



Like the Bamboo Tree

by Elmer Wurth



In response to a request by Sister Marge Zacharias of the U.S. Catholic Mission Association, I served this May as the group leader of a dozen American priests and religious sisters visiting China.

It was for me, personally, the most rewarding of my many trips to that country after becoming associated with the Holy Spirit Study Centre eight years ago. Our main stops were Shanghai, Beijing, Xian, and Guangzhou. We were warmly received by all on our visits to the many reopened churches, seminaries and convents in those cities.

During our stay, we also met with some Chinese Catholic Church leaders. One bishop remarked to us, "This is the best time for the Church here since 1949. Each year has been better than the last." The bishop himself suggested we pray for the Pope at our concelebrated Mass. He added, "Let us pray not only for the Pope, but also for peace, and for the personal sanctification of all of us." Actually, most of the people we met expressed the opinion that they would soon be allowed to recognize the Pope as their spiritual leader publicly.

But after the June 4th event in Tiananmen Square, foreigners wonder what direction the Chinese government will now take with regard to its implementation of the religious policy. It is my personal opinion that the government will take a harsher approach to religion so long as hard-liners are making decisions. It is a fact that under the umbrella of the Four Modernizations and the need for a more open policy to the world, concessions have been granted to religion. These concessions, however, did not flow from any basic change in the communist concept of religion, but rather as part of the government effort to form a united front to gain the support of all its citizens. Religion is still viewed as an opiate which hinders the development of the Chinese socialistic society. Concessions are pragmatic, quid-pro-quo exchanges to enlist cooperation in attaining Party goals. The Chinese government's recent moves give clear evidence that it has decided to silence all opposition, even to the point of employing violent means. If the present atmosphere of oppression continues, religion will lose much of the freedom that it has been grudgingly granted during the past decade.

However, history bears testimony to the fact that no matter how difficult the situation, religion will never die. Just as Noah sent out the dove periodically from the Ark to see if the destructive waters of

the flood had receded, so believers will surface from time to time from their underground sanctuaries of faith and worship to test the political climate for signs of change that will enable them to once again live their faith openly. A comment made by a foreign bishop during a previous trip to China now seems to me to be even truer than when he first made it. It sums up the resiliency of faith which Chinese believers have shown throughout history and which they will once again exhibit after the present crisis is over. As peasant farmers proudly showed us their ancestral shrines, first in their homes and then in the village temple which they had just finished restoring, the bishop remarked, "The Chinese are like the bamboo tree. They can be bent over until the top is almost touching the ground, and while this might go on for some time, sooner or later when the restraints are loosened, the tree will spring right back up to stand tall and sturdy once more."

A VISIT WITH FOUR YOUNG SISTERS FROM NANJING

TRIPOD

Last November, a group of six religious sisters from Nanjing were invited by the Canossian Sisters to visit Hong Kong. The four younger sisters had just completed their novitiate the year before and were still in training in Nanjing, where they work in a parish under the supervision of a local parish priest. The sisters are the first group of novices to graduate from the newly opened convent in Suzhou and they took advantage of their stay in Hong Kong to observe local religious formation and training methods, innovations in catechetical education, and the ways in which the church here takes care of elderly citizens. The Sisters do not belong to a separate religious community but to the diocese of Nanjing itself. All four of the younger sisters were baptized Mary, but this, and the fact that all share the same vocation, is where similarities end, as you can see from the following interviews.

Our first interview was with Sr. Zong Xiuhong, 25 years old:

Tripod: Sister Zong, what is your background? Are your parents Catholic?

Sr. Zong: I'm from an old Catholic family. Both of my parents are Catholics and our family has been Catholic for five generations.

Tripod: Being from Shandong, how did you end up

