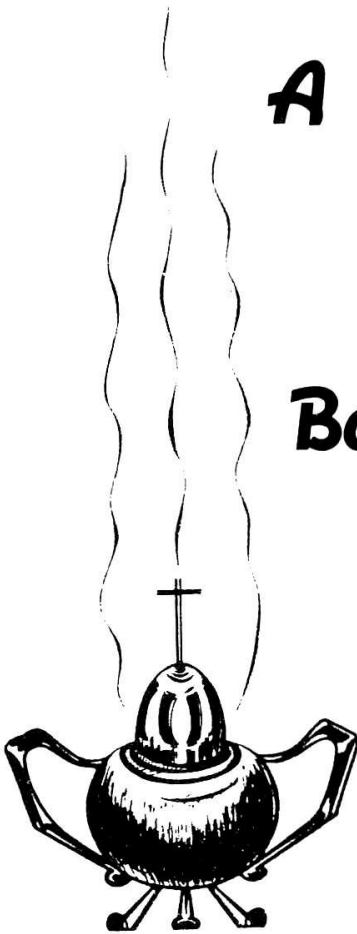


A Reflection on 'Particular Church':

Based on the Experience of the Chinese Church



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EDITOR'S NOTE:

The following paper was also delivered at the annual conference of "Catholics in America Concerned with China" held in Chicago during December 1983.

I would like to begin by expressing my gratitude to the Planning Committee of the CACC for allowing me to address you this afternoon. My subject is the Church in China. I am sure you are all aware of how complex and problematic this subject is, and because of the sensitive nature of present relationships with the Universal Church, how it is also charged with emotion and controversy. Therefore, it is important to me that from the outset I make my intentions clear. As a theologian, I wish to offer some theological reflections on the experience of the

Church in China, its present problems and future possibilities. As a Chinese Christian, I also wish to affirm my belief that out of so much pain and suffering, God will bring to the Church in China a new unity in the Holy Spirit.

The history of the Catholic Church in China has not been without its difficulties, especially with regard to relationships between Rome and Chinese officialdom. While Christianity has, in one form or another, been in China for over a thousand years, modern mission history dates from the arrival of Ricci and his companions during the last decades of the 16th century. Inevitably, there were conflicts in adapting to the culture. In the 17th century, the cultural conflict reached a peak in the Rites Controversy. The unfortunate decision by Church leaders in Rome to forbid Chinese Christians to engage in ancestor worship practices is now seen, in the hindsight of history, to have been arrived at before Rome had a proper understanding of Chinese rites and their place in Chinese traditional culture, their ancient role in maintaining cultural unity and Chinese identity. Of more specific importance, the negative decision by Rome was countered with an edict by the Emperor forbidding the preaching of the Gospel throughout the whole of the empire. Thus, the cultural conflict in China very quickly became a political conflict.

In 1949, when the People's Republic of China was established, it put an end to decades of civil strife and strove to re-establish national unity under the Chinese Communist Party. From the very beginning Mao Zedong and his confreres sought to use the model of the successful October Revolution in Russia to revolutionize China. It was, then, with a strong sense of urgency that Mao began immediately to implement Marxist-Leninist principles in order to effect radical social change. He believed that in doing this he could awaken the "Sleeping Dragon" and move China forward into the future, to gain its rightful place in the community of modern nations. History has shown that many of the policies he used to effect this goal were disastrous. The Sleeping Dragon had indeed been awakened, but also deeply wounded in the process. China's present leadership, while acknowledging Mao's crucial role in the revolution, has also admitted publicly his serious mistakes. Such doubts and misgivings, however, were to come later. During the early years of the communist regime, the 1950's, there were few doubts among the victorious revolutionaries about where the future course of China lay. The Communists had unified the mainland, they had ridden to victory on a wave of patriotic feeling, a spirit of nationalism made more intense by a century of humiliation at the hands of foreign powers. Considering itself to be caretaker of the national destiny, the Communist Party

branded any dissent as being obstructionist and an act of disloyalty. When Rome still took a very strong stand against international atheistic communism, the Chinese Communist Party felt itself included in Rome's opposition, and vice versa. At that time, many Chinese Catholics felt themselves to be caught on the horns of a dilemma. It seemed to them that they were being asked to make a choice: loyalty to the Pope or loyalty to their country. It is not my purpose here to pass judgment, but only to state that pressure was great, decisions were made and the Church was divided. Since then the rift between those represented by the Catholic Patriotic Association (CPA) and those usually termed "loyal to the Pope" has widened. One well might ask if there can not be found a third path that does not involve a choice of one side over against the



other, a way that perhaps might lead eventually to unification and reconciliation? The search for such a solution, I might add, is not reserved to the Church in China alone. The common catholicity that we all share means that the whole Church is necessarily involved. As to what future paths may be opened to the Church in China, the search still goes on. And while the possible alternative way must necessarily be found by the local Chinese Church itself out of the

concrete situation of its own experiences, the overseas Churches, by their constant concern and frequent contacts, can help that local Church to reflect on and discern what path to take.

Let us turn now to the local Chinese Church as it has developed in the Post Mao era. What changes have taken place, what theological problems confront it?

THE CHINESE CHURCH FROM 1979 UNTIL THE PRESENT;
HER STANDPOINT AND DIRECTION:

1976 was an important year in China. Three outstanding Chinese

leaders died - Zhu De, Zhou Enlai and Mao Zedong. In the same year, the Gang of Four were arrested. As a result, drastic changes took place. Under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping, the country has shifted from the far-left to a more moderate and pragmatic road to socialism. Deng has emphasized economic development with the attainment of the Four Modernizations as China's immediate goal. Within the scheme of the Four Modernizations, present leadership hopes to reorganize both China's internal structures as well as its foreign policy. The new Constitution passed last year indicates that the China of the 80's will be guided by policies inaugurated in the early 1950's. This rather comprehensive readjustment of state policy also included a revision of its religious policy.

The Direction and Stance of the CPA as reported by the 'Catholic Church in China':

In 1979, after the 3rd Plenary Session of the 11th Central Committee of the Communist Party stated its policy regarding religious freedom, the national Religious Affairs Bureau (RAB) was reopened in Beijing with branch offices in every region. The Catholic Patriotic Association also became more active again in the larger cities. From 1981 to 1983 under the direction of the RAB and the leadership of the CPA, about 300 churches were reopened in various places in China. In the past couple of years 5 former seminaries have also reopened. She Shan, a diocesan seminary in Beijing, the national seminary also in Beijing, Shen Yang and Hua Yuan Shan near Wuhan are now receiving students. From 1981 to the end of 1982 about 14 bishops were consecrated. These bishops were elected locally and consecrated without approval from Rome. According to one recent report present Catholic membership in China totals about 3,000,000.

Recently, the CPA has given special emphasis to indigenization. This is also in accord with state policy. A clearer understanding of what indigenization means in this context can be found in the 4th issue of the Catholic Church in China, the official organ of the CPA. Here spokesmen for the patriotic bishops explain what they mean by indigenization in the following assertions: one, the Chinese Church is independent and self-administering; two, it represents the majority in service to the whole; three, it participates actively in the construction of a socialistic society along with the whole nation; four, it is autonomous, i.e. churches are to be governed by local clergy; five, it works to create a theology which will adapt itself to the country's needs and special circumstances, and be in harmony with the mentality of

its people and the Chinese culture.

As regards pastoral ministry, the Catholic Church in China offered in the same issue the following directives: to emphasize quality of membership rather than quantity, consolidation rather than expansion; to encourage the clergy and lay people to contribute to the national construction of a socialist society and to work for the welfare of all Chinese people; and, to preach the Gospel and bring people to the faith through true Christian witness.

The Direction and Standpoint of other Catholics in China:

Let us now turn our attention to the other group within the Catholic Church, namely, those who explicitly profess loyalty to the Pope. Their views often differ with those expressed officially by the CPA. Although they live within the socialist system, they refuse to compromise with many points of communist ideology and praxis. They do not approve of the close relationship between the CPA and the government. They continue to profess publicly their allegiance to the Pope, often at the risk of having to sacrifice personal freedom and suffer great hardships, including imprisonment. Basically their stance is that while not desiring to directly oppose the government, they want to demonstrate to the government that a majority of Catholics are not in agreement with the position of the CPA.

In Shanghai, four Jesuits re-arrested in 1981 exemplify the attitude and stance of this group. They were first arrested and imprisoned during the 1950's. After their release they continued to maintain their former attitude towards both the CPA and communism. They were accused of being counter-revolutionary. In March, 1983, the Jesuits were sentenced to prison terms in excess of ten years.

Within this Catholic group, there are those who refuse to attend



services held in the reopened churches or to have anything to do with the CPA. They worship together in their own homes. Others, however, while not agreeing with every position of the CPA, attend services in the reopened churches for the sake of receiving the sacraments. Their common concern is to maintain loyalty to the Pope. They simply will not accept the policy of independence from the universal church stated by the CPA. They practice and try to transmit their faith among their families and relatives and in this manner fulfill their missionary responsibility.

A New Church Model to be Born in the Chinese Church

The revival of the Chinese Church (both the CPA and other Catholics) has been a recent phenomenon. It is too early yet to talk about the contextualization of the Chinese Church and what final form that might take. Although China has had a history of several thousand years, it is now living under a socialist system with communist leadership for the first time. This thirty-year experience is a very brief period in comparison with that long history. However, the reality of having to live within the present socialist system demands that the Church reflect on the following realities: how is it to survive under this system? how is it to work out its contextualization within this reality in order to enable the Gospel to take root in the lives of the Chinese people? and can it discover a new face of Christ in its present experience and give practical expression to it through the daily lives of its members?

From our Christian point of view, God is the God of History. It is my conviction that in this particular moment of history God has given the Chinese Church a prophetic mission, that out of the purification brought about by suffering, a new model of church will be born. Furthermore, this model may serve as a point of reference for other local churches living under socialist governments, (also for the Church in Hong Kong as it looks to the reality of 1997). It is imperative, then, that other local churches in similar situations should not remain indifferent to the success or failure of this search for a new model in China. We should do everything we can to help them reflect while they are still in the process of struggling to find it. Although the Chinese Church is not the first church to experience life under a socialist or communist regime, the fact that it represents such a tiny and powerless minority of the total population makes its situation unique, (quite different from the situation in Poland, for instance.) For the above reasons, the experience of the Church in China in its struggle for survival is of particular importance to the universal church.

In the search for models, my own reflection leads me to believe that the model of the suffering servant can serve well for China. Although the present positions of the CPA and other Catholics are divergent, still, both groups share the common experience of having met difficulties under the communist regime. The experiences of the grassroots Catholics bear witness to the inability of secular powers to sever the ties that bind the local church to the universal church. As silent witnesses to church unity, many Chinese Catholics have sacrificed the best years of their lives, some even life itself. Indeed, no witness can be stronger than that shown through the shedding of one's blood and the giving of one's life. These Chinese Christians have reinforced through their suffering and death the truth that authentic local churches are and must remain in union with each other as members of the universal Church in faith and in the Spirit.

The sufferings of the grassroots Catholics give authentic witness to this truth, and are affirmations of belief in the Resurrection. May the blood of martyrs also be the seed for a restored, authentic, local church - a church made whole again by the healing of internal divisions and by being fully reconciled with outside churches. We have learned from the course of history that no church can survive permanently underground. Even without outside pressure from the government, an underground Church runs the danger of gradually withering away from within. Its nature changes from a public to a private religion and it gradually dies out. The example of the "hidden christians" of Japan can serve as an example. No matter under what political system the church exists, it must continue to struggle for whatever measure of freedom it can obtain to practice its belief openly. It is true that freedom of religious expression is a fundamental human right. On the other hand, it is of the very nature of religion that it be expressed through public liturgy and public worship. It is only in this way that belief can be acquired and unity of belief maintained as dynamic developments of faith. For religion to remain secret and underground on any permanent basis is an abnormality. And so it is incumbent upon both the CPA and other Catholics to struggle to arrive at the same goal - the maximum degree of freedom of religion that can be attained. How one goes about attaining this aim for the public expression of christian faith, how these two groups can be brought together in this common cause, this is another question, one to be discussed at another time. One must mention here, however, that one of the problems brought about by the 30 years of isolation of the Chinese Church is that it does not yet fully comprehend the shifts and changes of attitudes within the universal church towards various world ideologies, including both capitalism and communism,

especially since the 2nd Vatican Council.

The CPA is also under great pressure from within and without as it tries to survive under communism and strives to search out a new way to bring the church into the open and gain acceptance. CPA members live under a government-defined religious tolerance, and suffer, because of misunderstandings, even rejection by other Christians both inside and outside China. Some of their fellow-christians even speak of them as being in "schism". Much of their suffering stems from their acceptance of the responsibility for searching out a suitable way to help the church surface and prosper. It cannot be denied that recently they have made great efforts to facilitate the opening of churches and seminaries. Part of their suffering is also due to the fact that suffering is a normal ingredient in the struggle for legitimate autonomy by all local churches.

Unfortunately, the attitude and public statements of the CPA, especially as regards the Pope, are often so strong that they lose the sympathy of even open-minded christians. And while their work of restoring open activities to the church shows that they are genuinely trying to seek out a new path for the contextualization of the local church, their constant overemphasis on the element of complete independence undermines an authentic concept of what legitimate autonomy means for a local church. Of course the Chinese Church needs a degree of independence, but does this mean that independence involves severing all spiritual ties with the universal church? I personally think that the Chinese Church is seeking to develop an authentic local church, and not a schismatic hybrid. It must then, enter into a dialogue with the universal church as well as with other local churches. It is meaningless for a community of people to seek independence for its own sake. The struggle for independence and freedom is, in the end, directed towards the realization of a more profound and mature unity in relationship. This is also true as regards the independence of local churches. It is my deepest hope that the Chinese local church, in the course of searching for independence, will grasp the profound meaning of this concept.

And now as a Chinese Christian, I feel that at this point I must make my act of faith. The sufferings of the Church in China will be of great benefit. If the Church in China is able to accept these sufferings and appreciate their value, it can, like a mother in labour, bring forth the birth of a new community. With the birth of this new community of believers, which is both in union with the universal church and which has acquired its own proper autonomy, past suffering and pain will be

transformed into the joy of new life. At the same time, the Chinese Church as suffering servant will manifest a new model of church for the world, a church which has passed through suffering into the joy of the resurrection.

PRACTICAL PROBLEMS:

Finally, let us turn to a few practical problems facing the Church in China at the present moment.

The Problem of the Formation of Personnel

Since the late 50's when the Catholic seminaries were closed down, the training and formation of church personnel has been very difficult. Moreover, because of the lack of trained candidates for the priesthood, the Chinese Church is presently facing the problem of an aging clergy. The average age of the clergy, religious sisters, brothers and lay leaders would be above sixty. Encouraging new vocations and training new personnel are now the most urgent tasks being faced by the local church. Although seminaries have reopened recently in several larger cities, there is a lack of trained personnel for specialized subjects. Seminaries are also lacking textbooks and other teaching materials. Perhaps overseas churches can offer some immediate help in this area. It would also be a way for the overseas churches to establish friendly relations with the Chinese Church, and help the Chinese Church to increase her knowledge of recent changes in the universal church.

What Further Contribution can the Overseas Churches Make?

Whenever I am asked to speak about the situation of the Chinese Church to overseas Christians, they always ask what they can do in a concrete way to help. Therefore, in closing, I would like to offer 3 suggestions.

First, I think that overseas churches must try to inform themselves as well as possible of the complexity of the situation in China and what options the church there might take.

Second in importance, and following from the first, is to refrain from anything which might cause a deepening of the division within the Chinese Church. This necessitates a rather sophisticated understanding of the political situation: to what degree is freedom of religious practice allowed and what are the limitations within which we as outsiders

can help? Can those, who while not agreeing with the policy of the CPA, go beyond criticism to join the search for realistic positive ways of helping to heal the internal division and also to help them in their efforts to achieve the maximum degree of religious freedom for all believers? For those who have frequent contact with CPA leaders, can they help them to improve their relationship with the universal church? For those who have the opportunity to meet with grassroots Catholics, can they pray and share the scriptures together with them, so as to experience the strength of their faith, while they, in turn, may be encouraged to open their hearts more to the possibilities of a mutual dialogue?

My third suggestion concerns students from China now studying in the United States. Upon returning to China after their studies, these students will be counted among China's intellectual and political leaders. If we can succeed in helping them now to a better understanding of the true nature and practice of christian belief, then, when they return home, they will be more understanding toward christian believers in China.

Finally, a word about the many research centres now concerned with China. I think that all research centres have the two-fold task of engaging in serious research and serving as a bridge between the Chinese Church and other churches. This latter role is basically one of communication and one that can be shared by all overseas churches interested in China. These centres can serve as bridges especially in their concern for and contact with Chinese Christians. In this they provide a valuable service in helping Chinese Christians draw closer to the universal church.

Thank you for your patience this afternoon. You have been a most attentive audience. Your concern for China both in the past and in the present is most appreciated and valued. Let us, then, continue to face the future together with faith and hope in the one God who unites us all as brothers and sisters.