

A Response

to «Hong Kong Roman Catholic Church and 1997»



by Patrick Sun

I have been asked to serve as a respondent to the paper on "Hong Kong Catholic Church and 1997." This is not an easy task. What follows are some of my general impressions, given as one born and raised in Hong Kong and also committed to its uncertain future.

The author speaks rather freely about the future of Hong Kong. But the fact of the matter is that no one can know for certain what the future holds in store for us. Only educated guesses are possible, and then only after studying in detail the social, economic and political realities, as well as current trends now existing in China, Hong Kong and major foreign capitals of the world. Another way of arriving at an educated guess might be to study the present values and goals of the families and communities involved.

The paper fails to touch upon the current life and culture of Hong Kong itself, especially its negative side, for example, its rampant consumerism and individualism, the competitive attitude found not only in business but in education as well as in so many other areas of life, its aggressive and hostile competitiveness, its sexism and self-centredness, its selfishness and lack of a caring attitude for others, not to mention such prevalent social problems as gambling.

Prescinding from the fact of 1997, it seems to me that the crisis the church here now faces is that gospel values are no longer credible and evident to our present Catholic generation. Among Catholic boys and girls, even those who study in our catholic schools, there is evidence of a decrease in the practice of their faith and a decline in moral standards. Further, can it be said that the religious formation of the young is considered a priority among our adult catholics?

What are our goals? China wants Hong Kong society to strive for stability and prosperity. I suppose we catholics would say that our goal is a thriving christianity. But what does it mean for christianity to 'thrive'? Increase its number? Live more by christian values? Having good church-state relations? Would a 'catacomb' christianity be considered as a 'thriving' christianity? Can either stability or prosperity be described as a goal of the church?

With regard to the author's comments on 'the local church', he takes a definite stand on the issue of the papacy and the episcopacy

with which I myself disagree. First, his language is imprecise, i.e., 'having full respect for the self-governing of the Catholic Church in Mainland China.' On the general topic of local church government, I agree with much that the author has said, but nowhere does he give a clear theological foundation for his position on the papacy and the episcopacy. For me, the bishop signifies the headship of Christ within the local church, and the pope the headship of Christ within the universal church. The subject of the papacy is a delicate, sensitive, and emotional issue in the local church here, but to push the author's concept of papal primacy would only serve to destroy church unity among our catholics; whereas, a dialogue that is based on sound theological scholarship can only serve to build up our church unity.

The author neither develops further nor makes concrete some of the central concepts of his paper, such as what is meant by 'salvation' or 'the servant church'. No mention is made of how 'the servant church' might already be reflected in present church structures, its pastoral practices, its basic christian communities, and its social services.

Other aspects of the local church are not treated at all. The author prefers to deal chiefly with its administrative personnel and self-government. In speaking of the need for an indigenized church, he does not proceed from any theology of indigenization. We Chinese like to philosophize from history, perhaps theologizing from history is also possible. While I do agree with the author that in the context of our local church a Chinese pastor is more suitable than a foreign one, the indigenization of theology, not merely personnel, is the greater task, and perhaps indigenization should proceed rather from the needs of evangelization.

With regard to church ministry, I too like the idea of having a Chinese bishop running the local church in Hong Kong, and I rejoice in the possibilities a Chinese local church may offer. What troubles me is not so much the indigenization of higher church administration, but rather the level of faith of our catholic leaders, especially our lay professionals. How are we ministering to them? Are we giving them ample opportunities to minister to the church through their professions? With regard to church ministry, I also ask myself if after 1997 the public witnessing of christians will not be regarded as a form of church ministry. My own priorities for what is needed now in terms of church ministry would be to deepen the faith of our catholics, inculcate in them a firm commitment to christian mission, and instill in them a deeper sense of church and community life.

As for post-1997 church-state relations, I think our most important task now lies in helping our lay people to form positive attitudes towards China. What should be their attitude towards the communist government, the Chinese church, the Patriotic Association? Can we reach

some consensus among those holding extreme views? Today many of our people are visiting China and come into contact with catholics there. What should motivate and guide us in such exchange?

Also, we find at present many different and contrasting interpretations of the past history of the church in China. It would be helpful for us to arrive at some unified version. when we talk about Hong Kong being a 'bridge church', does this mean only that we are to assist China in her modernization programmes, and on her terms? What other needs of China can we help to meet? Many have spoken of serious defects in China's economic and social systems. Can the church here also join in helping eradicate some of these defects? Could our professionals not be organized to improve China's medical and research services?

In the author's treatment of Church and Society, he says nothing about the future of catholic education. Some of our catholic schools turn out graduates totally secular in their values and attitudes, while others seem to be able to imbue their students with definite christian principles. It is not, then, a question of whether the church is serving Hong Kong's student, but how it is serving them. To give true catholic service in our schools, we must have committed christians on our teaching staffs and work to develop educational communities that are christian in outlook and attitude.

The author also assumes that catholics on the grassroots level identify with such movements as 'democratic government' and 'church for the poor'. In fact many catholics do not side with the proponents of democracy, and even more are unsympathetic towards the refugees from Vietnam. To presume otherwise would be dangerous. What is needed is more dialogue and better formation on the grassroots level. Our parishes are, indeed, lacking in theological formation when it comes to social concerns. We well might learn from sister churches in Korea and the Philippines how to combat our social apathy and foster a climate of social concern within our society.

Finally, with regard to the future, the author urges that a programme of personal and community renewal be initiated. But what would be its content? What type of christians do we want to form for the future? With regard to the possible secularization of our present institutions after that, is it not essential that our catholic professionals working within these institutions who have a deep faith and christian values organize themselves into vital communities? Such communities will know how to respond to future challenges.

In closing, I would like to say that sharing the Word of God with all our Asian sisters and brothers in our prayer services during the seminar has given me a stronger faith in the presence of the living Lord among us. He is lovingly caring for us at this time and guiding our steps through this crucial period of transition.