

The Right Place at the Right Time

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After a four-year stint teaching in our Maryknoll seminaries, a six-year experience of mission in the mountains of Taiwan, and a 13-year assignment on development and fund-raising work which included four years as our Society's vocation director, I was about to celebrate my half-century birthday and wondered if I'd ever get the chance to continue mission and Chinese studies. I got my chance, but Fr. John Cioppa, the present business manager of our Holy Spirit Study Centre, encouraged me to come to Hong Kong instead of returning to Taiwan. That was in 1979, and as he said, "China is opening up and you can use your Mandarin language learned in Taiwan. Why don't you join Fr. Peter Barry (present editor of the English section of *Tripod*)? He'll be coming from Taiwan to help Fr. John Tong (the present Auxiliary Bishop of Hong Kong), and Fr. Angelo Lazzarotto, PIME, to open a



The four founders at the early days of the Holy Spirit Study Centre: (from left to right) Fr. Lazzarotto, Fr. Wurth, Fr. (now Bishop) Tong, and Fr. Barry

research and study center.” I said that it didn’t make any difference to me so long as I could get back into active mission work, but I assured him that my Mandarin language ability was very limited. Peter, my former student and the only person among the three founders that I knew, and I showed up at the same time.

We helped Fr. Tong look for a building that would accommodate five or six members of mission groups and several lay personnel. The few properties that seemed adequate for our purposes were far beyond the financial commitment that the diocese was prepared to make, although at the asking price it would have made a tremendously successful investment as it has turned out. So we began to work out of, and meet in, our respective residences. At this time we started a monthly Ricci Study Group to exchange ideas we had learned about the Chinese Church scene, which is still continuing today, although the group has had a steady transition of members. In these 25 years, probably well over 500 different participants have attended these meetings, but the Centre staff has formed the core of the group. Finally Bishop John Baptist Wu (later made a Cardinal) suggested that we take over one floor of Holy Spirit Seminary in Aberdeen. This suited us fine and we began to prepare for the extensive renovation that needed to be done before the space would become user-friendly as a research center. Originally we planned to have the clergy involved in the project live and work together as a community, but we quickly gave up this idea as more and more communities became interested in having one or more of their members become associated with the Centre.

What we did not envision was that the split between the official and unofficial segments of the Church in China would spill over into Hong Kong, and make all of us researchers *persona-non-grata* with some of the conservative clergy, religious, and laity of the Hong Kong Diocese. We certainly understood their concerns, but we did not take a confrontational approach to their mistrust. We went about our work and accepted criticism, confident that we were doing the right thing in trying to act as a bridge between the splintered groups in the Church in China, as well as between the Chinese Church and the Universal Church. Our main goal from the very beginning has been to become a factor in bringing about the reconciliation of all concerned. It’s hard to say if

and when we were in any way successful in our efforts, but I think that today most people inside and outside the Church of China would see us as sincerely trying to move the process of reconciliation along. We're happy with that, and in the meantime more and more members of missionary communities have seen our Centre as a place for them to work out of. Most contribute some work at the Centre while using our facilities and materials to get information back to their religious communities and countries.

One of the many strong qualities of Bishop John Tong has been to welcome many individuals to use the Centre as their basis of research, while showing appreciation for whatever they can do to enhance the goals of the Centre and giving them complete freedom to do their own thing. Some write for the Centre's publications, do translation work, travel to China to visit the areas where their communities worked in the past to see what they can do to assist the local Chinese Church personnel working there now, or simply share the results of their travels and research with their religious communities. There are presently six missionary priests and one Sister who have an office at the Centre and spend most of their time there. Five lay people form a full-time support team as researchers, computer programmers, or secretaries who run the office and oversee many funding projects for donors from principally European, Asian, and North American countries. Most of the present people have been with us for many years and we do have a good time working and socializing together. We are happy with the spirit and direction of the Centre, and are pleased to be part of it. The diocese of Hong Kong gives us an opportunity to work together with office and library facilities. It's an ideal mission cooperative effort that challenges us both intellectually and spiritually. It would be hard to find a better venue or situation to develop a well-rounded approach to and impact on the Chinese Church's relation with the Universal Church.

I think the Centre's establishment has been in the right place at the right time. Hong Kong is strategically located and is a real crossroads for traffic to and from China. It's a free society where discussions can be openly conducted in a friendly atmosphere of sharing news with and about China. Countless tour and study groups have stopped at the Centre on their way to China to receive

a briefing about some of the realities in the Chinese Church and society. At first even the Centre staff could travel to China only with a tour group, but as China opened more and more to tourists and study groups, even these visiting groups could enter China on their own without being accompanied by members of the Centre staff. After trips to China and visits with members of the Church there, many of these groups arrange for de-briefings with members of the Centre staff, just to see if their impressions gained during their short visits are correct. As part of China since 1997, it's much easier to travel to the Mainland via Hong Kong.

The Centre's work has gradually shifted from having its members visit China to see the renewal of the Church there to assisting this same Church in many different ways by supplying short-term teachers and serving as an avenue for funding of some Church projects by Church groups from outside Hong Kong and China. We have also enabled the Church in China to share its ideas by inviting scholars there to contribute articles for our publications. The Centre has also been able to find scholarships for some deserving Church personnel to study abroad. So Hong Kong and the Holy Spirit Study Centre have proven to be a most advantageous place for facilitating communication between China and overseas Churches. Bishop John Tong, Fr. Peter Barry, and myself, three of the four founders of the Centre, are still involved in its work, while the fourth founder, Fr. Angelo Lazzarotto, has been on assignment by his PIME community to Italy for the past ten years or so. Ours has been an exciting and an enjoyable venture in our relations with and service to China. I have felt privileged to be a small part of this experience. I feel that the Holy Spirit Study Centre and myself have been in the right place at the right time.