

An Interview with Bishop Anthony Li Du'an of Xi'an

Interviewed by Gianni Criveller, PIME

This interview appeared in the March 2004 issue of Mondo e Missione, an Italian monthly mission magazine published by the Pontifical Institute of Foreign Missions (PIME). It was translated into English by staff of Mondo e Missione, and is published here with permission.



***Bishop Li Du'an of Xi'an
(right) was interviewed by
Gianni Criviller (left)***

Q. – Your Excellency, let's begin with the issue of the papal primacy. What do you have to say about this?

A. – The Pope is the head of the Catholic Church. The apostolic nature of the institution of the Church consists in the fact that its governance descends from the apostles, starting with Peter as its first leader. The Pope has the right to govern and supervise all

Church activities, including the nomination of bishops. We will never deny that the Pope has the right to do this, since this is an essential element of our Catholic faith. The Pope's right to govern is real and true. However, in China, we have a religious policy which supports an independent and democratic administration of the Church. How can the two systems be harmonized? I think the Holy See and the Chinese government have the means to resolve this dilemma. The most urgent problem now involves selecting new bishops. Under today's circumstances we cannot go ahead and consecrate new bishops without government authorization. If the government is not against the candidate, we then proceed to present him to Rome for approval. Should the Pope not give his consent, then the candidate cannot be consecrated as bishop.

Q. – What is your opinion regarding diplomatic relations between China and the Holy See?

A. – I think both parties want to reestablish relations, and I believe that the Pope personally wants this. The greatest stumbling block is still the election and consecration of bishops. Indeed there are difficulties, yet it must also be said that great steps have been taken in the right direction. The Chinese government, for example, recognizes that the Pope has a primary role to play in the Catholic Church. We publicly pray for the Pope, and we have no reticence about saying that the Church is one, holy, Catholic and Apostolic. I feel confident in saying that there is ever less distance between the two.

Q. –In 2003, the Bishops Conference of the official Church approved three documents endorsing the principle of the democratic administration of Church affairs. What do you think about this?

A. – If these documents are in line with Catholic tradition, then we can accept them. Yet the role of the Church hierarchy must absolutely be preserved, just as Christ wanted. The power of the bishops, as successors of the apostles, is a true form of governing. Certainly each bishop has his limitations, and he must lead the Church as God's servant. Yet his power is real, not symbolic. No one can take the place of a bishop in leading the Church. Vatican

Council II promoted the participation of the laity in the Church. While a bishop must open himself up to and accept their contribution, yet he is still their leader. His role [as leader] can never be deprived of its significance!

Q. – What do you think about the role of the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association (CCPA)?

A. – Under the present circumstances we acknowledge the existence of the CCPA. If its whole purpose were to act as an association of Catholic faithful, then there would be no problem with it. However, the Patriotic Association cannot act above the Church. It must act within the Church, and answer to the bishop.

Q. – What do you have to say about the so-called “underground Church” in China?

A. – All Catholics in China are united under the same faith. As far as I know, the Pope respects both communities and urges us to move in the direction of reconciliation and unity. Some members of the underground Church say we have rebelled against the Pope. I belong to the “open Church,” but I am not rebellious, since in no way whatsoever do I deny the Pope’s primacy. We have the same faith, and we both support the Holy Father. Therefore we should join together under the traditional structure and doctrine of the Church.

Q. – Modernization seems to lead to secularization. How is the Church facing this challenge?

A. – Secularization is a universal challenge, one which now both the Church and China must face. Society is quickly moving toward [a culture based on] money and hedonism. We Christians, even priests, religious and bishops, live in society, and are therefore naturally influenced by it. This is especially true for young priests, who observe persons of their own age getting rich and living comfortable lives. On the contrary, the lives of priests in China are very hard. They lead lives of poverty, without most human

comforts and compensations. It is easy for them to become discouraged. The same holds true for young Sisters.

Q. – Do you believe this is one of the causes for the crisis in priestly and religious vocations?

A. – Indeed I do. Here in Xi'an, thank goodness, we have had only two cases of priests who left the priesthood. But there have been more in other parts of the country, where 5-10% abandon their vocations. Moreover, some priests find themselves in serious moral dilemmas. Yet it is understandable—especially in the poorest dioceses—because they lead very difficult lives. The Catholics can't help them, and the diocese cannot give them suitable salaries to live on. Thus they view their lives as miserable. The situation is even worse for nuns. The superficial cause of their crisis lays in their emotional instability. Yet it is clear that deep down the problem is linked to a lack of spirituality. If they had better spiritual formation, they would be better able to deal with their emotional and financial problems.

Q. – What is the situation like for new vocations?

A. – Indeed we have many priests in Shaanxi—260 for 260,000 Catholics—and we still are attracting many new vocations. However, after the boom years of the 1980s, since the 1990s vocations have progressively gone down in number, and some families even discourage their children from becoming priests. The situation is quite bad in the coastal provinces. In Shanghai, for example, there are hardly any vocations. Some of our seminarians went to be formed, and to serve in those dioceses.

Q. – Are seminarians and female religious receiving adequate formation?

A. – At our Xi'an seminary we have 16 priests in charge of formation and teaching. This is the highest number of seminary staff in all of China. But I must admit that our quality of teaching and formation is rather low. Another problem is the lack of spiritual directors, and therefore spiritual and moral discipline is not

practiced perfectly. Even the formation of our religious men and women is insufficient, in terms of allowing them to mature, as well as become psychologically and emotionally stable. We do all we can in Xi'an to educate and form our young seminarians and novice Sisters. Unfortunately, the quality of formation in other parts of the country is even worse than ours.

Q. – How can you tell whether someone has a real vocation or not?

A. – This is a serious problem for us. Many of our Catholics have traditional mindsets. Once someone enters the seminary or convent, the Catholics think they must become a priest or nun. Should they leave, it is a cause for embarrassment, or it is assumed that they did something wrong. Personal freedom is still not taken into much consideration. We don't have persons with proper, up-to-date skills to handle this serious issue. We have called in priests and Sisters from Taiwan and Hong Kong to help us. But it is not enough. There is an audiovisual tool made in Taiwan, which we use to help verify whether someone has a real vocation or not. After I show it to the seminarians and Sisters, I often talk to them about this topic. But much more is needed to help each one personally.

Q. – What do people say about female religious life?

A. – Unfortunately male chauvinism is still deeply embedded in both Chinese culture and in the Church. We still have priests and bishops who think that the nuns' purpose in life is to serve and obey them. Awareness of the dignity of the female religious life is still not widespread in the Chinese Church. When I speak to female religious, I start with a discussion of papal teachings. I urge them to maintain a deep sense of dignity and self-respect, and not to be at everyone's beck and call. I also encourage them to study hard and to become qualified to take on new roles and responsibilities. In this way people can see for themselves just how wonderful female religious are for the Church and society.

Q. – What kinds of social services is the Church involved in?

A. – Since 2002 our diocesan offices have been active in social services, which are supported by Misereor (an organization of the German Catholic Church sponsoring international cooperation). Our five full-time employees and three volunteer staff work quite well together. We sponsor small projects in poor villages throughout Shaanxi Province, like digging wells and irrigation systems, and supporting health and educational services (e.g. for hair-lip operations and building schools). We also provide care to orphans and relief to families following natural disasters. This is a new development for the Church in China. And I must say our diocese is at the forefront in this field.

Q. – Is the faith still being passed on in Catholic families?

A. – Once upon a time the faith was successfully passed on from parents to children. Today this still happens, but not as easily. Nowadays families need help in carrying out this duty, since they cannot tackle the dangers of secularization all by themselves. In recent years we have organized Catholic catechism courses for Chinese youth, as well as children's "summer camps." However government authorities have forbidden us to organize such activities in the future.

Q. – What are the prospects for evangelization in China?

A. – It is well known that many young people are attracted to the Christian faith. Even a certain number of intellectuals are open to Christianity.

Q. – In this field it seems that Protestants have a greater rate of "success" than Catholics. Is that true?

A. – Certainly. They are growing at a faster rate. They are more active than we are. They are required to "bear fruit," that is, to bring new members into their communities. And their members are warmly and enthusiastically welcomed, much more than in our Church. The teachings they present to new members are much simpler and more basic than ours. It is easier for them to understand and accept the faith. Moreover, they have greater contact with

students and intellectuals. These become enamored with a biblical faith, which does not require too many duties and obligations of them. However, we must be happy with their success. In one way or another the people hear the words of Christ. And when some of them want to deepen their faith, they end up appreciating the treasures of Catholic tradition and doctrine.

Q. – So it seems that the Catholic Church lacks a missionary spirit. Can you comment on this?

A. – There is a missionary spirit within the Chinese Catholic Church, and I can give you many examples. But our Church is still growing slowly, and we are incapable of satisfying every interest found in society. We will do a better job at it. I am optimistic. I can personally say that in the last 20 years there have been changes for the better. This is the best time to evangelize in China. People have never been so open to, and in favor of, the Christian faith.

Q. – China is undergoing a change in generation. Do you trust that young bishops will lead the Church well in the future?

A. – In ten years there will only be young bishops leading the Chinese Church. I won't be here, but I have well-founded hopes that they will do a good job. I believe that God will help them out.

Q. – What can the Church abroad, for example in Italy, learn from the Church in China?

A. – We are a Church struggling amid great difficulties, and we realize that we do not bear enough witness to Jesus Christ. We have nothing to offer the Church in Italy. We are still poor, and still need to receive help. I went to Italy in 1992. I visited the basilicas and the tombs of the apostles in Rome. Rome is so important. It witnessed the testimony of the apostles and is the home of early Christianity. This is the real glory of Italian Catholics, who have always kept their Catholic faith and have been ever-faithful to the Church and to the Pope. I hope we will continue to learn from the fidelity of Italian Catholics.