

JESUS BENT DOWN AND STARTED TO WRITE ON THE GROUND WITH HIS FINGER

by Jerome J. Heyndrickx

The attitude of Christ will help us to understand better the Catholic Church in China. This understanding can help preserve unity and lead to the development of insights into the meaning of events.

We have known for many years now that members of the Patriotic Association of the Catholic Church in China are not on good terms with other Chinese Church members. This 'division' between the 'two groups' has become clearer and more personalized since 1976 when China opened its doors to a steady stream of visitors from the outside. It soon became apparent that visitors from abroad while trying to understand better the Catholic Church in China were also beginning to identify with one side or the other, defending one group against the other group. In this manner, the differences existing in China were carried into the Church outside.

One day, when I was discussing this with a confrere, he said to me: "I get the impression that you have not yet made up your mind as to which side you are going to take." His comment shocked me. I felt as if I were being pushed into making a choice, a choice I had been trying to avoid. "The only side for us to take," I told him, "is the side of the Gospel."

I am still of that opinion. More specifically, I refer to that Gospel episode where Christ is challenged by the scribes and Pharisees to condemn a woman who stood before him accused. St. John says: "But Jesus bent down and started writing on the ground with his finger" (Jn 8: 6). He did not condemn, nor did he condone.

What could be a more reasonable attitude than this one for

Christians to adopt today with regard to China? One hears about the suffering that took place during the Cultural Revolution. This is Church history! These are facts! People have lived through them, suffered through them, testified! One can only admire, be deeply moved, and be inspired by them.

And then I read a letter from a priest in China who was writing with some regret about certain steps he had taken in the past which ran counter to important disciplinary regulations of the Church.

This man is well aware of the negative judgments others have made about him, and people like him. His final comment is tinged with bitterness: "But do not think that by taking these steps that I have renounced my faith. We will talk about all these things in heaven... It is true that I am no longer the old James, but neither am I Judas. Perhaps I am Peter..."

What response can one make to this in Faith? Is it not a time when Christ would invite us to do as he himself did, to bend down and, in silence, write upon the ground? Or are we to condemn people for doing that for which we have such limited understanding?

Yet among those of us outside, trying to understand the Catholic Church on the China mainland, there is a movement in the opposite direction. Religious publications in Hong Kong and Taiwan, as well as those in the West, give evidence that many of us are identifying with one side almost to the exclusion of the other. And our judgments are often quite harsh.

In view of what is being said and written by members of the same One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church, the present situation seems to call for special attention and concern. It also calls for some soul-searching on our part, and, perhaps, some bold steps leading towards an open dialogue. That reconciliation take place among Catholics on the China mainland is our most fervent wish. However, do we, who are outside, not feel the same need for ourselves?

AN EXERCISE IN PERCEPTION: THE LADY OR THE WITCH

When studying perception in Basic Psychology, a famous picture drawn by R.W. Leeper is often used. Within the picture there is a perfect blending of a young lady and a witch. Depending on how their eyes fall upon the picture, those looking at it see either a young lady or a witch. Once the eyes are fixed on one, it is difficult to adjust one's vision to

see the other. Thus, those who see the lady find it hard to find the witch and those who see the witch are hard-pressed to make out the lady.

So it seems to be with us when we speak about the Church in China. We are all looking at the same picture. Some see only the witch, others only the lady. And we have trouble trying to communicate to each other what we perceive. Someone expresses sympathy for one side, often for the best of reasons, although sometimes for superficial ones. Afterwards, it becomes increasingly difficult for him to admit or attempt to try to understand the other side of the story.

One would wish that those who see only the witch would sit down together with those who see the lady and share experiences, discover ways to see and understand the other part of the picture. What is at stake is not just a matter of reaching agreement on certain theoretical questions, but rather, coming to grips with the historical meaning of this latest turn of history in China. We need to expand our capacity to understand the signs of the times as far as the Church in China is concerned. This calls for free and open attitudes.

OUR CHALLENGE: TO UNDERSTAND THE MEANING OF EVENTS IN CHINA TODAY

The events of history have carried a message to us. Have we understood it? It may take some reflection in Faith and openness of attitude to discover its full content and draw appropriate conclusions. History must remain part of our theological reflection.

The nature of the presence of the Church in China today and in the future will never be the same as it has been in the past. Events of the past decades have created a new situation. The hope is that out of the new situation there will come new growth both in depth and in strength. Some signs already point to this possibility. But whether or not growth will continue to take place still depends a great deal on whether we are able to discern the meaning of what has already happened in China.

One obvious conclusion seems to be that the era of the foreign missionary inside China is over. The Chinese Bishops Conference, the hierarchy of the local Church of China, needs to find its place within the family of local churches in the one Catholic Church. One would hope that they will soon receive permission to join with the Collegium of Bishops, despite existing differences of opinion. These differences can be worked out within the context of the bishops' collegiality. This is one of the main functions of the collegium.

However, before this happens -- and even after -- it will be our task to understand and correctly interpret the changes that have been brought about by events in China; the attitudes of those in authority; the words they speak or write; the decisions they make and the reasons for them.

Such understanding cannot grow in an atmosphere where some are labelled as faithful and others as unfaithful, only on the basis of our limited data. Nor will understanding grow out of an intellectual application of principles alone. What is required is insight into the total human situation of the many persons involved and the historical evolution that took place. This is, for most of us, the lady who waits to be discovered in our picture.

UNDERSTANDING GROWS OUT OF THE SILENCE OF CHRIST

We live outside the situation where "events have happened". Our judgments of people come across as harsh to those who can neither answer us nor defend themselves. We take much for granted. We think we know but, in reality, we do not.

It is, of course, right and proper for us to respect, admire and extol the faithfulness, the pain and suffering of so many. Their example will continue to edify the whole Church.

But before one speaks of the "unfaithfulness" of others, we might do well to consult the Gospel and see what Christ said or did not say about judging others. We might also do well to look back into our Church history to what happened to Tertullian, to the writings of Augustine, to events in Europe after the French Revolution.

Are the norms for faithfulness that are so fixed in our minds the only norms? Are we not too easily inclined to use these norms as yardsticks for making facile judgments, calling some "faithful" and others "unfaithful"? Are our norms and yardsticks able to "measure" accurately and evaluate authentically human situations which are so highly complex that it is well nigh impossible for them to be expressed in the familiar categories in constant use among us?

All these are reasons for us to keep silent and "write with our finger on the ground" when confronted with events taking place in the Church in China. Such silent listening in a deeply Christian attitude is an attitude of being-with-the-other which will allow us to discover that part of the picture which we did not see before. Nor is it a passive

silence, even less is it a denial of our own principles; rather, it is a very intensive act of Christian Faith and Trust in the presence of the Spirit. A silence that searches for understanding; an understanding that will lead towards Unity, this is the significant hallmark of the Church community - Unity in the same Spirit of Christ.

A SENSE OF CHURCH: A SEARCH FOR UNITY IN ONE SPIRIT

If someone prays: "I believe in one God, the Father, in Jesus Christ, in the Holy Spirit, the Church, forgiveness of sins and life everlasting," then I know that, as Christian, I am one with him in a special unity. The same Spirit that through baptism inspired me, lives also in him, speaks to me through Him. This unity is more basic than any other differences that might possibly exist between us. It is the bond that unites us into one Church. It is this sense of the Church united that we need to keep very alive in us while we speak about the Church in China.

On the basis of this unity in Faith, we approach the Church Community in China and address ourselves to the complex historical and human reality that lies before us. We are aware that we are in a non-dialogue situation. Certain decisions have been made, words have been spoken and written, attitudes have been assumed, and, in all this, signs of unhappiness and even rejection seem to have emerged. But even if our lack of support and understanding in the past has given pain, even if present attitudes are difficult for us to accept, we know that the basic unity in the Spirit remains our hidden strength. What separates us is of human origin. Is it sinful? Is it weakness? Only God can judge.

Unity is the essential concern for any Church. Yet history shows that we have often failed to maintain it. Why? Why have there been so many incidents of fragmentation in the history of the Church? Human failure is certainly one of the reasons. Misreading of events, misinterpretations of intentions, failure to enter into an open dialogue where clarification might be made possible. But beyond these, there must also have been a weakness in Faith, a failure to believe in the presence of the same Spirit inspiring all and to trust in Him and His strength to overcome human narrowmindedness.

There is no doubt that we are at a turning point in the history of the Church in China. It is the challenge of the whole Church, of the authorities yes, but also of all the faithful, -- especially the Chinese faithful who are outside mainland China -- not to allow themselves to be misled by human judgments and feelings. We must approach people and

situations with our inner Faith in a search for Unity. Now more than ever we must rely on the Spirit who unites us. We are still in a position to avoid a split that, should it take place, we shall in the future be calling upon the Spirit to mend, to reunite what we ourselves have allowed to be divided. All of us share the responsibility for the course that the history of the Church will take in China.

RELY ON THE CHINESE TRADITIONAL SENSE FOR UNITY AND HARMONY

The challenge to maintain unity and harmony does not come to us only from the Gospel. Chinese tradition and culture are also marked by a sense for harmony and a desire for maintaining unity.

Traditional and cultural values are strong in China. It will, therefore, be part of our effort to understand, to trust China, to trust the Chinese Catholics that they, the strength of the Spirit and their Chinese sense for unity and harmony, will be able to deal successfully with their problems.

Faith blended with the Chinese sense of harmony will also provide the Chinese outside of the mainland with a greater ability to understand human situations, human limitations and so be agents of this Unity.

The result of such efforts in Faith and human understanding will not only be Unity, but also growth. What will result is a renewed understanding of the situation of the Church in China, an acceptance of it and insights into the identity and maturity of the Church, a sense of history, that provides understanding of our Mission in this century. If we fail to make this effort history will blame us.

A SENSE OF HISTORY

One needs to look beyond the present moment in order to be able to interpret the meaning of events and see them from the perspective of history. This is an art. But the Church needs a degree of serenity and peace, unity and commitment to dialogue to discern the signs of the times. We hope that our search for unity in Faith will result in such a creative approach to insights into the future of the Church in China.

What happened in China since 1949 is part of a long historical evolution. The drive towards modernization began many decades ago. The problems of the Catholic Church in China are to be understood within the total context of this evolution.

Four hundred years ago, Matteo Ricci was a man who understood his time and the opportunities China offered for preaching the Gospel. He acted accordingly. Human failure in understanding and communication have caused part of his efforts to fail.

The missionaries of the 19th century came to make a new beginning. They brought a spirit of great dedication and zeal. Their efforts have been interpreted quite differently by people both inside and outside the Chinese Church. Part of these misunderstandings is due to the historical and political context.

The Church is entering a new era. Her opportunities today are of a different nature than those of the time of Matteo Ricci, much different even from those of the time before 1949. Yet, what are the opportunities that the present offers? They are to be found in the picture of history that lies before us at this moment. We must learn to interpret that picture well. If we are not careful and if we allow prejudices and biases to cloud our view, we may see only the witch and not the lady. It would be a pity if we failed to see our present opportunities.

UNRAVEL 400 YEARS OF HISTORY

In order to approach the situation of China today with such a sense of history, we must learn more about our own past in China, the mission history of the Church in China.

When we hear or read the often-repeated accusations against the Catholic Church in China, or when we read interpretations given to events of Mission History, it becomes quite clear that we are not dealing only with the history of the past 30 years. What we are trying to unravel is a history that goes back to the times of the first meeting of China with the Gospel, if not all the way back to the Nestorian times, at least back 400 years to the missionary movement of the 16th century.

Study of China Mission History is useful, meaningful and even necessary today, provided this study can be made with openness and objectivity, in a candid search for truth about our past. It can help in a direct way to further our search for understanding and for maintaining unity. We should not lose ourselves in exaggerated breast-beating, nor should we try to compose a eulogy to the past. To admit to certain mistakes or failures will be liberating for us; while at the same time, to celebrate and extol the achievements and valuable contributions of the past is only right and proper.

TO INTERPRET CORRECTLY OUR ROLE TODAY

China is at another historical turning point. This is also true for the Catholic Church in China. The news that reaches us gives evidence that the Catholic Chinese Community has shown an unexpected vitality and dynamism during the past decades. At present, it is calling on all its strength -- the strength of the Spirit as well as its own cultural tradition -- to engage in an intensive struggle to remain faithful to its own identity, its own Faith, within the limitations of its situation.

Catholics outside China are equally confronted with a responsibility to interpret the signs of the times well and read carefully what their responses and attitudes towards China and the Chinese Catholics should be, what we can or cannot, should or should not do. By "we" I mean: we in Hongkong, in Taiwan, and all those "concerned with China", throughout Asia, Europe, the USA.

Meanwhile, it may be good for us to remember the attitude of Christ, silently writing in the sand, as an inspiration for our own attitudes. It may help us to discover that for us, too, there is more than one lady in the picture.

TRIPOD

(Bi-monthly periodical in Chinese and English)

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