

SIGNS OF PROGRESS IN THE STONE HOUSE CHURCH

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translated by Peter Barry



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(This is the first article sent to TRIPOD from the Church of Mainland China. We thank Mr. Zhang Minggao, Secretary General of the Guangzhou Catholic Patriotic Association for his contribution. Perhaps our readers will be interested in his point of view.)

Sacred Heart Church of Guangzhou, which used to be referred to as the "Stone House Church", celebrated the sixth anniversary of its reopening on October 21, 1985. These six years have been for us a most challenging period of time.

All are well familiar with the havoc wrought by the Cultural Revolution on the churches throughout China, and Sacred Heart did not escape the unprecedented suffering and destruction of those ten years of turmoil. The 3rd Plenum of the CCP's 11th Central Committee, however, re-affirmed the policy of freedom of religious belief, and our "Stone House Church" was reopened in 1979. Since then, local church affairs have been moving along the right path.

NORMALIZATION OF RELIGIOUS LIFE

As the government began implementing its religious freedom policies, priests and religious gradually returned from prisons and villages where they had been detained or banished during the Cultural Revolution. The government has either returned or made compensation for confiscated church property, and released church finances previously frozen. This has made it possible for us to pay salaries long overdue and also to provide for the care and well-being of our aged and infirm sisters. A committee has been established to administrate the recently returned properties, whose revenues will provide the main economic base for our church's policy of independence and self-support.

Today, some members of our clergy serve as elected representatives to the People's Congresses and as members of the Political Consultative Committee, which authorizes them to participate in decision making and to serve as advisers in the formation of national policies. Further, as religious representatives, they have also been elected to posts of leadership within those various organizations.

Mass is offered daily in both Sacred Heart and Our Lady of Lourdes (our church in Shamian which was reopened in 1982). On Sundays, the Eucharistic service is enhanced by hymns sung by a choir and a sermon given by the celebrant. After Mass there is Benediction of the Most Blessed Sacra-

ment. Since the reopening of the churches, sacraments have been administered according to traditional custom, and priests are frequently called upon to anoint the sick and bring communion to those unable to attend Mass. Requiem Masses are now celebrated in the funeral homes. Last Christmas there were well over three thousand of the faithful in attendance at worship services, and for some it was the first time in 30 years that they had been able to gather in church. Needless to say, their participation in Mass was joyful and enthusiastic.

It was a rainy day in March of last year that Bishop Ye Yinyun made a personal visit to the churches of Huizhou City and Zijing County. He came to celebrate Mass and administer the sacraments in Lashi, Baipu, and other places where Catholics gather. Despite the rain and treacherous conditions, Catholics, dressed in their best clothes, lined the road for miles, carrying aloft statues and banners, beating drums and gongs, and setting off strings of firecrackers. Crowds of Catholics attended the Masses and their sincere expressions of devotion were very moving. We all gave thanks to God and expressed gratitude to a government that made such a day possible.

Among the clergy now serving the Guangzhou church are Bishop Ye Yinyun, Vicar General Lian Mingde and five priests: Fathers Liu Qianchang, Lin Bingliang, Liu Lingsi, Liang Kezhi and Tan Tiande. The church also has ten sisters including Sisters Chen Zhidao, Li Fuzhen, Gu Lihua, Zhang Guiqing and Su Wude. Many of the priests and sisters are quite old, but, thank God, the diocese now has ten seminarians studying at the South-Central Seminary in Wuchang, and three of these have already received tonsure. The seminarians are studying diligently to prepare themselves for a future of service in the independent and self-governing Chinese church.

THE FOUR MODERNIZATIONS: POSITIVE SERVICE

The progressive development of the church in Guangzhou has led to an increase in church activities here. New doctrine classes, youth bible study groups, an altar boys society, and academic associations have sprung up, and



Benediction at the main altar

Catholics often meet to study and discuss current events and policies. When important feasts coincide with national festivals, we celebrate both together.

During these past few years, we have come to realize more and more that a Christian who loves his country must not only follow Christ along the way to salvation but also must become more involved in improving and strengthening our socialistic system. In this way, we feel we are able to sink roots deeper into our native soil and give promise to a bright future. More and more Catholics are concerning themselves with service to society as part of their personal spiritual formation. Some recent examples of this have been our people's spirited support of campaigns for the relief of the starving people of Africa and for repairing the Great Wall, as well as our youth's generous use of their free time to help the handicapped through fund raising.

It was this spirit of public service that gave birth

to a festive "Serve the People Day" here, during which the whole parish turned out to offer a full range of services to people in the neighbourhood. The square in front of the cathedral was filled with stalls offering medical services, advice on pre-natal care, bicycle repair, sewing, homework assistance, photography, and other services. Fr. Lian Mingde our eighty-six-year old vicar-general and seventy-year old Fr. Tan Tiande delighted everyone by giving haircuts to children. The day was a dramatic symbol of how the spirit of Christian love and the ideal of serving people are one and the same.

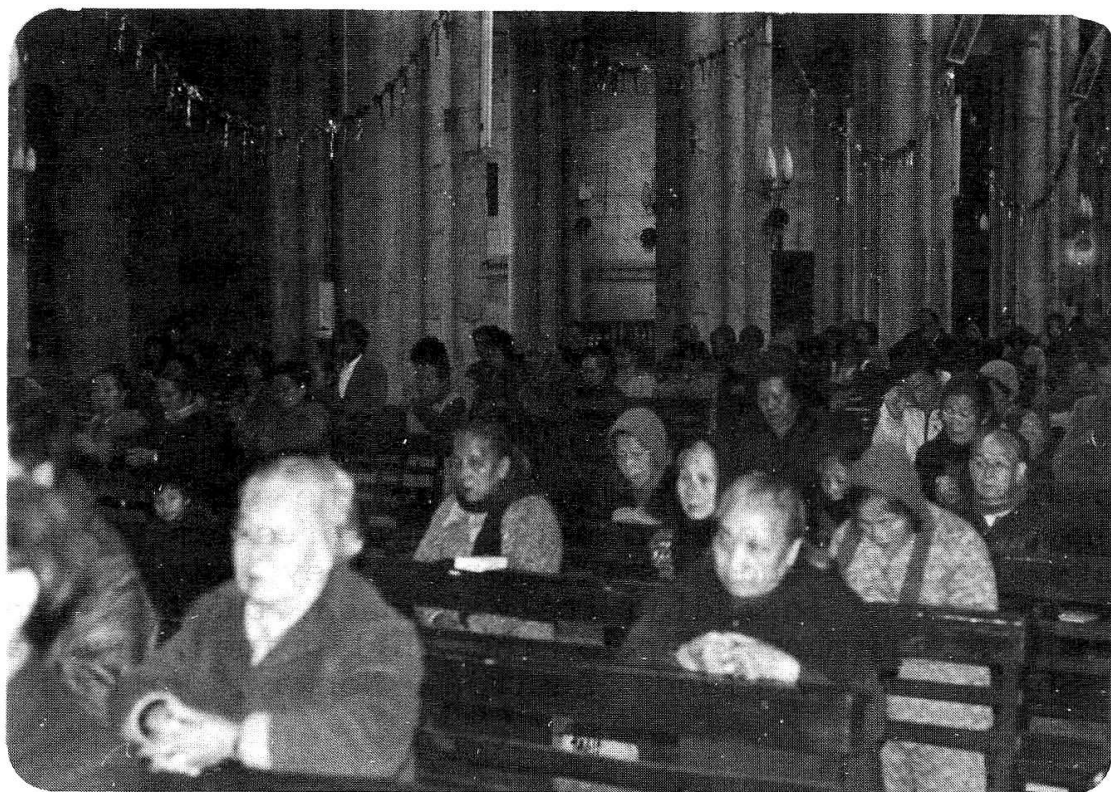
Another project that has met with success and was deeply appreciated by our Catholics was a multi-disciplinary seminar on increasing our knowledge of the Church. Included in the seminar were such topics as Christian doctrine, Church history, the current situation of the church both at home and abroad, overseas news, and social services.

In order to encourage the Catholics to participate more actively in the nation's modernization program, a seminar on "Implementing the Four Modernizations" was held. Fr. Liu Qianchang, Ye Zhifen, Li Dewang, Zeng Qiang, Ye Jihan and Chen Jiede all spoke of their faith and its relation to their work experiences. They represented such diverse fields as education, technology, industry, agriculture and business. An example of dedication in service came from eighty-six year old Father Liu Qianchang, who, besides his regular duties, works tirelessly on a church history, seeking interviews, collecting and preserving data, and putting into writing a great amount of historical material. Ye Zhifen is a local school principal who has spent over 30 years educating and training China's next generation. Ye Jihan is a specialist in experimental methods of animal feeding. His work in this area is one of the main reasons why Guangzhou's White Cloud Company consistently surpasses its yearly production quota. Participants in the seminar saw their work as an opportunity to put into practice the Gospel spirit of Christ, make a contribution to the nation, and give worship to God.

COMMUNICATIONS WITH OTHER PROVINCES

In recent years Guangzhou's Catholics have become

extremely mobile, participating in church rededication ceremonies not only in Shiqi, Guizhou and Zhanjiang, but also traveling as far as Shanghai, Nanjing, Wuhan, Hangzhou, Suzhou, Yangzhou and Beijing, with numerous pilgrimages made to Sheshan. Aside from enjoying the motherland's beautiful scenery, our Catholics have been witnessing new growth in churches everywhere. The sight of fervent Catholics by the thousands following the way of the Cross up Sheshan's picturesque mountain creates a deep impression on everyone.



The faithful praying in the Church

Some are unable to hold back tears. These excursions also draw attention to the government's conscientious efforts to implement its policy of religious freedom. In recent years, what has brought added delight to us has been visits by Catholics from Beijing, Shanghai, Nanjing, Wuhan, Xian, Inner Mongolia, Guangxi, Fujian, Henan, Hunan, Wuxi, Hainan, Lintong, and so many other Christian communities. Notable among our guests have been Bishops Zong Huaide, Yang Gaojian, Tu Shihua, Qian Yirong, Wang Xueming, Yu Chengcai, Dong Guangqing, Ma Longlin, Qian Huimin and Jin Luxian. We

have all been enriched by these opportunities to exchange experiences, and have sought to learn from each other ways and means to increase efficiency, develop self-sufficiency in our church, and implement practical methods for engaging in the work of modernization.

WELCOMING 20,000 FOREIGN GUESTS

Our country's friendly contacts with the international community have now become quite extensive. This has resulted in a great increase in the number of visits by Catholics from many countries to our church in Guangzhou. We have been guided by the principles of mutual respect for church sovereignty, mutual non-interference in church affairs, and equality of relationships in our efforts to build and strengthen communications with churches of other nations, and nurture closer ties with our brothers and sisters in the Lord throughout the world. This has helped to promote mutual understanding and has strengthened our communion in the Lord.

We estimate that over 20,000 foreign Catholics have resided for a time in Guangzhou over the past few years. These have included foreign experts, professors, scholars, diplomats, bankers and businessmen. They have come from over 40 countries, including Italy, Canada, the USA, France, England, West Germany, Japan, the Philippines, Australia, India, Spain, New Zealand, Austria, Norway, Holland, and Peru.

Among our guests have been bishops, priests, sisters and lay people. Their visits have added to their better understanding of the actual situation here and have cleared up many misunderstandings from the past. All have gained more knowledge about present conditions on the China mainland and in the Chinese Catholic Church.

Archbishop Henry D'Souza, the Indian Secretary-General of the Federation of Asian Bishops Conferences, said while he was here: "From this visit to China I have learned that the country has expended much energy fulfilling the basic requirements for furthering the people's livelihood. We have not seen any beggars; the people have a spirit of exuberance; all have sufficient food; some are able

to save enough money to buy a television set or a washing machine. This shows that the Chinese people have a good life." He also said: "It seems to me that there is more freedom to carry out church activities now." Archbishop Fernandez of Kuala Lumpur, Chairman of the Office of Human Development of the Federation of Asian Bishops Conferences said: "This trip to China has been the realization of my dreams. I have experienced all sorts of deep feelings on this trip."

In summary, then, during the last six years the Guangzhou church has made much progress in its pastoral ministry and has attained an independence in administering its own affairs. This has been a result of the government's implementation of the policy of religious freedom, the Patriotic Association's conscientious carrying out of its responsibilities, and the common efforts of all our Christians both clerical and lay.

Let us ask God's blessings, then, on this new foundation that He might give to the Guangzhou Catholic Church the grace to achieve even greater accomplishments in the future. May His will be done on earth as it is in heaven.