

A Glimpse at the Faces of Christ in China Today

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From May 10 to 15, the Office of Theological Concerns of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC) sponsored a theological colloquium on the outskirts of Bangkok on "Asian Faces of Christ." Among the papers was one written by Jonathan Tan Yun-ka, a Malaysian lay theologian who teaches at the Theology Department of Xavier University in Cincinnati, Ohio, USA.



The paper was entitled "Jesus, the Crucified and Risen Sage: towards a Confucian Christology," The writer, who could not attend the symposium, proposes a distinctive Confucian Christology that could help many East Asians, especially those people who have been influenced by the Confucian tradition, its views and values discover the significance of Jesus,

At just about the same time, I had been planning a trip to China, to visit various provinces, in order to renew contacts with old friends. The topic, "Faces of Christ" was already quite familiar to me, along with the question of the incarnation of the Christian faith into the local cultural context ("inculturation"), about which I have reflected on several past occasions. The approach for an incarnated and contextualized theology, starting from the living situations and conditions of people, appeals to me very much and, consequently, it has been the motivating force behind my visits and contacts with the Chinese world, although perhaps only subconsciously. Which faces of Christ could I contemplate in the Chinese Christians I was going to meet?

I was fully aware of the danger for everybody to confuse the face of Christ for the projection of the human will, such as the will to power, the power to control, to dominate, to manipulate and to punish; the will to conquer, the will for security in the present and in the next life. This type of face was visible in quite a few people: secretaries, guards and doorkeepers, who seeing me visiting churches and looking for people, inquired in a commanding way whom I wanted to see, and why, for what purpose, etc. I could see in them the face of those who feel strongly about keeping the situation under control, who are responsible for public order, who sense they need to be 'God's high commissioner responsible for the good of other people.'

Was this the true face of Jesus? This kind of encounter reminded me of the question raised by Bishop K.H.Ting, I had read about some time ago: "What kind of God do we believe in?"

We Christians are very concerned about whether or not people believe in God and Christ. If someone believes in God and Christ, we acknowledge him or her as one of us; otherwise that person is simply 'not one of our own'. As to the kind of God and kind of Christ that the person may believe in, we don't delve too closely into it... The God who is clearly revealed and demonstrated to us by Jesus is a God of love. In the person of Christ Himself, we see that God is love... It is this kind of Christ who causes us to believe that love is the greatest of God's attributes and that this is the most important truth of the universe... One cannot replace the Gospel of Christ with a 'Gospel of Doom'¹

A person cannot put on the welcoming and compassionate face of Christ at his/her own will and pleasure.

Fortunately I was able to contemplate more authentic faces of Jesus. The first of these I discovered while visiting a bishop of a large city. I was already familiar with his difficult living situation trying to balance the control of the public authorities, with the demands of his own and other local communities, as well as the

¹ "Believing in what kind of God?" by Bishop K.H.Ting in an article in Amity News Service (electronic version, 15 Dec. 1998).

needs of his own personal faith. Recently, he had also had to deal with a rather serious health problem. I was struck by his serenity and constant smile. Even when he told me about his difficulties and illness, his face seemed to me like the face of Jesus full of trust in the love of His Father, patient and peaceful. Jesus was really making him 'blessed' and helping him embrace the will of the Father with trust and joy.

On another day, I was able to meet a priest and a lay leader from the non-official Church. After our conversation, we went to a restaurant. The manager was the priest's Catholic friend. He greeted us warmly and joined us for the meal. But after few minutes he was called and, soon after, he came back looking worried. He said that some policemen had entered the restaurant: were they following us? He was not sure. But the face of the priest changed immediately. It was full of apprehension; he checked his bag and shredded a sheet of paper, and suggested a common version of the fact of our being together. The lay leader, also checked his bag and things, but his face remained firm, patient, and almost imperturbable. We ate quickly and decided to depart one by one, starting with me. I met with no trouble. In the evening, the lay friend called informing me that neither had they met with any difficulty; moreover, he was ready to continue helping me, by arranging for me to meet with another priest from the underground Church. And he did. We went together to another location, when suddenly once again the window-darkened car of the public security police appeared and made it impossible for us to go on with the plan. His face, though thoughtful, remained patient and calm. We separated.

That very evening at around 10:30 I heard a knock at my hotel room door. I quickly got up and opened the door: it was the layman with his wife who had come to tell me that they were ready and happy to have the previously disrupted meeting in their own home. I looked at their face: it was the same firm and resolute face of Jesus after, according to Luke (9,51), Jesus had set his face toward Jerusalem ready for everything. Jesus was certainly present in them, making them courageous and willing to carry out their mission, without fear, ready to meet with any kind of painful consequences. I felt deeply moved, but worried about them, I decided not to go through with the meeting

I could see the face of Christ struggling with the temptations in the desert when I met other priests, who were facing the dilemma between obedience to God and obedience to the human authorities, or in the perplexed expression on the face of a priest torn between his desire to go abroad to further his studies or to remain in his place to commit himself to the work of reconciliation between the official and unofficial church

A bishop, publicly expressing his sadness about one of his young priests who left the priesthood, reminded me of the face of Jesus when he announced the betrayal of Judas: "One of you will betray me" (Jn 13,21).

I still vividly remember the faces of a Chinese couple, friends of mine for many years: being already quite advanced in age and not very strong. They wanted in my presence and of other friends to settle and announce their last will and testament. I felt moved not only for the trust they were showing me, but for the serenity and calm on their faces. I knew the difficulties and pains they had suffered in the past; now they had put everything in the hands of God, and fully detached from earthly things, they were willing, like Jesus, to say "Everything is accomplished." (Jn 19,30)

Christ is present in China and living in his disciples, enabling them to continue his redeeming mission. They make Christ's face visible in today's society, the face of the compassionate and reconciling Shepherd, the peaceful and serene face of the Son of the Father and the Universal Brother, even in the midst of troubles and difficulties, the patient face of the Victim and Priest, bleeding from the cross but willing to offer his life for others. Certainly, he also shows the "face of the crucified and risen Sage", as suggested by Tan Yun-ka, in the above quoted paper, but unfortunately I found it only in the seminaries, where the intellectual interest for theological studies is strong, where Truth is still underlined according to its Western understanding of Doctrine and not in the Eastern perception of the Way.

My recent visit to China was like 'contemplating flowers from a galloping horse, but it was well worth it. Memories of the different 'faces of Christ' linger in my heart and strengthen my faith, with the assurance that the Lord is accompanying us on our journey: He is our Companion and Guide. He is our Way.