

# THE CHURCH IN CHINA: TODAY AND TOMORROW

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It gives me great pleasure to be here with you this evening, and I wish to thank the Rector of Louvain University for extending me his kind invitation to come to Belgium. I am returning to a country that is no stranger to me, for Belgium has always had a warm place in my affections. When I was a child in Shanghai, my father worked at the Scheut Fathers Centre, and part of my earliest recollections were of Belgian missionaries with long flowing beards visiting our home. That was over 60 years ago. Later, while studying Chinese Church history in the seminary, I came to appreciate the wisdom and work of Ferdinand Verbiest, the famous Belgian missionary-astronomer to the court of the

Qing emperor, whose 300th anniversary of death you will be celebrating next year. In more recent times, the Belgian missionary Father Vincent Lebbe and the many Belgian engineers who helped us to build our railroads, have also been special objects of my admiration. So it was with eager anticipation that I looked forward to my first visit to your country in 1947. Nor was I disappointed. I made many friends here, and even ended up being adopted into a Belgian family, with whom I corresponded up until my arrest in 1955. That first journey from my native Shanghai to Marseille took almost a month. It seemed to me then that the world was very large. This, my second trip, was by jet plane and took only 15 hours. In forty years, the world has become very small indeed.

If the world has changed, so too has Western Europe. Fifty years ago, close cooperation among the European nations was quite rare. An atmosphere of hostility existed, which often brought them into armed conflict with each other. Today, however, this situation has been transformed, as farsighted statesmen from all nations work together to bring about unity and mutual cooperation within the European community. As the countries of Western Europe move steadily in the direction of forming deeper and more extensive alliances, they cannot but continue to exercise greater influence on international affairs.

If Western Europe has undergone profound changes, so too has Louvain. I speak not only of the external face of the city, but also of the shifts in the mental outlook and values of its people. The changes have been such that I hardly recognized the place after all these years. But I have not come to talk about Louvain, rather, I have come to speak to you of my own country, China.

What first strikes people about China is its massive population. Numbering over 1 billion people, the Chinese account for one out of every five inhabitants on the planet. China also has very ancient cultural roots, with a history dating back 20 centuries before the birth of Christ. Our most influential philosopher Confucius was active five centuries before Caesar became emperor of Rome. In the course of human history, many great civilizations have risen and flourished, only to disappear without leaving any important legacy behind them. Chinese civilization has lasted without significant interruption for over 40 centuries. Drawing upon her inner strength as well as her contacts with other nationalities and cultures, she continues to flourish today.

Except for brief periods in our history, China has always maintained a positive and open attitude towards other cultures. We

encourage friendly contacts with all nationalities, and have a policy of mutual respect and cultural exchange based on the principle of reciprocity: fulfillment of mutual needs. An early example of this policy can be found in the development of religion in our country.

Of all the religions in China, only Taoism is native to China. The other four major religions: Buddhism, Islamism, Catholicism and Protestantism originated in foreign countries. Islamism is so closely connected to the cultures of some of our national minorities that whole sections of our country are almost totally Muslim. This is not unlike the situation in the later Middle Ages in Europe that gave rise to the dictum: "Cujius regio, ejus religio." Buddhism, over a long period of time, permeated the ideology and praxis of Chinese civilization. It adapted itself to the culture and was gradually assimilated, becoming sinicized to the extent that many Chinese forget its Indian and Nepalese roots and consider it to be peculiar to China. Unfortunately, Christianity did not follow the same pattern. The Gospel failed to take root in China. From the end of the Ming Dynasty, when Matteo Ricci and his companions arrived in Beijing, up to the time of Liberation in 1949 -- a period of 400 years -- the number of Catholics has never exceeded 3 million. Contrast this with the Church in the United States. At the time of the American Revolution there were only 25,000 Catholics in the Thirteen Colonies. Today there are over 50 million. Of course, there are many distinctive historical reasons for this kind of development, not the least of which was the large number of Catholic immigrants over the years. However, another factor that has contributed to the great success of evangelization in the United States has been the spirit of initiative and the courage to follow a road in conformity to the conditions the Church found already existing in that country. The American Catholic experience impels us to serious reflection. In recalling the four centuries of Catholic history in China, we must conclude that, with notable exceptions such as Ricci and others of rare foresight, those in authority pursued a policy of total uniformity in all church matters. Neither our culture, nor our traditional sages were accorded the respect and evaluation that was their due.

What remains for us to do is to draw up a balance sheet that evaluates the lessons and experiences of four centuries of history in order that we might continue to develop what was good, and correct past mistakes. While visiting West Germany last year, I touched upon various aspects of this subject. I do not intend to repeat myself today. Also I would like to call your attention to Father Jerome Heyndrickx's article "The Emergence of a Local Church in China" which appeared recently in Tripod, and which I feel represents an objective and

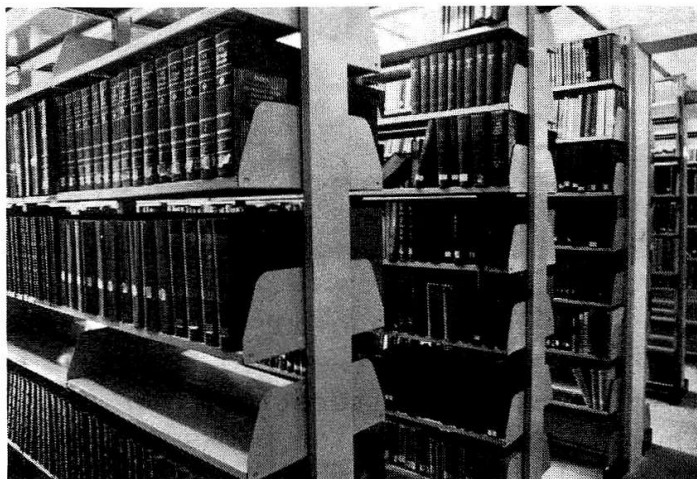
unbiased interpretation of the history of the Church in China. His understanding has come from many years of experience in Taiwan, Hong Kong and Belgium, and he is motivated by the principle of "using the past to understand the present." I have nothing to add to the conclusions of his article here. What I would like to do this evening is to focus not on the past but rather on the present -- to give you a description of the Church in China as it exists today. Then I shall close with a comment or two about our future.

Since my most recent experience has been as auxiliary bishop of Shanghai, let me begin with my own diocese. The diocese of Shanghai has over 120,000 Catholics, two-thirds of whom live outside the city itself, in the countryside. Many of the latter are fisherfolk. In the past, fishermen lived with their families on their boats and much of their time was spent traveling up and down the rivers and lakes making a living. In recent times, they concentrate on the breeding of fish according to modern scientific methods. Economic reforms have improved their livelihood, but their life-style still retains much of the modest simplicity it has always had. There are about 100,000 fisherfolk among the Catholics of Shanghai and its two neighbouring dioceses. As a group they are fervent and pious, faithful to the traditional practices of their religion. At dawn and at dusk, it is not uncommon to hear the chanting of morning and evening prayers rising from the boats moored along the water's edge. Parents are concerned about the Catholic education of their children, who from infancy are taught the rudiments of the catechism and their prayers. The boat people live in a world apart, somewhat isolated from the influences of the larger society. They hold firmly to their traditions and their faith. And for this we respect them.

Since 1980, the diocese has reopened thirty churches. Six of these are in Shanghai, with the rest sprinkled throughout the countryside. Three more churches will reopen this year. An example of one of the recently opened churches is the neo-gothic cathedral at Xujiahui, which was originally built in 1911. It seats three thousand and is in the native district of the famous Catholic scholar and patriot, Xu Guangqi. Over 6,000 foreign tourists attended Mass there last year. Another well-known church is the basilica of Our Lady of Sheshan. At the close of the 19th century, French Jesuits purchased fourteen hectares of land there, and they built a small chapel which could seat 400 people. Later they constructed a basilica on the top of the hill that can accommodate over 2,000 people. The basilica is dedicated to the Virgin Mary under the title of Our Lady Help of Christians. It is one of the most popular pilgrimage sites in China. On May 1st of each year over 10,000 pilgrims

come by land and sea to climb the hill, attend Mass and pray the rosary. During May of this year over 60,000 Catholics from all parts of the country came to Sheshan on pilgrimage. Detailed reports of the ceremonies received coverage in local government newspapers and on national television.

In 1982 we opened a regional seminary at Sheshan for the training of priests. At present we have 116 seminarians preparing themselves intellectually and spiritually to serve the church in the eastern dioceses of the country. All our seminarians are graduates of secondary school and their ages vary from a young 17 to a spry 67 years old. Two years ago I ordained the first seven seminarians to the priesthood. The ceremony was carried by



Library of the New Sheshan Seminary

national television to the remotest parts of China. Another priest was ordained in December of last year, with two American priests from Hong Kong joining in on the laying on of hands. On my return from this trip, I shall ordain another eight priests on the Feast of the Holy Trinity. The seminary began from scratch. Now we have a library of over 20,000 volumes, most of which were donated by foreign friends. Ten priests, including myself, and ten lay-people comprise our faculty. Many foreign friends come to visit and some stay to give lectures to our students. The seminary does not have its own financial resources, but relies on the annual contributions of those dioceses who have students studying there. As you already know, the most urgent problem facing us is the aging of the clergy. Our own bishop Zhang Jiashu is already 93, and I, who am 70 years old, am considered to be a youngster among the bishops. That is why we must waste no time, but rather redouble our efforts to train and form new priests as quickly as possible.

There are 80 religious Sisters in our diocese, whose average age is 77. We opened a novitiate last year, and accepted eighteen novices, the youngest being 20 years old.

With the opening of the seminary and the novitiate, succession is guaranteed. We do have the vocations, but we are in need of both teachers and textbooks. Almost all our Catholic books were lost during



Novices in Wuhan

the Cultural Revolution. We are in process of writing new textbooks ourselves according to the order of importance and urgency; we teach while we write. After five years of work, we have completed a series of books for a complete course in theology. The texts are now in the process of being edited. We have already begun work on a similar series for a course in philosophy.

Two years ago our diocese re-established the "Guangqi Research Centre" whose three-fold purpose is to study the whole question of theological inculturation, to provide information on the universal Church, and to publish books on religion and philosophy. The centre has a small library which contains more than forty periodicals from different countries. These include Documentation Catholique, La Croix Quotidienne, Osservatore Romano, Etudes, Civilita Catholica, Lumen Vitae, Die Zeit, Missi, and La Nouvelle Revue Theologique. We publish two reviews, one of which is a bi-monthly and the other a quarterly. They have been well received. We have translated the Four Gospels from the original French of the Jerusalem Bible, and printed 300,000 copies. We have also published translations of The Imitation of Christ, Jesus in History by Daniel Rops, A Commentary on the Gospel of Mark by Father Huby, and With Jesus by Cardinal Martini. Ten thousand copies each of the abovementioned books were printed, and they were sold out in one month. We will make a second printing of them soon. We have set as our goal the publication of new book each month.

Aurora University, established by the famous Catholic intellectual Joseph Ma Xiangbo and later administered by the French Jesuits, has trained a great number of talented people throughout its history. With the old Aurora alumni and alumnae as the core, we have established the Association of Catholic Intellectuals of Shanghai, whose members now number over five hundred. The president of the Association is Professor Zhu Zhonggong, a member of this delegation. After graduation from Aurora, Dr. Zhu did post-graduate studies in dermatology in France. The Association has organized the Catholic doctors to make medical tours into the countryside. And a group of Catholic professors has established an evening school where they teach English, French and German in their free time. Demanding no salary and sparing no effort,

these intellectuals are helping the Church greatly by contributing their energy, knowledge and precious time.

We are about to open a new convalescent home for the aged. The building is ready and management personnel have been assigned. We are also in the process of setting up a medium sized printing plant. The overall situation of the Shanghai diocese is good. And the same can be said for the Chinese church as a whole.

There are now about 3.3 million Catholics in China. During the Cultural Revolution they had neither churches nor priests. But Christians preserved the faith in the deep recesses of their hearts, and transmitted this faith to their children within the family. From 1979, when churches were allowed to reopen, Christians worked without remuneration to have a part in their repair and renovation. In certain places, the Catholics built new churches out of their own resources, and walked long distances, sometimes up to a hundred kilometers, to attend Mass. From 1980 to 1985 over 13,000 adults were baptized. By the end of 1986, seven regional seminaries and four preparatory seminaries have been established throughout the country. There are at present over six hundred seminarians and more than 200 novice Sisters, some of whom are university graduates. In the course of the last six years, about 1,000 churches and 1,000 chapels have re-opened, which averages out to almost one a day.

Among the one billion inhabitants of China, 3.3 million Catholics make for a tiny minority, only 0.3% of the total population. But it is a minority that does not pass unnoticed. During the Cultural Revolution, the Catholics did not abandon their faith, despite terrible persecution. Today they enjoy universal esteem. They thank God, as they try to reflect in their lives the spirit of Christ and become the "light of the world" and "the salt of the earth". Always and everywhere, by word and deed, they seek to give witness to Christ. In school, they are usually good students: they study diligently, obey the rules, love their country, respect their teachers and love their classmates. In their jobs, they work hard, protect the property of the State, are ready and willing to take on all sorts of tasks, and have gained the confidence of society. In their families they live in harmony. They respect their elders, and are frequently singled out as model families. The authorities admit publicly that there are few criminals among the Catholics. They come to the aid of their neighbours. In places where there are no priests or churches, the Catholics gather at the home of one of their number to celebrate feastdays. In cases of serious illness, Catholics are always willing to

care for the sick. They pray with the person to the point of death, and assist at his funeral. This often causes non-believers to be deeply moved and to seek entrance into the church. Jesus said: "The Spirit blows where it will" (Jn.3:8). During this short span of 20 or 30 years, since the Chinese Catholic Church has become independent and is administered by its own priests and laity, the former crisis has passed, and our church goes forward full of vitality and certainty. The Spirit blows over the whole country, and there are charismatic Catholics among us. We must believe in the Holy Spirit.

God has spoken to us through the prophet Isaiah: "My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor my ways your ways." The events of the last few decades teach us that we must continually abandon our thoughts and our ways to discern the thoughts and ways of God and adapt to them. It is not easy, it seems, to abandon our ways and follow those of God. The history of the church proves that since the time of Christ this has been difficult for all, even for the authorities from all ranks of the church, high and low. Now I am going to tell you briefly why and how I could not arrive at this stage sooner.

I was born into a family which had been Catholic for many generations. As I said above, in my childhood I received a strictly French education at the hands of the Jesuits. In secondary school, except for Chinese, all the other courses, including the history and geography of China, were taught in French by French priests. Afterwards I entered the Paris Province of the Society of Jesus. After ordination, I came to Paray-le-Monial to do my tertianship. Afterwards I did further studies at the Gregorian University and obtained a doctorate in dogmatic theology. While I was in Rome, I attended the assembly called by Pope Pius XII after the arrest of Cardinal Mindszenty by the Hungarian government. His speech, "The crime committed on the banks of the Danube causes waves of resentment on the banks of the Tiber," resounded in my ears for several years. At that time China had already been liberated. I decided to return. In the face of questions raised by certain persons - Cardinal Celsius Costantini for one - my response was always the same: some individuals could flee to foreign countries and become Chinese without a nationality, but given the three million Catholics on the mainland, the shepherd could not desert his flock. I returned to Shanghai at the beginning of 1951, having been influenced by my sojourn in foreign lands, and with many prejudices.

It was not a time of dialogue. One could only see the negative aspects of communism. As in other parts of the world, a situation of confrontation arose in China which saw the Church and communism pitted



against one another on a collision course. A great number of Catholics were imprisoned. This was a great catastrophe for the Church.

Nevertheless there remained some Catholics who came forward at the critical moment to address themselves to the disastrous situation. They abandoned the policy of confrontation with the People's Government. They followed the principle of loving the country and obeying the law. They led the Catholics on the road of independence and taught them to rely on their own capabilities. They also saved and preserved the Church of China.

In prison, after having reflected for a long time, I became aware that my thoughts and my ways were perhaps not those of God. Having been absent from my country for many years, I had not understood very well the meaning of the events which were unfolding there.

During the 70's I was released from jail upon completion of my sentence. In 1976, the Gang of Four was crushed, and my country changed its policy to one of openness. I began to make contact with foreigners. I knew that the world had changed, and that the Catholic Church had also changed.

The changes in our Church both instructed and inspired me. We must submit ourselves to God's commands. We must take reality into consideration. The reality of the arrangements which God has made for us are the following.

China is a socialist country. The Chinese people have chosen socialism. The corrupt rule in China and the insults inflicted on the Chinese people by colonialism were such that the latter took the anti-imperialist and revolutionary road. We must love our country. We Catholics are only a minority of 0.3%. We must take part in the life and destiny of our country, experience its joys and sorrows. Being a shepherd, I could not run away. I must think of the welfare of the Catholics and render service to them. The socialist system has provided the answer to a problem which we have not been able to solve for a long time: it has wiped out starvation. One billion people lead a happy life. The national dignity has been restored, and we are respected by all the world's peoples. The Chinese Church, administered by Chinese Catholics is patriotic and law-abiding, and it maintains its independence and autonomy. It has adapted itself to the actual situation of China. Perhaps the truth of what Cardinal Lekai, primate of Hungary, said applies here: "I would never attempt to go back, but rather to push history forward."

These are the arrangements which God provided for me. At the beginning of the 80's, on the one hand, I had a job suited to my speciality in the north of China. I worked as a proof-reader in a translation company. Life was tranquil and the work easy. On the other hand, the diocese of Shanghai wanted to reopen the seminary, and they asked if I would return to direct it. To remain in the north or to return to Shanghai: an interior struggle raged within me for a long time. If I stayed in the north, which was my second home, I could spend my old age in peace. If I returned to Shanghai, not only would the work be exhausting, but I would also be subject to slanderous attacks by certain people. Was it worth the pain? After a long period of reflection, I came to the conclusion: if I stayed in the north it would be for selfish reasons; if I returned to Shanghai it would be for the good of the Church. Thus, in June 1982 I returned to Shanghai. Under the direction of Bishop Zhang Jiashu, I have taken part in the rebuilding of the Church. After five years' experience, I am convinced that it is the correct way desired by God. I have decided to continue in this way.

The world is in the process of change. It is becoming more and more rational and perfect.

One has seen the changes which have taken place among the European nations. States formerly separated from one another and hostile, are now one community. The Benelux nations provided the example, and the European Economic Community followed suit. This was great progress. This sort of alliance has blossomed on every continent. The tendency is irresistible; humanity is conscious of its unity.

The Church has also changed. The early Church did not confine itself within the framework of Judaism. She opened her doors and assimilated the Greek and Latin civilizations. In this way, was not the Gospel able to spread throughout the whole Roman Empire? For a rather long period of time, due to a lack of knowledge about geography, church leaders thought that Europe, the Middle East and North Africa constituted the entire world. They were unaware that beyond these mountains and these seas there were other mountains and other seas. They were enthusiastic for the latinization of the church. Other civilizations were put to one side. The church portrayed herself as an old monk, immovable on an isolated island in the middle of a river, watching the water flowing rapidly towards the east. The church gloried in her immutability.

However, the church's mission is to serve all of humanity and to bring about salvation for a mankind which only exists in time and space.

The world has changed, man has changed, and man's ideology has changed. These changes, having for their object the adaptation to circumstances and the assimilation of new input, are a sign of vitality. Immutability on the contrary signifies ossification. A human society which remains immobile risks being eliminated and abandoned, risks disappearing and becoming only a vestige of history. The church is the people of God which is on the way towards the heavenly Jerusalem. How can it not but change its appearance? Our church is about to celebrate its second millenium. She remains always young. The reason is that she does not cease renewing herself. For more than twenty years the church has recognized once again the importance of inculturation and renewal, of leaving the isolated island in order to walk with the people, and of speeding up the pace of "aggiornamento." Those who participate in change do not spell out clearly their own transformation. Cut off from the external world for over thirty years, my first contact with the outside world really came as a great surprise. One of the greatest changes in the church was the complete abandonment of Latin. This was inconceivable 40 years ago, but it has become a reality greeted by Catholics as a sign of great progress. The second change was the importance attached to pluralism. This is without doubt the breath of the Holy Spirit.



Wuhan Catholics pray for peace

In the past the church has insisted on uniformity. Complete and absolute control was exercised over everything. Too much control stifles vitality. The core of Roman civilization was "power," which is to say authority and law. "Charity," the most important commandment of Our Saviour, was neglected. Now many theologians are rediscovering the spirit of communion, or koinonia. This is another indication of progress. However, we clearly perceive that it is easier to abandon a dead language than to give up attachment to power.

To have real pluralism, it is first necessary to promote inculturation. Pluralism in the church consists of not identifying with any one political system in society. History marches on. At first the church took a negative attitude even towards the revolution of the bourgeoisie, and this caused needless losses. The church is now opposed to the socialist system. The lessons of history are very valuable. They educate us, we who are living at the turning point of history and in the midst of a revolutionary storm, we who desire to take sides with people seeking a better life for themselves and for others. Pluralism means to try with all our effort to preach the Gospel in the midst of all kinds of social systems. Already more than one billion people live under the socialist system. Ought not the attitude of Catholics throughout the whole world be this: to understand and support the pioneering efforts of Catholics who live under this system, to draw conclusions from their experiences, successes as well as failures, and to encourage them. For their witness is all the more valuable as their situation is totally different. The dream of interference and domination by relying on the financial and military forces of the great powers has been disastrous in the past, and it will be even more so in the future. The reason is apparent: because it does not conform to the spirit of Jesus Christ.

Pluralism requires as a condition sine qua non a true inculturation. It is only by inculturation that the church can preach the Gospel to all the inhabitants of this world, who exist in different circumstances in time and space. Allow me to quote a passage from the conversations of Cardinal De Courtrai with Andre Seve:

But many people think that the faith is found and expressed in a pure state. In reality, the faith is always transmitted in a cultural package. The Word of God as contained in the Gospels encounters us in human words, wrapped in a given culture, and in that sense, dated. As for the relationship between faith and the Word of God, faith in Jesus Christ can be lived, expressed, and celebrated in completely diverse

cultures without ceasing to be essentially the same faith in the same Savior. This is truly the great miracle of the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of Pentecost. But more must be said: it is through this that the Word of God unfolds its infinite truths in time and space and that the church's faith blossoms into countless expressions. In proportion as the Gospel penetrates history, so the unfathomable riches of Christ are deployed. I see here an application of the extraordinary word of Jesus which is one of my favorites, and which shows Jesus' extraordinary humility and gives us hope: "You will do greater things than me." (Jn 14:12) Due to His Spirit, of course! But we should make an equal affirmation: the Christian faith cannot be stingy nor fearful before any culture. Inculturation, which is part of missionary work, is an exciting undertaking. It allows the people of a given culture to receive the message of Christ. If this message was expressed in a language foreign to their culture, they would not understand it..."

We must guard against uniformity. There is a Chinese proverb: "Master Ye loves the dragons." But at the sight of a live dragon, he is frightened out of his wits, as if seeing a phantom. There are people who speak of pluralism and inculturation, but when they come up against them in reality, they immediately want to interfere with and oppose them. They look for any means to return to uniformity. Not only is this contrary to the course of history, but also to the Holy Spirit. Permit me to cite here the words of the famous Christian theologian Oscar Cullman: "Where the Holy Spirit is at work, he gives birth to diversity. However, each action does not result in fragmentation. Each member of the body carries out his/her mission, which is directed towards unity."

In conclusion, I wish to repeat the words of Isaiah: "My ways are not your ways." When many Catholics in Europe thought that the church in China was dead, the Lord prepared a new way for us. For the first time in its history the Catholic Church of China is conscious of being a truly local Chinese and independent Catholic Church. This is the content of my message. I am grateful to have had the occasion of acquainting you somewhat with the quite positive evolution of this church. After so many years of non-communication with the Catholic churches of Europe, the purpose of our trip has been precisely to re-establish friendly relations of exchange, cooperation and understanding. We want to walk with you on the road of friendship, equality, mutual respect and unity. Ut in caritate et veritate unitas crescat. (That unity many grow in love and truth).