

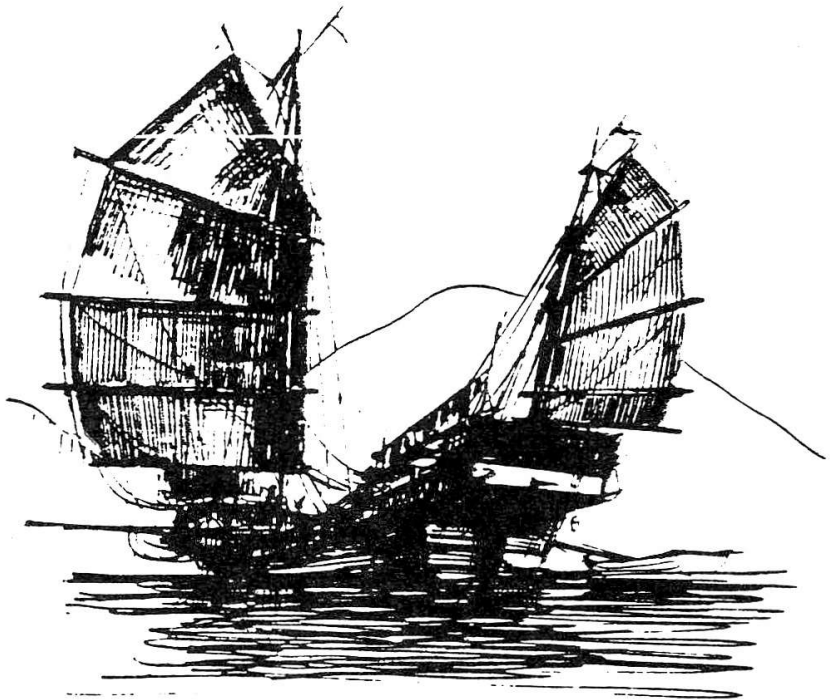
HONG KONG:

WHAT SORT OF A BRIDGE?

by Jim Knight

During his recent visit to Guangdong Province, Bishop Wu told Catholics in Shantou, "It is apparent that due to circumstances of time and place, the Hongkong Catholic Diocese ought to play a bridge role between the local church and the universal church"(1) One rejoices that the Catholic Church of Hong Kong has set for itself the mission of building a much needed bridge to Catholics in China; and the following observations are offered in support of Hongkong Catholics who have taken up this challenge. However, as a missiologist with one eye on past missionary activity, I cannot help but ask: what kind of a bridge?

For a bridge to carry heavy traffic and survive the ravages of an unexpected flood, it must be properly designed, built of durable materials, and located at the best possible spot on the riverbank. Similarly, a local church setting out to build up partnerships with other local churches must carefully design and evaluate its efforts, especially if the partnerships are as complicated as those between the Hongkong church and the churches in China promise to be. I do not pretend to have answers to the multitude of difficult questions



which the endeavour of the Diocese of Hongkong will certainly produce. Rather, I want to offer three models of missionary activity and inter-church partnership which, I believe, will help evaluate the design and construction of an inter-church "bridge". (The models, of course, have never existed anywhere in a pure state, they are theoretical constructs drawn up to highlight and evaluate various tendencies in missionary activity and inter-church partnerships.)

The raw materials, if one may use such terms, of any partnership between churches would seem to be: the institutions of the churches, the faith of the churches, and their people. Naturally, the materials are always mixed, and the three models I shall set forth are concerned with the mix. Each model depicts a tendency to stress one element in a mix over against the other two.

INSTITUTION-CENTRED PARTNERSHIP

When Pope Gregory the Great sent the monk Augustine and his companions to England in 596, he launched a new form of missionary activity. Before Augustine arrived in England, there were scattered Christian communities, the remnants of an earlier Christianity which had been devastated by the invasions of Angles and Saxons. Basically, they were Christian communities constructed along tribal lines. Augustine came from the newly founded Benedictine Order, and he was sent by a Pope who was both a Benedictine and a prodigious organizer of the early medieval Church. On arrival, Augustine went straight to King Ethelbert of Kent, in order to win his approval and hopefully to convert him. Pope Gregory supported Augustine with letters of advice. One letter, dated 18th July, 601, instructed Augustine to be sensitive to the feelings of the local pagans and tolerant of their customs. The Pope urged patience: "If we allow them outward joys, they are more likely to find their way to true inner peace ... It is doubtless impossible to cut off all abuses at once from rough hearts, just as a man who sets to climb a high mountain does not advance by leaps and bounds, but goes upward step by step, pace by pace." (2)

Augustine and his companions enjoyed quick success,

baptizing 10,000 Saxons by the end of the first year. They established monasteries which became centres of ecclesial, educational, social and economic development. Soon a vital local church flourished, with strong links to the Church of Rome, and its own clergy, learning, art and architecture.

The model, which has developed from Gregory's sending of Augustine to England, has four trademarks. First, the missionaries are sent and supported by the Pope (or Catholic kings delegated by the Pope), and they establish local churches with strong links to the Pope. Second, the missionaries' first approach is to the king and rulers of the people. Third, the missionaries tend to be tolerant, even accommodating toward pagan customs and beliefs. And, lastly, they strengthen the faith and resources of the local church through building up institutions that promote spiritual and intellectual life and social and economic development. The institutions also play a central role in developing ties with other churches and the Holy See. During different periods of history, of course, one or another trademark became more prominent.

When the English missionaries - Willibrod, Boniface and their successors - left for the continent of Europe, just over one hundred years after Augustine's arrival, they took this model with them. And, with the exception of the early Franciscans, it has remained the predominant model of missionary activity. When Francis Xavier and the early Jesuits moved beyond the Portuguese Empire in the sixteenth century, we see them hoping to convert the emperors of Japan and China to Christianity. It took Matteo Ricci eighteen years to work his way from Macao to the court of the Wan-li Emperor in Peking. The Jesuits in China, though, took the practice of accommodation far beyond anything envisaged by Pope Gregory. The aim of their accommodation was the conversion, not so much of the emperor, as of the Confucian intellectual elite.(3)

The institutional dimensions of the model have probably never been stronger than during missionary expansion of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. That the Pope commissioned missionaries to non-christian peoples was largely taken for granted. Good relations with authorities, colonial or local, were the ideal and for the most part

carefully preserved. During strong colonial periods, however, toleration and accommodation were not high priorities. But institutions which would provide educational opportunities, and, where necessary, health and social services were considered the top priority. Great energy went into building up these institutions.

The Catholic Church of Hongkong is the inheritor of this long-established model of missionary activity. Because of the institutional emphasis of the model and the large funds of money that have been available since World War II, the Church in Hongkong is now endowed with a massive network of educational, health and social service institutions. The help which the Church has been able to give the needy, especially refugees, has also been massive. Thanks to the institutions, there is an educated Catholic laity who are at the forefront of the changes now taking place in Hongkong. With a few notable exceptions, however, one may wonder if the promotion of an indigenous Christian art and architecture, which was so central to the original Benedictine model, has found a place in the institutions of the Hongkong Church.

For good or ill, the institutional wealth of the Hongkong Church will be a factor in the relationships between the Hongkong Church and her sister churches in China. If, on the one hand, the Hongkong Church is allowed to keep its institutions but not allowed to help her sister churches in China, who in turn are not allowed to build up corresponding institutions, it places the Hongkong Church in an awkward position. If, on the other hand, the Hongkong Church is allowed to help her sister churches build up their institutions, it puts the sister churches in a position of dependency. Building partnership out of a donor-receiver relationship is not easy, as churches all over the Third World know. It requires great humility and honesty from a receiving church and equal humility and sensitivity from the donor church. Furthermore, there is enough truth in the axiom "We create our institutions and then our institutions create us" to make one pause and ponder.

THE "NO-BAGGAGE" MODEL OF MISSION AND PARTNERSHIP

This model takes its origin and inspiration from

the Lord's instruction: "Take nothing for the journey:neither staff, nor haversack, nor bread, nor money; and let none of you take a spare tunic. Whatever house you enter, stay there; and when you leave let it be from there. As for those who do not welcome you, when you leave their town, shake the dust from your feet as a sign to them" (Mt. 10: 5-14; Mk. 6:7-13). Time and time again, individuals have been struck by these words. In the early centuries of the Church, there were wandering missionaries who took the words of Jesus literally. Devoid of possessions, they moved from town to town preaching the Gospel. They left faith in the hearts of their hearers but little ecclesiastical organization. They traversed the Roman Empire and beyond it; some eventually became desert fathers and others spent periods of time in the desert.

These early wandering missionaries were replaced by wandering Irish monks. Even though they were mighty missionaries, Lawrence Nemer has pointed out, "...their primary motive for leaving home was not to bring the faith to unbelievers or to deepen the faith of those who had been baptized but never catechized; it was to perform the highest act of asceticism an Irish monk could perform in those days - to leave home and to wander for the sake of Christ: perigrinatio pro Christo." (4) They were scholars who handed their learning on to their converts. Yet, they were not tolerant nor accommodating; they kept and promoted the traditions of the Irish Church wherever they went. One may be forgiven if he sees behind the Irish monks the austere but prophetic figure of John the Baptist.

St. Francis of Assisi revived this form of missionary life in the thirteenth century. Again, he was stricken by these words of Jesus and, in an age of Crusades, decided to live out the Lord's instructions amongst the Muslims. His first two attempts to reach Islamic territory failed, but he succeeded in Egypt on his third. Of this expedition, Father Buhlmann writes: "Deaf to all advice to be prudent, he left the camp clearly unarmed, walked across no-man's-land and entered the Sultan's camp. There, he talked to him about the love of God and won his friendship. For the first time, the Sultan had found a Christian who was not an enemy but a friend." (5) Francis saw the desire that drove him to go amongst the Saracens armed with nothing

but love and the Gospel of Peace as a "divine inspiration". He, therefore, left it as a legacy to his followers. Under the impact of this inspiration, early Franciscans journeyed all over North Africa, the Middle East and Asia, as far as Beijing. (6)



In the modern missionary era, this faith-alone model of mission lost out completely to the institutional model outlined above. It reappeared at the beginning of this century in the person of Charles de Foucauld (1858-1916), who stressed the hidden life of Jesus in Nazareth as the model and motive for mission among the Tuareg, a nomadic Muslim tribe in North Africa. He never made a convert, but his person and hermitage were a truly sacramental presence of God among the Tuareg. (7)

The attempt of the worker-priests to establish a Christian contact with the dechristianised workers of France during the 1940's and 1950's, was also a revival, in a new form, of this model of mission. And it seems to be gaining a new life and form amongst expatriate missionaries, especially Mennonites, in China today. (8)

Characteristics of this model are that it is personal and charismatic. A missionary life grows from a personal conversion and call, although it doesn't necessarily exclude being commissioned by the Pope or another religious authority. "Only after long religious training in monastic asceticism could they (the Irish Monks) gather twelve followers and go in search of a new location in Greenland, Canada, Scotland, England or Europe." (9) Even though wandering missionaries at times founded monasteries and ordained local clergy, building up the organisational and institutional side of the Church remains very secondary in this model. Missionaries with this vision of mission can be hard and confrontational or gentle and accepting. In either approach, accommodating the liturgy and church life to local

customs and culture is never of great concern. If it happens, it happens.

But history warns that the model has limitations, both for the establishment and growth of a local church and, by implication, the development of partnership between churches. This is not to deny that this model is extremely important today. It is. Both as a counterbalance to the high profile, highly institutionalised model that we have inherited from the recent past and as a necessity in the initial contacts and engagement with believers of other faiths and ideologies, and other churches, particularly when they possess nothing but their faith. What we need, it seems, is a third model which can move us beyond these first two models, while incorporating from them what we need. The recent work of Calvin Shenk (10) and Robert Schreiter (11) on the theology of presence gives us a good basis from which to move.

A PEOPLE OR COMMUNITY-CENTRED MODEL

Let us first be clear about what we are aiming at. We are aiming at designing a process which will establish and build up bonds between churches, specifically the bonds between the Catholic Church in Hongkong and the Catholic Churches in China, together with the bonds between the Catholic Churches in China and all the churches in the Universal Catholic Communion of Churches which has the Holy See, the Chair of Peter, as its central see and the incumbent of that see as its leader. The communion which this process should achieve cannot be a unity based on the lowest common denominator between the churches involved. It must be a communion in the fullness of the Risen Christ, i.e. a communion which will reject any loveless union based on pressure, or some cheap, superficial harmony that is dishonest. What is called for is communion which will possess all the richness, love and diversity promised by the Second Vatican Council.

To achieve this ultimate purpose, we aim to design a process of contact and engagement that can nurture faith and community while strengthening ties and communication between Churches. The inspired missionaries mentioned in the previous model have shown us how to make contact

with others without the help of political powers or large institutions. Shenk and Schreiter have demonstrated theologically that Christian engagement must be nothing more and nothing less than the revelation of God's presence within us and within the situation. Awareness of our presence as revealing God's presence surely must provoke us to deepen our faith and make us sensitive to the way we are present to others. But how can these insights and this awareness be transformed in a praxis of contact, engagement, nurture and strengthening?

In 1895, Roland Allen went to China as a missionary, but ill health forced him to return to England in 1903. For the next forty years, he devoted his time to writing and speaking about missionary principles. Allen had been appalled at the paternalism of Western missionaries in China and, in 1912, wrote a book called "Missionary Principles - St. Paul's or Ours".(12) In it he advocated a return to St. Paul's missionary model of establishing Christian communities which, from their very beginnings, rely on their own ministerial and material resources.(13) The Basic Christian Community (BCC) Movement reflects these ideas propounded by Roland Allen.

The BCC Movement is founded on St. Paul's understanding of the Church as the Body of Christ, i.e., the Church as the Body of Christ can be fully present in the smallest and poorest ecclesial community. Although the Movement has achieved considerable diversity, a Basic Christian Community is fundamentally a community whose members know one another and share a common bond of faith, love, prayer, mission and service. As far as possible, a Basic Christian Community relies on its own ministerial and material resources, and it is the base from which it and its members interact with the society and culture in which they happened to be. A Basic Christian Community is strongly linked to its Bishop and through him to the Universal Church; but it is also linked in a variety of relationships to other Christian communities in and outside its own diocese.

Characteristics of a missionary model drawn from the experience of the Basic Christian Community Movement are relational and community centred: relationships within the Community (ad intra) and relationships outside the

Community (ad extra). As the Church is missionary by nature, so is a Basic Christian Community. The Community, nevertheless, is aware that God is at work outside it and, therefore, it must discern the presence of the Spirit in the world and relate to his initiatives. If there is any fixed preference within society, it is to approach the poor first - from the bottom up rather than from the top down. The community itself is the locus for accommodating the liturgy and life of the Church to the culture in which it finds itself. But accommodation is not an end in itself. It must lead the community to relate its faith effectively to the world around it, to become a sacrament in that world - a sacrament of unity amongst different groups and peoples and between humankind and God. Hence, the goal of missionary activity is to reveal the Kingdom by breaking through barriers that separate people from themselves, from one another and from the Father who sent his Christ into the world in order to break all such barriers. All witness and evangelization is directed to this goal.

Over the past twenty years the BCC Movement has proved extremely versatile, and there is no reason why the Catholic Church in Hongkong cannot use the principles and dynamics of this movement to reach out to Catholic communities in China. There is no reason why basic communities within the Catholic Church in Hongkong cannot develop the ability to be with and listen to Catholic communities in China, to discern how the Spirit has worked and still works through them, and together with them build up the Catholic unity of the churches. I believe the laity are in the best position to do this, and perhaps the young and the elderly are in the best position of all: the young, because they can approach the situation with freshness, creativity and hope, and the elderly because they have the experience of having lived through all the changes that have come since the beginning of the Second World War. And even though most Basic Christian Communities have been started by priests and religious, it is fundamentally a lay Movement.

In offering this third model though, I do not wish to place the communitarian dimension of the Church in opposition to its institutional dimensions. My only wish is to point out that personal and faith relationships must have a higher priority than institutional relationships.

Personal and faith relationships establish trust and love, without which even the best intended institutional relationship will flounder. If personal and faith relationships between Catholic communities in China and their counterparts within the Catholic Church in Hongkong are well founded, the institutions of the Church in Hongkong could then be of considerable help in further strengthening the ties between the communities and churches.

Fortunately, in working out its role as a bridge Church, the Catholic Diocese of Hongkong is not tied to or limited by any of these models. Hopefully, as it goes about its rare and delicate task, the Church in Hongkong will work out a fourth model, more suited to building bridges to reach others and in perfecting the Catholic communion of the churches. It may then, offer that model as a gift to the Universal Church.

NOTES

- 1) As reported in Tripod (February, 1986, No. 31) page 80.
- 2) Venerable Bede, Ecclesiastical History of the English Nation. Book 1:30
- 3) See John D. Young, East-West Synthesis: Matteo Ricci and Confucianism. Hongkong: University of Hongkong (Centre for Asian Studies), 1980, and Confucianism and Christianity: First Encounter. Hongkong: Hongkong University Press, 1983.
- 4) Nemer, Lawrence, Spirituality and the Missionary Vocation. (Missiology, Vol. XI, No. 4, October, 1983) page 423.
- 5) Buhlmann, Walbert, Forward, Church. Slough: St. Paul Publications, 1977, page 136.
- 6) See, Stephen Neil, History of the Christian Missions, Peligan Book, 1964 pages 116-128.
- 7) See S.C. Lorit, Charles de Foucauld: The Silent Witness, New York: New City Press, 1966.
- 8) See Calvin E. Shenk, A Relevant Theology for Mission Today. Elkart: A Mission Focus Pamphlet, 1982.
- 9) Nemer, ibidem. page 423.

10) Shenk, *ibidem*.

11) Schreiter, Robert J. A Theology of Christian Presence in a Secular Society (Tripod, April (?) 1986, No.32(?)).

12) Allen, Roland, Missionary Methods: St. Paul's or Ours? Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1962. Allen also unfolded his understanding of mission in later works, especially The Spontaneous Expansion of the Church and The Ministry of the Spirit.

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