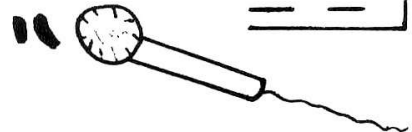


INTERVIEW: CHINA'S CHRISTIANS -

WEST AFRICAN IMPRESSIONS

interviewed by **Edmond Tang**



Editors note: It was during the recent international ecumenical conference held in Nanjing in May that Edmond Tang from Pro Mundi Vita in Brussels met and spoke with Fr. Engelbert Mveng. Father Mveng is a Jesuit from West Africa who resides in a grassroots Christian community called the "People of the Beatitudes" in Cameroon. He is also the coordinator for the Ecumenical Association of Third World Theologians (EATWOT).

Edmond Tang: Fr. Mveng, can you tell us how you came to visit China?

Engelbert Mveng: We were invited by the Catholic Patriotic Association of China. The practical arrangements were made through Sister Theresa Chu, who works for the China Programme in Canada. EATWOT has had a longstanding interest in China because China belongs to the Third World and up to now Chinese theologians are not members of EATWOT.

Tang: Now that your visit is nearing its end, do you still have the impression that China is a Third World country?

Mveng: Very much so. The ordinary people I have met, especially in the rural areas, remind me so much of the people of Africa - poor and simple. I also found a great contrast between the countryside, and the urban centres, but, of course, in China urban development goes back many centuries, unlike that in other Third World countries where it is a more recent development.

China also differs from other Third World countries in that there is a certain "levelling"



of the population, and this seems to be the result of their political and social option. I did not find a great contrast between rich and poor, nor the rampant consumerism which is to be found in our cities. The streets are full of bicycles and there are few private cars. This is in strong visual contrast to our own traffic congestion. African cities just do not have the infrastructure to cope with the consumerist expansion.

Tang: What other impressions do you have of the Chinese people?

Mveng: Well, I find them simple and extremely hospitable, not only our hosts but also the students and youth we met in the streets who came up spontaneously to talk with us. I was also in the USSR but I did not have the same feeling as I have had in China. In fact this was quite a surprise for me. There are many Chinese professional advisors in our African countries, but they tend to be closed in on themselves; they do not mix with the local people. We

have the image of the Chinese as reserved and distrustful. Here in China, however, it is just the opposite. They are open, happy and sociable.

There are also two other things that struck me strongly. Firstly, the Chinese people appear to be very sober. I mean that they have a sense of purpose, and are happy and content. In Africa it is quite different, which is why socialism has such difficulty in taking root there. We are not capable of bringing our capitalist values under control. Secondly, I find the Chinese very disciplined, very united around a national goal. The drama of the Catholic Church arises, perhaps from the conflict with the national character.

Tang: Can you say more about this? It is very interesting to hear an African point of view.

Mveng: I think that the problems with the Catholic Church came from a conflict of cultural values. There is a national enterprise in China, a goal to be reached. And this pushes some Catholics to rally round the national project, otherwise they will not be a Church tolerated by the Chinese people. We find the historical context of this very confusing, but the result is that the Catholic Church is very alive today in China.

Tang: Were you aware of the conflict between the Chinese Church and the Vatican before you came to China?

Mveng: Yes, I had read about the conflicts, and the controversy around the Patriotic Association. But my personal contacts with them gave me another view besides the one of conflict. I was very touched by their hospitality and was moved by their insistence that they are Catholics just like ourselves. I did not ask them about the Vatican, but posed the question, "Are you Catholic like I am a Catholic?" Their reply was; "We belong to the same one, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church."

I met aging bishops and priests. In Shanghai, Beijing and Nanjing the average age of the priests is over 65 and for bishops it is over 70. This forced me to change my impressions. Old people do not revolt; they do not want to revolt against Rome but just want to save the situation.

I was also touched by the archaic character

of the Catholic Church in China. I lived through the pre-Vatican II days in my youth. It seems that holding on to the old liturgies and forms is a choice they have made, considering it the best expression for them of their Catholic identity. The same can be said on the doctrinal level.

Tang: You were all theologians in the EATWOT delegation. Were there any interesting discussions with the Chinese Christians about theology?

Mveng: Not much with the Catholics. They wanted first to listen and said they had no time for theological reflection, and many of the Church leaders are not intellectuals. But, in our many sessions with them, we introduced them to the theology of liberation. Their reaction was: "We do not have any dogmatic or doctrinal problem with the traditional doctrine of the Catholic Church. As for liberation, our context is a post-liberation context."

With the Protestants we had more theological exchange, e.g. in Shanghai and Nanjing. They talked about a post-liberation theology in China vis-a-vis the theology of liberation in other Third World countries. They described their post-liberation theology as a theology of incarnation which reflects the involvement of Chinese Christians with the people.

My first impression of this theology is very positive. China also requires us to revise the definition of Third World theology, since in the Third World there is also a post-liberation world.

Tang: But does not the theology of incarnation also imply a theology of the cross? And should the critical, prophetic role be neglected?

Mveng: That is true. We also talked about that. They referred to their experience of the Cultural Revolution as an experience of the cross. On our side, we pointed out that a theology of liberation is never complete. For example, in China economic and political reforms are still going on, and the Christian continues to reflect on the on-going liberation.

Tang: Social analysis is an integral part of the theology of liberation. Did you find this in the post-liberation theology in China?

Mveng: Not really. In fact I think it is more a product of compromise, an adaptation. We respect this and

I try to look at it not as a Third World theologian, because in our countries we feel very free vis-a-vis the State. I can understand there is a certain allergy to politics after their experience during the Cultural Revolution and their emphasis on spiritual reconstruction.

Tang: Finally, can you say a few words about the Nanjing Conference?

Mveng: I think it was a good thing, although I expected more Chinese participation and more discussion about ecumenical sharing; it is still too limited to the material aspect. In Africa we talk about anthropological poverty. Our definition of sharing depends on our understanding of poverty. There can be an imbalance even in sharing as the economic or political relationship is in imbalance. Sharing cannot be one-way traffic. It must be reciprocal. We are all rich in one way and poor in another, and we share our richness and our poverty.



Participants sharing their views