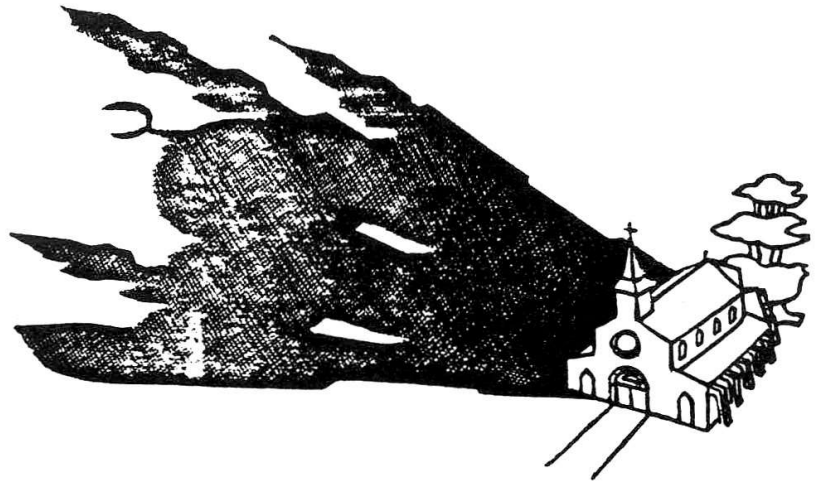


# THEOLOGICAL-PASTORAL REFLECTIONS ON THE CATHOLIC CHURCH IN THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA (CCPRC)

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Recent events in China have aroused much interest among the nations outside its borders. But this is not for the first time. The reports of the well-known Venetian traveler Marco Polo at the end of the 13th and the beginning of the 14th century fascinated the Europe of his day; and the written accounts of the experiences of missionaries in China have served since the 16th century as important stimulants for Western philosophers such as Leibnitz, Lessing and many others.

But the present spread of "China fever" can be described as a new phenomenon in so far as it has not been limited to Europe alone, but has taken on world-wide dimensions, as the whole world now watches with some concern the awakening of the "sleeping giant".

Christian churches everywhere, and in particular we Catholics as part of a universal Christian communion, are active participants in this vital concern for a nation of over one billion people which is now commanding world attention.

As Catholics, we are also immediately and directly concerned because we are convinced that the same Holy Spirit who animates our communities is very much at work in the upsurge of new interest in China and in the events now taking place there. We must try, then, to discern the ways of the Triune God in all of this, in order that we might be better able to respond appropriately to what is happening as well as to arrive at some basic practical principles to guide our present and

future actions. The following theological-pastoral reflections are given as part of the search for a more comprehensive understanding of the Catholic Church of the People's Republic of China (CCPRC) along with offering some possible practical guidelines for concrete action in responding to its present reality. These reflections move from my thesis to some practical conclusions in four steps:

- I. Thesis: the CCPRC is in search of its new identity.
- II. Lights and shadows in the search for a new identity.
- III. How can the Universal Church contribute?
- IV. How can the Federation of Asian Bishops Conference be present to this situation?

## I. THE CCPRC IS IN SEARCH OF ITS NEW IDENTITY

The present situation of the CCPRC can only be understood in the light of its own history and by an analysis of the main agents working within the framework of that history.

### 1. Historical Analysis

This is not meant to be an elaborate or comprehensive historical account of the CCPRC. We are more interested here in discerning the relevant theological-pastoral elements in that history than we are in an enumeration of historical events.

More than three hundred years of missionary history had left Chinese Catholics with feelings of admiration for the work of the foreign missionaries and a sense of gratitude for what they had accomplished, yet many Chinese people continued to harbour resentments and doubts about the missionary enterprise taken as a whole. The proclamation of the PRC in October, 1949 put the CCPRC to a severe test. It had to confront the problem of how to survive in the ideological and political framework of a totalitarian state.

The totalitarian state immediately began to take steps to isolate the CCPRC from the central leadership of the Pope in Rome. The Three-Self Movement was introduced at this time. While the Chinese Church continued to apply to Rome for approval of its episcopal candidates, Rome refused to grant its permission. Pius XII, on January 18, 1952, issued his encyclical letter, Cupimus Imprimis, demanding obedience to the Roman pontiff. On October 7, 1954 he issued another encyclical letter Ad Sinarum Gentes, in which he explained the principles involved

in ordaining a bishop, and, at the same time, criticized the Three-Self Movement. Three years later, on July 15, 1957 the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association (CCPA) was founded. In June, 1958 Pope Pius XII wrote his third encyclical letter Ad Apostolorum Principis, in which he condemned the CCPA and their election of bishops as illicit. Should we wonder then why not a few Chinese faithful and clergy felt misunderstood and pressured into further isolation?



The history of the CCPRC since 1949 now becomes immersed in the mystery of Jesus Christ; his passion, death and resurrection. In this process we see the Holy Spirit at work. We have no other way of explaining how it came to be that at the end of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) a CCPRC, marked by years of persecution emerged with greater determination to hold fast to the faith. Because the CCPRC had been cut off from normal communion with the Universal Church, its members had no opportunity to experience the events of Vatican II. As a result of this, they showed a certain mistrust of and reluctance to participate in the world-wide renewal of the Church

initiated by that Council. However, recent experience with the CCPRC has shown that there does exist a fundamental readiness among Catholics in China to take steps in the direction of the renewal which began with Vatican II.

## 2. Main Agents

### A. The socialist regime of the PRC

The attitude of the socialist regime toward the CCPRC has gone through three phases; from a gradually intensifying attempt to gain complete control in the fifties, to a rather brutal oppression in the following decades which climaxed in the persecution of the late sixties and early seventies, and finally, in its "modernization" policy, coming to some kind of acknowledgement of the existence of the CCPRC (contrary to Marxist-dogmatic expectations) and its place in the building up of a spiritual socialist culture.

## B. The CCPRC

For the sake of clarity it seems important to distinguish three interrelated agents, each with its own specific character and agenda, within the CCPRC.

a) There are the millions of Catholic laity. Due to the hostile stance of the socialist regime of the PRC, they did not have the opportunity to nourish their faith in the light of Vatican II and to enter into efforts of renewal within the Catholic Church and the Christian world in the last twenty years. There is no serious reason to doubt that the large majority of Catholics want to live in communion with the Universal Church. We can call it a "communion of desire". It is, however, difficult for them to express this "communion of desire" in explicit and structurally appropriate ways.

b) There is the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association (CCPA), officially established in 1957. Its membership includes laypersons, religious, priests and bishops. While they do agree in a more or less explicit way to the Three-Self principles: self-government, self-financing and self-propagation, it is not yet clear to what degree the members of the CCPA actually consent to its officially stated main functions:

- to unite the entire country's clergy and laity under the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party and the government of the PRC
  - to develop the spirit of patriotism
  - to observe the government policies and decrees regarding religion
  - to actively participate in the country's socialist reconstruction
  - to increase friendly relations with international Catholic groups
  - to oppose imperialism and hegemonism
  - to safeguard world peace and
  - to help the government implement its policy of religious freedom
- (Cf. "Guide to the Catholic Church in China", published by China Catholic Communication, A. Queen Street, Singapore, 0718, p.204)

These functions, in themselves, are not directly opposed to communion with the Universal Church. In fact a wide range of opinions and attitudes exist within the CCPA regarding the concrete realization of the three-self principles and the interpretation of the CCPA's main functions. In some members the spirit of patriotism seems to prevail over everything else, and this often is joined to a certain hostility toward the Vatican. Some members conform outwardly to the CCPA



directives but privately adhere to a faith-communion with the Pope as the successor of Peter. They suffer as the "Communion wounded". We must state here that it is not in our competence to judge our brothers and sisters of the CCPA regarding their catholicity. As Pope John XXIII, when addressing the topic "China and the Catholic Church" in 1961 has said; "We had best refrain from launching criticism, but rather continue to pray." It is the Holy Spirit who will teach the lesson on how to integrate a genuine spirit of patriotism with an authentic communion in the Universal Church.

In the Fourth Plenary Assembly during a joint conference of the Religious Affairs Commission and the Chinese Bishops Conference that took place in November of 1986, the CCPA refrained from using the strong anti-Rome language of the past, but nevertheless, it did express caution and some reservations concerning the Post-Vatican II Church.

c) There is, finally, the leadership of the CCPRC. According to the present structure, there are two leadership bodies: The Chinese Bishops Conference (CBC) and the Religious Affairs Commission (RAC). In addition to these official leadership bodies, we should not ignore those bishops who did not join the CCPA. They are, in our view, an essential part of the leadership of the CCPRC. The official CBC has a three-fold function:

- to study and explain the catechism and Church laws
- to exchange experiences in evangelization
- to increase friendly relations with international Catholic groups

From a theological perspective this threefold function appears as a kind of reductionist view of the meaning of Bishops Conferences as described in the documents of Vatican II. We do, however, discover some of its original functions in the second leadership body of the CCPRC, the Religious Affairs Commission. The Religious Affairs Commission states as its intention the accomplishment of the following goals:

- to continue and to develop the traditional spirit of Jesus Christ in establishing His Church and to continue the

- mission of His apostles in accordance with the Bible
- to promote the work of glorifying God and saving souls
  - to lead the clergy and laity to observe God's commandments
  - to uphold the principles of independence, self-government and democratic administration
  - to deliberate and decide major questions in Church affairs
  - to manage the CCPRC satisfactorily
- (Cf. "Guide to the Catholic Church in China," p. 204)

The RAC obviously has taken over some important functions of the Bishops Conferences as understood today in the Universal Church. The RAC includes clergy and laity in its membership. We are faced with an ecclesial phenomenon which deserves our full theological and pastoral attention. What and who are the dominant forces within the RAC? Is RAC the place where the socialist regime exercises its hold on the CCPRC? What can the Universal Church in general, and FABC in particular, learn about the actual existence and functioning of the RAC, given its complicated web of sometimes contrary forces?

We say "contrary" because we know that within the Catholic laity there does exist among its official leadership a wide diversity of position, ranging from a clear opposition to Rome, through a large middle ground of subtle adjustment to concrete circumstances, to a rather clearly stated position of adherence to the Pope. This is most clearly in evidence with regard to those members of the non-official leadership, who, in spite of pressure, stand neither with the official leadership position of the left nor the centre but side with the official leadership of the right.

While we can say that the CCPRC is searching for its new identity, we can also say that after having been scattered during the years of persecution, it is labouring now to effect a more integral unity as a Catholic community.

## **II. LIGHTS AND SHADOWS IN THE SEARCH FOR A NEW IDENTITY**

In an effort to discern lights and shadows in the multi-faceted process of the CCPRC as it moves towards a more integral existence, it might be helpful to observe this process from four angles:

### **1. Native leadership**

The gospel of Jesus Christ is usually brought to a non-Christian country by non-native missionaries. As the local Catholic community

takes root in its new soil, the awareness of the need for native leaders increases. The CCPRC enjoys a full native Chinese leadership.

The shadow, i.e. the other side of the coin, lies in the fact that this official leadership does confront serious difficulties in the area of making contact with the Universal Church, especially with the Bishop of Rome.

## 2. The challenge of modernization

It is laudable that the CCPRC involves itself with the socialist regime in order to promote the establishment of a modern China. It has too often been characteristic of the Chinese to look to their glorious past while neglecting to confront the challenges of the present. If in our time the CCPRC is really shifting its emphasis from the past to the present and the future, then we can truly rejoice in the movement.

If I am permitted to ask a daring question, will this not make for a very healthy contribution to the Universal Church, which seems at the present time to place strong emphasis on conserving the past? No one denies the value of the past. What matters is that the past, present and future be kept in proper balance.

The shadow arises in the area of political manipulation. While all Catholics should be concerned with the political reality, the local church as an ecclesiastically structured community has its own specific role and purpose in salvation history (Final Statement, Fourth Plenary Assembly of FABC, September 16-25, 1987 in 3-1). It must always stand on the side of gospel truths - a stance which implies a certain neutrality when it comes to party politics and factional struggles.

The questions arise: Is the CCPRC de facto controlled by the socialist regime? How far is the CCPRC able to avoid the iron grip of a totalitarian government?

## 3. Testimony of faith

We are in admiration of the splendid witness of millions of Christians who held to their faith in spite of the all-pervasive atheistic atmosphere of the PRC since 1949. Despite such negative treatment, the CCPRC still wants to play an active role on the stage of public life. This is in itself a positive sign of genuine Christian faith. To understand this might be difficult for those Christians who have never had to live in an atmosphere actively hostile to all forms of

religious belief. We see in this testimony the presence of the risen Lord who through His Holy Spirit cannot be hemmed in by any human force.

The shadow consists in the fact that the official CCPRC is limited in the exercise of its religious freedom--it is not allowed to participate in the country's educational efforts, nor to proclaim openly the gospel, nor to have direct and co-creative involvement in the development of the mass media, nor allowed to establish a natural flow of contacts with members of the Universal Church. While the cost of official recognition is indeed very high, it does seem worthwhile to pay the price. Other local churches might find themselves in different situations, but they too are faced with the task of weighing the costs. However, the internal division that has resulted between the official Church and those faithful to the Holy See makes a unified Christian life difficult, and it is also a counter-witness to the unity of the one Catholic Church.

#### 4. The role of the laity

As the Church has experienced throughout its history, in periods of persecution the laity emerges to play an essential role in the process of transmitting the faith to the next generation. This was, and still is, the case in China. It is no wonder, then, that the laity, who make up the vast majority of the People of God, recognize their importance and are quick to assert their own role in the Church. Within the CCPRC we find the laity represented in its most important governing body, the Religious Affairs Commission.

This is indeed a new phenomenon in the Catholic Church. It raises deep theological questions regarding an integral exercise of leadership within the Catholic community. On the basis of the biblical image of Church as a communion of charisms, by which the members of the Christian community serve each other in love, the following question arises: How can we, on the one hand preserve the "College of Bishops" as a responsible leadership body, and on the other hand integrate the laity in a real way into the decision-making process of a fully alive Catholic community? Must the College of Bishops govern exclusively or are we allowed to begin to speak of an inclusive style of leadership where the entire Catholic community can substantially contribute to its more important decisions?

The shadow in the concrete context of the CCPRC could be called a certain confusion in distinctions among ministries. In the richness of charismatic life, we find some specific forms of ministries being handed



down from the primitive Church of the Apostles to our time. The Catholic community wants to be faithful to this tradition. In fact, there does not seem to be any cogent reason to move away from this tradition. The question is whether the Catholic Church should open herself to new forms of ministries, e.g. the lay participation in the ministry of governing the local church. Are we allowed to think that the temporary confusion of ecclesiastical ministries in the CCPRC is in reality the price to be paid for a future opening to new forms of ministries?

The realities of the CCPRC searching for its new identity, i.e. for a more integral ecclesial existence, carry within themselves light and shadow. We have tried to face up to these realities by raising some fundamental theological and pastoral questions. It will be fascinating to observe how the two most decisive forces in this process, the religious policy of the socialist regime and the inner strength of faith (a gift of the Holy Spirit) will continue their struggle. Or to put it in another way, how the CCPRC will integrate two seemingly opposite tendencies: cooperation with the PRC and real communion with the Universal Church.

But just to observe is not enough. Both the Universal Church and the Church of Asia, led by the FABC, will have to reflect on how to actively contribute to the CCPRC's search for its new identity and how to continue to be present to it. Parts III and IV address themselves to these questions.

### **III. WHAT CAN THE UNIVERSAL CHURCH CONTRIBUTE TO THIS SEARCH?**

There is no need to enumerate again the various initiatives taken by the Universal Church to express in a tangible way her concern for the CCPRC. The period of a rather negative critical attitude on the part of the Vatican is a thing of the past.

Three questions command our attention:

1. How can we increase person-to-person contacts?

Individual Catholics in China live their life of Christian faith in the concrete situation of the PRC. This context does not offer much nourishment for their faith. On the contrary, it continues to portray religious belief as a temporary, basically outdated element of the ideological superstructure.

In this milieu, the individual Catholic most urgently needs to intensify his contacts with convinced and well-trained Catholics from other countries, who are capable of giving substantial assistance to their brothers and sisters in the PRC. These contacts should be made with all sectors of the CCPRC, laity and clergy alike.

2. How can we increase our support through cultural dialogue?

If we can succeed in promoting further exchange programs between Catholic universities and institutes of learning in the PRC, would this not be in itself a real support for the CCPRC?

In a similar way an exchange of professors and students, sponsored by Catholic institutions would seem to be a genuine and positive contribution.

Among other possibilities is the organizing of international conferences where Catholics from PRC can meet other Catholics in a free and open atmosphere.

3. What can and should be done on the diplomatic level?

We are addressing the delicate and much debated issue about the possibility or feasibility of establishing diplomatic relations between the Vatican and the PRC.

Our viewpoint here is a theological-pastoral one. It seems advisable here to raise more questions than give answers.

Is it clear that the establishment of diplomatic relations could solve many problems? What do we actually expect from the diplomatic level?

We know the mystery of the Church is not defined by diplomacy, but rather by the actualization of faith, hope and love in the everyday life of Christians. Would such a stress on the diplomatic dimension downgrade the heroic witness of many Catholics who have remained faithful to the communion with Rome? Would they not say, "We are opposed to atheism, and in our struggle against it, we have a living symbol, the Pope in Rome. However, if this same pope, a clear symbol of resistance to atheism, should recognize the atheist socialist regime of the PRC by establishing diplomatic relations with it, what about us?"

No doubt these many Catholics would feel deeply hurt by such an action on the part of the Roman Pontiff.

Instead of expecting too much from the diplomatic level, should we not rather, in our vision of faith, believe that the faithful of the CCPRC, under the inspiration and wisdom of the Holy Spirit, will be able to find a realistic solution to this problem? We have to take seriously



the reality of the Holy Spirit at work. Furthermore, we believe that the same Holy Spirit is at work in the atheist socialist regime. It might one day realize that the Catholic Church represents no harm to the building up of a modern China. On the contrary, it might find it a source of genuine support, in so far as it is a community which ex professo wants to be a spiritual supportive force in the total social process of any given country (Cf. China News Analysis 1349, Dec. 15, 1987, Religion in the People's Republic, pp.2-3)

If you add the fact that many Catholics of the CCPRC might not feel too close a relationship with the Pope in distant Rome, we arrive at a realistic theological question: Would not a growing and living communion with Rome, in the midst of the hard realities of the PRC, not be more meaningful than the mere establishment of diplomatic channels between Beijing and Rome? But let us suppose the PRC should move positively towards the establishment of diplomatic relations with the Vatican and the Vatican would consent to it. What then?

#### IV HOW CAN THE ASIAN CATHOLIC CHURCHES CONTINUE TO BE PRESENT IN THIS SEARCH?

We have all witnessed with deep gratitude the many initiatives in the Asian Catholic Church to assist the CCPRC in its actual search for a new identity and in its struggle for a more integral existence. Since the Asian Catholic churches represent a part of the Universal Church, they should assume as one of their more important tasks the initiation of many more activities that have as their aim support of the CCPRC.

From the theological-pastoral viewpoint, the following principles offer themselves as a kind of guideline for concrete initiatives:

1. We should try to overcome isolation by communion.

Isolation is bad for both individuals and communities. It is in the last analysis, directly contrary to the concept of the Triune God who lives in the eternal now by a most intimate, mutual indwelling.

2. We should try to be present to the whole CCPRC.

As we know, a large sector of the CCPRC does not belong to the officially recognized Church. Usually foreign visitors have little chance to meet these Catholics who hold firmly to their loyalty to Rome. We should continue to make efforts to come closer and to be more present to these Catholics. In doing so, we actually move within a genuinely Catholic spirit.

3. We should try to struggle for human and religious rights.

No matter whether or not Beijing and the Vatican establish diplomatic relations, the urgent struggle for human rights will continue. No totalitarian system likes to give up its iron grip on the people. Usually it gives in gradually only from mounting pressure by the grassroots. Here the FABC's creative presence is called for. The modern media of social communications offer many channels for maintaining an active presence. It is up to us, here and now, to think with courage and prudence about the various ways we might continue a supportive presence with the whole of the CCPRC.

As we have said, the recent upsurge of interest in China--the "China fever"--cannot be viewed outside the working of the Holy Spirit. In these theological-pastoral reflections, we have tried to keep this working of the Holy Spirit within the CCPRC in focus.

It seems to us that we are witnessing a local church in search of its new identity amid lights and shadows, and in need of loving support from the Universal Church and from her sister-churches in Asia.

By giving our loving support, we help to make present the communion that we all share in the mystery of the Triune God. Limited as it may seem, it is in its way already a realization of the Kingdom of God.

May the Holy Spirit grant us the necessary wisdom and courage to join hands in support of the CCPRC.