

BRIEF REPORT AND REFLECTIONS ON MONTREAL CONFERENCE 1981

BY JOHN TONG

A. BRIEF REPORT

The international conference on the Church in China, sponsored by the Canada China Programme of the Canadian Council of Churches, was held in Montreal, Canada from 2nd to 9th October, 1981. The theme of the Conference was "God's Call to a New Beginning." There were 160 participants. The Chinese delegation consisted of ten people: three (3) Catholics and seven (7) Protestants. The Catholic delegates were: Fu Tieshan, Bishop of diocese of Beijing, Tu Shi-hua, Bishop of Hanyang and Wang Zicheng, Vicar General of Yaoyang. Mr. Lo Wei-do, Catholic layman from Shanghai, was absent because of illness. The Protestant delegation included: Bishop K.H. Ting, President of the China Christian Council, Dr. Jiang Wen-han, Prof. Han Wenzao, Rev. Shen Yi-fan, Vice-President, Assistant General Secretary and member of the Standing Committee, of the China Christian Council, Dr. Zhao Fusan, Deputy Director of the Institute for the Study of World Religions in Beijing, Prof. Chen Ze-ming, Vice-Principal of Nanjing Union Theological College and Sister Jiang Peifen, President of Jiangsu Christian Council.

The meeting lasted eight days, the first being spent in formal introductions and the final day devoted to conclusions or ceremonial closing messages. The other six days of the conference were divided into three parts.

(I) 3rd and 4th October: Speeches on the experiences and theology of the struggles of the people were delivered by theologians or other concerned persons from South America, South Korea, the Philippines, Sri-Lanka, Haiti, the Caribbean Islands, United States and Canada. "Theology of contextualization" could be

considered the focus of all these addresses.

(II) 5th and 6th October: The ten Chinese delegates gave reports and theological reflections on the changes and experiences of the New China. The titles of their speeches were: "Chinese Catholic Clergy and Laity are Witnessing to Christ" and "There is Freedom of Religious Belief in the New China" by Bishop Fu Tieshan; "Independence as a Right" by Bishop Tu Shihua; "Difficulties and Expectations" by Bishop K.H. Ting; "Some Theological Insights in the Chinese Church," by Vice-Principal Chen Ze-ming; "How Foreign was the Christian Church in China in the Past?" and "How I recognize the New China" by Dr. Jiang Wen-han; "Colonialism and Missionary Movement" and "Church Autonomy from a Theological Perspective" by Dr. Zhao Fusan; "How the New China Helps Christians towards Theological Reflection" and "Freedom as Viewed by a Chinese Christian" by Rev. Shen Yi-fan; "An Evangelical Perspective" by Sr. Jiang Pei-fen; "On International Relations of the Chinese Church" by Prof. Han Wenzao.

(III) 7th and 8th October: The participants were divided into two groups; a Catholic forum and another gathered to consider principles and their application. The latter treated principles which foreigners should respect when manifesting their concern for China and the Catholic forum treated problems within the Catholic Church.

I participated in the Catholic forum and we briefly explained to the three Chinese Catholic delegates factors leading to and consequences of Vatican II, and also the situation of the Catholic Church throughout the world today. On their side, the Chinese delegates told us about the present situation of the Catholic Church in China and of their plan to open a Catholic seminary. Each side listened to the other with attentiveness and openness.

There was a very friendly atmosphere throughout the entire conference. Mornings were devoted mainly to speeches, while afternoons and evenings were given over to small group discussions and sharing in general forums. Personally, I had special interest in four of the speeches delivered by the Chinese delegates. I would like to share with readers some of the content of these four speeches.

1. In his speech, "Some Theological Insights in the Chinese Church," Chen Ze-ming dealt with systematic theology. His approach was very similar to that of many contemporary Western theologians. I believe his speech was one of the fruits of research taking place within the Nanjing Union Theological College community. He pointed out that Chinese theology is now in a post-liberation age. He drew a comparison between the Chinese and Latin American churches, and said that both have gone through colonial and semi-colonial phases. As in Latin American nations, the basis of the Chinese perspective was the consciousness of the people in the praxis of history. It is understandable, then, that theological thinking in the Chinese Church has been quite close to that of Latin America. Although the Chinese and Latin Americans have been companions on two different phases, yet, while the Latin Americans use theology as an ideological instrument in socio-political struggles and in the pursuit of liberation, the Chinese people, including Christians, already attained political liberation thirty years ago. Chinese theology, then, has taken reconciliation as its task, while the theology of South American Christians has taken liberation as its goal.

2. In his speech, "Colonialism and Missionary Movement," Dr. Zhao Fusan revealed some important ideas among Chinese Christian leaders. He pointed out:

"The historical ties between missionary movement and colonialism do not imply that all missionaries have endorsed colonialism or imperialism. (a) Many missionaries lodged their sharp criticism against colonialism and imperialism. There were also a few missionaries that sympathized with the revolutionary movement of the oppressed peoples and got into difficulties with their mission board. (b) On the other hand, people also notice that many missionaries in the field, while claiming to be 'non-political,' supported the local government, took the latter to be the representation of law and order. Many missionaries would be opposed to any violence, hence their opposition to any people's revolutionary movement. They sided with the local reactionary government supported by colonial powers. This was also the usual policy of

many mission boards in the past. (c) There were also missionaries engaged in political activities in support of their home colonial, imperialist government and local reactionary government. However, the number was very small."

3. Talking on "International Relations of the Chinese Church." Prof. Han Wenzao declared that the Chinese Church must be independent before it can be inter-dependent. In order to express their basic attitude - one of "differentiation of groups according to their attitude toward us" - he reaffirmed the resolution adopted at the third National Christian Conference held on 13th October, 1980:

"While adhering to the principle of self-government, self-propagation, the Chinese church looks forward to friendly intercourse with Christians and churches of other lands on the principle of mutual respect, for the furtherance of fellowship in Christ. However, we are opposed to the infiltration and anti-Chinese activities of a handful of people abroad who work under the pretext of 'evangelism' to implement their schemes of hostility against New China and to split up the Chinese church. They totally ignore the jurisdiction and the Three-Self principle of the Chinese church. We know that many Christians abroad are opposed to such attempts as much as we are. Their attempts are doomed to failure."

4. The content of the speech, "From Blind Obedience to Independence," by Fr. Wang Zi-cheng was intended to explain that the Catholic Church promoted by the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association today remains the same as the church brought to China by Fr. Matteo Ricci four hundred years ago. Every Catholic is free to choose and accept the present social system. "This is a political, not a religious, problem." All that has happened in the Catholic Church in China during the past thirty years, he said, is the logical consequence of its past, and can be considered a second Rites Controversy."

B. REFLECTIONS

What did the speeches of the Chinese delegates inspire in us? As someone working in the field of theology, I would like to bring up two theological points for reflection.

1. Theological Method. Last year Fr. Bernard Chu gave me an article entitled " Search Illustrated Faith: Varieties of Theological Reflection," written by Robert A. Mitchell, S.J. (March 12, 1978). In his article, Fr. Mitchell pointed out five important elements related to theological reflection, as used by Woodstock Theological Centre. The first element is the subject matter in which the problems of humanism are singled out for attention; e.g. science and human development, faith and justice. The second element is the interdisciplinary nature of the study which deals with questions that are not confined to any one field, but which involve several. These are frequently questions of value, meaning and purpose. Third is team work and group effort. This follows naturally from the fact that reflection is interdisciplinary. This is the way to bring the expertise of many disciplines to bear on a single problem and to exchange ideas together under the light of faith. The fourth element is the relationship of reflection to experience which demands personal touch with reality. Fifthly, there is the presence of intersecting themes. Research begins to make progress on any given project when it begins to identify intersecting themes.

Considering the content and the important points of the speeches given by the Chinese delegates, I found that their theological method was quite similar to the abovementioned method.

- (i) Regarding subject matter, Vice-President Chen Ze-ming pointed out that the secular ideas expressed by Chinese people and intellectuals in newspapers, magazines and broadcasts today are the material of theological reflection.
- (ii) Regarding interdisciplinary nature of their study, the Chinese delegates' speeches showed that they first tried to understand social problems from the angle of social science, literature, history and philosophy, and then to discern the will of God the Father from their life and experience.

- (iii) In regard to teamwork, Bishop K.H. Ting mentioned to me in a private conversation that the teaching team of more than thirty faculty members at Nanjing Union Theological College has been one of the most important factors in developing a theology of contextualization in the Protestant Church of China.
- (iv) As regards the relationship of reflection to experience, the speeches of Sr. Jiang Peifen and Dr. Jiang Wen-han most clearly expressed their own personal experiences.
- (v) Finally, intersecting themes can be found especially when the speeches dealt with problems like freedom of religion, the independence of the church, nature and grace, love of country and love of church, etc.

As the Chinese proverb says, "If one wants to accomplish his work, he should make his instrument acute first." The attention paid to theological method by both Woodstock Theological Centre in the United States and the Nanjing Union Theological College in China reminds all of us doing theological work in Hong Kong or other parts of the world to make greater effort to search for a theological method suitable for building up an indigenous theology.

2. Theological Content. For our reflection we can focus on two points:

- (i) Liberation and Reconciliation. The Chinese delegates pointed out that although the theological thinking of the Chinese and Latin American churches has been quite similar, yet Latin American theology has liberation as its goal while Chinese theology has taken reconciliation as its task. I think these few words remind us to reflect on three dimensions of the Theology of Liberation: the social, on-going and religious dimension.
 - a) Social dimension: The new and specific point of liberation theology is breaking through the narrow concept of individualistic redemption. As sin not only corrupts the individual but also infiltrates historical and social structures,

making economics, politics, culture and religion become oppressive systems, so the purpose of liberation is to liberate mankind from such structures and systems, so that the kingdom of justice and peace can be realized more quickly in this world.

- b) On-going dimension: Although people outside of China use the term "liberation" to mean both liberation and reconciliation, the Chinese delegates express these two meanings by two respective terms. Thus, the theology of China is in a period of post-liberation; i.e., the period of reconciliation. By expressing the transition from the stage of "breakthrough" to "building-up," Chinese theology clearly indicates that the stages of liberation are in process and liberation cannot succeed without continuous effort.
- c) Religious dimension: As Vice-President Chen Ze-ming pointed out in his speech, the most important meaning of reconciliation is to enable those who have alienated themselves from God to return to God through the incarnated Christ and through the long historical process of the whole human race, and so to be reconciled with God our merciful Father. Therefore liberation is not only a process in history, it also transcends history and infiltrates the depth of human existence, in order to achieve complete union between God and man.

Undoubtedly, to realize the Kingdom of Christ, every Christian should participate in the work of liberation. However, what means should be employed to accomplish liberation is still an open question. Some advocate radical revolution, others a gradual transformation. Some emphasize changing society so that the individual will change, others emphasize changing individuals in order to change society. Therefore, the method of liberation must be studied and chosen according to the circumstances of different societies.

- (ii) Independence. I think that the appeal for independence made by the Chinese delegates not only runs through all their speeches but also give us several messages:
- a) The independence advocated by the Chinese Church is involved with complicated factors, as history, politics, society and culture of contemporary China. We can no longer judge and answer this complicated problem, then, with the simple analysis of former times. We should study the question again more deeply.
 - b) By their appeal for independence the Chinese delegates wished to indicate that they do not intend to give up their faith, but rather that they wish to make even greater effort to relate the church closely to the society of contemporary China.
 - c) Their appeal demands of us trust in the Holy Spirit. If the road of independence chosen by the Chinese Church is correct and in accordance with God's will, such a road will surely be able to face the test of time, and will continue. Thus, people outside of China should not offer excessive concern that can be misunderstood as illegal interference.

Therefore, we who are outside of China, faced with the issue of independence as advocated by the Chinese Church today, should avoid over-simplified analysis, too negative judgment and too rash action.

In conclusion, I feel that the conference was very successful. I personally profited from the conference and felt very satisfied, especially in terms of contacts made with the Chinese delegates. Seeing the mutual acceptance, respect and openness between the Chinese delegates and participants from outside China, I feel more hopeful of reconciliation within the Catholic Church.