

## CHINA'S MODERNIZATION, THE CHURCH AND THE SPIRIT OF VATICAN II

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Reason, technology and trust in the potential for unlimited human development are three basic pillars of Western modernization. These three deal with the experiential world. The methodology used in the process of Western modernization is based on experimentation. It rationalizes, regulates and systematizes and deals entirely with the tangible, physical world. Religious faith, on the other hand, deals with the metaphysical and the sacred world of spirit, and human and material reality. "Secular" and "Sacred" define two different aspects but these should not contradict each other.

In its thrust towards modernization, China is rejecting its former system of strict central planning in favor of a free market economy and emphasizing economic development. For more than a decade now, China's economic growth has

brought about very rapid changes to society. As the living standards of the people improved, however, some serious social problems also came to light: the disparity of wealth between the urban and rural areas, the weakening of moral values and the lack of peace in people's hearts. These are only some of China's present social problems. The Church, living in society, cannot but be affected by this situation. How, then, should she confront these challenges during this period of China's modernization? I propose to deal with this question from three aspects.

## Religion and Modernization

Theoretically, we see that the basic ideas which underlie modernization and religious faith converge on two different levels which must be kept distinct to avoid confusion. That is, the spiritual and the rational have their own distinctive ways of gaining knowledge and their own ways of operating. Each affirms truth in its own way and each seeks results but on different planes. Yet, since the person is, in reality, a totality, religion and modernization do influence each other. On the one hand, religion itself can undergo a modernization process. And this process can actually take place on two levels. Faith, the core of religion, is expressed in community life, doctrine, liturgy, and operating structures. For example, religious modernization requires at least the use of modern

languages in teaching, modern forms for the liturgy, and a more democratic administration. This is true for all other areas of religion also. Of course, faith, being the very essence of religious life, cannot be eradicated. Its eradication would mean absolute secularization—a denial of all spiritual values.

Modernization can also be influenced by religion. This influence has often been seen as an obstacle to modernization, and history records many such examples. Because faith belongs to the spiritual realm, it cannot itself directly undertake the work of modernization. Also, religious faiths differ widely from each other and, consequently, their approach to the question of modernization also differs. However, faith can inspire believers to rely on their intellectual abilities and, by means of science and technology, take part in the modernization process. This is certainly what the Chinese Communist Party hopes for. Of course, it has its own motivation for implementing its policy of modernization.

## The Church and Modernization

Setting aside a general historical approach, I shall limit myself to what the Second Vatican Council has said. In Vatican II the Church sought to reform itself. It set itself on a two-fold course: to return to its sources, Christ and Scriptures and to respond to the needs of the modern age. How the Church chose to achieve its twofold goal is clear from the position

taken in the *Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*. From its opening words, “the joys and the hopes..of the men of this age...”, the Constitution positively affirms the development and progress that comes through modernization, but it also uncovers a deep yearning for true faith among people today.

*Gaudium et Spes* or *The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World* is Vatican II’s longest document. A detailed discussion of its contents is impossible in this short essay, but I wish to point out that much of its content emphasizes progress and development. Most of the first part of this document is set against the background of modernization. It defines human nature from the Christian perspective, using terminology adapted to people in today’s world. It points out that men and women are the image of God and in this lies their dignity, the embodiment of their rights—spiritual and material. It is the spirit that draws people to seek the true, the good and the beautiful and that guides their lives according to ethical norms. People are both individuals and social beings. They belong to families and society and have responsibilities towards both. Men and women also possess both spiritual and material capabilities. Activities proceeding from these capabilities must be orderly—in accord with the will of their Creator.

The first section of *The Church in the Modern World* is

based on Christian faith, which understands its destiny in terms of following Jesus through the mystery of his death and resurrection.

In summary we can say that the first section of this document shows how the Church upholds its faith while meeting the challenge which modernization presents.

The second part of *The Church in the Modern World* proceeds in orderly sequence through those areas of human life affected by modernization: marriage and family, culture, society, the economy, government, peace and international organizations. The overall pattern taken by Vatican II in addressing each of these areas is as follows: (1) It acknowledges the phenomenon of modernization in each area, affirming it according to the Christian view of human nature; (2) It points out, in line with the mystery of human existence, excesses made by modernization in each area, i.e., by materialism, individualism, atheism, etc. The excesses emanating from these various ideologies all violate human dignity; (3) It expresses its own concern.

Let us take economic development as an example: (1) Modern economics shows the following positive characteristics: ever increasing control over the natural world, mutual interdependence of the human family, a constant improvement in methods of production and in service industries, and in meeting human needs. (2) Negative results

emanating from the modernization process are: people enslaved to the economy; the constant worsening of social problems and the gap created between the rich and poor to the point where the life and labor of the masses do not conform to their dignity. (3) The Church appeals for a balanced industrial development, where profits and increased output are not the sole major concerns, but serving people and satisfying human needs (material, intellectual, moral and spiritual) are given priority. Development is not solely a matter of individuals freely seeking their own advantage without self-restraint, nor is it a matter of being under the total control of a government interested solely in the collectivity while disregarding the individual.

Above, I have pointed out the norms which Vatican II applies to the process of economic modernization. In other areas as well, the Council states its principles using the same norms. In fact, it goes even further saying that the Church itself has derived many benefits from the process of modernization.

The importance of *The Church in the Modern World* is that it reminds believers of their duties to the modern world without ever mentioning the problem of secularization; it would seem that the document does not regard modernization as necessarily leading to secularism or to a loss of faith. On the contrary, the Constitution goes so far as to view modernization as salutary.

## The Chinese Church in the Process of Modernization

Many people have addressed China's modernization process. Although the prosperity caused by the process of modernization has not reached all areas of the country, still there is no area that has not felt its effects, at least indirectly. The Chinese Church also finds itself in the midst of this process and is affected by it in some degree. What role should it play? Following the teaching of *The Church in the Modern World*, I would like to offer a few suggestions to the Chinese Church based on my own reflections. The Catholic Church in China, of course, is only a "little flock", and Paul's words in his first letter to the Corinthians reflect its situation: "From the human point of view few of you were wise or powerful or of high social standing." (1 Cor. 1:26). In other words, not many Catholics in China today can meet the standards underlying modernization's three basic concepts: reason, science and technology, and the unlimited trust in the potential for human development. Nevertheless, we propose the following for the Church's consideration.

1. Since *The Church in the Modern World* is the document of Vatican II which addresses the question of modernization, the Chinese Church, especially its leaders and seminarians, must read it with great care, strive to penetrate its meaning and discover its message for China's modernization. By doing so they will obtain an accurate

understanding of the positive and negative elements of modernization that touch every sphere of Chinese society, especially the economic sphere.

2. The Chinese Church is itself caught up in the process of modernization. Adopting only modernization's rightful values, the Church should march with the times and seek to dialogue with its contemporaries. In renewing itself the Church should meet the diverse circumstances of each locality. At the same time it should preserve and spread the faith and, using language its contemporaries can understand, point to its own teaching on human dignity and other matters associated with human values.

3. The modern world impinges upon the lives of Chinese Catholics in every aspect and in all their business and professional dealings. Therefore, high priority should be given to their formation in the faith. Traditional catechesis is insufficient to meet present needs. While new catechetical books are waiting to be printed and circulated, the most realistic thing to do is use other means, such as homilies, etc. to explain the key points of *The Church in the Modern World*.

4. The Church should encourage Catholics to enter into secular society and participate in the country's modernization. They should know that the Church accepts the pressing need for modernization. At the same time Catholics should



be forewarned about the dangers of a purely materialist secularism. With this preparation they will be able to witness their faith within the process of modernization, and even be able to critique it constructively, thus fulfilling the Church's prophetic role in the world.

5. Amid the pressing demands brought about by the modernization of the economy, Church leaders should study Church administration and make good use of capital to be self-supporting. Yet they should never lose sight of the Gospel spirit. For the Church is always being tempted by "worries about this life, love of riches, and all other kinds of desires which crowd in" (Mark 4:19).

6. While China is undergoing its modernization process, the Church cannot just "light a lamp...put it under a bushel." "You are the salt of the earth, but if salt loses its flavor, what can it be salted with?" (Matt. 5:15,13) During the country's complete economic reconstruction, should not the Church speak from her heart and show her concern for its needs? Certainly this is in line with her prophetic role!

We are not unaware of the challenge presently facing the Chinese Church. However, as a follower of the Lord, the Church in China surely has a role to play in China's modernization process!

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