

A RESPONSE TO FU LEAN'S ESSAY

"THE GENERAL SITUATION OF THE MODERN WESTERN CATHOLIC CHURCH"



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translated by Peter Barry

It is at the request of the Editor of Tripod that I write this brief response to Fu Lean's original essay on "The General Situation of the Modern Western Catholic Church", which appeared in a recent issue of Materials on World Religions, a literary magazine published by Beijing's Institute of World Religions. I have divided this response into three parts: first, a description of the Institute itself; second, a few comments on the structure and content of Fu's essay; and, finally, some remarks on what appears to me to be certain limitations in Fu's point of view.

A Brief Introduction to the Institute of World Religions

The Beijing Institute of World Religions was established in 1964 as a department of the Academy of Social Sciences. The Academy itself has four branches of study: politics, economics, international affairs, and the humanities. Its prime objective is research. Each branch is subdivided into eight departments, with the Institute of World Religions as part of the humanities section. As the main concentration of the

Institute is in-depth research, it has throughout the years admitted few students. In fact, since 1978 when it began the practice of enrolling students, only 27 have been accepted to date, and none since 1981.

The Institute is again divided into six sections, a cover-all section on the Principles of Religion and the remaining sections specializing on research of China's five major religions, i.e. Buddhism, Islam, Christianity, Daoism and Confucianism. The first three religions are considered by the Institute to be the most important and receive a lot of attention. The sections on Daoism and Confucianism were established only a short time ago, and I get the impression that in modern China neither has many adherents. Researchers at the Institute are free to choose their own field of study, but they do labor under heavy restrictions, and of course, all must conform to Marxist principles of analysis.

The Structure and Content

Fu's introduction is written in a clear, precise and uncomplicated style. It is easy to read and quite informative. The article is divided into two parts: first, a description of the present situation of Catholicism in contemporary society, and second, the challenges that face the Catholic Church in the modern world. Since only one page is devoted to the Church's present situation and 14 to its challenges, one can readily see that the author is much more concerned about the latter than the former.

What are these challenges? The author singles out five: the rise of basic Christian communities, the ascendancy of the local church, the women's movement, liberation theology, and modern secular morality. The challenges are bracketed by a few words of introduction and a concluding paragraph. The introduction emphasizes the contradictions, struggles, crises and problems arising both from within and outside the Church, and the resulting ambivalence in leadership in deciding what course the Church should take to insure its future. The concluding paragraph summarizes the above-mentioned challenges facing the Church, and the final sentence reads in part: "The Roman Curia is besieged on all sides... the future of the Catholic Church has become a problem demanding the urgent attention of Vatican authorities."

Taking the challenges one-by-one, I found the author's treatment of the Basic Christian Communities to be quite lively and done in some depth. Especially moving is his description of the aspirations and motivating spirit of these communities. He mentions seven major

movements very much a part of modern Catholicism at the cross-roots level. They include the Charismatic Movement, Opus Dei, Communion and Liberation movements, Focolari, the Taize Ecumenical Community, the New Catechumenate and Marriage Encounter. While categorizing all of the above into Basic Christian Communities may be a little forced, and other groups are noticeably not included, such as the Legion of Mary and the Christian Life Community, still Fu has given a good representative cross-section of these movements and their special characteristics within the modern Church.



Fu Lean

With regard to the second challenge to the Church--that of the growing consciousness of the identity of local churches--the transcription of the exchange between Cardinal Bernadin of Chicago and the Pope, which took place on John Paul II's second pastoral visit to the United States in September of last year, is most absorbing, for it does clearly spell out each side's position, both that of the Vatican and that of the local church.

The challenge of the women's liberation movement in the Church is high-lighted by what the author clearly feels is a representative comment by a French theologian in La Croix (March 25, 1987): "This is a problem in the Catholic Church which it does not dare to face squarely... it is always covered over, made to look ridiculous, or considered as a joke. This attitude does not come from any theological principle, but it arises out of a long-standing attitude of ignorance fostered by our cultural history."

When speaking of the challenge of Liberation Theology, Fu's Essay acknowledges that "the conclusion of a theory which has been under suspicion of heresy for over 20 years was finally handed down" on April 5, 1986 by the publication of the Holy See document "The Freedom and Liberation of the Christian." On April 9, Pope John Paul II's letter was read to the assembly of Brazilian bishops: 'Liberation theology is not only in line with the times,' he said, 'but it is also beneficial and necessary.'

Finally, with regard to current secular morality, Fu's essay clearly explains the Vatican's position on divorce, abortion, artificial birth-control, homosexuality, in vitro pregnancy, etc., denouncing them as passing; popular theories founded on values in today's society which only serve to undermine tradition, fundamental human consciousness, and authentic human values. They are also seen to violate the natural laws that have been determined by God as absolute guidelines for all.

Some Limitations

After speaking about the structure of Fu's essay and its content, I would now like to say something about its limitations. There is nothing untoward in this, since every piece of writing by its very nature limits as well as informs. My criticism, then, is offered not for the sake of criticism, but rather as an alternative interpretation of the given data. Living situations differ, and the perspectives arising from them also differ. The same evidence can be seen and judged from a variety of points of view, and this will naturally result in different conclusions. In general, it may be said that "the basic purpose of Marxist religious research" and the basic purpose of others concerned about religion, especially Catholics, admits of wide differences of interpretation. When Fu writes about "problems", "contradictions", "struggles" and "the future" of the Catholic Church, his use of language and the understanding of such terms is vastly different from that of Catholics. The Catholic Church's faith in the Creator and Saviour is rooted deeply in history and has passed through nearly 2000 years of conflict and testing from both within and without. Catholics, who make up almost one-fifth of the world's population and are found in every nation and culture, are not a static community, and the church's core leadership personnel, numbering over 4,000 bishops, 400,000 priests, and 1,000,000 religious can hardly be described as a complacent leadership group which has lost all sense of its own direction.

Secondly, the remarks of Frank Whaling in his comparative study of the religious research institutes of Harvard and Beijing can also serve to shed some light on the direction religious research must take at both places. Whaling concludes that such study must "go beyond the ordinary rules and methods of undertaking research dictated by past historical or philosophical points of view, and turn instead to the global hermeneutical dimensions." Actually, Fu's material, which is largely based on translations and reports from French sources, is rendered quite clearly and well. However, his interpretations and criticisms--the so-called hermeneutical dimension--all too often do not arise from clarifications and extensions of the material itself, but rather seem to

be imposed on the original material to fit Marxist principles of research. In short, the material is used to serve the author's own purposes. For instance, when he writes that the Basic Christian Communities within the Catholic Church "are fundamentally independent and autonomous grass-roots organizations", his words are easily misunderstood. Readers could conclude that these Basic Christian communities seek to divest themselves of Church authority and control. Actually, the opposite is true. All the Basic Christian Communities mentioned take pride in their belonging to the one, universal Catholic Communion. Another misconception is the author's statement that "Liberation Theology has its origin in the coming together of thousands of Latin-American Basic Christian Communities." This is just not true. The reality is that Liberation Theology has its roots in European theology and was developed by Latin-American theologians who studied in Europe and only later introduced it into the social context of Latin-America's poor. The frequent use by the author himself of Gustavo Gutierrez' material in this regard is further proof of this.

Finally, Fu's essay seems to express a special concern for the beleaguered Vatican and the Pope. However, the concern he expresses and judgement rendered certainly are not those shared by most Catholics, nor by most informed non-Catholics for that matter. Sentences such as "The Vatican has already lost its sense of direction and the Pope no longer possesses absolute authority", and "Support for the local church and for its authority is a judgement against the hegemony of the Vatican" are quite gratuitous assumptions and specious interpretations of the given data. The same can be said for the way he uses the welcoming speech of Cardinal Bernadin of Chicago and the Pope's response as a direct confrontation of two entrenched and antagonistic positions, making it appear that the local church is in opposition to the Vatican. In reality, the levels of prestige and authority enjoyed by both the Vatican and the Pope these days is higher now than at any other period in history. Moreover, the Vatican actively encourages and fosters free expression of ideas and opinions among the local churches as a matter of church policy. Theologians today are freer than ever before to go about their research and expound their many theories, giving ample evidence that the hierarchical Church established by Christ 2,000 years ago is also very much influenced by and in favour of modern democratic patterns and styles.