

## *The Catholic Church in China*

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**M**ark, a Russian journalist, comes every year to the Holy Spirit Study Centre in Hong Kong for an update on the Catholic Church in China. This year he arrived right after the election of Pope Benedict XVI. “What is your opinion?” he asked, “Will Benedict XVI accomplish more than John Paul II in terms of Sino-Vatican relations?” I realized that he, like many others, thought of Sino-Vatican relations as the solution to the many challenges confronting the Catholic Church in China. Diplomatic relations would be helpful, but they constitute only one element in the overall well-being of the Church in China.



How large is the Catholic Church in China today? The Catholic population is estimated at 12 million. Active dioceses number 116 and Catholic churches number over 6,000. There are 103 bishops, over 3,000 priests and more than 5,000 Sisters.

Opinions on the present situation in China range from uncritical optimism to unmitigated pessimism. David Aikman, in his book *Jesus in Beijing* (2003), paints a glowing picture of Christianity in China. He is convinced that religion is already having a significant impact on politics, education and economics. He substantiates his argument with statistics. In 1949, he points out, the number of Catholics was four million; today there are 12 million. He reports an even more impressive increase for Protestants, from one million in 1949 to the present estimate of some 70 million.<sup>1</sup> From these figures he extrapolates that within 30 years, China could become the largest Christian nation ever in the history of Christianity.

This shift would effect a revolution of such proportions that a new Christianity would emerge, changed forever. The kinds of Christianity that Aikman describes as thriving, however, have virtually no place in Catholicism. His optimism leads him even to suggest that many Muslims will become Christians, achieving what the Christian world has never been able to accomplish before.<sup>2</sup> Such optimism belies the reality. Catholics in China are still only about 1 percent of the population, and they are for the most part, poor, uneducated rural people. The journey of Catholicism in China will be uphill into the distant future.

Other scholars, such as Gianni Criveller, maintain that although the country is changing rapidly along economic and social lines, it has not changed for over 20 years in matters of politics and religion.<sup>3</sup> Exponents of this view maintain that the last significant changes regarding religion came under Deng Xiaoping, with Document 19, March 31, 1982, and Article 36, April 12, 1982, on the freedom of religious belief in the New Constitution. Even the

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<sup>1</sup> David Aikman, *Jesus in Beijing*, (Washington, D.C., Regnery Publishing, Inc., 2003) pp. 290-292.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 12.

<sup>3</sup> Gianni Criveller, "China and the Catholic Church, The Country is Changing; but is the Regime?" *Tripod*, No. 129, Summer 2003, pp. 26-36.

three documents on codifying the Church in China of March 2003,<sup>4</sup> and new “Regulations on Religious Affairs” (Decree No. 426), which came into effect on March 1, 2005, have signaled very little in the way of new openness and change.<sup>5</sup>

Taking the short view of the present situation, one might be tempted to agree with the less optimistic scholars. If you take the long view, you are likely to acknowledge that religion has made considerable strides since the early 1980s.

To assess where the China Church is today, it is necessary to look at its bishops, priests, Sisters and laity.

## **The Church in China**

Since January 2005, at least one elderly Chinese bishop has died each month. There are presently 70 bishops active in the open church and 48 active in the underground. Eighteen underground bishops are in some form of detention. The bishops who have spent most of their lives in prisons or labor camps will soon be a memory—valiant men who gave their all for Christ. Their passing will bring an end to a traumatic period in the history of the China Church, and usher in a period of unparalleled change, whose dimensions are not yet clear.

The youngest bishops in the world today are in China. They are a sign of newness and life. The older priests, who suffered long, have been cautious men. The new bishops are more willing to take risk. They are eager to bring the Church into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Many of them, educated abroad, are more tolerant of their counterparts in the underground church, and more ecumenical in outlook. The future of the China Church is in their hands.

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. *Tripod*, No. 130, Autumn 2003, for an in-depth analysis of the three new documents.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. *Tripod*, No. 136, Spring 2005.

## **Religious Sisters in China**

Since 1991 I have routinely visited the religious Sisters throughout China, and carefully observed the evolution of religious life for women. In general the religious Sisters are very poor. Their accommodations are often nothing more than abandoned seminaries. But if much of the life of the Church depends on the religious Sisters, one way to assess the situation of the Church is to look at what has happened with the Sisters since China's re-opening.

Religious Sisters have come a long way. Today, there are two centers for religious formation with a full contingent of young women every year studying various aspects of religious life. Major superiors conferences have been set up in several areas of the country. Sisters from Hong Kong and Taiwan give the religious sisters retreats and workshops. Members of Hong Kong's catechetical office have offered them catechetical training. Sisters from the mainland come to Hong Kong every summer for special courses on religious life. A good number of young mainland religious Sisters have studied or are studying abroad. Some Sisters are now doctors working in clinics all over China. Hundreds of elderly people are in the care of young religious. Lepers are finding hope through the loving service of religious Sisters, and a significant number of Sisters are being trained to minister to AIDS patients.

Nonetheless, religious Sisters still have a long way to go. Many need better religious formation and academic training. This is especially important as young university students discover Christianity and seek answers to their search for meaning in life. Very few young religious sisters are trained to minister in this more sophisticated environment.

## **Priests in China**

The situation of young priests is more problematic than that of religious Sisters. Young priests are given a great deal of responsibility, often immediately after ordination, and sometimes



too much is expected of them.

Young priests have generally been given many more advantages than religious Sisters. Their education and educational facilities have been superior; they have been given many more opportunities to travel; many more priests have studied or are studying abroad. They are, however, under more pressure than the religious Sisters. Before entering the seminary they are under pressure from their families, especially if they are an only or an elder son. Once in the seminary, they are under pressure to achieve academic success, often without adequate background or resources. They are under more political pressure from the government than religious Sisters. Their spiritual needs are sometimes neglected in favor of political indoctrination. After ordination, the generation gap creates pressures as the older people measure the quality of this new generation of priests against those of former times. Furthermore, many young priests must serve in very isolated and poor areas. Many live poor and lonely lives, and eke out a living from any available foreign Mass stipends.

Not long ago, a young man ordained a priest could expect to be better educated than most young men of his generation. But today, China offers intelligent young men attractive educational opportunities, options and challenges.

## **The Laity**

Most of the Catholics in China are concentrated in the rural areas. Historically, missionaries were much more successful in making converts in the countryside than in the cities. Catholics also tend to be concentrated in two provinces: Hebei and Shaanxi. Hebei is the home of at least one quarter of the country's Catholic population; it is also the seat of the underground church where most arrests of bishops and the faithful take place. The province boasts a number of "Catholic villages," where most or all of the inhabitants are poor Catholic farmers. Attending an early morning Mass in one of these villages can be a very moving experience. The

depth of faith of the people is palpable. On one occasion, when I was traveling with two women from the German Office of Aid to the Church in Need, one became so overwhelmed that she could not stay to greet the people after the Mass. She went off alone and wept.

Can such faith survive in China's growing consumerist society? And what about the Catholics in the cities? The Christianity fever of the 1980s in China never made a deep impact within the Catholic Church. Burdened with division, difficulties with Sino-Vatican relations, the rebuilding of all its structures destroyed by the Cultural Revolution, the need to educate its younger generation of priests and Sisters—to name only a few difficulties—the Catholic Church has not had sufficient leisure to develop quality pastoral care to address the spiritual needs of the laity both in the country and the cities. Much work needs to be done to help the people rid themselves of superstitions and absorb the teachings of Second Vatican Council beyond the externals of the vernacular at Mass.

Although many bishops are taking the new role of the laity in the Church seriously, and are eager to have laypeople assume the responsibilities proper to their status, the laity remains, for the most part, loyal and passive, rather than active members in the Church.

### **The Open and the Underground Church**

The very mention of the Catholic Church in China conjures up a kind of double image: of an open and an underground church. The simplistic approach to this situation goes something like this: The open church is a patriotic church loyal to the government, and not in communion with the pope or the Universal Church. The underground church, on the other hand, is the loyal church in communion with the Holy See and the Universal Church. The reality is much more complicated historically, ecclesiastically and canonically.

First of all, we must understand that there are not two

Catholic Churches in China. There is only one. Pope John Paul II was always careful to speak of the Church in China as one. Second, China does not have a “patriotic” Catholic Church. There is a Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association, which is a political organization set up by the Communist Party to monitor and direct the activities of the open church.

Similar associations monitor each of China’s five approved religions. Just how freely any church operates depends almost entirely on the quality of the individuals who serve on these associations, on their motivation, and their knowledge and respect for religion. Many on these organizations are there because it is a good job with steady remuneration and power. Finally, the division within the Catholic Church in China is political and not doctrinal.

The terms “open” and “underground” do not clearly describe the reality. Churches are either registered or unregistered. Government regulations require places of worship to be registered. Open, official or government approved churches are all registered.

Underground churches are unregistered, and sites of worship that refuse to register are illegal and subject to closure and repression. Authorities in different places, however, deal very differently with both the registered and unregistered groups.

The underground church is not literally in hiding. In certain areas that I have visited, the church is large and beautiful, built in view of everyone in the middle of the city. On the other hand, in some places, it is literally on the 7<sup>th</sup> floor! In a few places the underground church is the only Catholic Church in the area. In still other places people meet for Mass or prayer in people’s homes. These are the communities most vulnerable to the surveillance of the Public Security Bureau. In some open seminaries, underground bishops serve as professors. In a few places, both the open and the unregistered church share the same building for services while in other places the two groups are at complete loggerheads. Still in other places a man may be a bishop in the underground church and a priest in the open church.

We in the West, who like things neatly boxed in categories, are not comfortable with this kind of ambiguity.

### **Sino-Vatican Relations**

I began this article by mentioning a Russian journalist who asked whether I thought that Pope Benedict XVI would be able to accomplish more than John Paul II in terms of advancing Sino-Vatican diplomatic relations. There is no doubt that John Paul II had a great love for the Chinese people and great respect for their magnificent culture. He prayed for China and the Church in China daily. One of his deepest wishes was to set foot on Chinese soil, kiss the ground and personally embrace the Chinese people. This wish was never fulfilled. To prove his sincerity the Pope apologized for the mistakes made by some missionaries in the past during their evangelization efforts. He took every opportunity to talk to China and the Church in China. He certainly tried to do everything in his power to advance the situation.

Much has been said about John Paul II's role in toppling Communism in Eastern Europe. Whether this role has been exaggerated or not is of no consequence. For the Chinese authorities, whatever role he might have played constituted a serious threat.

Benedict XVI's background is considerably different, but his task is still a formidable one. Some advise: "Establish relations first and then work out the details." It seems to me that it is essential to work out the details before establishing relations to insure that no principles are compromised.

What are the implications for the unregistered churches if China and the Vatican set up diplomatic relations? What are the implications for the Church in Taiwan that has been faithful and supported the papacy throughout these long years? Would the Holy See seem to ignore the fidelity of Catholics and church leaders in Taiwan and appear to abandon them diplomatically? And what about the selection of Chinese bishops? The large majority of

bishops are already in union with Rome, but so crucial an aspect of Church tradition must be carefully worked out and openly legitimized.

Vatican officials during the new reign of Pope Benedict must somehow convince the government in China that the mission of the Church is religious, not political. Can the Chinese government understand that kind of language in a society where everything includes political overtones? The government must be convinced that a Church independent of government surveillance and control can work in favor of national stability. This will not be an easy task. The Catholic Church in China will survive with or without diplomatic relations, but such relations would certainly be mutually beneficial. The fact that the new Pope so early in his pontificate has already made overtures to China shows the willingness of the Church to reopen the dialogue.

Is China ready? Through the fidelity of its many young priests and Sisters, and laity, who are assuming increasing leadership responsibility in pastoral and social services, the Catholic Church in China continues to show promise. The recent ordination of auxiliary bishops in the two major cities of Shanghai and Xi'an, both with public, though separate, affirmation by the Holy See and the Chinese government, are signs that the Catholic Church in China may well be ready for the next stage of its development.