

HONG KONG CATHOLIC DIOCESE IN THE 1980's: A BRIDGE

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On his first visit to China in 1985, Cardinal John B. Wu addressed the Chinese government and Catholic Church officials in these words: "The Church throughout the world is very pleased at China's ever-increasing openness to the outside world. The Church sincerely desires to enter into a dialogue, promote understanding, increase contacts, and cooperate with China in the building up of our society for the benefit of all mankind. By serving as a bridge, we Hong Kong Catholics will expend every effort to realize this hope."

On his second visit to China, Cardinal Wu also spoke to Catholics in Guangdong saying, "It is obvious that, given present circumstances, the Hong Kong Catholic Diocese should play a bridge role between your local church and the universal church." What has characterized the Catholic Diocese of Hong Kong over the past decade is its bridge building role, and as we enter the new period of the 1990's it is appropriate to review and reflect on how the diocese has taken up this challenge.

The Diocese of Hong Kong offers assistance to China mainly through Caritas which emphasizes social services, and the Holy Spirit Study Centre which is concerned with pastoral formation. Because some of the work overlaps these two groups maintain close contact with each other.

Caritas' connections with China began in 1980 when officials from the Shenzhen Economic Zone made a request for training courses in

English, administration and hotel management. Since then Caritas has expanded its work to include a broad base of government and church related services, mainly in the educational, medical and social areas. In 1986 Caritas set up a special fund that elicits donations from local people and outside funding agencies to finance its work in China. The primary motivation behind Caritas' involvement is to implement the Christian ideal of love in practical ways. The Gospel is not proclaimed explicitly but such service bears witness to the Gospel within the contexts of China's law.

The personal impact on our local Catholics through involvement with these programs is reflected in interviews carried out by Teresa Yeung for Zhu Ai Zhong Hua, a monthly insert on China in our diocesan Catholic weekly. Some examples are given below.

In 1987 a young man, who had just graduated from university here learned that Caritas was recruiting English teachers for a school in southern Guangdong. Out of curiosity and having no other commitments, he applied for the post and was accepted. Compared to similar work in Hong Kong, his teaching load was rather light, and the number of students per class was less. He found that the students were older, and more conscientious and serious about their studies.

At the end of the school year, Caritas asked the young English teacher to take a summer English class in another town, where his associates included an American Jesuit scholastic and another young man who played the guitar and taught English through singing. They helped him polish his English conversation and taught him how to incorporate his own love of games into his classes.

However, the person who made the deepest impression on the teacher throughout his year in China was a simple workman who was assigned to cook and take care of their house. "Always cheerful and dedicated he never accepted gratuities, going about his daily task in a spirit of unaffected and quiet service. He mothered us, and was the main reason for the harmony among us. He had a way of making us feel at home, like a family, rather than strangers from outside. Because of him we learned to trust each other. I learned more from him than I could have learned from a whole library of books. My association with him deepened my understanding of my life and the value of my work."

In the beginning the young graduate had no real interest in teaching. He just wanted to get to know something about China. "After a few months my attitude changed. The students' desire for knowledge pushed me

into preparing my lectures more carefully and through that preparation I experienced the true meaning and purpose of education. When I returned to Hong Kong, I entered the educational field."

Another Caritas staff member was involved in a training program for the mentally handicapped. In 1985 some young men from Guangzhou wanted to help mentally retarded children. They had enthusiasm but neither experience nor money. They asked help from Caritas, and Caritas agreed.

Caritas sent one of its specialists to Guangzhou to set up an in-service program for the teachers, which offered supplementary courses, lectures and seminars on weekends. At first only a handful of students came to the Centre, but now there are over 140, between the ages of 4 and 20, with a staff that numbers over 50. The program has brought about a major change in the attitude and mentality of the teachers toward the retarded. At first there was much sympathy but little understanding for the mentally handicapped. After a while the teachers began to see them as fellow human beings who enjoy the same basic rights and values as themselves. They saw that the mentally handicapped can be helped to develop skills and live more independently without relying entirely on others. They also can contribute to the building up of society. The teachers have re-named their centre, Chi Ling, which mean "Reaching the Heart of the Person."

Another example of Caritas' involvement is its service to the elderly. In 1986, the government invited Caritas personnel who were experienced in helping the elderly to assist in the administration of several hostels. They were asked to give training courses on dealing with retirement to those who were in charge of retired cadres. One of the Caritas staff workers commented, "Our purpose was to communicate an enthusiasm for serving the elderly and the great value and dignity we place on individual persons. We knew that Mainland China was strong on communal values, but we felt we could contribute a sense of the worth of the individual. We invited a group to come to see our work with the elderly in Hong Kong. The visit made a deep impression on them. They were moved especially by our attitude of service to each individual person. They were curious about why we chose this kind of work? It's hard, but you do it with a joyful attitude."

"In all 90 persons participated in our training course, and we were impressed by their serious attitude. At first we worried whether our ideas on service would be accepted by them. Given the differences in our two social systems, would they accept our ideas on service? But after a while we found that they readily accepted our ideas, whenever they found

our theories practically useful to them. When they saw that our actions were in harmony with our words they began to trust us."

Caritas has also held training courses on nursery care in China. The situation there was similar to that which existed in Hong Kong in the 1960s. Participants in the course came from a variety of different backgrounds. Some were university graduates, others only went as far as junior middle school. Initially they resisted the system Caritas proposed, feeling it could only be carried out in wealthier countries. But after a visit to Caritas nurseries in Hong Kong, the trainees found that less staff was required to run a nursery in Hong Kong than in China. Originally the training program was to last for a period of 8 months. This was extended to a year. The response was very positive. When Caritas staff visited China after the course, they found many changes reflecting their child centered approach.

Holy Spirit Study Centre represents a pastoral approach. The Centre was set up to enable the diocese to keep in touch with the changing situations in China and to make appropriate responses. It enables the diocese to share in the responsibility of the Universal Church with regard to matters concerning the local church in China.

Since its foundation nine years ago our Centre has been busy gathering documentation, furthering research, and encouraging active dialogue with mainland Catholics.

Our Centre subscribes to over 100 magazines and newspapers, most of which are in Chinese or English. These provide us with up-to-date documentary material. We publish a bi-monthly magazine, TRIPOD, that promotes interest in Christianity in China and dialogue with religious people on the mainland. We also publish a monthly insert, Zhu Ai Zhong Hua, in the diocesan Chinese Catholic weekly. Its purpose is to help Hong Kong Catholics increase their knowledge of and concern for the Catholic Church in China. In addition, our staff and researchers make frequent visits to the mainland to promote social exchange and personal dialogue.

We also serve as hosts for church groups from the People's Republic visiting Hong Kong. Upon request, we offer orientation sessions for individuals and groups from overseas intent on visiting China. These sessions are quite popular and average about two per week.

Our Centre provides some assistance to the newly opened seminaries and novitiates in China, providing educational equipment, books and

other materials for their use. Such assistance is supportive and advisory, and is a way that the Centre can make a small contribution to the formation and training of China's future priests and religious.

When Cardinal Wu called me to his office in 1979 to inform me of the diocese's wishes to establish the Centre, he also indicated what he hoped would be its underlying philosophy. It should avoid being too far to the right or to the left. But rather it should pursue a path that would show that the diocese is open to dialogue with all parties while maintaining a firm commitment to Church policies, especially as outlined in the Second Vatican Council.



Looking back over the past nine years, we at the Centre feel that have received much from the Church in China. We continue to remind ourselves that our role as bridge builders must be understood in terms of mutual trust, learning, and service.

What can be learned from Catholics in China?

As the years pass, I am more and more convinced that the working model for the Church today should be the apostolic community of the early centuries. Three major elements define that early Christian community and all of these are relevant when speaking about the Church in China today.

The first is described by the Greek word didache, "the way of life", which marks the spiritual journey of Jesus Christ; the second by the Greek word koinonia, "communion", which requires that the Christian community be hierarchial in structure but formed in faith, hope and charity; the third element is diakonia, "service." When I reflect upon my personal experiences with the Church in China during the past nine years, I find many moving incidents that give striking evidence of the presence within the community of these three marks of the apostolic

Church. Circumstances there have served to bring about a reawakening of these basic values, and something can be learned from China's experience which may be helpful to our own Christian communities.

Catholic leaders whom I met in China recounted to me the pain of their own spiritual journeys. In many cases they were pressured into accepting a leadership role, only to find themselves shunned by some of their own Catholics. It remains a heavy weight on their consciences to this day, having adverse effects on both their spiritual and physical well-being. Yet they do not complain, but continue to work and pray for reconciliation within the Universal Church. With the government's present policy of greater tolerance toward religion, they are able to serve with greater zeal and give themselves more wholeheartedly to their tasks. Such a spiritual journey, it seems to me, exemplifies the way of Christ, a self-emptying of which St. Paul writes in his letter to the Philippians (2:6-8): "His state was divine yet he did not cling to his equality with God, but emptied himself to assume the condition of a slave and became as men are and being as all men are he was humbler yet, even accepting death, death on a cross." Is this not a moving example of didache? This makes me realize more deeply the value of the following prayer: "O God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference."

Furthermore, there are Catholic dioceses in China led by reputable bishops of strong faith and convictions who show great flexibility in working under the most difficult conditions. They are deeply loved by people both within and outside the church. The new religious policy allowed them to return to their dioceses where a pre-Vatican II situation awaited them. Some of these dioceses have tried to catch up with recent liturgical reforms. Though the liturgy by law must be celebrated in Latin, they employ lay leaders, to read the Mass prayers aloud in Chinese, with the people also making their responses in Chinese. A more mature church, with lay leaders and a strong community spirit is emerging. Does this not reflect the unified spirit of the early church in "the breaking of the bread" and worshiping under adverse conditions? And might this not be a dramatic example of koinonia?

A couple of years ago in one of China's larger dioceses four lay Catholics and a priest founded an eye clinic with the permission of the government. The staff of 18 included 6 doctors, 8 nurses and one laboratory assistant. In one year the clinic treated over 7,000 people. As is customary in China, the clinic received many commendations in the form of banners and scrolls inscribed with words of appreciation. One of

these came from the government, which noted that its small fees, 24-hour service, and willingness to make house calls, gave proof that the clinic's sole concern was to relieve the sufferings of the poor. As a result, it soon became a popular saying around the district that if Catholics were part of a community project, it could not fail. Is this not a striking example of Christian service, of diakonia?

I use these brief examples to illustrate the vitality of the Holy Spirit in the church in China, a vitality that has emerged from decades of hardship. Such a church bears striking similarity to the Christian community of apostolic times and offers lessons to be learned by other Christian communities, who grow and flourish in more favorable climates.

These examples reflect the words of Vatican II as contained in The Constitution on the Church: "By her relationship with Christ, the Church is a kind of sacrament or sign of intimate union with God, and the unity of all mankind. She is also an instrument for the achievement of such union and unity." (No. 1).

In China we can find many excellent Catholics, like Rose Yeung, a member of the Legion of Mary in Guangzhou City. I knew her well, because years before we belonged to the same parish. She is a woman filled with a great love for others. While in prison she often went hungry, eating less so that there would be more for the other prisoners. Even her prison guard was deeply moved by her love for the other prisoners, and while others tried to get more food for themselves, she would share the little she had. It was her Christian love and her firm witness to the Christian life that brought her into communion with the world. Is her heroic witness in prison less impressive, powerful and praiseworthy than that of Charles de Foucauld among the Tuareg people in Northern Sahara? Such modern apostles lead humanity toward the Eternal God through their silent presence and witness of love.

What can we do for the Church in China?

When we have asked Catholics in China what we can do for them and for the church there, they frequently answered that while the situation had improved, they hoped that outside help would not arouse the suspicions of the authorities. They said that prayer was the most important thing we could give them. They firmly believe in the power of prayer.

Besides praying for the Catholics in China, other possibilities for help are social services, increased cultural exchanges, information sharing, and supplying liturgical, theological and philosophical books

and other educational materials for Christian formation in faith. We also can support their efforts towards authentic indigenization.

Perhaps the most important task is that of reconciliation. Undeniably, the Catholic Church in China is a wounded church. Gossip, rumours, division and hostility are still present within it. Healing divisions is difficult and not without pain. It can be done only through the mediation of Catholics who are willing to shoulder the Christian responsibility for bearing one another's burdens.

There are three ways of resolving conflicts. One is to acknowledge fault and ask pardon from the other. The second is for the offended party to forgive without being asked. If the first and second ways of resolving the conflict fail, there still remains a third possibility. It demands the intervention of a mediator, who while himself innocent, freely and willingly from a motive of love assumes the burden of the conflict -- the pain, guilt and sin of both parties. His example of goodwill, genuine love and self-sacrificing generosity may serve to break the deadlock and help both sides to acknowledge past failures and seek reconciliation with each other. This was Christ's way.

To conclude, I would like to describe our feelings about the bridge-building work of the diocese during the past decade in three words: surprising, difficult and possible.

Surprising, because when we began in 1980 we never thought we would be able to build up so many contacts, learn so much, form so many new friendships, and expand so rapidly our services to China.

Difficult, because in the course of the past nine years we have had to face many new challenges. We have often had to be circumspect, careful and prudent in dealing with them.

Possible, because working along the guidelines of Vatican II and under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, we are assured that the complete unity prayed for by Our Lord Jesus Christ at the Last Supper will certainly be achieved. Our conviction echoes that voiced by a church leader living in another socialist country: "We Catholics should be united in our efforts regardless of what events or impacts may occur; we should always have faith in the Lord of History, who promised to send forth his Spirit into the world; we should be confident that everyone can be changed by our Christian love." I hope and pray that God will give to all Catholics in Hong Kong the courage to accept their role as his humble instruments in achieving unity for the Church and all humankind.