

# THE PROPHETIC ROLE OF THE CHURCH IN CHINA TODAY

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## Introduction

The 21st century will open a new epoch in the history of China, a time of reunification, when territory currently under colonial rule will be restored. China can also look forward with the rest of the world's nations to the full attainment of its goals for modernization. The dream of a global village is about to become a reality as more and more countries open themselves to outside forces, begin to develop market economies, and move towards greater democracy and freedom. Despite some reservations, and not without a certain amount of anxiety, nations will continue to draw closer together in a spirit of mutual cooperation to create what in Confucian terms might be called the *Great Harmony*.

As a Chinese and as a Christian living in times of such great change, I feel it my duty to reflect on and search out the

direction this world will take, so that I might find a definite place in which to make my own contribution to its future. I feel a certain urgency in this matter as China accelerates the pace of its onward rush towards full modernization. It seems to me that it is also of grave importance that the Church as a whole begin now to give priority to defining its own role in the country's immediate future.

Catholic Church is by its name and nature universal. It has a prophetic and evangelical role to play in the development of all nations and in every culture. How it fulfills this role in individual societies depends very much on the particular needs of that society and the nature of the changes taking place within it. When the Church finds itself confronting a society in which violence, cruelty and war prevail, it calls out for a new birth of gentleness, compassion and pacifism. In the face of social disorder, oppression and exploitation, wherever human rights are seen to be violated, the Church must raise a cry for justice. The Church, as part of its prophetic role, must also speak out energetically against all forms of corruption, licentiousness, extravagance and wasteful living. The Church is a multifaceted organization called upon to take up moral positions on ways of meeting social needs and eradicating social abuses.

After almost half a century of self-imposed isolation, China in recent years has begun to open herself up to the

outside world and has, at the same time, committed itself to an ambitious policy of modernization. In such a society, the Church should first and foremost continue to provide many of its traditional services, such education, social works, health services and other works of charity. But it is also called to take up its spiritual role more in keeping with its presence in the modern age.

True modernization is not measured in terms of economic development or scientific and technological progress alone. It must also include a commitment to further democracy in government, the creation of a free and open society, respect for life and the individual rights of its citizens. The overall purpose of modernization is to raise the quality of life not only on the material but on the spiritual level as well.

The rate of progress of modernization in China varies from place to place. Like automobiles on a highway, those regions in the rear are impatient to catch up with those out ahead. Unfortunately, what is common to all areas is the excessive emphasis on the material side of development to the almost total neglect of the spiritual.

### Taiwan and the Modernization Process

In this matter, Taiwan can serve as a cautionary example. It has been some 20 years now since Taiwan began to industrialize. At the time, no one questioned the policy of

tossing nearly all of its natural resources into the effort to develop the economy. Labour, commerce, foreign investment, science and technology were enlisted to serve the island's economic growth. Only a pitifully small amount was left for cultural, educational and social development. Few gave a thought to the need to protect the environment. In the race for development, the economy came first and everything else ran a distant second. Initially, things went rather smoothly and no one faulted the system, since it did succeed in its promise to make some improvements in the material lives of most of the people. Today our foreign exchange resources rank among the world's largest; and we can say that we are at present drowning in a sea of money, while our economic development continues apace. But this rule of the economy over all other interests has had a crippling effect on society in general. We may now be a materially rich but spiritually impoverished people. The social atmosphere in which we live has reached a saturation point, where obsession with work and profit, personal rights and privileges, consumption and luxury, corrupts and pollutes the very air we breathe. The growth in personal wealth has been explosive. We were given neither the time nor the education to prepare for our sudden transformation into a modern technological society. Everything happened so fast. It was like letting the reins of the wild stallion we were riding

slip through our hands and now being left with no means of regaining control. Not a day passes without some new revelation of unspeakable violence on our streets or of the flagrant misuse of money in our counting houses, and there is no place on the whole island of Taiwan which is free from such serious social evils.

The development of technology, while producing more things more quickly and with greater efficiency, neglects to take into consideration or assign to itself any responsibility for disposing of its products after they have been used. Vast quantities of refuse are generated, some toxic in nature, left to pollute and poison the environment. These create a serious threat to life and well-being. Industry is concerned only with production. In a throwaway society, consumers only want what is fashionable, convenient and disposable. Living in overcrowded cities, we have little enough air to breathe, and what we have is contaminated. Nor can those who live in the country at some distance from the cities or along the coastlines escape contamination, for it comes to them in the form of acid rain. Forests and farms, rivers and streams, the earth itself are all pollution's victims. The unclean gasses we discharge upward weaken the ozone layer and endanger what protection we might have against dangerous levels of radiation from the sun. They also create a greenhouse effect which alters weather patterns, and

interacts with air pollution to produce climatic changes that wreak havoc with the land.

Industry and agriculture are both responsible for the increase in water pollution. Factories and farms continue to pour endless quantities of chemicals, pesticides, detergents, human and animal waste into our rivers and streams. Because even our tap water is not to be trusted, the buying and selling of bottled water has become a major industry. Can the day be far behind when the air itself will also be sold to us by container in the market place? Air and water are fundamental to life, and our efforts at modernization have brought us to the point where both are under threat. In addition, the food that we eat is also polluted by the many pesticides and detergents now used to grow, produce and package it. When the very food we eat becomes a cause for worry and concern, we might well ask ourselves what has modernization brought: overcrowded cities where people choke on the smells of garbage, grow deaf from the noise of the traffic, breathe polluted air, eat unhealthy food, and watch the rich grow richer and the poor more desperate. Is there any wonder that social problems abound?

While it is not an easy task to measure Taiwan's modernization in terms of material progress, it is even more difficult to evaluate the effect such *progress* and *development* have had on the spirituality of its people. There can be no

doubt, however, that a feeling of spiritual emptiness and moral decay, a decline in the quality of life, a growing sense of personal insecurity and the flight from reality into escapism in all its forms are now commonplace features of life in our present society.

### Hong Kong and Macau in the Process of Modernization

In many ways Hong Kong and Macau are similar. Both are colonies on the brink of return to the motherland; both are cities that while small in size are densely populated, both are lacking in heavy industry, and both are inhabited almost exclusively by Chinese. Like Taiwan, Hong Kong and Macau have experienced dramatic industrial growth and development in a relatively short time. While Hong Kong may be said to have developed its commercial resources earlier, Taiwan's industrial progress has been sudden and on a much larger scale. Both Hong Kong and Taiwan entered the economic ranks of the Four Little Dragons of Southeast Asia at about the same time. Hong Kong and Macau also share a similar history of being governed by non-Chinese, thus both have lived under regimes in which their political, social and educational progress has experienced more outside control. Both societies while more free are, due to their colonial status, less politically democratic. This condition may account in part for their greater stability and lower

degree of disruption in their social order. Although population density is high, administration is more efficient, the rule of law more effective, and social disorders kept to a minimum. Because heavy industry does not exist here and the few farms that still exist are small, there is little pollution from these sectors of society. However, the large number of people living in overcrowded conditions along with the large number of commercial establishments and the presence of light industry does cause serious environmental problems, especially in the more congested areas in and around harbours and beaches, which are used as dumping grounds for waste products.

### China in Process of Modernization

During the last few years, China has been actively engaged in modernizing itself in an effort to raise its economy to a level that would eliminate poverty and backwardness among its people and provide them with better food, shelter and clothing. Unfortunately, it is following in the footsteps of Taiwan. Modernization has brought with it pollution, the systematic destruction of the environment, and, sad to say, increased corruption as well. Although industrial and commercial progress has had a late start, one can already see the ruinous effects of air and water pollution in the industrial areas and overcrowding in the larger cities. People in remote



areas have laid waste the land, causing serious flooding in many places. The water washed away the top soil, created wastelands in which it is no longer possible to cultivate crops. Water supplies for farmers, once carefully regulated, have been thrown out of balance. The tremendous effort which has gone into planting saplings on mountain slopes and on the edges of the deserts cannot keep pace with those who continue to destroy what is left of the trees. Wherever you look, all you see is mile after mile of barren wasteland.

Transportation is vital for modernization, and so are the large convoys of trucks and endless streams of trains that cross the land bringing goods from one place to another. But those who drive them leave behind mountains of refuse: bags, bottles, cans, cigarette ends, and all sorts of other debris. This combines with the untreated waste of factories that is strewn across the landscape to give the impression that no matter where you go there is no escaping the garbage around you.

With the rise of the private enterprise system in the big cities, those with *know how* stand out and they have become a new social class. They are referred to as the *10,000 Yuan households*. The country people continue to drift into cities in ever larger numbers looking for work and for more opportunities to better their livelihood. Gaps between city and farm, rich and poor are widening. People want money

and are not scrupulous about how they get it. When they do, they tend to spend it extravagantly on immediate pleasures such as food, drink and sex. Traditional morality is easily overturned and ethical values twisted. Wealth changes people; it makes them more self-indulgent and extravagant, wasteful and lewd. This has been so from time immemorial, but what is new and unprecedented is the wholesale destruction and pollution of the environment caused by the modern drive for greater economic development. It is a worrisome thing, and quite frightening, to realize that China's modernization has only just begun and social chaos and environmental destruction have already reached serious proportions.

While the end of the Cold War between the Western super-powers may have diminished fears of an impending nuclear holocaust, a new nightmare has now taken the place of the old one. The threat that China and the rest of world's nations will have to deal with in the 21st century will not be one of war but rather of ecology, and wholesale destruction of the natural environment on which humanity depends for its survival. The continuing existence of civilization as we know it might well depend on how we come to terms with the ecological problems we now face. The United Nations has shown its awareness of this by establishing a special commission on environment and development to search out

ways and means to neutralize the threat of a global catastrophe. The World Congress on Environment in Brazil in 1992 also appealed to the developed nations to put curbs on their consumption of the world's natural resources. It urged them not only to expend greater efforts to deal with pollution at home, but also to deploy their superior scientific and technological expertise to help developing nations with their ecological problems. The developing nations in turn, were told to continue in their efforts to modernize and develop themselves, but to do so with more foresight and at a more deliberate pace, taking steps to avoid whatever does harm to the natural environment.

China's modernization problems are not hers alone. They are common to all nations. To see this is to understand that the systematic destruction of the environment is a significant and grave *sign of the times*. How are we Catholics to respond not only as individuals but also as Church? How can we be brought to a new level of prophetic awareness and what positive action can we take?

It is true that only after the need for food is met do people turn to satisfying other less basic needs and desires. Developing nations are still locked in the daily struggle of providing sufficient food for their people, while the developed nations enjoy a surplus of food and many other resources besides. It is also true that modernization is able not only to

quicken the pace but also enlarge the scope of development. But what cannot be denied are the large-scale questionable means used to achieve development that have given rise to serious social and agricultural problems. In their quest to provide adequate food and shelter, developing nations are guilty of destroying the very environment on which their people depend for survival. They poison their land, lay waste their forests, and allow industrial waste to be unattended. In the end it is the land that suffers and the environment which must bear the full brunt of such irresponsible negligence. On the other hand, the developed nations, since they no longer have to worry about providing food and shelter for their citizens, concentrate their superior science and technology on satisfying more extravagant and sophisticated desires, and do so with hardly a thought about their responsibility to protect the environment. When ecological problems finally reach a critical state and enough anger is aroused to do something, it is often too little too late.

### The Role of the Church in Modernization

God has created the heavens and the earth and all that is good and beautiful within their boundaries. This he has entrusted to us to tend and care for. But we denizens of the modern world driven by greed, selfishness, and the pursuit of material gain, instead of becoming caretakers of God's

creation have become its enemies, its polluters and destroyers. Christians, more than any other group of people, should be quick to assume responsibility for this earthy home of ours. We are called to take the lead in calling the attention of peoples and government to the crucial nature of this problem. It does not matter that we as a Church lack the political power or the scientific resources needed to bring about radical change. What we do have is a prophetic vision and the Good News of salvation to impart to our society and to the world. In his World Peace Day address on January 1, 1995, Pope John Paul II issued a call for all of us “to become reconciled with God and to live in harmony with the earth.” Bishops’ conferences have also raised their voices, calling upon Catholics everywhere to take practical steps in protecting the environment and in restoring creation to its original beauty. Both the Pope and the bishops also appeal to us to take up new and simpler lifestyles, those lived more in communion with nature.

In China you will find wherever you go these days, not only in the cities but also in the underdeveloped country areas, an obsession for acquiring more and more material things. Even more unfortunate, you will also find everywhere the systematic destruction of the environment going on unabated. The Church in China though small, is a committed community that recognizes and acts upon ‘the signs of the

times.’ As such, it must voice its concerns about the environment to government and Party alike demanding a review of the present modernization policy and an immediate slow down in the current pace of development. The primary purpose of any development policy is to improve the quality of life of the people, not merely to satisfy the needs and wants of the privileged few. National development is also for those who come after us, our children and grandchildren. It is a patrimony to be handed down to them; it must not be thought of as something to gratify the wants of the present generation alone.

## Conclusion

The Church must lead by giving good example. It must adhere to a simple and frugal lifestyle thus bearing authentic witness to society at large. The Church has always promoted Gospel values, none with greater zeal than the value of poverty of spirit. By this is meant that we are to be content with what we have, restraining our appetite for material things, rejecting showy display, and living the simple life. The Church encourages social reform, but a reform that must begin with the self and not falter. We Catholics become a strong force for good in society where we come together as a community, one in heart and action, to give ourselves in prayer and self-sacrifice to the service of God. While the rich

and powerful may not listen with a ready ear to what we have to say, can you think of any place more proper for us or any role more suitable to play in society than that of prophetic witness? This is indeed the ministry that the Church of China and its members are called upon to fulfill in these challenging times!



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