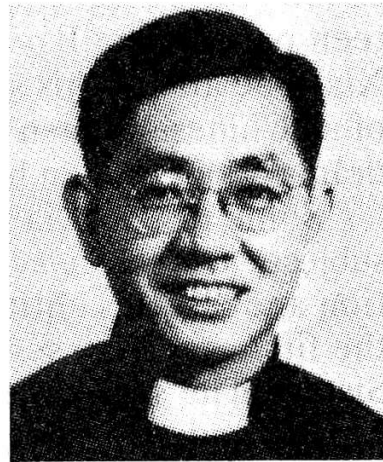


More on the Fundamental Attitude of the Bridge Church

A Commentary on the Essays of Fathers Robert Schreiter and Joseph Zen

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translated by Peter Barry, M.M.*

In February 1991 I published the article *Fundamental Attitude of the Bridge Church* (*Tripod*, No. 61). That article sprang from my own experience of visiting mainland China and from theological reflection. Maintaining a pastoral spirit and a spirit of mission, it suggested an attitude directed towards helping the Church in China for those involved in bridge-church work. In February of last year, Father John



Tong hosted the customary yearly gathering of bridge-church workers at which they share with one another the accomplishments of the past year. This time he asked me to present a paper to stimulate discussion among participants. That paper, *The Church in China: Ecclesiological Impasse? - A Christological and Trinitarian Approach towards a Solution*, was subsequently published in *Tripod* No. 69. Originally written in English, it was translated into Chinese by Anthony Lam. At the time the paper was warmly received by the more than 20 participants at the bridge-church meeting. On the whole the response of the participants was positive, except for two or three who had reservations. One of the latter was a person of authority who thought the most important thing for the Chinese Church at present was the work of reconciliation; theology was not important.

The latter article can really be considered another essay on the fundamental attitude of the Bridge Church since it derives from additional experience of the mainland. Simply put, I am more and more of the feeling that the Church in China has fallen into an impasse. Due to the religious policy

of the Chinese Communists, it is difficult for reconciliation to take place between the official and unofficial churches. This does not come from subjective factors on either side, but it is rather a decision made when faced with the government's religious policy. Regarding those decisions, each has its own foundation. The Communist government likewise, whether it deals with the official or the unofficial Church, finds itself at a dead end. The position of the unofficial Church is obvious, and the official Church has a bottom line beyond which it will not go. Finally, we do not know when or how the impasse between the Chinese Communists and the Vatican will be broken. Based on such personal experience, I attached a very important subtitle to my essay: *A Christological and Trinitarian Approach towards a Solution*.

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I really believe that the Chinese Catholic Church possesses an ecclesiastical centralism which creates an impasse difficult to overcome. For this reason I suggested a Christological and Trinitarian direction for the Chinese Catholic Church, because even though the above mentioned impasse cannot be breached, at least it can be overcome temporarily. I would like to introduce to them modern Christological and Trinitarian trends, so that both sides can communicate and be in communion with each other on a higher level. At that time I sincerely thought that such sentiments could be especially experienced by those visiting lecturers who go to China to teach in the seminaries, or by those bridge-church workers who come in contact with bishops and priests in China. Compared with the 1991 article, the most recent essay on the fundamental attitude of the bridge church contained some new thinking.

I was surprised to discover that the *Impasse* article became a topic of discussion for Fathers Schreiter and Zen at a seminar on the Church in China held in the United States

in January of this year. Father Schreiter delivered a paper entitled *Ecclesiological Challenges for the Sake of Service*, and Father Zen responded to his paper. I myself was not present. Later a participant gave me the speeches to read. After reading them, I was too busy to give them much thought, but I did have the feeling of having been misunderstood. Now the speakers' original paper and response have been published in *Tripod* No. 75. According to what I have heard, the discussion after the talks continued to mention my paper. Some participants even said that it would be better if the author had the chance to explain any misunderstandings about his paper. Therefore, I would like to express a few thoughts at this time. At the same time the English readers of *Tripod* must be confused because Father Zen's response to Father Schreiter is directed only at "an alternative ecclesiology." The remaining subjects brought up by him are like shooting at random, without aiming at a target. The *From the Editor* column in Chinese gives more of an explanation. However, since I was not present when Father Zen gave his paper, I would like to take this opportunity to express my opinion.

I do not have much to say about Father Schreiter's essay, except that I feel that he did not take note of the reasons why I abandoned ecclesiology and sought the path to a solution in Christology and the doctrine of the Trinity. According to my observations, because of the environment in which the Chinese Catholic Church exists and because of the difficulties she faces, any discussion in the field of ecclesiology will naturally move in the direction of the practical problems within the Church and once again face an impasse with no means of resolution. Father Schreiter introduces different models of ecclesiology for the Chinese Catholic Church. Although I appreciate his achievements in the field of ecclesiology, I am not very optimistic that the models Father Schreiter presents will help to break the impasse. Secondly, the *Impasse* article was written for the bridge church, whereas Father Schreiter's paper is directly concerned with the Church in China.

As for Father Zen's paper, it should be read in conjunction with my *Fundamental Attitude of the Bridge Church*. From this, one can see that my explanation of the religious situation in China, my knowledge of the Chinese Catholic

Church and my respect for the suffering Church, even my support for the rebuilding of churches, is practically the same as Father Zen's. The problem now is: How the bridge church can help the mainland Church to face the impasse created by the religious policy of the Chinese communists and the severed relations between China and the Vatican? As I have stated above, the bridge church cannot do so. For this reason the so-called *Ecclesiological Impasse* article has a definite range of discussion, and I have pointed this out very clearly in the conclusion of the article. Most likely because the first part of my *Impasse* article was written in somewhat sweeping terms, Father Zen thought that I was making a general application to everything in the Chinese Catholic Church. For this reason he pointed out different things in church life which do not belong to the category of impasse as I describe it, things like devotions, observance of church laws, courage, a spirit of service and liturgical ceremonies. According to Father Zen, these things show that, not only is the church not at an impasse, but it is quite active. Actually, when I say that the Chinese Church has sunken into a so-called impasse, this does not necessarily apply to church life. What I mean is that the Chinese Church is in a situation of ecclesiastical centralism from which she cannot extricate herself, and because she is in this impasse, it is difficult for her to reform and to

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become more open. The purpose of the *Impasse* article was to suggest Christology and Trinitarian theology as a direction in which to go, in order to temporarily overcome the impasse and to lead to communication and communion at a higher level. Therefore, I was already beginning to think of another essay on the fundamentals of the bridge-church. Unfortunately neither Father Zen nor Father Schreiter paid attention to my reason for suggesting the path of Christology and Trinitarian theology. My *Impasse* article clearly explained the subject.

Therefore, the question of the levels of truth can only be

discussed within the limits of this topic. Faced with the Church's impasse, I proposed a higher level of truth. Father Zen has obviously come up with his own article, and he has reached conclusions different from mine. After Vatican Council II, ecclesiology has been a hot topic in which opposing sides have been locked in battle. However, most knowledgeable people have now moved in the direction of Christology. Personally, I think that if the Chinese Catholic Church emphasized Christology and Trinitarian theology more, or more concretely, if she had more experience of the cosmic Christ and of the mystery of the Trinity, then, although the old impasse would most likely still be present, it would definitely indicate a change of direction, from ecclesiastical centralism to openness and reform. This idea has already been expressed in the *Impasse* article. How can such an idea harm the true love, respect and appreciation which the bridge-church has for the Church in China? Although the *Impasse* article does not dare claim to have achieved its purpose, still "to be incarnate" is at the same time "to rise up."

Finally, the part of Father Zen's article called "A Methodology for Serving the Church in China" should be read in conjunction with the five principles listed in my *Fundamental Attitude of the Bridge Church* (Tripod, No. 61, pp. 14-17).

