

The Canadian Catholic Roundtable on China has as its purpose:

- To study the contemporary scene in China, including the people, culture, history and languages, but with a particular focus on the Catholics and Catholicism there. Our concern is strongly motivated by the Vatican II document, "Ad Gentes".

- To share knowledge of the current situation in China with other groups through seminars, talks, and media presentations. Opportunities for further exposure to China like teaching or doing research would be welcomed and favorably considered.

- To act as a liaison to other China-concerned groups in Canada.

- To work as an "Ad Hoc" China concerns committee for the Canadian Bishops' Conference.

- To serve as a forum for questions and information regarding China and the Church in China which may arise from Canadian Catholic context.

The Canadian Catholic Roundtable on China is still in its initial stages of development. The group has not yet determined definite modes of structure and membership. Concern for China and the Church in China has brought Canadian Catholics together to search for significant responses to questions that arise. The Canadian Catholic Roundtable on China is a concern group of the local church in Canada in relation to the local church in China. At the present time, its preoccupation with China outweighs the number of its activities. The group sees itself as a continuation of the friendly mission of the Canadian Church towards the Church in China.

Eucharist and Tradition in the Middle Kingdom

by Eugene LaVerdiere, S.S.S.



Introibo ad altare Dei. It was Passion Sunday, not Palm Sunday but the Sunday before Palm Sunday, the first of two Sundays in Passiontide. The Mass was in Latin from beginning to end, including the reading of both the epistle and the gospel. Throughout the Mass, people prayed aloud, chanting in the vernacular litanies and other prayers long committed to memory.

The priest was garbed in vestments such as those I remember from my earliest years. He wore a maniple; his chasuble was vintage roman; his back was to the people, to whom he occasionally turned to greet with bowed head, a brief but closed gesture, and in a barely audible voice. Only the altar server responded to his Dominus vobiscum with the Et cum spiritu tuo. Few went up to communion, and these would have had to

refrain from eating food or drinking liquids from midnight. After the final blessing, the priest walked to the side of the altar to read in a low voice the Last Gospel... the prologue of the Gospel according to St. John...In Principio erat Verbum...

It was Sunday the 12th of March, 1989. I was in Jiangmen (Kongmoon) China, attending the early morning Mass in Immaculate Heart of Mary Cathedral, a church dedicated by Bishop James E. Walsh, M.M. in 1928. Built in a Chinese-European style, the church has been beautifully restored and was rededicated for Catholic worship on August 22, 1986. The priest who said the Mass was Father Paul Liu, who was ordained in 1945.

There were about forty people in attendance at the Mass. The front pews were occupied by two religious sisters and nine novices, all members of the Sisters of the Immaculate Heart of Mary, a diocesan congregation founded by Bishop Walsh and formed by the Maryknoll Sisters before Maryknoll was expelled from China in the early 1950's. Also in attendance was a couple from Macau, who had come to Jiangmen to visit a sick relative. Behind these sat the local parishioners, men and women, young and old-Catholics who had not only held steadfastly to their faith even during the ten-year terror of the Cultural Revolution but passed it on as well. I was told that there were many more parishioners who could not be present that morning because they had to go to work. In China, Sunday is not the Lord's Day.

For a middle-aged foreign Catholic to participate even minimally in such a Mass, the memory has to shift into high gear. Catholics from outside China have to recall just how the Mass used to be celebrated before the inaugural reforms of Pius XII in the late 1940's to appreciate what is going on. The majority of the world's Catholics, of course, have never even seen this kind of liturgical expression.

For most Catholics the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy which was issued by Vatican II in 1963 was a watershed in modern liturgical reform and renewal. The eucharistic liturgy as celebrated today in China not only pre-dates Vatican II, but also Pius XII's encyclical Mediator Dei, which in 1947 allowed direct if somewhat limited participation in the Mass by the faithful, who were at least allowed to make the responses normally reserved to the altar server. As for the eucharistic fast, Pius XII's apostolic constitution Christus Dominus began modifying legislation as early as 1953.

The Mass I experienced at the Jiangmen Cathedral was the very same as the one said at its dedication in 1928, remaining unchanged throughout the years and showing no signs of the impact of the 1940's reforms on parish liturgy. In those days, priests 'said' and the faithful 'attended' Mass. No one spoke of 'celebrating the Eucharist', let alone 'sharing in the Lord's Supper'. But it also must be

remembered that it was this style of Mass which sustained Chinese Catholics through the terrible years of the Japanese occupation, the decades of government persecution, and the horrors of the Cultural Revolution. In recent weeks, it has also sustained them through the violent political repression of China's popular democratic reform movement.

With a cultural history nearly a thousand years older than Christianity itself, China has historically seen itself as the Middle Kingdom...the world's centre...self-sufficient and self-contained. If in recent years, China has begun to open itself to allow for greater economic contact with the rest of the world, this openness has been restricted and controlled when extended to religious matters. The authorities take a dim view of a Chinese giving any kind of allegiance to a universal Church centered not in Beijing but in Rome.

What are we to make of such a liturgy which for many is bound to appear as hopelessly conservative. The tendency is to ask, "Why do they cling to...? Don't they see that...? Why don't they change to...?" In short, "Why are they not like us?"

Such questions, usually rhetorical, do not lead to greater understanding. We would do better to ask what the Chinese practice and experience of the eucharistic liturgy does for the Church in China today? We also need to ask what it is that makes the Catholic Church in China retain forms of liturgical expression that have been set aside by the rest of the Catholic world? Finally, we need to realize that the Catholic Church in China has neither shared in our recent history, nor does it enjoy our present situation.

Today, thirteen years after the Cultural Revolution and in the aftermath of the most recent violent convulsion, the Church continues its struggle to make its way in a politically ambiguous climate. Internally, it is led by the government sponsored Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association, and externally, it is under the control of the Bureau of Religious Affairs, the department that oversees all organized religions throughout China. For Catholics in most parts of the world, this is a completely alien and unacceptable situation. Given such circumstances how could the Church in China possibly be part of the liturgical mainstream of the universal Church?

Are there sound reasons why the Church in China is so conservative liturgically, and are there good reasons why it should move in new directions? I am not in a position to criticize liturgical practices of those who have suffered so courageously over so long a period of time, and it is not my intention to do so. However, perhaps an outsider's reflections can be of some help, at least in understanding the reactions of foreign visitors who have not shared in China's experience of the Church.

The most basic issue for the Church in China today is that of universality and particularity; that is, of being and functioning visibly as a member of the one body of Christ and as a unique member of that body. That most obvious expression of a particular church's belonging to the universal Church is through communication and other forms of association. The universal Church is a communion of local or particular churches in which the particular churches share their spiritual gifts with the universal Church and the universal Church, in turn, enriches local churches with the gifts of all.

For various reasons, historical and political, this expression of universality is to a large extent beyond the reach of the Church in China at the present time, at least insofar as it involves concrete and visible church structures. But there is another way for a particular church to express and maintain its relationship to the universal Church, that of fidelity to tradition. This, too, is important for every local church. Tradition, which includes the liturgical life of the Church, finds different expressions in various parts of the world, but each of those expressions springs from a common root where all are one. This second way of expressing a particular church's relationship to the universal Church, that is through traditional continuity, is fully available to the Church in China.

Perhaps it can be said that for the Church in China, liturgical conservatism is an important expression of continuity and association with the universal Church. Through the use of Latin, which once was the universal language for official worship in the Latin Church and its missions, through its use of liturgical vestments, prayers and rites, which are no longer in use elsewhere in the Church, the Church in China demonstrates continuity with its own history and through it with the universal Church.

Where regular communication and dialogue between a particular church and the universal Church are possible, and where the ordinary structures of association are present and visible, continuity by way of historical tradition would not be enough. But in China today, they are signs and guarantees of fidelity and expressions of hope.

The conservatism of the Church in China is not a reactionary conservatism. It is not the conservatism of those who have been offered new forms of expression, tasted them, and found them unpalatable; nor is it the conservatism of Christians who have enjoyed the freedom and luxury of turning away from the new to return to the old; rather it is the conservatism of Christians holding on to the only thing available to them. For Catholics in China, the alternative would be to abandon the Catholic structures they have known and drift into isolation. It seems to me the basic question facing the Church in China is whether to be or not to be Catholic. If the answer is to be Catholic, then for the

present time at least, it is also, unfortunately, to be conservative liturgically.

The experience of Mass in the cathedral at Jiangmen stands in sharp contrast to that which is celebrated outside of mainland China. The differences are particularly striking when compared with the liturgy in Hong Kong, where Mass is celebrated in the local Cantonese dialect, with music rich in traditional Chinese tonality, and with prayers that breathe with an awareness of the life of the universal Church. There, where I participated in eucharistic celebrations in several different parishes, I noted a fairly high level of participation and felt a strong sense of community.

These contrasting experiences focus attention on the far-reaching effects of the liturgical renewal inaugurated by Pius XII and continued by Vatican II. These effects are most visible in the way the renewed eucharistic liturgy draws individuals together and forms them into a community. Because the renewed liturgy is in the vernacular and includes a homiletic reflection on the scriptural lessons, it is also spiritually very formative and even prophetically challenging with regard to internal church issues as well as larger social issues.

With its ancient liturgical forms, the eucharistic liturgy on mainland China maintains individuals in their isolation even as they celebrate the sacrament of unity. It also abandons them to their own formative resources and private devotions, and it cuts them off from the formative power of the scriptures and eucharistic prayer itself.

But then there may be those who are eager to prevent the Church from developing strong local communities, and even more eager to stifle its prophetic voice. For those people, keeping the Church well within the Middle Kingdom, even as the nation emerges from it economically, would be a priority.

It is possible then to understand the need for conservatism in the liturgy and to appreciate the lack of experience with vital liturgy, but it is also clear that there is a need for at least cautious change and renewal. It is already ten years since the reopening of the churches in China. I heard it from young people, and old people too, "Why couldn't our Mass be in our Chinese language?"

I have been told that the liturgical commission of the Chinese Bishops' Conference, led by Bishop Dong Guangqing of Wuhan, is currently working on a Chinese text for use in the eucharistic liturgy. This commission certainly deserves our encouragement and our prayers. Without such consciousness, we ourselves might one day awaken to discover that we have been in a Middle Kingdom of our own, self-sufficient, isolated, and separated by a great wall of indifference from a Church whose universality reaches out to the people of China.