



From the Editors



A seminar on "The Hong Kong and Macau Roman Catholic Dioceses in Political Transition and the Asian Church Experience" was held in Hong Kong in late December. Participants in the seminar included representatives from Hong Kong, Macau, South Korea, Japan, India, Pakistan, Vietnam, the Philippines, Mainland China and Taiwan. Discussions focused on how the impending return to Chinese sovereignty has affected local church life in Hong Kong and Macau, and how these churches are responding to the inevitable social changes of the transitional period.

The Holy Spirit Study Centre was part of the seminar's organizing committee. During the seminar, it was suggested that the discussion papers should be published, and this responsibility was entrusted to the editors of Tripod. This issue includes papers presented by participants from Hong Kong and Vietnam, while those given by representatives from Macau and Goa will appear in our next issue. We also have in this issue an article by Rev. Mark Fang, which is not related to the seminar. It is entitled "A Response to Fu Lean's Essay 'The General Situation of the Modern Western Catholic Church'".

During the seminar, there were wide differences of opinion expressed, especially with regard to certain political and theological issues. We feel that a few remarks should be made here to clarify TRIPOD's own position on some of the more important doctrinal questions raised at that time.

Since Vatican II, the nature of the local church has been one of the most hotly discussed topics among theologians all over the world. To construct a theology of the local church is not as easy as one might first imagine. It involves many difficult problems, which, from an ecclesiological point of view, require extensive research and

investigation. Up to the present moment, a systematic theology of the local church has yet to appear. However, all current discussions about the local church tend to hone in on two areas: contextualization and indigenization. Theologians, both in the East and West, offer wide differences of opinion when treating these issues.

In the recent past Karl Rahner made significant contributions to theological reflection on the nature of the local church; however, he did not attempt to give us a complete theology. He left this task to theologians with a specialized interest in the field. At least three basic problems await those who would deal with this subject at length: first, a clarification of terminology; second, those theological or faith elements which constitute the Christian assembly in a given place as a local ekklesia; and third, structural elements of the local church.

After a few remarks on the first and second problems, we shall direct most of our attention here to the third.

With regard to the problem of terminology, the term "local church", theologically speaking is very flexible. Not only can it be applied analogously to a small basic community with a parish structure, it can also be used to designate a national or continental church; for instance, the Church in China, or the Asian Church, etc. Traditionally, the term "local church" refers to a diocese headed by a single bishop. The New Code of Canon Law uses "particular church" when referring to an individual diocese. Nevertheless, theologians tend to prefer the term "local church" over that of "particular church". The former suggests more from a theological point of view than does the latter.

As for the second problem concerning those theological or faith elements which constitute an ekklesia, we must turn to that first local church, which was born in the city of Jerusalem. This initial Christian community was deeply aware of its unique nature, and considered itself to be a distinct community, differing from all other kinds of social gatherings. The members called themselves the followers of Jesus Christ. This primitive Christian community was referred to as the ekklesia or Church. Later, all Gentile churches established by St. Paul would bear the same title. All are called either the Church of Christ or the Church of God. The New Testament and the writings of the early Church Fathers provide us with more than adequate information on these constitutive elements of a local church.

The third problem, which is our main interest here, concerns the structure of the local church. The term "local church" in this section

refers to the diocese. When speaking of the diocese as a local church, we are immediately faced with several problems related to local church structure, such as, the role of the bishop, papal ministry and the local church, the principle of co-responsibility for the administration of the local church, etc. We do not intend now to resolve all these problems, but rather to point out some theological guidelines for a general discussion of the issues involved. These theological guidelines are derived from the teachings of Vatican II, and are also in harmony with the theological teaching of contemporary church theologians.

First of all, Vatican II affirms that the bishop is the head of the diocese. He represents the local church over which he presides. In the universal episcopal college, the diocesan bishop plays a very important and twofold role. On the one hand, as the leader of his own church, he serves as a "bridge" between his own church and the universal Church, which is understood as a communion of churches. On the other hand, as a member of the universal episcopal college, he represents his own church in this college.

As a member of his own church and as a fellow Christian redeemed by the saving events of Jesus Christ, the bishop is "within" the local church. As the head and the pastor of the diocese, he is "above" the local church, overseeing the administration and pastoral ministry of the diocese. In our opinion, the question of whether the bishop is "within" or "above" the local church is misleading. From a theological perspective, the bishop is at one and the same time "within" and "above" the local church. In the ancient tradition of the Church, the bishop is seen as the centre of unity in the local church. St. Cyprian in the fourth century writes: "The bishop is in the Church, the Church is in the bishop." This statement expresses clearly the relationship between the bishop and his own church.

Secondly, regarding the papal ministry and the local church, the problem is too complicated to discuss in this brief essay. However, let us note here that the pope in the universal Church is like the bishop in his own diocese, at one and the same time "within" and "above" the universal Church. According to the ancient traditions of the Church, the pope is the centre and the symbol of the unity of the whole Church. While we readily admit that the doctrines of papal primacy and infallibility cannot be put on the same level as those of the Incarnation and Resurrection, still, these doctrines regarding the pope are vital to the self-understanding of Catholicism. Of course, they can be further developed and better interpreted in the light of the present ecumenical movement and new insights arising from theological research;

however, it is essential that these doctrines be correctly understood and properly explained to the faithful.

Thirdly, the issues of co-responsibility and collegiality are very sensitive ones, not only in the local church of Hong Kong, but also in other local churches. Co-responsibility is considered to be an ideal model for governing the Church. In fact, this model has a history of almost two thousand years. The primitive Church was governed by a college of apostles, who were assisted by elders and lay people. In the ancient Church, lay people played an important role in the process of decision-making and formulating Church policy. Unfortunately, the model of co-responsibility gradually fell into decline, with the result that the Church must now deal with the crisis brought about by too great a centralization of authority.

During Vatican II, this model was restored. The Council encouraged all the churches to adopt such a model in the government of local churches. But Rome was not built in a day. In order to revitalize the values represented by this model, and to be able to put the concept of co-responsibility into concrete practice, we need to devise well-planned programmes of formation for church personnel, including clergy, religious and laity.

Recently, the idea of "democracy" has become very popular in Hong Kong. We recognize its positive function in stimulating the church in Hong Kong to reflect more upon and to examine more closely its strengths and weaknesses as an organizational and administrative instrument in the exercise of authority. However, we must be wary of trying to substitute a concept of democracy for either that of co-responsibility or collegiality, nor can democracy be used to describe the notion of common participation of Catholics in Church activity, for the former does not possess the profound theological meanings of the latter. Besides, the connotations of the word democracy are very ambiguous; its political interpretations vary from one country to the next. To adopt such a concept as a model for Church government is hardly appropriate. It can lead to serious confusion among ordinary Catholics with regard to their understanding of the nature of the Church.

In the end, what is really important is not what terms we use, but the basic attitude we have towards each other. The model of co-responsibility cannot be truly actualized unless we are humble, sincere, and open to mutual dialogue, and are prepared to cooperate wholeheartedly with one another.