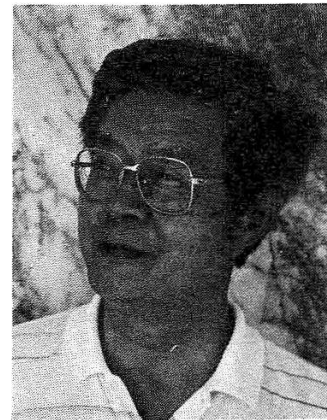


Mark Fang Replies to J.B. Chiang

Mark Fang, S.J.

An article appeared last autumn in the September 16th and September 23rd issues of *Shandao*, one of Taiwan's two Catholic weekly newspapers. It was entitled *A Consensus on Reconciliation and Unity in the Chinese Catholic Church Gradually Gaining Acceptance*. The same article was also printed in the October 1990 issue of *Vox Cleri*. The author's subject is quite attractive. His personal commitment to the view that "the Chinese Catholic Church is one integral church, be it on the mainland or abroad, above ground or underground" entices the reader's admiration. However, this is precisely the problem, as loyalist Catholics are quick to point out. A failure to discriminate does little service to the cause of the Chinese Catholic Church. What's more, the rather blaring reference to "the most recent instruction from the Vatican" only increases apprehension among loyalist church members.



Points of Clarification

Before giving reasons why this is so, and prior to taking exception to certain arguments raised by the article, I wish to make clear that in no way do I want my words to be interpreted as a censure of Father Chiang, the author. We both share a common concern for the Chinese Catholic Church and a common purpose in promoting unity within its ranks. But where practical measures are called for, an over-eagerness to achieve success should not prompt us to indulge in wishful thinking. A second point I wish to clarify is that I have no intention here of setting one church publication against the other. Rather, I see this as an opportunity to further our mutual awareness of the need to support each other in our efforts to increase our knowledge of and sensitivity to a complex situation. It may be true that in untroubled times few pay much heed to what is written in church publications. But where sensitive issues are involved, it only takes a phrase, even a single word, to foment an incident. One must, then, think first before publishing what is

likely to arouse a great deal of indignation and anger.

Misleading Reference

Perhaps the most misleading reference in Father Chiang's article has to do with a so-called "most recent instruction from the Vatican".¹ Does such an "instruction" really exist? If so, in what official church document has it been promulgated? The mistake arose when the author, in writing his article, made reference to *TRIPOD* #56 which had cited an account of a visit to China published in Taiwan's *Christian Life Weekly*. In speaking about this, the author mentions a so-called new instruction from the Vatican unconsciously misleading readers to believe that the Vatican has indeed issued a new directive to the mainland Catholic Church.

In actual fact, as I was later to ascertain from reliable Church authorities, since the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples issued its 8 guidelines for Catholics visiting China three years ago (which was not directed to the Chinese Catholic church itself), no new instruction has been forthcoming from the Vatican. If so, what possible meaning can be given to the author's words indicating that a Vatican representative in Hong Kong has asked visitors to bring the new "instruction" into China and transmit its contents to the Chinese church there? I think Father Chiang may be guilty here of being loose with language. According to those familiar with the Vatican, the two points of the "new instruction" quoted in Father Chiang's article are merely ordinary interpretations of directives already laid down by Canon Law. Their main import is that there cannot be two bishops exercising ordinary jurisdiction in the same diocese. This applies to local Catholic churches throughout the world and is not a separate determination for the Chinese church.

The juridical problems presented by the Chinese Catholic church are complex and somewhat unique. The best policy to follow in such circumstances is to continue to apply the common interpretations of Canon Law to concrete situations as they arise, and in the most ordinary manner. There is no need for a dramatic proclamation of some "new instruction". The Vatican's present approach of maintaining a low profile in the present circumstances is a result of painful past experiences and years of careful study. There is no need to hurry the situation along, nor any reason to pre-judge the loyalty of Chinese Catholics as constituting a kind of blind allegiance. Nor should one be careless in the use of the Scriptures. Describing loyalists as those who "having put their hand to the plough, in looking back are not fit members of the kingdom of God," appears to me to be a careless way of doing exegesis.

Need for Sensitivity and Responsibility

Having spoken at some length of the content of the article, mention must also be made about how it came to be published at all. Publishers and editors alike must take responsibility for what they print. For the most part church publications are positive and constructive, even if many of their articles only scratch the surface. But there is certainly no harm in this. However, when it comes to assessing who is right and who is wrong among church members, or when dealing in sensitive matters, it is always best to follow the policy of saying too little rather than too much. Such an article should only reach publication after the editorial board has discussed its pro's and con's and weighed the possible repercussions. Another case in point was an article that appeared in the "Catholic Forum" section of *Shandao* on October 7th. It was a mistake to print an article of such a highly critical nature under the anonymous by-line: "a collective presentation by a group of priests, Sisters and members of the laity who love the Church" to promote one's own personal opinions. Should not our Catholic publications be guided by and operate under a basic code of ethics?

Note

Cf. Section: The Most Recent Instruction from the Vatican in John B. Chiang's article above.



Holy Spirit Study Centre founders, 10 years later.