

Doors of Mercy in the Church in China

Annie Lam

After Pope Francis opened the Holy Door of St. Peter's Basilica on Dec. 8, 2015, the Church in China, like all Churches in the world, opened their Holy Doors to celebrate the Jubilee of Mercy. When Christians pass through the Holy Doors of Mercy, they will recall the graces received at the Sacraments of Christian Initiation (Baptism, Confirmation and Eucharist), where they experienced the Death and the Resurrection with Christ, and meditate how to pass on the mercy of God to others.

The Church in China has more than 100 dioceses with about 10 million Catholics. How many Holy Doors for pilgrimage have been opened in the whole country? According to a list published by Shijiazhuang-based Faith Press on Dec. 23, 2015 of designated churches in China for pilgrimage in the Jubilee of Mercy, a total of 256 pilgrimage sites from 90 dioceses (or places) throughout the country were recorded. The list showed that Zhanjiang diocese (Guangdong) has designated 15 churches for the Jubilee pilgrimages. For Xingtai (Hebei, including Zhaoxian, Weixian and Shunde), Nanchong (Sichuan), Taiyuan (Shanxi), Meizhou (Guangdong), Jinzhong (Shanxi) and Liaoning, each has eight or more designated sites. However, Jining (Inner Mongolia), Shanghai, Tianjin and Hunan province lacked data for this purpose. Indeed, some dioceses have encouraged parish priests to open the holy doors at local churches, and therefore, the actual number of holy doors and pilgrimage sites may be even more. The list does not seem to include the unofficial (underground) communities, such as Zhengding diocese. As *AsiaNews* reported on Dec. 15, 2015, the diocese opened its Holy Door with the presence of 10,000 Catholics and surprisingly no one was detained. Yet, some underground priests said their dioceses were restricted in religious activities and it was hard to designate places for pilgrimage.

Presiding over the opening of nine Holy Doors in his diocese, Bishop Meng Ningyou of Taiyuan said the chosen churches were mostly located in the birthplaces of the Martyr-Saints. Numerous Catholics in Taiyuan area were martyred in 1900 because of their faith, of whom 26 were canonized in 2000. The opening of the Holy Door on Bansishan, a suburb of Taiyuan city, drew more than 10,000 Catholics, who braved the wintry cold of minus 16 degrees Celsius, and went on foot or by car upslope at dawn to the church. Bishop Meng said, at every opening of the Holy Door, he was moved to see the faithful fervently and enthusiastically take part in the prayers. “I hope the faithful will experience a conversion through the pilgrimages and prayers, and show greater care to others, beginning with their parents and grandparents, and then their neighbors and the needy. May the Martyr-Saints of the diocese enlighten their faith and good work” (*AsiaNews*, Jan. 1, 2016).

Chinese bishops and diocesan administrators have published pastoral letters to mark the Jubilee of Mercy, explaining the meaning of mercy and the significance of the holy year. Many quoted from *Misericordiae Vultus, the Bull of Indiction of the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy*. Bishops encouraged their faithful to have greater care for the marginalized, especially the single elderly, the disabled and the “left-behind children” in rural villages, and to share meals with the homeless. Moreover, concern for “the marginalized in the Church” was urged, as such faithful, for various reasons, have stayed away from the faith. The faithful were encouraged to recite the Divine Mercy Chaplet regularly and to have Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament. Activities like blood donations, speech contests and concerts on mercy would be organized. Certainly, pilgrimages in or outside the diocese were held, especially in the Month of Mary and in the summer time.

Actually, the prelates’ pastoral letters for the Jubilee of Mercy have reflected points of concern of the local Church, including for freedom of worship and against secularization.

Bishop Zhu Weifang of Wenzhou (Zhejiang), 90, in his pastoral letter *Mercy, listen first*, stressed that praying is like the breath of Christian spiritual life, and praying must start with repentance, and let mercy become the action of love. “More and more do I feel that hearts of mercy are weakened, and that hearts of

indifference and coldness are widespread. This is not only a symptom of illness in the world, but also of a crisis for us Christians.” Even though his pastoral letter did not make direct reference to the alarming forced demolition of crosses in Zhejiang, it exhorts the faithful to abandon their resentment and to promote social harmony. “Not long ago, our Church in this area was treated unfairly and rudely,” he said. The forced demolition of crosses in Zhejiang since 2014 had driven Bishop Zhu and his priests to protest to the government in July 2015, with a banner: “Uphold the dignity of the faith and oppose the demolition of the crosses”.

“Yet as pastors, we have to appeal to all the brothers and sisters in the Lord, in true Christian compassion, we must give up all confrontational and resentful emotions in order to achieve social harmony, promote communication, and raise awareness of the values of life and multicultural communion,” Bishop Zhu said. “Only by doing so can we really win our compatriots’ support and respect from the whole of society,” he said. “Let mercy be an act of love, beginning with listening to our Christian contemplation. The Church needs to listen to the voices of the poor and the wounded; to listen in this society and the country where we are; to learn to cure and be healed by listening; and to listen to the Pope’s words,” he said.

Another pastoral letter mentioned a missing Chinese bishop in Hebei province. The whereabouts of Bishop Shi Enxiang of Yixian (as well as Bishop Su Zhimin of Baoding in Hebei), who has been missing for more than 10 years, are still unknown. The administrator of Yixian Father Paulus Zhang, in his pastoral letter *Be merciful as the Father* revealed how the Catholics in the diocese are cherished by a merciful God in the absence of their bishop. “For years, we have no news about our bishop, but God did not forsake us. He accompanies and guides us along in our lives, enabling our work of evangelization to continue in a systematic way. He protects His followers, and we are loyal to Him.” Father Zhang stressed the importance of prayer, receiving the sacrament of reconciliation and obtaining the indulgence in this Jubilee of Mercy. He asked that special attention, with kindness and patience, be given to young people.

In Hebei, since the Xianxian (Cangzhou) diocese's celebration of its 160 years of history (1856-2016) in 2016, coincided with the Jubilee of Mercy, Bishop Li Liangui, in his pastoral letter to his flock, *Comfort the sorrowful with God's mercy*, noted that this period of history recorded more than 3,000 martyrs and 56 Martyr-Saints in their diocese. "The 160 years of history of Xianxian diocese is undoubtedly a history of salvation with God's mercy. One hundred and sixty years ago, God's mercy was first passed on to us through a group of French missionaries, and we received His grace thereafter. Our diocese underwent the ravages of the Boxers, the Sino-Japanese War and the Cultural Revolution. With God's mercy, we were saved time after time. Each parish of ours can be described as a well with the living waters of God's mercy, from which we constantly draw the water of life to nourish our spiritual poverty," Bishop Li noted. With the Jubilee of Mercy, the prelate requested each parishioner to look for those "who suffer and do not want to come close to the Church."

In Shaanxi province, Bishop Wu Qinjing of Zhouzhi, installed in July 2015, hoped his faithful would spend more time in meditative prayer during the Jubilee of Mercy. In his pastoral letter *Meditating on God's mercy, witnessing the value of faith*, he explained from the Bible the significance of the meaning of mercy, and expounded with examples from Chinese traditional culture and Buddhist thought. "In Chinese culture, the characters *ci* (慈) and *bei* (悲) always go together. The word *ci* means moisturizing, giving others love and happiness. And *bei* is made up of an upper part *fei* (非), meaning be not, and underneath *xin* (心), a heart, meaning to take away a bad heart and to lift up the suffering of others with a merciful heart. Buddhists hold that the giving of all sentient beings' happiness is infinite compassion or *daci* (大慈); and the uprooting of all sentient beings' suffering and grief is *dabei* (大悲). The term mercy, according to Bishop Wu, has four meanings: commiseration, kindness and forgiveness, gratitude and blessings.

Bishop Wu stressed that the Jubilee of Mercy is a moment for all Church members to pray and reflect on God's mercy. "But our Church is living in a fast-paced, efficiency-oriented and web-info society, leaving little space for meditation, caring for people and

quality conversations. Thus, faith, prayer, reflection, Bible study and contemplation seem to be lacking. Priests, sisters and the laity have been busy with pastoral work, evangelization activities, church construction and socializing, leaving little time to interact with God.” He noted, “Only those with an inner experience of God’s mercy can be messengers of the Merciful God.”

Chinese bishops also addressed other issues including how the Church faces secularization and materialism in society. As a Jubilee of Mercy statement of the Tangshan diocese (Hebei) noted, facing today’s growing apathy, loss of faith, moral degeneration, violence and injustices, Christians should reflect “on whether we have participated in those acts, or performed acts that contravened faith and the commandments of love or not. The Jubilee of Mercy calls us to repent.” Pastoral letters of other dioceses noted that modern materialism, atheism, hedonism and individualism have caused a weakening of social morality, growing disparity between rich and poor, and social justice and human virtues have been clouded with selfishness.

Similarly, Bishop Li Jingfeng of Fengxiang (Shaanxi), aged 94, told the faithful in his pastoral letter for the Jubilee and Pentecost that many challenges now face our Church, e.g., the emergence of a crisis of faith, atheism, heresies, liberalism, pleasure-oriented life, a degradation in morality, divorce and remarriage, same-sex marriage and sexual liberation. “What should we do?” Bishop Li asked. He hoped that the Church, guided by the Holy Spirit, will uphold the dignity and sacredness of liturgy, noting some faithful are not praying in the churches, showing little respect to the Blessed Sacrament, or even laughing and running about during Masses. They should actively respond to the Church teaching and continue to walk the path of Jesus’ salvific way. “How can we still be unmoved, unchanged, and continue to take the road of secularized liberation in the Jubilee of Mercy?”

From the pastoral letters of the Chinese bishops and administrators, one may see many challenges faced by the Church in China today, including freedom of worship, conflicts between the Church and social values, and secularism, and so on. Some bishops stated that Christians believe God is the defender of the poor and the father of orphans, for everyone knows that God is the Merciful

Father. Now, how does the Church arouse its moral courage to manifest Christian values in society? The Jubilee of Mercy calls us to repent, especially when we cross through the Holy Door, and reflect on how we can do more for the poor and the little ones. Through charity and care, we learn to appreciate and transcend our own lives, and discover “the visible face of the invisible Father” (*Prayer of Pope Francis for the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy*).