

Preface

In the first half of 2020, quite a number of Catholic churches in mainland China shared an experience similar to most countries around the world, namely, they had to shut down public liturgical services due to the Coronavirus Covid-19.

The threat of the coronavirus is so severe that it has claimed more than 400,000 lives all over the world up to the present time. Hopefully it will pass away slowly in the second half of the year. Unlike in other countries, Catholics in China have to face other kinds of challenges which are quite unique to them.

Among the host of problems, the most urgent one perhaps is the drastic decline in the number of priestly and religious vocations in China. As we know, quite a number of seminaries closed down in the last few years because of a poor admissions rate.

My colleague, Dr Anthony Lam, has spent quite a number of years following the changes in the Catholic population in China. In 2014 he issued a warning that the significant decrease in the Catholic population in China after the turn of the

new millennium would cause great obstacles for priestly and religious vocations. In addition, Anthony has paid attention to a number of problems which are deeply affecting the Church in China. These include the large-scale pulling down of crosses (or even church buildings) in Zhejiang and other provinces since 2014. This is still a wound harming Christians in general in China.

Pressure from the government's side on the Church has been ever-increasing. Anthony wrote a series of articles regarding the National Security Law, the new version of Religious Regulations (promulgated in 2015 and 2017 respectively) and other related government policies. In the eyes of the government, such laws and regulations might help keep society more stable. But in the eyes of religious people, they were nothing but an extra burden for and a hindrance to religious communities.

In face of all the negative news, Anthony treasures very much the breakthrough of the Sino-Vatican provisional agreement which was signed in 2018. He gave an optimistic, but prudent analysis of it. Anthony had also made a comprehensive review of Pope Benedict's *Letter to the Catholic Church in China* in 2007. In the letter Pope Benedict expressed his sincere wish to establish dialogue with the Chinese Government. The agreement can be counted as a fruit of that dialogue in the last decade.

Following the agreement and the pardon granted by Pope Francis to the seven illicit bishops, the long lasting painful

problem of the so-called “self-elected and self-consecrated” episcopal events would seemingly come to an end.

Addressing all the above-mentioned issues, Anthony compiled his analyses and commentaries into a new book, *Conflict and Dialogue: Church and State Relations in Early 21st Century China*. Regarding the ups and downs of the Catholic Church under Communist governance in the 20th century, Anthony had published *The Catholic Church in Present-Day China: Through Darkness and Light* in 1997. Now this new book can be seen as the sequel to the previous one in the new century,

After working for more than 35 years at Holy Spirit Study Centre, Anthony retired at the end of 2019. The book may also be counted as his last publication as a staff member of the centre. I would like to take this opportunity to wish him great success with his new book and a wonderful and fruitful retirement!

+ John Cardinal Tong,
Pontifical Administrator of Hong Kong
Feast Day of St. Anthony, June 13, 2020