

The Spirit of Vatican II in the Church in China

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The Catholic Church in China has lived apart from the rest of the world for over four decades, from 1958 to 1979 in almost total isolation. During this time even the basic minimum of communication was all but impossible. So when Pope John XXII convened the Second Vatican Council in 1962, the bishops of China were not among the participants, with the result that they knew little of what was going on and even less of the new initiatives the Church was making to respond to the challenges of the modern world. More unfortunate, the ending of the Council in 1965 coincided with the beginning of the Cultural Revolution which began a decade of turmoil and chaos that brought Chinese society almost to a complete standstill. After the Cultural Revolution, the Church virtually had to start again from scratch. The process of recovery was arduous and slow. In the early years, both clergy and laity concentrated their energies on reclaiming confiscated property and rebuilding places of worship. The renovation of physical premises, where Catholics could once again congregate, took precedence over theological renewal and reform.



Readiness for Renewal

It was only natural that as the Chinese Church began to re-establish itself in society after the Cultural Revolution, it would rebuild itself along traditional lines and revive its former structures. In outward appearance, the new church looked much the same as the old one had looked before the opening of Vatican II. Other local churches throughout the Catholic world had moved on under the influence of Council reforms and new

ecclesial models inspired by the Council. Those having a particular concern for the welfare of the Chinese church became alarmed at this widening gap and worried about what it would mean for the Chinese local church of the future. On the other hand, Chinese church leaders did begin to show an interest in the Council's reforms, and educating the Chinese church to a better understanding of them became a major task for church people both in and outside of China. Referring to this situation Fr. Aloysius Chang, S.J. pointed out:

Because the Catholic Church in the People's Republic of China had been cut off from normal communion with the Universal Church, its members had no opportunity to experience the events of Vatican II. As a result of this they showed a certain mistrust of and reluctance to participate in the world-wide renewal of the Church initiated with the Council. However, recent experience with the CCPRC has shown that there does exist a fundamental readiness among Catholics in China to take steps in the direction of the renewal which began with Vatican II.²

Despite the fact that its bishops did not participate in the Council (the one mainland prelate invited to take part in its preparatory stage was refused permission to leave the country),³ as I watched the re-establishment of the church there, I could not help but feel confirmed in the belief that the Holy Spirit is always present in His Church. He guides people and communities in different ways. And while the Chinese church may not have had the advantage of participating, the Holy Spirit realized in practise through the concrete experiences of the Church in China much of what the Council originally set out to accomplish through its deliberations.

Clearly the Council brought nothing new to the Church's traditional deposit of faith. According to Karl Rahner,

The Second Vatican Council is the Church's first official self-actualization as a world church.⁴

The Catholic faith has remained essentially unchanged for the past 2,000 years, and the revelation of the Father given to us in Our Lord Jesus Christ remains complete and entire in itself.

The most intimate truth which this revelation gives us about

God and the salvation of humanity shines forth in Christ, who is both the mediator and the sum total of revelation (DV 2)

What Vatican II did bring about, however, were new ways of reflecting on and speaking about the deposit of faith in terms more applicable and understandable to modern society. It does indeed represent a new-age response of an age-old faith to the complex problems of today. And there were three areas of particular concern at the Council that received major emphasis: the development of local churches, lay commitment and participation, and dialogue with other religions and non-believers. In these three areas the Church in China was to contribute greatly under the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

Becoming a Local Church

In 1979, as the Chinese church began to rise from the ashes of the Cultural Revolution, the Chinese church continued the use of the Latin Tridentine Ritual in its liturgies. This served to give outsiders the impression that the Chinese church had not changed at all and was out of step with the teachings of Vatican II. On the level of ecclesiology, however, the Chinese church had indeed changed. It had in fact been purified, emerging from the fires of persecution very conscious of its identity as a local church, a localized community of faith under its own leadership, independent and self-propagating. In moving in the direction of establishing an authentic local church, it had accomplished significant gains in implementing the ecclesiology of Vatican II before many of its sister churches in Asia which are still to some degree under foreign influence.

When the foreign missionaries were forced to leave China in the early 1950's, the mission mandate of the Church was placed entirely on the shoulders of the local church. Whatever might be said about this sad and painful separation from the universal church and its dire religious, social and political consequences, it did also have the positive effect of changing the way of life of the local church in China. The local church was not prepared for such a radical change, and yet, of necessity, it had to come to grips with the situation. It not only survived the most difficult circumstances of the 1960's and 1970's but in the process has grown and matured into a truly local church, adding to its

membership an ever increasing number of converts who serve as visible signs of its life and vitality.

This newly found sense of identity as a local church has situational implications. By this I do not mean its geographical location on the China mainland but rather its situation within Chinese society itself. While it is neither large enough nor strong enough to play a significant role in Chinese society, it still is very much a part of Chinese society. In comparison to many local churches in Third World situations who depend very much on outside resources for support both in terms of material support and foreign missionaries, the Church in China has learned to rely on its own resources. What has resulted from this practical necessity has been the growth in solidarity with the local people. No longer separate and apart, they share the struggles and accomplishments of working together for a common cause. The departure of the foreign missionaries and the assistance they provided also brought about the loss of social privilege that the outside wealth and resources created and sustained. But in the end, this, too, served to demonstrate that the underlying life and vitality of the church was not based on privilege but on faith. An important lesson was learned, which was, that the first step in authentic church renewal well might be the voluntary surrender of social status and privilege.

As so well stated in the *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*,

Nevertheless, there are close links between the things of earth and those things in man's condition which transcend the world, and the Church utilizes temporal realities as often as its mission requires it. But it never places its hopes in any privileges accorded to it by civil authority; indeed, it will give up the exercise of certain legitimate rights whenever it becomes clear that their use will compromise the sincerity of its witness, or whenever new circumstances call for a revised approach. (GS 76)

Obviously, these words are applicable to a certain extent to the Church in China. Under the communist government the church has always been singled out as a special object for ill-treatment and persecution. Chinese Catholics have suffered much from the political campaigns of the past. Yet even this has had a positive effect on the Church. Far from destroying it, active persecution brought a new understanding of and compas-

sion for the pain and suffering of China's masses, from which its previous isolation had shielded it. While solidarity in enduring the most painful episode in China's history, the Cultural Revolution, might have done little to alleviate the terrible loss and pain, Catholics could and did offer rays of Christian faith and hope during what was by all accounts a period of darkness and despair. Thus the Church in China was able to realize in a concrete way its missionary mandate as a local church to accompany its fellow countrymen as equal pilgrims on the road of history. This too is very much in harmony with the language and imagery of Vatican II ecclesiology.

Lay Commitment and Participation

Another major theme of Vatican II was lay involvement in the Church. As for liturgical participation, it must be said that the place of the lay person in China is still in the pews and not around the altar. You will find no lay preachers, lay readers or lay ministers of Holy Communion at Mass services there. In some remote areas lay Catholics do bring communion to the sick because of the lack of priests. On the other hand, Vatican II did not mean to limit lay ministry and involvement to the liturgy alone.

Whenever mention is made of lay commitment in the Chinese church, inevitably the name of the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association comes up. Catholics outside China, however, question the value and purpose of such lay involvement. When I speak here of lay participation in the church, I do not intend to include the CCPA in my remarks. The CCPA operates solely as a political instrument to further political interests, and it is not to be considered as part of a discussion on lay ministry within the church. In a country like China where everything is given a political interpretation and where there is no escaping the political dimension in all social activity, organizations such as the CCPA can argue their own grounds for existence. The subject lies outside the scope of this article's concern. What I prefer to speak of here is the kind of lay involvement that is directly involved in the spiritual growth and development of the local church.

Lay involvement does not mean lay people serving in the

role of the priest, as a substitute for the priest. On the contrary, Chinese Catholics are, comparatively speaking, more respectful of and deferential to priestly authority than are Catholics elsewhere in the world. But what I have noticed on visits to China during the past ten years is the lack of barriers in the relationship between priests and laity. My experience has been that even in the company of bishops, lay Catholics come and go quite freely and feel at ease in their presence, whether they be discussing church business, making appointments or just dropping in to sit and chat. Nowhere did I find boundaries or limitations set in these relationships, but everywhere an easy going intimacy equally shared by pastors and their people.

The lay people's commitment to the church is reflected in their openness to accept authority. But they are also able to express their ideas candidly and without reserve. Yet I noticed that they were not stubbornly insistent on having their own way, and when their views were not accepted, seldom did I see them get upset or angry. Perhaps this is a lesson they have to teach us: not to be afraid to speak our minds, and yet to accept things in a positive spirit of Christian obedience. The *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church* addresses this point:

The pastors should give the laity the courage to undertake works on their own initiative. They should with paternal love consider attentively in Christ initial moves, suggestions and desires proposed by the laity. Moreover, the pastors must respect and recognize the liberty which belongs to all in the terrestrial city. Many benefits for the Church are to be expected from this familiar relationship between the laity and the pastors. The sense of their own responsibility is strengthened in the laity, their zeal is encouraged, they are more ready to unite their energies to the work of their pastors. (LG 37)

The phrase, *familiar relationship between the laity and the pastors*, is most applicable to the Church in China. Another area reflecting lay commitment in China can be found in the construction of churches. In the north especially, churches are built by the people themselves, who not only pay the expenses but volunteer their leisure hours to erect the structures by their own hands. And because the finished church is the work of their hands, it is truly a home for their Christian community.

Up until the middle of the 1980's all churches were built by the laity without any foreign assistance. This rule, in general,

holds true even today. But in recent years, Church leaders have been permitted to accept some financial help from abroad. Despite this, however, of the 4,000 churches newly built or renovated in China up to and including 1992, less than 5 percent involved help from the outside. In the old days missionaries built churches according to their own design and purpose. They seldom involved the local people in the planning. As a result, the finished products often struck the local people as strange and foreign. Now, however, the local people have a personal stake in the design and construction of their own churches, and these structures reflect the character and designs of their local communities.

Catholics in many parts of China not only build their own churches but are also ministering to the church communities as well. In the rural areas where there are few or no priests, lay leaders will call local Catholics together for prayer and Bible study. They will also minister to their needs by preaching the gospel and teaching the catechism. On each weekday morning the community habitually gathers for morning prayers and they come together again in the evening for night prayers. Communal prayer has become part of their daily lives. During the absence of the priest, (in some areas priests can come only once a month, and in others, once a year), the laity preached and administer the Sacrament of Baptism. It comes as no surprise that, in spite of the difficulties of the last forty years, the Catholic population has increased.⁵ As Fr. Aloysius Chang has so well pointed out:

As the Church has experienced throughout its history, in periods of persecution the laity emerges to play an essential role in the process of transmitting the faith to the next generation. This was, and still is, the case in China. It is no wonder, then, that the laity, who make up the vast majority of the People of God, recognize their importance and are quick to assert their own role in the Church.⁶

Inter-religious Dialogue

There is little or no formal inter-religious dialogue going on at present in China. When asked by outsiders, Church leaders reply humbly that they are reluctant to get involved because they know little about the subject and are caught up in the more

pressing work of pastoral care for their flock. What time they have to left over is spent in the formation of the young whom they hope will become their successors in the priesthood. In this way they give outsiders the impression that inter-religious dialogue is something of a luxury that comes only after the church has achieved a higher stage of development. What they do not mention, however, is that inter-religious dialogue does indeed take place in concrete but informal ways on an almost daily basis. In neighbouring Asian countries, inter-religious dialogue is organized formally. It brings representatives and leaders of the various organized religions together at formal meetings where beliefs are discussed, ideas exchanged and cooperative action undertaken. None of this is found in China. What you do find there, however, is a dialogue based on relationships that have been formed in the cauldron of pain and persecution.

Forty years of religious persecution have created a solidarity among believers. Especially during the Anti-Rightist Movement and the Cultural Revolution, religious believers were at the forefront of the struggle, the main targets of government oppression and violence. Catholics and Protestants suffered together, often tortured in the same groups, assigned to live in the same prison cells, and sent to the same camps for "re-education". This was where they not only got to know each other as individuals but also became knowledgeable about each others' religious beliefs. They came to understand and appreciate the real meaning of their faith and how it was able to feed their hopes and support them in their common will to survive.

Formerly, when Chinese Catholics studied other religions, they consulted books that taught them more about their differences than what they had in common, the things that set them apart rather than those that brought them together. This was also the way members of other religions learned about the Catholic faith. In the camps, however, there was little room for the discussion of religious differences or which system of belief was superior. God was present among them to effect a greater work, which was to unite them as companions, fellow pilgrims on the road of life. Could the labour camp experience perhaps be a reply to the fundamental life questions raised in the *Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions*?

People look to their different religions for an answer to the

unsolved riddles of human existence. The problems that weigh heavily on the hearts of people are the same today as in the ages past. What is the human being? What is the meaning and purpose of life? Where does suffering originate, and what end does it serve? How can genuine happiness be found? What happens at death? And finally, what is the ultimate mystery, beyond human explanation, which embraces our entire existence, from which we take our origin and towards which we tend? (NA 1)

In the camps, religious believers also had to contend with the challenge of atheism. They were forced to reevaluate the meaning of their faith in the context of aggressive unbelief. Atheists monitored their every move, imposed themselves upon every aspect of their lives. For the believers atheism was no longer a philosophy, a thought system separate and apart from their own world view, but it was a constant assault on the assumptions of how they were to lead their daily lives. This was a dialogue with unbelievers carried out on the most basic level of human existence, the struggle for survival.

The camps offered atheists an opportunity to come in contact with religious believers, many for the first time. Not all of the atheists were political opportunists. Some were sincere men of good will, who actually did believe that only atheism could bring about the authentic liberation of humanity. In the camps these men came to realize how religious believers could endure suffering with great patience and without loss to their personal dignity; how they could be self-sacrificing in serving others; and, how their faith enabled them to rise above inhuman conditions to achieve a higher ideal of human existence. These atheists began to learn and understand how religious believers were not the cultural victims of the old society and old ways of thinking as they had previously been led to assume, but were as eager as they were to commit themselves to work for the fulfillment of human destiny and they were willing to suffer in order that it might be accomplished.

Dialogue is based on hope and love, and will bear fruit in the Spirit.⁷

As I traveled about the great cities of China, it was easy for me to locate Catholic or Protestant leaders. All I had to do was ask the Protestant and Catholic pastors whom I met along the

way who their counterparts were. They had come to friendship by traveling the road of pain and persecution together. This is not only true of the older clergymen but the younger pastors as well. In many provinces, the Religious Bureau instituted classes in political theory, whose purpose was to promote the government's political policies among the clergy. What happened was the courses ended up promoting inter-religious dialogue instead, as the young Catholic priests and Protestant ministers got to know each other, exchange ideas and become friends. Nothing is impossible with God. And while the establishment of a formal inter-religious dialogue in China is still far off in the future, the Holy Spirit for the present has found other ways of accomplishing His work, in this instance by using atheists as His instruments for promoting good Catholic-Protestant relations.

The Holy Spirit: Soul of the Church

The experience of the Church in China serves to reaffirm the ancient truth that the Holy Spirit is the soul of the Church, the source of its life and vitality. Long before the closing of Vatican II, the Church in China was already living out the spirit of the Council's teaching. And this to the delight and wonder of Catholics both in Hong Kong and abroad. And yet it does give us Catholics in Hong Kong pause to consider whether we are not wasting the talent that God has given us, or must the observation of Arnold Toynbee about cultures be true also of local churches...that they can only thrive and develop when challenged? Are we in Hong Kong too complacent and comfortable in our present situation to fight for our church's future? Key to that future is vocations to the priesthood among our youth. The Second Vatican Council has stated:

By ministry of the Word and by personal testimony of a life radiant with the spirit of service and true pascal joy, priests should have it dearly at heart to demonstrate to the faithful the excellence and necessity of the priesthood. Sparing neither care nor inconvenience, let priests assist those young men or adults whom they prudently judge to be fit for so great a ministry, that they may prepare themselves properly and then at last with full external and internal freedom be able to be called by the bishop. (PO 11)

The priests I have talked to in Hong Kong all admit how difficult it is to promote vocations in the parishes. And yet this very task is for the priests of mainland China their top priority. Again the directives of Vatican II are being carried out in practise on mainland China where they have yet to be formally promulgated.

As Hong Kong Catholics face the difficult political transition ahead, it is natural to be nervous about the future of our local church. Our worries are not groundless. Our future is full of uncertainties. We shall see things we have never seen before and experience things beyond what we can imagine now. And yet when we find ourselves over-anxious about what the future will bring, we can fall back on the experience and example of the Church in China. While the road may be long and hard, while control of that future may be out of our hands, we can with confidence rely on the Holy Spirit to guide and direct us that our anxieties may by our faith in His presence among us be turned into new hope and joy.

Notes

1. Dr. Josef Chao, *A Brief History of the Hierarchy in the Church of China*, Window Press, Tainan, 1980, p. 149.
2. Aloysius Chang, SJ., *Theological-Pastoral Reflections on the Catholic Church in the People's Republic of China*, *Tripod*, No. 45, August, 1988, pp. 35-46.
3. According to a Chinese priest in Europe, an invitation was sent to a bishop in China through Austria, a neutral country. The bishop failed to join the preparatory committee due to the government's refusal to permit the bishop to participate.
4. Karl Rahner, *Towards a Fundamental Theological Interpretation of Vatican II*, *Theological Studies*, December, 1979, Vol. 4 No. 4, pp. 716-727.
5. Anthony Lam, *How Many Chinese Catholics are There?* *Tripod*, Vol. 12, No. 71, pp. 51-57.
6. Chang, op. cit., pp.42-43.
7. John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*, No. 56.