

# THE CHURCH IN MODERN CHINA

*by René Gilbert*

## Introduction

China lay prostrate after the Cultural Revolution. After the arrest of the Gang of Four in October, 1976, the country was re-set on its modernization program first proposed by Zhou Enlai in 1965 who called upon China to modernize its agriculture, industry, national defense and science and technology (education being added later) by the end of the century. Any China observer today can only marvel at the pace of progress and development, at least in major urban areas and surrounding territories. Many see the present situation as quite volatile, subject to changes not all of which necessarily bode well for the future. Be that as it may, the purpose of this short article is not to describe the rapid modernization of China under a Marxist regime with Chinese characteristics. Our interest lies in how the Catholic Church,

living in modern China and facing such rapid change, can meet the challenges of this situation.

### Confronting the Challenge of Change

According to some estimates the Catholic population in China is somewhere between nine to ten million and the actual number may be higher. That is about 0.08 percent of the total population. In any case it is an extremely small minority. It is also a community that has, since the fifties, been under constant pressure and heavy government control. During the years of the Cultural Revolution the Church seemingly disappeared altogether. At least this is what observers outside mainland China thought. Since the late seventies and early eighties the Church has been much preoccupied with reestablishing its presence, regaining or rebuilding its churches, establishing seminaries and convents, and undertaking social works in many areas in order to meet the needs of the local populace. In the past 10 years it has made remarkable progress.

It is also faced with serious internal problems. Catholics, both clergy and laity, are divided over the question of “cooperation” with the officially recognized church. Many consider those who “choose” to cooperate to be mere tools of the government since they are under the authority of the patriotic associations. It is well known that these associations

are the means the government uses to exercise its control over religious bodies in China. Bishops are consecrated without approval of the Holy See. Furthermore, the association constantly insists on its autonomy and independence from all outside control, considering any such control as interference in China's internal affairs. Others, in order to nurture the life of the Church, assure its development and carry out its mission to evangelize the huge population that is mainland China, choose to operate under very hostile and adverse conditions. Recriminations between the two groups in some places can be very bitter and cause great pain and scandal. One Catholic lady complains that she and her family are confused and do not know what to do or whom to follow.

The matter is very complex and requires a great deal of understanding. Besides the church's problems, which are more or less directly related to China's recent history, the church communities face other challenges and difficulties. Yet there are many signs of hope, signs of the Spirit's presence in the Chinese Church. The aging clergy—there are few middle aged priests and Sisters in China, a sign of the troubled years—is now gradually being replaced by newly ordained priests. Many young people are asking to become priests and Sisters, and by necessity, many lay people are coming forth to serve. The liturgy is being renewed. This is one of



several areas where the decrees of Vatican II are being implemented.

Many wonderful things can be said about the Church in China, but perhaps this is time to ask: does the Church have a role to play in modern China? Must she accept unquestioningly and completely the government's demand that all citizens and all institutions within the country work for China's modernization? In case of conflict, must the rights of the state always take precedence? Can the church afford to withdraw into a ghetto solely concerned with her own needs and problems? Is she justified in instructing only those who come to her doors seeking faith?

### China's Concept of Patriotism

The Party insists on the loyalty of all its citizens and limits the definition of patriotism to this loyalty which is owed solely to the Party and to its directives. How do Christians respond to this definition? How do they view the modern world and the particular modern world now evolving in China? It has been said that the Church is *in* the world, but not *of* it. The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World addresses this same problem in a very poignant way:

*The joys and hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men and women of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these too are the joys and hopes, the griefs and*

*anxieties of the followers of Christ. Indeed, nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in their hearts. For theirs is a community composed of men and women. United in Christ, they are led by the Holy Spirit in their journey to the kingdom of their Father and they have welcomed the news of salvation which is meant for everyone. That is why this community realizes that it is truly and intimately linked with all of humanity and its history (Gaudium et Spes, No. 1).*

Patriotism for Christians goes far beyond the Party's definition. To them God has entrusted the task of building up the world. For the Christian all men and women are their pilgrim companions with whom they wish to share their lives and to journey towards their final and true destiny: the new heaven and the new earth which is being created for them. It is this world and how they form it that will serve as the building blocks of the new creation. "By this will all know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (Jn 13:35). Christians cannot yearn for anything more ardently than to serve the men and women of the modern world ever more generously and effectively. Therefore, holding faithfully to the gospel and benefiting from its resources, and united with every man or woman who loves and practices justice, Christians have shouldered a gigantic task demanding fulfillment in this world. Concerning this task they must give a reckoning to Him who will judge every one on the last day (G. S. No.93).

## Models for China Christians

It might be asked how such a small community as the Church on the China mainland, having suffered through a generation of persecution, with few resources, divided, still struggling to hold its own, can really fulfill Vatican II's mandate? History teaches us that this is not the first time that the Christian community, existing in similar if not worse circumstances, has been called upon to bring the Lord's message of hope and joy to a troubled world—even to a world that does not welcome it and persecutes it. Carefully reading the Church's early history, as we find it in the Acts of the Apostles and reflected in the writings of Paul and other apostolic authors, we see small communities, scattered throughout the Roman empire, mostly poor and composed of people with little influence in society, at times divided among themselves, and struggling to hold on to their faith. Today's Christian communities are the proof of their perseverance and success. We are their successors, brothers and sisters moved by the same Spirit.

For one who lives outside China, but who has made many visits and talked and lived with Catholics there, there is a temptation to want to tell them what they should do and even, perhaps, how they should go about doing it—all this in the name of encouragement. Yet I am discovering that our brothers and sisters in China are not afraid to face the reality

of their situation. They are very much concerned not only about their own communities but about their commitment to their country and their fellow citizens. They are proud to be Chinese and glory in their centuries' long cultural tradition. They are far from being unaware of China's present situation. No one is sad about the rapid material progress, that the living standards of people are better than before and that China is much more open today than in previous years. But neither do they deny that major problems exist. With the rush for money, family, societal and moral values are all being sacrificed on a wide scale. Corruption and oppression are painful indicators that China today is forgetting where true values lie. Committed Christians are aware that many of their fellow citizens are living in a moral vacuum, puzzled about the meaning of life and where they, as individuals and as a nation, are headed. They can easily make Laotzu's lament their own:

*If I had any learning of a highway wide and fit, would I lose it  
at each turning? Yet look at people spurning natural use of it!  
See how fine the palaces and see how poor the farms, how bare  
the peasants' granaries while gentry wear embroideries hiding  
sharpened arms,  
And the more they have the more they seize, how can there be  
such men as these who never hunger, never thirst yet eat and  
drink until they burst!*



*There are other brigands, but these are the worst of all the highway's harms (The Way of Life According to Laotzu, 53).*

Yet this situation presents countless opportunities for the small Christian communities in China. The awesome treasure that they hold is a treasure to be shared. Christian communities outside China enter into this sharing process. The communities within China, intimately joined to the entire Catholic body, need each other and offer mutual support. Mutual understanding and the possession of the common faith is the bond that holds them together. St. Paul understood this well when he wrote long ago to the Ephesian Christians: “So then you are no longer strangers and sojourners, but you are fellow citizens with the holy ones and members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the capstone. Through him the whole structure is held together and grows into a temple sacred in the Lord; in him you also are being built together into a dwelling place of God in the Spirit” (Eph 2:19-22).



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