

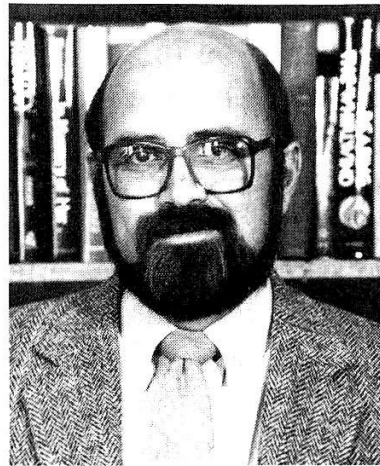
***Ecclesiological Challenges for the
Sake of Service:
Towards a Renewed Sense of the Church
in China***

by Robert J. Schreiter, C.P.P.S.

(This paper was prepared for the China Conference sponsored by the U. S. Catholic China Bureau. It is used here with permission.)

Introduction

The theme of this conference is "Missiological Perspectives with the Church in China." As I understand it, the reflections that led to the choice of this theme grew out of a renewed understanding of a theology of mission and a theology of the church. The renewed theology of mission stresses mutuality among local churches, a mutuality that is itself a reflection of the coming Reign of God to which each witnesses. It focuses upon the rich variety of ways Christians witness to the coming Reign of God. These ways involve proclamation, the witness of life, a posture of dialogue, humble and committed service, and the prophetic witness of those who suffer. The mission of Christians mirrors the communication between the three persons of the Holy Trinity, which is the source of all mission. The mission of Christians must reflect the provident and sustaining care of the Father, the self-giving and self-emptying of the Son, and the dynamic energy and power of the Spirit.



This renewed sense of mission finds its ground in a renewed theology of the church that was given its initial hope in the documents of the Second Vatican Council, especially *Lumen gentium* and *Gaudium et spes*, and developed through the living experience of faithful Christians and their shepherds during the

more than quarter century since they were first promulgated. Most noteworthy about this new ecclesiology has been its retrieval of dynamic biblical imagery to (quite literally) re-imagine the church, and its concern about a lively engagement with the world. Study and reflection on these and other Vatican II documents have produced a veritable renaissance in ecclesiological thinking.

My task here today, as I understand it, is to enter with you into some theological reflections that are nourished by this renewed missiology and ecclesiology, and see what fruit may come for strengthening the bonds between our local churches. These reflections will highlight how, in that mutuality between local churches that was noted at the very beginning of this presentation, some of the issues with which the church in China is struggling appear to those of us outside of China. It must be said at the outset, of course, that what will be said here is not meant to be in any way prescriptive for the Church in China. I am not Chinese and do not pretend to be in any way an expert on the situation in China. Rather, a guiding image here is one where I try to offer the results of reflection on the mystery of the Church to the church in China, and allow Chinese Catholics to take from these reflections what they might deem useful. The reflections, therefore, are proffered, not imposed.

Likewise, the purpose of these reflections is to ponder how, we, in this local church and in other local churches outside of China, who are parts of the universal Church, can strengthen our bonds of solidarity, commitment and faithfulness as a result of our reflections on China? How might the bonds of mutual service and respect be made more real?

In other words, the reflections that follow are offered as a stimulus to our own thought and, in some instances, a challenge to an ever greater fidelity in our witness to the Gospel. The bulk of what is presented here falls into two parts. The first part consists largely of reflections on the nature of the Church as understood and expressed at the Second Vatican Council and in subsequent documents and theological reflections. The second part turns to the implementing of those theological reflections in addressing the concrete issues that are part of the environment in which the Catholic Church in China lives. This will lead to some concluding reflections.

In all these reflections I am helped by a similar set of reflec-

tions published by Father Aloysius B. Chang Ch'un-shen, provincial superior of the China Province of the Society of Jesus.¹ His analysis of the current challenges to the Church in China helped me clarify my own thinking. What follows might be seen as a dialogue with his own reflections and an attempt on my part to carry them even further. Let me begin by recounting what Father Chang sees as the current situation, one that he characterizes as an "ecclesiological impasse."

An Ecclesiological Impasse

As Father Chang sees it, the Catholic Church in China is far too absorbed with internal church matters in its contemporary life. Recurring questions about who has been faithful and obedient to legitimate authority, who can be trusted, and a preoccupation with external observance of church laws all have a constricting influence on the Church's spiritual life. There is a greater preoccupation with refurbishing old buildings or constructing new ones than with enhancing the quality of Christian communities. While all of these preoccupations have gone hand in hand with the integrating of Catholics, as a tiny minority within the larger population, into the larger social fabric, it may well also have diminished the contribution that Catholicism can make to the larger social life. Likewise, much of the Church's vital energies have been sapped by external relations, especially Chinese-Vatican relations, and resisting efforts of the state to domesticate the Church.

Chang notes that much of this inward turning or focus on intra-church issues grew out of history and was to a great degree necessary for the survival of the Church during difficult times. But he challenges the Church now to take up the challenges of Vatican II to renew itself for a new stage of its history. He calls for a translation of all the Vatican documents into Chinese so that they can be studied by all faithful Catholics.

Before going into some more direct theological reflections, a few preliminary things should be said. First of all, even the intra-church preoccupations of much of the Church in China that Chang recounts should be recognized for what it is: an alternative ecclesiology. As I have tried to say elsewhere, this represents a previous local theology that must be made explicit if it is

to be transformed into something else.² To fail to recognize this allows it to continue to be operative but not directly accountable to the new process of dialogue.

The ecclesiology that fosters a preoccupation with external observances, that is constantly concerned with juridical relations to the hierarchy, and that finds itself largely absorbed into internal affairs is one that prevailed through four hundred years of the Catholic Church's most recent history. Two names associated with its development are Robert Bellarmine and Pope Pius IX. Bellarmine, living at the time of the Protestant Reformation, developed what might be called one of the first ecclesiologies. The need to develop a more explicit theology of the Church came from the fact that there were now competing communities that called themselves the Church of Christ. Bellarmine developed in his theology an image of the Church as the *societas perfecta*, the perfect or complete society. The extraordinary power of this image derived from the fact that it identified the Church in its hierarchical structure as the ideal ordering of any society, not only the ecclesiastical community; and that it could be seen as a complete alternative to the civil society in which it found itself. This ecclesiology was expressed architecturally in the building of baroque churches, that intertwined the heavenly, the earthly or terrestrial, and the civil dimensions of life into a single harmonious unity. Margaret R. Miles has effectively delineated how the Catholic and Protestant ecclesiologies were reflected in their architecture.³

The other name associated with this ecclesiology that saw the Church as a perfectly ordered society was Pope Pius IX. After a brief period when it had been thought that he could come to terms with the changes going on in the nineteenth century Europe, the revolutions of 1848 and his own escape from Rome left him a much changed and chastened man. He saw the Church as the bulwark against modern society rather than any dialogue partner with it. The publication of the *Syllabus of Errors* and the promulgations of the First Vatican Council underscored his determination to pit the Church against what he saw to be a hostile and threatening world.

This kind of ecclesiology that portrayed the Church as an alternative to modern society naturally had to have a preoccupation with the boundaries between itself and the world that functioned as sources for identity. Consequently, all the things that

made Catholics "different" from the rest of society became badges of honor. To blur in any way those boundaries was to invite confusion. Likewise, preoccupation with the legitimacy of how the internal structure of the Church was ordered was a necessary consequence of this kind of ecclesiology. Its hierarchical ordering seemed less and less relevant in a wider society and so had to be reasserted and justified over and over again. Any compromise--either on the badges of identity that maintained the solidarity of the group, or on the lines of power and authority that were seen to maintain the coherence of the group--threatened to undermine the alternative society.

It was this ecclesiology that was brought to China in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It was the same ecclesiology that marked most of the Catholic Church everywhere. But there were two historical features that strengthened its hold on Chinese Catholics. Both of these features are, I believe, still operative today.

*How can we strengthen our bonds
of solidarity, commitment and faithfulness
as a result of our reflections on China?*

The first feature is that the Catholic Church in China is a minority church, one that has had to struggle not only with its being but a "little flock," but also one that has frequently been viewed by other Chinese as foreign and therefore not-Chinese. Given periodic historical reactions of the Chinese to foreignness, there are (and historically have been) periods of great danger for the Church. The bulwark mentality of the Church as perfect or complete society can be used by the Church's members to see their distinctiveness from the rest of society as making them special rather than making them odd or even dangerous to their neighbors.

The second feature to be noted here is that the Catholic Church in China has undergone four decades of isolation and

persecution. As we have since learned from similar situations elsewhere, especially in Eastern Europe, isolated and persecuted churches do not have the luxury of openness and the blurring of boundaries. The preoccupation with fidelity and the fear of infiltrators goes hand in hand with keeping a beleaguered community alive and together. Once the pressures ease, a local church can undergo a profound crisis in finding its place in a society in which previously it had so much to concentrate on being *against* things, and in which it is now called upon to be *for* things. Some of the crisis that the contemporary Church in Poland or Chile faces is representative of this.

Besides these two historical features of minority status and persecution, two external factors must be recalled, especially as they are applied to the contemporary Church in China. First of all, the Chinese bishops and the rest of Chinese Catholics could not participate in the Second Vatican Council. Some of the new ecclesiological ideas were already in the air in the 1940s and 1950s (such as Pius XII's *Mystici corporis*), but China's own internal troubles with civil war and the events after 1949 did not allow much time to absorb any of this. The Second Vatican Council is today for Catholics more than the documents solemnly promulgated at its closing. It was also the collective experience of the spirit that emerged from the Council. That is hard to communicate if one did not participate in it. China was unable to be part of this. Indeed it is to the credit of today's Catholics in China that they would wish to embrace the Council so enthusiastically not having had that experience that has been so important to the Council's reception in other parts of the Church.

The other external feature is one that has only begun to come into focus with the distance of nearly three decades from the Council and the growth of the world Church in those same years. In terms of attendance, Vatican II was probably the most ecumenical (in the sense of world-wide) Council that the Church has ever experienced. Its results have been monumental in renewing the Church and have been embraced by nearly all Catholics is truly the work of God in the midst of our own day. But what has become increasingly evident is how much it was preoccupied with helping the Church come to terms with the "modern" world--which meant principally the increasingly secularized Western, capitalist world. Other areas received

attention, such as the burgeoning churches of Africa, but only in a more agenda-setting fashion rather than in any worked-through analysis. It would take the efforts of the CELAM bishops at Medellín and Puebla to give those programmatic items more specificity for Latin America, and the work of the federations of bishops' conferences elsewhere in the world to do the same. This in no way undercuts the authoritative nature of the teaching of Vatican II. It is only said to focus the matter of reception. The reception of Vatican II's teaching will be the most direct and perhaps the easiest for those "modern" societies in the secularized Western, capitalist world. And Father Chang notes in his article how difficult and long that reception has been even there. For countries and societies falling outside that ambit, the reception is equally necessary but admittedly more complex.

In the case of China, the Church is part of a country that is undergoing modernization too, but modernization in a very different fashion and at a much quickened pace. In the midst of this, many of the contradictions that mark modernity's move from traditional agrarian societies to mass urban industrialized societies become apparent. In the meantime, that "modern" society in the West is moving into yet other phases, called by a variety of names.

Indeed, it is to the credit of today's Catholics in China that they would wish to embrace the Council so enthusiastically not having had the experience that has been so important to the Council's reception in other parts of the Church.

No one can predict the future directions of modernization in China. But there was some speculation outside China that the recent Party Congress might have been looking to modernizing modes wherein industrial modernization takes place within the framework of authoritarian political regimes, with Singapore being held up as an example. It is certainly true that modernization in Asia has taken different paths from those taken in Europe and North America where Democracy had been viewed as a

constituent part of the modernizing process. The Asian experience in places like South Korea and Singapore may be pointing to different trajectories.

It is important to be aware that, even as China is urged to appropriate the teachings of Vatican II, their reception may not end up looking like the reception in Europe and North America--any more than reception in Eastern Europe or in Latin America mirrors the reception in the North Atlantic countries. What needs to be remembered is that the experience of the Chinese Catholic Church--both past and present--brings to this reception process a special kind of "previous local theology" that must be described and made as explicit as possible in order that it can be brought into encounter both with the changing Chinese social reality and the teachings of Vatican II. Put another way, how would *Gaudium et spes* look if it were rewritten from China's experience of coping with modernity rather than that of Europe or North America? What will be needed is a genuinely contextual appropriation of the ecclesiology first set forth at Vatican II. For only if it is genuinely contextual, taking root in Chinese soil and bearing Chinese fruit, can it be part of and enrich the *communio communiorum*, the communion of communions, that Pope John Paul II used to describe the mystery of the Church.

This rather long aside is necessary, I feel, to speak of ecclesiological issues in China today, and between the Chinese and other churches that make up the Catholic Church. I see this as expanding upon points that Father Chang implied in his article. I believe it is especially important for those of us outside China who want to help the Chinese Church, in any way it finds useful, appropriate Vatican II's ecclesiology. We must not use our experience of that appropriation ("our" being here North American) as the sole criterion for judging the adequacy of their appropriation process.

Ecclesial Imagery from Vatican II and the Church in China

Having tried to set the stage upon which a renewed sense of the Church in China might be played out, we can now turn to some images that might stimulate the imagination of Chinese

Catholics to envision, in some fashion, what a renewed ecclesiology might look like. I would like to take four such images, all deriving from the Second Vatican Council. They are all spoken of in *Lumen gentium*, and that provides an anchor for the discussions that will follow. They come most alive, however, when they are brought into dialogue with the realities--"the joy and hope, the grief and anguish" of humankind--so eloquently described in *Gaudium et spes*. As was suggested above, the Church in China might consider, as an imaginative exercise, what *Gaudium et spes* would have looked like had it been written from the perspective of Catholics in China. While such an exercise would never replace the document itself, it would have the advantage of both leading participants more deeply into the letter and spirit of the Pastoral Constitution, and also allow for pondering contemporary realities in China in that light.

The four images I suggest for our reflection here are the Church as (1) *sacramentum mundi*, (2) People of God, (3) the local church, and (4) *communio*.

The Church as *Sacramentum Mundi*

The image of the Church as *sacramentum mundi*, a sign or sacrament of God's presence in the world--rather than as *sacramentum contra mundum*, or sign against the world--represented the consolidation of important developments in theology between the time of World War I and the beginning of the Council: namely, the development of the theologies of "earthly realities" and the recovery of biblical images of the Church. Those developments cannot be gone into here; suffice it to say that they represented a new openness of the Church to the larger world, placing the Church within the world rather than over against it. The Church could not exist over against the modern world; it had to engage the world so as to bring the grace of Christ into the very midst of everyday problems and realities. This ended a policy of confrontation and isolation, and called for a theology more sympathetic to, but nonetheless critical of, the modern world.

Chinese Catholics have to think about what it will mean to be a *sacramentum mundi* within their own contexts. It will mean identifying as clearly as possible the "previous local theol-

ogy" under which they have been operating--one promoted by the Tridentine Counter Reformation and anti-modern policies of Pius IX on the one hand, and a history of persecution and suffering on the other. As noted above, this will not involve simply adapting the stances of Catholic local churches in the West who have lived out very different histories, but it will entail trying more efficaciously to be the Church *in* China, a sign of God's grace in that great country. What does it mean to be a sign of God's grace and presence in such a country at this point in its history? Only Chinese Catholics can answer that. But suggestions to stimulate the discussion might help. How Catholics treat one another, and what they count as true signs of catholicity will speak volumes to outsiders about what God's grace in their presence might mean. If it centers on perpetuating old battles, bureaucratic wranglings and obsession with peripheral matters (accusations that have been directed at times against Catholics) grace will seem little in evidence. The early Church was attractive to many outsiders precisely because of the spiritual values of charity, compassion, and self-giving that they manifested. Can contemporary Christians do the same?

Some Catholics, in light of the longer tradition in China, might want to see themselves as the *sacramentum coeli*, or sacrament of heaven. This is certainly an image that strikes deep resonance in Chinese hearts. While forming a genuine manifestation of the Lord of Heaven in their midst, the *sacramentum mundi* image really tries to communicate the same thing, but with an important qualification. The reality of Heaven is no longer mediated to the Chinese people solely through one person, the Emperor. Thanks to the mediation of Christ, it is now accessible to all who believe. The sacrament of heaven makes possible the sacrament of earth, of the world. That wider access should be evident in the generosity and hospitality that Christians show in their lives. In so doing, they open up not only new riches for China, but the possibility of another appreciation of the *sacramentum mundi* image for the rest of the world Church.

People of God

The recovery of the biblical image of the People of God in

the second chapter of *Lumen gentium* has prompted some of the liveliest discussions among Catholics since the Second Vatican Council. The image is rooted in the history and experience of the Jewish people, living in covenant with God and being led to the fulfillment of those promises. For many Catholics (and other Christians beyond them), the Exodus-quality of that image evoked the possibility of change, of moving from situations of stagnation and slavery into a new place. It bespoke a journey that was often uncertain and dangerous, but also one carried out under the provident eye of God. For others, it seemed to provide a healthy correction to an overly hierarchical reading of the Church. It connoted a sense of equals in the struggle for justice and authenticity in faith. It mirrored the tentativeness with which Christians face the future, but also the confidence they have in God.

How might the image of People of God contribute to a renewed sense of the Church in China? The almost jaunty imagery of the People of God as invoked by many Western Catholics may seem too naively optimistic to a Church that has suffered much in the past four decades. Change is not always good and certainly not always for the better. Yet reaching for an image of departure and journey is one that has excited the imagination not only in Western literature, but in Chinese literature as well. It echoes with danger, but also with new possibilities. If the Catholic Church is to move beyond an impasse in its ecclesial self-understanding, it will need to make such a journey--not simply away from the past but one in which all contesting sides journey *together* to a land of new promise. The image can do much to renew a Church if the experience of what has happened elsewhere is the case. It does not mean a "falling away" from old certainties, but like Abraham and Sarah, being called out to a new place.

One of the most fruitful areas for learning among the local churches in the past two decades has been in the stories of their journeys as People of God. Each story has been shaped by the history and experience of that people; each has experienced something renewing and challenging about God along the way. One would want to hear what stories Chinese Catholics might be able to tell us some years hence of how they have been renewed by the image of People of God.

The Local Church

One of the great gifts to Catholic ecclesial self-understanding has been Vatican II's retrieval of the concept of the local church. The notion that each local church, gathered round its bishop, is wholly the Church while not being the whole Church, has done much to renew the identity of what it means to be Catholic. Among other things, to be Catholic means to be, in imitation of the Church's incarnate Lord, rooted in a specific time and place and committed to mission in that time and place. At the same time the Church is manifested in its fullness only in the communion between and among all those churches, with its unity symbolized in that communion with the Church of Rome and its Head. Local churches are not branch offices of some centralized European office; each local church has its own integrity. It is only in respecting that integrity and living out the challenges of faith that mission in those situations evokes that the richness in communion is realized. The real beauty of this ecclesiology lies in seeing new relations between local and universal that can emerge from this experience.

For several decades, Chinese Catholics have struggled with the meaning of being local, being truly Chinese, and harmonizing that with the tradition of a universal heritage. The teaching of the Second Vatican Council regarding local and universal Church might provide a new way of reading that history in two ways. First of all, for the Chinese themselves: their story usually told in terms of rupture, division, betrayal, mistrust, suffering and hope might become now a story of new beginnings: beginnings that honor the suffering of the past, but beginnings that see a new vision of what Catholic identity can bring to Chinese people; secondly, the Chinese experience of renewing themselves as a local church could be instructive to local churches elsewhere. Their story will help us see how churches that have suffered divisions can find a way to a new wholeness--not by dwelling endlessly on their past divisions, but by looking toward a new configuration of unity amid diversity.

Communion

The image of Church as communion--communion with God

and unity among all humankind--is outlined eloquently in the first chapter of *Lumen gentium*. Unfortunately in the discussions in the 1980s "communion" became in some circles a rallying cry to counter the "People of God" image that had evoked so much enthusiasm in the 1960s and 1970s. If each is taken alone, they can be seen to represent two diverging (although not necessarily opposing) ecclesiologies: the People of God representing a more egalitarian, tentative approach; communion a more hierarchically sensitive approach centered on God. The special Synod of 1986 became a wrestling ground for these two approaches.

While *Lumen gentium* can be read as presenting two diverging ecclesiologies, it is their juxtaposition rather than their contraposition that makes them valuable for our purposes here. In fairness to the supporters of the advocates of the communion image of the Church, it does have strong foundation in the Pauline tradition. And it can be seen as taking an organic step away from the overly cautious ecclesiologies of the Counter Reformation and anti-modern positions of the time immediately prior to Vatican II. It is a voice to be heard and to be reckoned with, especially in the marvelous phrase of John Paul II, envisioning the church as communion of communions.

The struggles in the world Church around these two images are important, but perhaps should not distract us, at least initially, from our task here. Communion becomes, at the very least, an image rooted in Vatican II that permits Chinese Catholics to move from the dominant ecclesiology of the past forty years--an ecclesiology that looks similar to the older ecclesiology, but is one that has been reified through the pain of suffering and history. Chinese Catholics should be accorded the opportunity to find a middle path between what People of God imagery and what communion imagery have meant to Catholics elsewhere. In so doing, they will no doubt learn something about themselves, but also have something to teach the rest of us.

Implications of a Renewed Church for Mission

A Church does not renew itself for its own sake. It does so in order that it might follow its Lord more faithfully. Renewal is for the sake of mission.

Father Chang outlines a number of areas where he felt the

Church was not achieving its mission because of the ecclesiological impasse in which it found itself. I would like to select a few of them in order to make some suggestions that might be useful for further reflection and discussion. Briefly, let me look at four such points.

First of all, *ecumenism and interfaith relations*. Father Chang avers that Chinese Catholics are so bound up in protecting their own boundaries that they have no time for ecumenical or interfaith relations. These are areas of action incumbent upon a renewed Church, as Vatican II and subsequent Church policy have shown. The ability to move out bespeaks a different sense of boundaries that distinguish us and relate us to the rest of the world. Moreover, I would add that, at a time when there are so many seekers in China--those attracted by spiritual values yet not (yet) willing to commit themselves to Christ--Catholics must extend a Gospel hospitality to these people.

Second, the Church's *inside/outside* issue. Much of the energy to date has been expended on trying to straighten out the jurisdictional questions. These are important, but will not in themselves result in a renewed Church. The images of *sacramentum mundi* and local/universal Church provide opportunities for a greater sense of renewal.

Third, the Church's possible role in *modernization*. Despite some setbacks from time to time, the general direction of Chinese society seems to be in the direction of modernization. Considerable progress has been made in the past fifteen years, and the 1992 Congress seems to indicate a continuation here. As part of a world Church, the Catholic Church in China, small as it may be, has access to a history of modernization in other parts of the world, and those experiences can be of benefit within China as it struggles to find its own way. A renewed Church that is willing to think of its role (modest though it may be in such a large society) in the future of the country can offer something about what human and spiritual values must be cultivated for a genuinely humanizing modernization process to take place.

Fourth and finally, a process of *reconciliation* within the Church can portend pathways of reconciliation in the larger society after decades of struggle and suffering. I have already sketched out some directions regarding reconciliation elsewhere.⁴ Suffice it to say here that a biblical understanding

of reconciliation requires understanding what reconciliation is *not*, and becoming aware that it is not we who reconcile ourselves, but rather God who makes God's reconciling grace well up within us and among us amid our histories of pain and suffering. Were Chinese Catholics truly to become "agents of reconciliation" (2 Cor 5:20), they would be signs of a renewed Church and the coming Reign all at once.

Conclusion

To call for renewal within the Church and to diagnose what needs renewing is one thing. To discover the rich biblical and ecclesial resources for that renewal is another. To embrace the challenge and follow it wherever the Lord leads us is yet again something more. It is easy and perhaps too facile for those of us outside of China to look in and make suggestions. But we must also be willing to walk with Chinese Catholics as they strive to become a true *sacramentum mundi* for China, the People of God on the way, a full representation of the local church, and a communion among the communions that make up the Catholic Church.

Notes

1. A.B. Chang, S.J., "The Church in China: Ecclesiological Impasse," *Tripod*, 1992, No. 69:60-69.
 2. Robert J. Schreiter, *Constructing Local Theologies*, Orbis Books, Maryknoll, NY, 1985.
 3. Margaret R. Miles, *Image as Insight*, Beacon Press, Boston, 1985.
 4. Robert J. Schreiter, "Reconciliation and the Church in China," *Tripod*, 1992, No. 69:44-52.
-