
CATHOLIC CHURCH IN CHINA MERITS TRUST

FOR ITS FIDELITY AND ITS SERVICE

Editor's Note: The following article issued by International Fides News Service on November 5, 1986 served as a commentary by the Sacred Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples on the December intention of the Apostleship of Prayer: "That all Chinese Catholics may enjoy full communion with the universal Church." It is reprinted here for the interest of our readers. The monthly prayer intentions are indications of the special pastoral concerns of the Pope, who makes the selections.

Historic Anniversaries of the Church in China

This year, there were two important anniversaries of the Church in China that received extensive news coverage: the 40th anniversary of the institution of the Chinese hierarchy, which took place on April 11, and, the 60th anniversary of the episcopal ordination of the first Chinese Bishops of modern times, which was celebrated on October 29. The original consecration took place on October 28, 1926 in the Basilica of St. Peter's in the Vatican, with Pope Pius XI officiating.

April 8, 1985 was the 3rd centenary of the ordination of the first Chinese Bishop, Gregory LO WENTSAO. The centenary was celebrated in particular by the Regional Episcopal Conference in the Cathedral of Taipei.



Mgr. Philippus Tchao, one of the first six Chinese Bishops of modern times

In 1982, the 4th centenary of the arrival of Father Matteo Ricci S.J. in China was commemorated with a series of cultural meetings and religious ceremonies.

This regard for the formation and the promotion of indigenous clergy, which these anniversaries reflect, has always been a basic concern of the Church in China. Already as early as the 17th century, both Pope Clement IX and Clement X clearly directed that the principal task of all Vicars Apostolic sent to China was to be the formation of local clergy with a view to the eventual establishment of an indigenous ecclesiastical hierarchy.

Signs of Openness

Recently, the openness of the Chinese Government to establish broader relations with other Governments and outside organizations has also a religious dimension. One notices a better understanding of religious values and of the work of organized religions, including the Catholic Religion. It is not easy to evaluate the extent of this openness, that is, the level of religious liberty that the Government will permit, because there are also along with positive signs certain opposing factors and negative attitudes towards the Church. On the one hand, the government seems to encourage a certain amount of church renewal: many churches and seminaries and some convents of women have been reopened; on July 3, 1985, Bishop Gong Pinmei of Shanghai was released after 29 years in prison; there is an increase in the number of visits by outside priests, Bishops, Cardinals, lay Catholics, and Catholic delegations, such as the visit of five Asian Bishop delegates of the FABC

in 1984; the Government also allows Chinese Catholic delegations to visit other countries; and finally, there are the visible signs of greater participation by Catholics in public church worship. Yet, at the same time, there are also incidents of harsh repression: the death in December, 1983 of Francis Xavier Chu, S.J. in a labor camp, the rearrest and the sentencing to ten years in prison of the 76-year old Bishop of Baoding, P.J. Fan, and, in May 1986, according to reliable sources, the arrest and imprisonment of two priests and two religious women who were involved in the formation of seminarians and novices who live outside the seminary context. This occurred in the town of Qiaozhai, in the region of Shijiazhuang, where the Catholic population is estimated at 4,000. Arbitrary arrests of priests, hardly in accord with the proclaimed new spirit of religious liberty, can still be found, particularly in certain of the North-West provinces of the country.

There is also some ambiguity surrounding the role of the so-called "Patriotic Church" - an association of Catholics relatively few in number - which acts as an intermediary in government and Church affairs.

New Vitality and Development

It is a fact of no small consolation that the Catholic Church in China is growing in numbers and in vitality.

In 1949, statistics indicate there were 3,500,000 Catholics, 146 Bishops (60 Chinese), 5,800 Priests (2,700 Chinese), and 7,806 Brothers and Religious Women, (half of whom were Chinese).

According to recent official statistics, the number of Catholics remains about the same. It is difficult to calculate the number of Catholics in China today; but judging from reports by Chinese Catholics and those of many visitors, the actual number of Catholics would exceed the official figures. Many sources assure us that the number of Catholics is on the increase.

The pastor of the Cathedral parish of Beijing, Father Shi, on his return from a visit to the Philippines, stated that in the Diocese of Beijing there are some 30,000

Catholics, 10 priests, 20 religious women and 20 seminarians; he also stated that the principal problems were the shortage of places of worship and priests. In his parish alone, in the space of one year, there were 300 adult's baptized and 200 confirmed. In general, these come from young families who previously had not had the opportunity for Christian instruction. In Beijing, recently, 100 couples have received the sacrament of matrimony. The Bishop of Beijing, Fu Tieshan, speaking to a group of French tourists, affirmed that Christians must be the "leaven of the masses" and the "salt of the earth" in their society. He added that it is necessary in China for the Christian message to gradually penetrate Chinese culture and Chinese society.

In Zikawei, Shanghai, Father Lian Guobang, informed this same French group that on feast days, about 6,000 Catholics come together to worship in this large parish church: workers, farmers, teachers and those belonging to the medical profession.

Last Christmas, a Chinese priest wrote to the Holy Spirit Study Centre of Hong Kong: "I have been very busily engaged in pastoral ministry in the two parishes that have been entrusted to me. There are between eight and nine hundred catechumens in each of the parishes, and each Sunday, no matter how far away from the Church they live, they come faithfully to learn the catechism. Their zeal is really impressive".

Similar sources of information speak of the signs of greater sensitivity and interest on the part of youth for religion and for the Church. The same sources speak of an admirable Christian witness in the lives of first generation Christians, of the surprising vitality of the Church, of the increase in the number of Christians, and also following upon conversion, the increase in religious vocations, particularly of religious women, especially in the northeast.

The new openness to culture - to cultural values - is another sign of the new course Chinese policy is taking. Dialogue, increased contacts and collaboration on all cultural levels, including religious values, when carried out honestly, cannot but lead to further knowledge, understanding, respect and mutual esteem. In this respect, cultural engagement offers the best prospect for mutual knowledge and

understanding between the Chinese people and the Church. It was in fact Catholic missionaries who were among the first westerners to study closely and come to appreciate China and her traditional culture. Also, the Church has always been a leading advocate of the integration of human culture on all levels in quest of man's eternal destiny, in the service of man. The Church has also demonstrated in China its eagerness to engage in scientific as well as cultural collaboration with Chinese society.

Today the Chinese spirit seems even more sensitive to the values of religious culture. Chinese youth especially wants to come to know the Gospel in depth. Not only Chinese Catholics, but also many non-Christian Chinese young people are on the lookout for books relating to religion and culture, and are most interested in the Bible - the foundation for traditional Christian religious culture.

Communion with the Universal Church, Right and Obligation

Communion of the Church in China, of its Pastors and Faithful, with the Universal Church and with its Head, the Pope, is without doubt, the most delicate issue facing the Universal Church in its relationship with the Government and the local Church.

This communion does not derive from an arbitrary assumption of authority by the Church or the Pope; it is an essential element of the Church as founded by Christ. It is therefore an essential, constitutional component of the Church, characteristic of her identity. She is not bound to any nation, culture or time, but is at the service of all, because she is at the service of mankind with regard to its ultimate destiny.

The particular Church of China, as every other local church in the world, by its very nature, must be understood to be in communion with the universal Church and with the Pope. Thus, and only thus will the Church in China be truly Church and truly Chinese, that is, having an authentic Chinese identity in the context of communion.

Henry D'Souza, Archbishop of Cuttak-Bhubaneswar, India, on returning from his trip to China with the FABC delegation mentioned above, stated: "I am convinced that the Church in China is animated by a great desire for communion with

the universal Church. We must do whatever possible to overcome the difficulties from which they suffer, bound by certain historical facts. This task represents a great challenge for the FABC".

Vital and visible communion of the Church in China with the universal Church and the Apostolic See is the object of growing pastoral concern by this See, Propaganda Fide, the Chinese Episcopal Conference in Taiwan and of local Churches everywhere.



Pope John Paul II, in his letter of January 6, 1982, which he addressed to all Bishops to invite Catholics of the whole world to pray for their Chinese brothers in the faith, said: "The solicitude for the Church in China which has always been so vital in my recent predecessors, Pius XII, John XXIII, Paul VI, and John Paul I, has become the particular and constant urgency of my pontificate".

The Pope also asked specific prayers for the realization of the visible communion of the Chinese Catholic community with the universal Church: "Prayer,

then, can obtain from the Divine Mercy those gifts, spiritual light and strength, so that the indispensable conditions to enjoy even visible union with the Church of Jesus Christ, which is 'one, holy, catholic and apostolic', may be assured to the Church in China."

In his discourse and directives to the Bishops of the Regional Episcopal Conference of China, on the occasion of their ad limina visit in November 1985, the Pope underlined the same concern: "That Church, so dear to me, is continually in my mind and I daily beseech the Spirit that the day may soon come when, after the obstacles of various kinds have been removed, there will come the desired moment of communion fully lived, expressed and enjoyed."

"In the meantime, there is entrusted to us the fruitful mission of praying for those communities that their faith in the Redeemer of humanity may be lively and deeply experienced in the communion of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic

Church, which has in Peter and his Successors the 'permanent and visible source and foundation both of the Bishops and of the whole company of the faithful' (Lumen Gentium 23)".

Archbishop Dermott Ryan, then Pro-Prefect of the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, in his homily of a Mass celebrated on November 9, 1984 for the Church in China, expressed sadness at the news coming from China which reflects "the absence, at least exteriorly, of that communion with the rest of the Church and with the Vicar of Christ which is proper and essential to being Catholic..."

"Oh, that they would understand, those who must understand, that the Kingdom of Christ is not of this world! That it is not a political power. Oh, that they would understand, those who should understand, that the Church is not a foreigner in any part of the world; that the bond of communion that must unite the various local Churches with the Vicar of Christ and with the See of Peter is not an unjust interference in the internal affairs of nations, but only a spiritual bond, a necessary and indispensable service of unity in the Faith that must join all the followers of Christ in the one great Church of the Lord!"

The Bishops of the Taiwan Regional Episcopal Conference in a Joint Letter of November 1984, also insisted on the necessary communion between local Churches, Universal Church and the Pope.

" 'I believe in the one holy, catholic and apostolic Church'. This is our Faith... From apostolic times, the Churches, spread out over the world, have been in communion with each other..."

"Traditionally, the Chinese Church has always been in communion with the Pope, maintaining a relationship of dependence, according to our Catholic faith..."

"In these extraordinary times, when the bishops in China have no means of communication with the Pope, they have many faculties and powers which enable them to decide on their own temporarily; but they may not publicly deny their allegiance to the Pope, thus damaging their own faith."

"The relation between the Church and the Pope is a matter of communion in Faith".

Given the above outline of the special situation that exists in the Church in China, it is for these reasons that prayer for ecclesial communion becomes a matter of pressing and urgent concern for Catholics everywhere.