

German Catholics hold out a helping hand towards China

by Stephan Puhl



(Editor's note: Stephan Puhl is Asia referent of Misereor [Aachen] and member of the Catholic China Commission, West Germany.)

After the moral, political, and national catastrophe of the Nazi regime and World War II, the German people and the Catholics in Germany experienced for themselves how much it means to be offered forgiveness, cooperation, and reconciliation by other countries. Today, the Catholic Church in Germany runs various organisations which have different specific working orientations, but are all intended to offer the people in the so-called developing countries appropriate forms of cooperation in the social welfare field, in matters of development, and in the field of missionary work. The Common synod of the Dioceses in the Federal Republic of Germany (1972-75) reiterated that these three areas are part of one and the same mission and should lead towards the same common goal: reconciliation with God and among all human beings in justice and love (cf. 2 Cor 5;14-21).

The agencies of the Catholic Church in Germany involved in cooperation with the People's Republic of China are Caritas, Misereor, and Missio. The following will introduce briefly the history and work of these organisations:

1. The German Caritas Association (Deutscher Caritasverband, DCV) was founded in 1897. Recognized by and working on behalf of the German Bishops, it is the institutional body of all Catholic charitable work undertaken by the dioceses in the Federal Republic of Germany. However, mindful of its responsibility to people in need in other parts of the world, it also participates in the international tasks of the German Catholic Church. As a result of its general orientation and within the limits of its resources, the DCV provides emergency

aid wherever it is needed to relieve acute misery and want caused by natural calamities (e.g. earthquakes, droughts, floods) or man-made disasters (e.g. war, ethnic conflicts, etc.).

The DCV provides its emergency aid in coordination and consultation with a variety of Church and non-Church bodies on the national and international levels. It also supports projects and programmes in various sectors of social work such as the promotion of child and youth welfare, services to the handicapped and elderly, appropriate support for marginalized social groups (e.g. drug addicts, prostitutes), or measures intended to help improve and strengthen the social structure of a region or a country. Such development-related measures and programmes are often undertaken as an appropriate continuation of emergency relief.

The greater part of DCV's financial resources comes from donations. Funds for specific projects can be applied for from the German Bishops' Conference, the West German Federal Government, and the European Communities.

2. Misereor is the German Catholic Bishops' Organisation for Development Cooperation. Founded in 1958, it was given a three-fold assignment:

- to raise the social awareness of Catholics in the Federal Republic of Germany so that they would be prepared to give up part of their worldly goods to help people in need in developing countries;
- to make appropriate and efficient use of funds thus created in efforts intended to help overcome hunger, disease, and social misery, and to bring about permanent and lasting improvements in the situation of the poor. All Misereor aid is guided by the principle that local groups must be helped to help themselves.
- to draw people's attention in the prosperous countries to the injustice evidenced in the unfair division of resources; and to appeal to the conscience of the powerful in governments, political parties, business circles, and other influential bodies and institutions.

The funds made available to Misereor also come from donations by German Catholics, from the budget of the German Bishops' Conference, and from public funds of the West German Federal Government and the European Communities.

3. Missio, the international Catholic Mission society of Aachen, was

founded in 1832 through the initiative of Catholic lay people as the St. Francis Xavier Association for the support of the Catholic missions in Asia, Africa, and Oceania. In Bavaria (one of the southern German states), the corresponding Ludwig Mission Association (named after the then Bavarian King Ludwig I) was founded in 1838; it is known today as the International Catholic Mission Society of Munich. In 1922, Pope Pius XI raised both the Aachen and Munich Societies to the status of Pontifical Mission Aid Societies.

Missio-Aachen and Missio-Munchen are engaged in missionary conscientisation efforts in West Germany, and support social and pastoral projects undertaken by the so-called Young Churches. They also promote the training of qualified local leadership personnel in the Churches of Africa, Asia, and Oceania, and provide material assistance for their pastoral work.

Some 5,600 requests for project support reach Missio every year from churches in Africa, Asia, and Oceania. They range from the purchase of a mop to the extension of a seminary, from the reconstruction of a destroyed church to the printing of bibles.

Missio's financial resources are mainly composed of donations from the Catholic faithful in West Germany, and from funds made available by the Association of the German Dioceses.

Both Misereor and Missio support only those projects which are proposed and planned by the local people in the developing countries themselves, and are carried out under their responsible supervision.

Before the end of the 10-year Cultural Revolution and the death of Mao Zedong in 1976, it was inconceivable, that Caritas, Misereor, and Missio would be able to support any projects in the People's Republic of China. A change in this situation occurred in 1979, when Deng Xiaoping introduced his open-door policy.

All three agencies are currently in the process of what might be called the preparatory phase of establishing contacts and gaining basic experience. As foreign non-governmental organizations (NGOs) offering aid in China, they first must make clear their identity, their working methods, and their respective aims, thus trying to remove gradually any possibly existing areas of mistrust or suspicion.

At present, the financial volume of project-cooperation with partners in the People's Republic of China is still rather modest:

Projects in the People's Republic of China approved for funding 1988 and 1989				
Agency	1988		1989	
	Number	Amount allocated	Number	Amount allocated
DVC	1	DM 390.000,--	2	DM 1.835.000,--
Misereor	25	DM 2.162.700,--	35	DM 3.908.000,--
Missio	4	DM 91.000,--	30	DM 1.087.800,--
Total	30	DM 2.643.700,--	67	DM 6.830.800,--

Exchange rate before the devaluation of December 1989:
DM1.00 = RMB 2.00

Caritas and Misereor support social and development projects mainly in the areas of health care, education, vocational training and rural development, as well as programmes for the disabled (rehabilitation) and for the elderly. Initial contact with the partners in China is usually established through Caritas Hong Kong or similar bodies, which also provide the projects with appropriate advice and supportive supervision during their implementation stage. It is a long-term aim of the three agencies to extend their cooperation from the coastal areas into the poorer provinces of the interior of the country. Missio concentrates its project efforts on providing appropriate support for seminaries, helping them purchase theological books for their libraries, promoting bible study, and providing assistance in the renovation of Church buildings.

In view of the special situation of the Church in the People's Republic of China, and bearing in mind that until only a few years ago the existence and work of non-governmental organisations was completely unknown in that country, Caritas and Misereor decided to proceed in a slightly different manner from their usual approach in other developing nations where these difficulties resulting from the particular history of that country do not exist, by cooperation with partners on various levels: with governmental authorities (e.g. with the Ministry for Public Health in the central government), with private non-church initiatives, and, finally, with Church institutions and initiatives, as far as this is possible.

Missio also tries to make the best possible use of the room for

maneuvering allowed by the State with regard to worship and religious freedom to establish a relationship of close cooperation with the Catholic Church in that country. Although the three agencies have different specific working orientations, they share the conviction and intention that locally existing antagonisms among Catholics must not be aggravated. The German aid agencies are well aware that they cannot solve the problems prevailing within China in this regard, but it is their hope that the atmosphere and relationships among the Chinese Catholics, between the Chinese Local Church and the Universal Church, and between the Chinese Local Church and the Chinese Government may be marked less and less by mistrust and misgivings and more and more by concrete information and everyday practical cooperation. For in spite of the existing differences resulting from the particular history of the country, it does not seem impossible that by increasing practical cooperation, even differences in the question of communion between the Chinese Local Church and the Universal Church or problems occurring in the relations between Church and State in China can eventually be resolved. As far as the Catholics in Germany and the agencies Caritas, Misereor, and Missio are concerned, it is their intention to contribute through their practical assistance to the process of reconciliation and better understanding among the Catholics in China as well as between the Church in China and the Universal Church. At the very least, they wish to make sure that by offering their project support no additional obstacles will be put in the way of such a process of reconciliation and cooperation.

In 1988, Caritas, Misereor, Missio, and the missionary societies in Germany working together, set up a China Centre in Bonn with the aim of promoting the exchange of information and improving coordination. Bearing in mind that project-cooperation with China has started only in recent years, people in China and in Germany should be aware that a good deal of patience is indispensable; gaining experience needs time, and even if the Catholic Church in China cannot act as a direct partner in some of the projects financed by Caritas or Misereor, we still intend to make sure that the Church in China is at least informed about such projects, and that, through the concrete work of the three agencies, it will become evident that German Catholics wish to hold out a helping hand towards China and that the Catholic Church wants to contribute to improved living conditions and a better future for the common people. As the Chinese themselves often put it today, the essential thing is to establish a good relationship of cooperation between equal partners, serving the interests of both sides, and based on mutual trust and confidence.