

The Challenge Facing the Chinese Catholic Church

*by a Priest from Northern China
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Vocations to the priesthood and religious life are flourishing on the China mainland. Recent estimates point to over 1,000 young men now studying for the priesthood on the major seminary level and over 2,000 young women preparing for entry into religious life. However, most of the priests and Sisters engaged in the training of these candidates are of advanced age. While their dedication is unquestioned and their willingness to soldier on long after reaching the age of retirement is commendable, advanced years do bring with them serious physical and mental drawbacks. It is also a fact that the philosophical and theological background of most of these administrators and instructors date back to the time before Vatican II. The shift in ecclesiological thinking since Vatican II has been dramatic and is most apparent to those closely involved in formation programmes in both seminaries and convents. They know only too well how much improvement needs to be made in teaching methodology and applying new administrative techniques, as well as the need for a general renewal in all areas governing spirituality and religious life. There is also general agreement that a change of climate within formation institutions is long overdue. Something new and challenging is called for if only to add life and zest to spiritual formation. The old reliance on an atmosphere of severe austerity that lumped together unquestioning obedience, blind conformity and poor food just doesn't seem adequate to fulfill present needs. Several seminaries, in an effort to solve the problem of aging staff, hold on to their more talented students after ordination. While their youthfulness does give them the advantage of being able to take on more teaching responsibilities, their intellectual development is limited by the lack of time and opportunity to devote to further study. Most seminaries do not have on-going education programmes that allow younger faculty members to take study-leaves. Unfortunately, many seminary administrators are of the old school and see only the

task at hand. They are more adept at assigning jobs than they are at the more important task of cultivating the skills and talents of their young faculty members. While there does exist in the open Church a certain conformity to traditional formation education which serves as a discipline within the training system, the preparation of students for priesthood in the underground Church is more problematic. Here the disciple/master model is followed. This means that a young man is ordained after spending several months or years with an older priest. Needless to say, this training method causes a number of problems that have proved to be quite difficult to resolve.

If institutions are to grow and prosper, their administrators must spend much time and effort on the education and formation of their most gifted members. The Church is no exception to this rule. The new generation of clergy, those recently ordained and those to be ordained in the immediate future, will have an enormous influence on the shaping of the Chinese church of the future. How seminarians are to be nourished and cultivated both intellectually and spiritually is then of most grave concern to us in the present. Indeed, it is perhaps the most important of the many challenges facing the Church in China at the present time.

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At the time of the Second Vatican Council, the Catholics of China were in the throes of the disastrous Cultural Revolution. As a result they heard little about its deliberations and even less about the dramatic and radical changes which it brought about in the Church itself. When economic reform came to China in the early 1980's and China became more receptive to the outside world, the enormity of the changes made at the Council struck the church in China like a sudden and unexpected tidal wave. While most prelates, priests and laity were ready to accept the new church teachings, they were shocked to find them seemingly at odds with some of their own most cherished traditional beliefs... beliefs, we might add, that they had recently suffered so much to uphold and held on to only at a great price. The

Church in China still needs time to digest the teachings and new directions of Vatican II. Although this is not a matter of some urgency, excessive zeal by a few in implementing the changes can do much harm to the genuine fervour of the many. It could even result in a crisis of faith itself. One need only look at the resistance of many Catholics to the liturgical reforms, especially in the countryside, to see the need for patience and prudence. This, then, is the second major challenge confronting the Church in China, how to bring the Church here into conformity with the changes that have been made over a gradual period in the universal church.

In recent years, not a few visitors have asked us the question: "Just how many Roman Catholic churches are there in China anyway?" The answer is quite simple: "Only one." This is not to minimize the problems and differences that do exist between the so-called official and underground churches. The division, however, has not come about as a result of doctrinal differences but rather from political and historical factors. The struggle between the two is not one of teaching but rather of certain factions within the Church, and the factional fighting has all too often led to greater friction and the loss of amity. There have been times when some members of both parties actually have become so antagonistic towards each other that they have resorted to vicious slandering and even physical violence. Such behaviour only serves to do harm to the image of the Church at large and to create an even greater distance between religious leaders and the laity. But while the wounds do run deep, I myself feel this problem is only temporary. An improvement in Sino-Vatican relations coupled with an increase of knowledge among ordinary Catholics concerning the political and historical roots of the problem will, in the long run, do much to dissipate anger, clear up misunderstandings and bring about mutual accord and a new spirit of harmony.

It should be noted that the new generation of priests and laity are not part of this rift between the official and underground church. This is because, unlike their parents, they have no personal history of the split, nor did they share in the suffering and animosity that marked the division. For them, it is enough now to have a building in which to worship and the ready availability of the Sacraments. On the other hand, it is among the younger priests that we find the demand for unity

more pressing and urgent. It is also true that there is in many places a growing spirit of cooperation, now more so than in the past, between elements in both factions, especially when it comes to sharing pastoral responsibilities and the work of evangelization. This cooperative spirit has been heard to extend even to the joint administration of certain seminaries.

It must be emphasized that there is no desire on the part of the Chinese Church to make an issue out of its present condition of separation from the Vatican. The majority consider themselves to be true members of the Roman Catholic Church, believing it to be the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church established by Jesus Himself. Between the Church in China and the Vatican there still remains certain problems that have to do with the selection and consecration of bishops. Discussions on this issue have not yet been satisfactorily resolved. The present situation has indeed created an enormous problem in the minds and consciences of Chinese bishops and lay people alike. However, this problem, too, must be seen as temporary. Just as the will to establish friendly relations, dispel discord and achieve lasting peace and harmony continues to find acceptance and approval among the nations, so too will the obstacles that separate China and other countries continue to lessen. How much more, then, will the comparatively minor misunderstandings and estrangements between China and the Vatican and between the official and underground churches dissipate and disappear?

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May I offer at this time a word of counsel to foreign friends who have made and continue to make in print critical remarks about the current situation of the Church in China? When with calm and detached prose you discuss the highly complex and volatile situation in China, when you pick one side over against the other and question its authenticity, when you offer assessments that can only be described as rude and unmannered, when you offer for our enlightenment opinions and prerogatives fashioned in Rome, all this has a negative effect on people not only inside but also outside China and can do us incalculable harm. But perhaps you already know the hornets' nest stirred up among a large number of Catholics who have an incomplete

knowledge of the truth of the situation. How many respected Church leaders have been attacked and insulted in public, and how many Catholics now enter certain churches with uneasy consciences, if they enter at all, to receive the sacraments? And all this is a result of high sounding but unrealistic and impractical assertions by a few privileged outsiders who are only uninvolved bystanders. Sympathy and good intentions when misguided can lead to reprehensible action which is inappropriate and unhelpful to say the least. Some people feel that in the past two years the support of foreigners for one side of the Church or the other has resulted in widening the split and has served only to add another obstacle in the way towards Church unity. All lament this unfortunate intervention. While the matter between the government approved and the underground churches has not yet reached "Rites Controversy" proportions, nevertheless, the results could be quite similar. What the Church in China needs at this stage is a concern that is reasonable and rational and a reconciliation that is healing and long-lasting.

While China today offers unique opportunities for the spread of the Gospel, there are many difficulties as well. According to government figures, over 100 dioceses here are manned by less than 60 bishops and 1,000 priests most of whom are elderly.¹ The pastoral work alone is too demanding for so few. Just administering the sacraments takes up all of a priest's time and energy. He has little left over for the work of evangelization. While vocations are on the increase, the shortage of priests remains serious. Organizing and forming the laity to assume more and more direct responsibility for both evangelization and pastoral work in the parishes is at the top of the agenda of every parish priest. You might ask, then, of what consequence are 4,000,000 Catholics in a population of over a billion?² My answer is that they sparkle like stars in a darkened sky, giving light and bearing witness to the truth for all to see.

People are astonished by the great progress made by China in the short time that the economic and political reforms have been in effect. So also can this be said for the Church of China. We look forward one day in the future to seeing the door opened even wider for China to accept foreign missionaries. We know that the dream of once again serving God and the people of China by spreading the Gospel of Christ here remains in the hearts of the religious orders and still waits to be realized. When that time comes, I do hope and pray that the missionaries

from the West will come in the spirit of Matteo Ricci and others like him who always held the Chinese people and their culture in high respect. Certainly to be avoided is the example of those who came in the wake of the Opium Wars with the spirit of imperialism and whose arrogance caused the people to label the Christian Church a *religion of foreigners*.

The challenge to be faced now and in the future is for all of us to work together to bring about the inculturation of the truth of Christ in China that the Chinese people may receive the grace of the Gospel at an early time and become a mighty host joining the Christians of the world as they move steadily and surely towards eternal life.

Notes

1. Editor's note: There are at present 123 dioceses, 71 bishops in the Open church and more than 1200 priests of whom 600 are over 80 years of age.
2. Editor's note: The Chinese government gives four million as the official number of Catholics in China. The actual number is estimated at somewhere between eight and ten million.

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