

# THE ROLE OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH IN TODAY'S CHINA

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## Introduction

Of the world's many great communities, two, for me, stand out though they differ greatly in nature. One is primarily spiritual and the other socio-political. For at least two thousand years, these two communities have tried, without much success, to understand and communicate with each other. The day they succeed will be a great day, for together they make up one third of the world's population and both of them are carriers of great human values.

These two communities are the Catholic Church and China. They each claim approximately one billion members. At most, however, there are only 10 million Catholic Chinese, a mere 0.8% of China's total population. Some maintain that 5 million is a more realistic figure, making the Church in China a minuscule minority.

Although the Church in China is small, the Kingdom of God is present in it as a seed, and so its future is full of promise. “With what can we compare the Kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? It is like a mustard seed which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of the all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade.” (Mk 4: 30-32).

## A Wounded Healer

The Catholic Church says, “The Kingdom of God is greater than I.” She also says: “The Kingdom of God is within me and I am in the Kingdom of God.” In a spirit of humility, confidence and trust I would like to discuss four ways in which Chinese Catholics can contribute to the welfare of their country, a welfare which includes the well-being of the whole human person and society materially, spiritually, economically, politically, socially, culturally, psychologically, religiously, and mystically.

I shall use the concept of “therapy” to illustrate my observations. Therapy implies the need for healing and I think it is appropriate to think of any human community as a person in need of healing. Neither China nor the Catholic Church are any exception and both can help each other to

bring about the healing they both need. I am convinced that China has something to offer to the Catholic Church for some of its illnesses, and I am also convinced that the Catholic Church in China can provide healing to the Chinese community. The Catholic Church can be like a “wounded healer” for China, an efficacious healer, because in her is alive the undying seed of the Kingdom of God.

The concept of the “wounded healer” comes from the prophet Isaiah, (52:13-53,12). In this passage we encounter the mysterious person of the wounded healer. Although he is covered with wounds from head to foot, he is the source of healing for all of humankind. Behind his bodily weakness lies a tremendous spiritual power. The Catholic Church knows that this mysterious person is her Lord, the Incarnate Son of God, Jesus Christ. Insofar as the Church shares the fate of her Lord, she knows that she herself is this wounded healer. Though wounded, and seen as such, she cannot refuse to offer her healing power to those who need it. China is badly in need of two basic therapies that the Catholic Church can offer her: Reality Therapy and Legality Therapy.

## Reality Therapy

By reality therapy I do not mean the type espoused by William Glasser. The type I have in mind does relate to Glasser’s modern psychological technique, but it is not

reduced to it. The type I am thinking of finds its home in the Catholic Church. The Church is a great realist. She is interested in every and any reality. Whatever is not real does not interest her. No reality escapes her grasp. Science and technology are at home in her, as are sports and philosophy. No human endeavour, nor worldly consideration is beyond her concern. She is deeply rooted in history and in the whole world. She takes one reality especially seriously: the reality of God. God is such an overwhelming reality that the Catholic Church cannot fail to confess it and to help other people to confess this reality. Most people throughout history have shared the Catholic Church's reverence for the reality of God and this is true especially of Islam. The Catholic Church and Islam are one great family, a family of two billion people ardently convinced of the reality of the invisible, just and merciful God.

### The Two Roots of Modern Disbelief in God

Many people, however doubt the existence of God. Throughout the whole of human history there have always been non-believers but their increase is a recent phenomenon. Plato over 2,300 years ago spoke of this lack of belief as a disease. Talking to an imaginary young atheist, he said:

*My lad, you are still young, and as time advances it will lead you to a complete reversal of many of your present convictions.*

*You should wait for the future, then, before you undertake to judge the supreme issues. The greatest of these, though you can count it so trivial, is that of thinking rightly about the gods [read: God] and so living well, or the reverse. I may begin with a single word of significant warning which you will assuredly find to be no mistake, and it is this: You yourself and your friends are not the first nor the only persons to embrace this tenet [i.e. atheism] as your doctrine about the gods [read: God]; nay, in every age there are sufferers from this malady, more or fewer (Laws, 888b).<sup>1</sup>*

Atheism is a disease found in capitalist and socialist societies alike and is a carrier of disastrous effects. It is at the root of many of the horrors perpetrated during the First and Second World Wars. It is a main component of the blind hatred for everything religious which characterized the Cultural Revolution in China.

The cure for this disease can only come through Catholics' awareness of atheism's deep historical roots. The present widespread diffusion of this disease has a twofold root. The first stems from the principle of absolute immanentism characteristic of modern European philosophy, implicit in Descartes' famous dictum: "*Cogito, ergo sum*". Descartes implied that the thinking human being not only responds to existence, but ultimately posits existence. This concept is made explicit in Immanuel Kant's "Copernican revolution." Immanentism perceives human thought as

creative existence. The second root of contemporary atheism is the scandalous unconcern of many Christians and theists for the social injustices which exist around them alongside ostentatious forms of religiosity.

Karl Marx was deeply influenced by these two factors. This is evident in the following quotation from one of his early writings: “When you ask about the creation of nature and man, you are abstracting, in so doing, from man and nature. You postulate them as non-existent, and yet you want me to prove them to you as existing. Now I say to you: Give up your abstraction from the existence of nature and man has no meaning. Or are you such an egoist that you postulate everything as nothing, and yet want yourself to be?” (Karl Marx, “Private Property and Communism”).<sup>2</sup>

Why should asking about the origin of nature and the human being be equivalent to denying the reality of nature and humanity? Is not this the *reductio ad absurdum* of modern European philosophical immanentism, to pretend to start with the human being as a thinking subject and end up denying it? The second root of modern atheism is also evident in Marx’s works. Marx was shocked by the social indifference of theists, by their lack of concern for grave social injustices, by their ability to juxtapose their faith and oppression. Marx quotes W. Howitt who says, speaking of the Christian colonial system: “The barbarities and desperate outrage of the so-

called Christian race, throughout every region of the world, and upon every people they have been able to subdue, are not to be paralleled by those of any other race, however fierce, however untaught, and however reckless of mercy and of shame, in any age of the earth.”<sup>3</sup>

These words, written before the two World Wars and the Cultural Revolution, are perhaps unfortunately true. Their barbarity pales beside the terrible events that have marked our century. Hitler and Stalin did not consider themselves Christians. True, Hitler was born a Catholic, but he thought of himself more as a disciple of Nietzsche’s Anti-Christ than of the Christ of the Gospels. As for Stalin, it is true that he attended an Orthodox seminary, but he was also expelled. Hitler’s and Stalin’s crimes do not justify our committing similar ones. Still, Christians do evil things, but not *because* they are Christians, rather it is in spite of their being Christians. Recent examples of “Christian” atrocities require that we make this distinction: in Lebanon, in the former Yugoslavia, in Northern Ireland, in Rwanda-Burundi. In these instances supposedly religious people paid no heed to the Church’s plea for mercy and peace.

Catholics must face the fact that the inconsistency between Christian behaviour and Christian belief terribly undermines the credibility of Christian truth. The Catholic Church in the Second Vatican Council underlined the

responsibility of some of her members for the spread of atheism: “[Believers] themselves frequently bear some responsibility for this situation. For, taken as a whole, atheism is not a spontaneous development but stems from a variety of causes, including a critical reaction against religious beliefs, and in some places against the Christian religion in particular. Hence believers can have more than a little to do with the birth of atheism. To the extent that they neglect their own training in religious, moral or social life, or teach erroneous doctrine, or are deficient in their religious moral or social life, they must be said to conceal rather than reveal the authentic face of God and religion” (Gaudium et Spes, 19).

### The Importance of Attention to God’s Reality

Our past shortcomings notwithstanding, the great mission of Catholics in China today is to show forth by their behaviour and by their convictions the true face of God, the Just and Merciful Supreme and Infinite Reality. The light of this face will make China a more just and more merciful nation.

God’s reality is the only basis for absolute, meaningful and efficacious moral norms. The strength of the Ten Commandments, which are the basis for ordering all social and individual behaviour, lies in the fact that they allow for no exceptions and this prerequisite is ultimately grounded on God’s existence. It is not by chance that at the last United



Nations Conference on World Population at Cairo only the Catholic Church and the Muslim world were united in their opposition to abortion as a method of family planning. With widespread practical, if not theoretical, atheism, the conviction that there are absolute moral norms has almost been obliterated from the human conscience. As a result, we are confronted, for example, with the immense problem of abortion, legal and illegal. The United Nations report a world figure of 50 million abortions per year. This means that each year abortions account for as many deaths as those suffered during the whole of World War II! Almost a third of these abortions take place in China. China will never be a nation of happy people unless it adopts more humane methods to solve its population problem. Raising the overall standard of living, especially that of the peasants, may be slower but in the end, it is a surer and certainly better way.

China, like the rest of the world, badly needs the conviction that there are absolute moral norms, but this conviction posits the existence of God. The Chinese Catholics must be ever ready to bear witness to God's existence by their lives, their words and their thoughts. As Saint Peter used to remind the early Christians scattered throughout the vast Roman Empire: "Always be ready to make your defense to anyone who demands from you an accounting for the hope that is in you; yet do it with gentleness and reverence"

(1 Pet 3,15-16). Only the awareness of God's reality will enable China to meet the challenges posed by national order and development in a realistic way. Will the eye that cannot see the light of the sun, see the light of a candle? The Catholic Church can help China realize that much of her trouble derives from the illusory nature of her vision of the future: "At that time, the vast majority of our citizens will be able to deal with the world and their fellowmen from a conscious scientific viewpoint and no longer have any need for recourse to an illusory world of gods to seek spiritual solace." (Central Committee of the Communist Party, Document 19, XII, 1982).<sup>4</sup> God exists. God does not exist. Which of the two is an illusion?

The conviction of God's reality goes hand in hand with the certitude that the individual human conscience is inviolable. Conscience is the sanctuary where each human being encounters his or her Creator. Besides God and self, no other human reality can claim sovereignty over this sanctuary. In the past Chinese Christians have been courageous witnesses of conscience. Today and in the future they are called to be the moral conscience of China. Their witness may help China realize that without God there is no law and without law there is no heaven. This leads us to our second point.

## Legality Therapy

The Catholic Church and China are both heirs of legal systems which go back almost three thousand years. The legal system of the Catholic Church is rooted in the Mosaic law of the Old Testament which, at least in part, dates back to the 13th century B.C. The roots of China's legal system can be traced to the historical books compiled by Confucius in the 6th century B.C. Both systems have enjoyed a continuity in development, something rather unique in the history of humankind.

Naturally, the law of the Catholic Church and the law of China differ in character. The former is religious; the latter is secular. Both, however are truly laws. In studying the social conditions, we find that these laws contributed to narrowing the gap between social classes and to promoting equality. This is evident in the religious law of the Bible, where even the king is subject to the Law of God (cf. Deut 17, 18-20). But it is evident also in China where the Confucianist tradition held that moral principles are the basis of all law. In the judgment of a legal historian, "The Chinese legal system, despite its severity, was a highly refined system, with built-in restraints and moderation."<sup>5</sup> In this century, especially, the Catholic Church and China have applied their age-old legal systems very differently.

## Catholic Church in China: Recent Legal History

The Catholic Church at the beginning of the 20th century succeeded in codifying almost two millennia of legislation with the publication of the Code of Canon Law in 1917. Towards the end of the century, in 1983, Rome published a revised Code of Canon Law which incorporated the dramatic developments ushered in by the Second Vatican Council.

In the last one hundred years, China was confronted with the tremendous task of adapting its legal system to a new era. The young Chinese Republic, born in the midst of tremendous difficulties (1911-1912), continued the revision of Civil and Criminal Law Codes, started before the fall of the Qing Dynasty. In 1949 the victorious Chinese Communist Party, wishing to start from scratch abrogated all preceding Law Codes. Even the very concept of Law had to be changed. Law was no longer to hold a privileged position with the government and Party policy. Rather, from now on what was essential was not law but the promotion of Party policy and government by the dictatorship of the proletariat. The abolition of previous legislation and the change in the concept of Law created a legal vacuum for more than a generation. This vacuum was one of the conditions that made possible the upheaval of the Cultural Revolution. In its turn, the Cultural Revolution intensified China's legal vacuum. The first Criminal Law Code (1979) and the first Civil Law Code

(1986) were only initiated and promulgated with Deng Xiaoping's new course of action.

Promulgation of the Law is one thing, implementation is another. After telling the people for thirty years that Party policies are above the law, China faced a very difficult task of implementation. The 1984 session of the People's Congress explains the difficulty: "Too many people have the notion that acting according to the law is new, unfamiliar, not something they are used to."<sup>6</sup> In the same year the *Beijing Daily* noted "that there was wide ignorance of laws and legal matters among the civil servants and even among Party leaders. It was still believed that laws tie the hands of administrators, and indeed Mao had said that law is not indispensable; that Party policy is enough, and Party leaders can decide what is to be done. These people do not understand that laws are necessary to maintain people's democracy, that they create stability."<sup>7</sup>

### Service to the Spirit of Law

In such a situation the Catholics in China have the duty to be living witnesses to the importance of law and the observance of law in society. This is true not only for Church Law but for all civil laws not at odds with fundamental human justice. This is a tremendous challenge which may at times require great sacrifices, and the pain of not seeing any result in the

short run. In the long run, however, this may well be one of the greatest contributions that the Catholic Church can make to China. Honesty and righteousness do not always triumph in the short run, but they will certainly eventually succeed. This realization was the basis of Mahatma Gandhi's programme of uncompromising resistance to unjust laws. There may only be one person of unshakable character in a community, but even with one such person, that community has hope. In times of crisis, that one person can become a rallying point for all the constructive forces in the community. Thanks to this one person, what might have ended in disaster has instead effected a transformation of the entire community. May the Catholic Church offer many such persons to the millions of local Chinese communities!

This is a field where Catholics from abroad can also make a contribution. I like to imagine Catholic businessmen and industrialists as shining examples of respect for the spirit of law. I also like to imagine them as truly concerned, not only with profit but above all with the integral welfare of their workers. What beautiful witnesses Catholic entrepreneurs would be to China in its struggle for development if they refused to exploit their workers.

## The Legality of Religious Freedom

One particular field of law badly in need of updating in China

is the relations between Church and State. The present laws which see the Church as interfering in China's internal affairs is a throwback to the old imperial laws of China and the West and seriously out of step with modernity. One aspect of this legislation, however, is acceptable; namely, the understanding of religious freedom also as "freedom not-to-believe". This accords with the Catholic Church's stance that belief cannot be compelled, as was clearly enunciated in Vatican II's *Declaration on Religious Freedom*: "This Vatican Synod declares that the human person has a right to religious freedom. This freedom means that everyone is to be immune from coercion on the part of individuals or of social groups and any human power, in such wise that in matters religious no one is to be forced to act in a manner contrary to his own beliefs... It follows that a wrong is done when government imposes upon its people, by force or fear or other means, the profession or repudiation of any religion..." (Numbers 2, 6).

One aspect of China's legislation sorely in need of revision is the State's view that religious activities interfere with the "freedom-not-to-believe" and the consequent need to monitor and restrict religious activities. In doing this, the State unfairly tilts the balance in favour of non-belief, thus discriminating against religious believers. The State insists this has nothing to do with discrimination; it is rather a means of protecting religion. This attitude, of course, is

counterproductive in today's world. The same rationale was used by the absolutist and totalitarian States of the *ancien regime*, before the French Revolution and before the great upheavals of 1848. It is a distinction that antedates the Communist Manifesto!

The peaceful but courageous resistance offered by Chinese Catholics to State interference in religious affairs has been, is, and will be of great benefit to China. In the long run China will come to the realization that individual and communal freedoms are most valuable for a wholesome and balanced development.

While working for the respect of all just laws, the Church can also help the Chinese people regain what China has seemingly lost: the proper concept of law as the guarantee of the common good (and not merely as a tool for government), and of justice as substantive fairness (and not merely as formalist compliance with State directives)<sup>8</sup>.

### Beyond Reality

Finally, the Catholic Church's witness to the importance of law will go beyond law to charity. Chinese Christians have already started to take on the burden of meeting many of the pressing needs of deprived and helpless people. Tiny welfare institutions for abandoned infants and homes for the uncared elderly, clinics for the poor, support centres for the lepers,



etc., have mushroomed throughout China. These works, often carried on at the price of great personal sacrifice, are part and parcel of the Christian charism. It is also part of Chinese tradition as expressed in the ideal of the Great Unity: care for one's children as well as for the children of others, care for one's elderly as well as for the elderly of others.

There are human needs which State legislation will never achieve in meeting. This was surely in the mind of Jesus when he said, "The poor are with you always" (Mk 14:7). There will always be poor with us, because there will always be rich people unconcerned for the lot of the poor. The new rich in China today prove the truth of Jesus' words. The needs of the poor cannot wait for the abolition of unjust economic structures. So China sorely needs that religious spirit, in the style of Mother Teresa and others, that has been so resourceful in meeting the needs of the underprivileged.

The Catholic Church is the community that believes in God's unfathomable mercy, A God who sent his only begotten Son to earth in human form and who became like us in all things except sin; a God who suffered and died to redeem us (cf. Jn. 3:15; Ph 2:6) The Catholic Church knows that she is her most authentic self when she identifies with the sufferings of the community. Those who engage in works of charity feel they are not only being true Christians but true patriots

also, builders of their country's future, a future based on the respect for and the value of every human being.

### The Freedom of the Children of God

True freedom is China's most basic need. Through baptism each Christian is endowed with "the freedom of the glory of the children of God." (Rom 8:21) This is the freedom to do good, to be truly human, to live according to one's conscience, unhindered by personal or social shackles. While the Catholic Church deeply appreciates China's efforts to free its people from misery and want, it is also mindful of the need to stimulate China to grant its people their true freedom. Without it, freedom from misery and want can be almost meaningless. The State, which is truly at the service of its citizens, has as its mission to guarantee individual and communal freedoms for all.

China's Constitution bears witness to this responsibility. However, there is a great discrepancy between Constitutional guarantee and actual practice.

### Conclusion

China has some of its best friends and citizens in the Catholic Church and its members, in all good Christians and all true believers in God and even in non-religious people who accept their conscience as an absolute authority in directing personal

thought, word and action. Conscience and the Gospel of Jesus Christ do not destroy but build up humanity. Furthermore, the truth about God can only be a help to China's development.

“I have faith in China”, the Catholic Bishop of Hong Kong, Cardinal John Baptist Wu, recently told a group of German sinologists. Yes, there is hope for China. Not only hope for survival, but hope for an integral development that will benefit not only China but the entire world.

#### Endnotes:

1. Irwin Edman, *The Works of Plato*, New York: The Modern Library (1956), p. 1443. I have slightly modified the translation to make it more intelligible. The insertion between square brackets are mine: when Plato speaks of “the gods” he means the one true God.
2. Robert C. Tucker (ed.), *The Marx-Engels Reader*, New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1972: *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844: Selections*, Karl Marx, “Private Property and Communism”, p. 78.
3. Karl Marx, *Capital*, Volume Two, London: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1930, p. 833.
4. English Translation by J. Wickeri.
5. Laszlo Ladany, *Law and Legality in China*, London: Hurst & Company, 1992, p. 39.
6. Ibid., p. 95.
7. Ibid., p. 98, *Peking Daily*, December 17, 1984.
8. Cf. Pitman B. Potter, “Riding the Tiger: Legitimacy and Legal Culture in Post-Mao China”, *The China Quarterly* 138 (1994), pp. 325-358.

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