

## *Ecclesiological Challenges*

### *Response to Robert Schreiter*

*by Joseph Zen, S.D.B.*

(This paper was presented at the Thirteenth National China Conference sponsored by the U.S. Catholic China Bureau in January, 1993. It is printed here with permission.)

Let me begin by telling you a story that actually happened to one of our professors in Rome during the 1950's. He was a professor of philosophy, a kindly gentleman, and a pretty good teacher in his own right. But he was notoriously conservative, which was precisely the reason he had been invited to a symposium on Teilhard de Chardin. The organizers were all avid admirers of the scientist-theologian and they felt what their symposium lacked was a strong voice for the opposition to counterbalance their own enthusiasm. What happened, however, was the good professor felt so grateful for having been invited in the first place that he did not want to give offense to his hosts, so he worked extra long and hard to gather material all of which could be given in Teilhard's favour. Now I leave it up to you to imagine just how disappointed were those who had invited him.



I, on the other hand, do not intend to disappoint you. For while I am far from being of equal theological weight with Frs. Chang and Schreiter, I will not hesitate to add a discordant note or two to the general discussion. I would like to proceed in the following manner: offer first a brief analysis of the general situation, then add some comments of my own to their reflections, and, lastly, suggest a possible methodology that might be helpful to us in our efforts to serve the Church of China.

### **Analysis of the General Situation**

When describing the present situation of the Church in

China, we must from the very outset and all along the way be clear about the two basic entities involved; namely, the atheist regime of a nation heavily burdened by past injustices suffered at the hands of the imperialistic countries; and, secondly, a Catholic Church which is in fact a small minority organization divided at present into a so called 'official' church and an 'underground' church.

The official policy of China's atheistic regime is one of tolerance for all religions, but only within the framework of strict government control. This policy is spelled out clearly in the many official documents published recently by the Communist Party.

As far as the internal life of the church is concerned, the present division did not actually originate over doctrinal differences, but rather represents the polarization of two basic responses to pressure from outside the church. So when we speak of the 'liberation' of the church, we must understand it as a liberation from this external pressure. However, when we speak of 'reconciliation', we mean the softening of positions on both sides of the divide, a coming together in mutual understanding that both belong to one and the same church. Given the dependent relationship of the internal division on the external pressure which is its cause, I am confident that once this is removed, reconciliation will easily follow. I am well aware, however, of the real danger of a hardening of positions on both sides if this interim period is protracted, especially if we who are on the outside merely stand idly by and do nothing to alleviate the situation. Time may not be in our favour here. My own question at this point is: given the above clarifications of the basic factors comprising the present circumstances, should we categorize the situation of the Church in China as an 'ecclesiological impasse'? The question brings me to part two of my response; that is, to some additional comments and personal reflections on the subject in general.

## **Comments and Reflections**

To categorize the present situation of the Church in China as an 'ecclesiological impasse' is, I think, to see too little and to read too much into the actual reality. It seems to me to be a

somewhat inadequate and one-sided description of the present situation. I agree that the first impression given visitors to China may be one of excessive concern about and preoccupation with ecclesial-hierarchical questions, but there is also very much in evidence another side to this picture. On both sides of the divide there can be found a strong faith in God, a deep devotion to the Blessed Sacrament and Our Lady, a daring missionary zeal courageously expressing itself within the narrow confines allowed by civil authority, and a constant and lively witness to the principle of Christian charity. While tensions may have risen from the ecclesiological problems, they have in no way paralysed the inner life of the church.

Incidentally, why must we minimize the value of the efforts expended by Chinese Catholics to erect new churches? When I see these Catholics, especially those in the north, giving their time, money and labour to building new churches and repairing old ones, what comes to mind are the Catholics of Europe's Middle Ages. While there are those today who might look somewhat unfavourably on the Christians of that former time, there can be no doubt about the strength, depth and sincerity of their faith.

And why should the external observance of Church law be viewed as something opposed to genuine Christian spirituality, or an obstacle to authentic spiritual growth? Are we to become spiritualists in our point of view? Do those deprived for so long a time of the sacraments and other visible signs of their faith have no right to hold fast to outward observances as sacramentals of the church, i.e. external signs signifying deeper internal meanings?

And again, what kind of ecumenism or inter-religious initiatives can be expected of Catholics in China, when all religious activities there are so strictly controlled, and each religion is necessarily preoccupied with its own struggle for survival? Despite this, however, I myself have witnessed on more than one occasion that special bond of solidarity among the different religions that can only come from sharing the common experience of persecution.

I think if we were to ask the ordinary people who lived side by side with our brother and sister Christians in China, and who were their companions in the prisons or their guards in the labour camps what they had to say about them, they would tell

us that in general Christians are a marvelous if somewhat mysterious lot. They would speak of their wonder at how these people could bear up under prolonged, harsh and undeserved punishment with such patient serenity, harbouring no resentment or ill will towards their persecutors, but continuing to maintain a spirit of self-forgetfulness and service to others.

We might also ask those Catholics who attend services at the open churches today about their priests, and they will tell us how much they admire the courage of these suffering servants of the Gospel, who endured much and continue to remain faithful to their ministry in the most difficult of circumstances. It seems to me, then, to be misleading and inadequate to sum up the present situation of the Church in China as an 'ecclesiological impasse'.

Such a categorization also tends to read too much into the reality. If ecclesiology means a way of understanding the church, then formal and explicit questions concerning ecclesiology can be found only where there exists different systems, that is to say, where there are a number of ways of understanding the church from which one might choose one or another. But Catholics in China have had no alternative choices. For them, the question of loyalty to the Roman Pontiff is not a question of a way of "understanding the church" but rather of believing in the church according to the one and only understanding available to them at this time, that which Fr. Schreiter calls "the alternative ecclesiology".

Here I would like to pose the following question: is this "alternative ecclesiology" to be considered a false or erroneous ecclesiology? Is there something wrong with it? I think the answer must be in the negative. It may not be perfect, and it may leave much room for improvement, but it cannot be said to be false or erroneous. The development of faith-understanding does not proceed by substitution...an exchange of one for another, but rather by coherent growth. What Vatican Council I had affirmed has not now been superseded or declared obsolete by the teachings of Vatican II.

Moreover, and more importantly, I think we all agree that the intensity of faith is not always in direct proportion to the degree of our understanding of it. Abraham could not have experienced the same degree of understanding that we Christians do today, yet, nonetheless, Abraham remains "our Father in

Faith".

A parallel with the liturgy may be useful here. On the Feast of St. Jerome in the year 1989, Shanghai's Sheshan Seminary celebrated its first post-Vatican II Mass in the Chinese vernacular. During the homily, I commented on the Gospel passage of the day: "...a good scribe brings forth from his storeroom both the new and the old..." Matt. 13:52. I told the seminarians that there was nothing 'wrong' with the old liturgy. In fact, it was the old liturgy that nourished the faith of martyrs (including the living martyrs of China) throughout these many difficult years. It was also the old liturgy that nourished the generous charism of the saints and the heroic zeal of the missionaries down through the ages, and it is this same liturgy that has nourished our own faith and is the source of our own vocations. Certainly we must embrace the new and learn it well; it is, after all, the most recent of gifts from the Holy Spirit to His Church. But let us emulate, too, the faith and devotion that our fathers and mothers brought to the old liturgy, for if we fail in this, we shall run the risk of allowing it to degenerate into a hollow and empty formalism.

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Returning to the ecclesiological question, I agree that an opening of the mind of the church in China to Vatican II ecclesiology will go a long way in helping to defuse and disarm current tensions and tendencies toward polarization. But what is truly most consoling in this matter is the fact that all sides have already accepted Vatican II with positive feeling and equal enthusiasm. Many copies of the Council's official documents are already in the hands of mainland priests and seminarians. As far as Fr. A. B. Chang's suggestion goes that a new edition with accompanying commentaries be brought out, I would like to make the following distinction. In general, commentaries take two forms: there is the commentary that explains the meaning of

the texts in themselves and as such is an aid to understanding; the second form carries the work of critical theological reflection to new levels of understanding. I would encourage the use of the former over the latter. This is not to underestimate the intelligence and theological understanding of our brothers and sisters in China, but is rather an appeal to follow the principal of graduality. To use another kind of analogy, when feeding a starving person, too much, too rich, and too fast can be dangerous to his health and can do him more harm than good.

At this juncture, I would like to add a word or two to the general discussion about a hierarchy of truths of faith and the distinction made between primary and secondary truths. The distinction is legitimate and should be borne in mind when dealing with our separated brethren. However, and I want to emphasize this point strongly, if and when the integrity of the Catholic Church is at stake or compromised, it is another matter altogether. The Church teaching on the Primacy of the Pope is an integral part of our faith. When it comes under attack, there can be no question as to whether it be a primary or secondary truth. When it comes to a choice between either rendering to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's or giving in completely to Caesar, then we must remember the words spoken by John the Baptist to Herod: "It is not allowed!" John paid for his stand with his life. Are we to assume he was merely overreacting to what might be categorized as a minor matter of personal morality in a palatial context? Ought we not also remember the courage of old man Eleazar, a respected teacher of the law in the days of the Great Persecution (2 Maccabees 6), who lost his head over a mouthful of pork?

And can we really tell members of the underground church that they are making too big a fuss over secondary theological truths? Especially when it was because of a secondary truth that their bishops and priests went to prison, many dying there...religious men and women have suffered every kind of persecution and humiliation all over a secondary truth...young Catholic lay men and women entered prison camps in their twenties and were released in their fifties as second class citizens... all because of their adherence to what is termed as secondary truths.

Along the same line, are we now to tell patriotic association

members that to be one with the Pope or independent from the Papacy doesn't really matter much one way or the other? (Some participants in the convention held a few years ago in Montreal went so far as to congratulate the Chinese delegates for opting for independence from Rome in running their own church.) This is hardly the kind of consoling words that Chinese Catholics are longing to hear. Is it not a cruel thing to wish on them a forced separation from the unity for which their hearts yearn? It is common knowledge that many bishops of the 'official' church have secretly asked the Holy Father to have their present situation regularized. And all can witness for themselves what joy the Shanghai priests utter aloud during the Eucharistic Prayer the words "we pray for John Paul our Pope" after the decades of enforced silence. And when the seminarians now compose their Prayers of the Faithful for use during Mass, they never fail to include as the first intention a prayer for the Holy Father, and they employ words of such affection and fervour seldom expressed in seminaries throughout other parts of the world.

The greatest desire of the members of the official church, with rare exceptions, is to be reunited with the Successor of St. Peter who is the Vicar of Christ on earth. We could perhaps learn from them how to appreciate better the privilege of belonging to the Roman Catholic church, and how not to be ashamed of our identity as Catholics nor take inordinate delight in blurring the boundaries of its authority and identity.

## **A Methodology for Serving the Church in China**

Let me conclude with some positive remarks under the general heading of 'methodology for serving China'. Such a methodology must be both incarnational and kenotic. Incarnational denotes a love so strong so as to bring the Divine Lover to take upon Himself our feeble human nature; *kenosis* means that He did not hesitate to strip Himself of His own glory. If called upon to do so, are we ready and able to love as Christ loves and be willing to strip ourselves, for example, of our sophisticated theological categories, our advanced ways of understanding the faith?

To love our brothers and sisters in China, we have to identi-

fy with them, see as they see and feel as they feel. We should be careful not to offend their sensibilities, nor take offense at their 'old fashioned' pre-Vatican II ways. Let us, as Fr. Schreiter has so beautifully put it, walk with them together. But in order to do this, we must begin not from our own but from their starting place...from where they themselves are now. To love is to desire to be close to the one who is loved, as the incarnation suggests. Let us draw closer to our brothers and sisters in China, if this is not possible geographically, certainly it can be done in spirit, and let us draw closer to both those in the official and those in the underground church. We must never take sides, choosing one over and against the other, but we are to defend each against the other's attacks, even at the price of being misunderstood for a time. Let us not erect obstacles but rather help to build bridges between them. True love is inseparable from respect and appreciation. We are to see in these our brothers and sisters in Christ the *anawim* of God, His humble and faithful servants. For so many years they have suffered the loss of everything, having only God to turn to as their one and only possession. They have suffered much, and their sufferings reach back long before the onset of the Cultural Revolution. During that ten years of madness, however, it was the members of the official church who suffered even more, for those who had resisted earlier were already in prisons and labour camps well-guarded against the terrors of the Red Guards.

If we believe in the Communion of Saints, we can only begin to surmise how much we remain in their debt for so many graces. I believe that just as Christ has gained for His Church the gift of the Holy Spirit through His passion and death, so too have the sufferings of Christians, not only the Chinese but all those throughout the world who have suffered in the cause of right, gained for the whole Church the outpouring of the Holy Spirit in the Second Vatican Council. We have received much more from them than we can ever hope to give in return.

And finally, let us make it known to our brothers and sisters in China that they indeed do have our love and our respect. For it is only when we love them with an incarnational love that we can even hope to arrive at a position where we will be able to help them without hurting them and adding further to their suffering and pain.