

## *Shining Stars in My Life*

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**John Tong**

*“Where is the child who has been born King of the Jews? For we observed his star at it rising, and have come to pay him homage.”*  
(Mt. 2:2)

**O**n January 6, 1966, the Feast of Epiphany, I was ordained to the priestly ministry. So the Feast of Epiphany, the celebration of the public manifestation of the promised Messiah to all the nations of the world, is a day of special significance for me every year. On that day, I unite myself with the Holy Father in Rome and with all our bishops, priests, Sisters, Brothers and lay people throughout the whole world as I offer my Mass, praying that we will find Christ, follow him, and become lights to the world ourselves.

What touches me most in the Gospel of the Epiphany is the *shining star* that led the Magi to find Jesus. Looking back on my life, I find a lot of *shining stars* in my life. My mother was the first in my family who accepted the Catholic faith. When she was studying in a high school run by religious Sisters, she was impressed by the good witness of the Sisters, in particular of the Principal, Sr. Mabel Anderson, FDCC, and she started to learn catechism. My mother adopted the name of Mabel, from the one who first showed her the face of Christ. Sr. Mabel Anderson was the *shining star* in the conversion of my mother and my family.

I was born in Hong Kong in 1939. When I was two years old, Japan invaded Hong Kong. My family fled to Macau. From there we went to Guangzhou, a city in southern China. I started to receive my primary school education in Guangzhou after World War II ended. Soon afterwards, the Communists started to gradually take over China. A large number of wounded soldiers and refugees fled

from the north to the south. I saw many wounded soldiers and refugees gather in front of the church every day. I also saw my parish priest, Fr. Bernard Meyer, MM, a foreign missionary, busy distributing medicine, relief goods and money to those needy strangers everyday. My mother and I quite often assisted him in the distribution of relief goods and leaflets on Catholicism. Moved by his all-embracing Christ-like compassion toward the wounded soldiers and refugees, I desired to become a priest like him in the future. My parish priest was the *shining star* in my priestly vocation.

After studying at the minor seminary in Macau and the major seminary in Hong Kong, I was sent to Rome to study at the Pontificio Collegio Urbano de Propaganda Fide. There were more than 400 seminarians there at that time. Our graduating class of 1966 had 69 seminarians. We came from 27 different countries. I had a wonderful time with them. We were like a family. It was a manifestation of the Catholicity of the Church. They were God's gifts to me. We were supposed to be ordained before Christmas 1965. Everything was prepared. We started our retreat in preparation for our ordination. To our surprise, the Rector came one day to announce that the Holy Father himself would like to ordain us on January 6, 1966. It was God's providence that things happened this way. By moving our ordination from Christmas to the Epiphany, we were reminded that we should be witnesses to the whole world. After graduation, before leaving the Collegio, we also stopped for a courtesy call to Cardinal Agagianian, who was then the Prefect of the Sacred Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples. He gave each of us a cross, a sign of our mission to be *shining stars* to the world, reminding us that we should care not only for our mission in our own diocese, but also for all missions in the whole world. The many people I came in contact with in Rome, including the Holy Father, the Prefect of the Sacred Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, my superiors, professors and classmates, were the *shining stars* for me from the time I studied in Rome until today.

After returning to Hong Kong, I was assigned to teach at the seminary. I have also been blessed since 1980 for being assigned to a ministry concerned with the Catholic Church in China. This

assignment has enabled me to fulfill my love and missionary service to the Church in China.

The Church in China is very much alive in spite of all the oppression she has undergone. The number of Catholics actually increased from three million in 1949 to over ten million today. Many new Catholics are the fruit of the suffering and persecution of the faithful Catholics in China. These faithful Catholics are *shining stars* in my priestly ministry.

In his Apostolic Letter, *At the Beginning of the New Millennium*, promulgated on Epiphany 2001, our Holy Father suggested five traditional ways to deepen our spirituality: (1) to pray for a certain period each day, (2) to participate actively in the Eucharistic Celebration, (3) to receive the Sacrament of Reconciliation periodically, (4) to depend on God's grace in all of our efforts, and (5) to listen to and to proclaim the Word of God (Chapter 3). I will illustrate how the Catholics in China witness to the power of these five ways in their lives, and thus have become *shining stars* in my priestly life.

*Regarding prayer:* Many imprisoned Catholics had no prayer book or rosary and yet they were faithful to their daily prayers and the recitation of the Rosary by using their fingers. This fidelity to prayer gave them the support they needed to endure the difficulties of prison. The late Archbishop Dominic Deng Yiming of Guangzhou spent 22 years in prison for his faith. He told me that during those years, he prayed not only by speaking, but also by singing. He sang hymns especially at Christmas time. If he heard an echo in the dark, he knew that there were Catholics singing back to him. Sometimes he sang a Latin hymn and heard someone else sing it in the distance, meaning that there were other priests in the same prison. They supported each other by singing in prayer. By his example, I am even more convinced that prayer is essential for my priestly life. This is why I enjoy reciting Psalm 23, and the reason why I chose "The Lord is My Shepherd" as my episcopal motto.

*Regarding the Eucharist:* I want to tell you the story of a Chinese priest, Fr. Joseph Li of Meixian Diocese in Guangdong Province. Shortly before the Communists took over in China, Fr. Li

returned from his studies in Rome. He had gotten a Doctorate in Theology there. Political turmoil soon followed his return. Fr. Li lost his freedom by being sentenced to a labor camp. However, he never gave up celebrating Mass daily, even if he could only do so on his bed at midnight. For a time, relatives of the inmates were allowed to bring food to them, and a visitor could also apply to stay overnight with the inmate. Fr. Li's cousin went to visit him. It was a very emotional reunion. By the end of the day, Fr. Li asked his cousin if he would like to attend Mass. Of course he did! He couldn't recall how long it had been since he last attended Mass and received Holy Communion. It was a big 300-bed dormitory. Fr. Li and his cousin went to bed, and let down the mosquito net. They waited until all the others had gone to sleep. At midnight, Fr. Li got up. His cousin made his confession. Then Fr. Li took out a small bundle from under his pillow, untied it, and there was everything he needed for Mass. He began to say Mass. They prayed in whispers for fear of waking up other people. They both burst into tears at Holy Communion. Daily Eucharist was the source of strength that helped Fr. Li overcome his difficulties in the labor camp. Fr. Li's example often comes to my mind and is a source of strength when I feel tired while celebrating Mass.

*Regarding the Sacrament of Reconciliation:* I can cite the example of two deceased churchmen. One was Archbishop Dominic Deng Yiming of Guangzhou, the same man who spent 22 years in prison. In his *Memoirs* the archbishop wrote that before his imprisonment, every time when he was threatened with the possibility of being taken away, he would go to the church to pray and to go to confession. After his release from prison, his first thought was to go to confession. Another example was Archbishop Stanislaus Lokuang of Taipei, who lived to be over 90. He told his seminarians in a talk that he was in the habit of going to confession every other week. He credits this practice for his fidelity to his priesthood.

I heard that in the days of the Soviet Union, some Catholics went to the tomb of a bishop or priest and confessed their sins to the dead clergyman. Similarly, in some Catholic villages in northern China, during the long period when the laity were without a priest,

the catechist placed the priest's stole in the confessional box, and the laity went inside one by one and voiced their sins aloud. From such examples, I have learned the value of confession.

*Regarding the primacy of grace:* After the Cultural Revolution, many Catholics were given back their destroyed church buildings, seminaries and convents. With few spiritual books, personnel, little or no finances and other related materials, they fearlessly took up the work of the church again, depending only on God's grace. In Xianxian Diocese in Hebei Province, with the government's permission, a Catholic hospital was officially opened for service in May 1985. Its staff of 18 included 6 retired doctors, 8 nurses, and a laboratory assistant. There were 9 beds in the ward. In a year's time, it had already treated 7000 patients, including 200 in-patients. The hospital continuously receives many letters and plaques of appreciation from patients and their families. Even the government has openly expressed its appreciation. The government has also pointed out in its official newspaper that the hospital charges very low fees, opens long hours, makes every effort to care for the sick, and insists on delivering medicine to the patient's home. In fact, the purpose of opening this hospital was to provide a place for many young Sisters who had taken their first vows to live their communal life, and at the same time to gain a good reputation for the Church. Nevertheless, as a result, not only non-Catholics in that region, but also the government has words of praise: *See how united the Catholics are! With Catholics, nothing is impossible!* For me, this is a strong witness to reliance on God's grace.

*Regarding the Word of God:* The famous Indian Jesuit, Fr. Anthony De Mello, told us this story: A priest always prepared his homily well. On the first Sunday in his new assignment, he preached enthusiastically to 100 people. On the second Sunday, only 50 people came, but the priest still preached with great fervor. On the third Sunday, only 20 people came, yet the priest put his best effort into his homily. Then he spent long hours in the coming days, preparing hard as always. On the fourth Sunday, only one person was in the pews, yet the priest maintained his enthusiasm. On the fifth Sunday, no one came to church, yet the priest spoke as loudly

as if the church were full. Afterwards, someone asked him, "Why did you go through all that trouble?" He answered, "I must preach first for myself."

Fr. De Mello's inspiring message finds echoes in the hearts of the Catholics in China. During the Cultural Revolution, neither Catholics nor Protestants were allowed to keep their Bibles. After the Cultural Revolution, in order to nourish themselves with the Word of God and to share it with others, many of them recited biblical passages from memory and wrote them down. In recent years in the Ningbo Diocese in Zhejiang Province, all the priests are very united and fervent. They gather together to pray when they have important things to discuss, and resolve their problems together in light of the Word of God. They also organize many Bible groups, and as a result the number of Catholics is steadily growing. For example, in one parish, there were only 200 Catholics a few years ago, but now there are more than 1000. For me, this is another inspiring witness.

In a word, my small pastoral efforts for the Church in China offer me many benefits for my spiritual life. These *shining stars* make my priestly life possible. There have been many other *shining stars* in my life, and I am sure there will be many more, which could be introduced in a future article. Permit me to end with a prayer:

*Jesus, You are the Light of all peoples. Please help me and every Catholic to become shining stars enlightening everyone in the world, and to help the whole human race to recognize You as the one, true Lord. May we be united as one, and become one great family enjoying Your love and Your peace. Amen.*