



Bishops'

Reflections On China

by J. Clancey

Five bishops who participated in an exposure tour in China from September 24 to 29 have said that their experience has helped them to better understand the conditions which affect the lives of ordinary people and has also helped them to better appreciate the present situation, problems and hopes of the Catholic church.

The bishops participated in a six day tour to the cities of Shanghai, Nanjing and Guangzhou. In each of the cities they met with the bishop, priests and laypersons belonging to the Patriotic Association. Through conversations and visits to churches, a seminary, a commune, factories and kindergartens the bishops were able to get a glimpse of life in China.

In interviews which are scheduled for publication in the October issue of INFO, the monthly publication of the Office for Human Development (OHD) of the Federation of Asian Bishops Conferences, the bishops described their impressions of China and the implications they see for themselves as Asian bishops.

Some of the bishops come from countries where poverty is a pervasive problem, yet all were impressed by the progress being made by the people of China in meeting their basic needs.

Archbishop Henry D'Souza of Cuttak-Bhubaneswar, India, who is the newly elected Secretary-General of the Federation of Asian Bishops Conferences (FABC) said, "It was a great experience to be in China. The State seems to have done a good job in providing basic necessities for people. We did not see anyone begging. Everyone seemed to have enough basic goods and there was enough money for some people to shop for certain luxuries like TV sets and washing machines."

Archbishop Soter Fernandez, of Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, who is the present chairman of the OHD which sponsored the tour, said, "For me this trip was like a dream come true. I am greatly impressed by what I have seen and heard."

Bishop Julio Labayen of Infanta in the Philippines, the first chairman of OHD, said, "On the relation between the political and economic system and its challenge to religion and the Church, it seems China has performed a miracle. China has a population of more than one billion, yet the impression I gathered is that there is no poverty like we see in Third World countries like the Philippines. I did not see a beggar on the street or elsewhere. Everybody seems to own a bicycle. People were relaxed and could enjoy their leisure time in gardens and parks. Another impression is there is no marked gap among the people in the way they dress and travel."

Bishop Vianney Fernando of Kandy, Sri Lanka, said, "It was a very rewarding trip." Fr. Desmond De Souza, the Executive Secretary of OHD said, "Our trip to China was really historic. A lot of my illusions about the regimentation of the Chinese people were shattered. There seems to be not only an improvement in the socio-economic situation in terms of people's basic needs for food, shelter and clothing being answered but also a great sense of nationalism and unity. The closer we came to Hong Kong the more I noticed the difference in clothes, behaviour and freedom. It seems that the clear ideological lines between capitalism and socialism have broken down."

While in China the bishops were told that the Church enjoyed a brief period of freedom after liberation but during the Cultural Revolution churches were closed, the public expression of religion and faith forbidden and Catholics - lay persons and clerics - were harassed and persecuted. Many priests were assigned to work in villages or factories.

The Chinese church leaders said that since 1978 they have had the freedom to open churches where people now come for mass, baptism, and religious instructions. The priests said that now they are also free to

visit sick people in government hospitals, to pray with them and anoint them, and that they are also allowed to preside at Catholic funeral services in public places.

One problem mentioned by all the church leaders is the aging clergy. To help solve this problem the Catholic church has been able to open six seminaries in recent years. The first seminary was open in Shanghai three years ago and now has 96 seminarians.

The bishops were impressed by the accomplishments of the church since 1978 and felt that they should maintain more contacts with the church in China.

Archbishop D'Souza said, "The Church appeared to be doing much to train new ministers and make personnel available to meet the spiritual needs of the people. There was zeal to maintain Church discipline and practices so as to appear Catholic. Also apparent was the desire, on the part of the Church leaders in China, to get our moral support and our prayers. They seemed to want to reach out to the real source of unity through our mediation. They expressed the desire that we should come back and see them again. I believe that the Church in China has a great desire for communion with the Universal Church. I think we should do whatever we can to ease the difficulties that have arisen due to certain facts of history. This is, I believe, one of the challenges to the FABC."

Archbishop Fernandez said, "I hope that what we have experienced, and will share with others, will have some effect in the future. I am sure people in authority will like to know more about what we have personally heard and seen. For the rest we leave it to the work of the Spirit. For me the great virtue today is hope. By the time we celebrate the Golden Jubilee of China's revolution I hope we have a Church in communion with the Universal Church, yet having something of its own uniqueness. I pray for a new era in the Church in Asia, especially in China."

Bishop Mansap stressed the need for the Asian bishops to help to build a dialogue between the Church in China and the rest of the Church. He said, "Before going to China we intended to learn how the Church in China coexists with the government, how it functions and propagates itself. Our visit not only taught us something but has made us committed to do something, to help the dialogue between the Church outside China and the Church inside China. We especially hope to do something so that the Vatican opens the dialogue with the Church in China."



At the top of Sheshan Basilica, L - R: Bp. Mansap; Archbp. H. D'Souza; Fr. Jiang Weilin, Director of Sheshan Seminary; Archbp. Fernandez; Bp. Labayen; Fr. Gu Pingxian, Sheshan Parish Priest, Bp. Fernando.

Bishop Vianney Fernando mentioned the existing division in the church in China and the success the church has had trying to live within the restrictions which still exist in China. He said, "It was a very rewarding trip. Even though we could not meet the "Underground Christians", by reading between the lines we reached a fairly good understanding of the situation. There are a lot of positive things about the Church in China. After 35 years of liberation the church had to accept a new China that was emerging and could not cut itself off from the socio-political reality and the strong sense of nationalism. In this context allegiance to the Vatican is interpreted as supporting foreign intervention in China. Catholics are trying to find a modus vivendi, a positive way of living within the present set-up without compromising the tenets of their faith."

Bishop Labayen said that although at present the Church in China is not united to the Vatican, the bishops had to search for more effective ways to encourage dialogue with the Church in China. He said, "There have been certain experiences with the Pope that have left a deep hurt in them and have been considered by them as an interference in their life. Yet we could sense an aspiration for Catholic unity. This was particularly evident in their joy of receiving us as Roman Catholic bishops and the open invitation for similar visits and the hope for better cooperation between us."

Bishop Labayen said that one of the implications of the trip is "that we have to discover more effective channels of communication. The efforts of the Vatican to establish diplomatic relations, while commendable, will take very long. We need other channels, like our visit, which can provide very informal contacts without any political implications or involvement."

While in China the Asian bishops described the various programs of the FABC and particularly noted the plan to have bishops live with poor people as one means to experience their lives and understand their problems. They asked if it would be possible to live with Chinese peasants and workers for a short period of time to better comprehend their problems and aspirations and were informed that such an experience could be arranged. Commenting on this invitation Bishop Labayen said, "We are also interested in an exposure program that would see China through the eyes of peasants and workers. We have seen China through the eyes of those who have suffered persecution and who are realizing a certain freedom, by reason of their position in the Church or on account of religion. We need to explore and search for new venues to different questions and perspectives. We need to explore the reality of China as the people themselves see it, and, in the process, to discover the real challenge to the Church today, if not to discover the "footprints", of the Lord of history among "His people"."