

Mission, Indigenization, Dialogue

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INTRODUCTION

Recently, the Theology Division of Chung Chi College, Chinese University of Hong Kong, published a book entitled 1997 and Hong Kong Theology. One of the essays in this compilation is called "Christian, Hongkongite, Chinese" and is written by Rev. Alan Chan, the Dean of the Theology Department. In his article, he emphasises the fact that Chinese Christians in Hong Kong embrace at one and the same time these three identities. As a Chinese Christian in Hong Kong, I would like to borrow Rev. Chan's concept around which to structure my own reflections on mission, indigenization and dialogue.

MY CHRISTIAN EXPERIENCE OF MISSION

My understanding of mission has gone through many phases. The family I was born into was not Christian. However, it happened that during my primary school years, my aunt who was a very fervent Catholic came to live in our home. After observing her life and hearing her explanations of Catholic doctrine, my family became interested in Catholicism. Later, my aunt introduced us to the pastor of the local



Catholic Church who happened to be a foreign missionary. We studied the doctrine at the church and were eventually baptized as a family. My understanding of mission in those days was strongly linked to the foreign missionaries. I felt that we locals were the receivers while they were the presenters of the Good News. This was the first stage in my personal understanding of mission.

Later, while studying in middle school, I came to learn more about the Christian doctrine, and my faith deepened somewhat. It was then that I began to realize that each Christian should not only be "evangelized", but also be an "evangelizer". Whenever I had the opportunity to talk about mission with others, I used to emphasize as the "sine qua non" for being a good evangelizer these three qualities: integral faith, constancy, and a spirit of renewal. By an integral faith I meant a faith bound up with the totality of life, and a faith which must bear witness in all its concrete manifestations. For me, constancy meant that I must imitate the unflagging missionary spirit of St. Paul in his concern for planting the seed and not to be overly concerned about reaping the harvest. I saw a spirit of renewal as nurturing a continuing process of updating, the desire to learn more and more of the content of the faith and to explore new methods for evangelization. At this time, I took Jesus' mandate to "go, therefore, and make disciples of all the nations; baptise them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teach them to observe all the commands I gave you," (Matthew 28, 19-20) as my personal responsibility. This was the second stage in my understanding of mission.

Still later I entered the seminary and began the formal study of theology. My ideas about evangelization were broadened and deepened by my reading of Vatican II's Decree on The Missionary Activity of the Church. The concept of mission in this decree is rooted in the context of the universality and comprehensiveness of God's plan for man's redemption and elevation. According to the Decree, the source of mission is the internal life of the Trinity, and its motivating power is the love of God. First, God the Father freely creates us out of His boundless love and graciously calls us to share His life and glory. Then, in order to restore the intimate relationship between Himself and sinful mankind, God sends the Son to enter human history. The Incarnate Christ establishes the Church and sends forth His Holy Spirit upon her. From Pentecost to the Parousia, the Church cooperates closely with the Holy Spirit to accomplish Christ's salvific work by participating in God's intervention in world history. Therefore, viewed from this broader and deeper perspective, evangelization is not only carrying out the command entrusted to us by Christ, but it is also a flow of Trinitarian love which through

the Mystical Body spreads itself throughout the whole world. Thus, our individual christian lives, preaching of the Word, the administration of Sacraments and all other means are instrumental in leading humanity to respond to the call of God's love and to follow Christ in order that He who made all things may at last be "all in all" (1 Cor. 15:28). From this time on, I became more and more aware of this broader concept of mission as the love of the Trinity flowing through the Church to the outside world. I no longer limited mission to merely the literal interpretation of Christ's command to preach and teach. I had now arrived at the third stage in my understanding of mission and a milestone on my path to integrating my life experiences with the Gospel message.

MISSION FROM A HONGKONGITE VIEWPOINT

Theologically speaking, mission also demands an integration of the Gospel with a particular culture or a particular race of people in space and time. Thus, mission requires us to make efforts to "indigenize" the faith. Today in the Hong Kong Church "indigenization of the faith" has become a very popular slogan. At the conclusion of the Diocesan Priests' Renewal Camp in March of this year, the participants set as the main goal of the renewal year to make every effort to become a Church that is truly mature, truly at the service of all, and truly indigenous.

Recently many of the laity and clergy of the Hong Kong Diocese have remarked on comments carried in the pages of the Hong Kong based Yi-China Message (no. 41-42) which questioned the extent of actual indigenization taking place in local church authority structures. The editors of Yi point out that foreign missionaries still occupy major positions of authority in the administration of the Hong Kong Diocese and that half the local parishes still have foreigners as pastors. I followed with interest the resulting feedback to Yi's criticism for it afforded me an opportunity to rethink my own ideas of mission not only as a Chinese Christian but from the viewpoint of Hongkongite.

The Church has been in Hong Kong for over a hundred years. The first missionary to come to Hong Kong was a Swiss priest in 1841, to be followed soon after by Spanish and Italian Franciscans. In 1847, priests of the Paris Foreign Mission Society arrived, and they, in time, were followed by members of many other religious orders and missionary congregations. Through their missionary efforts, the Church, along with its schools, hospitals and other social services, developed rapidly. After World War II, the number of foreign missionaries working in the Hong Kong Diocese increased greatly. Due to the combined efforts of foreign missionaries, local clergy, and the laity, Catholics in the

Diocese now number over 270,000 making it today the largest Chinese Diocese in the world. Its parishes, schools, hospitals and social services have continued to experience remarkable development. In 1969, Bishop Francis Hsu succeeded Bishop Lawrence Bianchi as Bishop of the Diocese. Since then, responsibility for the general administration of the Diocese has more and more been assumed by Chinese bishops and priests. It is true that there still are not enough local Chinese clergy to serve effectively the great number of Hong Kong's Catholics nor enough to fill all its responsible positions; however, there is no denying the following facts: the number of Catholics has greatly increased, episcopal authority is in the hands of a Chinese bishop, and the number of local religious and catechists serving the Diocese in leadership roles and responsible positions is very large. All this gives evidence that the Hong Kong Diocese has made great strides on the road to indigenization.

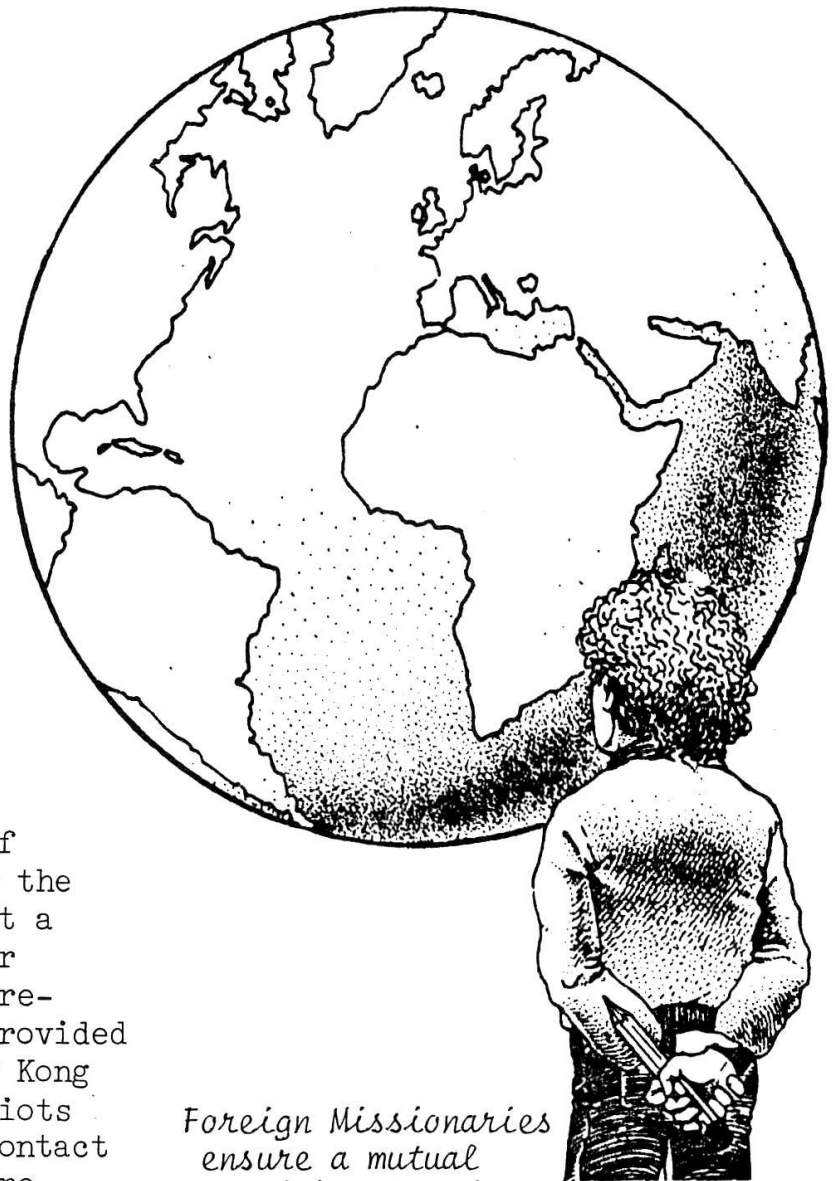
However, indigenization not only means the training of local clergy, religious, and laity to take over positions of leadership and authority in the Diocese, it also seeks to develop personnel and other resources among all local people in order that, under the impetus of a deep and lively faith, each member can assume his and her particular responsibility in the mission of the Church. Even if one day all the important authority positions of the Diocese and the parishes were to be filled by the local clergy, this still would not allow us to become self-complacent. The indigenization of the Church is not merely a matter of filling authority structures with local clergy; rather, it demands that each member of the local Church bear witness to Christ by integrating biblical revelation into one's own life and into the local culture in which one lives.

After determining the content and the priority of indigenization, let us now ask what the role of the foreign missionary is in an indigenized local Church. The presence of the foreign missionary in the local Church is important and necessary. Their presence is a living sign of the universality of the Church, and it serves as a constant reminder to the local diocese of the Church's fundamental missionary nature. Moreover, since foreign missionaries come from different countries and from different backgrounds, their presence stimulates and promotes a necessary cultural exchange. It insures a mutual enrichment and source of constant variety. The presence of missionaries also serves as a challenge to the local Church. This challenge is not one of competitive rivalry, but rather, a challenge to realize the Christian ideal of mutual acceptance, a unity based on difference - dissimilar life styles, values, and even shortcomings. Seen in such a light, the presence of foreign missionaries is beneficial and constructive in a local

Church.

MISSION FROM A CHINESE
POINT OF VIEW

Our Christian identity is an acquired identity just as, for most of us, is our Hong Kong identity. However, our racial and cultural identity as Chinese comes with birth. If my mother and father are Chinese, even though I carry a non-Chinese passport, I still cannot change my Chinese identity. However, our Chinese identity appears less strong and more diffuse in the circumstances of Hong Kong society. Clearly the 1997 issue has brought about a renewed consciousness of our Chinese identity. China's recent open-door policy has provided more opportunities for Hong Kong Christians to visit compatriots in China and to come into contact with the Chinese Church there. Such contacts have aroused much solicitude but also much controversy about our perceptions of mission, in particular our mission responsibility to the China Mainland.



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Because of our identity as Chinese Christians, we feel a compelling responsibility to preach the Gospel to our compatriots. We also feel that no foreign missionary can assume our own responsibility in carrying out this important task for us. However, part of the task of evangelization is also to gauge the degree of possible acceptance of our message in light of China's present situation and to discern the psychological processes of those who we hope will receive the Gospel.

People outside China are continually asking: is there really religious freedom in China? This is a topic of hot debate among Hong Kong Christians as well. Today most countries in the world legally guarantee their citizens the right to enjoy religious freedom, but there are differences both in content and degree of expression allowed. On the mainland of China, religious freedom is guaranteed by article 36 of the Chinese Constitution. Here it states that citizens can "believe or not believe in religion." The same article declares that "normal religious activity is protected by the government." However, what is meant by the word "normal" has not been defined. Therefore, the degree of acceptance of religious freedom in such a society can only be discerned and hopefully expanded through an on-going dialogue between government and people.

The decree on The Missionary Activity of the Church (P. 11) reminds us that while evangelization is a dialogue, not every dialogue is evangelization. Actually, in places rich in cultural traditions and where non-Christian influences are very great, the missionary is required by necessity to enter into a dialogue with the local people. In such situations the Gospel seldom can be preached directly without giving rise to certain tensions in that society, incidents spilling over into serious confrontation with authority. This should be taken into account when considering how to preach the Gospel in socialist China. Here an emphasis on dialogue should be encouraged because it preserves both aims of the missionary task: to preach the Gospel to others, and to listen, aware that the Holy Spirit offers guidance and wisdom through his presence in those to whom we preach. This makes it incumbent on every Christian to make use of a sincere and open dialogue in promoting the search for truth. As for actual conversion, this is the work of the Holy Spirit and is dependent on the gift of God.

Our Chinese wisdom is not the kind that seeks to conquer minds, but rather a wisdom that moves others, to respond with their hearts. Besides discerning the possible degree of acceptance in a particular society, the evangelizer must also perceive the psychological processes of those to be evangelized. For example, some people are first drawn to Christianity because they seek after moral goodness, and imbued with the Chinese spirit of universality, they hold all religions as means to encourage people to be virtuous. Some are attracted by the hope of realizing some material gain or favour. Still others find in the Christian social teachings a possible way to make a more positive commitment to the building up of society and work for the benefit of the people. Given such a wide variety of different motivations, we evangelizers must



cultivate an interior ability to discern and encourage the movement of the Spirit within those who come to us. In this way, we will be following in the footsteps of Christ, who led people to the truth by showing his authentic concern for them.

HOPES FOR THE FUTURE

Finally, I believe that the missionary task should also include establishing a local Church which is "self-supporting, self-governing and self-propagating." If each member in the Church, as a mature

Christian possessing a deep life of faith that bears witness to Christ in society, assumes his and her missionary responsibility, then that Church will be a flourishing Church. If we build up this kind of self-propagating Church, it cannot fail to produce outstanding leaders, and thus it is well on its way to achieving self-government. At the same time, this kind of mature Christian will understand his responsibility to support his Church. He will not be open to the accusation of being a "rice christian," nor will he any longer be dependent on financial assistance from abroad. Thus, the Church will have reached the stage of self-support.

However, a "self-propagating, self-governing, and self-supporting" Church should also be a missionary Church. The wheels of time continuously go forward. Already the Churches of Asia have begun to realize that evangelization means more than younger Churches receiving the Gospel from older Churches. They realize that the younger Churches, too, must take up the responsibility of passing on the Good News. In recent years, the local Churches of the Philippines, India and South Korea have begun to send missionaries abroad. Seeing what others are doing gives us pause to reflect on ourselves. If others can do it, why can't we? I earnestly pray that the Lord will help the Churches of China and Hong Kong to take their place among the missionary ranks, and that one day we, too, may become a "sending" church to bring the Gospel to other lands and other peoples.