

Documentation

How Many Chinese Catholics Are There?

by Anthony Lam

According to information published in the September 25, 1992, issue of Hongkong based *China News and Church Report*, the State Statistical Bureau in June 1992 completed a survey of the total religious population in China. According to the survey, not yet released to the public, the total Catholic population in China is presently 12 million, a figure which far exceeds the data provided by the National Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association. The survey figure did not come to me as a surprise. Three years ago, I was asked by UCA News to offer an estimate of China's Catholic population. Based on data up to December 1988, I estimated the number to be around 8 million.



Though the official Church leaders insist that the Church population is only between three to four million, many scholars share my opinion. Early this year, Father Gabriel Ly Zhen, the Chancellor of the Catholic Fujen University in Taiwan, wrote an article in Hongkong's Catholic weekly *Kung Kao Po*, entitled "Review of the Role of the Bridge Church". In his article he mentioned that there are 10 million Catholics in China. This figure approximates my own estimate. Last year, Professor Jin Sikai of Hong Kong University published an article entitled "Political Wrestling between the Communist Party and Religious Bodies", in which he too maintained that China's Catholic population exceeded ten million. Other articles published previously expressed the same view. However, none of them provided any hard data to support their claims.

Local Bishops Concur on Ten Million Estimate

Obviously, the data supplied by the official Church is far different from the data of overseas Church watchers. However, even the official figure varies from time to time from 3.4 to 4.5 million. Puzzled by this discrepancy I consulted Fr. Gabriel Ly. He stated that while it is impossible at this time to come up with any exact figure, the CCPA figures do not include Catholics under the age of 18. In arriving at his own estimate he took the following factors into consideration:

1. Many mainland bishops from different provinces told him that the CCPA census represents no more than half the actual number.

2. Many baptisms of children in various parts of China, where local Party officials turn a blind eye, go unrecorded.

3. The acknowledged resurgence of interest in Christianity in recent years has resulted in a large increase in the number of catechumens.

4. The published findings of those Chinese scholars researching religion also estimate the total number of "religious believers" in China to be about 100 million, a figure which includes members of the Catholic Church.

5. First hand reports of priests and religious returning home for a visit all note a marked increase in the number of Catholics in the towns and villages. In some areas such as in the northern provinces, Catholic communities have swelled enormously.

I find Father Li's criteria not only well-founded but also borne out by my own personal experience. When on a visit to northwestern China in 1988, I met with a Chinese bishop who said that the number of Catholics in his diocese had grown from 7,000 to 15,000 since 1949. He mentioned attending a national bishops' conference in Beijing in 1957 where it was announced that Chinese Catholics then numbered 4,000,000. One can surmise from this example, which can be multiplied throughout the whole country, that the number of Chinese Catholics must at the very least be twice that figure today.

Growth in the Catholic Church during the 1980's

The conservative Catholic population figure given by the CCPA differs widely from the sum arrived at by adding up

totals given by the individual dioceses throughout the country. Reflecting a rapid increase of membership over the past 12 years, diocesan statistics would put the total well over the 4,000,000 mark. One of the reasons for this sudden jump in numbers can be found in the experience of two seminarians I happened to meet on a visit to the north in 1991. They told me that they were baptized secretly as babies by their parents during the Cultural Revolution, and they were instructed in the faith at home. Since no priests were available, it was common practice among Catholics in their village to administer baptism to newly born children themselves. Naturally, such baptisms went unrecorded. When a priest finally arrived in the village in the early 1980's, he gathered all those under eighteen baptizing them conditionally, thereby doubling the number of registered Catholics in their village in one day.

The following is taken from an article on the growth of the Catholic Church in Fujian Province which appeared in the January-February 1986 edition of *Bridge*, a publication of the Christian Study Centre on Chinese Religion and Culture in Hong Kong:

The number of those professing belief (in the Catholic Church) is now 200,000, more than double the number at the time of Liberation. They belong to about 80 churches and parishes. Fuzhou City, which had only a few thousand Catholics forty years ago, today has nearly 40,000 members in the city and another 70,000 in the nearby country villages.

On a visit this summer I was given evidence of even further growth in the number of Catholics in this area by Bishop Zhang Shizhi of the Mindong Diocese, the chairman of the CCPA for Fujian Province. He told me that there were now over 300,000 Catholics in the province: 200,000 in Fuzhou Diocese, 70,000 in Mindong, and 20 to 30,000 divided among the remaining four dioceses. This represents a 50% increase in 6 years.

A research paper from the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in Beijing released early in 1989 claimed that the work of evangelization among Protestants has been booming in Wenzhou, Zhejiang Province. Christians now account for 9% of the district's total population. In addition, the paper noted that Catholics there number over 600,000. These figures are perhaps exaggerated. I have come across more recent estimates that put the number of registered Protestants at 700,000 and Catholics at about 70,000 or ten times more than there were in

1949.

While on the subject of Catholic Church growth, it is also important to note a decrease in some areas. In parts of China where people have been deprived of the pastoral services of priests and bishops for many decades, Catholics have scattered and in some places drifted away from the practice of the faith entirely. Bishop Wang Zhenye of the Diocese of Shaanbei (formerly Yanan Diocese) told me in 1988 that before Liberation there were 30,000 Catholics in his diocese, but due to the lack of priests to care for them the number had dwindled away to almost none by 1988. The present official diocesan figure of 10,000 came as a result of the government's restructuring of diocesan boundary lines to include Dingbian and Qingbian counties. I was told by a diocesan administrator in Hunan on the same visit that the diocese of Yuanling and Lixian in Hunan province suffered a similar fate, and that priests returning to these areas found few resident Catholic families and they had to start again from scratch.

The above cases, however, seem to be exceptions. In general, the Church continues to grow and thrive throughout China, even in those areas that are without resident priests or religious. Many communities have not seen a priest in 30 years, but continue to pass their faith on to the next generation and also attract new converts. In Yunnan alone, where the ordained clergy are only 10% of their 1949 number, Catholics have increased from 60,000 to over 100,000. Perhaps a more dramatic example of church growth in a priestless area is that reported by *The Catholic Church in China* where the Catholic population of Shentang Village located on the island of Weizhou went from 1,500 in 1983 to 2,992 in 1989, almost doubling community membership in this four year span, despite the fact that no priest has lived on the island for decades.

Reasons Behind the Conservative Estimates

Many reasons have been given to explain why the obvious increase in the number of mainland Catholics is not reflected in the official estimates. The telling fact, however, is that in China large numbers of baptisms continue to go unreported. The reasons for this are personal and psychological. CCPA officials and other authorities in the official Church may be reluctant to

disclose the increased numbers because to do so would embarrass cadres in the local Bureau of Religious Affairs, whose responsibility it is to discourage and contain the spread of religious belief. And the cadres themselves are unwilling to accept any signs of Church growth which might reflect unfavourably on their management of local religious affairs.

This reluctance of officials in the Religious Affairs Bureau to own up to the increase in the actual number of Catholics can cause much confusion within the government itself. At a time in the mid-1980's when Shanghai's CCPA secretary was stating that there were 100,000 Catholics in the diocese, and Shanghai's Bishop Jin Luxian on a visit to Belgium was quoting a revised official figure of 120,000, a member of the Religious Affairs Bureau told me privately that the real number was more like 160,000 to 180,000. Today, six years later the number must indeed be even higher.

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Another factor hampering attempts to arrive at definitive Catholic population figures is the attitude of church leaders on the provincial level. On a visit to Shijiazhuang city, Hebei in 1986, I called upon Bishop Chang Shouyi, who is also the chairman of the Provincial CCPA. During our conversation, I asked how many Catholics there were in Hebei. He said that the official figure based on a pre-Liberation census stands at 800,000. Two years later a theology professor from Hebei told me that the total Catholic population in the dioceses of Hebei actually exceeded 1,000,000. But he then hastened to add that as a matter of principle he would continue to support the bishop's publicly stated figure.

Another reason why statistics vary is because the government itself suffers from insufficient data on which to base its estimates. At one point in 1986, Chinese officials put the number of religious believers in China at 50,000,000. Five years later the State Council in its white paper on "Human

Rights in China" revised this estimate to 100,000,000. The dramatic increase over such a short time can only be attributed to the availability of new and more complete data. This alone should be enough for the CCPA to take another look at its 1980 figure of 3,000,000 and make some new adjustments.

It is common knowledge that the number of children actually born in China, especially in the countryside, exceed the government's recorded figures. Farmers in general tend to have more than the one child stipulated by the government's "One Child Family Policy". Additional children are, naturally, not registered with the government for fear of reprisals. This is also true of "illegal" Catholic children, who remain without certificates of birth and whose baptisms are not recorded in the parish baptismal registers.

Finally, since the 1950's many Catholics have been unwilling to have their names and those of their family members registered in the local parish churches. Such records are open to the government and have been used throughout the years to identify them and target them as victims of persecution. Registering or failing to register as a Catholic in the local parish has nothing to do with their actual practice of the faith and only becomes a problem when a young man or woman wants to study for the priesthood or enter religious life. There is no telling how many fall into this category of practicing but unregistered Catholics.

Conclusion

Regardless of whether mainland Chinese Catholics number 4,000,000 or 10,000,000, they still only comprise a very small minority, not even one percent of China's total population. Communist fear of Catholic political influence reflects more their own insecurity and lack of self-confidence. The government has nothing to fear from an increase in the number of believers. Nor does an increase necessarily reflect a failure of socialism. China's Catholics, however, should not bask in the sunshine of increased numbers. Lolling in feelings of self-satisfaction, is unwarranted. A glance at the population figures shows that Chinese Catholics have their work cut out for them if they are to assume their Christian responsibility of spreading the gospel to the unevangelized.

Nor would it be wise to read into the official statistics and

private estimates more than what they represent in fact. Some have said that the CCPA's quoted number of 4,000,000 represents the total membership of the official Church, while the rest belong to the "underground" Church. My travels throughout China and my interviews with countless church leaders, lay people and government officials confirm that this is just not true. While Catholics may be divided in their willingness or unwillingness to join the ranks of the "official" Church, there is no acceptance of the notion in either camp that there are two distinct Catholic churches in China. In fact, the disputes among the so-called "above ground" and "underground" churches are grounded in the mutually shared conviction that there is only one Catholic church.

We must remind ourselves that the measure of faith is not found in numbers but rather in the changes it makes in the human heart. Statistics belong in the realm of sociological phenomena. And the ultimate success or failure of a Church is expressed not in numbers, but rather in the quality and depth of faith of its believers. Nevertheless, at a time when the Chinese government itself is promoting "Seeing the truth from facts", the domestic issue of the growth in the number of religious believers should be faced squarely. Government research that is accurate, detailed, concrete and well-defined would go a long way in helping it to institute religious policies which would be, in its own words, "more in accord with Chinese national characteristics."

I would like to close with a personal reflection. As a Chinese Catholic I am delighted by the daily signs of growth and development in the Church in China. But I am also learning from it valuable lessons about the meaning of evangelization. When the Church on the mainland was deprived of its institutions, its material assets and wealth, the community of Catholics continued to grow and increase. Does this not tell us that we should not be anxious about these lesser goods as we commit ourselves to the task of evangelization? Nor should we place our security and hope in such things as government laws or policies, but rather ground our faith in the power of the Holy Spirit who animates Christ's Church to accomplish our Father's will.