

Parishes Tell Their Stories

How Will the Parish Meet the Challenge of 1997?

Translated by Michael Sloboda, M.M.

Debbie Lo, Holy Spirit Study Centre, interviews Fr. John Kwan Kit-Tong of St. Mary's, Hunghom, Kowloon.

In less than five years, Hong Kong will revert to Chinese sovereignty. What can parishes in Hong Kong do during this transition period to help Catholics meet the challenge of 1997? In 1992, St. Mary's in Hunghom, Kowloon, organized its major parish activities around the theme: *A Year for Focussing on China*. Was this done in response to a felt need of the parishioners? Debbie Lo of Holy Spirit Study Centre went to interview the pastor, Fr. John Kwan Kit-Tong, to find an answer to her question.

Lo: Why was A Year for Focussing on China selected as the theme for your parish activities for 1992?

Kwan: Every year, we at St. Mary's in Hunghom select one theme on which to concentrate hoping to help the parishioners pay special attention to a particular issue. Since 1997 is getting closer by the day, we decided to make *A Year for Focussing on China* our 1992 theme, and through carefully thought out parish activities, to help the parishioners be better informed about China.

Lo: Would you describe some of your parish activities on this theme?

Kwan: Besides the *Evening of Traditional Music* in September and our *Pilgrimage to Zhaoqing and Guangzhou* in October, we decorated the church and bulletin boards regularly in Chinese motifs. China was the focus of the bidding prayers at Mass every week, and of the Exposition of the Blessed Sacrament every Friday night. Also, to help raise the awareness of the

parishioners, the priests' Sunday sermon dealt with some matter related to the mainland. China was also the main theme for a variety of parish programs. For example, Chinese history and geography were often the topics for question-and-answer games. We hoped, through a variety of activities, to provide our parishioners with a unbiased view of China, since the matter is of vital importance and of direct concern to them personally. Our aim was to assist the people to make an informed free choice about their future.

Lo: What kind of response did you get from your parishioners?

Kwan: The vast majority of Catholics really seemed to enjoy the programme. No one expressed any negative feelings or adverse comments. A good proportion of the parishioners came to all the activities sponsored throughout the year. Of course, only time will tell whether our efforts have changed anything or whether our year of focus on China has helped deepen the people's knowledge of the mainland.

Lo: Was the "Pilgrimage to Zhaoqing and Guangzhou" a success? Did the parishioners come back with any special impressions?

Kwan: The main purpose of the pilgrimage was to visit the churches in Zhaoqing and Guangzhou. Those who made the pilgrimage were really enthusiastic about having been able personally to meet people from churches in China and to learn first hand about their life situation. Before they went, they felt like strangers to their Catholic brothers and sisters on the mainland. Some were even suspicious and fearful. After actually making the trip, they had a better understanding of the mainland church and many of their fears were dispelled. Many said they would like to make more such trips in the future. Moreover, when they saw how materially poor the churches there are, they better understood and appreciated all that we have here in Hong Kong. In all, looking at the goal of the interchange between the churches of Hong Kong and mainland China, the trip was 100% successful.

Lo: The church in China is currently divided into "open" or "official" church and the "underground" church. As a pastor,

how do you explain this unfortunate situation to your Catholics?

Kwan: The so called *unfortunate situation* of the "open" or "official" church and "underground," church is a matter of history within the church in China, but it is not up to me to pass any judgment. I believe that people in the church, whether in the "open or "underground" are all brothers and sisters in the Lord. We all have our limitations and reasons for doing what we do. These reasons are not always known or understood by others. In this church matter, we Catholics in Hong Kong form a third party. We must be bridge builders, reconcilers open to entering into contact with and helping people on both sides. These contacts can help deepen the mainlanders' understanding of the universal Church and even introduce them to the reforming spirit of Vatican II.

Lo: Your 1992 program, A Year for Focussing on China, is now over. Do you plan to do anything further on this theme in the years to come?

Kwan: Consciousness raising regarding China cannot be achieved with a one year parish programme. So the end of *A Year for Focussing on China* certainly does not mean we are no longer concerned about China. In fact, we have a three year plan. The first year was for focussing on China; the second is for focussing on Hong Kong; and for the third year, we plan to develop something around the theme of self awareness within the people's actual life context. I hope to be able to help the parishioners better understand the times and conditions in which they live, and encourage them to reflect on, and to respond to the challenges and problems of the times. After these three years we will perhaps once again focus on China. But as of now, we have nothing specifically planned.

Lo: As 1997 draws closer by the day, what do you think the parish can do to help Catholics prepare?

Kwan: In 1997 the power of administration over Hong Kong will revert to the Chinese government. To help Catholics meet this tremendous challenge, the parishes' most important task now is to give Catholics a solid grounding in their faith and in ways to live out the Gospel. No one of us has any idea just how the government and societal models will change in the future. Yet, I believe that, no matter whether people opt to leave Hong

Kong or to remain here, their faith must be firm and deeply rooted to be able to face life's increasing challenges.

Because life in Hong Kong is so hectic, even a few long-term formation courses often have very little impact. In fact, a number of diocesan organizations have already sponsored such courses. Thus, it is of paramount importance for parishes to take every opportunity to deepen the faith and the knowledge of the faith among the people, e.g., retreats, anniversaries, Sunday liturgies and homilies, pre- and post-baptismal instruction classes, special discussion meetings, etc.. People must be encouraged to take part in the proclamation of the Gospel. Of course, I know from experience, that the laity do not always respond wholeheartedly to church activities. They are very busy and are not always aware that faith formation is important for them personally.

Lo: What do you see as a future direction for your parish?

Kwan: We have not yet seriously thought about developing small basic Christian communities which is a trend throughout much of the world. Our parish has a great number of Catholics preparing to emigrate. We estimate that one-third of the parishioners will leave Hong Kong by 1997. So we are not now able to organize BCC's. Establishing these communities will have to wait until after 1994. The population of our parish will be more stable after that. In the next two or three years, most Hong Kong people will be searching for a way out for themselves, or strengthening their present circumstances. By 1994 or 1995, those planning on leaving will already have left. Most people will have made a decision on their future. There will be a greater need then for a mutual support group and, consequently, a better time to develop BCC's.

As 1997 nears, people are getting more and more concerned. What will happen in the future? Will freedom be lost? These anxieties are real and have some foundation. To be practical, I believe we must develop basic Christian communities, teach the laity to carry on without the presence of a priest, help them deepen their own faith life and train even more lay leaders to meet future needs.
