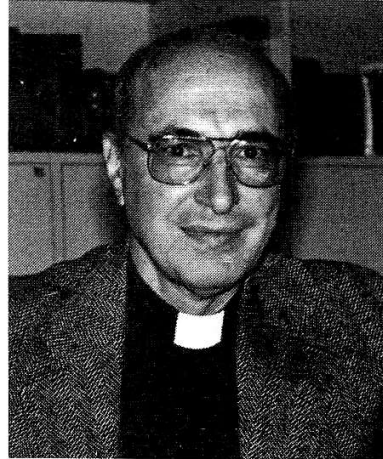


## *The Catholic Church in China: Between Death and Resurrection*

*John Cioppa, M.M.*

Having lived in Hong Kong, the doorstep of China for over 30 years, I have learned many things, but two strike me as very relevant to our meeting here today. The first is that I am not an expert on China and the second is that people who think they understand China are living under an illusion. What is true today may not be true tomorrow and everything about China has to be understood in a context of 5,000 years of history. What I would like to do in this presentation is to share with you some of my reflections on the present condition of the Church in China. However, in order to better understand the Church of 1993 and beyond, it is best to look at it in context of its recent history.



### **A Look Back - The Church from 1979 to 1992**

Throughout the centuries there have been four attempts to preach the Christian Gospel in China: the Nestorians, 638; John of Montecorvino, Franciscan, 1291; the Jesuits, 1583, and the return of foreign missionaries in 1842. History may indicate that 1979 was the beginning of the fifth attempt.

The revival of religious practice in this period dates from the Third Plenum of the 11th Central Committee of December 1978, which saw Deng Xiaoping's return to power and the party line turn from "class struggle" to the "four modernizations." As part of those modernizations, Chinese believers were granted a certain freedom to practice their religions. Although the Party spoke of "religious freedom," tolerance is the more appropriate word. All the old structures from the 1950's were brought back to supervise and control religion:

the Religious Affairs Bureau (RAB), the United Front Department, and the Catholic Church Patriotic Association (CCPA).

Government policy regarding religion is enshrined in the 1982 Constitution and in policy documents. Article 36 of the 1982 Constitution is much fuller than previous ones (1954, 1975, 1978) which merely carried the one line: "Citizens enjoy freedom to believe in religion and freedom not to believe in religion and to propagate atheism." The new policy lists out six points and indicates that the State protects normal religious activities.

The Document makes a sharp distinction between freedom of religious belief and the practice of religion. Also the guarantee of protection for "normal" religious activities is open to many and varied interpretations. No definition of "normal" is given. However, the usual interpretation now in Chinese courts of law is that religious belief is a private affair, but when it comes to putting faith into practice in public worship, to be considered "normal" these activities must only be carried out in government approved churches or gathering points. All other activities, e.g. "underground" or "home" worship services, run the risk of being labeled "counter-revolutionary."

The document which spells out most comprehensively the government's policy towards religion is Document #19 of March 1982 which upholds the traditional Marxist arguments against religion. It states that China is atheistic, and religion will die a natural death when all the conditions of "socialism with Chinese characteristics" are met. However it quickly adds that Party members who think that religion will die out in a short time or disappear through coercive measures are not being realistic. Further on it states that the main task of religion is to unite believers and non-believers alike to work to construct a modern socialist state. The Document points out that the independence and autonomy of churches must be preserved and cautions against the encroachment of foreign reactionary religious forces mentioning the Vatican by name.

For all its Marxist rhetoric however, Document 19 does display an openness regarding religion, and the Government has shown a certain sincerity in its open door policy. Over

the past few years friendly visits have been welcomed from officials of the Church like Cardinals Koenig of Germany, Etchegaray of France, Sin of the Philippines and Wu of Hong Kong. (Cardinal Etchegaray at the time was President of the Justice and Peace Commission in Rome.) Today there are over 3,000 churches and chapels open, 24 major seminaries with more than 800 seminarians and 37 convents with over 1,000 sister candidates.

While official contacts with the Vatican are discouraged, there have been many unofficial visits of Chinese church people to counterparts outside of China and ongoing dialogue at various levels. At the same time there have been rebuffs when Rome named Dominic Tang Archbishop in 1981 and Gong Pingmei as Cardinal in 1992.

While there were ups and downs, the era of good feeling of the early 80's gave way to a feeling of dismay among foreign Catholics when in 1989 the Government decided to firmly suppress "underground" Catholic activities. This crackdown was inaugurated by Document #3 directed at the Catholic Church and entitled, "Strengthen Catholic Church Work in the New Circumstances." Strengthen in most cases means supervise or control

To this day Document #3 is still in effect and is still being acted upon. This is particularly true in view of the recent collapse of Communism in Russia and Eastern Europe and the criticism of human rights abuses in China. In most cases the underground Catholics are the victims of these crackdowns. China is paranoid about intrusion by "hostile forces" from the outside which they blame for most of the problems of China. Thus it feels compelled to protect itself against "bourgeois liberalism", including foreign religious activities and organizations. The hopes of a so called "peaceful evolution" have all but been lost.

As many have pointed out the political environment of China is mercurial, characterized by periods of relaxation and restriction, of tightening and relaxing controls, centralizing and decentralizing. Fr. Beda Liu, a China scholar, calls the cyclic pattern the "shou-fang" effect. "Shou" means to pull back' "fang" means to release. This becomes obvious from the attitude of church people observed on visits to China. At times they are very relaxed, happy to see foreigners, encour-

aging exchanges of visits, literature and openly accepting funds from outside sources. At other times they are reserved, very formal, talking little and happy to see the visit end. Almost always there are CCPA or representatives of the Religious Affairs Bureau present. But even their attitude is affected by the political climate at the time. Sometimes it is patriotic to receive funds for church building and activities; at other times it is a violation of the principal of self-reliance and nationalism.

I would describe the mood of the 80's as a movement from euphoria to cautious optimism. With ten years of experience behind them Catholics still have hope, yet realize that the world in which they live and the environment in which they practice their faith is neither free, open nor secure. There is still much fear, anxiety, tension and concern about an uncertain future.

## **What Happened in 1992**

### **Secular Events**

Whatever happened in the church in 1992 has to be considered in the context of what happened in the country of China as a whole.

One would think that a country as large as China would have difficulty changing. But just the opposite seems to be true. And the person behind the changes still seems to be Deng Xiaoping. Many thought his days of influence were over, but such is not the case. On January 17, 1992, he left Beijing for Wuhan and on February 19 arrived in Shenzhen, a special economic zone just over the border from Hong Kong, and showcase of China's economic reforms. Everywhere he went, Deng trumpeted the cause of reform and by the time he reached Shanghai, his campaign had gained momentum. The opposition tried to stifle the media, but eventually the news burst and Deng's face was on every newspaper and T.V. newscast.

Leadership is key in China. The person at the helm wields tremendous power. A Chinese scholar recently

compared the political system in America and China by saying that America is rule by Constitution, China is rule by person. In America, he said, you can change your president every four years, yet the country remains relatively stable and secure. In China when leadership changes, everyone holds his or her breath.

Deng carried the battle for reform to the National People's Congress (NPC) in March and the big question on everyone's mind now is whether Deng, 87 years old, will have the time and the clout to make his dream come true. The wheels are turning and 1992 marks a historic turning point; that year for the first time in four decades more than half of China's industrial output was produced outside the state-run sector. Mao's "the tail of capitalism" has begun to wag the dog. The big question is whether China can remain ideologically socialist and become economically capitalist. Time will have to be the judge.

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In June Xu Jiatusun, the former Hong Kong New China News Agency director now in exile in the U.S., wrote an exclusive article for the South China Morning Post. In it he says that Chinese Communism is in crisis but that it could be "saved" through copious borrowing from capitalism. He argues that the reforms patriarch Deng Xiaoping propagated early this year did not go far enough because they failed to touch on politics or culture. The veteran party man who still considers himself a Communist, thinks that Chinese socialism is not "beyond repair" if the party would unreservedly adopt both economic and political ideas and institutions from the West. A retooled Chinese system could still preserve enough of the ancient regime to continue to qualify as Socialism.

At the NPC in October ideological hair-splitting became irrelevant. Instead the energies of almost everyone were consumed with seeking ways to exploit the new opportunities



offered by the inchoate Chinese marketplace. Suddenly, officials began hopping on the bandwagon realizing that in terms of pay, perks and tenure, it is better to become a manager of a corporation than a minister of government. Intellectuals are hoping that as the forces of supply and demand sweep the country, the political landscape will also change. How to bring about a radical transformation without provoking a revolt of the masses may, however, require a miracle. Again time will tell. For a millennium, the dream of every Chinese was to become a mandarin. After 1949 it was to become a mandarin-cadre. Now it is to become a cadre-entrepreneur. A friend recently entered into a joint venture selling luxury cars in a large port city on the East Coast of China. His partner in China was the vice-mayor of the city.

### **Church Events**

It is in this context that we must look at the Church in China today. The socio-economic, political environment is quite different from that of a year ago, much less that of 1989 after the events of June 4. However, as Mr. John Kamm, a Catholic Hong Kong businessman, and former president of the American Chamber of Commerce, said recently, "Despite all of the political and economic changes in China in the past year, as regards the Church, 'fundamentally' there has been no change. However, there have been changes of attitude." He went on to say that the Government still views religion and the Catholic Church as a potentially hostile force that can destabilize society and therefore must be controlled. All former legislation and restrictions remain in force, but because of the changing attitude of some cadres, there is hope for some basic changes as well. As the officials and people give in to the conviction that the system has failed them and begin to savor the advantages of a free market economy, perhaps some of the cultural and value changes suggested by Mr. Xu, the exiled diplomat in the United States, might begin to come about. This would include greater understanding of the role of religion in life. I believe this is the change of "attitude" alluded to by Mr. Kamm.

This is being played out in various ways. On recent visits to China religious leaders have openly asked for financial

assistance for the restoration of churches and other buildings. Some have even asked for funds for investment in joint government ventures or encouraged the Church outside of China to invest in China. Catholic Foundations are urged to collaborate with the local church people, who in turn, work with local authorities. The projects most often mentioned are clinics, water systems and wells, village schools, care centers for handicapped children, old people's homes, weaving and embroidery shops and small factories. Some question this type of collaboration, but in so restrictive a society as China perhaps this type of cooperation with local authorities provides an opportunity for the Church inside and outside of China to show authentic Christian service for the poor, the needy and the sick and for the initial pre-evangelization of those who are seeking a more meaningful life.

### **The Fifth National Congress of Catholic Representatives**

The most significant church event which took place in China in 1992, however, was the Fifth National Catholic Representatives' Congress which was held in Beijing from September 15 to 19, 1992. The 272 delegates came from 30 provinces, municipalities and autonomous regions to discuss affairs of the three government-sanctioned Catholic organizations. Fifty of the 68 government-recognized bishops attended the event. The three bodies are the Chinese Catholic Bishops' College (CCBC) Chinese Catholic Church Administrative Commission (CCCAC) and the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association (CCPA). Although the Congress is supposed to be held every 4 years, the last meeting took place in 1986.

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The three main issues discussed were: 1. the constitution for the bishops' conference, 2. the structure of the three government approved organizations and 3. the election of officers of the

bishops' conference and the patriotic association. The principal change which was approved by the representatives was the adoption of a Constitution for the Bishops' Conference. Although the Chinese Catholic Bishops' Conference was established in 1980, it never had a constitution of its own; it functioned under Article 7 of the statutes of the Chinese Catholic Church Administrative Commission. This commission is now one of the six committees under the Bishops' Conference. Slight amendments were also made in the constitution of the Catholic Patriotic Association. After the meeting the New China News Agency reported that the three former Catholic bodies have now been reduced to two: The Bishops' Conference and the Patriotic Association. As stated above, the Catholic Church Administrative Commission was placed under the bishops' college.

Bishop Joseph Zong Huaide, 75, the Ordinary of Jinan and Zhoucun dioceses, was named president and chairman of both the Bishops' Conference and the Catholic Patriotic Association. He was also named the head of the Catholic Church Administrative Committee.

It seems that the two existing Catholic organizations are now on a parallel level and that the Patriotic Association is to be seen as more a helping than a dominating organization. Its redefined purpose is to "assist" in Church affairs and to cooperate with the open Church's episcopal conference on major decisions. In the past the CCPA was often criticized as being merely agents of the government whose real goal was not to boost religion but to control China's Catholic Church. We will have to observe the events of the next few months to see how these new relationships are implemented.

After the September meeting some observers had the following unofficial comments to make:

On the Positive side:

- 1 For the first time there is a formal constitution for the Bishops' Conference and it is put on a par with the Patriotic Association.
2. It was decided to promote the use of the vernacular (Chinese) in the liturgy throughout the whole country.
3. Seminaries are allowed to employ teachers from outside China after approval has been obtained from the Board of Directors of the seminary. The same holds true for seminarians study-



ing outside of China.

4. Not only the formation of seminarians, but also the formation of Sisters is to be considered a top priority for the bishops.

5. The Primacy of St. Peter i.e., the Holy Father, was acknowledged. Bishop Zong said that the Pope is our spiritual leader for whom our episcopal conference always prays.

6. There is a better regional balance in the make-up of the new Standing Committee with bishops John Cai Tiyan of Shantou, Yu Chengcai of Haimen and Pius Jin Peixian of Shenyang coming respectively from the south, east and north.

7. The CCBC has more authority to resolve problematic issues, e.g. appointment of personnel or the determination of seminary curricula.

8. The new CCBC will have more prestige when dealing with religious counterparts in other countries.

9. Putting the CCCAC under the CCBC will help the bishops implement their decisions.

10. Priests and bishops with irregular clerical status were encouraged to step down.

Monsignor Gabriel Ly Chen, president of Fu Jen Catholic University in Taiwan, said that the new episcopal structure makes him feel that the Church in the mainland is governed by a more genuine and acceptable Church body. But this development, he added, would be merely "new wine in old wineskins" if the Church were to remain under the control of the Chinese government. Catholics have long been unhappy about the control of the Church by the CCPA.

On the Negative side:

1. The chairman and vice-chairman of the Bishops' Conference were not elected only by the bishops as directed by Canon Law. All representatives both clerical and lay took part. Also Canon Law stipulates that bishops are responsible to the Pope and not to episcopal conferences which are organizations for coordination and communication.

2. Most of the Catholic representatives were elected only after government approval.

3. The election process at the meeting was done by a show of hands during which each representative indicated his approval, disapproval or abstention. There were some unpleasant consequences for some of those who voted negative or abstained.

4. The wording of Articles 2 and 9 of the Constitution could allow the Bishops' Conference or the Standing Committee to restrict the local ordinary in the exercise of his proper jurisdiction.

5. The relationship between the Bishops' Conference and the Patriotic Association is stated as one of cooperation, but there is still lack of clarity about how they are to function and relate to one another.

6. There are many practical problems in the implementation of the use of Chinese in the liturgy, e.g. what calendar is to be used.

While the Fifth National Catholic Representatives' Congress does hold out some hope, the basic position and relationship between the Church and government remains unchanged. At the moment the Church is in a period of "fang" according to the "shou-fang" theory as it enjoys a little more freedom and openness, but as we have seen this can change very quickly.

Chinese officials are still paranoid about any type of internal dissent, dialogue or challenge of the basic tenets and policies of Communism. Questions of human rights, democracy and freedom for them are not academic questions. I believe there are a few dedicated Communists who believe in Communism's ability to help the people achieve a better life. Democracy, freedom and the implementation of the UN Bill of Human Rights, however, means the end of Communism and a relatively comfortable way of life for 50 million members of the Communist Party. Top officials and local cadres are adamant about the preservation of the Communist system. They have seen what has happened in the USSR and in Eastern Europe and are concerned. The collapse of Communism means the ouster of fellow travelers and a disruption of power, prestige, privilege and the life style for many--perhaps even civil war. The success of "People Power" in Russia and Europe has sent waves of panic into the leaders of the Party sending them scurrying to secure the Party on all fronts including religion.

They fear radicals, students, scholars and even workers--any group which can organize, speak out or challenge them. Included in this category is the Church. Of itself, the Church in China is relatively small, even with a

possible 10 million believers, but it is a dedicated group with principles and ideals and is closely related to the international body of Christians around the world. It also accepts and pays allegiance to the authority of the Holy Father. The government does not want to alienate the Church, but it also knows that it will never be an ally.

### **Internal Divisions**

While the Church is made up of truly dedicated people, unfortunately it does not exist without serious divisive elements. The underground Church is at odds with the open Church, there is wrangling among some bishops, and there is even division within the underground Church itself. In some places there are two or more bishops of the same area all with different claims to legitimacy. Everyone suffers in a situation like this and the true enemies of the Church rejoice. It is the old principle of divide and conquer.

The rupture between the underground or clandestine Church and the open Church is deep and it is not the Communists who are to blame, but the Churches themselves. They often attack each other, do not talk to one another and spread rumors. The open Church accuses the clandestine Church of not understanding their motivation which, they say, is to provide services for Catholics and to assure them of the Sacraments. They see no problem between an exterior submission to authority and an interior fidelity to Rome. The clandestine Church, on the other hand, sees any kind of accommodation as a devaluation of the faith. Concerned about the unity of the Church, they fear a change in faith and doctrine if the link between the Church and Rome is broken. They have gone so far as to forbid Catholics from attending Mass or receiving the Sacraments in an open Church under pain of sin. Some have even threatened bishops of the open Church with excommunication.

In some areas like Hebei Province the relations are most antagonistic and counter-measures by the government are most severe. In other parts of the country the relationship between the open and the clandestine Church is more friendly and the dividing lines between the two groups more blurred. In the last couple of years there has been more

information available about the clandestine Church. In many places they seem to have gained in strength and self-confidence and have become more militant and intolerant. In some places they have set up seminaries and novitiates for religious and in 1989 even established an episcopal conference of underground bishops. Unfortunately the formation and experience of some of the leaders of the underground Church is often deficient which leads to poor judgments, misunderstandings and conflict.

This disunity puts Rome in a very difficult position. To back any one side exclusively serves only to deepen the rift and complicate efforts at reconciliation. To back the underground Church would mean the recognition of a fragmented group while at the same time alienating the open Church and making negotiations between Rome and Beijing impossible. To back the open Church would abandon the group which has adamantly protested its loyalty to Rome and would be seen as bowing to the demands of Beijing.

What does the future hold in this conflictual situation? Fr. Charbonnier in a recent issue of *Eglises D'Asie*, the newsletter of the Paris Foreign Missionary Society, says, "Reconciliation can only come about on the basis of a magnanimous charity lived out in mutual trust and openness. The spiritual resources capable of overcoming the present difficulties are already present among the Catholics of China. Whether they are patriotic or clandestine all have a great devotion to Mary, Mother of the Church and Queen of China. The Mother of the Redeemer will know how to bring her dispersed children together again."

### **Moral Challenges**

What does the Church have to offer to the Chinese people at this time in their history? In a recent article in the *South China Morning Post*, Beijing Correspondent Edward Paley, commented on the celebration of Christmas in China. Yuletide merrymaking has begun to spill over into the Chinese mainstream, he said as students send cards, shops and restaurants put on elaborate displays and some young people declare an unofficial day off from work. Although China's interest in Christmas is growing dramatically there is little

indication it has to do with the spiritual meaning of the holiday. The commercialization hardly poses a spiritual crisis since Christ is barely known in China. Many believe that the appeal of Christmas is merely an indication that Chinese society suffers from a more serious ailment--a lack of anything to believe in.

The great fear now, even of government propagandists is that China's "Crisis of Faith" leaves people with no moral framework by which to judge right and wrong. Many older Chinese still believe in the traditions of Buddhism and Confucianism and some middle aged people still cling to Marxism and Communism as a meaningful ideology. But today's young people have written off Communism as a viable belief system, and have found nothing to take its place.

Professor Zhou He, in his talk to this group in 1989 said that China today is experiencing the greatest moral confusion in its history. Challenges are present in all areas of moral concern: in politics, in the work place, in the family and in religion. He goes on to show how the lack of political integrity by the leadership, rampant corruption, lack of ideological beliefs, the disintegration of the family and commercialism have led to frustration, disillusionment, the awareness of a spiritual void and moral confusion.

Another author from Taiwan, Professor Bo Yang, in *The Ugly Chinaman*, the third most popular book in China, said, "The deterioration in morality may not be the deepest crisis. The real crisis is the fact that Chinese culture has so far been unable to find from within itself an answer to the moral challenges of modernization." He alleges that the Chinese culture itself has some inherent characteristics or elements which makes it difficult for China to adapt to the modern world.

Materialistic self-interest is the guiding principle of social intercourse today. As Mr. Paley indicated in his article, people still go to Buddhist temples to pray but only for good fortune and Confucius' concepts of relationships, stability and fear of change still help to shape people's general world view, but nowhere do we find a guide for moral behavior. On a recent visit to some churches in China, several of the pastors mentioned that many young people and even intellectuals sensing this void are coming to the Church looking precisely



for that meaning and direction for their lives. One young student said, "We live in a world where people cheat each other and deal hypocritically with each other, so we are seeking deeper values in our lives."

In the years since 1979 Christianity in China has grown and has again begun to take root for the fifth time. With all that is happening in China some think that this may be the "golden age" for Christianity. In the January 15, 1992 issue of *China News Analysis*, the authors indicate that Christianity may become a serious option with an attractive message which the Party lacks. However, they also say that history invites caution and suggest serious questions about whether Christianity is the best and only answer and whether it has ever been sufficiently "contextualized." Some Chinese intellectuals like the philosopher, Liu Xiaofeng of Shenzhen University, have become cultural Christians, meaning they believe in Jesus Christ, but refuse to be baptized into any Christian denomination. Also present opposition by the government will insure that the Church remains a sub-cultural minority at least for the present.

True, the Church in China today remains a small minority and is riddled with divisions from within and without. However, the experience of those of us who have visited with church people in China is one of deep respect and admiration. My personal attitude is one of not judging. Most older Catholics, regardless of whether they are members of the open or underground church, have suffered. Their faith means a great deal to them. As Pope John Paul said in Manila. "We can never fully appreciate the sufferings which they have had to endure." One senses a profound warmth and a subtle dynamism in the Church in China as it struggles to re-establish itself as a vital and viable member of the Body of Christ. Perhaps like its founder it must participate fully in the Paschal Mystery--first to endure suffering and death, but then resurrection and new life. We like the Apostles are being called to be silent witnesses to this mystery.

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