

MACAU ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH AND 1999



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Macau sits on a tiny peninsula of the China mainland where the West River flows into the South China Sea. It comprises only 17 square kilometers of land, including its two offshore islands, Taipa and Coloane. The city itself, which is only five kilometers square, contains 95% of the territory's half-million population. This makes Macau the most densely populated city in the world.

Macau has been governed from Portugal since 1550. Recently, just as it began to establish its own style of local government, Portugal and China signed a joint declaration which calls for the return of Macau to China on December 20, 1999. Its citizens must now prepare themselves after 400 years of Portuguese administration to live under the rule of the Chinese communist government. Most of its people envision a bleak future, and it is of little consolation to them to find their sister port down the coast sitting in the same boat.

While Western interest in China dates back to the 13th century when Marco Polo's travelogue gained widespread popularity in Europe, it was only after the Portuguese navigator, Vasco De Gama, found a sea route to India by rounding the Cape of Good Hope that Macau began to come into prominence. The small fishing village had an adequate and favourably located harbour that could be used to serve the trade interests of European maritime nations, who were just beginning their expansion into the Far East. It was the missionaries accompanying these early adventurers who brought Christianity first to India, then Malacca, and finally to Macau.

The opening of the East set off a struggle for power and profits between Spain and Portugal. In 1493 when Pope Alexander VI was asked to arbitrate the dispute, both nations entered an agreement whereby Spain was to restrict its activities to the west and Portugal to the east of the meridian line 100 miles west of the Azores. As part of the agreement, both countries were to assume responsibility for protecting the missionaries, supplying personnel, and financing the building of seminaries and churches in the territories under their domains. In return the Church gave the governments of Spain and Portugal a say in the selection and appointment of bishops in their colonial territories. This agreement, called the Treaty of Tordesillas and dated 1494, brought the church of Macau into direct political involvement with the colonial government. It was the beginning of the Padroado system.

Because the church in Macau had its origins in Western colonialism and since it developed along with the rapid pace of Portuguese mercantile expansion, it has always been strongly affected by the winds of political change. From the beginning, religious congregations moved quickly to send large numbers of European missionaries to the Far East. Macau became a stepping stone for missionary activity aimed towards mainland China. In fact, when Macau became a diocese in 1576, it was also placed in charge of missionary work in China, Japan and other areas of Southeast Asia.

In the middle of the 17th century, as England and Holland successfully challenged the naval supremacy of Spain and Portugal, the fortunes of Macau declined. Portugal was no longer able to support the Catholic missions in the Far East, and the Holy See had to intervene. In 1659, Rome set up apostolic vicariates to administer the missions in Japan, Vietnam and China, thus bringing to an end Macau's religious influence overseas. In 1720, the Emperor Kang Xi forbade all missionary activity in China and expelled the foreign missionaries. This policy continued under his successor Yong Zheng. At the same time, on the other side of the world, the anti-clerical movement in Portugal was in full swing. When the pope, under severe pressure from European monarchs, dissolved the Society of Jesus, the Church in Macau was greatly affected, for it was the Jesuits who were the backbone of the Far East Portuguese mission. Catholics in Macau now dwindled to less than 5,000.

When Britain gained possession of Hong Kong in 1841 and turned it into an international free port, the importance of Macau dwindled further. In 1887, a treaty signed by China and Portugal acknowledged Macau to be under Chinese sovereignty with Portugal retaining tenant rights. Portugal was allowed to continue to administer the territory so

long as it continued to pay rent to the Chinese government, but its rights as a tenant could not be conceded to any other country. At the same time, the boundaries of the diocese were redefined by the Holy See in an agreement with the Portuguese government, which promised also to give reimbursement for all previously confiscated church properties. This freed the diocese, at long last, from its preoccupation with foreign and secular affairs, so that it could now concentrate its attention on its own domestic needs.

The overthrow of the Qing Dynasty and the foundation of the Republic of China in 1911 set off an era of unrest and civil strife on the mainland. Thousands of refugees streamed into Macau seeking safety, among whom were many Catholics. Later, the Sino-Japanese war would bring another wave of refugees, since Portugal was to maintain its neutrality throughout the whole of the Second World War. The local population increased immensely, as did its number of Catholics, which rose to over 60,000 by the end of the war.

One of Macau's more notable characteristics, and one often overlooked, is the role it has played throughout the years as a haven for refugees, a temporary shelter for people in dire straits, few of whom stayed on for any great length of time. Refugees from the Japanese war, for instance, returned home when peace was declared, only to come again when civil war broke out on the mainland. The church in Macau has always received its refugees warmly and generously, establishing for them emergency aid centres, schools, orphanages, homes for the aged and many other social welfare programmes to meet their serious needs.

The Church was one of the main targets of China's Cultural Revolution. This movement spilled over into Macau, most notably in the riots of December 3rd, 1966. Local Communists saw in the Church a collaborator with the colonial government because of the Church's historical links with Portugal. After the riots, many religious orders joined the steady flow of foreign emigrants out of the colony. This period of internal unrest coincided with the time of the Second Vatican Council and was one of the main reasons why the spirit of renewal which had taken hold of the rest of the Catholic world was delayed in its coming to Macau.

On April 25, 1974 a military coup ousted President Americo de Deus Tomas from office in Portugal. The "Captain's Revolution" resulted primarily from a growing dissatisfaction with the handling of the prolonged armed conflicts in Portugal's African colonies. By 1975 Portugal granted independence to all its former colonies in Africa, retaining Macau as the last vestige of what was once a worldwide colonial empire. While

Macau remained under the control of the Portuguese government, the relationship of the government and the local church continued to become more distant. In 1976, Bishop Arquimínio Rodrigues de Costa assigned Chinese priests to major positions in the diocese and he founded the Diocesan Pastoral Youth Centre, which plays a significant role in local social affairs. Then, in 1988, just 11 years before the return of Macau to China, Macau's first Chinese bishop, Domingo Lam, was appointed to head the diocese.

What becomes clear from any historical study of the Church in Macau is the fact that the fortunes of the Church and the government have always been closely linked, not only on the local level, but also on the international level, where Portugal and China's mutual relationship has been a deciding factor in much of Macau's history. We should also take note of the fact that the Church's presence here has been more in the nature of a base camp for missionary activity elsewhere rather than as an independent local church. Macau has served primarily as a stepping stone for work in China and other Far Eastern countries.

Serving as a base camp for missionary societies bent on evangelizing China and other neighbouring Asian countries did little to foster efforts toward localization. Nor has the continual presence of Portuguese colonial rule helped to rid the local church of its stigma as a foreign religion among the local people. In the early colonial period, Chinese Catholics had to take Portuguese names and adopt Portuguese styles of dress if they wanted to live in the Portuguese quarter of the city. For this reason some fellow countrymen considered the conversion of Chinese to Christianity a form of betrayal of the ancestors. Also there was a tradition of sending Chinese speaking priests to work on the mainland while retaining those who spoke Portuguese or only a bare minimum of Chinese in the colony. This did nothing to alleviate the language barrier. It was only in 1871 that the Chinese Catholic community got its own parish, St. Lazarus, for ministering to its own needs.

The local church is self-supporting. It also spends large amounts of money caring for refugees. This sometimes gives Catholics the impression that the Church does not need their local financial support, since money from international agencies makes up a large part of refugee support. At the same time the remnants of the Padroado system's support of the Church adds to this false impression. As a result, not only do many of the Catholics assume that the diocese is rich, but the failure to give the Church full financial support weakens a personal sense of belonging that is vital to the establishment of a strong local church.

Self-support, however, involves more than money; it also includes personnel. The present generation of Catholics are better educated than their parents before them. It is up to the diocese to use well this reservoir of talent. Bishop Domingo Lam has already begun to implement a plan to establish a training institute for the education and formation of local lay leaders.

According to recent statistics, the diocese has 21,700 Catholics living within the boundaries of 6 parishes. There are at least two priests serving in each parish. Within each parish there are also many other church administered institutions, such as schools, clinics, old age homes, orphanages and social welfare centres. These are generally run by religious orders, each independent of the other and independent of the parishes in which they are found.

Pastoral ministry in the parishes is completely in the hands of the clergy, with the laity only helping out where needed and having little or no say in decision making. Much of parish work involves sacramental services, with the target group being those already baptized, especially those who attend Mass regularly on Sunday. There is also a great deal of time-consuming paper work, which is usually carried out by the parish secretaries who are in charge of parish records. While some parishes are quite active in raising funds for the needy, outside of this not much attention is given to the non-baptized within the parish areas.

One of the reasons that parishes are so priest-centered is because those ordained 15, 20 or 30 years ago have had little opportunity for on-going education and formation, and clerical leadership reflects the more traditional styles. While priests are bi-lingual and often tri-lingual, most have had very little background in English, a language that has become the major vehicle for communication among Asian countries. The lack of sufficient theological up-dating is reflected in the attitudes of the laity, who tend to be more traditional in their understanding and practice of their faith.

In 1949, with the advent of the People's Republic, foreign priests from Macau were forbidden to preach in China and Chinese priests there were forced to sever all ties with the church in Macau. This already tense situation was aggravated further with the riots in 1966, when Catholic schools came under attack by local groups supporting mainland China. The Church is heavily involved in education here, as well as in other forms of social welfare. Historically, wherever the Portuguese government failed to address social welfare problems, the Church stepped

in to establish needed institutions and welfare programmes. This has given the Church a well-earned reputation within the community for serving society's needs. At present, while both parties have an attitude of mutual respect, Church and government are no longer in the close relationship of collaboration that they once were, although the Church still enjoys certain privileges such as tax exemption. There is in Macau a Chinese faction with strong political ties to China, and this group has become very actively involved in setting up neighbourhood social welfare committees on a large scale. Up to very recently, there has not been much communication between the Chinese group and the Church. But there are signs that this is changing. In March of last year, both the Macau Association of Catholic Schools and the China Education Union united against the government to object to the continued teaching of Portuguese in private schools. This indicates the influence the Church and the Chinese group have on society, despite their ideological differences.

The signing of the Joint Declaration has thrown the Church here into an entirely different political situation. In September of last year, the Chinese government included Bishop Lam as a member of the Basic Law Drafting Committee. The majority of the members represent Chinese political interests. It is important for the Church to clarify its present situation and the direction it must take in the future.

A new element has entered the political scene in recent years, that of local intellectuals organizing themselves into political groups. One of these, the Friendship Association, managed to win 6 seats in last year's legislative assembly elections. This represents the same number of seats won by the Chinese faction. The rising political power of such a non-traditional political group came as a surprise to both the Chinese faction and the Portuguese government. The Association has ties with the Church insofar as all 6 elected members are Catholics. So while the Church sees the gradual demise of Portuguese influence in the years ahead, there are bright prospects for an active participation by local Catholic lay people in the future politics of Macau.

What lies ahead for the Church in Macau? At a seminar held last October, this question was addressed by its 200 participants, who came up with six major recommendations:

1. More formation and education for lay people in matters of faith and leadership.
2. Reorganization and renewal of all church run institutions.
3. More efforts toward direct evangelization of new immigrants,

youth and working class people.

4. Use of modern technology for evangelization.
5. More involvement in social issues to create a more just and caring society.
6. The promotion of grassroots basic Christian communities.

All of these recommendations reflect the primary mission of the Church in Macau, which is evangelization.

It is our conviction that 1999 gives the Church a heaven-sent opportunity to reflect on itself and its future in light of working to establish the Kingdom of God in a new era. The period ahead is one of challenge and responsibility. Mindful of its relationship with the universal Church, and its relationship to the Church in China, we feel that the Church in Macau should proceed along the following lines:

1. Enlarge its communication network with other local churches.
2. Surrender all past privileges granted by the Portuguese government, and become entirely self-supporting.
3. Cultivate among the faithful a deeper sense of belonging to the Church and to Macau.
4. Concentrate on developing lay leadership programmes and church renewal programmes.
5. Establish information centres where people can find reliable material on which to base decisions.
6. Encourage active support and participation in social welfare services.
7. Initiate lay ministries and the permanent diaconate for diocesan administration.
8. Foster closer cooperation among religious orders and communities within the diocese.
9. Offer more opportunities for Christian family formation and education.

In conclusion, we would like to say that while Macau and its diocese are quite small, still we find ourselves in a situation that calls upon us to respond to the best of our ability to radical change. We hope to face those changes with an active spirit and a contemplative attitude, so that with the help of God's grace, we may respond as faithful Christians to the signs of the times.