

GOD'S CALL TO A NEW BEGINNING —
AN INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE IN MONTREAL (OCT., 1981)

by Beatrice Leung

"God's Call to a New Beginning" was the theme of the conference held in Montreal, 2nd-7th October, 1981, on the Church in China. The planners of the conference chose to describe the gathering in this way because it was hoped that this gathering would result in a breakthrough quite unlike all previous meetings on the Church in China, dating back to Louvain in 1974. The participants felt that the direction of the sessions were toward a new beginning and concrete efforts were made to break with the past.

THE PARTICIPANTS

In 1974, Catholic and Protestant researchers met for the first time at Louvain, Belgium to exchange information and research with the hope of stimulating all concerned parties to probe further into China's religious problems. At that time the door of China was still closed to outsiders and information was difficult to obtain. The researchers took advantage of this golden opportunity to exchange information and knowledge. A meeting of this nature was held annually or every other year. Finally when the door to China opened wide in 1978 and the policy on religious freedom was issued in 1980 the researchers felt it would be more meaningful and valuable if delegates from China were present.¹ The presence of seven Protestants and three Catholics at the Montreal conference was the first time in the history of the new China that delegates from the People's Republic participated.² The conference in Canada was a watershed in the years of research on China when non-Chinese participants analyzed religious issues and drew conclusions on their own.

Apart from scholars who devoted their time to research on the Church in China, there were many Third World Church workers who are involved in justice and peace movements. Both theologians and active field workers were present to provide a mixture of theory and practice. It was the first opportunity for Church workers involved in Third World struggles to become acquainted with their Chinese companions. Heretofore, they had been linked indirectly through the efforts to change conditions in Third World nations.

The Protestant Church in China was in a period of denominationalism. Rev. Peter Tsai of Hangzhou Protestant Church said the reason for denominationalism in China was possibly due to the fact that both Protestants and Catholics expended much of their energy in the reconstruction of the churches.³ Because the believers in China were beset by different problems, the ecumenical movement did not flourish there as it might in Hong Kong, Macau and other localities of the West. On 4th October, a joint Sunday service was held and it marked the first time that such an ecumenical gathering was observed in the history of the Church in China. It was indeed, a "new beginning".⁴

THE DIRECTION OF THE CONFERENCE

From 1974 until the present it was a practice to discuss the political, economic, social and religious problems of China and thus risk isolating China from the global scene. The preparatory committee of the Montreal conference realized that issues must be viewed globally or be viewed badly and therefore decided that half of the one hundred and sixty delegates not be directly involved in the study of the Church in China. The Third World theologians came from all continents as catalysts of people's movements and formed panels in the conference to share their experience of the struggle for justice among the oppressed of South Korea, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, South Africa and Latin America. These Third World representatives reflected on their respective situations in the light of Liberation and Contextual Theology. The Chinese delegates shared their valuable experiences relating how the faith of believers was manifested during the establishment of the new regime in China and how faith is to be lived out in the era of reconstruction. Within a socialist framework

the Chinese delegates proceeded from existential situations to theological reflection. In this arena of mutual enlightenment the Church in China was not singled out and isolated for analysis but was placed on an international plane of mutual giving and receiving together with other Churches of the Western World. In this respect the conference in Montreal was unique and the mode of exchange unlike the gatherings since the Louvain meeting.

In 1980, Bishop K.H. Ting issued a significant statement entitled "A Call for Clarity" which revealed the attitude of the Chinese Church towards international relationships. He stated that their international Christian commitments would be limited, that they would be selective and differentiate in their global contacts. "We want to have contacts and exchange for the purpose of mutual learning with Church groups and individuals overseas who have a friendly attitude towards the New China and who respect the Three-Self principle of the Chinese Christians."⁵ Mindful of Bishop Ting's statement, the conference in Montreal naturally maintained an open and friendly attitude towards China. Had this not been obvious, would the Chinese delegation have ventured to fly such a distance to Canada to attend the meeting? This attitude of respect and friendliness was apparent to those concerned about the Church in China even before the meeting took place.

Montreal is more geographically accessible to participants from the West and therefore nearly half of those present came from Canada or the United States. Nevertheless, the discussions centred on the problems of the Third World. Many delegates took the Chinese experience as the model of Third World transformation, and the Chinese delegates having been in isolation for more than thirty years, were quite willing to be exposed to the great changes which took place and be reunited to the universal church through dialogue. Participants felt that the conference had laid aside the previous practice of a single-track analysis of China through transformation into a dialogue between Chinese representatives and those from other countries. This exchange of Third World experience and theological reflection is in its infancy and will proceed on the basis of seeking out what all have in common, preserve the differences which necessarily exist, and come together in an atmosphere of warmth and friendliness.

Montreal was adorned with red maple leaves of the autumn season. The beauty and tranquility of this city enhanced the "new beginning" of dialogue, openness and friendship between Chinese Christians and the universal Church.

REFLECTION

In panel discussions and group gatherings the impression was given that the ten Chinese delegates were searching for a new path in Theology. Most of them were striving to give new meaning and insights to a church which had been transformed from a semi-colonial model dominated by foreign missionaries to that of an authentic Chinese Church witnessing in a socialist regime. The Chinese Church is standing with the people and searching out the implications of Christian faith in the social realm of the People's Republic. The theological reflection of Professor Chen Zeming, Vice-Principal of the Nanjing Union Theological College, was apparently written in this vein. In a speech he said: "The traditional dichotomy between belief and unbelief is not such a sharp contradiction at present. The high ideal of a Christian life rests upon the pursuit of social justice and in striving for perfection in one's social relationships. In the past evangelization stressed the quest for more Church members and converts. This mentality has faded away and now our attention is diverted to the improvement of relationships between the church and the people. We wish to strengthen the quality of faith and also improve the material lives of the Christians. The mentality of the prophet Jonah who looked upon the people of Niniveh as evil, once pervaded the Christian minds. This self-assuming goodness in an evil world is being replaced by a gospel attitude of humility, love and service".⁶ In the meeting Bishop K.H. Ting also echoed the same attitude by using the simile of salt to describe the Chinese Church. He emphasized that one could not put a big block of salt on the dining table. It must be served in small grain quantities so that it could be dissolved in all kinds of food and thereby add to the flavour. Through this analogy Bishop Ting was alluding to the future in which there would not be great numbers of Christians in China, nor would the Church

appear as a large institution. In his address Professor Chen explained clearly how the Church is not a system, institute or a ruling body with a clearly defined class structure. In China the Protestant Church is extremely careful in dealing with the problems of structure, administrative systems, hierarchy and liturgy. At the same time various kinds of experiments were in process with the hope of finding a model suitable to the special circumstances of the Church there.⁷ The Chinese approach is similar to contemporary Theology in the Western world. It is a theological truism that the depth of faith or quality of a believer is of greater importance than large numbers of church members with a superficial foundation in the Gospel. Not least, the Church is to be a leaven in the world and act as a humble servant of the people.

From the perspective of theological studies, the Protestant Church has its intellectual base in the Nanjing Union Theological College. The Protestant Church had a number of scholars who were trained before the liberation of China to do academic research. This historical advantage explains how the Protestants could tap such resources to prepare for the Montreal conference. On the part of the Catholics, there is still no crystalization of theological thought to comment upon. According to the report of Bishop Tu Shihua, the appointed rector of the proposed theologate in Beijing, the school of Theology has encountered difficulties and the opening date is still not determined. Young men who wish to become priests remain in their homes and study some subjects under the tutelage of senior priests. In this type of apprenticeship, without formal textbook or curriculum, Bishop Tu thought that there was a possibility to learn and prepare for the ministry while waiting for the theologate to open. Because of this basic weakness in the theological preparation of priests, it is not expected that there will be any significant achievements in Catholic theological research at this stage.

Beginning from the arrival of Matteo Ricci, the Chinese Catholic Church has a history of four hundred years (anniversary to be observed in September, 1982). Prior to the liberation of China, the number of faithful approached 3,000,000. The Protestant presence in China is but 100 years and in their evangelizing efforts, they claimed about 1,000,000 members. Since

the Catholic Church had a longer tradition it might be expected that its members would be better prepared to cope with the abrupt transition brought about by the Communist takeover in 1949. Ironically after the trials of thirty-two years under an atheistic system, the Catholic Church was bereft of both clergy and laity in the field of academic pursuits while learned people of the Protestant Church remained in their work at the Nanjing Union Theological College. There were very good reports on pastoral work in the Catholic Church but theological reflection was minimal. In the conference the Catholic delegates were attentive to any comments on the universal church following Vatican II, especially on the role and image of the Church in the modern world. They carefully took notes on these topics as useful materials in their studies. The eagerness of the Catholic Chinese delegates to obtain information on the Church in the modern world indicated that the unhealthy separation between them and the churches outside has been painfully long. In the 1950's the Chinese Church sought a degree of autonomy but the refusal was inevitable as power was concentrated in Rome during the reign of Pius XII. Decentralization is now occurring in the Vatican. The principle of collegiality and co-responsibility enables bishops to be more autonomous. The closed mentality of the Vatican had to result in a conflict with the Chinese Church. Those who clung to this vision of unbending universal control have gone from the scene and there are signs of a more flexible attitude with regard to regional collegiality or autonomy. In the 1970's Cardinal Casaroli even initiated a policy of "Ostpolitik" which allowed for a dialogue with the Eastern Bloc nations.⁸ The present conflict between the Vatican and the Chinese Church is in reality a conflict within the Catholic Church. Would an open dialogue not lead to certain degree of understanding which might bring both factions a step forward on the path of reconciliation? Everyone realizes that there are differences but also points which both have in common, most significantly that burning faith which causes us to follow the Lord Jesus Christ and to extend his Kingdom of Justice. Since we belong to one God, profess one faith and receive one baptism why did we engage in quarrels in the past? Can we not

"beat swords into plough shares" by turning our attention to the urgent task of reconstructing the Chinese Church by making it a truly indigenized community of faith? It is a difficult but meaningful task to build up the Church in a regime with a totally different economic system under a political approach which professes atheism as its ideology. It would be a miraculous breakthrough, a partial fulfillment of the biblical longing for the New Jerusalem if such a Church could be realised within this kind of regime. After thirty two years of diverting time and energy to other endeavours, it is essential that we re-focus on the religious issues which confront us. God wishes that his Church of faithful believers be reconstructed on Chinese soil and bear fruit in a Chinese mode.

Bishop K.H. Ting pointed out that China had gone through the period of liberation theology but was now entering an era of reconciliation. It is our urgent task to reconstruct the temple of God in this spirit of reconciliation. Since our Protestant brothers and sisters have already embarked on this course, is it not to be expected that the Catholics learn from them and make up the lost time?

In the meeting, Bishop Micheal Fu of Beijing and Bishop Tu Shihua of Hanyang and rector of the Beijing seminary, both admitted there was a severe shortage of church personnel. It was pointed out that foreign missionaries were the pillars of the Church who trained indigenous religious and diocesan priests. Shortly after liberation the foreign missionaries were asked to leave China, together with many religious and diocesan priests. Now the latter are engaged in various kinds of work overseas and are reaping spiritual fruit abroad. How few of these servants of the Gospel have been left for the pastoral care of the Chinese Church? Since the time of Matteo Ricci, the religious congregations were the pillars of the Chinese Church. After liberation this source was stopped and the field of Chinese vocations became a parched land.⁹ It is true that foreign missionaries had done much good for the Chinese but unfortunately they did not leave behind an infrastructure which would provide the Church with a continual source of trained personnel. This is an eternal loss to the Chinese faithful. By contrast, the Protestants had

formed a nucleus of trained leaders who assumed responsible roles when foreigners were expelled from China. One prominent example is K.H. Ting who eventually became a spokesman for the Protestant Church when he was appointed to be one of the high officials in the standing committee of the People's National Congress. Moreover a number of learned scholars were available to become the faculty of the Nanjing Theologate and provide a continual source of theological reflection in Protestant circles. All of these historical events revealed the importance of the principle of self-reliance and taught the Catholic Church a painful but meaningful lesson. In the future she could not rely upon others to assist in formation work. With good personnel, the Chinese could stand with confidence alongside other members of the universal Church. Without properly trained personnel, independence is impossible. It follows then, that interdependence with other churches cannot be achieved until there is a modicum of independence.

In conclusion, we must admit that all matters dealt with in the Montreal conference were common issues and rather familiar theories, but all of the delegates were very satisfied with the meeting. The primary reason for this satisfaction was the spirit of respect and understanding which pervaded the gathering. All of the delegates had their own personal position and convictions but were open to other points of view. There was an atmosphere of understanding but the delegates admitted openly that compromise was not yet possible on certain principles. There was mutual respect in all encounters and careful attention paid to varying perspectives. Cordial friendship was a priority even when different theologies were discussed and conflicting views were expressed. At the end of the eight days, all discovered the doubts and fears which were present before the opening sessions had melted away in the atmosphere of sincerity and good will. Because of the boundless gift of God's grace, coldness and suspicion were overcome and the delegates took advantage of the journey home to acknowledge that the Holy Spirit had descended upon them in Montreal.

NOTES

¹Kuo Ju "Thoroughly Implement the Religious Freedom Policy" Renmin Ribao, 17th Oct., 1979.

²Tripod, #5, 1981, p.2

³K.H. Ting: "A Call for Clarity", Message, Hong Kong Christian Council, March, 1981, and Peter Tsai: The Church in China: Yesterday, Today and Tomorrow", CCA Consultation With Church Leaders from China, Christian Conference of Asia, March, Singapore. Editorial, South China Morning Post, H.K. 25th March, 1981.

⁴Statement by Bishop Michael Fu of Beijing, at the Montreal conference 2nd-7th Oct., 1981.

⁵K.H. Ting, op. cit.

⁶This is expressed by Professor Chen Zeming in his talk "Some Theological Insights in the Church of China", in the Montreal conference.

⁷Chen Zeming: ibid.

⁸Hanson: Catholic Politics in China and Korea, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, New York, 1980, p. 7-8.

⁹In Louis Wei Tsing Sing's Book Le Saint-Siège et La Chine, the statistics in p. 187 revealed that before the liberation there were 3046 foreign missionaries and 2542 Chinese priests in China. In Guide to Chinese Catholic Diaspora, Singapore, 1971, there were more than 300 Chinese originally from China scattered throughout the whole world (not including Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan.)

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4. E. Hanson: Catholics in China and Korea, Orbis Books, New York, 1980.