immense continent, home to different peoples, cultures and religions of ancient origin, ...the Christian message has so far reached only a small minority, who all too often practise their faith in a difficult context, sometimes even of real persecution.”

In this panorama, promising and worrying at one and the same time, China occupies a special position, not only due to the vastness of its territory and number of inhabitants, but more so because of the economic and political importance it has gained in the global balance of power. Besides this, other important East Asian countries share characteristic elements of China’s Confucian tradition.

The present study appeared first in the Italian language¹, in an issue of the journal *Ad Gentes*² devoted to the gospel mission in China. Now, an updated and expanded edition intends to expose the dramatic situation of the 12 million Catholics, whose bishops are pressed to accept the leadership of official structures, which the Beijing government imposed upon them (the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association and a “Conference” of the officially recognized bishops). On July 7, 2013, the Shanghai diocese, while mourning the loss of its pastor Bishop Aloysius Jin Luxian (97), recorded a sad anniversary. One year has now passed since the police detained Shanghai’s new auxiliary bishop, Thaddeus Ma Daqin (whom the authorities initially approved), and prevented him from performing his religious duties. The purpose of the government policy, disguised as patriotism, is to build an “independent” Chinese Church. To justify this, they accuse the Pope of being the head of a foreign (hostile) country.

The book opens up with the present emergency, followed by a rapid review of past evangelization experiences in China. The dramatic facts making up today’s crisis are then recalled in greater detail without forgetting to identify areas of hope for possible constructive dialogue. In the present dramatic situation of the Catholic Church, its resilience and vitality also come to light, and the need for the solidarity and prayer of the Universal Church appears as an urgent duty and an invaluable contribution to solving the present difficult impasse.

My grateful thanks go to the Hong Kong Bishop, Cardinal John Tong Hon, for his unfailing encouragement and the undeserved words of appreciation he graciously wrote in his preface. That this updated analysis of the dramatic Church crisis could have a Chinese language edition published in Hong Kong was also due to His Eminence’s support. For this English language version, I am deeply indebted to the two executive editors of the bilingual quarterly *Tripod*, Anthony Lam and Peter Barry, who used much of their precious time to go through the whole text, revising, polishing and updating it.

I am grateful also to Gianni Criveller, whose epilogue further updates the content of the book, with comments on the rifts that developed between Beijing and the Holy See during 2012.

Angelo S. Lazzarotto

May 24, 2014, Day of Prayer for China

¹ *Quale futuro per la Chiesa in Cina?* EMI, Bologna, 2012, pp. 156.

² This six-monthly journal of Theology and Anthropology of the Mission is edited by the Italian missionary institutes. We refer to the monograph issue on China (2011, n. 1) simply as *A.G.* adding the page number.

Chapter I

THE DANGER OF A SCHISM EMERGES ONCE AGAIN

The word “schism” is a frightening one, especially when it refers to a country which for generations has been a symbol of the missionary expansion of the Church. In the first half of last century, China, liberated from the rigid limits of the millenary imperial regime, seemed a privileged field for evangelization, for both Catholics and Protestants. In the Catholic context, the decision taken by the Holy See, on 8th December 1939, to withdraw the prohibition against the rites to Confucius and the ancestors put in place two centuries earlier during the inauspicious “Rites Controversy,” appeared to be an encouragement to evangelize that large country. Even after the devastating tragedy of the Second World War, missionary initiatives towards China multiplied, so much so that on July 1, 1948 foreign missionary personnel were more numerous than ten years earlier. Bishop Lorenzo M. Balconi, who knew China well, having worked there for 33 years, as Superior General of the Pontifical Institute of Foreign Missions (P.I.M.E.), did not hesitate in 1947 to send 18 young priests and lay brothers to work in the missions entrusted to the Institute there.

The Church in the grip of Communism

But already the murderous civil war was spreading, forcing the Nationalist government to retreat to the island of Taiwan, while the Red Army expanded its control over the whole country. On October 1, 1949 Mao Zedong (1893-1976) could proclaim the birth of the New China. In the years that followed, the whole of Chinese society was overwhelmed by the impact of the Marxist revolution, experiencing periods of extreme difficulty, complicated by the Korean War. The ideological campaigns that shattered the traditional social fabric included the creation of the people’s communes, the Great Leap Forward and the hunt for right-wing elements after the opening of the deceptive “Hundred Flowers Campaign” (1956-58).

Over five thousand foreign missionaries (men and women), committed to announcing the Gospel in China were forced to leave the country, often after undergoing many dramatic experiences. The fragile local Church had to suffer the shock of a regime that considered religious faith a mental aberration destined to disappear. Mao’s government, imitating its Soviet Big Brother, proclaimed a constitutional regulation that allowed for the “freedom to believe or not to believe” in a religion, while developing an effective system to bend even the recognised religions to its own political policies¹.

¹ I had the opportunity to document the revolutionary encounter of the Chinese Catholic mission with Communism in Henan province in *La Cina di Mao processa la Chiesa. I missionari del PIME nel Henan 1938-1954*, EMI, Bologna 2008, pp. 527. Cf. also Elisa Giunipero, *Chiesa cattolica e Cina comunista. Dalla rivoluzione del 1949 al Concilio Vaticano II*, Morcelliana, Brescia 2007.

While New China was shutting itself off from the outside world with an impenetrable Bamboo Curtain, alarming voices filtered through to the West about the forced episcopal ordination (April 13, 1958) of two Franciscan friars in the river city of Hankow (known today as Wuhan), in place of two European bishops who had been forced to leave the country. In that context, John XXIII, the popular Pope who had just been elected to the papal throne, in his first consistory for the appointment of new cardinals (December 15, 1958) expressed the fear that in China “the path was being opened for a deplorable schism.” In the following month he asked for prayers for the Chinese clergy and faithful, who were “directly exposed...to the very serious danger of a disastrous schism.”

At the beginning of the Second Vatican Council, when Pope John XXIII met a group of bishops representing the Chinese Church (most of whom had been deported) he was able to hear a number of convincing accounts about the loyalty of priests forced to comply with the impositions of the State, and he did not use those expressions about schism again. The Council came to an end without issuing any public declaration of excommunication regarding the bishops who had accepted episcopal ordination without papal approval. This was so even though their number, following the second Assembly of Catholic Representatives in 1962, had risen to forty-two.

At that time, a half a century ago, Mao’s China was entering the most disastrous period of its recent history. It was the decade of the so-called Cultural Revolution (1966-76), which seemed to mark the end of all religions. During this period the Church risked being literally suffocated, when all the bishops, even those sponsored by the regime, as well as countless faithful, ended up in labour camps. Fortunately, after Mao’s passing from the scene (September 9, 1976), the situation improved considerably. Private initiative was encouraged when, in December 1978, Deng Xiaoping came to power and opened China up to the outside world. In the past thirty years, church life also resumed and slowly developed. This occurred despite the state bureaucracy’s placing of various obstacles in the path of such development. It must not be forgotten that the oppressive “religious policy” introduced by Mao Zedong remained essentially the same. In recent decades, there have also been a number of attempts at dialogue between Beijing and the Vatican, which have been successful to varying degrees.

The present serious crisis

Today, however, we are plunged into a serious crisis again, sparked by a decision taken by people responsible for the religious policy. On November 20, 2010, the illegitimate ordination of a bishop was carried out with force in the city of Chengde (Hebei), despite an explicit warning from the Holy See. This was followed by the convocation, also forced, in Beijing of the eighth Assembly of Catholic Representatives (December 7-9, 2010) which elected, the highest-ranking members of the Chinese Catholic Bishops’ Conference (CCBC), a structure which the Holy See cannot recognize, and of the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association (CCPA). In the months that followed, the opposition between Beijing and Rome became more accentuated with two new imposed ordinations of bishops, on June 29, and July 14,

2011 respectively, in Leshan (Sichuan) and in Shantou (Guangdong). For the first time, the Holy See decided it would have to reply by declaring that those two priests, by letting themselves be ordained bishops against canon law, had automatically incurred the penalty of excommunication (called *latae sententiae*). Furthermore, the prelates (in communion with Rome) who had let themselves be induced into carrying out those rites were told to explain their conduct, and to express their repentance in public, if possible. The government bodies reacted immediately, firmly and scornfully.

As early as the beginning of 2011, rumours from Beijing expressed “bewilderment and fear” in the Catholic community, for it was mentioned that Rome might intervene with a “formal declaration of schism” for that part of the Chinese Church that operated in opposition to the Holy See. The impression was that the situation was completely out of hand, to the point that a young “patriotic” priest could say: “Why should we worry about the Holy See? It doesn’t understand China!” Francesco Strazzari concluded a factual review with this statement: “There are those who maintain that the political pragmatism (of the Chinese) should be answered with ecclesiastical pragmatism, without yielding on religious rights or human rights” (*Il Regno Attualità*, no. 4, of 15/02/2011, p. 119). This was certainly not an easy path to take, but one that perhaps deserves attention.

Later, Gianfranco Brunelli, recalling that the illegitimate ordinations of June 29 and July 14 had been carried out with the “usual technique” of having new bishops, not acceptable to the Holy See, being ordained by bishops in communion with Rome, also added to the gravity of the situation. He wondered if, as announced, the State structures would continue along this line of open conflict with the Holy See, “as the Vatican cannot go back on its decision of excommunication, what would happen to a Catholic Church in which almost half of its bishops were excommunicated?” Yet, he expressed the opinion that “the new line of the Vatican, which was certainly harsher and firmer, does not seem to have achieved its desired objective.” He also questioned the position of the Secretary of Propaganda Fide, Savio Hon Tai-fai, who in an interview with *Fides*, expressed his amazement about a theology “that claimed autonomy in the choice of bishops and of independence from the Holy See,” that was supposedly “penetrating the Chinese Church” from America and Europe (*Il Regno Attualità*, no. 14, of 15/07/2011, p. 456).

Gerard O’Connell also dwelt on this observation, commenting, on the authoritative site *Vatican Insider* (14/07/2011), on a declaration made on July 8, 2011 by Father Joseph Yang Yu, spokesperson of both the Patriotic Association and the Bishops Conference. Yang Yu had said that, in the absence of normal relations between China and the Holy See, “it is inevitable” that the Church in China chooses and ordains its own bishops according to the traditions of the Church, to meet the urgency of evangelization and of pastoral requirements. O’Connell recalled that such a declaration by Yang Yu provoked many negative comments in China on a well-known Catholic website. But he also pointed out how this spokesman tried to justify his position with arguments from the Scriptures, tradition and the history of the early

Church. It would therefore appear that “the authorities of the institutional Church are developing another theology of the Church which differs from that shared by the Universal Church.”

Another theology?

To confirm this concern, an article by William Grimm from Japan took as its starting point the recent crisis between the Irish government and the Holy See on the lack of oversight over sexual abuse on the part of some bishops, and compares it to Rome’s current practice of appointing new bishops in a country (unlike in the times of Ambrose and Augustine). Recalling that today the Church in China lives with a government that places its policies before the needs of the local Church, Grimm wonders provocatively whether the Vatican is “incapable and perhaps not interested in choosing bishops who are also pastors of flocks,” adding: “Why should Catholics in China be forced to have recourse to Rome?”²

It is well known that the autonomy of local Churches (even without such controversial tones) is a thoroughly debated subject among theologians even in a number of Western Churches. However, statements like this certainly do not foster serene reflection inside the Chinese Church, where already in the past some clergymen had presented arguments to justify the official policy of the government. This is the impression one gets when reading certain theological and historical studies in the bimonthly Chinese magazine, which the official structures in Beijing have published for the past thirty years (carrying the English title *The Catholic Church in China*). It is impossible to ignore that in China today this discourse is sponsored by the Communist Party, and it tends to create the image of a “Chinese Church autonomous” from Rome, in the name of the specificity of China and the requirements of patriotism.

The official press also plays an important role in the campaign against the Holy See. An article in the “*People’s Daily Online*” (11/08/2011) highlights alleged “interference by the Vatican,” which has been denounced by various sides starting from Ireland, the “most Catholic country in the world”, as Pope Paul VI defined it. The article quotes the words of Irish Prime Minister Enda Kenny: “We are fed up with hearing about Canon Law. This is a Republic and it’s a question of civil law.” Dwelling on recent history, the Beijing article paints the Vatican as a “political and economic animal,” which would have made its yoke weigh heavily on emerging countries in particular, and it underlines the fact that England, Scandinavia and parts of Germany have gotten rid of it. China, which did not grow up in a Christian culture, can well question the right of the Vatican to appoint priests (as bishops) in distant

² The author, who writes in *UcaNews* (26/07/2011), thinks that the Catholic Church in China ends up by being persecuted in different ways by the government and by the Vatican. He therefore hopes that it can “find the way to move between the two and develop its own leaders and ways of choosing them, that they can also help the rest of the Church to overcome the sclerotic system that gave us these Irish bishops.”

countries. Besides, “the Pope is not only the Vicar of Rome, which is one of his titles: he is also a head of State, with soldiers who carry real weapons, a diplomatic corps and a bank.” In Europe, this may be taken lightly, “but China is against a foreign state imposing on another one the principles it adopts in its own.” And it quotes (as evidence of interference in the matters of other States) the excommunications of some Catholic politicians in the Netherlands and Belgium in the 1960s, ending with praise for the Irish Catholics who put love for their country above that of the Church, without feeling less Catholic for that. On the other hand, the same article in the *People’s Daily* recognises that “the Church is an admirable institution that brings spiritual comfort to hundreds of thousands of people all over the world.” Having “also a pragmatic structure”, which has been able to adapt over the centuries, today “it has to recognise that it cannot claim that China accepts without discussion extraneous measures that it has not contributed to creating.” “The Vatican has to recognise the potential of a country like China and its cultural differences.” “Otherwise it risks being considered as more interested in its temporal power than the spiritual needs of its Chinese faithful”.³

The importance of politics in the Communist Party

In Mao Zedong’s time, Communism was a sort of State religion. Party members and simple citizens had to confess their sins and promise to make amends in front of a picture or the statue of the great leader. Many things have changed since then. Authoritative voices, even in the Party, kept their distance from the pseudo-scientific vision of Marxism that branded religion as the “opium of the people.” Confidential statistics of a few years ago showed that even among Party members at least one-third had some religious belief, an obvious sign of disappointment at the corruption and lack of ideals in the official ideology. At the present time, however, a certain return to ideological fundamentalism seems to prevail.

Such is the contradictory context of the recent developments we are discussing. The involvement of high-ranking Party and government officials in the handling of relations with the Catholic Church is not new. Jia Qinglin, president of the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference, and the number four person on the Standing Committee of the *Politburo* of the CCP (of which he has been a member for a decade), has been very active on this front. At the conclusion of the aforementioned National Assembly of Catholic Representatives in December 2010, he also received the delegates in the Great Hall of the People, stressing the Party’s traditional line, and insisting on the need to resist foreign infiltration. Not a few Catholic delegates publicly expressed their enthusiastic agreement with his remarks.

In late January 2011, the State Administration for Religious Affairs (SARA), after holding an evaluation meeting in Haikou, Hainan, published its 2010 work report and

³ The *People’s Daily* article was reprinted in the Hong Kong Catholic weekly, *Sunday Examiner* of 21/08/2011.

its forthcoming priority agenda. For the year 2011 it stressed the decision to “guide the ‘one Association and one Conference’ of the Catholic Church to fully implement the spirit of the 8th National Assembly of the Catholic Representatives, to strengthen efforts in the education of administering the Church autonomously and independently as well as in its democratic management.” They also planned “to deepen the formation of the clergy by organizing 6 training courses for them involving more than 1,000 people.” The SARA officials also resolved to strengthen regulation over the religious activities of foreign nationals within China's borders, and to resist foreign infiltration under the pretext of religion (Cf. *Tripod*, n. 164, Spring 2012, p. 46).

This means that the political power (through SARA offices) is determined to force the Catholic Church in China to consolidate doctrinal and pastoral lines that are at odds with universally recognized Catholic traditions. In fact, a month later (February 21-25, 2012), the leaders of the “One Association and One Conference” gathered in Kunming, Yunnan, where among other things they decided on a plan for the next episcopal ordinations (Cf. *Tripod* 164, p. 47).

Then, after a 3rd meeting of the leaders of ‘the one Association and one Conference’ (not casually the Patriotic Association is always mentioned first, before the Bishops Conference), the spokesman Yang Yu reiterated (on June 23) that it is the urgent duty of the Church in China to choose and ordain bishops for the 44 vacant dioceses (out of 94), for the purpose of the development of the Church and of evangelization. Once again, remarkably at such a meeting, SARA director Wang Zuo'an gave the main speech. Then the two illicit episcopal ordinations, mentioned above which served as a direct challenge to the Holy See, went ahead at Leshan (June 29, 2011) and Shantou (July 14, 2011) as scheduled.

The meddling of the State Administration for Religious Affairs into Church matters went so far as to see them publish (on 4 July 2011) a set of “Norms for the Appointment of Parish Priests in the Catholic Church of China,” with immediate effect (Cf. *Tripod* 164, pp. 53-4). The de-facto joint management of Catholic Church affairs by the Patriotic Association and the Bishops Conference was again confirmed when a new board of directors for the National Major seminary in Beijing was announced (August 22), with bishop Fang Xingyao as president and bishop Ma Yinglin vice-president and rector of the seminary (Cf. *Tripod* 164, p. 57).

Many foreign and Chinese observers explain the extreme pressure exercised on the Catholic Church as due to the prevalence of leftist factions in Chinese political life.

A crucial expression of such trend was an amendment to the Code of Criminal Procedure approved on August 30, 2011, legalising “detention under surveillance.” These are the so-called “forced disappearances” which allow the detention of people considered suspicious or dangerous, even without a trial and without specific accusations. The well-known dissident Wei Jingsheng did not hesitate to speak of “a return to the dark times of the Cultural Revolution” (*AsiaNews*, 19/09/2011). This may be due to a determination to prevent any contamination spreading to China from the “jasmine revolution” taking place in other parts of the world.

Willy Wo-Lap Lam, a Hong Kong analyst with an in-depth knowledge of China, stated that this leftist trend also emerges in the orientations of the 12th Five-Year Plan

(2011-2015) approved by the People's Congress in the Spring of 2011. It was also learned that in mid-October 2011, during the 6th plenary session of the Party's 17th Central Committee, Secretary-General Hu Jintao (who was also President of the Republic) denounced a strategic conspiracy to westernise the country in order to divide it. He insisted on the need to reinforce the "Socialist culture." The official Party journal *Qiu Shi* (Seek truth) published a summary of this speech on January 1, 2012 (*AsiaNews*, 02/01/2012). The previous month, the same Party journal had published a comment on the discussions of the Central Committee signed by Zhu Weiqun, Vice Director of the United Front. In his article, Zhu lashed out at religious conversions in the Communist Party, stating that these weaken the Party, making its role in controlling religions confused. Stressing that religion and communist "faith" are irreconcilable, he especially criticised the Catholic Church. It is usually the Department of Propaganda that handles the setting up of ideological lines for its members. The fact that this outburst of Maoist extremism comes from the United Front Department, to which the Communist Party entrusts "guidance" regarding religions, appears as a matter of particular concern (*South China Morning Post*, 19/12/2011; *AsiaNews*, 20/12/2011). At a later lecture given at Qinghua University in Beijing, Zhu Weiqun repeated the theme that the main instrument hostile forces in the West use to culturally infiltrate China was the propagation of Christianity. In many circles within the regime, the Catholic Church is also considered a threat for the perceived role it played in the collapse of Communism in Poland. On the other hand, practice confirms that there seems to be greater tolerance for traditional religions, such as Taoism and Buddhism, because of a perceived need to fill a void created by a lack of religious faith.

Bernardo Cervellera attributed this new edition of Maoist rhetoric to the fight for power in the leadership, in light of the then imminent replacement of President Hu Jintao and Prime Minister Wen Jiabao as leaders of the country. However, according to several different observers, the motivation that drove the Chinese authorities to approve of the recent three illegitimate ordinations of bishops appeared to be "incomprehensible." It is also difficult to understand whether this decision represents the official position of the Chinese government as such. Or did a subordinate body make the decision? Obviously, even thirty years after Deng Xiaoping's historic "open door policies," some internal factions are not resigned to a minimum of religious freedom within the confines of the country.

Professor Ren Yanli, formerly responsible for the Institute of Christianity at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in Beijing, wrote that he is convinced the policy that led to the recent incidents "goes against the Marxist principle on religion and inverts the direction of the Chinese revolution; there is an attempt to draw the government into a mess of religious conflicts, doing what no other government in the world would do." He went on to say: "China follows the principle of separation between Church and State, ... and ecclesiastical affairs are not State affairs. The government should not guide the Church, and ecclesiastical personnel should not have positions in political institutions. The affairs of the Church should be decided inside the Church," Prof. Ren concluded. (*UcaNews*, 22/07/2011)

The carrot and the stick

In such a social context, it is inevitable that the Catholic minority are deeply affected. First of all, there are the communities not recognised by the State, which the police have always monitored. In August 2011, four “underground” priests were arrested in Shandong, and in September a number of others in Gansu. But even the “official” structures of the Church are subject to manipulation. It is a classic kind of carrot and stick method. When a young bishop of Shanxi, who should be in communion with Rome, was asked why he had taken part in that problematic Assembly of Catholic representatives in Beijing in December 2010, he replied that not going would have meant antagonising the local authorities, and causing a paralysis in the work of his diocese.

A Chinese priest, who signs himself *Tang Xia*, complained about the danger of the pollution of pastoral activity by political interests. He mentioned the extreme case of the provincial seminary in Hebei, where, in 2010, officials of the province tried to appoint a Communist SARA official as vice-rector of the seminary (this did not occur because the seminarians went on strike). He also noted: “In the areas for information or on the walls of the churches in certain ‘open’ parishes, it is possible to read the regulations of the CCPA and of the Chinese Bishops’ Conference, creating conflicts and divisions within the Church, because the ‘underground’ Catholics, who refuse to recognise those structures supported by the government, feel insulted.” Perhaps, *Tang Xia* observes, “We have tolerated the principle of the “democratic administration of the Church” too much. Such a policy allows outsiders to interfere in the running of the Church, even superceding the administration of the bishops. (*UcaNews*, 15/12/2011)

A recent episode confirms the confused and dangerous climate prevailing in the Chinese Church. More than twenty members of the Patriotic Association and of the (official) Bishops’ Conference, including several bishops, some priests and a nun, were summoned in August 2011 to Harbin, in Manchuria, for a week’s study session. This was followed by a cultural trip. The United Front of the Party and SARA organized everything, and government officials from these two bodies were in the entourage. A meeting was arranged at the final stop, Beijing, with the then head of the United Front Department, Du Qinglin, and his deputy Zhu Weiqun, as well as the director of the State Administration for Religious Affairs Wang Zuo’an. The group included two illegitimate bishops who had recently been ordained (and excommunicated). On the trip, some of the participants apparently did not want to concelebrate Mass with them but, according to information from “a priest from northern China,” once they arrived in Beijing, the group celebrated the liturgy in the Nantang Church on August 23, 2011. The chief celebrant was the (legitimate) bishop of the capital Bishop Joseph Li Shan. “About a dozen bishops, including some illegitimate ones, such as Joseph Ma Yinglin (elected President of the official Bishops’ Conference in December 2010), Vincent Zhan Silu, Joseph Guo Jincan, Joseph Huang Bingzhang and Paul Lei Shiyin are believed to have taken part.” The concelebrants included Johan Fang Xingyao, Bishop of Linyi (Shandong), recognised by the Pope but elected President of the Patriotic Association in December 2010, and

the main celebrant at the illegitimate ordinations in Leshan and Shantou. I have not been able to check the accuracy of this information but this “priest from the north” observes that “the majority of Catholics consider such an action to be a provocation towards the Vatican.” He added, “While they suffer wounds in their hearts, the faithful still await, with the hope that their bishops will repent for their actions against the faith.” (*UcaNews*, 22/08; 04/09; 09/09/2011).

On November 30, 2011 in Yibin in Sichuan, elderly Bishop John Chen Shizhong (95 years old), recognized by both Rome and Beijing, presided over the beautiful ceremony of the episcopal ordination of his coadjutor Peter Luo Xuegang. However, to the bewilderment and suffering of the faithful, Lei Shiyin, illegitimately ordained in June 2011 as bishop of Leshan, Sichuan, and excommunicated for this, also participated in the ordination of Bishop Luo, who before going to Yibin, had been a priest of the Leshan Diocese. Father Federico Lombardi, the spokesman of the Holy See, commenting on this, recalled “in ordinary situations the presence of Bishop Lei Shiyin should have been absolutely excluded. (His participation) would entail canonical consequences for the other bishops taking part.” He added, however, in the concrete case it is probable that the concelebrating bishops “were unable to prevent it without serious problems...” Lei Shiyin is the chairperson of the Patriotic Association of Sichuan Province, and is openly supported by the government (*Zenit*, 01/11/2011). Lei Shiyin repeated his defiant act on April 19, 2012, when he participated in the ordination of a new bishop for the Nanchong Diocese of Sichuan Province. The *Sunday Examiner*, a Hong Kong Catholic weekly, reported on this ordination in a front page article entitled, “Presence of illicit bishop puts spanner in the works at ordination.” The new bishop, forty-seven-year-old Joseph Chen Gong'ao, had been the diocesan administrator of Nanchong and rector of the Sichuan Catholic seminary. He enjoys a good reputation. The Holy See had approved him for episcopal ordination ten years previously, and the government had added its consent in 2010. After his ordination, Bishop Joseph Chen announced that one of his priorities would be the ongoing formation of the clergy, Sisters and seminarians. He also said that he would encourage the 86,000 lay faithful of his diocese to contribute to spreading the faith. People present at the ordination, as quoted by *AsiaNews*, called the presence of (excommunicated bishop) Lei Shiyin as disrespectful to the Church, and a catalyst to further division within the Catholic community of China. (*Sunday Examiner*, 29/04/2012)

The faithful are at a loss

The fact that several bishops in communion with Rome, who have been forced against their will to participate in illegitimate ordinations, also contributes to disorientation of the faithful. Some may ask: “Were they really unable to offer any opposition?” They would like to know: what is the status of these bishops in the Church today? Moreover, acts of pastoral jurisdiction by illegitimate bishops also weigh heavily on the normal life of the communities. On November 30, 2011, Bishop Joseph Ma Yinling ordained six deacons in the rural district of Shilin, in his diocese

of Kunming (Yunnan). An elderly administrator recognised by the Holy See, Lawrence Zhang Wenchang, still lived in Kunming. He was in a hospital with terminal cancer. Bishop Ma Yinling is reported to have visited him several times. But some Church observers questioned whether he had asked Father Zhang for the dismissorial letters for the deacons, as required by Canon Law. Lawrence Zhang subsequently died on February 5, 2012.

Even more disturbing was Bishop Ma's performance of the priestly ordination of six deacons on March 26, 2012. Three of them were from the neighbouring Dali diocese, and belonged to three different ethnic groups, Tibetan, Miao and Jingpo. Up to then the Dali diocese had only three priests and three Sisters, serving a Catholic population of 80,000, mostly members of tribal groups scattered in remote mountainous areas. Church observers think that there was no need for Bishop Ma to violate Church law in order to have the deacons ordained priests. He could have sent them to a papal approved bishop to be ordained. His action makes the new priests validly ordained, but irregular according to Canon Law (*Sunday Examiner*, 25/03/2012).

The Roman unapproved bishop Joseph Huang Bingzhing of Shantou (Guangdong Province) made the opposite decision. His diocese too had three deacons ready for ordination as priests. However, he himself chose not to perform the ordination. Rather, he sent the deacons to the Haimen Diocese (in Jiangsu) Province, where the papal approved Bishop Joseph Shen Bin ordained them to the priesthood on October 27, 2011. Bishop Huang was not present at the ceremony. However, here too some observed that canon law had not been followed, as the legitimate pastor of Shantou, Bishop Peter Zhuang Jianjian, who is not recognised by the government, had not been consulted, i.e., he not been asked for dismissorial letters for the new priests (*UcaNews*, 14/12/2011).

Another priest, who signed himself *Guanshan Kanwu*, who says he represents an underground community, complained about the lack of attention by certain Vatican officials with responsibility for China. He said that "problems pile up" and many answers are perceived "as not being from brothers and sisters, but from a terrible bureaucracy" (*UcaNews*, and *Sunday Examiner*, 24/04/2011). According to him, the recognition by the Holy See of bishops belonging to the Patriotic Association ends up as being a victory for the government. At the same time, visits by ecclesiastical experts to official churches only, without the possibility of meeting the underground communities, can only represent unilateral relations. Pope Benedict XVI's 2007 Letter to the Catholics of China had been perceived as a "ray of light," but since then various problems existing in the Church have not been clarified.

An incident involving legitimate and illegitimate bishops occurred also in Fujian. A Catholic signing himself *Simple*, in a letter to the Hong Kong *Sunday Examiner* (6/3/2011), mentioned the complicated situation in his diocese of Mindong, which is one of the oldest in China, and where the official community represents only 3% of the Catholic population. The official bishop, Vincent Zhan Silu (ordained without papal mandate on January 6, 2000), whom the government openly supports, has only 5 priests out of almost 50 in the diocese. The occasion for bewilderment was the

consecration of a church, which had recently been renovated in the town of Muyang. Zhan Xilu presided at the ceremony. This was followed by the ordination of three new priests linked to Bishop Zhan (who then had 8 priests to work with). However, Bishop Joseph Cai Bingrui, papal recognized bishop of the neighboring diocese of Xiamen, performed the ordination ceremony. *Simple* notes that Zhan himself has not carried out any ordinations in recent years, most likely to avoid the situation of local Catholics boycotting “his” few priests, if he had ordained them. But the writer complains about the confusion such events cause among the Catholic community. Moreover, the legitimate bishop of Mindong, Vincent Huang Shoucheng, 89, had not even been consulted about the ordination, nor about the invitation to the bishop of Xiamen to take part. A further clash occurred in the Mindong diocese, when all the underground Catholics of Tashan village, Ningde district, closed the church door and defended it against the attempt of the official bishop Zhan Silu, supported by local civil authorities, to occupy it, and to send an official priest to substitute for the underground one already there. (Cf. *Tripod* 164, p. 50).

The danger of having “Mandarin Bishops”

In an article on an Italian church website, Sandro Magister denounced the “mandarin bishops”, namely “those bishops who instead of being united to the successor of Peter ...act as officials of the empire” (www.chiesa, 22/07/2011). He pointed out that “if the bishops who have definitely been excommunicated are added to the ‘presumed guilty’ (i.e. those, who although recognised by the Pope, bend to political power) and the bishops who are not recognised by the Pope, there are now several Chinese bishops today in a state of schism from Rome.”

The divisions disrupting various local Churches and the distance often perceived between the pastors and the community also contribute to making matters more complicated. Many of the young bishops, who today are called to guide the Church in China, are in serious need of reinforcement and support from all their lay brothers and sisters, who have been able to overcome flattery and threats to maintain their faith. Modern techniques of communication can facilitate dialogue, but contact is still difficult, especially where the Catholic minority is dispersed in rural areas. The unforeseeable risks produced by the current climate of prevarication and confusion raise once again, as mentioned above, the dark shadow of schism.

Former Shanghai Jesuit missionary André Bonnichon, pondering on the crisis he had observed in China before his expulsion, wrote a fitting article on this danger over half a century ago. He recalled what the Chinese bishop of a big city told him at that time: “A subtle and very great effort to promote a schism is to be expected, and the problem will be to preserve Catholic unity.” Bonnichon then remarked: “The schism may pass unnoticed by the masses. It may be induced in the (Church) leaders in a semi-conscious manner coming from their moral weakness.” Such a semi-consciousness and moral weakness among the pastors, along with division and unresolved conflicts, create the ideal conditions for a possible break with the universal Church. This becomes a particularly serious threat when combined with a secret ambition for career advancement, encouraged by the political power and easily

justified with pastoral considerations, e.g., “to ensure the continued function of the life of the diocese.” (“Naissance des schismes”, *Etudes*, Paris, avril 1956, pp. 29-44). Considering these possibilities, the provocative title “Towards a Chinese schism?” used by Gianni Valente after the illegitimate ordination in Shantou is hardly surprising. The recent illegitimate ordinations of bishops followed by two declarations of excommunication appear as “the start of a political-ecclesiastical tsunami with potentially devastating results.” He recalls that in November 2010, out of the 80 or so government approved Chinese bishops all elected in recent years, only 5 had not been recognised by Rome. He repeated that in such a confused and tense situation “the ideal conditions are being created to spark off a schism.” (*Vatican Insider*, 15/07/2011).

In a subsequent in-depth analysis (21/07/2011), Valente noted that different positions taken by the Holy See also influenced the current crisis. He mentioned for example the Instructions of *Propaganda Fide* of 1988, which prohibited every kind of “communicatio in sacris” with bishops and priests belonging to the Patriotic Association. This gave impetus to those who denied the validity of liturgies and sacraments celebrated in the “open” churches. He recalled heroic figures, such as Bishops Matthias Duan Yinmin and Anthony Li Du'an, who had even accepted to become members of the Association, but who within those bodies controlled by the regime, were able to defend their loyalty to the successor of St. Peter. Today, with a new generation of priests and young bishops, both in the official community and in the underground community, “episodes of paradoxical careerism arise,” a plague which unfortunately is not restricted to China only. In the whole of the Church, “the appointments of bishops and their moves from one see to another often end up being perceived as rewards and distinctions in a universal bureaucracy. The appointments seem to be a reward for a distinguished career or for skill in cultivating powerful relations.”

For Francesco Sisci as well, “the reality is that some Chinese Catholics are teetering on the brink of a schism, which would be difficult to correct. Chinese Catholics cannot say: ‘We do not want the Pope to interfere’, because without the Pope they would be Protestants.” This is why “the possibility of an objectively schismatic Church is becoming real”. It would be a Church that remains theologically fairly close to Rome, but without “the interference of the Pope,” a little like the Church of England. On the other hand, Beijing, or the Communist Party leaders, do not intend to put themselves at the head of the Church in China which, after all, is a tiny minority. Sisci also observes that China suspects the Vatican of being an accomplice in a conspiracy along with the US and the West capable of undermining China. Paradoxically, the Pope and the Chinese government agree on the principle maintained in the Pontifical Letter of 2007, namely, “that there are not two Churches in China, and China has a legitimate government.” In practice, however, the Vatican does not know how the Party acts and vice versa (*AsiaTimesOnlineA*, 20/07/2011).

The Hong Kong *Sunday Examiner* of August 14, 2011 had as the headline of its “China Bridge” article: “Lamentations for a schism on its way.” Paraphrasing some expressions of the prophetic biblical book of that name on the desolation wrought by the Babylonian army in Israel, the long reflection quoted some dramatic moments in

the history of Christianity: the reciprocal excommunication of Rome and the Church of Constantinople at the beginning of the second millennium, which Pope Paul VI only cancelled at the end of the Second Vatican Council. The rift with the Church of England in November 1534, has been partly overcome by the contacts which the Archbishop of Canterbury started with Rome in 1960⁴. Looking at the reality of China today, the article also recalled the sad situation of human rights and the silencing of many lawyers defending the activists. The same thing has happened in the area of religious freedom, with strong-armed tactics being used on bishops to force them to take part in irregular ordinations of other bishops. Despite some brave resistance here and there, “the capacity for the Church of China to prevent new ordinations is limited.” After having evoked the heroism of the evangelizers who crossed Asia in ancient times, the article observes that today, although travel and other contacts are extremely easy, the Church in China cannot hope to receive much help from abroad. This is because foreign entrepreneurs and governments that deal with China consider it more important to protect economic interests.

The same paper, interpreting the current tension between Beijing and the Vatican in the light of the millenary history of China and the 2000 year old life of the Church, wonders whether it is an exaggeration to speak in terms of “centuries” before full reconciliation can take place. Certainly, the procedures for electing bishops have changed in different places and at different times, but “it is not realistic for the Chinese government to expect the Vatican to rewrite canon 1382 or other canonical rules to satisfy the Patriotic Association.” It would likewise be “just as unrealistic for the Catholics in China or outside China to expect that the country would abolish the last sentence of Art. 36 of the Constitution (which states: “No religious bodies and religious activities are subject to foreign domination”). On the other hand, the Communist Party could continue to govern China for 100 or 200 years. It is pointless to fill our mouths with empty words in one direction or the other.” “Prayer, fasting and the patient faith of all Catholics (inside and outside of China) are essential to obtain the grace that will bring about the changes needed to help the Chinese Church, which the Pope has said is made up of real Catholics, who are also authentically Chinese,” the “China Bridge” column of the August 14, 2011 issue of *Sunday Examiner* concluded.

An editorial in the same weekly paper (August 21, 2011) underlined Amnesty International’s complaint about the worsening of the human rights situation in China. But it also observed that amongst human rights lawyers, the number of those ready to

⁴ On the occasion of Pope Benedict XVI’s visit to Cuba (end of March 2012), some international media spoke again of an excommunication allegedly imposed upon “Lider Maximo” Fidel Castro by Pope John XXIII. [This was also repeated in the “China Bridge” article mentioned above]. When asked about it, the well known former secretary of the “Papa Buono” Archbishop Loris Capovilla (now 96 years old, but very clear minded) firmly denied the story. Asked by journalist Gian Guido Vecchi, Capovilla hinted that such a “legend” started circulating some 50 years ago, when in Italy the Christian Democratic Party was about to agree on a joint government with leftist forces. Pope John, according to Capovilla, was “very displeased” with the allegation that he had excommunicated Castro (*Corriere della Sera*, 28/03/2012). The position of John XXIII is confirmed by a news item in *Sunday Examiner* of 19 January 1962, p. 13.

risk their freedom is growing, and the editorial underlined the importance of support for them. Albert Ho Chun-yan, a Hong Kong-based lawyer, recalled that the Church in China also needs the support of the international community, now more than ever. China is sensitive to opinions expressed abroad, and this should convince the international Catholic community to keep up the pressure on Beijing, and try to raise the awareness of governments and human rights organizations regarding this issue.

Chapter II

LIGHT AND SHADOWS IN THE ENCOUNTERS BETWEEN THE GOSPEL AND CHINA

With a difficult future ahead, it may be important to look at the experiences of the past, in the hope of obtaining some useful pointers. The history of evangelization in Mainland China began many centuries ago and was not without difficulties, heroes and failures. Knowledge of the attempts made, of the missionary methods adopted and of the circumstances that favoured or obstructed the missionaries, can help us to interpret the present-day crises with greater clarity.

Anyone wishing to further his or her knowledge of those past experiences is helped today by a vast amount of documents, and precious treasures hidden away in specialised libraries, which are becoming more accessible with the help of modern information technology. Nicolas Standaert of the University of Leuven is doing a meritorious job in this effort of making public the contents of missionary archives. In 2001, he published the first volume (almost a thousand pages) of a fundamental work, offering scholars a mine of references and information on past evangelization efforts in the Middle Kingdom, from the beginnings up to 1800¹.

For those seeking a more general, yet well documented, view of the slow progress of Christianity in pre-Communist China, the work by Kenneth Scott Latourette, although almost a century old, remains one of the most reliable sources². Another important source is Jean Pierre Charbonnier's work, which lets the Chinese converts speak for themselves. This goes beyond the tendency of many past historical accounts which are based almost exclusively on what the missionaries wrote, giving the impression that only they were the leading figures in evangelization. René Laurentin and Étienne Ducornet wrote good historical summaries in French, which include also comments and prospects for the future³.

The first impact

Considering the distant past, and the first contact of China with Christianity, the missionary enthusiasm of the Syrian Church is to be greatly admired. Its monks

¹ Nicolas Standaert, *Handbook of Christianity in China 635-1800*, Brill, Leiden 2001. For each period, Sources, Players, Scenes and specific themes are shown, giving place of privilege as far as possible to Chinese sources, and indicating parallel subjects associated with the central theme of the announcement and spread of Christianity.

² Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of Christian Missions in China*, London, 1929. Also deserving of mention is Columba Cary-Elwes, *China and the Cross: A Survey of Missionary History*, New York 1957.

³ René Laurentin: *Chine et Christianisme. Après les occasions manquées*, Desclée, Paris 1977. Étienne Ducornet, *L'Eglise et la Chine. Histoire et défis*, Cerf, Paris 2003. The quotations in our book are from the Italian edition of Ducornet's text: (*La Chiesa e la Cina*, Jaca Book, Milano 2008). Jean Pierre Charbonnier, *Histoire des Chrétiens de Chine*, Paris 1992, with a new edition in 2002. There is also an English translation of this work (with considerable additions) in San Francisco, 2007: *Christians in China A.D. 500 to 2000*.

travelled through Central Asia along the Silk Road as early as 635 A.D., taking the Good News of Christianity as far as Changan (the present-day Xi'an), in the heart of the Chinese Empire. Emperor Taizhong of the Tang dynasty received them favourably. He reportedly said: "We find (this doctrine) excellent, vivifying for humanity and indispensable." An enormous stele of grey limestone erected in 781, and engraved with Chinese and Syriac characters, spells out the fundamental points of what was presented as the "Religion of Light." This stele can still be seen in the provincial Museum of History in Xi'an today. Matteo Nicolini-Zani, a young Italian scholar, after in-depth research into original and unpublished texts, underlines the correspondence of this extraordinary monastic feat of Oriental Christians with the religiousness of the Middle Kingdom, where the Buddhist monasteries had a strong impact on cultural life⁴. Unfortunately, in the middle of the 9th century, an imperial edict (apparently aimed at Buddhism, which was perceived as a threat to imperial power because of its riches) marked the disappearance of Christianity. Nicolini-Zani is convinced that Christian monasticism could offer even today an irreplaceable contribution to the renewal of Chinese society, which an obsession for material wealth has parched of spiritual values.

In the middle of the 13th century, China once again encountered the Gospel. In 1245, Pope Innocent IV sent the Franciscan Giovanni da Pian del Carpine as his Legate to the court of the Great Khan, with a proposal to establish an alliance against the military expansion of Islam. Other delegations followed, such as that of Willem van Ruysbroeck, also a Franciscan. From his reports, it appears that the Syrian monks were still present in China. An exchange of embassies with the court of the emperor Kubilai, in Kambalik (present-day Beijing) took place in 1260. In the following years, the young Marco Polo also reached the mysterious Cathay, where he became an official at the Mongol court. In 1294, Giovanni da Montecorvino reached China as the Legate of Pope Nicholas IV, after following a new route and overcoming countless dangers. The court received him well, and he was allowed to preach the Gospel in Kambalik. About ten years later, he would report that he had baptized about six thousand converts and had built a church. In 1307, Pope Clement V appointed Montecorvino archbishop of Beijing and metropolitan of the whole of China. A year later, three bishops, specifically sent from Rome (seven had left Rome together) were able to ordain Giovanni a bishop. This heroic Franciscan mission contained numerous friars, remarkable for their zeal and pastoral commitment. Among them, special mention must be made of Odorico da Pordenone (beatified in 1755). He set out from Europe at almost fifty years of age, and reached China after a long journey through India and Ceylon. After a short stay, he returned to Europe with a message for the Pope⁵. When Archbishop Giovanni died (1328), the Catholic community numbered

⁴ His contribution: "La 'via monastica' al Cristianesimo cinese", appeared in *Ad Gentes*, (pp. 9-22). Cf. also: M. Nicolini-Zani, *La via radiosa per l'oriente. I testi e la storia del primo incontro del cristianesimo con il mondo culturale e religioso cinese (secoli VII-IX)*, Qiqajon, Magnano, 2006.

⁵ An account of his long journey, which he dictated shortly before his death (1631), was reproduced in a fine artistic edition (Latin and Italian) by the Chamber of Commerce of Pordenone in 1982; and again in 1986 with comments and notes (edited by L. Monaco, G.C. Testa): *Odorichus - De Rebus Incognitis*.

60 thousand faithful. Several studies highlight this missionary venture. They describe its extreme generosity, as well as the complexity of the events that accompanied it. Giovanni da Montecorvino paid remarkable attention to the cultural context of his mission. In Kambalik, he had the Psalms and the New Testament translated into the language of the ruling Mongols (Uyghur). The archbishop also sang the Mass in that language. However, there was not enough time to allow the seeds of the Gospel to sink roots in Chinese soil. Military and political events changed the situation in the middle of the 14th century. Popular revolts overthrew the Yuan, or Mongol, Dynasty. Moreover, Pope Urban V's appointment, in 1370, of a successor archbishop of Beijing, never succeeded in reaching China. Others after him also failed to reach their destination. With the establishment of the new Ming dynasty (1368-1644), the Han Chinese exacted their revenge, making their superiority felt with the elimination of the cultural vestiges of the "foreigners" that had previously dominated them.

The mission of the Jesuits in the East

Another two centuries would pass before a new attempt could be made to announce the Gospel in the Chinese empire. The roots of the living Church which we admire today in China, as we look to its future with a mixture of trust and fear, were planted in the last decades of the 16th century. The new Company of Jesus, founded in 1540, directed itself to the Orient from the very beginning of its existence. Its founder, Ignatius of Loyola sent one of his first companions, Francis Xavier, to the Indies in 1541. He was assigned to Asia as "Papal legate for all the lands situated east of the Cape of Good Hope." This is why, after a few years of apostolic work in Goa and along the southern coast of India, we find him in Malacca, and in 1548 in Japan. He stayed there for three years, passionately engaged in preaching the Good News of Jesus Christ, with the help of an interpreter, whom he had converted to Christianity earlier. In Japan Xavier discovered the central role of the Middle Kingdom in Asian culture, and he decided to enter the Chinese empire to spread the Gospel at all cost. However, the dream of this great Spanish evangelizer remained unfulfilled. He died on the small island of Shangchuan, facing the Chinese coast, on a cold December day (December 3rd) in 1552. In the same year in Macerata, Italy, Matteo Ricci, who was destined to make Xavier's dream come true, was born thirty years later. Rome proclaimed Francis Xavier a saint in 1622, and declared him a patron of the mission work, not only in China, but in the whole world.

Alessandro Valignano, who succeeded Francis Xavier as visitor and representative of the Jesuits' general for the Orient, worked intensely to carry out the mission project. He did it with intelligence and love, overcoming the obstacles that historical reality imposed upon him. Portugal monopolized travel and trade in that part of the world. For instance, the Portuguese sovereign had the right of patronage (the famous *padroado*) over the missions, which meant control over them, even to the point of being able to appoint bishops. The only place for contact with the Chinese empire was the small coastal enclave of Macao, which China had granted to the Portuguese

for trade. Valignano was convinced that it was neither with the use of force nor with the attraction of trade that the Jesuits could enter into a meaningful dialogue with the Chinese world. Rather, this would come about by appreciating Chinese culture and by emphasizing friendship with the Chinese people.

He called young Matteo Ricci from Goa, and commanded him to put great effort into studying the Chinese language. In 1583, the governor of Guangdong granted Ricci, and his companion Michele Ruggieri, permission to open a residence in the city of Zhaoqing. At first they appeared with their heads shaven and wearing the characteristic robes of Buddhist monks. But having observed that the people gave little credibility and esteem to the monks, Father Matteo decided to present himself as a member of the Confucian literati. Besides donning their dress, Ricci won the trust and admiration of the literati class by his deep knowledge of Chinese culture and history and an appreciation of the wisdom of China's ancient philosophers. Ricci became convinced that in the expanse and rationality of the traditions handed down by Confucius (purified of agnostic trends) he could find an ideal base to present the evangelical message⁶. One of the first works that attracted the attention of the Chinese literati was a map that Ricci made while in Guangdong and then gradually perfected. The Chinese empire appeared in a prominent position in it, but as part of the entire world. At the same time, Ricci's exceptional mnemonic capacity, which he cultivated with a technique of localisation, was greatly admired.

Relying on the esteem and friendship of various literati and officials, he tenaciously continued in his attempt to approach the capital, overcoming many obstacles and setbacks. After staying in several different cities on his way to the capital, in early 1601 he obtained the privilege of living inside the imperial city. Ricci was then able to send attractive gifts to the emperor, through which he represented himself as a sage coming from the West. He expressed the desire to make himself useful to the Middle Kingdom.

Ricci considered that an apostolate through publishing was a priority for China. In 1595 he edited his *Treatise on Friendship*, containing about a hundred maxims on that subject, taken especially from Latin classics. This work was greatly appreciated and was reprinted several times. Convinced, as he writes in his *History of the Introduction of Christianity to China*, that "the Chinese texts, from the distant origins of this people, are constant in recognising the principal attributes of the true God in the Supreme Lord (*Shangdi*) or Heaven (*Tian*)," Ricci presented the Christian doctrine as the "Religion of the Lord of Heaven." He developed this fundamental theme with the work *The True Notion of the Lord of Heaven*. In the face of the Chinese tradition of honouring the deceased ancestors and the officials' duty of periodically paying tribute to Confucius, Ricci concluded that these rites were merely cultural and civil, and had nothing to do with the worship of a divinity or with the adoration of God, as no prayers were said and no requests for grace were made.

⁶ On this basic point, see a contribution by Umberto Bresciani: "Come i Confuciani vedono il Cristianesimo", in *A.G.*, (pp.85-92). Bresciani is the author of an important study on new-Confucianism: *Reinventing Confucianism: The New Confucian Movement*, Ricci Institute, Taipei 2001.

In 1608, the Jesuit missionaries numbered about twenty scattered in four residences in as many cities, with Ricci as their superior. Among the 2000 Catholics, 300 of them lived in Beijing. The converts included government officials, ladies of the court and some members of the imperial family. Ricci was very strict about whom he admitted to baptism. One of his most famous followers was Xu Guangqi, a scientist who occupied the highest positions in the imperial administration and, and who today is honoured as the founder of the Church in Shanghai, his place of birth. Working tirelessly, especially among the literati who continually sought him out, Ricci died, worn out by his efforts, on May 11, 1610, at the age of 58. The Wanli Emperor gave permission for him to be buried near one of the gates of the Forbidden City.

Due to his missionary vision, Ricci clearly recognized that great attention must be paid to the training of young Chinese converts who showed signs of a call to the religious life or to the priesthood⁷. In all, Ricci and his collaborators trained 15 coadjutor brothers. With great zeal these brothers contributed to the preparation of the catechumens and to the consolidation of the first Christian communities. However, the proposal that some of them be admitted to the priesthood seemed premature to Ricci, and this was postponed. Thanks to another valuable intuition, Ricci and his early confrères imitated the local tradition, common especially amongst the literati, of forming associations. This is how the first confraternities of Chinese Catholics, in Beijing and in the other cities, were able to offer specific training to individual converts, stimulating their apostolic and charitable commitment. “The members of the Confraternity of Beijing were given the responsibility of helping the Chinese faithful, often poorly, or inadequately trained, in the celebration of Christian funerals for their dead.” This was in consideration of the importance the Chinese people attribute to the cult of the dead and of the need for attentive surveillance to avoid elements of superstition during the funeral ceremonies. The confraternities of Mary the Mother of God and of the Queen of the Angels, set up for women, were also providential, because the missionaries would not otherwise be able to make contact with and convert the women.

Not everyone in the Jesuit community agreed with the choices of their superior, Ricci, concerning the Christianization of some of the traditional elements of Confucian culture. His successor, Father Nicolò Longobardo had a different point of view. Nevertheless, he continued the intelligent commitment to mission that Ricci had. Longobardo sent Father Nicolas Trigault to Rome to plead the cause of the China mission before Pope Paul V. Trigault obtained three permissions: the translation of the Bible into literary Chinese, the use of Chinese for the liturgy, and the faculty for ordaining priests without requiring them to know Latin. However these important concessions seem never to have been implemented. Trigault returned to China with a library of a thousand volumes on scientific and religious subjects. Two Jesuit-

⁷ This is highlighted by Joseph Zhao Hongtao, a young Chinese priest now teaching in Rome, in a contribution written for the monograph *Ad Gentes* (pp. 93-100), where he notes that the first Chinese candidates took religious vows in the Company of Jesus in early 1593.

astronomers, Johannes Terrenz and Adam Schall, accompanied him. Ricci had requested this⁸.

In the two decades following the death of the great apostle from Macerata, Chinese Christianity suffered two persecutions (1614-17 and 1623), due to the intrigues of powerful court eunuchs. When Xu Guangqi became director of the tribunal of astronomy, he asked the Jesuits to collaborate with him on the reform of the imperial calendar. When the Ming Dynasty fell in 1644, great tension arose among the Jesuit scholars. However, their Qing successors continued to protect the Jesuits, who continued their presence at the Court. Adam Schall himself was appointed director of the important structure that regulated life at court. He became a confidant of the Manchu emperor and the tutor of the imperial heir, Kangxi. Unfortunately, when the young prince (at age fourteen) ascended to the throne in 1667, a new wave of persecution had already broken out against the Christians. Adam Schall became implicated in this, and lost his job at the Court.⁹ Yet, two years later, Father Ferdinand Verbiest, a former collaborator of Schall, was appointed to take his place.

The Church goes underground

With the passing of time, the *padroado* privileges increasingly proved to be an obstacle to effective missionary work. This called for a re-organisation in Rome's supervision of the missions. Thus, in 1622, Pope Gregory XV created a special structure of the Holy See, called the Congregation *de Propaganda Fide*, whose task was the direction and coordination of the work of evangelization throughout the world. Rome took a further step towards overcoming the control of the monarchies of Spain and Portugal over the missionary work by promoting in France (in 1658-63) the foundation of a missionary society, called *Missions Etrangères de Paris (M.E.P.)*. The M.E.P. would be directly dependent upon the Holy See¹⁰. The directives contained in the Instruction the Congregation of *Propaganda Fide* issued in 1659 were also important.

Historians have given special attention to the most excruciating drama to take place in Chinese missionary history, the "Chinese Rites Controversy." The controversy, which had been developing throughout the 17th century, brought heavy clouds of division over the China mission¹¹. The storms affecting evangelization continued into the following century, culminating in the Papal Bull of Benedict XIV (1742) which once and for all prohibited the participation of Catholics in the traditional Rites. The persecutions against the Christian missionaries led to a decrease in the number of literati asking for baptism. This was the case in both Beijing and other cities. Then

⁸ Among the numerous studies published on the life and work of Matteo Ricci, a scholarly edition of his writings is being published in Macerata by *Quodlibet* editions.

⁹ Through false accusations, he was imprisoned and condemned to death, but was granted a reprieve at the last moment. He died in 1666, and the young Kangxi Emperor rehabilitated him two years later.

¹⁰ In 350 years, the M.E.P. have sent more than 4,200 missionary priests to Asia and North America, committed to adapting themselves to the local customs and to training a native clergy.

¹¹ Gianni Criveller's brilliant essay: "La controversia dei riti cinesi", which he wrote for the *Ad Gentes* monographic issue "La Cina e il Cristianesimo", was also included in the Italian edition of this book. Here, however, we omit it, in order to highlight today's challenges.

came Pope Clement XIV's suppression of the Company of Jesus in 1773. Rene Laurentin wrote: "The sinophilia launched by the Jesuits had created a blossoming of vocations for China. The controversy dried it up. More than one hundred French missionaries (mostly of the *M.E.P.*) left for China between 1660 and the end of that century. Between 1693 and 1742 only 12 left for China, six of whom returned, nauseated by the discord." The author also quotes a comment of the historian Guennou: "The question of the rites prevented the conversion of China by distracting the French priests from training a Chinese clergy."

The Church was able to survive clandestinely thanks to the courageous perseverance of the simple faithful, most of whom lived in rural areas. They were assisted by a small number of Chinese priests, trained in part at the College for the Chinese in Naples (founded by Father Matteo Ripa in 1732), or in seminaries in Vietnam.

An era of martyrs began with some executions of Dominican friars in the coastal province of Fujian, followed by a number of Chinese of all walks of life. Nevertheless, the number of baptised Chinese increased. In Jiangnan, for example, the number of Catholics grew from about 17,000 to 33,000 in half a century. Meanwhile in Sichuan, where in the early 18th century only a few hundred immigrant Catholics lived, a century later the province counted 40,000 baptised Catholics. In 1803, the Vicar-Apostolic, J.G. Dufresse, M.E.P., called a Synod of the whole province of Sichuan, which was attended by 14 priests, all of whom were Chinese, except for one. At the beginning of that century, new decrees leading to the persecution of foreign missionaries and Christian converts were issued (in 1805 and 1811). Dufresse himself was beheaded in 1815, after a long imprisonment and after undergoing terrible torture. An imperial soldier, admiring his endurance, asked for baptism. He later became a priest, and also died a martyr.

The controversial "Great Missionary Century"

The 19th century recorded the start of the industrial age in various western countries, supported by a strong colonial expansion, which at times did not hesitate to impose with force a civilisation deemed superior to that of the "pagan" world. Commercial interests prevailed also over the Manchu empire which appeared backward and immobile. Taking advantage of this backwardness, western colonial powers made their superiority over it felt. For the British Empire, opium that the British East India Company imported from the Indian sub-continent and distributed in China in spite of official prohibition, was an easy source of income. The pretext for armed conflict arose in Canton in 1840. The British won the ensuing 1st Opium War and exacted the opening of five ports and the concession of Hong Kong as their colony. Other Western powers soon took advantage of the favourable circumstances. France, with its ambitions of political prestige asserted the right to defend the missionaries who were considered their subjects. The murder of Father Auguste Chapdelaine in Guangxi (1856) became a *casus belli* for them and, after easy victory in what came to be known as the 2nd Opium War, the treaties imposed on the imperial regime called for the abolition of the legislation against the preaching of Christianity, and the

assurance that missionaries would enjoy certain privileges, including the right to purchase or rent property, in the interior of China.

These events deeply hurt the Chinese people, and they remain to this day in their collective conscience. The decades from the middle of the 19th century to 1949 are branded as the humiliating period of the “Opium Wars” and of the “Unequal Treaties.” It is hardly any wonder that many Chinese, especially the intellectuals, have a negative view of Christianity, which is accused of having taken advantage of the weapons and interests of the Western Powers to consolidate and expand its presence in China. Some notable exceptions to this unfavourable view of Christianity range from the crude attempt of Hong Xiuquan to organize an armed revolt against the Qing regime in 1852 (the Taiping Rebellion), to the ministers who in vain asked the imperial court for reforms in 1898, to the founder of the Chinese Republic, Sun Yatsen, who converted to Christianity. However, the general feeling that most frequently emerges in Chinese publications regarding Christianity is one of detachment and criticism.

The Boxer Revolt broke out in 1900 in that climate of widespread hostility. Although the general populace was discontented with the decadent imperial family, the astute empress dowager Cixi was able to manipulate it and with the help of secret societies transform it into a head-on clash with the Western imperialists and Christianity. The Boxers wrought havoc and destruction in a wide swathe of northern China. About 30,000 Christians are estimated to have been killed (in many cases they were martyrs for the faith).

The past century was also a very eventful one. In addition to the disorders that accompanied the fall of the empire (1911), military clashes for control over the huge territory of China also marked the decades that followed the start of the first Chinese Republic. Yet, in Christian circles (both Catholic and Protestant), the period preceding Mao Zedong’s founding of the New China (1949) was seen as a “great missionary century,” and China continued to be considered a significant “missionary laboratory.” Giuseppe Butturini noted that for over a period of a century and half some thirty thousand Christians (men and women) belonging to more than fifty missionary groups worked there¹². It was a commitment of exceptional proportions, which did not fail to leave positive results in the field.

Yet, the path to resume the great tradition of the original Jesuit mission proved to be a difficult one. An in-depth revision of the prevailing missionary method, which had developed “under the shadow of colonialism,” was necessary. The Holy See, under the leadership of Pope Leo XIII, failed in an attempt to overcome the French “patronage” over the China missions by establishing direct relations with the imperial court in Beijing.¹³ The path was also made more difficult because some missionaries, though personally not involved in political activities, seemed to justify the reasons that had led to the granting of the privileges they enjoyed. They did not hide their

¹² Butturini’s analysis of this period appears in “Chiesa cattolica e mondo cinese nel ‘grande secolo missionario’ (1842-1949)” in the *Ad Gentes* monograph mentioned above pp, 49-68.

¹³ Cf. G. Criveller, “Il Seminario Romano nello Shaanxi meridionale”, in: Agostino Giovagnoli and Elisa Giunipero (ed.), *Chiesa Cattolica e mondo cinese. Tra colonialismo ed evangelizzazione (1840-1911)*, Roma, 2005.

nationalism. Chinese popular feeling towards Christianity remained mistrustful, if not downright hostile. A clear example of this appeared in the May 4th Movement of 1919. University students protested against the Treaty of Versailles' decision at the end of World War I to grant the German concession in Shandong Province to Japan. At the same time, they criticized traditional Confucianism and Christianity, and expressed the desire for more science and technology in their country. A couple of years later, when the American Protestant movement, the World Christian Students Federation announced that its next world congress would be held in Beijing, Chinese youth organized a mass protest throughout the country.

Even among Catholics, voices of discontent were raised against the arrogant foreign presence in China. The well-known intellectual Ma Xiangbo (1840-1939) decided to leave the Jesuit Order and the priesthood. Enlightened men among the Western missionaries also challenged the methods prevalent in evangelization, and sought a drastic renewal. This led to personal commitments on their part. An example is the Belgian missionary, Father Vincent Lebbe. He did not hesitate to leave the Lazarist Fathers to implement his prophetic vision of a Church that was at last "Chinese." He promoted Catholic Action, and founded the Little Brothers of St. John the Baptist, the first Chinese Christian monastic community. Another example is Father Paolo Manna, who while visiting China as Superior-General of the Pontifical Institute for Foreign Missions (P.I.M.E.), felt the need to report to the Holy See the many areas of Church life that he felt needed change there.

At the same time it is disappointing to acknowledge that the enlightened directives of Benedict XV's encyclical *Maximum Illud* (1919) were not met with much enthusiasm in China. It is well known that the first Apostolic Delegate, Celso Costantini, whom Pope Pius XI sent to China in 1922, encountered many difficulties in convincing the major Religious Orders of the urgency to appoint local Chinese bishops to administer the Chinese Church. After all, the Chinese clergy had worked with great dedication alongside the foreign missionaries to build up the Chinese Church.

In the 1930s, "Generalissimo" Chiang Kai-shek, having blocked a Communist attempt to take power, tried with his Kuomintang Party (the Nationalist Party) to develop the traditional Chinese cultural heritage. His personal choice to become a Christian seemed to open up a new favourable atmosphere for evangelization. Fighting with the Western powers in the Second World War (1939-45), China contributed to the defeating of the Japanese invaders. However a long civil war followed, which the Red Army won. This led to Chairman Mao's proclamation of the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949. A little before this, the Holy See decided to transform the juridical structure of the Church in China, by setting up the ordinary hierarchy (1946). They also honored the Chinese Catholics with their first Cardinal, Thomas Tian Gengxing, S.V.D. However, eventful historical changes neutralized this important step forward.

Our summary review of evangelization initiatives in China cannot ignore the efforts made by the missionaries of various Protestant denominations, who reached the Middle Kingdom in the early 19th century, and since then have been very active. Even today in the New China they have achieved remarkable success.

The religious policy of the sixty years of the Communist regime, inaugurated by Mao Zedong on October 1, 1949, would also require a specific analysis. We will mention some aspects of it, or at least highlight the context of the present-day crisis, later on in the text.

From a Western point of view, it may be worth mentioning an attempt to re-read the history of the New China from the perspective of the Gospel. I remember having attended a meeting in Bastad (Sweden) in 1974, followed by an international conference in Leuven (Belgium), both organized through the initiative of the Lutheran World Federation. China was still in the middle of the Cultural Revolution, which some people in the West idealized. Some theologians saw in Chairman Mao Zedong the “new Moses” of the Chinese people¹⁴. Later, the Communist authorities themselves denounced the atrocities behind the façade of the “Cultural Revolution” as ideological extremism.

Some indications from the experiences of the past

One basic observation can be made. From only a cursory glance at Chinese history, the presence of the political power in every religious manifestation emerges as a reality deeply rooted in the country’s tradition. A Ministry of Worship existed in imperial China, through which the supreme monarch exercised administrative control over religions. This stressed the emperor’s predominant position. It is a concept of pure absolutism, in which the whole of man, including his public and private life, along with his religious aspirations, belongs to the State. The conviction that religions were the guarantee of social balance, and were therefore an essential element of cosmic harmony corroborated this. It is remarkable to discover a similar confrontation in the first centuries of Christianity in the Roman Empire. Until the conversion of the emperor Constantine, the State could not tolerate a separate spiritual authority. In other words, the State did not admit that there could be any sort of “double belonging” for its subjects.

It was probably the observation that the Chinese supreme authority could never have accepted a religious reference that differed from that of the imperial throne that suggested the strategy of the Visitor of the Jesuits, Alessandro Valignano and of Matteo Ricci himself, who both aimed for the conversion of the high dignitaries of the State. Moreover, even the apostle Paul had probably thought he could find a way into the Greek world by winning over the elite who sat in the Areopagus.

In his introduction to the Italian monograph mentioned above, Mario Menin, the editor of the journal *Ad Gentes* wrote: “What is striking about going through the history of Christianity in China are the repeated failures at establishing a lasting presence.” This especially applies to the history of the last few centuries. Hinting at reasons for this “failure,” he highlights various shortcomings and errors of the Church, such as, the lack of a sufficient effort to enter Chinese culture and society, the too close association of the missionaries with the colonial powers, and the reluctance to

¹⁴ Some relevant comments by professors of Gregoriana university in Rome can be found in Lazzarotto (ed.), *Esperienza cinese e fede cristiana*, EMI, Bologna 1976.

allow the Chinese clergy to take up the running of the local Church. Reading about the recent difficulties of the Chinese Church against the background of the traditional attitudes of imperialism, while it may not quell our concerns, at least we are helped not to over-dramatise the difficulties.

At this point a natural personal feeling can only be one of great humility. Pope John Paul II, for the Jubilee year 2000 asked the whole Church to reflect on the events of history, and measuring themselves against the perennial values of the Gospel, undertake a serious “purification of the memory.” The dramatic events of the Church in China mentioned here cannot but help us to make an examination of conscience, so that we recognise how easily we can deviate from the “perennial values of the Gospel,” with the mirage of seeking more certain positive results.

On the other hand, in attempting to recall what the Catholic minority went through in circumstances which were often dramatic and even heroic, we cannot delude ourselves that we can obtain a road-map for the future out of these considerations. We know that the future is always open to unforeseen events, and that the decisions taken often end up conditioned by human weakness. Nonetheless, I trust that some suggestions may emerge from the following pages.

Chapter III

WHAT TRIGGERED THE CURRENT CRISIS?

Patriotism: that which binds the country together

The grandiose celebrations in 2009 marking the 60th anniversary of that fateful October 1st day in 1949, when Chairman Mao Zedong announced the establishment of the “New China,” were a source of great pride for all the citizens of that country, even by that part of the population that criticises the government. There can be little doubt that a hypothetical survey of the current 1,330 million Chinese would record a widely positive opinion of the journey made by the People’s Republic in the past several decades. The vast majority of the inhabitants have no difficulty, I think, in identifying with “this China,” that has now joined the “great countries” of the world. The hundreds of millions of peasants in the interior, however, would have accompanied their approval with strong grumbling because the benefits of the recent economic development redound to only a handful of avaricious entrepreneurs who live in the big cities. At the same time, they cannot forget the progress they have achieved in comparison to their old standard of living. Other citizens would express their approval with reservation, due to rampant corruption, the many limitations imposed on fundamental human rights, and justice that is conditioned by the interests of the Party in power. However, the news that the Nobel Peace Prize was awarded to Liu Xiaobo, the best known dissident towards the regime, was passed over in silence by the Chinese masses. Even the minority of Chinese, who profess a religious faith (they number a few hundred million in a country which is officially atheist), would not have a uniform opinion about the 60 years of the regime.

Obviously, the authorities are fully aware of the importance of promoting those things which the Chinese people appreciate most: their long history, culture, naturally beautiful scenery, etc. It came therefore as no surprise that the plenary session of the CCP Central Committee (October 15-18, 2011) was dedicated to this theme. A final statement announced that the reform of China's cultural system would be deepened. The country would promote the development of the culture industry. It would work to improve Chinese citizens' sense of identity, build up confidence in Chinese culture and enhance the international influence of its culture.

Religions are expected to become active partners in developing the “culture industry,” with Christianity having the pride of place. In fact, Catholics have already experienced the heavy weight of the official ideology. Soon after the Party statement mentioned above, the Theological Research Committee of the Chinese Bishops Conference organized a symposium in Beijing (November 22-23, 2011) on the topic of the inculturation of the faith. It was to be a theological reflection on how to express the Christian faith in the context of local culture. But once again, the “One Association and one Conference” organized the symposium in conjunction with the

(atheistic) officials of the United Front Department and the State Administration of Religious Affairs, who were present at the conference. As a consequence, theological reflection was practically eliminated. (cf. *Tripod*, XXXII, 164, Spring 2012, pp. 60-61)

It would be outside the scope of this essay to investigate the different stresses given in the past to the cultural aspect as applied to the religious policy. Considering the experience of the Catholic Church, we have already mentioned that during the first thirty years, the revolutionary ideas of Mao Zedong dominated everything. Even after Deng Xiaoping's "four modernizations" opened up China to a market economy and to the world (1980), the structural framework "guiding" religious phenomena in Chinese society dated back to Chairman Mao's era¹. With Deng's epochal changes, the whole of Chinese society began to move forward. For believers too it was the start of a slow restoration. The clergy and the faithful who had been sentenced to forced labour camps returned home, and churches, which had previously been closed or destroyed, began to re-open. A decisive moment in this new period took place in 1982, with the publication of a new national Constitution. It sanctioned (art. 36) the freedom of religious belief. However, this is counterbalanced by the famous Document no. 19 (also issued in 1982), in which the Central Committee of the Communist Party, from a cultural point of view, stated its position on the phenomenon of religion. In any analysis of the situation of religion in China, it must be taken into consideration, as it is still the main reference point regarding religion.²

Coming to the present situation, I shall point out the difficulties our Christian brothers and sisters face in trying to preserve the integrity of their faith, hinting also at the opportunities they may have in a China which, while still declaring itself Communist, has changed a great deal in the past few decades³. A simple view of the development of Christian life within the framework of the existing rules and complex bureaucracy will help us to reflect on future prospects.

The life of Christians today

When asking for statistics on the number of Christians in China, it is easy to be confused by the great disparity of answers. The fundamental reason for this is that there is no reliable official information. An estimate published in early 2012 by the Holy Spirit Study Centre of Hong Kong (*Tripod*, n. 164, p. 63) speaks of some 12 million Catholics, in 116 dioceses with 107 bishops (38 of whom are not recognised by the political authorities). As for priests, it should be noted that the older generation

¹ Much has been written on specific events of the first period. A well documented source is: R.C. BUSH, *Religion in Communist China*, Abingdon Press, New York 1970. See also: Angelo S. Lazzarotto, "Christians in China," *Worldview*, New York, 1980, 6, pp.8-10, and J.T. MYERS, *Enemies without Guns – The Catholic Church in China*, New York, Paragon House 1991.

² I was asked to comment on Document 19 for the magazine *Missiology*, Chicago, XI, 1983, pp. 207-290 ("The Chinese Communist Party and Religion"); also for *Atheism and Dialogue*, Vatican City, XXII, 1987, n.1, pp. 63-88 ("Church and Religion in China: How difficult the dialogue?").

³ Cf. my essay "Progress in Religious Freedom in China?" *Tripod* XXII, 2002, n. 124, pp. 9-30. See also: G. POLITI, "Sfide e prospettive attuali della missione nella Repubblica popolare cinese", in the aforementioned issue of *Ad Gentes* (pp. 237-256).

is gradually disappearing. It was mentioned that in 2011 about sixty “very elderly” priests still survived. Today, there are an estimated 3,200 priests working in the Chinese Church, of whom 1,300 operate underground. There are 560 seminarians in 10 officially recognised major seminaries. There are also an estimated 350 seminarians in 16 underground seminaries (this marks a decrease from the previous year). There are about 5,000 Sisters, all for the most part quite young, belonging to diocesan congregations (about one-third of them belong to religious communities not officially recognised). About 60 novitiates (20 underground) train novices and postulants. Catholic church buildings and chapels number about six thousand, but “underground” communities meet in places that are not recognised as places of worship.

The same issue of *Tripod* also reported some figures which the president of the Chinese Bishops Conference, Ma Yinglin, presented at the 8th Assembly of Catholic Representatives in December 2010 on the condition of the Church. He stated that during the previous six years more than 4,700 people received spiritual formation, 1,800 attended courses for catechists, more than 20,000 faithful took part in catechetical courses, more than 2,200 attended summer camps, about 5,000 parish leaders received training, more than 10,000 attended liturgical courses, 616 courses for catechumens were held and more than 100 thousand persons received baptism. Ma listed the members of the official Catholic Church as numbering 6 million.

The cultural institute linked with the Catholic journal “Faith” (*Shinde*) of Shijiazhuang (Hebei province), speaks of 3,000 priests in the recognised structures, and 350 members of religious congregations. Seminarians are believed to number 600 in 10 major seminaries, plus 400 in 20 minor seminaries. The previous report of the *Shinde* Institute added that the Catholic Church runs 220 clinics, 11 hospitals, 81 homes for the elderly, 44 kindergartens, 2 professional centres, 22 orphanages or centres for disabled children, 34 other social centres, and also noted that about eighty Sisters worked in government structures for lepers. At the root of the differences there is the fact that the Chinese sources closest to the government ignore the vast area of believers who, not recognising themselves as part of the official structures created to “guide” religions, become illegal or “underground,” and as such are not recognised by the State.

For Protestant Christians⁴, an even greater disparity can be found. American Evangelical circles estimate their number to be in the range of 70-100 million, while semi-official Chinese publications put their number at about fifteen million.⁵

The new social climate in recent decades has facilitated important practical successes for believers, such as the numerous vocations to the priesthood and religious life. As

⁴ As is well known, in New China, the Catholic Church (called *Tianzhujiào* or the “religion of the Lord of Heaven”) and the Protestant Churches (called *Jidujiao*, or the “religion of Christ”) are considered to be two different religions.

⁵ See, for instance: “In China, Protestantism's Simplicity Yields More Converts than Catholicism,” *International Business Times*, March 28, 2012. Other experts are cautious about certain figures.

was mentioned above, in the mid 1950s, all the seminaries were closed and all the female congregations dispersed. The prohibition against the Church's "interference" in education and the social sector continues, but it has been interpreted in a blander way in the past few decades, especially in poorer areas where State involvement has been lacking. In some cities it has even been possible to establish Catholic social service centres. For instance, "Hebei *Jinde* Charities" in Shijiazhuang has been recently recognized as a Foundation. A relationship of good neighbourliness and collaboration with the local authorities has permitted the setting up of courses for the training of catechists or conferences on evangelization. More recently, some dioceses publically celebrated the Year of Priests. Thanks to a continuing opening to the outside world, numerous seminarians, priests and Sisters have been able to study abroad, thus providing better qualified teachers for local seminaries and novitiates.

A government-established strong "firewall" limits and controls the spread of religious messages through modern IT instruments. But here too, as time goes on, more significant spaces are created. We will have the opportunity to mention new programs, run by Catholic individuals or communities, which share information on religious life and/or local pastoral initiatives. In the field of publications, religions are still not allowed to interact freely with public opinion in printed material. Three important publishing centres (in Beijing, Shanghai and Shijiazhuang) provide Catholic communities with educational works, although they have to submit every publication to official censors. In distributing the Bible, Catholics have not been as active as Protestants. The Taizé community had permission to distribute a million copies of the Bible in 2009. Alongside the classic translation by the Franciscans (done at the Father Gabriel Allegra, OFM founded Studium Biblicum in Hong Kong), the government permitted the Claretians to distribute a pastoral edition of the Bible. Religious books cannot be sold in public bookshops, but academics, who examine religious subjects in depth (so-called "cultural Christians") distribute them today as books on culture.

How the Christian community has grown

These notes, although fragmentary, help understand how the communities of believers in Christ, after risking extinction, have been able to develop in recent decades in the context of the evolution of Chinese society. It is a phenomenon which also involves the other officially recognised religions in the PRC (namely Taoism, Buddhism and Islam), and the very wide "grey zone" of popular religiosity, which often overlaps with crude superstition. According to a sociological study conducted by two professors of the *East China Normal University* of Shanghai, and published the *China Daily* in February 2007, about 300 million Chinese declare themselves to be in some way religious, more than 31% of the population. This confirms that the practical materialism proposed by Deng Xiaoping to stimulate economic growth cannot completely satisfy the human heart. Indeed, in areas privileged by development, such as Zhejiang Province, Christian entrepreneurs are courageously

promoting Gospel values and are positively taking up their social responsibilities.⁶ According to the former British Prime Minister Tony Blair, the “awareness that religion is a social asset that contributes to cohesion among citizens, offers moral rules in a society that suffers from massive economic migration, and heals the impact of a rapidly expanding capitalist economy is growing even among the Chinese authorities” (*The Washington Post*, 01/08/2010).

However, in today’s “New China,” believers, especially Christians, face many restrictions. This should come as no surprise, since the regime that governs them is atheistic. The Hong Kong journalist Frank Ching observed that while for Christians it is obvious that we must “give to God the things that are God’s and to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s,” the Chinese Communist Party seems to claim the prerogatives of both Caesar and God for itself (*South China Morning Post*, 29/12/2010). As already mentioned, the famous Document 19 guides the persistent political line on religions. It determined the end of persecution, which proved to be counter-productive, but it emphasized the Marxist “truth” according to which religion will disappear of its own accord when a Socialist society is fully realized. It also confirmed the need to keep religions under strict control, using them in the context of the Party’s United Front, so that they may contribute to the development programs of the State. This ideological approach has also been adopted in the “The Regulations for Religious Affairs”, which came into force on March 1, 2005, with the approval of the State Council.

The application of the traditional party line is at times less rigid, when the political apparatus deems that religious practice can contribute to social well-being. This led the 17th Congress of the CCP in 2007 to include in the preamble of the Party’s constitution an explicit recommendation to encourage the “mass of believers” to contribute to the nation’s economic development. Subsequently, the *Politburo* of the Party dedicated a plenary session to a discussion of this subject. During it, the President of the Republic himself, Hu Jintao, recommended paying greater attention to the positive role of religion in building up a “harmonious society” (a favorite expression of his). Unfortunately, alongside these positive signals, the practice of severe repression has continued to prevail, especially concerning individuals and movements engaged in the defence of civil and religious rights, or in the fight against corruption.

One of the main points in the development of the Catholic community has always been the selection and consecration of bishops. In this regard, The Catholic Church of China is currently experiencing a sensitive moment over the delicate matter of the appointment of bishops. This is aggravated by the fact that the older generation of pastors (who had become priests at the end of the 1940s and in the early 1950s) are inevitably passing away. In the past six years some twenty five bishops have died, at the average age of ninety. Their successors have to be chosen from priests who are

⁶ Cf. “The emergence of a New Type of Christian in China today,” by Prof. Chen Cunfu (Zhejiang University), in *Review of Religious Research*, Nov. 2003.

only about forty to forty-five years of age. They will be the leaders of the local Church for decades to come.

The first chapter highlighted the sudden crisis that broke out at the end of 2010. We already mentioned that in 2007 seven new bishops were ordained, five of whom were able to obtain the approval of the State. Then for two years, no more episcopal ordinations took place. Then, in the first nine months of 2010 no fewer than ten new bishops were ordained, all with the approval both of the Holy See and of the government (in one case it was the official enthronement of a bishop who had previously not been recognised by the government). Obviously this surprising development aroused in many concerned Catholics, both in China and abroad, the hope that a definitive agreement between the government of Beijing and the Holy See could be reached. Unfortunately, recent facts have shown us how far off the solution to these deeply-rooted problems really is.

Inside the religious policy of the State

It may be useful to recall the operative instruments devised by the State apparatus to apply Marxist ideology concretely to Chinese society. It is a complex, but efficient organization. From the early 1950s, the government established a Department of Religious Affairs, which is placed at various levels of the bureaucratic structure. It recently changed its name to State Administration for Religious Affairs (SARA). On the political level, the Communist Party gave the United Front Department the task to deal specifically with religious problems, alongside those of other sectors of society not in line with Socialist ideology. From the very beginning, freedom of religious belief was publicly stated, on the model of the Soviet Union, but at the same time, the leaders ensured that they had practical control of the five officially recognised religions, creating in each one a Patriotic Association to act as a conduit to the political power.

The Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association (CCPA) was the last one to be set up. This was because the representatives of the dioceses, who mistrusted the promises of the “revolutionary comrades” resisted it. A compromise was reached during a long meeting of especially summoned Catholic representatives in the summer of 1957. The final declaration (approved on August 2nd) stated that the Chinese Church “will maintain purely religious relations with the Vatican’s Holy See and will obey the Pope in the areas of doctrines to be believed and ecclesiastical regulations to be observed. However, from a political and economic point of view, it will completely cut off relations with the Holy See of the Vatican.” Just the very next day, the official *People’s Daily*, in reporting the news, accused “right-wing elements inside the Church” of sabotaging the interests of the motherland. This reflected a new political crisis, which had arisen. For two months already, Mao Zedong, disavowing the “Hundred Flowers” campaign, had triggered off a hunt throughout the country for the “right-wing elements.” Countless victims, including members of the Party were purged.

In the following months, under great pressure, some local Catholic communities voted to hold “autonomous” episcopal elections, and on April 13, 1958 Bernardinus

Dong Guangqing and Mark Yuan Wenhua, two Franciscans, well known for their integrity and loyalty to the Church, were consecrated bishops in Hankou (Wuhan). They had been able to send a telegram to the Congregation of *Propaganda Fide* in Rome and to their general superior. In their telegrams they explained the circumstances in which the elections had taken place, and asked for the Pope's approval. Unfortunately, a negative answer came from the Prefect of *Propaganda Fide*, influenced no doubt by a decree of the Holy Office issued in the context of the dramatic situations taking place in Eastern Europe⁷. That reply from Rome, although unobjectionable from a juridical point of view, widened the breach with Communist China, which was just then implementing radical reforms. The latter involved the Maoist mobilisation of the "Great leap forward" campaign, and the setting up of People's Communes.

In that context, elections and episcopal ordinations multiplied with no reference to Rome. In 1960, coinciding with the trial in Shanghai of Bishop Ignatius Gong Pinmei (sentenced to life imprisonment), the Chinese press began to unleash even more radical attacks against Rome. In January 1962, a second Chinese Catholic representatives Assembly took place. Its concluding declaration confirmed that the Chinese Catholic Church had to "be completely freed from the control of the Holy See of Rome" and to "completely establish an independent and autonomous Chinese Catholic Church." After the meeting, seven new bishops were consecrated without papal mandate, bringing the total number of illegitimate ordinations to 48.⁸

The tragic decade of the Cultural Revolution (1966-76) followed, during which extreme attempts were made to completely eliminate religion. The climate did not begin to change until after the death of Chairman Mao. In 1980, the Patriotic Associations were brought back to life. The Catholic one celebrated its third congress from May 22-30, 1980, with 200 representatives attending. This was immediately followed by a three day meeting, with practically the same people in attendance. They called their gathering the Third Assembly of Chinese Catholic Representatives. The representatives decided to create, alongside the Patriotic Association, a Conference of Catholic Bishops and a Church Administrative Committee. A Fourth Assembly of Catholic Representatives took place in 1986, and a fifth one in 1992. At the latter assembly the Statutes of both the CCPA and of the Bishops Conference were drawn up. These specified that the Representatives Assembly was the highest ecclesiastical authority in China. The statutes added that important decisions regarding the running of the Church required the approval of a "Joint Conference" of the leaders of the Patriotic Association and of the Bishops Conference. This confirmed the power the Patriotic Association had in Church matters. Today the

⁷ In his encyclical *Ad apostolorum principis* of 29th June 1958, Pius XII confirmed the duty of every Christian to love his country and respect its laws, but also underlined that the Chinese Patriotic Catholic Association aimed at "leading the Catholics to adhere to and support the principles of atheistic materialism."

⁸ On this complicated affair, see the well documented study by E. Giunipero, *Chiesa cattolica e Cina comunista*, p. 189.

official jargon calls the two groups the “One Association and One Conference.”⁹ Two other Assemblies of Catholic Representatives followed (1998 and 2004). The representatives elected Michael Fu Tieshan, bishop of Beijing, as Chairman of the CCPA, and Joseph Liu Yuanren, bishop of Nanjing, as Chairman of the Bishops Conference. Both bishops died a few years ago, so a new Assembly of Catholic Representatives had been expected to take place for some time. The 8th Assembly of Chinese Catholic Representatives finally took place in December 2010.

One Chinese non-Christian academic told me that he had been able to carry out in-depth research into the so-called “Family Churches” (Protestant) and their positive impact in one of the most developed areas on the coast. His detailed report ended up on the desk of the highest authorities of the State, who had the matter further investigated. In November 2008, the authorities called a closed meeting of high profile experts. After ample and free discussion (there were no officials of the SARA or representatives of the national “Patriotic” Committee of the Protestants present), those scholars recommended that the “Family Churches” should be recognised by the State structures without obliging them to join the national Three-Self Committee (which corresponds to the Patriotic Association of the Catholics). An English-language newspaper in Beijing even reported this news, and included an unusual article suggesting the possible recognition of domestic churches. It seemed therefore that at the political level there was a sincere interest in solving the problems of contradictions with Christianity. However, it soon became evident that no change of policy was in the offing¹⁰. In fact, recently the China Aid Association, quoting confidential documents of the Communist Party, revealed that the Chinese government had initiated an all out campaign to have the domestic churches, with their pastors and faithful, registered, so as to eradicate in ten years time all those underground communities (*AsiaNews*, 27/04/2012). Catholics have reason to expect that the same fate lies in wait for them.

Probably the top leaders of the Communist Party fear that if their grip was loosened, the number of those who, in the name of the Gospel engage in social and political causes, unapproved by the authorities, would grow. With reference to the Catholic Church, although the threat of controversial activities taking place may appear less obvious, it is probable that the political leaders do not intend to let the “underground”

⁹ This non-canonical structure, with a double chairmanship, approved Statutes for the Management of Catholic Dioceses in China, with 83 articles, in 2003.

¹⁰ Cf. “Houses of Worship Seek Legitimacy”, in *Global Times*, 04/11/2009, pp. 12-13. According to the Canadian journalist A. MCCABE, there were about 3,000 Protestant meeting points, often in rented premises, in the capital and surrounding areas that were officially not recognised, but which the police no longer persecuted. However, in 2010-11, the police carried out several repressive actions against the Shouwang Protestant community. Some leaders of that worship community sent an open letter to Wu Bangguo, Chairman of the Standing Committee of the People’s Congress, asking for a modification of the regulations regarding religion. This initiative seems to have been unsuccessful. The authorities continued to put pressure on the “house churches” to push them to become part of the official church structures. However, they are trying not to exacerbate tensions, except in regard to the pastors who seem to be challenging the regime. See also an article in the *Washington Post* (28/07/2011), reproduced in *Eglises d'Asie*, 30/12/2011.

communities spread their activities. Someone also suggested that the question of a “normalisation” of relations with the Vatican may have been downgraded in order to put a brake on a possible increase in conversions.

In this complex panorama, Pope Benedict XVI, at Pentecost 2007, addressed an important Letter to the Church in China.¹¹ This authoritative document offers a serene and objective analysis of the situation, highlighting the concrete problems as well as the needs and priorities that the Church must face. It also emphasised the central place Jesus assigned to the episcopal ministry in the Church. It was also critical of the situation in the Chinese Church, especially “the significant part played by entities that have been imposed as the principal determinants of the life of the Catholic community.” More specifically, the Holy Father wrote, “The declared purpose of the afore-mentioned entities to implement ‘the principles of independence, autonomy, self-management and the democratic administration of the Church’ is incompatible with Catholic doctrine” (no. 7). This is why the Pope went on to state: “In the light of the principles expounded above, the present Chinese Catholic Bishops Conference cannot be recognised as an Episcopal Conference by the Apostolic See; the “clandestine” Bishops, those not recognised by the Government, but who are in communion with the Pope, are not part of it; it includes Bishops who are still illegitimate, and it is governed by statutes that contain elements incompatible with Catholic doctrine” (cf. no. 9). After publication of The Pope's Letter, no official comment was forthcoming, but its diffusion was blocked. However, fresh contacts and meetings at various levels between Rome and Beijing took place, with the expectation of a hoped for agreement. However, the results were uncertain.

The Third Report on religions compiled by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, (the “*Blue Book on Religion in China*,” 2010 edition), contained a section on the Christian Churches. In her study of Catholicism, researcher Wang Meixiu recalled pastoral initiatives and courses held in various dioceses, and provided recent statistics. Reflecting on the preparation for the Eighth Assembly of Catholic Representatives, which had been talked about for some time, she noted that in past decades little consideration had been given to the commitment made in the statute of the Patriotic Association in 1957, “to obey the Pope regarding the teachings of faith and doctrine and the rules to be observed in the Church.” She also noted that on the practical level, the Chinese Church, in the last decade, had formed closer links with the Universal Church, and she wondered whether the Assembly of Catholic Representatives and the other two bodies (Bishops Conference and Patriotic Association), as they are today, were still necessary.

On his side, Ye Xiaowen, who was the director of the State Administration for Religious Affairs from 1995 to September 2009, never made a secret of his determination to implement the official policy with regard to the Church. He is at present secretary of the Central Institute of the CCP with the rank of vice-minister.

¹¹ *L'Osservatore Romano*, 30th June-1st July 2007. The text can be found in various languages on the site www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/letters/2007. A useful Summary of the Letter was published later.

His deputy, Wang Zuo'an, succeeded him as director of SARA. He has stressed on several occasions the importance of implementing the triple autonomies and the democratic administration of the Church.

It is a widespread belief that a definite desire to penalise the Catholic Church exists among several national leaders, including those responsible for the Party's religious policy. This would be expressed in the Central Committee by the United Front Department. A high official in the United Front Department would appear to be a prominent figure here. To him is attributed the suggestion of creating confusion in the Church by forcing bishops recognised by the Pope to ordain as bishops those not recognized by the Pope and imposed by the State, and vice versa.

The sudden step backwards

The recent serious crisis started suddenly in this complicated context. As already mentioned, on November 20, 2010 the priest Joseph Guo Jincai was ordained bishop in Chengde (Hebei, about 250 km from Beijing) without a papal mandate. The violent force used against eight bishops summoned to take part in the ceremony did not go unnoticed¹². The Holy See denounced these actions in this way: "Such constrictions carried out by Chinese government and security authorities represent a serious infringement of the freedom of religion and of conscience." It also mentioned the possibility of the invalidity of the ordination. Many wondered about the reason for the sudden break down in the dialogue.

The desire for conflict with Rome became even more evident with the eighth Assembly of Catholic Representatives, which took place in Beijing December 7-9, 2010. How it was prepared and held confirms that the authorities in Beijing wanted to show the uselessness of opposing the objectives of the government policy towards the Church in China, in spite of the expectations of the international Catholic community. It is possible that the green light for this provocative initiative can be connected with the harsher position of Beijing towards the West due to the conferment in Oslo (at that very time) of the Nobel Peace Prize on Liu Xiaobo. The regime sentenced Liu to 11 years in prison, and he is still serving his sentence.

The central government used the adjunct offices of the United Front and of the State Administration for Religious Affairs to ensure that there was full participation at this 8th Catholic Representatives Assembly, and that no representatives would be absent. The lists of the representatives were decided through various consultations. There was no hesitation about using the police to force the bishops to go to Beijing. In Hengshui (Hebei) about a hundred policemen and government officials fought for hours with priests and local faithful, who wanted to protect their bishop, and it was

¹² In an open letter all the priests of the Cangzhou Diocese (Hebei) addressed the government on 15th December 2010, asking about the use of deceit and improper means to force their bishop (Li Liangui) to go to Chengde for that unapproved "ordination." They asked: "Where is the constitutional right of the personal freedom of citizens?" The document was translated into French and appeared in full in *Eglises d'Asie*, no. 545, 16th February 2011. An English translation appeared in *Tripod*, XXXI, no. 160, Spring 2011, p. 9.

not until evening that the authorities could take him to the capital (*AsiaNews*, 07/12/2011). Provincial and municipal officials grouped the delegates into their respective areas several days in advance. They lectured the delegates about “unifying” their thoughts, expressing their love for the country and for the Church, unanimously voting for the candidates proposed, and staying for the whole congress. More than 300 Catholic delegates (313 according to the official figures, including 45 bishops, 158 priests, 23 nuns and 87 lay people) took part in the Assembly, which was held at the Friendship Hotel in Beijing. About a hundred officials of the United Front and the SARA were present to protect the environment. Everything was foreseen and arranged. Each representative was given his/her proper seat to occupy, so that those accompanying them could clearly observe them.¹³ Such a shameless use of force at an event of a religious nature prompted the Belgian Father Jeroom Heyndrickx, known for his understanding attitude to the Chinese situation, say: “The whole Catholic world was shocked and saddened by this.” (*China News Service*, 08/12/2010). The main aim of the Assembly was to elect personnel to the top positions in the two organizations of the official Chinese Catholic community, which had been vacant for many years. The elections took place on the third day of the assembly. For the choice of the new leaders, a single candidate was proposed, without the chance for discussion or for nominating alternative candidates. The voting, which was to be unanimous, was to be by raised hand. One bishop later said: “Throughout the meeting I kept my head bowed and refused to vote for the bishops presented by the government, but they still counted my vote. The results had been fixed in advance. None of us, bishops, priests, religious or lay people present had the chance to express an opinion against the official candidates.” (*La Croix*, 27/12/2010).

In this context, the designations of the illegitimate bishop Joseph Ma Yinglin of Kunming to chair the Bishops’ Conference, and the choice of the Bishop Joseph Fang Xingyao of Linyi (Shandong), who is in communion with the Pope, as head of the Patriotic Association, an organization explicitly declared “incompatible with Catholic doctrine,” have a precise political significance. Some commentators did not hesitate to say that it was a “slap in the face to the Holy See.” The reaction of the Holy See was made public one week later (December 17th), after it had been able to ascertain that “many bishops and priests were forced to attend the Assembly.” The statement denounced “the grave infringement of human rights, and in particular, the right of freedom of religion and of conscience” of the participants. The statement expressed “the deepest esteem for those who, in different ways, testified to their faith with courage.” It invited the others “to pray, do penance and, with works, reassert their will to follow Christ with love, in full communion with the Universal Church.” On its side, the government retorted that the Vatican also violated religious freedom by interfering in a country’s internal affairs.

¹³ One detail confirmed by several voices is significant: in the double bed rooms of the most prominent bishops an escort, or extraneous “custodian,” occupied one of the beds, so that the bishop was never alone.

Many contradictions have re-emerged

Prof. Ren Yanli, a non-Christian expert already mentioned above, found the unilateral gesture of the Chinese authorities incomprehensible. “China and the Vatican had regular and positive talks; for four years there had been no illegitimate ordinations.” He had no doubt that these actions would damage attempts to build a harmonious society, compromising social stability. As for the motivations that invoke “sovereignty” and “freedom of religion” to justify the election and autonomous ordination of bishops, Prof. Ren considers them “weak, ridiculous and not deserving of being refuted” (*UcaNews*, 27/07/2011; also *Sunday Examiner*, 31/07/2011).

One underground priest commented bitterly that it was “a farce from which both parties emerge defeated.” The large number of bishops who took part in the congress, including some who are very respected and considered faithful to Rome, indicates the success of the pressure Beijing exercises on the clergy (*South China Morning Post*, 10/12/2010). Apart from a few cases of an evident state of illness or extreme old age, only one bishop was able to avoid attending. Moreover this caused the police to take swift action.¹⁴ Can we say that this is a victory for the prestige of China, which proposes to be a leader on the international scene? Unfortunately, these regretful events also highlight a sort of implosion in the life and image of the Chinese Church. While various external observers tend to sympathise with the bishops because they are victims of the political power’s strong pressure, quite a few voices in the local communities point out that “before sympathising with them as ‘victims’, we should ask who will pay for the harm done to the interests and to the hierarchy of the Church, and for the confusion caused among the faithful (*UcaNews*, 28/12/2011)?

The question is how can the Church in China develop from now on? The fact that the illegitimate bishop Ma Yinglin will assign new pastors to vacant sees will certainly not facilitate the dialogue needed to arrive at solutions. No one seems to know the role of the retired lay Catholic leader Liu Bainian who, having officially left the stage, still seems to retain power behind the scenes because of his new position as honorary chairperson of the CCPA and of the Conference of Chinese Bishops¹⁵.

The many young Chinese bishops recently approved by the Holy See are faithful to the Gospel and pastorally committed, but the fact that they have not found a way, with their priests and the lay people present at the recent assembly, to resist the logic of the politicians determined to impose the “democratic principle” in running the

¹⁴ This was Joseph Li Liangui, bishop of the Cangzhou Diocese in Hebei. The previously mentioned Letter of the clergy of his diocese on 15th December 2010, emphasized that due to the pressure suffered during the ordination in Chengde, their bishop “has not returned home and nobody knows where he is.” In addition, they accused the government of having taken unacceptable measures, sending “officers of public security and police cars to surround the parish church, as though Bishop Li were a great enemy!” The Letter goes on to ask: “Are we again experiencing the policies of the extreme left? Are these the acts of a harmonious society? Or has the Cultural Revolution returned?” See also *AsiaNews*, 07/12/2010.

¹⁵ See in this regard the interview he gave to Marco del Corona, *Corriere della Sera*, 28/01/2011. Some observers believe that Liu has a strong influence over Bishop Fang Xingyao, the new chairman of the CCPA, who comes, like Liu, from Shandong Province.

local Church is worrying. It is also understandable that this young generation of pastors has an instinctive sense of awe in the face of a well consolidated and experienced ruling political class.

What does the future hold? Father Jean Charbonnier, who has a good knowledge of China, both past and present, wonders whether a sort of “Chinese Gallicanism” has insinuated itself into the souls of certain bishops and priests. He also finds traces of this in the history of evangelization in China, where a century ago foreign missionaries, although dedicated, often made their presumed superiority felt, creating by reaction “a certain cultural and slightly xenophobic patriotism.” However, he does not see the danger of a complete break, comparable to events in the English Church, taking place. For Communist China does not aim to become a confessional State, and there is no Henry VIII who can propose himself as a “defensor fidei” (*Eglises d’Asie*, no. 545, 16/02/2011).

The Commission set up seven years ago to advise the Pope on the problems of the Church in China will have many matters to reflect upon. First of all, it is urgent to encourage pastors and faithful to find trust again, rediscovering the roots of our common faith and resuming the difficult path towards full unity internally, and with the Universal Church. It will then be necessary to consider whether and how it is possible to resume a constructive dialogue with the political authorities of the country. Pope Benedict XVI has repeated several times, as did his predecessor, that the Chinese Catholics are committed to making a positive contribution to the growth of a harmonious and peaceful society. They are not asking for privileges, but being only a “small flock,” they need to keep their identity and be able to freely profess their faith. One concrete problem highlighted by recent failures concerns the partners in the dialogue, considering the variety of positions existing even at the highest levels of the political structure, and therefore of the government¹⁶. In this new context, the discourse about possible diplomatic relations between Beijing and the Holy See no longer appears to be a priority, although the international media continue to highlight it when they touch on religious problems in China. For years the Chinese government has repeated that it is interested in establishing diplomatic relations, but two conditions must first be met: the Vatican must rescind its diplomatic relations, established since the early 1950s, with Taiwan and renounce interference in Chinese domestic affairs. Strangely though, it seems that Beijing’s change of priorities on the first of the two conditions encouraged the CCPA to give the green light to the eighth Representatives Assembly. Francesco Sisci, an attentive analyst who has lived in Beijing for several years and knows the reality of China well, made this observation¹⁷.

¹⁶ An emblematic case concerns the Prime Minister himself, Wen Jiabao, an enlightened technocrat who, during his term in office, emphasized many times, both at home and abroad, the urgency to proceed with needed structural reforms. Strangely, such speeches were systematically left out of the official newspaper, the *People’s Daily*, controlled by the Department of Propaganda.

¹⁷ Sisci writes that the Vatican had recently asked to send a representative to Beijing as a *liaison*, after the two parties seemed to have come to an agreement on choosing bishops. In the meantime, however, as relations (especially commercial) had also become more intense with the government of the “rebel province” (Taiwan), “Beijing had agreed with Ma Ying-jeou, the president of Taiwan, not to further

What space is left for hope?

The greatest problem today appears to be the interpretation of the second condition, i.e. the presumed “interference in Chinese domestic affairs,” where the awareness of the need to defend the prestige of the country comes into play. Many Chinese leaders consider themselves different from the rest of the world, where the authority exercised by the Roman Pope on local Catholic communities is not considered “interference.” Some commentators observe that the crisis of the Church in China recalls the ancient battle over investiture. Even today, amongst the questions that touch on the interests of both the civil power and of the Holy See is in the first place the right to choose bishops. The territorial demarcation of dioceses (which in the *Annuario Pontificio* is still the one of 1946) is also highlighted, and is a question that would require a mutual agreement. On both, even in the absence of diplomatic relations, an agreement could be arrived at, which would foster the development of a “harmonious society,” an aspiration of the government.

The juridical aspects of these problems were touched upon, at least theoretically, at a conference which the Marcianum Theological Institute held in Venice in 2009. Msgr. Juan Ignacio Arrieta, the secretary of the Pontifical Council for the Legislative Texts of the Church, presented a detailed and critical examination of the Statutes of the Chinese Catholic Bishops Conference and of the CCPA (2003 edition). His conclusion was that, in the current period of transition, it would be possible to “leverage mechanisms of flexibility in the canon law system to establish a system of peculiar organization for the country (China), but those elements should be in conformity with the requirements of divine law”¹⁸.

It is precisely these “requirements of divine law” that the Chinese politicians cannot, or do not want, to understand. They established a structure which was “patriotic and Catholic” at one and the same time, in order to subjugate the Church. They find it convenient to continue using this structure, the Patriotic Association, for this purpose. Thanks to it, they can say that from the very beginning it was the Catholics themselves who wanted to ordain their own bishops, autonomously from Rome. It was in the context of the Patriotic Association that some thirty years ago the College of Chinese Bishops was established, and the Assembly of Catholic Representatives was officially declared as the highest authority in the Chinese Church.

reduce the diplomatic space of the island, by demanding that the Vatican remove its diplomatic recognition.” As is well known, the Holy See is the most important of the 28 small States that still recognise Taiwan, and permit it to have a certain international presence, in spite of no longer being a member of the United Nations. “If Rome,” Sisci continues, “had sent a representative to Beijing, this would have been a slap in the face for Ma and be a strong setback to Beijing’s policy of pursuing a peaceful reunification with Taiwan,” *Asian Times Online*, 16/12/2010. Such a development seems confirmed by a recent news item: “President’s Vatican visit ‘unlikely.’ Former ambassador to Vatican cites delicate political situation,” *UcaNews*, 25/03/2012.

¹⁸ See: B.F. PIGHIN (Ed.), *Chiesa e Stato in Cina, dalle imprese di Costantini alle svolte attuali*, Faculty of Canon Law, Marcianum, Venezia 2010, p. 163. On 6 June, 2011, the Pontifical Council for Legislative Texts signed a Declaration on the correct application of Canon 1382 (stating that people involved in illicit ordinations could be excommunicated). The Chinese translation was published on June 13, 2011 (cf. *Tripod*.164, Spring 2012, p. 52).

Some scholars persevere in being confident, considering the institutionalised ambiguity that characterises Chinese society today; they give as an example the fact that while politicians continue declaring that the “four cardinal principles” of Marxism in the introduction to the Constitution are untouchable, in actual fact civil society is developing in a totally different direction. Thus, they say, it is not unthinkable that, with time, opportune amendments may be introduced into the Statutes of the two officially recognised entities, to make them compatible with the doctrine of the Catholic Church (the Assembly of Representatives does not as yet have any officially defined statutes).

In December 2010, the 8th Assembly of Catholic Representatives approved some adjustments to the two sets of Statutes but it is too early to assess their extent. A representative of the SARA spoke about them in a long speech reported by the government’s *Xinhua* news agency (cf. *China Daily*, 22/12/2010). While entering into a debate with the Vatican, whom he accused of putting forward “unreasonable demands,” the representative recognised our concerns in some way, stating that the Assembly of Catholic Representatives “does not deal with Catholic doctrine and does not violate the fundamental Catholic faith.” He added that the Conference of Bishops “fulfils the pastoral mission regarding faith and morals with the power and the authority Our Lord Jesus Christ and the Holy Spirit granted to His disciples.” In addition, the statutes of the College of Chinese Catholic Bishops is said to include the wish to maintain “the union with the successor of St. Peter, the head of the community of the disciples” regarding dogma and moral teachings. Naturally that representative hastily added that the Chinese Constitution requires that religious organisations and activities be independent from foreign influences, therefore “it is out of the question that recognition has to be obtained from a foreign entity or State.” This confirms the principle of “democratic management” for Catholics, as is the case for other religions in China as well.

Strangely enough, in present-day China, the religious policy, especially at the local level, also often seems to be interpreted and applied according to concrete requirements and interests. The leaders therefore do not hesitate to use threats or to cajole, to persecute in various ways or to offer economic favours, in certain cases even fostering the expansion of religious services. Scholars in Hong Kong remember the amount of “money that flows through the CCPA to a growing number of dioceses, seminaries and parishes. Therefore those who do not cooperate with the government have to pay a large financial price. And, as everywhere in the world, accepting money means losing independence” (*Sunday Examiner* - “China Bridge,” 16/12/2011).

In such a situation, the Catholic community is divided. The majority of the faithful do not let themselves be intimidated by the fact that at the entrance to all churches the sign of the Patriotic Association is hung. Their *sensus fidei* helps them to recognise and follow the pastors that can nourish their Christian faith and life, while avoiding the others. Some faithful, out of protest against government control, stay away from churches and structures that they consider too compromised. Even some among the bishops are probably of the opinion that they can fulfil their apostolic mandate in

union with the Pope, in spite of the high-flown declarations of “autonomous management.” The danger is that the image of weakness given by these pastors who enjoy both the approval of the Holy See and government recognition can further compromise the unity of the faithful, deepening the existing gap between the “underground” communities and the “official” ones.

A step in the right direction was Pope Benedict XVI’s decision a couple of years ago to assign the Chinese priest, Father Savio Hon Tai-fai, a Salesian from Hong Kong, to the important post of secretary of the Congregation of *Propaganda Fide* (or, Evangelization of Peoples) In one of his first declarations after his episcopal ordination, Archbishop Hon stressed the contribution that “faithful and ecclesiastical groups outside the PRC” can make to dialogue, mutual comprehension and understanding between the two parties (*UcaNews*, 22/02/2011).

Chapter IV

THE DIFFICULT PATH TO A RESUMPTION OF DIALOGUE ¹

On October 10, 2011, China proudly celebrated the 100th anniversary of her Republican history, which started on October 10, 1911. This “Double Ten” event presented a new opportunity for Beijing to dialogue with the leaders of the “rebel province” of Taiwan, since all of the Chinese people honor Sun Yat-sen (Sun Yixian) as the Father of the country. China was born again after the overthrow of the imperial system. Sun Yat-sen chose to become a Christian because he found in the Gospel positive inspiration for his modernization program. He aptly combined this with traditional Chinese culture².

After several decades of Republican history

The better part of the past century coincided with the life of the People’s Republic of China, proclaimed by Mao Zedong on October 1, 1949. It developed along new ideological lines and with different social objectives from the republican era. Regarding religious values, this New China elaborated her specific policy, declaring that citizens have the freedom to believe or not to believe in a religion. The policy also “guided” the five officially recognized world religions, including Catholicism, to develop along socialist lines. As was mentioned above, religious believers experienced harsh conditions during the first three decades. However, from the late 1970s on, the situation improved considerably.

After Deng Xiaoping opened China up to the rest of the world, attempts to tackle a number of specific problems, stemming from the article of faith that Catholic believers could not renounce their concrete unity with the Pope took place. As is well known, the Pope, besides being the Bishop of Rome, is also the head of a symbolic territorial entity, the Vatican State, assuring his independence and sovereignty in the exercise of his universal mission³. At the international level, the Holy See, though not an official member of the United Nations, maintains the status of a recognized Permanent Observer both of the U.N. itself, and with other adjunct organizations (F.A.O., U.N.E.S.C.O., U.N.I.C.E.F., etc.). But New China's leaders, in the Cold War climate of the late '40s, considered “the Vatican,” along with some Western States, to be enemies of their country. From the very beginning this caused great difficulties for Christian life. Consequently, the right of the Pope to supervise Church affairs in China is considered by the leaders there to be “interference” in the internal affairs of

¹ The substance of this chapter was published in Hong Kong by *Tripod* magazine (XXXI, n.163, Winter 2011, pp. 34-45) with the title: “Loosening the Tension for the Catholic Church in China”. The present text is an updated version of that article.

² Various aspects of this great event were aptly documented by *Tripod* (XXXI, n.162, Fall 2011).

³ The Vatican State was sanctioned by the Trattato Lateranense with Italy (1929). A sentence of the Italian Supreme Court (no. 6569, of 18/12/1979) explains that “the international subjectivity of the Holy See has been recognized, and encompasses both the Catholic Church and the State of Vatican City.”

their country. At the heart of the problem is the selection and appointment of bishops. According to Catholic doctrine, the consent of the Bishop of Rome, the Pope, is necessary for this.

So far, this problem has been difficult to solve. Yet, over recent decades efforts to establish a dialogue to handle concrete questions have taken place. In the year 2010, as has already been pointed out, the situation seemed to be moving towards a possible solution, as some ten new bishops were chosen with the tacit agreement of both the Holy See and the Chinese government.

But by the end of that year, however, a fresh crisis developed. As has been pointed out above, the Chinese authorities decided to proceed with the episcopal ordination, on November 20, 2010, of Father Guo Jincai as bishop of the diocese of Chengde (Hebei). The following month they convened the 8th National Assembly of Chinese Catholic Representatives. The political leaders consider this body to be the supreme authority of the Catholic Church in China.

We are facing a dilemma fraught with danger. Should the present tension reach a breaking point, it would surely prove to be a mortal wound for the Chinese Catholic communities. But the credibility of the Chinese government on the international scene would also be severely affected, since 180 governments of countries around the world maintain diplomatic relations with the Holy See.

Since I am very concerned about such dangers, I would like to propose some personal considerations, with the hope they may help to clear up misunderstandings and start bridging the gap between the Church and the government of China. I take Deng Xiaoping's motto of "looking for truth from facts" as my guiding light.

Bishops caught between the Holy See and the Government

As mentioned above, from the earliest years of Maoist China the government pushed the Catholic Patriotic Association (CCPA) to choose and ordain new bishops without the Pope's approval. These bishops were to take the place of the European ones, who had been expelled from the country. Such "autonomous" elections and ordinations were numerous in the following years, during which China cut herself off from the rest of the world. After Mao's death, Pope Paul VI, faced with the risk of the disappearance of the Church in China, extended the privilege to legitimate bishops, previously granted to Catholic Churches in Eastern Europe, to secretly ordain priests and bishops⁴. News of such a prerogative did not easily circulate in China. But Bishop Joseph Fan Xueyan of Baoding (Hebei), soon after his release from prison, and concerned about the future of the local small Catholic flock, did not hesitate to proceed with some episcopal ordinations (in 1981). The Holy See, once informed about them, approved them⁵. Obviously, the government did not recognize those secretly ordained bishops. About the same time, most of those who had previously

⁴ This was done through a decree of the *Propaganda Fide* Congregation in June 1978.

⁵ See Anthony Lam's article: "Recalling the 1981 Episcopal Ordinations and their consequences for the Chinese Catholic Church", in *Tripod*, XXXI, n.163, pp. 20-33. The same issue of *Tripod* also carries Giancarlo Politi's, article, "Underground Consecrations in the PRC – Thirty years later", pp. 5-19.

been forced to receive episcopal ordination unlawfully, taking advantage of Deng Xiaoping's open door policy and more frequent contact with foreigners, found a way to become reconciled with the Pope.

The Catholic Church considers bishops to be the successors of the Apostles, who were entrusted to share with Peter the care of the community of believers in Christ. A Catholic bishop, therefore, is just a religious figure for his local community, but in certain contexts his social position cannot be ignored. Church history recalls not a few cases of conflict in the European Catholic countries, when civil authorities tried to push for the ordination of candidates of their choice, and who would support their interests or policies.

The official Catholic Catechism, which follows the dogmas of Vatican Council II (1962- 65), as well as those of the age-old Catholic tradition, is very clear on these points: "Each bishop exercises his ministry from within the Episcopal college, in communion with the Bishop of Rome, the successor of Peter and head of the college" (n. 877). And again: "In our day, the lawful ordination of a bishop requires a special intervention of the Bishop of Rome, because he is the supreme visible bond of the communion of the particular Churches in the one Church and the guarantor of their freedom" (n.1559)⁶. The Pope's responsibility in this regard is also expressed: "The Roman Pontiff, by reason of his office as Vicar of Christ and as pastor of the entire Church, has full, supreme, and universal power over the whole Church, a power which he can always exercise unhindered." (n. 882)

In the present Chinese Constitution (approved in 1982), Article 36 about religious freedom has this further specification: "No State organ, public organization or individual may compel citizens to believe in or not to believe in, any religion; nor may they discriminate against citizens who believe in, or do not believe in, any religion." This also obviously means that no one can be forced to change his or her religious belief. There is a final sentence, which states: "Religious bodies and religious affairs are not subject to any foreign domination." Catholic believers feel at ease on this point, as the Pope's authority does not constitute "foreign domination." It is simply part of a Catholic's religious creed. Thus, when this constitutional clause is invoked to force them to elect and ordain their bishops with no reference to the Bishop of Rome, they feel betrayed, as this would mean forcing them to change their faith.

Wang Meixiu's study, in the already mentioned "Blue Book on Religions" of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, also pointed out the need to reconsider the reciprocal authority of the Chinese Church structures and Rome. In any case, the proper task for the Bishops Conference in guiding the Chinese Church should,

⁶ The apostolic Constitution *Lumen Gentium* contains in chapter 3 an Explicative Note requested by Pope Paul VI and approved by a large majority of the Council Fathers. It specifies that, before a bishop may exercise the fullness of his power in the Church, including that of governing, besides the sacramental ordination, he should also obtain the "iuridica determinatio," that is, a juridical appointment from the supreme Church authority.

according to academician Wang, be clearly distinguished from that of the Patriotic Association, which was established to act as a “bridge” between the State and the Church. Moreover, the meaning of such expressions as “church affairs” and “the democratic running of the church” should be clarified in the context of various Vatican Council II documents dealing with such matters. These suggestions aim to foster a better implementation of the official religious policy, and to make the relationship of the Catholic minority with the State less contentious.

3. After the 8th Congress of Catholic Representatives, a spokesperson of the State Administration of Religious Affairs presented this statement (*Xinhua*, 22/12/2010): “China's Constitution grants Chinese citizens the freedom of religious belief, but requires the independence of religious organizations and affairs in China from foreign influence. Under this constitutional provision, the Catholic church and other religions in China adhere to the principles of self-governance and self-support.” Referring to the Holy See’s complaint (*Vatican Information Services*, 17/12/2010), the spokesperson continued: “It was a misinterpretation by the Vatican to declare that the Chinese Catholic Church’s principle of self-governance is incompatible with Catholic doctrine.” The spokesperson, referred to a new statute of the Chinese Catholic Bishops Conference which states that the conference works “in union with the Successor of St. Peter, the Head of the community of the Apostles” with regard to dogmas to be believed and the moral teachings of the Church to be observed. He also quoted another expression of this new statute: “The Bishops Conference carries out its pastoral mission to nourish the faith and to evangelize according to the power and authority which Jesus Christ gave to His apostles through the Holy Spirit.”

It is really unfathomable that a government structure should decide what is or is not compatible with the Catholic faith, when such statements come from a secular State professing “scientific historical materialism.” In fact, the statute in question fails to concretely commit the Chinese Church to act according to the current laws of the Universal Church, as expressed in the Code of Canon Law and practiced all over the world. This is why the Pope cannot give his approval to the Bishops Conference of China. As for the statutes of the Patriotic Association, they appear even more deeply at odds with Catholic doctrine and praxis. We are faced with an explicit attempt to meddle with the religious beliefs of Catholics, thus subverting the very nature of the Church. This causes great suffering and divisions in the Catholic communities all over the country. It surely does not contribute to the growth of a “harmonious society,” which former President Hu Jintao advocated.

What kind of religious freedom is being created in this New China?

4. Even more regrettable events weighing heavily on the life of the Catholic communities took place during the past few years. So many people witnessed these undeniable facts that the public authorities cannot deny them. They should be dealt with in order to have a full picture of the situation. I refer to the various incidents of moral coercion and physical violence used with bishops whom the public authorities

summoned to take part in episcopal ordinations not having papal approval and the National Assembly of Catholic Representatives, which Rome also disapproved of. Nowhere in the free world would the political power so interfere in the ordination ceremony of a Catholic bishop by actually organizing it and carrying it out with such a display of police force.

This confirms, unfortunately, that in present day China the declared religious freedom is conditioned upon the achievement the State's political objectives, with no regard or respect for the legitimate traditions of the believers. Samuel Gregg thinks that the Beijing-Rome confrontation aptly expresses the dilemma present day China faces, where the régime's utmost worry appears substantially to be the holding on to a monopoly of power, as an end to itself. This favors the rampant corruption afflicting China, while denying sufficient leeway to the very organizations capable of alleviating her grave problems (*The American Spectator*, 29/06/2011). Such behavior diminishes China's prestige in the world. As both foreign and Chinese scholars have often underlined, this preposterous use of force to impose specific religious policy positions seems to prove that leftist groups prevail within the halls of government. Some people are even drawn to ask if such actions constitute a return to the methods of the infamous "Cultural Revolution."

Sadly, the situation worsened with the public authority again using the police forces to impose episcopal ordinations on the dioceses of Leshan (29/06/2011) and Shantou (14/07/2011). The Holy See, before the events informed the concerned candidates of the reasons the Pope could not approve their ordinations. After the ceremonies took place, the Holy See found it necessary to declare that the two candidates had incurred excommunication, for seriously violating Church law (*VIS*, July 4 and 16, 2011). At that point, the SARA spokesperson responded by declaring that the "so-called excommunication" of the two bishops to be an "extremely unreasonable and rude" act (*Xinhua*, 25/07/2011). Besides confirming the determination to continue electing and ordaining bishops "independently," the Patriotic Association declared that it intended to continue doing so "for the sake of managing the country's Catholic work and for spreading the faith." The prospects for the future appear worrying, as the CCPA announced that at least seven new bishops' ordinations were on the calendar (Cf. *China Daily*, 22/07/2011). According to Jerom Heyndrickx, these forced ordinations show that religious freedom is still a great problem in China. "The way they pick up bishops and force them to perform these ordinations, makes China lose face before the whole world, in my estimation," he said (*Associated Press*, 22/07/2011).

5. Luckily, in some cases it has been possible, thanks to local circumstances, for Church law to be observed, even though within the limits of public structures. Such was the case in Fengxiang diocese (Shaanxi province in Central China), where old Bishop Lucas Li Jinfeng (aged 91) supervises the Church. Having been ordained a bishop secretly in 1980, the government recognized him in 2004. His name was then included among the members of the Bishops Conference, but he never joined the Patriotic Association. Well known for his integrity and wisdom, Pope Benedict

invited him to participate in the 2005 Synod of Bishops (but he could not attend). Bishop Li had already chosen a coadjutor bishop in the person of Peter Zhang Zhiyong; but at 82 years of age, and not having obtained government approval, Peter Zhang decided to resign. So, Bishop Lucas Li, in May 2011 proposed to his clergy the name of a new young coadjutor bishop, Father Peter Li Huiyuan (47 years old). Bishop Li followed the government rules in carrying out the election. Peter Li was approved practically without a dissenting vote (47 out of 48). The electors included 36 priests, 6 sisters and 6 lay Catholics. SARA officials confirmed that the election of the new bishop, organized along the “democratic” rules of the country, was valid. Monsignor Lucas Li explained that the ordination would follow the procedures of canon law, adding that he would in the meantime inform the Chinese Bishops Conference of the results of the vote (*UcaNews*, 23/05/2011).

In Hankow (which is part of the Hubei provincial capital Wuhan), in early June 2011 the forthcoming episcopal ordination of Joseph Shen Guo'an (50 years old), for the seat that had been occupied by the well known Bishop Bernardinus Dong Guangqing was announced. As mentioned before, Bernardinus Dong was the first bishop ordained without papal approval. Having been reconciled with Rome in the early 1990s, he died in communion with the Universal Church. At the present time, there are no bishops in all 9 dioceses of Hubei Province (through combinations of dioceses, the government has reduced the number to five). The candidate Father Joseph Shen did not obtain papal recognition. The local Catholic community (about 20 thousand faithful, with 25 priests in the official community and 40 in the clandestine one), was deeply upset by the pressure exercised on the priests to have them approve the choice of candidate and on several bishops of neighboring dioceses to induce them to take part in the ordination ceremony. At the same time, even the candidate appeared reluctant to accept the appointment. Strong opinions were also expressed on websites: “How can the Chinese authorities allow such repressive actions to take place on Catholic bishops and on episcopal candidates, particularly in the case of a candidate who is unqualified and unwilling to become a bishop?” Up to the Lunar New Year 2012, the question appeared not to have reached a conclusion.

A similarly tense situation developed also in the Handan (or Yongnian) Diocese at the southern tip of Hebei province. Old Bishop Stephen Yang Xiangtai (over 90 years of age) took the initiative, on June 21, 2011 to secretly ordain his own coadjutor bishop (and therefore his successor) in the person of Joseph Sun Jigen (aged 47). This young priest had acted as diocesan chancellor and then vicar-general. In 2010, he had been elected to become the coadjutor bishop. The ordination ceremony was arranged for June 29, feast of the Saints Peter and Paul. The government authorities, however, did not approve, claiming that the date was too close to July 1st, the 90th anniversary of the founding of the Chinese Communist Party. They were also pressuring the local church community to accept the participation of illegitimate bishop Joseph Guo Jincan of Chengde in the ordination ceremony. The new bishop Joseph Sun, soon after his secret ordination, went into a spiritual retreat in the neighboring diocese of Anyang (or Weihui) in Henan Province. When he emerged from it, on June 26, the police took him to the provincial capital, Shijiazhuang. At that time, the diocesan

office announced that the ordination, previously scheduled for June 29th was cancelled, and that the ordination had already taken place.

The authorities could only take note of the fact. But they insisted on bringing the new bishop to meet old Bishop Stephen Yang in the hospital, where in the meantime, he had been admitted for a heart attack, to confirm and verify the news. Bishop Joseph Sun Jigen could then return to his diocese at the beginning of July, apparently without suffering any negative consequences. (*UcaNews*, 07/11/2011).

6. Another disquieting feature is the well known fact that SARA leaders, as well as officials of the Party's United Front department dealing with the Church, frequently summon bishops and other diocesan leaders to up-dating courses and special study sessions, during which political and patriotic education is the core issue. It is also well known that in China the bishops cannot organize among themselves any study sessions to deal with pastoral, theological or moral topics, without the control of "political inspectors," usually members of the Patriotic Association and/or government officials. A decision taken at the National Representatives Congress in December 2010 to establish some working Committees, as part of the Bishops Conference could have proved useful. Unfortunately, once again the bishops had to share with the Patriotic Association leadership over such committees, thus inevitably leaving themselves open to becoming political stooges.

This is what happened when Bishop Zhan Silu of Mindong, Fujian Province, (consecrated without papal approval on January 6, 2000) convened at Ningde the new Committee for Pastoral Care and Evangelization October 8-12, 2011. Some 30 persons (bishops, priests, a sister and lay people) gathered there to discuss various aspects of evangelization and to exchange experiences. To the great surprise of everyone, Vice-Director Zhu Wei-qun of the United Front department decided to make a special trip from Beijing to Ningde to join the meeting. In the talk he gave, he underlined once more the importance of being patriotic, of adapting the religious practices of the faithful to China's "socialist society" and of strengthening the "principle of running an independent Church". A Chinese priest, who signed himself with the pen-name *Shanren*, remarked: "It is a great insult to the Chinese Catholics to say that they do not love their country and that they need a patriotic association to guide them." (*Ucanews*, 12/10/2011)

The experience of Catholic Bishops conferences the world over confirms that Church leaders feel the need to gather among themselves for study sessions, to analyze and discuss in complete freedom some theological, spiritual or pastoral questions, and to agree on common lines of action. In free countries they can meet without any problem of interference from political observers. This unfortunately is not possible in the People's Republic of China. In addition, officials often force bishops to attend political sessions⁷. The obsession with patriotism seems to justify any excesses. It is

⁷ In September 2011, while preparing to accompany a group of friends on a visit to China, I got in touch with some Churches where we hoped to join the local communities for Sunday Mass. I was advised that Bishop Anthony Dang Mingyan of Xi'an would not be present in his diocese, as he would be going to Beijing to attend one of the study courses organized by *Renmin Peoples University*. As a matter of fact,

not difficult to see that at the root of such inconsistency is the uncontrolled power bestowed over the years on the Catholic Patriotic Association, which does not pass up any opportunity to prove itself indispensable in preserving the honor of the country, and it does not waver from placing itself “above the Bishops,” as Pope Benedict XVI lamented.

Premier Wen Jiabao in his speech on October 1, 2011 launched a great effort to find solutions for peoples’ problems by promoting more internal democracy. It is to be hoped that among the problems ones of a spiritual nature would not be overlooked. This would seem to foster an authentic social harmony.

Bravery and weakness in the Church

7. We have also heard of the arrest of priests during the past few years. It is usually a case of clerics belonging to so called “underground” communities, who refuse to join the Patriotic Association. For this reason, the government does not trust them. In August 2011, four priests of the Heze (or Caozhou) Diocese were locked up in the Dongming County jail, in Shandong province, Eastern China. They had gathered with some other priests for a spiritual retreat in a private home in Luquan. Three were released after several days of detention. Their jailors had kept them in isolation and treated them harshly. The local police subjected them to many hour of questioning. National security forces and members of SARA exerted much effort to induce them to join the Patriotic association. It was all in vain; they refused to do so. Wang Chengli (b. 1963), the diocesan administrator, was kept in prison. Heze is a small diocese, which has been without a bishop since 2004. When Bishop Wang Dianduo passed away, it could count only four officially recognized priests and a small community of underground Catholics (*AsiaNews*, 08 and 12/06/2011).

In Hebei Province surrounding Beijing several priests are known to have been detained at length. Father Joseph Chen Hailong of Xuanhua (or Zhangjiakou) Diocese was ordained in 2009, and exercised his ministry in the Yanqing parish, in the suburbs of Beijing. Arrested on April 9, 2011, he spent more than two months in the hands of the police. Besides trying to persuade him to accept the principle of an independent Church, the authorities wanted to find out the hiding-place of the octogenarian “clandestine” bishop of Xuanhua, Thomas Zhao Kexun, who in 2007 disappeared without leaving a trace. About three other priests from the same diocese, who were arrested on June 22, 2011, there was still no news two months later (*UcaNews*, 04/08/2011).

At the end of January 2012, in the Diocese of Suiyuan (Inner Mongolia autonomous region), the police arrested five priests belonging to the “underground” community. For that vast area, in April 2010, an “official” bishop, Paul Meng Qinglu (b. 1962), recognised by both the Holy See and the Chinese authorities, was appointed. But for several years a clandestine Catholic community, with about 30 priests, flourished in

Bishop Dang had to join the 6th class for religious leaders (all together about 55 persons, from the 5 religions). He spent four full months away from his diocese, from the beginning of September to the end of December 2011.

Suiyuan. The priests had been able to work without great problems for a long time, but they ended up in detention on January 30, 2011. Among them were Joseph Zhang, considered the diocesan administrator, Father Ban Zhanxiong, the rector of the clandestine seminary and three parish priests, who were meeting in a private home in Erenhot (*UcaNews*, 31/01/2012).

8. Even more confusing appears the situation in Tianshui diocese, Gansu province, Northwest China. Bishop Augustine Zhao Jingnong (1909-2004), was ordained without papal approval in 1981. In the 1980s, he asked to be recognized by the Pope. However, he could not be declared bishop of Tianshui because in the meantime Rome had appointed a clandestine bishop, Casimirus Wang Milu, there. Augustine Zhao died in peace in 2004, having been reconciled with Rome. The Tianshui diocese, counting some 20,000 faithful plus a significant number of “underground” Catholics, continued to remain split into two communities, with about thirty priests divided equally among them. Recently, in the official community the diocesan administrator was Bosco Zhao Jianzhang, grand-nephew of Bishop Augustine, while the underground community considered its administrator to be John Baptist Wang Ruohan, brother of Bishop Casimirus (20 years earlier Bishop Casimirus, perhaps not as prudent as he was fervent, had ordained both him and another brother, John Wang Ruowang, as priests). Casimirus himself resigned from the episcopacy in 2003. In such a difficult context, the United Front Department in Gansu announced already in 2010 that they had as a priority project the creation of a new bishop in Tianshui. In August 2011, police arrested the leaders of the “clandestine” community and made them undergo a period of intensive “study.”

An unexpected development occurred at the beginning of 2012, when Catholic sources revealed that John Baptist Wang Ruohan (b. 1962) had been ordained a bishop a few weeks earlier with papal approval. On December 30, 2011, police had detained him and some of his priests once again and forced him to attend new “study sessions.” The security forces wanted to find out the circumstances of his episcopal ordination. According to the French agency *Eglises d'Asie*, while deciding to make John Baptist Wang bishop of Tianshui, the Holy See also approved the appointment of Bosco Zhao as his coadjutor bishop, in an apparent effort to encourage diocesan unity. No date for Bosco Zhao's ordination has been set, and it was not known how the authorities would react to the new situation (*UcaNews*, 23/08/2011; 10/01/2012; *Eda*, 11/01/2012).

9. Unfortunately, inside the Catholic communities in China some unhealthy signs are coming to light. While we know that the authorities have forcibly brought a number of bishops, priests and other Church members to attend official meetings and events, there have also been bishops and priests who went along without resistance, thus abetting the government's plans. It is difficult to know how willingly those forced to go, complied. Many are concerned to ensure the continued functioning of essential church structures, as quite often control over the diocesan finances is not in the bishop's hands. It is frequently the case that the Patriotic Association manages or

controls important Church properties, which the government confiscated during the Mao years. These have been given back to the Church at the local authorities' discretion, and have come under the control of the CCPA. Moreover, subsidies granted by the SARA offices usually go through the Patriotic Association to Church communities according to their friendliness to the authorities.

A serious danger for people serving in any Church community is also the temptation to strive for power. Pope Benedict XVI referred to this during a trip to Germany not too long ago. He warned that the Church, in carrying out her responsibilities, should always make repeated efforts to overcome worldliness. In the solemn ceremony for the elevation of 22 new cardinals (18/02/2012), Pope Benedict reminded them that in their new positions they will have to choose between “domination and service, selfishness and altruism, possessing and giving, self-interest and gratuitousness.” Such deeply contrasting attitudes, he said, will “always and everywhere” be opposed to one another. On another occasion he publicly admitted that the blight of “careerism” can be found even in the inner circle of Holy See officials. Sadly, recent events have sharply confirmed the frailty of the human side of Church structures, and the media have been quick to highlight them.

No one should deceive themselves into thinking that the Chinese Church is free of such dangers and weaknesses. They are simply part of human nature. In fact, the concrete Chinese situation rather makes the above mentioned temptations appear particularly strong. For one eager to have a successful career the road is comparatively easy. He has only to go along with the government priorities for the Church. The present situation in this regard is difficult to assess. In fact it has been a consistent United Front policy to have religious leaders elected or co-opted to hold important political positions. They are frequently appointed to be members of the Chinese Peoples Political Consultative Conference, or even the People's Congress, at various levels. Even within the official Church structures, the government holds “democratic elections” to appoint bishops and priests to leading posts, oftentimes just presuming the consent of the Church personnel⁸.

For example, Bishop Li Liangui of Cangzhou (Xianxian, Hebei Province), by hiding had avoided attending the 8th National Assembly of Catholic Representatives in December 2010. Soon after the event, the provincial government dismissed him from his post in the Political Consultative Conference of Hebei Province. More recently, Bishop Paul Pei Junmin of Liaoning Diocese (Shenyang), shortly after he was forced to participate in the illegal ordination of Father Guo Jincai as bishop of Chengde, was requested to preside at another illegal ordination, that of Huang Bingzhang as bishop of Shantou. He was able to resist Beijing's orders this time thanks to the massive public support and protection of his clergy. The authorities punished him by confining him to his house and not allowing him to meet other priests or to visit parishes. He was also “suspended” from his position as vice-President of the State-sanctioned Bishops Conference and from his position as head of the Patriotic Association and of

⁸ This of course never happens with secretly ordained bishops, whom the authorities simply ignore. As for those illicitly ordained in the past who were able to obtain papal recognition, in most cases the authorities appear to have closed their eyes.

the Church Affairs Committee of Liaoning Province. The news was spread that Bishop Pei had himself tendered his resignation from those positions in order to cover up the government's dismissal of him. When Father Joseph Yang, the official spokesperson of both the Bishops Conference and the Patriotic Association, was questioned about Bishop Pei's punishments, he gave the ambiguous reply: "On our website nothing has been written about that."(*UcaNews*, 21/10/2011).

Constructive dialogue is a priority need

10. The cases just mentioned confirm that the crucial point remains the selection and ordination of bishops. While Catholic doctrine and praxis requires the Pope's approval as a decisive element in this, the Chinese authorities label such an action as "interference in the internal affairs of the State." With such a "political" reading of affairs, the statement of the SARA spokesperson is not surprising: "If the Vatican is sincere about improving relations, it should rescind the so-called 'excommunications,' and return to the correct path of dialogue" (*Xinhua*, July/07/2011).

As already mentioned, one of Beijing's primary goals in the past appeared to be the breaking of diplomatic relations, which had been established around the middle of the 1940s between the Holy See and the "Republic of China". Recently, improved relations between the communist government and Taiwan downgraded such a priority. Yet, the Beijing authorities do not ignore the prestige enjoyed by the Pope on the international scene. The SARA spokesperson in the statement mentioned above repeated: "The Chinese government is willing to improve Sino-Vatican relations through constructive dialogue." Pope Benedict XVI, as already his predecessor John Paul II did, more than once also expressed his sincere hope to reach a "constructive dialogue" capable of solving the thorny questions at hand. Such intentions have to be turned into concrete actions, spelling out ways about how to restart a dialogue which will have some chance of succeeding. Ancient Chinese wisdom teaches that only a perspective allowing both protagonists to feel in some way winners will lead to a lasting peace. In the present situation, it is difficult to imagine the real possibility for a "win-win solution" being achieved.

A constructive dialogue should be sought, in my opinion, in the practical field, aiming at a series of regulations honoring the authority and prestige of the State, without creating new divisions and tensions inside the communities of believers. To ensure this, the interlocutors should be recognized delegates of the two parties, capable of negotiating in mutual confidence and respect, and authorized to sign agreements acceptable to both parties.

The "*Regulations on Religious Affairs*" approved by China's State Council at the end of 2004 marked an improvement when compared to the previous situation. But several points were still left vague, such as the meaning of "religious belief." Moreover, the Regulations placed some unduly heavy burdens on believers in the area of being able to express their convictions, even when social harmony or the common good were not being jeopardized.

Concerning the Catholic Church, it is to be hoped that the Beijing government would

take the further step of assuring that Catholics can manage their affairs according to their own traditions, and that local cadres not be allowed to overstep their authority in this field. Catholic communities are united in their determination to support social peace by following the common law and contributing to the common good. They have no difficulty registering, as requested, with the respective Offices of Religious Affairs. But coercing individual Catholics or Catholic groups to join or to become members of the Patriotic Association should never be allowed to happen. Nor should they be blackmailed to make them sign up. It is in the very nature of an association that applying for admission should be left up to one's own free will. All too often in China certain methods are adopted, which do not contribute to building up a "harmonious society." Such actions end up discrediting the work of those responsible for the government's religious policy.

One must recognize, however, that efforts to start a positive dialogue proved to lack consistency also on the Catholic side. The Letter of Pope Benedict XVI in 2007 set out important guidelines, but it did not specify a methodology to make the dialogue proceed successfully. It is to be hoped that the China Commission, which Pope Benedict set up to advise the Holy See regarding efforts to help the Church in China may offer it prudent and constructive suggestions, taking into account all aspects of the problem.

Various commentators think that Rome should ask, as a pre-condition for a lasting agreement, that the present structures created by the government to "guide" the life of Catholics in China be scrapped altogether. My viewpoint is that this is not realistic.

Yet, I would dare to make an equally important proposal, favoring, in my opinion, the arrival at an agreement. I think that it should be suggested to the Chinese authorities, as a conciliatory gesture, to empower the leadership of the Chinese Bishops Conference to study and approve a number of amendments to their constitution, in order to make it fully consistent with universal Catholic doctrine and praxis. The Patriotic Association should carry out a similar work on their Statutes, cancelling, for example, the rule that requires all important decisions of the Bishops Conference to be approved by them also. Such revisions would open the doors of membership in the Bishops Conference to all Chinese bishops, and would facilitate its recognition by the Holy See. Similarly, I am convinced that acceptance of the Patriotic Association would become less problematic for the consciences of the Catholic faithful.

I am quite aware that this proposal would face huge obstacles in certain quarters, as it may appear provocative. But I deeply feel that, if accepted, it would allow the two parties to meet half way. By applying democratic principles in dealing with the Bishops Conference and the Patriotic Association, the prestige of the Chinese authorities would be safeguarded. In fact, the SARA spokesperson has already stated that they accept the principles of the Chinese Bishops Conference regarding observance of universal Catholic doctrine and of remaining in communion with the Pope. Once the nature of the Catholic Church is upheld and is not undermined, discussion on concrete issues can easily take place, and agreement on suitable solutions has a greater possibility of being achieved.

Chapter V

THE CHINESE CHURCH AND THE UNIVERSAL CHURCH: A SINGLE DESTINY

One century ago, many of the young rebels who had overthrown the imperial system declared themselves to be against traditional values. They also rejected Christianity, declaring it to be a cult imported from the West that had exploited their country. Among the intellectuals some insisted that China had to gain possession of the technology, science and methods that had made the West great, but reject its cultural values. Then, in the first half of the 20th century, Republican China, the Guomindang (the Nationalist Party) under Chiang Kai-shek, from a political point of view, chose to rely on the West. With the success of the Marxist revolutionary project, a new cultural model was effectively chosen. This was also a product of the West, created in Moscow. Basing the New China upon it, Mao Zedong displayed an iconoclastic fury with regard to Chinese cultural traditions. He considered the national heritage of previous millennia as simply trash before the Marxist revolution. Fortunately, today many of the leaders of the PRC feel the need to once again resurrect the cultural traditions of the “Middle Kingdom,” believing them to be a perennial treasure and heritage to be given their due consideration and respect. Perhaps this rediscovery of the values of the past contains precious opportunities for discussion and dialogue with regard to the crisis that threatens the identity and future of the Church. I am convinced that reasons for confidence and hope can emerge from a serene reflection on the social and historical importance of the current problems. Hopefully this confidence can be shared by those who recognize that the evangelical message can make a precious contribution to the Chinese people, and are committed to confirming its presence.

An unclear political scene

From what has been said so far, it would appear that in China today there are forces of the extreme left, perhaps nostalgic for the feats of the omnipotent “Gang of Four,” who do not hesitate to render the “religious policy” of the country more contentious. This crisis can probably be linked to the struggle between the different factions in the Communist party that had been contending for dominant positions on the *Politburo* as seen from the recently concluded 18th Party Congress. However, more moderate and realistic trends are also at work to rebalance the situation. The Congress decided on an adequate political and economic strategy for the progress of the country both domestically and internationally. It is therefore pointless to speculate on future orientations. The outcome was resolved upon the choice of the new leaders.

All eyes are on Xi Jinping (58), who had been previously indicated by the media as the “designated President.” He belongs to the new generation of “princes.” His father Xi Zhongxun, who passed away in 2002 at the age of 89, was a companion of Mao,

twice a victim of purges, and worked with Deng Xiaoping after 1979. After spending seven years in the countryside during the Cultural Revolution, Xi Jinping was a student of the reformer (later dismissed) Hu Yaobang, and proved himself competent as governor of Fujian and Zhejiang, and later as Party secretary in Shanghai. He has a doctoral degree in chemical engineering, and a daughter who studied at Harvard. The successor of Premier Wen Jiabao is Li Keqiang (57), one of the members of the *Politburo*, who had long work experience in the province of Henan. He studied law and has a degree in economics.

One provincial official who is an emerging leader is Wang Yang, a member of the *Politburo* who became secretary of the party in Guangdong, after having achieved good economic results in Chongqing. Before the Chinese New Year 2012, Wang Yang defused in an unusual fashion a dangerous popular uprising in Wukan. He disavowed the local Party leader (accused of corruption), and appointed in his place the leader of the “rebels,” who had been able to resist the repression of the police. At a provincial Party meeting with high level officials, Wang Yang was quoted as saying: “We must do away with the mistaken idea that the happiness of the people is a favour bestowed by the Party and the government.” He also said: “Seeking happiness is the right of the people, “while the role of government is to give “the masses of people freedom to boldly explore their own road to happiness.” (*AsiaNews*, 10/05/2012)¹ In 2011, *Forbes* magazine chose President Hu Jintao as the most powerful man in the world, even before Barack Obama. The motivation was: “He exercises a dictatorial power over one-fifth of the world’s population, and he is at the head of the largest army on earth. He can move rivers, build metropolises, imprison dissidents and censor the Internet without bureaucratic interference.” These “merits,” listed by what may be considered the “Bible of Capitalism”, indicate a type of power which is almost absolute and uncontrolled. On the other hand, in China some have criticised *Forbes*, observing that Hu was, after all, “primus inter pares” in the *Politburo*, and the prize should have gone to the Party itself (*La Repubblica*, 05/11/2011). However, nobody seems to challenge the ideal of a “harmonious society,” which President Hu has proclaimed on several occasions. The problem is the choice of suitable means to foster harmony, in the face of the strident contradictions and the severe social tensions which citizens in the new China undergo. The tumultuous economic growth of the last thirty years, during which the social conscience seems to have crumbled, exacerbates the tensions. At the same time, the economic growth has not been supported by an adequate reform of the legislative and judicial systems.

The Frenchman Étienne Ducornet describes this moral crisis as the existence of “six classic evils:” prostitution, pornography, trafficking of women and children, gambling, drugs and superstitious practices. These are terrible scourges, which in turn are the result of a social context without any commonly shared moral foundations. Getting rich has become the “raison d’être” of a large part of the population, who

¹ Obviously, there was great expectation that the 18th Party Congress would foster the growth of a “harmonious society.” Yet, authoritative commentators remain sceptical. Willy Wo-Lap Lam appears to be one such commentator. See his evaluation prepared for the Jamestown Foundation's China Brief, reported in the paper edition of *AsiaNews*, (February 2012, pp. 29-32). See also *AsiaNews*, 14/05/2012.

wish to make up for the decades of deprivation they suffered due to excessive ideological campaigns. The elderly, disappointed by the “certainties” which Marxism-Leninism preached to them, are today dazzled by the successes of the new society that has become “viscerally capitalist.” For young people, determined to become wealthy, their trust in the institutions and the trust between individuals and generations is crumbling.

The well-known American sociologist of religion Robert N. Bellah (1924-2013), in his most recent book *Religion in Human Evolution*, published in 2011, examined the origins of faith and ethics in the ancient cultures of Israel, Greece, China and India from the years 800 to 200 B.C. Interviewed at his home in California on his return from a visit to China², he created a parallel between Qin Shihuangdi, the emperor who united China in 221 B.C, and Mao Zedong who founded New China in 1949 and governed it with an iron fist until his death in 1976. The former was a follower of the legalist philosophy, which recommended harsh punishment to keep the people in submission and to have a strong government. He silenced all criticism, burnt Confucian books and buried many scholars alive. “Mao, who admired the emperor, once boasted that he caused the death of more scholars than Qin Shihuangdi.” Bellah stressed: “Tyranny does not work. Qin Shihuangdi's short-lived reign proved that.” The Chinese people today seem to be morally adrift. Their leaders espouse a Marxism that cannot offer a coherent moral system or give any direction to life. “The fact that Marx is taught at every level of school, from kindergarten to university, shows that they (the executive branch) think they have a civil religion.” But many Chinese laugh Marxism off, and this is a major problem. The attempt to separate good from evil in the “Thought of Mao Zedong” is also in vain: “I think that China has to face the fact that Mao was a monster, one of the worst people in the history of mankind,” Bellah wrote. Therefore, “the country must first break the tyrannical spell cast by Mao Zedong.”

In Bellah’s mind, the search for a moral foundation is particularly urgent for a country that will have a growing importance in the global community. He sees good foundations on which to build a valid morality with the traditional Chinese concepts *tian* (heaven), *li* (manners, rituals) and *yi* (justice). Having had the opportunity to discuss the contents of his book with a number of intellectuals, he was surprised by a review in which Zhang Zhouxiang of the *China Daily* in Beijing stressed that *li* justifies the right to govern by those who govern, but it also imposes the obligation of treating subjects well: “The ruled are asked to maintain order, but they also have the right to choose another ruler if the covenant is broken.” Today the rulers of China justify their control over the population with the spectre of chaos, but there is need for something more substantial in order to govern well. According to Bellah, China has great moral resources. He found confirmation of this in the optimism he saw among intellectuals and in many young people. While the people are seeking happiness and freedom, spiritual traditions are flourishing. They are expressed in Buddhism, Confucianism, Taoism, popular religions, and in Christianity as well.

² A significant account in this regard appears in the magazine *Global Times* of Beijing (29/12/2011, p.2), with the title “Mao's spell and the need to break it.”

New opportunities for the Catholic Church ?

Premier Wen Jiabao even used the expression “spiritual crisis” with reference to China, but the ruling class thinks that the Party itself is capable of offering an adequate answer. They propose once more “Socialist spirituality.” Reality contradicts them, according to Tim Gardan who, when interviewing Professor He Guanghu of *Renmin University* for the BBC, was told: “The worship of Mammon... has become many people’s life purpose. I think it is natural that many other people will not be satisfied. They will seek some meaning for their lives, so that when Christianity falls into their lives, they will hold on to it very tightly.” What now worries a certain sector of the ruling classes is precisely, according to Gardan, the phenomenon of a lot of people turning to the churches (*BBC News*, 11/09/2011).

The attraction of Christianity in the current Chinese context expresses in some way a reaction to the blatant consumerism and idolatry of money that have caused the Communist party to lose the idealism and utopian attraction it had during the revolutionary period. New China is the victim of its own feeling of superiority. It has grown economically, thanks to the encouragement of Deng Xiaoping, who stated: “becoming rich is glorious.” But the fact of having established money as the supreme value in society has deprived that society of its soul.

In 2011, Hong Kong’s *Sunday Examiner* ran a significant story (09/10/2011): “On the morning of September 4 in the boomtown of Wuhan, an 88-year-old man fell in the street injuring his nose. Dozens, maybe hundreds of people passed him by, but no one raised a hand to help as he lay on the ground. It was not until his relatives arrived an hour-and-a-half later that he was taken to hospital.” The paper continues, quoting *AsiaNews*: “The *People’s Daily*, the official newspaper of the Communist Party, ran an online poll asking people if they would help an elderly person in distress. More than 80 per cent of the respondents said they too would pass the victim by, fearing extortion.” Various facts quoted by the paper explained that such a “fear” was not unwarranted, so much so that the Health Ministry issued a long Guideline, where, for that specific case, the suggestion was to call the elderly person’s relatives to take him or her to hospital. A heated debate ensued on the Internet. Shui Yinhe, a freelance journalist, tweeted on *SinaWeibo*: “What if we can’t get in touch with them, what do we do? Let them die in the meanwhile?”

Unfortunately, similar stories, and even more tragic ones, are not uncommon in modern China. For example, last year a two-year-old girl died after having been hit twice by cars on a street. No one stopped to help her. In an effort to counteract such inhuman behaviour, a legislative bill was put forward in Shenzhen to encourage “good Samaritans,” to protect them against the risk of getting into trouble.

Last year the National Association for Ethical Studies proposed a project aimed at educating one million children in filial piety, the focal point of Confucian ethics (*Corriere della Sera*, 04/11/2011). Another official decision taken about the same time indicates that a serious ethical problem effectively exists in today’s Chinese society. The Administration for Public Employees has decided to launch a new campaign for its 3.7 million personnel. They will be asked to take compulsory

courses in ethics for the next five years, in order to foster public confidence in the services provided by government. It openly admits to “unethical practices by a growing number of government employees, with public staff concerned with their own interests, rather than the public interest, abusing their power and wasting public money.” (*Avvenire*, 28/12/2011)

Liao Yiwu, a Chinese dissident author imprisoned and persecuted, who escaped from China by fleeing to Vietnam and found political asylum in Germany, published a book in 2011, entitled *God Is Red*. In 18 interviews and essays, Liao tells “the secret story of how Christianity survived and flourished in communist China.” While declaring himself to be a “non-believer,” he is convinced that China is going through a spiritual crisis, where “people’s minds are entangled and chaotic.” He thinks that to build a new China, Christians could offer essential qualities, such as optimism, honesty and a willingness to give – and forgive (*Christian Science Monitor*, 13/09/2011).

As Ducornet observes: “At this time when the Middle Kingdom dreams of diffusing its wisdom all over the world, it is a pity that the Chinese leaders do not understand the great contribution that Catholics in China could make to this cause if they were free to fully manifest their bond with the Universal Church.” Will Chinese leaders ever come to see that religious freedom and democracy represent a powerful remedy to the disorders that threaten Chinese society, and would also be of substantial value for its economy?

The fact that Taiwan is gradually becoming closer to the “motherland” strangely presents some favourable aspects from this perspective as well. Recently, when the Catholic *Fu Jen* University of Taipei opened an office in Beijing, with the possibility of recruiting students from China, including the offer of scholarships, it was reported in the mainland news. The official Beijing news agency *Xinhua* described *Fu Jen* as “one of the most prestigious universities on the Island.” Several Chinese priests and about forty nuns already take classes in the faculty of theology there, and they seem to have adequate spiritual assistance. Another positive sign, although indirect, was the result of the recent political elections in Taiwan. The reconfirmation of President Ma Ying-jeou constituted a marked success for the Guomindang Party, but various commentators also deemed it a victory for the then Secretary General of the Communist Party, Hu Jintao. He had discreetly supported a policy of dialogue and progressive rapprochement with the island, in view of a future reunification³.

The so-called “Bridge-Churches” (Hong Kong, Macao, Taiwan) should perhaps pay more attention to the opportunities they have, particularly in the present situation to contribute to such a lofty purpose. This could be done by simply giving encouragement to their Christian brothers from the mainland communities now visiting in greater numbers for tourism, business or cultural events. Mutual visits between local Christian groups also offer opportunities to exchange pastoral

³ In the context of this slow progress, it is also interesting to note that mayors all over China have invited Robert Wu, the founder and chairman of the new publishers “Eslite” of Taiwan (which has recorded 90 million visitors a year in their 48 bookstores open on the island), to open branches in their respective cities, with offers of land at greatly reduced prices. It should not be forgotten that the cultural soul of Chinese cities today are the *Xinhua*, New China bookstores (*AsiaTimesOnline*, 10/12/2011).

experiences, and encourage the social commitment of the believers. Better use of internet communication and modern technologies can enhance this exchange. Of primary importance is the support of programs for the formation of mainland China's priests, religious women and lay leaders. In this area, Churches in America and Europe have already been extremely generous.

Now, with tourism becoming more popular in Chinese society, attention should be given to our Chinese Christian brothers and sisters going on pilgrimage to the historical sites of Christianity in the West and to the best known shrines. At the same time, Catholic visitors from the West ought to understand the importance that even a simple testimony of their faith can have. This would mean, for instance, that when organising the programs for tour groups visiting China, arrangements should be made for them to attend Mass on Sundays with the local communities in the cities they are visiting. There is no need for special permits for this, but Sunday Mass should be clearly arranged beforehand, because sometimes local tour guides do not encourage such “deviations” from the traditional tourist venues⁴.

Discreet pressure by international public opinion can also at times have a positive effect on the orientation of the Chinese bureaucracy, provided there is an effort to dialogue without controversy. At the end of 2011, the Catholic agency *AsiaNews* dedicated a “2011 Prize” to two Chinese bishops of the underground community, of whom there has been no news for many years. Several media outlets reported the initiative. The bishops were James Su Zhimin (82), bishop of Baoding (Hebei), arrested by the police on October 8, 1997 (in prison for more than 40 years), and Cosmas Shi Enxiang (nearly 90), bishop of Yixian (Hebei), arrested on April 13, 2001 (he has spent 51 years in prison). According editor Bernardo Cervellera, the intention was to honour the two figures “who have been forgotten for many years, despite their struggle for truth, dignity and justice.” Two weeks later, in a letter to the then Chinese President Hu Jintao and to the Chinese ambassador to Italy, *AsiaNews* asked for the release of three bishops and six priests held in prison without a trial. In addition to the two bishops mentioned above, the list included Joseph Lu Genjun, vicar general of the underground diocese of Baoding (Hebei), who disappeared at the hands of the police on February 17, 2006, and six other priests, some of whose names are mentioned in these pages. Unfortunately, the Year of the Dragon (2013) did not bring any change to their situations. The Papal Commission for the Church in China, at their April 2012 plenary session mentioned the plight of “bishops and priests who are detained or who are suffering unjust limitations in the performance of their mission.” The members expressed admiration “for the strength of their faith and for their union with the Holy Father.”

At Easter 2012, according to concerned Catholic sources, the Chinese authorities released Coadjutor Bishop Peter Shao Zhumin of Wenzhou (Zhejiang), who had been

⁴ An invaluable instrument to help arrange such visits is Jean Charbonnier's *Guide to the Catholic Church in China 2008*, China Catholic Communication, Singapore; an updated edition has been published in 2014. Many years ago I went on one of these trips with a group of friends who, having discovered the lesser known face of the Church of China, decided to start a program of offering scholarships to seminarians from poor dioceses. Up to now this program has helped about twenty young men on their way to the priesthood.

detained for four weeks, accused apparently of having taken part (with four other unofficial bishops) in the ordination of the underground bishop of Tianshui. Government officials gave the then 49-year-old prelate some brainwashing sessions and escorted him to Leshan in Sichuan province, to visit the excommunicated bishop Paul Lei Shiyin. Paul Lei showed Bishop Shao a Church-run hospital, a guest-house and the construction site of the new bishop's house in the city. The officials then warned Bishop Shao to restrain himself, and not to travel too extensively to visit Wenzhou Catholics, who do business throughout the country. Father Paul Jiang Su'nian, chancellor of the Wenzhou Diocese, who accompanied his bishop, was released one week earlier. In Henan, government officials took Bishop Peter Jin Lugang of Nanyang on Holy Thursday (April 4th) 2012 apparently to prevent him from celebrating the Easter liturgies with his clergy. The officials detained him in a guest-house, and took him to several tourist spots, before they released him on Easter Sunday (*UcaNews*, 16/04/2012; *Sunday Examiner*, 28/04/2012). These actions seem to confirm the existence of a policy aimed at eliminating, by force or by persuasion, the unofficial communities, and at persuading pastors to accept the official policy.

Renewal for growth

According to political commentator Francesco Sisci, if all the Chinese Catholics could guarantee that Rome had no political designs on China, the current crisis would vanish. "The root of the current conflict in the Catholic Church." is due to divisions among the Catholics. These contribute to the conflict, because some are subject to the power of Rome while some consider the others as traitors. Thus, both groups end up not accepting the invitation in Pope Benedict's Letter, which insists on the unity of the Church (*AsiaTimes Online*, 20/07/2011). Sisci's analysis has some foundation, because the lack of unity among Catholics is a bitter reality. It cannot be overlooked, however, that it is the Party's policy to encourage it, since, as has already been observed, the ecclesiastical community and the bishops themselves have never been allowed to meet freely in order to discuss and find a common position on doctrinal and pastoral matters shared by all. Nor can they discuss these publicly in the media, in dialogue with the general population, due to the law that prohibits all "religious propaganda." Unfortunately, the authoritarian Chinese regime knows the classic motto "*Divide et impera*" (divide and conquer) only too well.

As for the fear that "Rome," i.e. the Holy See, has hostile sights on China and its government, Benedict XVI in the aforementioned Letter of 2007 clearly expressed his respect for China and a desire for dialogue with the authorities of that country. He did not ask for privileges, but for the simple possibility of fully expressing Gospel ideals. The special "Year of the Faith," that Pope Benedict designated to take place from October 11, 2012 to November 24, 2013, certainly benefitted China as well. To get the best results from concrete programs it is important to remember that "Faith is reinforced by sharing it." (*Redemptoris Missio*, 2) Fifty years after the start of the Second Vatican Council, Pope Benedict decided to involve the whole of Christianity in a crusade for a "new evangelization," choosing this topic as the main theme of the

2012 Synod of Bishops. The expression “new” goes well with the vision that guided John XXIII in convening Vatican Council II. He aimed at “updating” the Church, making it new, with the perennial purpose of presenting divine revelation in a more fitting way to a world in rapid transformation and to cultures other than European. The fact that the Council did not issue any explicit condemnation of Communism aroused surprise in certain quarters. But, more than condemning heresies and doctrinal deviations (which were not absent even then inside and outside the Church), Pope John XXIII wanted to offer some better means for the practical renewal of Christian life. Pope Benedict, in his message for World Mission Sunday, celebrated on October 21, 2012, expressed the urgency that the announcement of the Gospel must be concretized in help to one’s neighbour, justice for the poorest, support for development and respect for life in every phase. The Chinese Church, having been deprived in the middle of the 20th century of thousands of foreign missionaries that had supported it, and having overcome innumerable tempests, today rightfully takes its place in this pressing effort of announcing the gospel in a concrete way. This is possible thanks to the deep roots which the Chinese Church’s faith has sunk in Chinese soil, as many studies on the history of the laity in China have shown⁵.

Father Matteo Ricci, in his effort to open the Ming empire to the Gospel, gave primary attention to committing new converts, even among the “literati,” to programs of social concern. Exemplary is Xu Guangqi (1562-1633), baptized with the name of Paul in 1603; a great man of letters and science, whom Ricci described as “the most important pillar” of Christianity in China. He completed his political career as Grand Chancellor of the Empire. He brought the first announcement of the Gospel to his native place, Shanghai, where he is buried and honored to the present day. Former Bishop Aloysius Jin Luxian (1916-2013) strongly promoted the cause of the beatification of Xu Guangqi. In a Pastoral Letter written for Chinese New Year 2012, Bishop Jin recalled the 450th anniversary of the birth of Paul Xu. He exhorted the Shanghai faithful to study and imitate the life of their distinguished fellow citizen, stressing the fact that he respected Chinese culture and also tried to protect the ecclesiastical community as much as possible⁶.

Jean Charbonnier also emphasized the genuine Christian roots of the Chinese Church. He has brought to light many valuable examples of faith which simple Chinese faithful presented in the past.⁷ Persecutions have decimated Chinese Catholic

⁵ A symposium was held in February 2011 at the Baptist University of Hong Kong on “Historical Catholic figures in China.” According to Prof. Ku Wei-ying of the National Taiwan University, in 2011, no fewer than 150 texts (books and articles) on various aspects of the history of Catholicism in China have appeared in Chinese.

⁶ *Sunday Examiner*, 15/01/2012; see also an interview with Gianni Criveller in *Avvenire*, 22/02/2012, p. 24.

⁷ The faith of new converts, he wrote, may remain fragile and vulnerable during the first and second generations; but then it becomes part of the family tradition, benefiting from the tenacity that characterises the principle of filial piety in China. This aspect was sorely put to the test by the controversy over traditional rites, when the converts found themselves obliged to refrain from paying the traditional homage to their ancestors. This was especially difficult for the noble, conservative literati. Thus, “for centuries Catholics in China were rejected by the scholars and the powerful of the Celestial Empire, and their faith took root in particular among the poor peasants (...) From the evangelical point of view, the poverty of Christians does not necessarily represent a reason of weakness. The Christians ought to keep

communities on various occasions throughout their history, but their testimony, blessed by the redemptive sacrifice of Christ, was not sterile.

In a rapidly changing world, it is important to help our Christian communities revive their faith, making the participation of the lay people even more responsible and fruitful. They should establish a Christian humanism capable of generating a new social commitment and culture. Present-day Chinese Catholics, although still few in number, are well integrated into the complex social fabric and are determined to contribute to its transformation for the better.

The “China Bridge” column of *Sunday Examiner* recently dedicated a page to the unselfish services of Catholic Sisters, as a sort of complimentary gesture to Chairman Mao’s expression: “Women hold up half the sky. (*Sunday Examiner*, 18/03/2012). An example deserving of praise is the Ark-Nanjing Special Education Centre, started in September 2005 under the auspices of the Catholic Diocese of Nanjing, to offer services to families with youngsters who are mentally challenged, or suffering from a mental illness. “Total service, individualised care” is the motto of the Sisters, who with 17 hired teachers and volunteers are providing training and related services for the 60 students that are presently being cared for. The young people attend classes from Monday to Friday in one of four areas of formation: physical therapy, life skills training, career training and basic education. The Nanjing district government supports the project. But lack of support and bureaucratic restraints deprive large sectors of the Chinese population, especially in under-developed areas, of the free services of Catholic religious women.

A recent article in the Hong Kong daily *South China Morning Post* (27/04/2012) pointed out that mainland's authorities have kept a tight rein on the activities of NGOs to prevent challenges to their authority amid suspicions about foreign-funded groups and rights lobbying organisations. Moreover, with the major scandal that has tarnished the image of the officially-controlled Red Cross Society of China, public confidence has also been undermined in the charitable and other non-governmental organisations that fill the gap between what government and free markets provide. The Ministry for Civil Affairs has taken action to restore credibility by launching a public consultation on a draft law to make civil servants more accountable. Opening them to scrutiny and minimising the temptation for wrongdoing is a positive step. The paper continues: “With more transparency in place, Beijing should also open up the sector to foreign NGOs and make donations to approved causes tax deductible to encourage a culture of giving by an increasingly wealthy society.”

A positive contribution to the widespread confusion in Chinese society could also be provided by recognising the principles of morality contained in the Gospels. Certain problems of corruption could be alleviated if the moral influence of practising Catholics were allowed to grow. Authentic Church teaching promotes positive values and the common good at every level and in all contexts, condemning any choices dictated by egotism.

their solidarity with the poor, while hoping to gain the respect of the elite of the country as well. In this way they can contribute to raising the level of the whole people.” *Christians in China*, p. 542.

The rule of law is often emphasised in the New China, but on too many occasions it appears compromised by the abuse of “*guanxi*,” or preferential relations, suggested by personal interests. There is an urgent need for China to question itself on this. And the Catholic Church is not exempt from such dangers and risks. Precisely in the concern of ensuring good candidates for bishop in their respective dioceses, all Catholics must be clearly aware that, by opposing the practice of “*guanxi*,” they are contributing at the same time to a recovery of good morality in society, besides assuring God’s blessing on their Church. In this regard, it is worth recalling the recommendation repeated by Benedict XVI when he went to Germany in September 2011. He emphasized the ideal of a Church poor in structures, wealth and power, because this was how Christ wanted it. This is a challenge which we all have to face, because it goes against the mentality currently prevailing in the world. In this sense, addressing the Commission for the Church in China in the Spring of 2011, Pope Benedict stressed the “need for a good education in the faith at all levels of the Church in China”, and “the importance of spiritual formation in particular, to help the faithful face up to the difficult challenges of the time.”

The difficult challenges facing us

To overcome these “difficult challenges of the time,” it is imperative that the Catholics of China preserve and reinforce the unity among themselves, and with the Universal Church. In this respect, some facts recalled above highlight the inestimable role that some pastors have had and continue to have in their communities. Determined to defend the rights of the Church, at the same time they are capable of fostering cohesion in their respective communities. As has already been mentioned, only a few of this older generation of bishops still remain in their positions. The year 2010 marked the loss of three elderly bishops aged between 84 and 99. And the five prelates who died in 2011, apart from Bishop Lu of Yichang who was only 45, were also about ninety years old. The authorities did not recognize most of them. (In 2011, unfortunately, tragic road accidents claimed the lives of some young priests and seminarians).

The ecclesiastical community of Shanghai has attracted the attention of the Catholic media in the last few years. At the end of December 2011, Gianni Valente wrote that the nonagenarian bishop Jin Luxian, who spent several weeks in hospital for a fractured rib, had decided to appoint a new vicar general, Thaddeus Ma Daqin, a member of the local clergy. Father Ma was already well known for his various activities of a cultural and pastoral nature (*Vatican Insider*, 30/12/2011). It was hoped that this would facilitate a painless transfer of responsibility for the most important Catholic diocese in China. Shanghai, in fact, already had an auxiliary bishop, Joseph Xing Wenzhi, who was esteemed for his great love for the Church. However Bishop Xing, ordained in 2005 with the parallel consent of the Holy See and the Chinese government, had not found it easy to settle into the complex reality of the metropolis. It was rumoured that he subsequently renounced his episcopal ministry. When in late Spring 2012, the ordination of Thaddeus Ma Daqin as bishop was announced, the

news was considered positive, as both of the Holy See and of the Chinese authorities approved of him⁸.

In the area of having ecclesiastical autonomy respected in the face of State intrusion, an episode concerning the regional seminary in Taiyuan, Shanxi Province is worthy of attention. It re-opened in 1985, after thirty years of closure, which Chairman Mao imposed on all religious institutions throughout the country. Since then it has trained about 200 priests. In the academic year 2011-12, it had 70 students and a staff of eight full-time teachers and five part-time ones. On June 18, 2011, the governing board of the seminary, chaired by the elderly bishop of Fenyang, John Huo Cheng, 88, announced its anticipated closure and the resignation of the rector Father Anthony Chang (Diocese of Taiyuan) due allegedly to problems of poor administration. The provincial office of SARA took the side of the rector, asking for the decision to be annulled, as “the governing board had not been authorised (by SARA), and therefore had broken the rules.” Bishop Huo Cheng, however, did not yield, stating that “the board’s decision had been taken on the grounds of the unsuitability of the rector.” Bishop Huo’s position was that “bishops have full authority to guide and take decisions concerning the seminary and the formation of future priests. It was therefore a purely ecclesiastical matter.” (*Sunday Examiner*, 02/10/2011). The seminary was able to open again a few months later with fewer students, under the responsibility of Bishop Huo. In the meantime some bishops in the province decided to transfer their students to other seminaries. The dispute with SARA has not yet been resolved, as the belongings of the former rector are still in the rector’s office.

A front page commentary in the March 6, 2012 issue of the *Sunday Examiner* opened with a *Vatican Insider* announcement about the ordination of Father Methodius Qu Ailin (51) as bishop of Changsha (Hunan province), to take place on April 25th: “The ongoing insistence by Beijing in having bishops not in good standing with Rome participate in episcopal ordination ceremonies in China, raises the fundamental question as to whether the Chinese authorities are sincerely interested in a harmonious relationship with the Holy See”. Although all the conditions for a legitimate ordination ceremony were in place (since both the Holy See and the government approved of the candidate Methodius Qu), the presence of two bishops of irregular standing in the Church embroiled the day in “controversy and tension.” The principal ordaining bishop was Joseph Li Shan of Beijing, who was ordained a bishop with Vatican approval in 2007. But he has since participated in two illicit ordinations of bishops, and it appears that the Vatican has not as yet received any correspondence from him to explain this inconsistency. Four other bishops were in attendance at the Changsha ordination, all of whom have recognition from both Beijing and the Holy See. In addition, Bishop Joseph Liu Xinhong from Wuhu (Anhui province), ordained illicitly in 2006, was also present at the ordination of Bishop Methodius. Mr. Liu Yuanlong, vice president of the Patriotic Association delivered a message from the

⁸ The present chapter was already written at the time of Ma Daqin’s episcopal ordination (7 July 2012). In his epilogue, Gianni Criveller describes and comments on the unexpected controversial developments that followed that event.

United Front and SARA. *UcanNews* quoted one person as saying, “It seems that Beijing is using a new strategy to create more confusion and to provoke disunity in the Church.” It was remarkable that for such an important event in a diocese with 20,000 Catholics, which had been without a bishop for more than a decade, only 200 people attended the ordination ceremony.

At Christmas 2011, the *Sunday Examiner* of Hong Kong on its monthly page “China Bridge” pointed out the traumas the recent illegitimate episcopal ordinations have provoked in the Church of China. They not only complicate the relationship between China and the Holy See but they “create confusion, lack of confidence and division in the hearts of the faithful. These gaps can be filled only with repentance and reconciliation”. Priests, seminarians and faithful say that they are not at peace when Mass is celebrated by bishops without papal recognition or by bishops who have taken part in illegitimate ordinations. One young bishop in northern China, in whose diocese there is a lack of harmony, underlined that the peace that Jesus brought us is the fruit of his suffering on the cross. A certain Father Lawrence from Fujian Province expressed the hope that the community of faithful not yet living in harmony can at least be tolerant in order to facilitate the overcoming of these divisions.

Different approaches to a complex reality

In such a complicated environment, it is inevitable that there are different evaluations, both regarding the political situation and the most suitable means for improving the situation of the Catholic Church. An expression of these different feelings was a reflection given by Cardinal Joseph Zen Ze-kium (Bishop Emeritus of Hong Kong): “What is the real good for the Church in China?” (*AsiaNews*, 07/02/2012). In it, the cardinal, while proclaiming his respect for the great zeal of old friends, he still dialogues controversially with them. He challenged Gianni Valente for having published an interview with John Baptist Li Suguang, coadjutor bishop of Nanchang (Jiangxi) in the magazine *30 Days* (no. 9, 2011, pp. 30-35) in which the bishop stated that “the Church in China has not changed a single iota since the handing down of the apostolic tradition.” Cardinal Zen also criticized the Community of Sant’Egidio for having invited “figures like Bishop Li who are seriously compromised from an ecclesiastical point of view” to the international conference “Religions and Culture in Dialogue” (in Munich, September 11-13, 2011).

Well aware that I am not qualified to intervene in the question, I would like to recall some personal experiences here. One of the first times the Community of Sant’Egidio invited a Chinese delegation to its international events of interreligious dialogue was a little over twenty years ago (October 1991) in Malta. As I was involved (due to being a member of the *Tian Xia Yi Jia* Association), I well remember the difficult preparatory meetings, due to the impossibility of agreeing on the choice of guests to invite. Fortunately, the delegation, led by Liu Bainian and also included some Protestants and Buddhist monks. One of the two Catholics was Bishop Matthias Duan Yinming of Wanxian, Sichuan Province. As the group had a stopover in Rome to change planes, the Chinese friends visited the Christian monuments, but with the absolute prohibition of meeting any officials from the Vatican. I had the privilege of

accompanying the group. It was only due to a stratagem that Bishop Matthias could make a short visit to his Alma Mater, the Collegio Urbano, where he had studied in the 1940s. In later years, at conferences organized by the Community in other European countries, some officials of *Propaganda Fide* (which runs Collegio Urbano) were able to meet with Chinese Catholic representatives.

Bishop Li Suguang's statement made me recall a sad experience I had some 30 years ago. In 1982, immediately after the establishment of the Chinese Catholic Bishops Conference and the reorganisation of the CCPA, I had the chance to discuss with some official leaders of the Church in China some practical points of the "policy of religious freedom," which the country was in the process of implementing. As they kept professing to be members of the same Church universal, "one, holy, Catholic and apostolic," I emphasized that they should prove that they meant the concrete and specific Church that has developed over the centuries, "which is recognised as united around the Pope and that Father Matteo Ricci and his companions transplanted to China 400 years ago." What sense was there in stating that they maintain the same faith, while contradicting concrete and substantial aspects of the Church in which they were born? I added sadly: "The Orthodox and Anglican experiences, which developed over the centuries, speak too eloquently of the inexorable results that follow with the development of history."⁹

Unfortunately, we have to acknowledge that the same limitations and contradictions on the level of praxis still remain today. As Cardinal Zen also recalled, the fact that Bishop Li had taken part in the illegitimate episcopal ordination in Shantou on July 14, 2011 was not concealed by Gianni Valente; and I believe that Bishop Li is well aware of belonging to a Church that is also a sinner (as is ours!). For this reason, I prefer to see a positive meaning in the contested statement: that the Church in China does not intend, fortunately, to change anything of the traditional foundation of our faith. By playing on this stated doctrinal fidelity, I insist that an important positive step has finally been taken. This declaration should be translated into concrete choices. This is the meaning of the proposal that I suggested at the end of Chapter IV: the Chinese bishops must undertake to change the current statutes of their "Conference" or College, and the Patriotic Association must do the same. They should eliminate the operative clauses in both sets of statutes that contradict Catholic doctrine and practice.

The impassioned commitment of Cardinal Zen, moreover, reminds us again of the privileged position of the "Bridge Churches" in keeping alive in the Universal Church the awareness of the long Calvary that our brothers and sisters in the faith are going through in Communist China. The Catholic community of Hong Kong is committed to supporting Christian life on the mainland in various ways, not the least of which is the contribution of the *Holy Spirit* Study Centre for obtaining a better knowledge of the situation.

⁹ Cf. Angelo S. Lazzarotto, *The Catholic Church in Post-Mao China*, Hong Kong, 1982, especially pp. 153-157. A Chinese edition was also published in Hong Kong. See the review by G. Rulli, in *Civiltà Cattolica*, (quaderno 3183, 1983, I, p. 307), of the Italian edition of it.

The Chinese translation of the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* sponsored by the diocesan Justice and Peace Commission and published in 2011 in Hong Kong will also prove to be a valuable tool for formation.

Pope Benedict XVI, by elevating Bishop John Tong Hon, who succeeded Cardinal Zen as the ordinary of the diocese of Hong Kong, to cardinal, certainly meant to encourage Hong Kong's role of being a "Bridge-Church." Cardinal Tong recalled this aspect in a recent interview, in which he emphasized the specificity of his approach to the Chinese situation: "In 2008 I was invited to take part in the opening ceremony of the Beijing Olympics. I told the authorities that I was very pleased to receive the invitation, and that the Olympics were a great opportunity to bring glory to our country. After we had established a certain degree of mutual trust, I told them that, as a Catholic, I was concerned about the Chinese bishops in prison. I explained to them that this fact is not good for the nation. If these bishops can once again enjoy full freedom and respect for their human rights, they could make an even greater contribution to the nation. At the same time, with their release, China could enjoy a better reputation in the international community" (*AsiaNews*, 16/02/2012).

Both Cardinal Joseph Zen and Cardinal John Tong, together with bishops from Macao and Taiwan, responsible officials in the Roman Curia, and some members of religious congregations and missionary institutes, attended the fifth plenary session of the special Vatican commission on the Church in China April 22-25, 2012 in Rome. The participants "recognized the gifts of fidelity and dedication" emerging in that Church and expressed "deep spiritual closeness" to all those brothers and sisters in the faith. Examining the theme of the formation of the lay faithful, in view of the "Year of the Faith" announced by the Pope, they emphasized the need to nourish their Christian life. They encouraged the Chinese Catholics to "take part in civic life and in the world of work, offering their own contribution with full responsibility; by loving life and respecting it from conception until natural death; by loving the family, promoting values which are also proper to traditional Chinese culture; and by loving their country as honest citizens concerned for the common good." Praising the positive results (in terms of new baptisms) of the proclamation of the Gospel done by communities which are often poor and without spiritual resources, the commission recommended a serious catechumenate and a variety of programmes for an integral formation of lay Catholics. After repeating that "the Church needs good bishops," attention was given to the particular Chinese situation: "It was noted that the claim of the entities, called "One Association and One Conference", to place themselves above the bishops and to guide the life of the ecclesial community, persists." On this basic point, it is necessary to follow the instructions given in Pope Benedict XVI's 2007 Letter, to let the face of the Church shine forth with clarity. (The negative cases of clerics who have illegitimately received episcopal ordination and of those legitimate bishops who have participated in illegitimate ordinations were also mentioned). The participants in the Plenary Assembly, who follow in a spirit of charity these painful events and are aware of the particular difficulties of the present situation, could not but "recall that evangelization cannot be achieved by sacrificing essential elements of the Catholic faith and discipline." Finally, with reference to the

important task of an adequate formation for priests, consecrated persons and seminarians, the Commission praised the various good programs carried out in China.

The vitality of the Chinese Church

According to reports, the State Administration of Religious Affairs has authorized the main religious groups in China to form their own “*news publicity system*.” The contents and limits of this new system are not yet clear. As the report states, the various religious groups, through their respective spokespersons, will be able to hold regular press conferences or occasional meetings with the media, issue press releases or news online both to the press and to the public (Cf. *Global Times*, 14/12/2011). It is hoped that those spokespersons will really be able to make the thinking proper to the different religions heard on questions of common interest. A practical example comes, once again, from Hong Kong. Cardinal John Tong, in his Christmas message to the Catholics of his diocese for Christmas 2011, denounced the growing gap between rich and poor in local society. He said that it was the result of the selfishness of those who are already wealthy, and who only worry about increasing their capital at the expense of the common good. “We hope and we pray,” he wrote, “that both our government and the wealthy entrepreneurs, undertake to solve the urgent housing problem, which is a fundamental need and a right for every family” (*Sunday Examiner*, 25/12/2011). And in his message for Lent 2012, which was made public on the eve of his elevation to cardinal, he stressed the value of sharing. Referring to the imminent elections for the new local government, he also asked that the absolute liberalism that characterises Hong Kong be corrected and full democracy soon be implemented. An editorial in the most important English-language paper praised him for his interest in improving the city (*South China Morning Post*, 21/02/2012). Moreover, the Hong Kong religious leaders are in the habit of offering once a year a common message with comments and recommendations of a social value to the general population.

The Catholic agencies, and in particular *Fides* (which 2 years ago launched a special blog in Chinese and English, open also to Catholics in mainland China), often report on courses or catechumenates for adults and specific formation programmes, held in various diocesan communities in China. We can mention just some examples, to give a more concrete idea of Chinese Catholicism today. In Beijing, Bishop Joseph Li Shan inaugurated the Year of Evangelisation on April 9, 2011 with a ceremony in the South Cathedral in which he gave an ecclesiastical mandate to 50 catechists, who had followed an intensive six-month course of preparation. The diocese of Xi’an in Shaanxi Province also has about fifty full-time catechists. At Easter 2011, 150 adults were baptised in the four parishes of the city. In the diocese of Sanyuan (in the same province), a priest reported that he often invites catechists from other dioceses to give witness to his people. Many are volunteers and are not paid. They are generous but they have difficulty paying for travel if they have to go to remote areas. In the province of Zhejiang, south-east of Shanghai, an Association of Catholic Intellectuals, which has been in existence for about ten years and has about one thousand members,

is actively engaged in spreading the Christian message. The bishops of the province founded the association, in imitation of the one in Shanghai which already has 25 years' experience. It held its annual meeting in Wenzhou October 7-9, 2011 with 68 participants from 10 different cities in attendance. These meetings, which also offer the chance for a pilgrimage, are an opportunity to exchange experiences and to make concrete suggestions. The local Bishop Vincent Zhu Weifang exhorted them to make an active contribution both to the pastoral care of the already baptized Catholics and to the evangelical efforts towards the non-Catholics.

In Liaoning Province, in north-eastern China, where since 1983 four dioceses have been grouped together into one, having about one hundred thousand faithful, ninety priests and two religious congregations of women, the seminary in Shenyang organised a two-year course of religious studies for lay people. The program is focused on evangelisation, with courses in philosophy, theology, the Bible and spirituality. In Xingtai (Hebei Province), a group of 87 women took part in a special course held after the Chinese New Year 2012, on such subjects as the parish ministry, family relationships, implementing the Word of God, evangelisation and music. A group of students from the diocese of Handan (Hebei Province) has launched a new website for evangelisation, called "The Choir of Angels" which has been very successful. The person who conceived it said that many young students are interested in it. This not only confirms a great thirst for the spiritual life among young people, but it also shows the growing importance of the internet in the service of the Gospel. Actually numerous sites dedicated to evangelisation exist now, at both the parish and diocesan levels. Shijiazhuang, the capital of the province of Hebei, is a strong center of Catholicism in China. As has already been mentioned, the efficient institution of social communications called "*Shinde*" (Faith) reaches all the dioceses of China with the 50,000 copies of its weekly newspaper of the same name. It also runs a well known website, in addition to the *Jinde* Social Service Centre and an Institute for Cultural Studies. Two years ago, on the Feast of Christ the King, the parish priest of Xikai Cathedral in the Diocese of Tianjin, Father Zhang Liang appointed 179 new extraordinary ministers of the Eucharist, giving each of them a crucifix and an identification badge. This is a continuing practice, which in the past seven or eight years has allowed sick lay Catholics to receive communion at home or in the hospital almost 15,000 times. These lay collaborators also accompany the priest to visit the sick, who wish to receive the sacraments of reconciliation and the anointing of the sick. They also lead prayers in the homes of the deceased. Their training includes an intensive course on spirituality, and the study of ecclesiastical documents on the centrality of the Eucharist in the life of the faithful. The Diocese of Tianjin has over one hundred thousand faithful, and the Xikai church, which was built a century ago, reopened for worship in 1980. The parish (with thirty thousand souls) is well organised, and takes good advantage of modern technology to evangelize. It was one of the first parishes to establish a website of its own, and it uses a blog to make contact with the public.

The Church in China needs prudence and strength

The Catholic Patriotic Association is accustomed to give itself a lot of credit, including that of having allowed the faith to survive in the dark years of Mao's leftist policies. Nothing could be farther from the truth. In fact, during the so-called Cultural Revolution, as all religious institutions were ostracized, the CCPA itself also disappeared. Other official entities having to do with religion were also disbanded. Having re-emerged as a useful political structure in 1980, the Association's attempts to control every aspect of Church life have become more invasive than ever. One way this happens is taking it for granted that everyone exercising a public ministry can be co-opted to be a member. This occurred in the past with bishops, who could not bypass the Association, but who were in fact precious advocates and defenders of unity with the Holy See. This also happens today when the Association automatically places its label on anyone and when they put pressure on bishops, priests and lay faithful, who have stated that they wish to be in communion with the Pope and the Universal Church. Such tactics, perhaps aimed at proving themselves indispensable to the government, has the dangerous result of creating discontent and confusion within the Catholic community, and in society at large. I believe that it is unjust to qualify as a "patriotic Church" certain communities which in reality are rather victims of the misuse of political power exercised through the CCPA. It would also be wrong, in my opinion, to simply condemn as "schismatic" all the people who in these years have accepted to serve the State and therefore the Party, subordinating their love for the Church to this choice. In dealing with the ecclesiastical reality in various parts of the country, great discernment is required, because the relations and balances between the official communities and the "underground" ones are often conditioned by unimaginable circumstances.

In the previous chapter, I mentioned the punishment the regime inflicted on the Bishop of Liaoning, Paul Pei, for having refused to preside at the illegitimate ordination in Shantou. One Chinese commentator observed that the government will certainly do everything possible to prevent other bishops from following Bishop Pei's example for fear that its program of "autonomous" elections and ordinations would be compromised. He also added that it will be very difficult for Bishop Pei to avoid taking part in other illegitimate ordinations in the future. He said, "It will be the same dilemma for all the bishops of the communities recognised by the government as well" (*UcaNews*, 21/10/2011).

In relation to this difficulty, there are also some who reproach the Roman authorities for not always having followed a clear and univocal line in the choices and directions they take regarding the Church of China. This includes the responses they make to the regime's policy. One priest, who signs himself *Mu Di* and who belongs to an underground community, cites the episcopal ordination of Peter Luo as coadjutor of the Diocese of Yibin in Sichuan Province as an example. The candidacy of Peter Luo had papal approval, even though he was chairperson of the CCPA in Yibin City. *Mu Di* pointed out that the Holy See should have foreseen that the illegitimate Bishop Paul Lei of Leshan, who has strong support from the government, would have

imposed his presence and participation in the ceremony, being a schoolmate and friend of the candidate. For the authorities, who intend to impose their own political principles, it was important to have the illegitimate Bishop Lei standing at the altar alongside the bishops approved by the Vatican. *Mu Di* wrote: “The fact that Bishop Luo extended the invitation to Bishop Lei was a slap in the face to the Vatican.” He further commented: “A few years ago, the vast majority of Catholics in mainland China would have been pleased to receive a new bishop who had papal recognition, but this is no longer the case today. This joy has changed into anxiety or even sorrow, because we do not know when this recognition will be used as an instrument to exploit or embarrass the Holy See.” Stating that he does not believe that the government is sincere in its stated wish for dialogue, *Mu Di* thinks that the Holy See has on several occasions proceeded with episcopal appointments, restricting itself to weak protests at certain government candidates. He recommends worrying more about quality than quantity. According to him, excommunications do not solve the problem, because some Chinese think: “If a Westerner is excommunicated, either he converts or leaves the Church (as Luther and Calvin did); in China, where everything is counterfeit, (the individual candidate) neither converts nor has the courage to leave.” (*UcaNews*, 23/12/2011).

This bitter judgment reflects the feelings of quite a few communities that are not publicly recognised. They are frustrated by how the situation is evolving. Some even ask the Holy See to once again allow the election of underground bishops, a move which was stopped years ago in the hope of achieving an agreement with the government. This would not solve the problem either. *Paul Gan* (pseudonym of another young priest who said he comes from a traditional Catholic family in northern China) mentions clericalism as a disastrous threat in the Chinese church environment, calling to mind the sexual scandals that blacken the image of the Church in the world today. When certain members of the clergy give in to the temptation of seeking power and honors never intended by Christ, this inevitably leads to hypocrisy, prevarication and estrangement from the lay faithful. “In China, this phenomenon is encouraged by the mentality of the patriarchal society and social stratification” (*UcaNews*, 18/10/2011).

In such a dramatic context, it remains fundamental for the Catholic communities in China to commit themselves to a profound renewal. This entails a constant effort to live by the instructions of the evangelical message and to spread them, in harmony with the rest of Christianity. Our communities should be open to society, and nourished by the Bible and a sacramental life more easily accessible, as well as fostering fraternal collaboration among all the ecclesiastical forces. The Church in China is going through an extremely delicate period. To deal with it, new proclamations and decrees are not needed, but rather a sincere and warm solidarity of the Universal Church for the Church in China.

“Epilogue”

**CHINA AND CATHOLICISM: SINCE 2012 ANOTHER
DIFFICULT SITUATION**

By Gianni Criveller

Angelo S. Lazzarotto has been a protagonist for many initiatives in favor of dialogue between the Holy See and the authorities of the People’s Republic of China in recent decades. Here he introduces with expertise the present situation of the Catholic Church in China. He fully presents the facts, analyses and implications that since November 2010, have led to a dramatic worsening of relations between the political authorities on the one hand and the Holy See and the Chinese Catholics on the other. It is widely acknowledged that the present situation was brought about by the illicit episcopal ordination of Joseph Guo Jincal as bishop of Chengde on November 20, 2010, as well as the convening of the Eighth Assembly of Catholic Representatives from December, 7-9, 2010. The series of illicit ordinations continued in 2011 with Lei Shiyin becoming bishop of Leshan (June 29, 2011) and Huang Bingzhang becoming bishop of Shantou (July 14, 2011). Lazzarotto writes extensively about these facts.

Unfortunately, on July 6, 2012, Yue Fusheng was also ordained bishop in Harbin (Heilongjiang) despite the request made specifically to him by the Holy See not to accept ordination. At that time, government officials detained two priests of the underground community, Joseph Zhao Hongchun (appointed by the Holy See as Apostolic Administrator of Harbin) and Zhang Xisheng. They were taken hundreds of miles away evidently because their presence might create disorder. The Holy See publicly announced the excommunication *latae sententiae* of Yue, who was known for his weakness and proximity to the government. Yet, as a young priest, Joseph Yue had the chance to show his devotion to the Pope. He concelebrated with John Paul II (and thousands of other priests and bishops) at the unforgettable Holy Mass on January 15, 1995, in Manila, on the occasion of World Youth Day. Father Yue, the former vicar general of his diocese, did not leave Luneta Park when he saw the flag of the Republic of China (Taiwan) being unfurled, as the rest of the Chinese delegation did. At the end of Mass, he asked a European priest for the gift of a stole that was especially prepared for the occasion with a picture of the pontiff on it. Unfortunately, Yue is a case in point of how the authorities are able to sometimes pull good priests to their side, making them lose their authentic sense of belonging to the universal Catholic Church.

Even after his ordination, Yue has shown that he is easily manipulated by the officials in charge of the religious policy. He continued to express himself according to the government line with no consideration for those who suffer serious

consequences for having objected to his illegitimate ordination. Seven priests who had refused to participate in the ordination Mass were forced out of their parishes as punishment. To avoid being expelled from the diocese, they were asked to write a letter of apology to the illicit bishop and to concelebrate with him.

The ordinations of Joseph Chen Gongao, 47, as bishop of Nanchong (Sichuan) on April 19, 2012, and Methodius Qu Ailin, 51, as bishop of Changsha (Hunan) on April 25, 2012, were approved by both the Holy See and the Chinese official organizations. But Bishops Chen and Qu had to accept at their consecration ceremonies the presence of bishops in seriously irregular situations. The government's aim is clear: no one should be clean in front of the Catholic people; each must have some stain so as not to deserve the total respect of the community. Thus the government can more easily manipulate them.

These ordinations, even when approved by "both sides," make it evident that the conflict between the government bureaucrats and the Catholic communities is far from being resolved. The attempt to add one or more illegitimate bishops at an episcopal ordination Mass is a very serious abuse of Catholic tradition, showing that the officials, far from wishing to pursue a dialogue with the Church, are determined to humiliate it. Moreover, even in the recent episcopal consecrations, there was the intimidating presence of many dozens of public security personnel. Other acts of interference and manipulation also take place during the ceremony, such as having the appointment by the so-called Bishops' Conference (a canonically irregular body) read publicly, rather than the mandate of the Holy Father.

We are also aware that today the Chinese government prefers to attract bishops and priests with money and gifts rather than using imprisonment, threats and violence. It is sadly known that those who are ordained or actively participate as consecrators are attracted by a substantial financial reward. There is a stipend also for priests willing to concelebrate. The regime has found a more effective way than prison to achieve their goals: corruption. Many give in when the government promises assistance also for their families, the church, the proper functioning of church structures (cars, computers), for repairs, construction and expansion of buildings, for the community of nuns, etc.

You have to be really good to give up these rewards and gifts. After all, it is easy to justify oneself with the excuse that it is for the "good of the Church". Some resist, offering a splendid example to the universal Church, showing a virtue unknown to those bishops, cardinals and monsignors in Rome and throughout the world, who turn their life into the pursuit of an ecclesiastical career or a search for power and money. But thank God, there are some exceptions, and the choice of Bishop Ma Daqin of Shanghai gives reason for hope.

The story of Bishop Thaddeus Ma Daqin, who is just 45 years old, marks a dramatic change for the Catholic Church in China. What he did during his ordination Mass is considered by many to be a prophetic gesture, potentially loaded with important consequences. On July 7, 2012, in the Cathedral of St. Ignatius, at Xujiahui in Shanghai, the new auxiliary bishop of Shanghai was ordained after Bishop Joseph Xing retired from the ministry. His appointment was approved by both parties, but there were tensions. Government authorities considered Ma as the coadjutor of Bishop Aloysius Jin Luxian (who for them was the ordinary of the diocese), disregarding the fact that for Rome the diocesan ordinary was the underground bishop Joseph Fan, whose coadjutor was legally Aloysius Jin. In addition, the authorities imposed the presence of one illicit bishop, Zhan Silu, from Fujian province, whom government officials brought to Shanghai against the will of the Shanghai Church and of Bishop Jin. Consequently, many priests, religious and lay people decided not to attend the ordination ceremony.

Thaddeus Ma Daqin, with an unusual maneuver, prevented the illicit bishop from laying hands on him during the ordination Mass. Then, at the time for the reading of the appointment letter of the bishops' conference, the audio system stopped working. Towards the end of the Mass, the new bishop surprised everyone by declaring his resignation from the Patriotic Association. An amateur video of Bishop Ma's short speech, strongly applauded by the people in the cathedral, appeared for a few days on various websites until it became a victim of censorship.

Government officials from the religious sectors present at the Mass were highly offended by the statement and actions of the new Bishop Ma Daqin. So they did not come to the banquet afterwards. Rather they forcibly took the bishop away that same evening. It is believed that Bishop Ma is still under "house arrest" at the Sheshan seminary (Shanghai), thus preventing him from contacting anyone. His website is still running, and occasionally some verses of traditional texts or Christian prayers in the classical language appear. No one knows for sure whether Bishop Ma himself is doing the writing, but most likely it is him, since his passion for the classics is well known. The texts presented may indicate his willingness to endure in a Christian spirit his difficult situation. Shanghai Catholics believe that the detention of Ma may last for a long time, perhaps years, if he does not yield to pressure from officials. The latter, meanwhile, have questioned a hundred priests and nuns who had refused to participate in the ordination Mass, due to their disagreement with the presence of the illicit bishop Zhan.

Tension remains high in Shanghai, and the event is on the lips of all the priests and faithful, who continue to comment on what happened and ask what will be the repercussions. Everyone realizes that this is a turning point; for this was the first time in many years that a bishop of the official Church has rebelled publicly against government impositions. Bishop Ma may have listened to the calls for firmness by

Cardinal Joseph Zen and Archbishop Savio Hon. The events of September 8, 1955, the most tragic day in the history of the Shanghai Church, when government authorities imprisoned hundreds of priests, religious and lay leaders along with the heroic Bishop Ignatius Kung Pinmei (Pope John Paul II later created him a cardinal) come to mind. Bishop Kung publicly and firmly refused to abjure the Pope, suffering as a result 30 years of imprisonment. The case of Bishop Ma may be less dramatic, but nevertheless it fits well into the story of strength and pain already familiar to the Church of Shanghai.

Government authorities for once are out of options. It seems that Beijing has told Shanghai officials not to worsen the situation by taking any further dramatic steps. Bishop Ma Daqin remains in custody at the seminary while an investigation involving the diocese has started. Meanwhile, on the websites within China, Catholics continue to write comments in favor of Bishop Ma, who has become a true hero. Some Catholics also send their impressions to sites outside China, signing them with pseudonyms. One of them, who introduced himself as Chen Qian, wrote to *Ucanews* (August 16, 2012):

An important aspect of the Catholic Church is fidelity to the pope and obedience to Church law, which expresses the Church being one, holy, catholic and apostolic. Hence, the appointment of Catholic bishops should be solely endorsed by Rome. A bishop's duty is to meet pastoral needs, as he is the spiritual leader of his flock. The Communist Party has no grounds to replace the pope as the leader of the Catholic faith. It should not interfere with the Church's internal mechanism, especially on the issue of episcopal appointments. Bishop Ma's ordination seems to have made State leaders feel perplexed and forget the value of religion. (...)

No matter good or bad, the Shanghai incident is worthy of our reflection, but not to put more pressure on the prelate. Space should be given for him to move freely. (...) State leaders across the world respect the pope and have established friendship with him. The former leader of the Cuban Communist party, Fidel Castro, met the pope this year during a papal visit to the country, while the Vietnamese Communist leaders also pay high respect to the pope and exchange ideas through their envoys. (...) The Chinese Communists, on the other hand, should learn from the Vietnamese respect and support for religions. (Chen Qian is a Catholic layperson in mainland China).

On July 16, Cardinal Joseph Zen celebrated a Mass in Hong Kong, with several priests and more than a thousand faithful, to honor and support Bishop Ma. Card. John Tong also, through *Ucanews*, expressed his condemnation of the detention of Bishop Ma. The Holy See, after a preliminary statement approving the ordination, did not make any further statements. We are undoubtedly confronted with a dramatic step

backwards by the regime, one of many in the complicated history of the Catholic Church in China. This is all the more blameworthy, as it frustrates the hopes raised after many conversations and conciliatory gestures during the years immediately preceding 2010. Angelo Lazzarotto, narrating these events in his book, does not fail to denounce the gravity of the violation of personal and religious freedom of Catholics (nuns, priests, bishops and lay people), forced, often against their will, to participate in illicit ordinations or in the Catholic representatives meeting in December, 2010, in Beijing. The Chinese Catholic community as a result of this was deeply disturbed, while the Holy See found itself unprepared and apparently with no alternative response.

Some Vatican official, obviously not very knowledgeable of the real objectives and methods of the authorities in charge of the religious policy, fooled himself to the very end into thinking that things would be adjusted, that illegitimate ordinations and the general assembly would not take place. The one who seems to have gained most from recent events is a certain high official in the CCPA, who for decades the regime delegated to manage the Catholic Church and to guide the Patriotic Association. For all practical purposes, he appears to be the usual *deus ex machina*, even after the election of bishops Joseph Ma Yinglin and John Fang Xingyao to lead the respective official structures, as these two persons are closely tied to him. The only real challenge to the regime today is precisely the position taken by the courageous Bishop Ma Daqin which has given hope to the Catholic community. However, the outcome of the matter remains unpredictable.

Cardinal John Tong, the author of the preface of this book, shares Lazzarotto's concern that a number of Chinese bishops and priests, oppressed by a sense of loneliness and helplessness, may be tempted by the attractive persuasion of government officials. On the other hand, the Holy See too often fails to communicate with them in a significant and concerned manner, so that in the concrete Chinese context, the consoling nationalist feelings continually impressed upon them often end up prevailing. Lazzarotto, citing Jean Charbonnier's analysis, expresses a new feeling gaining ground in many places, namely a conviction that the Chinese Church seems to be doing fine without Rome. This trend leads believers far away from an authentically Catholic feeling. Indeed, it opens the Church up to the danger of a *de facto* schism. Such a trend is strongly suggested as a possibility in the pages of this volume. So there is an urgent need for Rome and the rest of the Catholic world to multiply effective signs of solidarity and help to encourage Chinese pastors and faithful to live fully the common Catholic faith which looks to the Holy Father in Rome as the leader to whom Jesus entrusted the guidance of his Church.

This appears quite difficult in the dramatic transition marking the evolution away from a faith lived in a traditional way when coming face to face with the demands of secularization. As is the case elsewhere in the world, the quick and all-

encompassing modernization now taking place has become a challenge and a serious threat to the practice and the spread of the Catholic faith in Chinese society also. In the decades of the violent Communist persecution, the example of several courageous believers assisted and strengthened the community. Parents today find it difficult to hand on their faith to their children who are leaving the village for the city, where they are tempted and overwhelmed by the prevailing materialism.

Chinese society's secularization is having a negative impact on Catholicism. The number of faithful is not growing at a significant rate (contrary to what is happening among some evangelical groups). Candidates to the priesthood in seminaries are getting fewer and fewer. This is true also for candidates to the religious life among women. Churches in the cities are not well frequented, especially by young people. There is little impetus towards evangelization, and little power to attract the interest of young people and the attention of society. Some priests, coming from families with a long Catholic tradition, confide to us that their young nephews and nieces do not go to Church any more, confused as they are by the drastic social changes. Luckily, there are happy exceptions to this grim scenario in cities like Beijing, Shanghai and Xi'an, as well as in Hebei Province.

Faced with such widespread problems, the Chinese Church is heavily handicapped by not having the possibility of organizing adequate formation programs to nourish true spiritual growth in support of community and pastoral life. The ever-present cadres in charge of the religious policy exercise constant pressure on bishops, priests and religious sisters, so that they often feel hindered from responding adequately to the needs of their communities, while society continues to change rapidly. For this reason, my support and solidarity go to the courageous Bishop Thaddeus Ma and to the young bishops, priests and sisters in China who know how to put Gospel needs first. If my words could reach them, I would say to them: "Keep free, keep strong, resist unreasonable pressures. Be prepared to give up episcopal dignity or other privileges, rather than compromise your conscience, which would make your life miserable. 'The truth shall make you free.'"

Experience proves that whoever surrenders to government pressures (and unfortunately they are not few), condemns himself to a life of moral misery and new defeats. Once these people have given in, control of their life is seized by cadres deciding everything for them. We have known such bishops and priests, ever more sad and isolated, unable to free themselves from the grip of the regime, which forcibly controls their every activity, or attempts to trap, implicate or blackmail them. Even in the decisive hours, as at death, they are prevented from behaving as true Catholics, deprived of the comfort of a confessor, of the sacraments and of a truly religious funeral (I am thinking of the sad case of Michael Fu Tieshan, the illicit bishop of Beijing).

Luckily, the Chinese Catholics themselves demand concrete gestures of fidelity. The experience of these years clearly shows that they do not tolerate the authority of illicit bishops. A bishop who is illicitly ordained is a shepherd without a flock. The case of Zhan Silu, the illicit bishop of Mindong (Fujian), is sadly symbolic: his Mass goes unattended; almost all the priests avoid seeing him; only officials supervising religious policy accompany him, taking him to perform sad missions, as to the Shanghai ordination mentioned above. The free and massive expression of support offered to Bishop Thaddeus Ma, also by means of modern technology and the internet, shows that the Catholic community does not want an independent Church dominated by political interests. It is frustrating to see how the officials are not able to grasp this reality, and how the government continues to persist in applying its policy with a zeal worthy of a better cause, sparing neither money nor personnel to achieve its goals.

Structures responsible for applying the religious policy wield control and pressure over the faithful, sisters, priests and bishops, particularly the younger bishops and priests. Their enthusiasm and zeal are put to a strong test by the lack of true freedom to carry out their pastoral duties. Conservative and old fashioned officials, who are determined to avoid any risk when interpreting the rules, prohibit, rather than approve, new ideas and pastoral initiatives. They prefer to err by forbidding rather than by permitting. Such an unfortunate situation sows discouragement and lack of trust in many young Church leaders. As mentioned already, some priests are known to have been involved in blameworthy moral behavior (not only in sexual improprieties, but also in financial matters, connected with *political and ecclesial ambition*). More than a few leave the ministry. Faced with the urgent need to redouble efforts for evangelization, which the Chinese Church cannot ignore, it would be useful to examine the experience of the many evangelical Protestant communities that are expanding more rapidly in China today than ours is.

The Holy See is expected to honor, encourage and support the bond with Rome desired by the majority of the Chinese Catholic community. There is, moreover, a need to reassert the indispensable theological and ecclesial bond of the universal Church with the Pope. Lazzarotto points to the spasmodic attention given so far by the media to the question of diplomatic relations between the Holy See and Beijing. Even in Rome, high officials, both political and ecclesiastical, have made so many efforts or attempts (so far always unsuccessful) to come up with a plan capable of solving all the problems. Diplomatic initiatives and travels by cardinals without a clear ecclesiastical purpose have not brought to fulfillment the hoped for results. It is evident today that Beijing has no interest in establishing diplomatic relations with the Holy See. Beijing will not cause Taiwan under the leadership of a friendly Ma Yingjiu to suffer the humiliation of losing the nunciature of the Holy See in Taipei. Consequently, the question of diplomatic relations has been put off indefinitely. It would, in any case, be unrealistic to expect that the establishment of diplomatic

relations with the present Chinese regime to solve all the problems of Catholicism in China.

Going beyond useless talks and consequent disappointments, it is urgent today to place the interest of the Catholic community above everything else, giving priority to evangelization and to pastoral activity, which are presently facing so many problems. Let us hope, as mentioned by Lazzarotto, that Archbishop Savio Hon Tai-fai, the Chinese theologian whom Pope Benedict XVI appointed, in December, 2010, to be the secretary of the Congregation of *Propaganda Fide*, may contribute to the realization of this task. Hopefully, he can help to provide new efforts, means, and initiatives for pastoral growth and evangelization. We can also hope for positive and decisive help from Cardinal Fernando Filoni, the Prefect of *Propaganda Fide*, who for eight years was responsible for the Holy See's Study Mission in Hong Kong. Today, huge tasks confront the Church in China. She lacks, in fact, a consistent evangelization effort that is up to the challenges of modernity. Enterprises that witness Christ's love are present, but they are too small to have any impact on such a vast and complex society. Almost totally absent are study and research centres capable of analyzing the situation and preparing the faithful and their pastors to solve questions that are crucial for the future of Catholicism in that great country.

In recent years, we have had several opportunities to remember Father Matteo Ricci, the founder of the modern Christian mission in China, and his best friend and co-worker, the great Paul Xu Guangqi, scientist and statesman, who richly contributed to the scientific, cultural, religious and social progress of Shanghai and the whole of China. I have been called to help with the cause of the beatification of Matteo Ricci. But I am also aware that in Shanghai the cause of Xu Guangqi has been taken up again (it had been originally initiated in the 1930s). Both of these two Christians and fathers of the Church of China are for all of us a shining example. Their friendship and collaboration eloquently manifest a possible way out of the present impasse. They show that it is possible to be both excellent Catholics and excellent citizens, contributing to the progress of the country. The way of friendship, which is both an evangelical value and a Confucian virtue, is the only way capable of overcoming the present difficulties and of creating an atmosphere of mutual respect and collaboration. We appeal to the government authorities: there are bridges to be constructed, not walls to be erected, if a more harmonious society is to be fashioned. Let Xu Guangqi and Matteo Ricci inspire our choices with their brilliant story of friendship and collaboration.

I appeal also to the young bishops, priests and religious in China: Rome is not perfect, but she remains the centre of our Catholic faith. The Holy Father is on your side. Many people in Rome, and indeed in the entire Church, are sincerely eager to be joined with you and to support you in your present difficulties. Not everything can be accomplished at once or as intended, but much can still be accomplished, even in

your concrete situation. Follow the authentic teaching of the Pope, and be eager to study it thoroughly. Do not let temptations for power, money or career lead you astray.

Do not hesitate to let the Holy Father's paternal and sympathetic ear hear your sorrows and real problems, knowing that, in spite of geographic distances, it is not impossible to reach him. Let *Propaganda Fide* and the other concerned Catholic structures in Rome and in the world know frankly and loyally the best ways for an effective solidarity to be expressed. In this way the Universal Church can respond to your real needs, and express solidarity in the fields of formation, of evangelization, of pastoral resources, and of the spiritual life. Your requests will have so much more attention and credibility if they are accompanied with a sincere effort to keep mutual unity. A genuine concern to build the unity requested by Jesus has proven in the course of time to be the secret of success also for true ecclesial growth. The whole Catholic community at large, which loves you and trusts you, admiring your witness and your courage, will find in your renewed effort to spread the gospel, a compelling incentive for them to live by it themselves, especially in these years of the New Evangelization, and for many years to come.