

# *Fundamental Attitude of the Bridge Church*

*Aloysius B. Chang, S.J.*  
*Translated by Luis Gutheinz and Norman Walling*

## **I Situation in the Chinese Church at Present**

People of faith observe, analyze and judge situations within the context of that faith. I do not claim that the following discourse has absolute objectivity. No such exists. China is very vast. The Church there, quite naturally, is spread throughout an immense area and its situation differs throughout the various regions. It is important to keep this fundamental fact in mind. To make sweeping statements that would be true for the Church as a whole in China, especially after only one trip, would be quite foolhardy. Such opinions could only be superficial and erroneous. What follows is an evaluation of what I myself have seen, or what I have heard from others or what I have gleaned from materials I have read. Anyone should feel free to add from his/her own fund of knowledge to what I have written.



### **1. The Environment**

#### **A. *Freedom of Religious Belief in a Communist Society***

The Church of the nineties in China lives under a Communist regime which is different from that of 40 years ago. There is *freedom of religious belief* but this *freedom*, at best is only tolerated by the communist and socialist doctrine. Its understanding of religion is limited by its own ideology. It permits religion to have a community organization, liturgical expression and a religious discipline. Presently, this is the only kind of freedom religious organizations can enjoy.

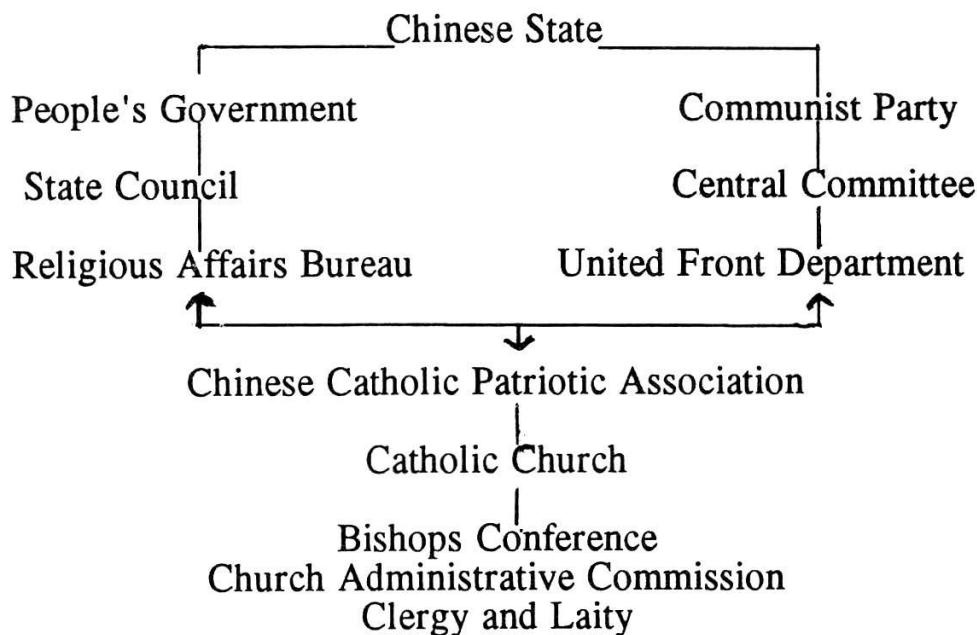
### ***B. Restrictions Placed on Freedom of Religious Belief***

China's Constitution gives a very narrow interpretation of *freedom of religious belief*. It strictly prohibits any foreign interference by those religions having world wide connections such as Buddhism, Islam, Protestantism and Catholicism. Religion is solely a matter for China's internal administration and foreign powers are forbidden to intervene in any way. Because of its universal and international character as well as its administrative organization and structure, the Catholic Church is in a worse situation than other religious bodies that do not have such centralized leadership. The primacy of the Pope and the Vatican with its apparent political organization make the communist government extremely suspicious.

### ***C. The Communist Regime and Religion***

Under the Communist regime religion exists for the good of the country and society. The party's United Front Department has several bureaus, one of which is responsible for making religious policy, implementing it and for governing religious bodies. Under the United Front Department and Religious Affairs Bureau, there is the Catholic Patriotic Association. The Protestant Church has the Protestant Three Self Patriotic Movement and its role is similar to that played by the Catholic Patriotic Association. The Buddhists, Taoists and Muslims also have parallel associations. The following diagram depicts the structure of the Church and State in China.

**Structure of the Church and State in China**



The United Front and Religious Affairs Bureau use the Patriotic Association as a liaison unit between the party and government on the one hand and the Church on the other. They are responsible for transmitting government, party directives and policies to the Church. In turn, they let government officials know the Church's needs.

***D. The Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association (CCPA): Its Structure and Members***

The Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association has a chairperson and vice-chairperson; its membership consists of bishops, priests, Sisters and lay Catholics. It is divided into national, provincial, urban and local associations and it adjusts its policies and their implementation to fit the requirements of the United Front Department. During its early years the Patriotic Association's way of working differed considerably from that of today. It has, however, made several contributions to the Church. Owing to the Association's mediation with the government, many churches have been rebuilt. Overall, it is a pliant organization apt at adapting its actions and communications to the party's policies. In itself, it is neither an ecclesiastical organization nor a community.

**2. The Situation**

We must bear in mind that the environment in which the Church on the China mainland today finds itself is not favorable to religious freedom. The Church is split into two factions: the Official and the Unofficial Church. (This article uses these two expressions rather than the more common but confusing terms "above-ground" and "under-ground" churches.) The Official Church is the one recognized by the government; the Unofficial Church is not recognized by the government. An antagonism exists between these two entities.

***A. The Official Church***

This Church exists by following party and government regulations and brooks no foreign interference. It implements the policy of independence and autonomy in church administration. It is noted especially for choosing and consecrating its own bishops. This causes an incomplete communion between the Local Church and the Holy See, especially on the level of law. In the past, owing to government pressure, the Official Church expressed a certain hostility towards Rome. Lately, however, this attitude has gradually mellowed. Today, the Official Church publicly recognizes that the Pope's pastoral primacy belongs to the content of faith. It even prays for him.

Noting this relaxation of tension, some people who do not live in China, have overrated the Official Church disregarding the fact that many problems still exist. We cannot deny that the Official Church's communion with the Pope is truncated. This is true at least on the legal level, even though there is still a many-sided communion in faith. For example, there is the communion of a shared faith in the Father, of a shared life in the Son, and the Holy Spirit as well as a common Scriptures.

Some will ask, "Why speak of a lack of communion on the legal level? Is not reality more important than law?" This may sound reasonable at first but since law is indispensable for social order and unity, our attitude towards it should be more positive. Many voices in today's society vying to bring solutions to the myriad problems facing our world lack guidance and direction. The Pope, representing the entire Church, makes use of encyclical letters and speaks to the whole world. He wants the Church to have one voice. This is the Pope's unifying function, a role not found among Protestant Churches.

The incomplete communion of the Official Church in China with the Pope is, I maintain, at the least, a legal question which, hopefully, will one day be resolved. An indication of this possibility lies in the fact that some bishops in China have already been legalized.

### ***B. The Unofficial Church***

We employ the term "Unofficial Church" rather than the "Loyal Church" or "Underground Church"--the latter term is very ambiguous evoking an image of the Church of the catacombs in ancient Rome--because the Communist government does not recognize this Church. This Church, for its part, does not accept the party's demands that it be independent and self-governing. The Unofficial Church firmly maintains complete union with the Pope in order to safeguard the hierarchical nature of the Church and loyalty to his primacy. There is an antagonism, even conflict, between the Official and Unofficial Church. Both, however, despite their differences, are influenced by the special circumstances in which the Church in China exists.

## **II Analysis of the Present Situation**

We shall now analyze the situation described above. Obviously, this process will involve making judgments. Our aim is to make these judgments within the spirit of the Gospel, our faith values and the Church's tradition.

## **1. The Relationship of the Bishop to the Church**

According to traditional theology (which still has value today) the individual church is a faith community of the people of God. It consists of the bishop, the clergy and the laity. The bishop holds the office of chief pastor in his diocese safeguarding the Church's unity and catholicity. In other words, the bishop as head represents the individual church community and guides its life and activities while also being closely linked with the other pastors. He must be in communion with the Pope and under his leadership shepherd his individual flock, otherwise his church cannot keep its unity and catholicity intact. He must have the permission of the Pope for his consecration and appointment to his individual diocese. Church Law demands this. To be elected, consecrated and installed as bishop without the papal authority is not only illegal, but it also breaks communion with the Pope.

## **2. The Illegality of the Official Church**

Today's ecclesiology and Canon Law both state that without Papal approval the election, consecration and appointment of a bishop to a diocese is illegal. The ecclesial community which is under his pastorship is also illegal. This illegality breaks the communion of the individual diocese with other bishops and the Pope and also with the entire Church. Allow me to state clearly at this point that illegality and communion established by law should not be straightaway confused with the fundamental issue of salvation.

Any action which is illegal involves the question of choice which, in turn, is linked with the "responsibility of law" and "responsibility of conscience". Very many elements obviously bear on the question of responsibility in the present special situation of the Chinese Church. (Here we can only make a general analysis of the situation without touching on particular details governing the cases of various bishops.) On the negative side, there is the external environment which creates fears, intimidation and the temptation to gain personal advantage. On the more positive side, there is the possibility of making an illegal decision based on pastoral needs. Unless one is personally involved in such a situation, it is impossible to understand the dilemma of one who is helpless, who lacks viable alternatives and finds it impossible to have acted otherwise.

We must also admit that even given this situation, the person who makes illegal choices cannot entirely escape all responsibility. Nonetheless, a bishop who accepts consecration within the Official



and moral guidance of the faithful makes a contribution to the Church of this particular time and place *even though his action is illegal*. In a word, we cannot deny the existence of the illegal act or the legal responsibility of the bishop concerned yet this responsibility differs with individuals. We must, by all means try to understand the situation.

Although we have said that individuals bear responsibility for their illegal actions, we have no way of judging the state of their conscience or their moral responsibility. Only the person in question can answer for this before God.

It is very important that we not try to judge the culpability of any member of the Official Church, rather we must try to understand the circumstances behind their illegal acts. For example, priests who work in the diocese of an illegal bishop act illegally, but they share in the illegality in varying degrees. Some priests who have never joined the Patriotic Association have suffered very much for the faith. Some are now cooperating with an illegal bishop purely for the sacramental and spiritual life of the faithful. Other priests, who have joined the Patriotic Association and are cooperating with the illegal bishop may do so for personal gain. Nonetheless, they also render genuine service to the faithful. Some priests have married. Obviously, their responsibility for cooperating with an illegal bishop is very different from the former two classes of priests.

Many of the laity who take part in the services of the Official Church know nothing about the legality and illegality of Church matters. They are leading a life of faith and receiving valid sacraments. It is useless to speak of responsibility as far as they are concerned. Summing up: 1) Priests, Sisters and laity who belong to the Official Church share in the illegality of the bishop who has been illegally consecrated and bear legal responsibility in varying degrees; 2) As far as moral responsibility is concerned only those persons directly and personally involved have the answer. 3) Persons, especially those who do not live on the mainland, should refrain from publicly discussing, analyzing and judging these matters of conscience.

### **3. The Legality of the Unofficial Church**

The Unofficial Church is the one not recognized by the Chinese Communist Party and Government. Since the bishops in this Church maintain full union with the Pope, they are legal in terms of Canon Law. At great cost to themselves, they face constant dangers but remain faithful to their belief in order to safeguard the Church's orthodoxy. They are loyal to the primacy of the Pope and

continue the Church's long tradition of martyrdom under persecution. The Church, in its long history, has never encouraged its members to compromise or deny their faith during times of persecution. We must acknowledge that, as a matter of fact, the Unofficial Church has, for the past 40 years, remained loyal to the Universal Church and preserved Catholic unity.

Naturally the priests, Sisters and laity who are under the leadership of these legal bishops are also legal. Considering the circumstances in which they live and the difficulties they endure, we can understand why the Unofficial Church does not readily understand the Official Church and why they even maintain an attitude of hostility towards it. Obviously, all the members of the Unofficial Church are not saints. Furthermore, those bishops in the Official Church whose status has been legalized now also enjoy complete communion with the Pope and the Universal Church. We must also emphasize that communion with Rome is not limited to matters of law. There are other links as well, e.g. prayer, Scriptures, Sacraments, etc. In saying this, I do not wish to minimize the importance of maintaining legitimate ties with Rome. Because the Mass is at the centre of the Church's liturgical life and symbolizes its unity, Church officials have forbidden legitimate priests from concelebrating with illegitimate clergy. The Official Church, for its part, knows that such concelebrations would also be against national policies.

Finally, it is not our place to pass moral judgment on some of the actions undertaken by some members of the Unofficial Church now facing so many difficulties.

#### **4. Theological Opinion**

The Church today in China is under the guidance of the Holy Spirit who permits a pluralism to exist within that Church. We have seen this from the various phenomena described above and from our analysis. The Spirit permits illegal bishops, acting under the principle of the "lesser evil" to be active in an atmosphere entirely hostile to a life of faith. The Unofficial Church too, under the guidance of the Spirit has safeguarded ecclesial orthodoxy and Catholic unity. Both sides are concerned about the faith and the moral life of the Christian Community and both, in varying degrees, have to bear the pressures inflicted on the Church by the Communist regime.

In light of this most complex situation, interactions between the Official and Unofficial Church are of utmost importance. I would like briefly to propose three possible ways in which these interactions can take place: a) Mutual Communion; b) Peaceful co-exist-

ence and c) Mutual antagonism.

**a) *Mutual Communion***

In the October issue of *Clergy Review* (1990, No.299) an article by John Baptist Chiang states that in a certain area in China two bishops, one official and one unofficial, live together in the same house. Although it is not too clear from the article just how far this "mutual communion" has gone, we can say that such a situation does exist. We must ask, however, what does this "mutual communion" really mean? Is it limited solely to the love that Christians must have for one another? From the negative angle, this could mean avoiding conflicts at all cost; on the positive side, it could mean taking preliminary steps to cooperate along certain lines. As a matter of fact, there are many levels of communion already existing within the Christian Community. Both the Official and the Unofficial Church belong to the same Church of Jesus Christ; both share the same Trinitarian life of grace; both have received the same baptism and read the same Scriptures.

There is a difference, however, in terms of hierarchical communion. As far as the Church's hierarchy is concerned, "mutual communion" means more than just saying that Jesus Christ is the Head of the Church. It also requires accepting the Pope's primacy. In the case of those bishops living in the same house, mentioned in the article cited above, some might say that mutual communion already exists as far as they are concerned. We have to ask however, does hierarchical communion also exist? Would not hierarchical communion require the bishop of the Official Church to renounce the policy of independence and autonomy and let the bishop of the Unofficial Church take over the leadership of the Local church?

**b) *Peaceful Co-existence***

The second mode of interaction is peaceful co-existence with each Church doing its own work without interference or conflict and working in the same area. This can be considered a viable, commendable and even ideal form given the present circumstances of the Church in China mainland and the difficulty of achieving a hierarchical communion at the present moment.

**c) *Mutual Antagonism***

From an ecclesial viewpoint mutual antagonism is certainly not an ideal situation. Recrimination and discord do not accord at all with Christian love. The fact that each party has chosen to walk a different path is no reason for antagonism. Articles, biased on either side, which report these conflicts do not help the situation;



they actually cause harm. Such matters can be reported but the "Bridge Church" should blame no one. If there must be blame, it should be laid on the environment hostile to religious freedom.

We have mentioned that the Patriotic Association has national, provincial and local structures. Its influence and operations differ. In some places it has little influence and in others, some maintain, it does not even exist. Where the Association has little or no influence, or where it does not exist, there is no difference between the Official and the Unofficial Church. There is only one Church--the legitimate one. This does not mean, however, that the life of faith in those places is free from intimidation and fear.

### **III Principles and Activities of the Bridge Church**

The analysis of the situation can help us chart a course which we, who live outside mainland China but who are called to be the Bridge Church, can follow.

#### **1. The Pope's Appeal**

The Pope, knowing the situation on the China mainland has appealed to us, living outside that mainland to bear responsibility for being the "Bridge Church". He has called us to action. We cannot stand by disinterested in what is happening in China as though helpless, devoid of concern or feeling. God is speaking to us through this situation and through the Church's Chief Shepherd who asks us to be the "Bridge Church". We must respond actively to this call.

#### **2. Personal Suggestions**

##### ***A. Five Principles of Action***

Whether we are praying for the Church on the mainland or are offering it any form of assistance, our attitude should be in conformity with the following five points:

1) Compassion for both sides should be our hallmark. Although certain elements of the Church may enjoy some modicum of freedom, both are living under conditions which are not favorable to religious life and progress in faith.

2) We regret the Official Church's independent way of acting--at least on the level of law--and its break in hierarchical union with the Successor of Peter. We are also aware that the Official Church is to some degree responsible for this state of affairs and as such cannot escape all blame. We hasten to add that the

Church's independence, self-government and self-support can be implemented while remaining within the bounds of Church Law. These three aims are an ideal for the Church and should in no way constitute a reason for breaking hierarchical communion.

3) The loyal orthodoxy of the Unofficial Church should encourage us.

4) Hopefully, both sides are maintaining the bond of love that holds Christians together. If we visit China, we must, while making our point of view clear, avoid entering into individual quarrels or doing anything that could exacerbate conflicts existing among different parties. If we as Bridge Church, act in this way, we will not only assist our brothers and sisters in China, but we may also possibly be called upon to share in their suffering.

5) We believe that the Holy Spirit is at work in the Church on the mainland. The Spirit is the One who preserves and develops the faith of the Christian Community. We maintain that this holds true both for the Unofficial and the Official Churches. Some Catholics in the Unofficial Church, owing to the humiliations and sufferings they have had to endure, do not understand why we have anything to do with the Official Church. We take this opportunity to exercise our function as Bridge Church and offer them our analysis of the situation. The Catholic laity may not experience the problems discussed in this article, but priests and Sisters often do. It is our duty to acquaint them with our position.

### ***B. Directives for Action***

During the years of the Cultural Revolution all religions suffered tremendous losses. Temples, churches, sacred writings need to be replaced. The Church in China is in urgent need of all kinds of assistance. We of the Bridge Church must offer a helping hand. The attitude we manifest in doing so and the way we extend this help requires both wisdom and prudence.

Our desire is to help both the Official and the Unofficial Churches. When we extend help to the Official Church we are not saying that we agree with or support their position. Our assistance is aimed at preserving and fostering the faith. Illegality is a matter of law which does not necessarily deny the presence of Jesus in the Church. When we see their real needs, we cannot simply say, "You are an illegal Church; we will have nothing to do with you." How would this manifest the love of Christ? The Unofficial Church, of course, needs even greater assistance especially in the remote countryside.

We hope both sides will understand why we desire to help them. We also hope that the bishops and priests in China will explain our motives for helping them to their faithful. Bringing in

explain our motives for helping them to their faithful. Bringing in books and other daily necessities is, of course, a good thing but what is more important is to make use of these occasions to explain to the mainland Church that our assisting both sides is part of the integrative nature of a Bridge Church. Hopefully, both will come to see that their divisions create difficulties for us. We are aware that we cannot resolve their fundamental problems but our explanation may help build a new psychological climate. At the present moment this is a very important task. The existing legal problems can one day be resolved. However, the psychological knot still needs to be untied. As we prepare for the task ahead, we need to be far sighted and supportive.

### ***C. Formation: A primary Task***

The training of leaders is one of the most urgent needs of the Church on the mainland. This holds true both for the Official and the Unofficial Churches. The Official Church already has 20 seminaries with approximately 700 seminarians. While we emphasize that this is the age of the laity, we cannot deny that, at the present stage, China is in dire need of Church leaders from among the priests and Sisters. Seminarians must be offered the best formation possible.

### ***D. Reporting***

The Bridge Church must be very careful in handing out information about the Church in China. Some reports originating in Taiwan are at times erroneous. This is bad for the Church in Taiwan as well as the Church on the mainland. It is also blameworthy. Those who write reports on the Church on the mainland should give their readers a sound, truly catholic, constructive and reconciling point of view. Since copies of *Christian Life Weekly* and *The Catholic Weekly* are sent to the mainland, we need healthy and accurate reporting written in charity. Sensitive questions should be avoided. Sound reporting should be the work and the hallmark of the Bridge Church.

### ***E. Experiencing the sufferings of the Church on the Mainland***

The service of the Bridge Church to the mainland Church cannot be limited solely to material support. Christ's work is never accomplished without the cross, therefore, the Bridge Church must also be willing to share in the experience of suffering of the mainland Church. The members of the Bridge Church will certainly experience misunderstanding and reproach but such sufferings are an integral part of being the Bridge Church.