

MEETING CHRISTIANS FROM CHINA  
REFLECTIONS  
ON

*by Mary Louise Martin*



Many news items have been written already about the recent visit to Hong Kong by Bishop K.H. Ting and the other members of the Chinese Christian Delegation to the Christian Conference of Asia. Here I only wish to note a few statements that provoked reflections on my own part.

At a seminar at Tao Fong Shan Ecumenical Institute on 31st March, 1981, I joined a discussion on youth in China. Interest centred on youth who presently attend the churches in Canton. I heard:

"As time goes on, I am more and more satisfied with the kind of youth who come to our churches. They themselves ask and search. They are not forced to come, yet they are coming. Many make great sacrifices. For example, some do not tell their families, who say there is no future in this sort of thing. Some go to great trouble to exchange working hours with colleagues, in order to be free on Sunday." (Rev. Matthew Tong, Pastor, Dongshan Church, Guangzhou)

"In regard to those who seek Baptism, we take it very slowly. In a socialist country, one must learn thoroughly, before Baptism, what it is to be a Christian." (Rev. Matthew Tong)

When the discussion became very philosophical, and contributions to the discussion were solicited, 81-year old Rev. Hung said: "We do not discuss philosophical questions. Philosophical debates are not related to our lives. What is most important is our strong faith in God our Creator." (Rev. Hung Chan-Pui, Chairman, Guangdong Provincial Christian Three-self Patriotic Movement Committee).

On 27th March, at a seminar sponsored by Hong Kong Christian Council, the eight delegates formed a panel to answer questions raised by Christians from various churches in Hong Kong. There I Heard:

"What we ask of Christians in Hong Kong most of all is your support. Support and respect for us on an equal basis. Accept that we are trying to do the best we can in the circumstances in which we are."

"We do not reject foreign help altogether. We want it to be given in the way in which we ask for it, not according to how the foreigners wish to give it. For example, we have accepted some much-needed books for the Nanjing Theological Seminary."

During a visit to Holy Spirit Study Centre on 7th April, Bishop Ting answered questions raised by the group of Catholics assembled for discussion. There I heard the following.

In response to a missionary's comment that "In recent years many of us have come to reflect more deeply on the Spirit working in all events, within the church, outside the church, and in society." Bishop Ting replied, "During the past thirty years many Christians in China have come to think this way."

A Hong Kong priest asked, "Will Catholics from China be allowed to visit Hong Kong or other countries for meetings or

special occasions?" Answer: "I imagine Catholics will be allowed to accept invitations to international meetings, just as we have come here on invitation. You know that in the fall, there will be an international meeting in Canada to which Catholics and Protestants from China will be invited. We hope our Catholic friends will be welcomed and received in a friendly manner. This is their first visit outside China. We would not want it to be their last."

A comment was made about the relationship between the local church in a country and the universal Church. Bishop Ting commented in reply, "We in China must learn that the Vatican has changed since John XXIII. You in other parts of the world must be friends of, not hostile to, China. We want to remain open to dialogue. Let us have a mutual respect for each other."

Q. "Do you encourage Christians to work for the four modernizations?" Answer: "Of course, all of us in China wish to work for this, so as Christians we work for it too. But the Church as an organization does not. It is quite different than you here in Hong Kong. In the churches, the sermons you hear will generally be on faith. Not all agree with this, of course."

To the question, "We know that ecumenism in China, due to historical circumstances, is looked at quite differently than in other parts of the world. What does the future hold for this?" came the answer, "I think contact with the outside world is helping. Our Christians hear and learn from what you are doing in other parts of the world."

Q. "During the Cultural Revolution many Christians suffered for many different reasons. Do you think Christians now are more united than before?" Answer: "I cannot speak for all Christians, of course, but I think there is a greater spirit of unity now than before."

A missionary commented that many former missionaries who suffered in China in the '50's find it difficult to accept that there is good in China today, or to trust the present

policies of religious freedom, and asked: "How can we help them?" Bishop Ting answered, "Their attitude is understandable, of course, because they suffered very much personally. Perhaps if they went back on tour to the place where they previously were and saw for themselves? At the least, we can say that China is better off now than it was before."

At the conclusion of his visit, Bishop Ting said, "I am very happy to be here at Holy Spirit Study Centre. We have heard of your Center and we are happy with what we hear. You gather information that is available to you, you analyze, you draw tentative conclusions. We do not always agree with your conclusions - perhaps your information is not complete. But you truly try to study. You do not gather intelligence. In China we make a distinction between Study Centres and Intelligence Centres."

At the public meetings and small gatherings I attended I saw eight Christian men and women who were cultured, educated, gracious. I saw people whose faces, especially their eyes, were happy, gentle and kind. I heard them plead for respect and understanding, and I heard statements with which, for the most part, I totally agreed. What I saw and heard were externals. As I reflected on these externals, I asked myself the following questions:

- What was the inner source of the extraordinarily kind eyes and gentle manners?

- If the local church of any other country said, 'We want foreign help only in the way in which we ask for it,' I would agree heartily. Why should I not accept the same sentiments from Christians in China?

- Why would I not give these Christians the respect and understanding, on an equal basis, that they so earnestly pleaded for?

- As a Christian and missionary I could appreciate and understand most of what they said. Why then should I not take their words at their face value?

- They are my Christian brothers and sisters who live in a different society than I. I do not know the decisions they have had to make in order to live out their Christian vocation. Should I not admire them for trying, even when I do not understand totally?

- Shall I conclude that what I heard was untrue and what I saw were not true, but hypocritical, Christians, or shall I accept them as Christians sincerely trying to live their Christianity in a Marxist society?

- In building human relationships we try to trust the other unless his words are proven false. Shall I not extend the same trust and forbearance to my fellow Christians in China?

- If not, why not?

