

Book Review

The Catholic Church in Modern China, Perspectives

Edited by Edmund Tang and John Paul Wiest

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Reviewed by Peter Barry, M.M.

News item No. 1: In September 1993 Cardinal Roger Etchagaray visited Beijing at the invitation of the Chinese Ministry of Sport to attend China's national games. Since then rumors have abounded about imminent negotiations between China and the Vatican to establish diplomatic relations. News item No. 2: three "underground" Chinese bishops in Hebei Province were recently arrested: Han Dingxiang of Handan Diocese on November 18, 1993, Jia Zhiguo of Zhengding Diocese on January 7, 1994, and Su Zhiming of Baoding Diocese on January 20, 1994. A number of "underground" priests from Hebei and Fujian were also recently detained. (Some of these have since been released.)

What is the uninitiated concerned Catholic to make of these two apparently mutually opposed news items? Where can one find an explanation of the present situation of the Catholic Church in China? As my late father used to say about baseball, "You can't tell the players without a scorecard." Luckily in the case of the Church in China, we have a "scorecard" in the Jean-Paul Wiest and Edmond Tang co-edited book *The Catholic Church in Modern China, Perspectives*.

In his introduction, co-editor Wiest states that the purpose of the book is to fill the need for a treatise explaining the present situation of the Catholic Church in China. Since such a task was considered too daunting for any one author to produce, the editors decided on the format of individual articles treating different aspects of the church.

Except for two original essays each by the editors, the book gathers together twenty-one articles about the Catholic Church in China already published in the late 1980's or early 1990's. The authors of the articles are both Chinese and Western. The Chinese live both inside and outside of China, while the Westerners have been involved in Church-in-China "bridge-building" work for many years. They are clergy, religious and lay,

trained in theology, Sacred Scripture, church history or canon law.

Regarding the question of names for the different divisions of the church, the editors make no decision themselves. They merely point out that the authors of the essays variously refer to the unregistered churches as "underground," "clandestine," or "secret," and to the government recognized ones as "government-approved," "public," "open," or "official."

Since each contributor from his/her own expertise presents an unique analysis, and no single one presents the complete picture, the subtitle *Perspectives* is quite accurate. And by giving a voice to both sides in the "underground" vs. "official" church debate, the book is an attempt, say the editors, to present a balanced picture of the situation.

Like "all of Gaul," the book is divided into three parts: a historical background to the present situation, a section in which Chinese church leaders of both the "open" and "underground" communities speak for themselves, and a final section called, "Looking Toward the Future," in which authors express their hopes and aspirations for the future development of the Church.

In the lead article of Part One and of the whole book, Father John Tong, vicar-general of the Catholic Diocese of Hong Kong and director of Holy Spirit Study Centre there, presents a brief history of the Catholic Church in China from 1949 to 1990. This is followed by "The Church into the 1990's" by co-editor Edmond Tang, director of the China Study Project of the Council of Churches of Britain and Ireland. Mr. Tang discusses at some length the relationship between the official Chinese Bishops' Conference (CBC) and the Catholic Patriotic Association (CPA). Despite initial rumors that the CPA would become subordinate to the Bishops' Conference, Mr. Tang notes, a decision taken at a September 1992 meeting of representatives of the "open" Catholic Church placed both organizations on an equal footing.

Next Julia Ching, professor of religious studies, philosophy and East Asian studies at the University of Toronto, discusses the question of religious freedom in China. This is followed by a carefully nuanced presentation of the origin, stance and present development of the "underground" community of Chinese Catholics by Fr. Jean Charbonnier, MEP, until recently director of China Catholic Communication in Singapore.

Sister Maria Goretti Lau, dean of theology in Hong Kong's Holy Spirit Seminary College of Theology and Philosophy, follows with a discussion of formation programs for seminarians and Sister-novices in present day China. Next, Fr. Geoffrey King, director of the East Asian Pastoral Institute in Manila, in an essay entitled "A Schismatic Church? - A Canonical Evaluation," gives a benign interpretation of the canons regarding excommunication in the case of bishops ordained in the 1950's without papal approval, citing the use of excessive force.

In Part II, Chinese bishops and priests of both "open" and "underground" churches speak for themselves. Here a June, 1990 speech given by open-church Bishop Aloysius Jin Luxian of Shanghai to members of the Catholic Patriotic Association of that city is reproduced. However, in the next article open-church Bishop Philippe Ma Ji of the Pingliang Diocese of Gansu Province expresses disgust with the behaviour of some clerical leaders of the Patriotic Association because they have gotten married and have denied the primacy of the Pope. And since the CPA was a product of anti-imperialist times, Bishop Ma asks is there a need for such an organization today when imperialism has been done away with?

Next it is the turn of the underground clergy to speak up. In an article entitled, "My Vision of the Patriotic Association", an underground bishop (who prefers to remain anonymous) lists 22 reasons why Catholics should not belong to the CPA, and why foreign visitors should not have any contact with this organization. This is followed by the famous Thirteen Points issued by underground Bishop Joseph Fan Xueyan of Baoding in 1988. In sum, the 13 points forbid Catholics from participating in the Masses and receiving the sacraments of open church priests. Next an anonymous priest from the open church criticizes the activities of so-called "little black priests" from the underground who allegedly create divisions by going around denouncing the bishops and priests of the open church.

In the final section, "Looking Toward the Future," co-editor Jean-Paul Wiest encourages foreign missionaries to learn from the mistakes of the past. Fr. Jeroom Heyndrickx, CICM, director of the Ferdinand Verbiest Foundation and the China-Europe Institute at Louvain University in Belgium, expresses the hope that open and underground churches will become reconciled with each other; and Fr. Aloysius B. Chang, professor of theol-

ogy at Fujen Catholic University in Taiwan, expounds on "The Fundamental Attitude of the Bridge Church." Other authors, like Thomas Gahan, Edward Malatesta, Hans Waldenfels, Joseph Yao Tianmin and Luke Tsui, all add insightful commentaries which fill out this kaleidoscopic picture of the Chinese church.

If one could find fault with *Perspectives* it would be that it is perhaps too "ecclesiastical." Most of the essays chosen for inclusion seem to highlight church matters only: the history of the church in China, disputes between open and underground churches, hopes for eventual reconciliation between the two, etc. Surprisingly not much is found on government and Communist Party policy regarding religion. One would expect something on this because government policy has a great effect on the present situation of the Church in China. There at least could have been some analysis of the three major documents on religious policy issued in recent years by Party Central: Document 19 of March 1982 entitled "The Basic Viewpoint and Policy on the Religious Question During Our Country's Socialist Period," Document 3 of February 1989 called "On Stepping Up Control over the Catholic Church to Meet the New Situation," and Document 6 of February 1991 entitled "On Some Problems Concerning Further Improvement in Religious Work."

For it seems to me that the government and Party's religious policy is one of the root causes of the division between "open" and "underground" communities in the Chinese Catholic Church. Open-church adherents feel they can work within the confines of the official religious policy, giving external assent to Party directives, while maintaining internal assent to universal church doctrine, all for the sake of being allowed to function as a worshipping Christian community. The members of the "underground" church, on the other hand, cannot go along with the official policy because they consider it as unwarranted interference by the government in an area in which the government has no competence. And they cannot become reconciled to an "independent" church because they consider this to be a violation of the integrity of the faith; namely, in the primacy of the Pope.

What is called for, in my opinion, is a drastic overhaul of the present religious policy, and the granting of even greater religious freedom. If this happened, then an atmosphere might

be produced in which the two sides of the Chinese Catholic Church could iron out their differences.

One also gets the impression that certain essays were last minute additions to *Perspectives*, and insufficient time was given to proofreading. This is especially true of the essay "My Vision of the Patriotic Association." Some awkward English vocabulary appears in this essay because it was most likely translated from Chinese into English by non-native English speakers. For instance, one reads of Catholics' "adhesion" to the Pope, where "adherence" would be better. The question is asked on page 129: "Have they examined the situation in death?" when surely "in depth" is meant. And even the very title of this essay should certainly read "My View" instead of "My Vision of the Patriotic Association".

However, in spite of the abovementioned shortcomings, in this day of fluctuating news about the church emanating from China, *The Catholic Church in Modern China, Perspectives* is recommended reading for the uninitiated reader who wants to find out more about the present situation of that Church.
