

# IMPRESSIONS OF MONTREAL

By Peter Barry

As multicolored as the autumn leaves on the trees around the conference site, so came the delegates to Montreal, during the first week of October, from several countries of the world, from different social and political systems, and each with his or her own rich personal experience. The delegates, 160 in all, came from every continent, including First, Second and Third World countries.

The discussions during the conference were as rich and variegated as the delegates themselves. During the first two days, the part devoted to theology in context, delegates from Asia, Africa and Latin America articulated their Christian faith from their own contexts. Throughout the conference as a whole great thoughts were expressed and powerful ideologies explained. More often than not these thoughts were expressed in the form of questions, such as, K.H. Ting asking, "What should be the attitude of intellectuals when confronted with mass movements, which sometimes make mistakes?" Or Cynthia McLean, USA delegate, asking, "What is the role of women in the church?" Or Father Wang Zicheng, referring to past Vatican denunciations of communism, "Should not the social system of a country be up to the people of that country themselves to choose?" Or as Han Wenzao, in a talk on the international relations of the Chinese church, declared, "Independence must come first, then interdependence."

Various theological outlooks were clearly spelled out, so that all participants might easily grasp them. For instance, Sergio Torres from Chile gave a brief (15 minutes) and lucid explanation of the Latin American theology of liberation. Chen Zeming, vice-principal of the Nanking Union Theological College, described an incipient Chinese Christian theology, which is incarnational and sides with the people. And Pastor Shen Yifan of the Community church in Shanghai gave two rich presentations: one, on "How New China helps Christians think anew theologically," and the other, a clear theological explanation of the different kinds of freedom.

The depths of emotion were also felt during the conference. A lump came to the throat of all those who desire to see China strong when Jiang Wenhan declared: "At Liberation, China stood up!" And then added, "How many people have wept over this statement!" All were likewise moved by the South African delegate's question: "In South Africa the churches talk of reconciliation, but how can you have reconciliation if you do not have justice?" All the delegates sympathized with the cry for justice from the Haitian Jesuit, exiled from his homeland because of his work to free his people from oppression.

We soared to mystical heights with Zhao Fusan, who asked the question (and proceeded to answer it himself): "What social contribution did Christianity make to China?" "It is like taking



*Author moderating a panel discussion*

a solitary walk in the countryside; it is like seeing a cross in the sunset, or a mother with her child (here Zhao quoted a Taoist poet); in other words, it (Christianity's contribution) can be appreciated, but not articulated." At another time, Zhao Fusan quoted God's question to Adam in Genesis, "Where art thou?" and applied it to the church. The church, he said, must ask itself the question: "Where art thou? Are you rooted in the life of your own people?"

Childlike hilarity was also experienced by the delegates when they were entertained by a folk dance troupe from Quebec Province. After the group's performance, its members then organized the delegates in the audience to carry out some giantsized folk dances of their own. The closing banquet likewise saw individuals and groups of participants getting up to sing.

The liturgical services were simple and fervent. One felt that God could not help but hear Sister Jiang Peifen's moving prayers. K.H. Ting remarked that, as far as he knew, this was the first time that Chinese Protestants and Catholics had worshipped together.

Now the leaves have fallen from the trees in Canada and North America. The delegates have all departed Montreal and dispersed to their homes in the four corners of the world. But as the Chinese proverb puts it: 落葉歸根, "The falling leaf returns to its roots," just so, I am sure that all 160 delegates return in thought to that marvelous week we spent together in Montreal, and rejoice again in the unity we achieved, a unity of the human spirit and in our Christian faith.

Certainly not all questions were answered, nor all difficulties resolved. Perhaps, even, not all segments of Christianity were represented. But for those of us who were there, arms were stretched out to each other in love and friendship, and an attempt at mutual understanding was made. Despite our differences of background and personality, we were united in our humanity and in our faith in Christ, and for one week we experienced together the meaning of the Chinese saying 四海一家 "Within the Four Seas all men are brothers." The whole conference was a hymn to the human spirit baptized in Christ. It was a real "New Beginning."

Long live the spirit of Montreal!