

The Catholic Church in China: a Significant Decade

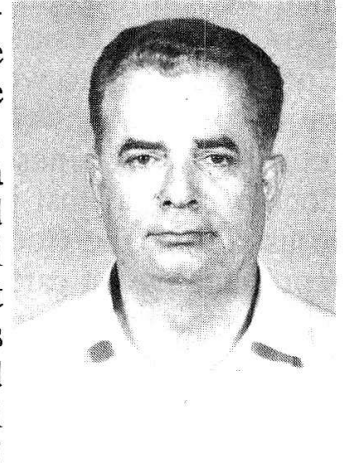
J. Charbonnier, MEP

(Editor's Note: Jean Charbonnier, a frequent contributor to TRIPOD, is a member of the Paris Foreign Mission Society and Director of the China Catholic Communication Centre, Singapore.)

It was Pentecost Sunday in 1978 when after the celebration of the Latin Mass in Beijing's southern district church (Nantang), I was able to speak privately for the first time with the three Chinese priests serving the parish. Since the thirty people who attended the Mass were all foreigners, there was little comment about the local Chinese parishioners. One of the priests did mention, however, that he had begun to teach Latin to a number of young men. The thought crossed my mind that only someone interested in becoming a priest would take the trouble to learn Latin. But a certain reticence governed the relationships in those days and much was left to conjecture and speculation. At the time, Nantang was the only Catholic Church in the whole of China to be reopened after the dark cloud of the Cultural Revolution had appeared in 1966.

When I returned to Beijing four years later in June of 1982, I found a completely different local church. I attended Mass in St. Joseph's Church on Wangfujing Road (Dongtang) and found it packed

with people chanting spiritedly the traditional Chinese Mass prayers. After Mass, a Marist brother told me with gleeful enthusiasm about seeing the pope's visits to Fatima and England on local television. And



when I returned to Nantang, the priests this time welcomed me into their rectory, where we spoke openly and freely about the church in Singapore, the documents of Vatican II, and the missionary spirit of Matteo Ricci. They also told me that since my last visit, over 200 churches had been reopened throughout the country.

The changes that had taken place during those four years were indeed striking, but it was only to be the beginning of a general revitalization of the Church in China which continues even to the present day. For a decade, a new Church has been taking shape, renewed in both its structures and its inner life. Deeply rooted in the Catholic tradition, it has faced up to dramatic challenges under a leadership that is now completely native Chinese. There has been a reorganization of basic elements in church life, and the

time is not far off when the church in China will be able to make its own unique contribution to the life of the universal church.

Let us, then, review here the main stages of this evolutionary process, and outline some of its general characteristics.

Priority of Worship

By 1982, two hundred churches had been reopened, most of them in the larger cities. Foreign visitors were given ample evidence to show there was indeed freedom of religion in China. Some might conclude that this was merely a propaganda device; the churches, however, continued to be reopened after 1982, many in the more remote regions that seldom if ever saw a foreigner. To questions raised about the use of Latin in an outmoded liturgy, Chinese church leaders were quick to respond that priority for the present was to be given to reopening churches.

Passing through Taiyan in Shanxi province during Holy Week in 1984, I was amazed by the fervour of the huge crowds of people, who knelt patiently hour after hour through the long traditional Paschal Vigil service. A priest there told me his people were so grateful for the opportunity to attend Mass and receive communion after twenty some years, that they wept freely during the services. Many thought nothing of travelling by foot for two or three days to attend Mass on Christmas and Easter. While in Chengdu, I was told that some came from as far away as Kangding, Tibet, crossing over high mountains through passes 4,000 feet above sea-level.

In Zhaoping, Guangdong, the parish priest spoke of twenty blind people among his congregation, who lived up-country and who came a full day's journey by boat to attend Sunday Mass. It is now part of the general policy to open a church wherever there are over a hundred Catholics requesting it, as long as they also have had the good fortune to secure the services of a priest.

Priority has been given to the reopening of churches for two main reasons. Firstly, the government's policy of religious freedom favours worship services only in officially sanctioned church buildings. The public practise of religion is generally not allowed anywhere else in society. This makes it easier for the government to control the situation by registering those who come to church. Secondly, on the part of the faithful, Chinese Catholics are church centred and being a Catholic consists principally in keeping the Sunday observances. Traditionally, Catholic practise in China meant long hours in Church. Morning prayers would be followed by the recitation of the rosary and then the Mass, after which there would be the stations of the cross, followed by the litanies, and finally the recitation of the catechism. Even today it is not uncommon for Chinese Catholics to spend from three to four hours in church on any given Sunday. Daily Mass is also well attended. In October of 1983, I went early in the morning to a parish church in Tianjin where I found some five hundred people singing the requiem Mass in full voice. The year before, I had taken the night train to Xi'an and arrived at the church door before six in the

morning. Much to my surprise, I was invited by the priest to offer Mass for his people. Needless to say, I was overjoyed at the invitation and readily accepted. I said the Latin Mass in the same way that I had when I was a newly ordained priest twenty-five years before. There were about forty people present, chanting the Chinese Mass prayers throughout, and it did not seem to disturb their devotion when I inadvertently forgot to include the Last Gospel.

I was told in many places that elderly Catholics are not quite ready to accept changes in the traditional liturgy, which they had learned to love in their youth and had yearned for throughout the long years of deprivation. Older priests also have a great fondness for the traditional *Missale Romanum*. However, in places where young Catholics predominate and there is more openness to the outside world, the post-Vatican II liturgy receives a warm welcome and is now part of current practise, even though liturgical books are scarce and no official directives have been forthcoming from the Religious Affairs Administrative Commission. The Commission was established in 1980. Its role is pastoral and it works hand-in-hand with the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association.

Official church leaders are not opposed in theory to the use of Chinese in the liturgy, but they would prefer it to be introduced in an orderly manner. A liturgical commission has already been set up on the national level and is now in the process of determining an official Chinese text. Some are calling on the commission to produce its own text, and for two

reasons: it would serve to emphasize the strict independence of the Chinese church, and it would allow for the adoption of a language style more suitable for Mainland Catholics. Others advocate using the translations already available in Hong Kong and Taiwan. They argue that these translations are also "made in China" and are already being used in many parts of the country. When in June of 1986 I made my way to Urumqi, the capital of the remote province of Xinjiang, I thoroughly enjoyed the celebration of a Mass which skillfully adapted the *Missale Romanum* plainchant to a Chinese text. The eucharistic prayer itself was the same version currently being used in Taiwan and Singapore.

Last Christmas in the presence of 130 seminarians at Sheshan in Shanghai, the concelebrated Mass was celebrated in Chinese. And on Pentecost of this year, three of our Chinese Zhongliam team members from Singapore felt quite at home in Jilian, northeast China, when Bishop Li Xuesong confirmed over 100 adults at a vernacular Mass. They were told then that while it is possible to use the vernacular in Masses in the larger cities where there are many young priests and Sisters, the older Catholics resent any interruption of their traditional Chinese Mass prayers.

Sharing the Task of Modernization

The Chinese Communists see religion strictly as a personal matter, which is not allowed to interfere in social affairs. Believers are permitted to save their individual souls through their private

religious practices just so long as publicly they behave as good citizens. Such a view is not incompatible with the teaching of the traditional Catholic Catechism, recently reprinted in China, whose response to the opening question of "Why were you born into this world?" is "To worship God and save my own soul."

Since 1978, the policy of the United Front has sought to mobilize all sectors of society, including believers, for the important task of modernization. Cadres were given detail instructions in an article in the June 1982 issue of *Red Flag* on how to train activists to guide believers to a more positive participation in the economic and social development of the country. *The Catholic Church in China*, a magazine published quarterly in Beijing, now has a special section featuring Catholic models of community service. Recently, a priest from northern Hebei has received much publicity for his leadership role in the national reforestation programme in that province. Catholics in Nanjing have also been singled out for awards of merit as outstanding examples of service to society. An Association of Catholic Intellectuals has been formed in Shanghai whose members volunteer their professional services to the poor. And since 1985, China has welcomed outside assistance in such areas as language education, teacher training, rural development, care for the handicapped, etc. As of this writing, Caritas-Hong Kong has been involved in over twenty such projects in different parts of the country.

In July of 1985, I accompanied a group of French Catholics on a visit to China. The group was composed of a

bishop, six priests and fifteen lay people, all of whom had experience in the Catholic Action movement in France. While in Beijing, they asked Bishop Fu Tieshan a number of questions about lay Catholic involvement in Chinese society. His answer was one that he liked to repeat on similar occasions. "They are to be the salt of the earth; love of God cannot be separated from love of others." As a faithful rendition of the Christian's obligation of service to the world, this is true enough. But such an interpretation must also be reconciled with the communist view that sees religion as merely an escape from this world's suffering into a dream of heavenly reward in the next. A sound Marxist will contend that believers become good citizens in spite of their faith rather than because of it.

Both points of view exist side by side in the pages of the magazine *The Catholic Church in China*. An article introducing model workers will argue that Catholics should not be discriminated against since they perform on a par with their non-Catholic fellow-workers, while another article in the same issue, usually written by a bishop or priest, will insist that their outstanding community service is motivated by their love of God and country.

Studying such documents as Vatican II's *Gaudium et Spes* has served to help many bishops and priests to formulate an integrated theology of Christian service in modern society. While they may differ in their theoretical foundations, both Catholics and communists can, in practice, find much common ground. Certainly, in its efforts to encourage Catholics to correct what appears to be a purely individualistic

approach to spirituality by urging them towards a more dedicated commitment to the common good of society, the Chinese government offers the Church an invaluable service.

Training Future Priests and Religious

An area where the church and government share a common concern, albeit for different reasons, is in the training of future church leaders. Most of the priests who resurfaced after the Cultural Revolution were already over sixty years old. The trials they endured in jails and labour camps may have weakened them physically, but certainly not spiritually. Knowing they had only a few more years left to minister as priests, they became obsessed with the idea of fostering vocations and quietly began training young men to take their place. Motivated by a great desire to see the church survive, they gathered them together to teach them Latin and improve their knowledge of the faith. While they did find young men, who were inspired by the staunch faith of their elders, willing to dedicate their lives in service to the church, most of them came from poor farm families. They had little formal education and few had ever had the opportunity to receive instructions in their faith before.

At the same time this was going on, the communist authorities also saw the need to train Catholic activists to carry out their new policy of religious freedom. They, too, were interested in training young men competent in the religious field who would also have a solid political foundation in the art of nation building. The authorities knew that candidates for

the priesthood would have to acquire sufficient religious knowledge if they were to find acceptance and respect among Catholics, but they would also need the necessary political formation to serve as guides for Catholic communities in carrying out the all important task of modernization.

The first officially sanctioned seminary to be reopened in China was in Sheshan outside of Shanghai. In October of 1982, some thirty students moved into the buildings at the rear of the church half-way up Sheshan Hill, which served as a retirement home for elderly priests. Fr. Jin Luxian, who later became the Bishop of Shanghai, was appointed the seminary rector. After he became bishop, he managed to collect enough money to erect a new set of buildings at the foot of the hill. The new seminary, now completed, can accommodate up to 150 seminarians. Bishop Jin, without compromising the Chinese church's principle of independence, was open to accept financial assistance from the Catholics of West Germany, as well as over 20,000 books from the United States and Taiwan for the seminary library. Beginning in 1989, the bishop has also been inviting professors from Taiwan and Hong Kong to help update the seminary's theological curriculum. In December of 1985, he launched the publication of a periodical, *Tianzhu Yanjiu Ziliao Huibian*, which reprints articles from Taiwan and Hong Kong as well as documents translated from French and English sources. *Tianzhu Yanjiu* is now under the management of the Shanghai Guanqi Society and seventeen issues of the review have al-

ready been published. Since most of its articles are concerned with introducing the renewed theology of post-Vatican II, with special emphasis on scripture, liturgy and ecclesiology, *Tianzhu Yanjiu* has become an invaluable instrument in the formation of present and future Chinese pastors. It is now being used all over China. On a visit to a church in Zhanjiang, Guandong, in December of 1986, I came across the parish priest giving a class to a group of seventeen young postulants. All held in their hands copies of the *Tianzhu Yanjiu* from Shanghai.

While outsiders might consider She-shan, because of its openminded approach, to be the leading seminary in China, insiders know that this position belongs to the National Institute of Philosophy and Theology in Beijing. Housed in the same building as the national office of the Chinese Patriotic Association, the Institute adheres to a strict policy of independence. Its director Bishop Shihua and his assistant Wang Zicheng, who was recently elected bishop, have taken great pains to translate, digest and modify the traditional Latin text-books which they themselves studied in their youth. Ironically, these old Latin texts are now considered part of the national heritage, even though they were introduced into China during Western colonial days. Chinese seminarians have not had access, until very recently, to any new books written abroad.

The Institute's text-books are channelled down to the regional seminaries: Shenyang, Chendu, Wuchang and Xi'an, as well as to the various diocesan seminaries, all of which have opened since

1983. The directors of the national and regional seminaries meet often for consultation, and all seminary programmes and teaching materials have to have the approval of the Institute in Beijing.

There are, at present, between six and seven hundred students studying in seminaries officially approved by the government. Already they have produced over two hundred ordained priests. These new priests are fervently committed to pastoral ministry. They are eager to obtain missals and breviaries in Chinese, and they are also anxious to get hold of books and articles that will help make up for what they feel was lacking in their seminary training.

Young Sisters, too, are becoming more and more involved in pastoral work, serving especially those Catholic communities in the villages that seldom see a priest. The religious communities that had originally been scattered began after 1982 to regroup. The older members were soon joined by many new and enthusiastic young women. In April of 1984, a parish priest in Jilin, with great pride, introduced me to ten elderly Sisters of the Diocesan Congregation of the Holy Family and four of their young postulants. By June of this year, the number of young women had grown to thirty: ten have already made their religious profession, seven of whom were sent to villages in the countryside; nine novices will be professed in September after completing their four years of formation-training; and twenty-one are in their second year of postulancy. The Sisters place great emphasis on spiritual formation and welcome especially books on gospel

meditations and the lives of the saints.

A surprise awaited me on another trip to South China in 1984. After hours of fruitless searching through the streets of the beautiful city of Liuzhou in Guangxi, I finally stumbled upon the church in the early evening. There I found Father Meng, the elderly pastor, listening to tapes of sacred music. After chatting for a few minutes, he asked me to wait while he went out to ring the bell. Not long after, the room filled up with twenty young women accompanied by an elderly Sister. Father Meng explained that the girls had come at great sacrifice to their families to enter a two-year training course in catechetics, liturgy, scripture, and to learn practical skills working during the day and studying at night. These young aspirants represented a revitalization of the Congregation of the Holy Family in this district. Later they were sent in teams to serve in Catholic village communities, who welcome them and support them. Others were sent to cities throughout Guangxi and Guangdong to assist in setting up similar communities.

The Sister members of international religious communities have now been re-grouped under bishops, or spiritual directors appointed by them. The period of religious formation varies depending on local circumstances, but all express the same need for more emphasis on spiritual formation programmes. The need is especially great in the cities where local branches of the Patriotic Association assign a heavy work-load to the Sisters with their so called "income generating projects". While such projects may help

the church to be self-supporting, they should not be maintained at the expense of what gives meaning to the church's life.

Achieving Financial Self-Support

Self-governing, self-propagating and self-supporting are the three basic requirements for the kind of independent church the Chinese government wants to see established. Chinese church leaders themselves are in general agreement that these three principles are necessary if the church in China is to become a responsible local church. The problem with the three-self doctrine lies in its interpretation as advocating separatism. Chinese Catholics were forced to stand against the Pope in the name of "the patriotic struggle against foreign imperialism". All foreign missionaries were subsequently expelled from the country. As a result of this policy, the church in China has had to live in isolation for nearly thirty years.

While Chinese Catholics suffered terribly in the process, some positive results were attained. This was not visible during the 1950's when political pressure was unremittingly destructive. But since the end of the Cultural Revolution, the church has been reborn. Like the phoenix it has risen from its own ashes and is now in a continuing process of growth and development. Priests who were once shy and retiring have now been urged forward by events to assume active leadership roles as bishops and teachers in the newly opened seminaries. Never in the days when foreign missionaries were dominant in numbers and in positions of authority were there so many

opportunities for native priests to utilize their abilities not only in the administration of church affairs, but also in propagating the faith among their own people. Even while they were in prison, they made converts, and now that they are free, they continue to open catechumens for adults and organize religious instruction classes for the youth of Catholic families, who previously had no chance to learn anything about their faith. Nor has advanced age dimmed their ardour. Elderly bishops who are now in their eighties have, during the past few years, baptized and confirmed thousands of new Christians.

While the Spirit is very much alive in the church and continues to work wonders, the main constraint seems to be in the area of finance. Many candidates for the priesthood and religious life have been left waiting, due to the lack of funds necessary to send them to the seminary or novitiate. In the past, most church institutions in China were financed from overseas, and church there often seemed much like a foreign investment programme. Local Catholics were passive recipients of goods and services, sometimes even depending on the church for their very livelihood. This may be partly explained by the fact that most Catholics were poor farmers or fishermen, often subject to heavy taxation by the government and to extortion by local bandits at a time when famine, disease and war were rampant. Foreign missionaries, on their part, were accustomed to erecting grandiose churches and rectories in imitation of those commonly found in their own countries. Such properties were far

beyond the means of the local people to support. When the foreign missionaries left, the up-keep of these buildings proved to be an impossible burden on the local communities. But in the end it did not matter, for the government soon after confiscated all church property, redistributing it among large numbers of work units, often to provide housing for local citizens.

In an effort to give concrete form to its policy of religious freedom, the government is now in the process of returning to the church some of the properties it had previously confiscated. Top officials in the Bureau of Religious Affairs and the United Front recognize that the church cannot be expected to achieve independence if it is deprived of a basic means of livelihood. Locally, however, cadres apply the policy each in his own fashion, making deals for themselves or for their municipalities for personal advantage and returning only a meagre portion of what had been taken away. In August of 1988, Bishop Ma Ji of Pingliang in Gansu province openly denounced these abuses and placed blame on the Patriotic Association for not doing its job. The bishop's experience in Gansu could easily be supplemented by innumerable cases of such corruption and exploitation in all other parts of the country. In a southern city of Guangxi Province, for example, it is reported that a lay leader built a house for himself and his family after selling church property. In other places where churches have been cut up into living quarters, the buildings themselves have been dutifully returned, but the tenants refuse to leave or pay rent. If the local

Catholic community wants its church back, it must pay a huge amount of money to relocate the squatters.

Since 1985, the problem has become even more acute as the so called "independent" church has departed from its strict policy of self-support. Now local bishops and priests are not only allowed but even encouraged to appeal for foreign aid to finance church restorations, the construction of new seminaries and convents, and "income generating projects", such as hostels, factories, restaurants, and the like. Local cadres and representatives of the Patriotic Association now benefit from such incidental advantages as the use of vans and other equipment generously offered to the local church by foreign funding agencies. Recently, a number of cadres who are involved in religious affairs have been arrested and charged with corruption for misappropriating funds designated for church use.

In contrast to the above, those Catholic communities who live an "underground" existence because of their loyalty to the Pope and to the universal church can be said to be more independent than the officially recognized church. They live in poverty but support each other. Whatever financial help they do receive from the outside, and the amounts are small, comes from relatives and friends living abroad. They depend neither on their own country's benevolence, nor on any foreign power for their sustenance. They should not be referred to as "underground" communities, but rather as "independent" communities.

These independent communities,

however, may feel resentment when they see Catholics who are aligned with the Patriotic Association receiving benefits from both their own government and overseas Catholic funding agencies. The finance problem might partly explain why some of the stronger among these communities have since the late 1980's become more aggressive in condemning their fellow-Catholics who attend Mass and receive communion in the churches sponsored by the Patriotic Association.

In many parts of China, however, such problems as those described above do not arise. There most Catholics live under the same poor conditions and share the same hardships in common with their non-Catholic neighbours.

Competing for Rome's Recognition

The uneasiness of the independent communities with the financial support given to the official or "legal" church by government and overseas funding agencies is only one of twenty-two points of issue raised in a paper written by an underground bishop in 1988 under the title "My Views on the Patriotic Association". The bishop states that the main cause for dissent is a matter of faith. The independent communities want to be considered as loyal citizens. They offer no political challenge to the existing government. But they also want to remain loyal Catholics of the universal Church, acknowledging the primacy of the pope as successor of St. Peter. They see the rejection of papal authority as the first step towards further encroachments on the basic integrity of the Catholic faith. The priests who took a dissenting stand in

the 1950's did so in light of the encyclicals of Pius XII and were acting according to the directives of their own Chinese bishops. Because of their unflinching loyalty, they suffered imprisonment in jails and labour camps. Even today they are watched carefully, and live in the half-light of a precarious freedom, which they exploit with great daring in pursuit of their pastoral responsibilities. These priests are not allowed to have contacts with any outsiders, but only with relatives and friends. As exchanges between the official church and foreign Catholics continue to multiply, they tend to feel more and more isolated and passed over by the international Catholic community. When the government began to apply the policy of religious freedom more liberally in the 1980's, many Catholics chose to accept and cooperate with the Patriotic Association in order to be able to worship and receive the sacraments openly.

In some parts of China, the Catholics who remain strictly loyal to the papacy are in the majority. They practise their faith fearlessly and often openly. In May of 1990, over 20,000 of them took part in a pilgrimage to the shrine of Our Lady of China in Donglucun, Hebei, despite the presence of police blockades. During the past few years, their bishops have issued directives forbidding any participation in worship services that are approved or controlled by the Patriotic Association. As a result, many churches are left deserted. On the 21st of November 1989, a number of bishops, priests and lay leaders met near Sanyuan, some forty kilometres north of Xi'an, where they established an Episcopal Conference which would

"accept fully the leadership of the Pope and keep itself in complete communion with the whole Catholic Church". Most of the participants were arrested before the year was out.

The Communist Party issued *Document 3* in February of 1989 which aimed to put an end to the underground church by isolating its leaders. The document merely confirmed a policy of suppression that had already been in force for some years. Since 1986, a series of violent acts of suppression have been brought to the attention of world opinion: the brutal arrests of young seminarians and novices in Qiaozhai in May of 1986; the savage police assault on the Catholic village of Yutong in April of 1989; and the forceful detention of a young priest, eight seminarians, and six young Sisters in the village of Zhaozhuang on June 4th 1990. While the three villages in which these events took place are all in Hebei province, the arrest and detention of priests and Sisters is a frequent occurrence in other parts of the country as well, especially in Fujian province. Violent action, however, does not suit the purposes of the United Front. In order to bridge the growing gap between the two church groups, bishops and priests of the official church have been advocating broader religious freedoms, which include praying publicly for the Pope at Mass and the acknowledgment of his place in a spiritual communion. Patriotic Association leaders argue that Rome should now recognize the Beijing government and the official Chinese Church. Such recognition of the official church would serve to legitimatise it in the eyes of the people as genuinely

Catholic and would allow it to escape further condemnation by the underground bishops.

Whatever developments the future might bring, the present state of affairs has generated many divisions and much bickering, which, sad to say, is very disruptive of church life. Both sides use Canon Law and Vatican II documents to defend their loyalty to the papacy and the Church. In both camps, however, there are quite a number of Good Shepherds who refuse to adopt an attitude of exclusiveness when it comes to receiving brothers and sisters of the one faith. These advocate a higher loyalty, which is to the Gospel of Jesus Christ and his commandment of mutual love.

The Church in China

Despite the confusion that has resulted from a long history of misunderstandings and confrontations between Rome and the Chinese government, the Church in China

is moving forward into a future filled with promise. It offers a moving portrait of a people who have suffered much for their faith, where heroes and martyrs are found side-by-side with people who have compromised and some who have fallen away. Its dramatic development during the past ten years has been aided by China's reopening to the outside world and by the policies of the United Front to consolidate all sectors of society in a concerted effort to modernize the country. But the real source of its dynamic growth is to be found in its inner spiritual resources and tenacious fidelity to four centuries of Christian faith. With an increase in exchanges between Chinese Catholics and those overseas, especially Catholics of the Chinese diaspora, the Church in China will continue to develop into an authentic Chinese Church, and will make its own unique and original contribution to the history of Christianity in our time.

在北京全國大修院就讀的修生
Students studying in Beijing's
National Seminary.

