

# *The Church in China: 25 Years of Renewal*

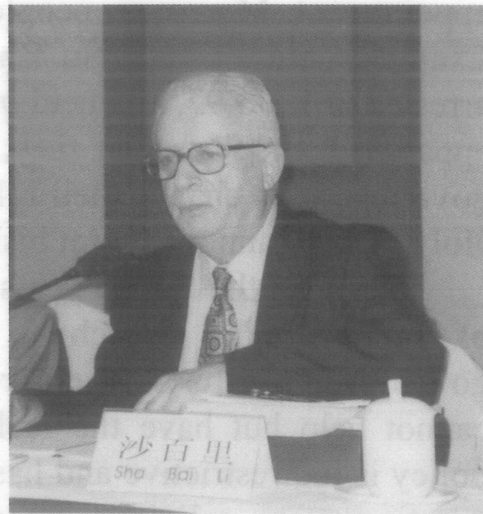
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*Jean Charbonnier, MEP*

*Translated from the French by Betty Ann Maheu, MM*

*A condensation of an article by Jean Charbonnier, which first appeared in the supplement to Eglise d'Asie, No. 403, September 2004, translated and published with permission.*

**I**nformation on the Catholic Church in China in the press and on TV can give Europeans [and other] readers a rather negative impression of the situation of religion in that country. The on-going arrests of bishops and priests, and the relatively frequent destruction of churches, give the feeling that Christians in China are always being persecuted.



The interest of many readers in everything that reveals dissidence within a totalitarian regime helps to create an image of an ideal underground church loyal to Rome, confronted by a patriotic church in league with the Chinese Communist Party.

These images that haunt the mind of many Europeans [Westerners] need to be corrected. Let us say this clearly right from the start. There are not two churches in China. Neither is there a “patriotic” church. There is only a Catholic Patriotic Association charged to make links with governmental organs and to assure respect within the Church toward the official political line.

The conflicts that continue to set the underground and official church members against each other are obviously to be regretted, if they go as far as to be mutually exclusive. This is a

counter-witness, a negation of the Gospel of mutual love announced by Christ. On the other hand, this jumbling of diverse orientations is significant of the Christian message that requires at one and the same time a presence in the world and a retreat from the world. The underground members uphold the primacy of faith and fidelity to the Church. The members of the official church make an effort to integrate into their society and its culture. They have the possibility of radiating Christian values within the mass of non-believers.

### **The tremendous effort of the new generation**

The Protestants also have their problems, but they are less dependent on their pastors and less quarrelsome about canonical regulations. They center their message on accepting Jesus as their Savior more than on the laws of the Church. Their hymns are simpler and closer to the life of the people. Their traditional churches are also under the patriotic movement of the Three Autonomies, but their evangelists, supported by America and Taiwan, show an extraordinary energy, much more dynamic than the witness of the underground Catholics. They are also the victims of police raids on their many unofficial meeting places, and their leaders must pay fines or go to prison. In 1950 the number of Protestants was much lower than that of Catholics. Today they are much more numerous and better known by the people. Some Catholic bishops appreciate their evangelical success and wish that their faithful would show as much dynamism.

This is the case, in fact, in a number of regions where a new generation of young priests and religious give evidence of a bold dynamism along various lines in the life of the Church. The young priests, for their part, have in a remarkable way succeeded in putting into effect the liturgical reforms of the Second Vatican Council. Still it was only in 1982 in the seminary in Shanghai that they began to discover the Conciliar documents. Mass and the Sacraments had already been celebrated in Chinese in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore since 1965. In China all celebrations were still in Latin. The priest celebrated in a low voice, with his back to the people, while the faithful chanted their prayers in old Chinese, as had been done for three centuries.

Christianity today is no longer considered as a foreign

religion. The Communist regime has done it a great favor in making it one of China's approved religions with totally Chinese personnel. Furthermore, Christianity is seen as linked to modernity with its appeal to the individual conscience, and respect for the human person. Certain intellectuals such as You Xilin of Shaanxi even think that Christianity is the indispensable antidote for the moral deviations caused by modernization. Certain Marxist theoreticians have even been able to make a reinterpretation of the Marxist and Leninist views by showing that these pillars of Communism did not always describe religion as the "opium of the people," and that the Chinese Communist Party has led the people astray by ignoring the positive support that religion can give to social life, culture, and morality. But the old guard is vigilant and forbids cadres from believing in religion. The view remains that scientific and politically well-educated persons must not get involved with religious illusions. Is this really a Marxist conviction or more simply the staying power of the old Confucian humanism—*jing er yuan zhi* (respecting spirits but keep oneself at a distance).

Young women religious are even more numerous than young priests. There are now some 40 novitiates throughout the country. Since most of the Sisters come from poor peasant families, they have often not even completed secondary school. They belong to local congregations recently founded by Chinese bishops or to international congregations such as the Franciscan Missionaries of Mary, The Helpers of the Holy Souls, the Presentation Sisters, the Sisters of the Sacred Heart, the Sisters of the Holy Spirit, etc. They are not permitted to belong to international congregations with a superior general abroad. Their superior, in fact, is the bishop of the diocese or often the local pastor in the parishes where they are sent. The authority of their religious superior is in reality much diminished, and the tasks given to them are often those of humble servants. Bishops spend most of their money on the construction of churches and very little on the livelihood and the formation of religious. However, a certain number of religious woman have been trained as doctors and nurses to meet some social needs. Religious coming from Taiwan or Hong Kong have also helped them better organize themselves and better understand the spiritual aspects and the requirements of their vocation. The leaders of the Catechetical



Commission in Hong Kong have also gone through the country orientating young religious in how to use more lively methods in their catechetical instructions, rather than the simple repetition of prayers and questions and answers.

Unlike many priests who depend largely on foreign money, or receive funds for the construction of churches or for enterprises linked to the church, religious women have a more independent spirit and are less influenced by foreigners. They manage to support themselves, thanks to their administration of kindergartens or clinics. They also display independence by wearing slacks, which are more suited than long dresses for their daily work. In contrast to the priests who waste a lot of energy on the “official/underground” conflict, women religious tend to keep an open mind towards all. Being officially recognized at the diocesan level, they regret the discrimination against those communities who work in an underground milieu. But well aware of the political constraints, they avoid confrontation with the government authorities. Having no power whatsoever in the ecclesiastical hierarchy, the government pays them very little attention. In this way, they enjoy more liberty and time to give themselves over to various activities that drive the Church out of its closed world and open it up to non-Christians. This flexibility helps reduce political interference into the ordinary activities of the Church, and indirectly helps the Sisters survive under the pressure of the regime. Close to the local families through the children, the sick, and the elderly, the Sisters frequently visit their homes. With courage and devotion they are once again taking up the role that the “Chinese Virgins,” founded in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, had played for over two centuries. Their ministry with the women and children is indispensable to the vitality of the Chinese Church.

### **Solidarity with the Universal Church**

China’s openness to the world during these 25 years has allowed for religious encounters and exchanges. These have surely contributed toward sustaining the morale of the [Chinese] Church that felt itself to be in a precarious situation because of its isolation. Thanks to the initiative of the Bishop of Shanghai and the support of some missionaries familiar with China, during the last twenty years some 100 priests, seminarians, and religious have been able to



pursue their theological studies in America, Europe, and the Philippines. For a number of reasons, these sojourns abroad have not been without difficulty: inadequate formation due to the lack of religious studies since the reopening of seminaries in 1983; a gap between the fervor of the traditional Catholic communities and the very secularized Church life in the West; the intellectual conflict between the Chinese way of thinking, which is always attentive to the harmony among human beings and between their natural and social environment, and Western logic that expresses itself in an abstract and critical way. On the other hand, whatever may be the success of their studies, the students of theology abroad experience a more reflective faith in a secularized milieu without complacency toward religion. In this way they will discover more the support that Christian faith gives to human life, and are prepared to witness this in the materialistic Chinese society, which is developing today.

Professors of theology, liturgy, and Scripture, able to teach in Chinese, have been invited from Taiwan, Hong Kong, and other places to give courses in China's seminaries to make up for the lack of teaching personnel, and introduce the reforms encouraged by the Second Vatican Council. One of these professors, of Shanghai origin, was the Salesian priest Zen Ze-Kiun, who was able to teach philosophy in Sheshan Seminary in Shanghai as early as 1989. Fr. Zen became Coadjutor Bishop of Hong Kong in 1996, and Bishop of Hong Kong in 2002. He has continued to keep people informed on the Catholic position in matters of personal and social morality. Favoring democratic progress in Hong Kong, since the return of Hong Kong to Chinese sovereignty on July 1, 1997, he has aroused some anxiety in Beijing, which does not wish to see a democratic foothold developing on its doorstep. Forbidden to visit the Mainland for several years, he was nonetheless allowed to spend a few days in Shanghai at the end of April 2004 to have a reunion with his family and to make a pilgrimage to the Marian Shrine in Sheshan.

Young priests returning to China after studying in America or Europe face the problem of how to reconcile what they have learned in a more liberal environment, with what they can accomplish under the authority of an old conservative spirit in the Church, or under the many constraints of the political order. Their

confreres, who have remained in the country, fear that they will take over the most interesting positions in the diocese. Some of the newly returned have been unable to absorb the shock and have left the priesthood. Most of them, however, render great service, often as seminary professors or seminary superiors. A few of them display great energy and launch promising initiatives. In Beijing, Father Peter Zhao Jianmin, with a doctorate from the University of Louvain, launched a course of initiation to Christian culture for about 40 academics, who have already mastered a foreign language. The ten professors he has hired are young priests who have graduated from schools in America. In Shijiazhuang, the capital of Hebei Province, Father Zhang Shijiang, educated in the Philippines, is in charge of *Faith Press*; he publishes the newspaper on the Internet, and he has set up a social service agency analogous to Europe's *Secours Catholique*. In Kunming, in the southwest of the country, the young priest Chen Kaihua, who has not yet benefited from studies abroad, has nonetheless become well known in Chinese academic circles. In 1998, during a colloquium in Hangzhou, he presented a bibliographical listing of Chinese Catholic works published during the last three hundred years. In 2003, while carrying out his regular pastoral duties, he organized a photography exhibit on the life of the people in Yunnan Province. This exhibit attracted many people and created a bond with the Christian minority in the province.

On the national level, from March to December 2003, at the major seminary in Daxing, about 40 young priests who had been ordained for 10 years participated in a year-long program of on-going formation. The people most qualified within China's Catholic Church are progressing towards a level of competence that will assure the formation of priests, religious and lay leaders locally. Hopefully they will be able to dialogue with non-Christian intellectuals from the Academies of Science or from universities, who are doing specific research in Christian theology and the history of Christianity.

On the academic level, research, publications, and many exchanges are taking place especially during colloquiums organized either in China or abroad. The history of East-West relations constitutes a special element at these gatherings. The Chinese

researchers who are working on the contribution of the missionaries of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries are sometimes embarrassed by their lack of knowledge of Latin, French, and European languages other than English. They would like to be able to place a few experts in stages in European Institutes for about two years, enabling them to consult the archives of the missionary institutes. The Catholic Institutes in Belgium, Germany, and Italy have supported this effort. France could do more along these lines given the extent of the activities of its missionaries in China for over three hundred years: Jesuits, Foreign Missions of Paris, Lazarists, etc. It is true that the considerable expansion of missionary activity during the colonial period tends to obfuscate the richness of exchanges with China during more peaceful periods. China's researchers tend to study to a lesser extent the history of Christianity in China during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. The Marxist interpretation of history still makes it impossible to study certain subjects objectively. Therefore, Chinese professors of culture or comparative religions have grouped together to translate a great number of works of contemporary Western theologians. In European theology they obtain a sense of the drama of history, of human misery, of the tragedy in human redemption, human liberation from slavery to evil, many elements that seem lacking in the Chinese view of the world.

The idea of belonging to a Church does not seem to worry those intellectuals that we classify as *cultural Christians*. But personal exchanges between foreign believers and the Chinese have increased, thanks to service rendered to China by certain missionary societies. For example, thanks in this regard to the Holy Spirit Study Centre in Hong Kong, and thanks to the *Guide to the Catholic Church in China* published in Singapore since 1986 in both English and Chinese. The sixth edition of the *Guide* has been amplified with the addition of addresses of more churches, more than a thousand telephone numbers, and the E-mail addresses for the most important Catholic centres. The Internet is also a medium of exchange, which during these last years has developed at a tremendous rate. The Chinese Catholic sites are today online either in Shijiazhuang or at the Christian Study Centre at Tao Fung Shan in Hong Kong, also at the UCANews, etc. Information on the present day life of the Church in China is diffused in French by the



bi-weekly *Eglises d'Asie*, in German by the monthly review *China Heute*, in English by the trimestrial review *China Study Project*, in Italian and other languages by *Fides*, the review *AsiaNews*, and the bulletin *Mondo et missione*.

The Chinese proverb “*bai wen bu ru yi jian*” (to hear something 100 times is not worth as much as seeing it once) has convinced many Westerners to make a trip to China. Christian visitors have been able to participate in local Chinese Masses and to meet bishops, priests, and laity. These encounters introduce a missionary aspect into tourist and commercial circles. After 25 years of progressive openness, the Christians of China are always comforted by the friendly and supportive presence of Christians from other countries.

For several years now the Catholic communities of China are coming out more and more from the poor villages to improve their lives in professional urban centers. Christians who have the means to take a trip to Europe are eager to make pilgrimages to the great shrines of Lourdes, Lisieux, Rome, etc. More and more Chinese tourists visit the Cathedral of Notre Dame in Paris, the Church of the Madeleine and Sacred Heart. However, Chinese visitors could benefit from the use of explanatory guidebooks in Chinese.

The thousands of Chinese students without any particular religion who come to study for several years in European universities merit a similar welcome, and dioceses need to provide information services for them. In France some priests have recognized the importance of this task, e.g. in Lyon, Angers, Brest, Poitiers, Pau, Grenoble, and of course Paris. Even without knowing the language, these priests can call on some Chinese volunteers who speak French, procure missals, Bibles, catechisms and various works imported to Paris from Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore, Shanghai, etc. Since many of these students hope to be instructed in the Christian faith, it is important to set up a special catechetical program for them since their questions and interests differ often from those enrolled in the local catechumenate. Whatever might be their motivation, the Chinese approach to the Gospel is based on a foundation of friendship, respect and mutual trust, and on prayer, liturgy, sacred hymns, and the Little Way of St. Therese. The

relation between science and faith can constitute a problem for some of them, perhaps because of the effect of the education received in Chinese schools. They are nonetheless less allergic to religions than a great number of Europeans. Their aesthetic vision of the world, their sense of poetry and of symbols are some psychological assets for deepening the meaning of human existence.

To conclude briefly, let us mention that the present process of globalization spurred on by economic imperatives must also bear a human, moral, social, and cultural aspect. From this point of view, a richer dialogue between the Chinese world and the West can be very important to establish an ethical base recognized worldwide. Mutual openness and means of communication have never been so advanced; it is only our human and Christian weaknesses that prevent us from reaping all the benefits.

### Correction

In *Tripod* No. 137 (Summer 2005), on page 24, second paragraph, "...the Chinese martyrs, the African Canossian Sister Josephine Bakhita, and two South Americans" should read "*...the Chinese martyrs, the African Canossian Sister Josephine Bakhita, and two foundresses of religious orders of Sisters, namely Mother Katherine Drexel of Philadelphia, USA, and Mother Maria Josefa Sancho de Guerra, a Basque.*"