

Hong Kong Women Religious Superiors Visit China

Editor's Note: The Hong Kong Association of Major Superiors of Religious Women, which represents over 800 religious women working in the Diocese of Hong Kong, visited five Catholic dioceses in mainland China during November. The group, which consisted of 11 members, was led by the Association's president Sister Marie Remedios and guided by Father John Tong from the Holy Spirit Study Centre. We have asked Sister Grace Lee, one of the delegation, to share with us some of her thoughts and impressions about their journey.

Our trip, which included Shanghai, Nanjing, Beijing, Wuhan and Guangzhou, was conducted in an atmosphere of genuine warmth and traditional hospitality. Wherever we went we were deluged with invitations to visit churches, seminaries, convents and social centres where Christians are accustomed to gather. For many of us this pilgrimage to China was the fulfilment of a long cherished dream. Sister Marie Remedios set the tone when she said to our gracious hosts at each port of call: "We have come to renew old friendships and make new ones; to pray in your churches and enjoy the beauty of your country." In response, our hosts mentioned that we had arrived at a good time, for the 13th National People's Congress, which had just concluded in Beijing, had just given reconfirmation to the open door policy which China has espoused in recent years, encouraging more and closer contacts with the outside world.

Our first stop was Shanghai where we were met by no less than four bishops, one of whom was Bishop Gong Pinmei, who had been released from prison in 1985. His only words to us were: "We are happy to be here together with you. We don't know how much longer we shall be in this world, perhaps five or six years. But then we hope we shall all meet again in heaven." Among the bishops were Zhang Jiashu, who himself is 95 years old, Li Side and Jin Luxian, who are in their seventies. Our hosts and hostesses during the trip were mostly members of the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association, who welcomed our group warmly and invited us on every occasion to break bread with them. At a banquet in Shanghai, an official of Shanghai's United Front Department waxed enthusiastically about the quality of the social work, being done by Caritas and the sisters, which he had witnessed personally on a trip to Hong Kong.

The following day was the Feast of All Souls and we were invited to attend the morning Masses at Shanghai's oldest and best known cathedral. Dedicated to the Blessed Mother it is now named after one of China's most well-known Catholic Laymen, Xu Guangxi. Xu was a member of the literati baptized by Matteo Ricci in 1603. The church itself was built in 1911 and is one of China's largest places for Catholic worship. Because the liturgy was in the Latin language, it brought back memories to us of a former time, and especially during the singing of the Gregorian Chant, waves of nostalgia washed over us. One of Xu's descendents is now the vice-president of the Catholic Intellectuals Association of Shanghai, a group of about 400 lay Catholics that does volunteer social, medical and educational work among the poor.

In this city of 12 million people, there are about 120,000 Catholics. The diocese has 52 priests (including four who are newly ordained) working in 32 parishes. There are also 80 sisters with 20 novices and, according to Bishop Li, there is a lot of concern for the training and formation of these young women for pastoral ministry. The younger sisters go out from the convent to teach in the parishes, while the more elderly ones remain at home making vestments and doing other tasks. Many elderly sisters have applied for entry into the convent, hence the need for younger sisters to take their place in the active apostolate.

While in Shanghai, we journeyed to Sheshan, home of the Marian Basilica, and a popular pilgrimage site. The Marian shrine continues to draw large numbers of pilgrims, especially during the month of May. The old people told us how they used to row their boats up the canal which led to the church in the old days before the new road was built. We received permission here to have a private Mass in the basilica. Afterwards Bishop Jin took us on tour of the regional seminary. Sheshan seminary is one of 7 regional seminaries that have recently opened to allow students to prepare themselves for the priesthood. In all, China has about 600 seminarians and there seems to be no shortage of youth vocations. Bishop Jin also told us of the talks underway with Caritas of Switzerland and Misericordia of Germany to establish a clinic and printing press in the diocese. He raised the topic of women's changing role in the Church, and how Sisters would play in increasingly important role in the future. "I hope," said the bishop, "that there will be more laymen and women at the next synod than there will be bishops."

The next stop on our tour was Nanjing where we were met by two young and lively sisters and their pastor Father Liu Yuanren. The cathedral, which was reopened in 1980 after months of restoration work, is on the site of a church originally built by Matteo Ricci. It was the first church to be built in Jiangsu Province, and after the Japanese War served also as the residence of Bishop, later Cardinal, Paul Yüpin. Its

exceptionally beautiful vestments and sacred vessels were carried out and hidden away during the time of the Cultural Revolution. At present, Bp. Qian Huimin administers a diocese of over 50,000 Catholics. 10 priests and 6 sisters assist him in this work, which includes 10 parish centres.

Nanjing is also the centre for the Protestant Three-self Movement and we took advantage of the proximity of their headquarters to pay them a visit. The building houses a seminary and the offices of the Amity Foundation. The seminary has 200 seminarians now preparing for the pastoral ministry. Amity was established in 1985 as a Protestant community response to the needs of society at large. It is involved in educational, medical and social services, boasting of a modern printing press that has already turned out 20,000 Bibles as well as many other educational materials. Amity also has had much success recently in the development of artificial limbs. Mr. Gu Renfa, director of liaison, welcomed us and explained to us the progress of their unique organization. "We started from nothing, but we are expanding rapidly. Already there are 15 foreign organizations, including Caritas Hong Kong and Misericordia from Germany, helping us to provide social services to the community."

From Nanjing, we moved north to Beijing where we saw the Church of Our Saviour (Beitang) which was reopened in 1985. It is now being readied to replace the Church of the Immaculate Conception as the diocesan cathedral. It is a handsome structure, built with a combination of eastern and western styles. Its twin pagoda pavillions flank a Gothic facade, and within the church the red and green spiral pillars blend harmoniously with its ornate stained-glass windows.

Unfortunately, we were not able to meet with Bishop Fu Tieshan, the ordinary of the diocese, who was ill and in the hospital, but Father Laurence Shi Yukun, the pastor, showed us around the old cathedral. He explained that there were 93 priests in the diocese serving over 40,000 Catholics, with Beijing itself having four main churches. Old churches continue to reopen and there are plans to build new ones in the suburban areas. Catechism classes are well attended at the cathedral and about 300 baptisms are recorded there each year. The sisters working in Beijing are divided into two groups: the professed sisters living together on the cathedral grounds (numbering 20), and 12 novices under the supervision of Sister Wang Boren, who reside at St. Theresa's Church. Sister Wang informed us that the two groups gather together frequently for community celebrations.

There are two seminaries in Beijing. We saw only the National Catholic Seminary, which is housed in the former residence of the Society of the Divine Word at Fujen University. The building is in need of repair and the 69 seminarians have to live in cramped quarters.

However, work has already begun on the new seminary, which should be completed in two years.

While touring the seminary, we had the opportunity to ask many questions of Bishop Tu Shihua its rector. We wondered why the Latin language was still given such prominence in the training of the seminarians and is still used in liturgical rites. He told us that the vernacular was beginning to make some headway, but the changes would only come gradually. He said: "It will take time, just as Vatican II took time." We also asked if there was any conflict between the elderly professors and their youthful students. The Bishop said that this was not a problem, as the Chinese still have much respect for their elders. He added that the seminary's first priority was the thorough spiritual formation of the seminarians. Mr. Liu Bainian, who is the director of liaison for the CCPA of Beijing, emphasized that present needs were very pressing. New churches had to be built, old ones restored, and the immediate need to catechize the people as well as take care of their social and educational concerns all demanded more immediate attention.

When asked about accepting the Pope as the spiritual head of the Catholic Church, Bishop Tu said that this was a political issue. He quoted Vatican II as encouraging a spirit of equality among local churches. "We are Chinese and reject westernization," he said, adding, "We hope the Vatican will respect us because of our desire to bring the message of Christ to our one billion Chinese." The Bishop spoke of the good work done in the past by foreign missionaries but resented their overall treatment of the Chinese people. He was willing to forget the past and noted that the Church in China has been waiting since 1981 for Rome to take realistic steps to normalize relationships. Liu Bainian commented that both parties should strive to improve their mutual relations, and he reemphasized that it was not a doctrinal problem that separated them, but a political issue. Father John Tong responded by saying that it was not merely a political issue but also a matter of faith. He pointed to the downgrading of the Vatican's diplomatic relations with the government of Taiwan over the political issue and how it had not effected the basic loyalty of Catholics there to the Pope as a spiritual leader of the Church.



In front of Matteo Ricci's tomb

Perhaps the most significant dialogue of the trip took place when the group met with the Director of the National Religious Affairs Bureau of Beijing, Mr. Ren Wuzhi, and Vice Director Madam Cao Jinru. Again the question of the Pope's spiritual leadership as an integral element of the Catholic faith was raised. Sr. Marie Remedios readily admitted past mistakes and misunderstandings, and the influence of Vatican II in opening up new directions, but as a religious she saw no contradiction between being fully Catholic and fully patriotic. To be patriotic is to love one's country, to know and support government policies that serve the common good and further the building up of a just society; to be Catholic is to accept the teachings of the Church which include acknowledging the successors of Peter as the spiritual leaders of the Church. She asked Mr. Ren how it was not possible for a Chinese Catholic to be both patriotic and Catholic?

Mr. Ren stated that he understood the connotations of the question and that the issue of normalizing relations with the Holy See had been brought up many times. He felt that the issue demanded further exploration on both sides. But, he added, the policies of self-reliance, self-propagation and self-determination also had a long and deep history in China. He hoped that the delegation would approach this with sympathetic understanding. Sister Marie remarked that while the political issue might take some time before it is finally resolved, the spiritual issue should be pursued with alacrity. China's world reputation had much to gain from its resolution, and its reputation in Hong Kong would also be greatly enhanced. Mr. Ren admitted that he did not fully understand elements in the Pope's role as leader of the Church, but he hoped to give it more attention in the future. Madam Cao brought this part of the dialogue to a close when she stated that it was not up to China but up to the Vatican to resolve the problem.

The conversation now turned to the 13th Party Congress which was recently held in Beijing. Mr. Ren called upon the group to make a careful study of its resolutions and policies that they might judge for themselves the Party's commitment to reform and greater religious freedom. He spelled out for the group the meaning of religious freedom in China. "If religious activity is normal, the government will protect it. If it falls outside the policy and goes contrary to the laws of the land, it will not be permitted." With regard to Hong Kong, he said that it had its own laws which would be respected and relations regarding the Church in China and that of Hong Kong would to be characterized by mutual respect. But he reaffirmed that no interference by or subordination of one to the other will be tolerated. It is in keeping with the spirit of the 13th Congress, he said, that believers and non-believers work together to build up the country and raise its standards of living.

Sister Marie asked why all the emphasis on interference when the goals to be stressed were mutual exchanges, collaboration and communion. She used the example of China's presence at the United Nations to illustrate how international collaboration among religious of many nations can help in the formation of the young Chinese religious. Mr. Ren pointed out that the line between interference and genuine exchange was at times ambiguous and in need of further exploration, using as an example the secret appointments of Chinese bishops by the Pope. And with regard to the religious activities of sisters in the countryside, he said it was hampered not so much by policy as by the lack of an organized church in many areas. He hoped this shortcoming would be remedied by further economic progress which would allow for the reopening of more churches there.

The delegation moved on to Wuhan, where Bishop Dong Guangqing received us with great warmth and affection. There was something of a homecoming atmosphere in our visit here, for some of the religious congregations represented by our group had previously worked in the diocese and were able to be reunited with sisters that had stayed behind after they had left. Bishop Dong has 10 priests, 40 professed sisters and 16 novices under his administration, which serves over 40,000 Catholics. The local seminary has 114 students, despite the stringent academic requirements demanded for entrance, and with them lies the hope for the future of dioceses in five provinces in central-southern China.

Our final stop was Guangzhou where we visited the city's three main churches. In Honam we were shown around by Father Wu Dexin, who had been released two years ago after 23 years in a labour camp. A new convent on the grounds of the cathedral reopened last month, and houses sisters who formerly belonged to the Congregation of the Immaculate Conception, which was founded in Canton in 1932. There are 10 elderly sisters living there and 14 aspirants now in their training-formation programme. On our last evening in Guangzhou, at a banquet we hosted to thank the Religious Affairs Bureau, we were privileged to meet Father Tan Tiande, whose 30 years in a labour camp have diminished none of his zeal and enthusiasm for preaching the gospel to the parish members of the cathedral.

It was with reluctance and fond memories that we finally returned to Hong Kong on the 10th of November. During over 10 day journey, we did manage to take in many of China's well known historical sites and experience its unsurpassed beauty. But we treasure most of all the memory of the people we met along our way. In the biblical words of Bishop Dong's greeting: "It is indeed good for brothers and sisters to come together in unity."

by Grace Lee