

## *We Must Understand*

### **Reflections After Reading *Can Mainland China's 'Official' Church Still be Called 'Catholic': A Discussion of the Mainland Church's Three Documents and Other Matters***

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Deep feelings were stirred in this writer, a member of the mainland Church, after reading Father Aloysius B. Chang's essay *Can Mainland China's 'Official' Church Still be Called 'Catholic'?... (Tripod, 86)*. My deepest feelings were aroused by his treatment of church structures and organization. Also, the present situation and historical experience of the Chinese Church impel me to call upon church authorities and everyone everywhere to strive for a deeper understanding of the situation of the whole Chinese Mainland Church, with its millions of Chinese Catholics.

### **I. Defining the Problem and Its Consequences**

When Chang in his essay uses the term *Mainland China's 'Official' Church*, although he does not say so explicitly, he necessarily implies the existence of an *unofficial church*. I do not intend to enter into a discussion of the different terminology currently employed by government, church and foreign observers to describe the church in China, e.g., 'above ground' and 'underground', 'patriotic' and 'loyal', 'public' and 'non-public', 'official' and 'unofficial'. The focus of my concern here is the *official church*. In his preliminary remarks Father Chang does not give a clear definition of what he means by the official church. But he does single out three documents for special comment: *The Constitution of the Chinese Catholic Bishops Conference*, *The Constitution of the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association*, and *Regulations of the Chinese Catholic Bishops Conference regarding the Election and Consecration of Bishops* (cf. *Catholic Church in China*, no. 42 and *Tripod*, no. 77). From these documents we surmise that the official church is that Catholic Mainland community which openly administers and

participates in the sacraments, and which is formally recognized by the government. However, what must be pointed out here is that there are many clergy and Catholics in China who openly administer or participate in the sacraments, who cannot really be said to belong to the *official church*. These Catholics do not on their own initiative participate in government supported church organizations; neither do they belong to the *underground church*, because they do not approve of its methods. But many people, including government officials and foreign Catholics, insist on referring to them as *above ground* or *official church* members.

Although Father Chang emphasizes that his reflections "contain no judgment about the subjective religious-Catholic attitude of the members of the *official Church*, nor are they meant "to apply to particular concrete situations," it becomes apparent that the term *official church* points to, if somewhat vaguely, those clergy who carry out pastoral and missionary work in the open church and those laity who practice their faith in public. In the very sensitive situation of the present day Chinese Catholic Church, this kind of implication will definitely have a negative effect on the faith-life of all Chinese Christians.

There can be no doubt, as Father Chang has mentioned, that the structures and organizations of the official church in China have many glaring and serious problems, which Catholics of both the public and the non-public churches find unacceptable and which they ceaselessly work at trying to correct. Father Chang's reflections are clear and detailed. His comparison of "church teaching" with the "documents of the official church," followed by a "theological reflection," is a thorough, reasonable, orderly presentation. As a whole it represents a formidable challenge to the official church. However, if we only keep to the strict and literal analysis of his words, and forget about their political and social background, we do an injustice to those Catholics who are erroneously labeled members of the official church. It would add an unnecessary and unreasonable burden to their consciences. It will cause some Catholics, who hitherto have led a peaceful and open religious life, to falter, putting them under uncalled for psychological pressure. It may even bring about such confusion and distress as to cause Catholics to leave the church entirely. They may stop going to the open church and also stay away from any underground activities.

This could be a negative result of Father Chang's essay.

## II. Background of the Church Documents

The documents cited by Father Chang are: *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, (1993-4); *Documents of Vatican Council II*, (1963-1975); *The Code of Canon Law*, (1983); and Pope Paul VI's, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, (1975). The three documents of the official Chinese Church were formulated in either 1992 or 1993.

What must be noted right from the start is that when the three church documents of the universal church were being prepared for publication, local churches throughout the world participated in the work of their revision. Only the Chinese Catholic Church was excluded from this process; nor was it given any opportunity to offer opinions which reflected the conditions of the Chinese local church. Even as late as 1994, when the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, was published, because of a lack of diplomatic relations between China and the Vatican, the Chinese Church could present no opinion about matters related to China's own cultural background.

Attention must also be paid to the fact that several decades of devastation have left the Chinese Catholic Church unable to adequately study, absorb, not to mention accept and implement the full meaning and spirit of Vatican Council II. The level of ecclesial consciousness is severely limited, and this should not be considered strange. Opinions of all kinds abound among clergy and Catholics of all camps in China, whether in the underground, above ground, or somewhere in between. One easily recognizes that not only are some of the structures and institutions of Chinese ecclesiology stuck in the past, but also the social and political attitudes of some members of the church are also stuck in the past. A foreign professor visiting China told me that after listening to an address of a loyal bishop, he realized that although the bishop lived in the present, his ecclesiology was pre-Vatican II. Does not the spirit of Vatican II teach us that in all its evangelistic activities the church today displays an open and tolerant attitude of dialogue in its relations with other religions, even communism? In reading the letters, comments and declarations coming out of the Chinese Church, especially those of the loyal church, do we not note positions that border

on the extreme? Sometimes they seem very naive. We must remember, however, that some attitudes were formerly held as sacred doctrine, and are the fruit of an education then common to both foreign and local clergy.

Finally, one must understand the problem of maintaining an untroubled conscience amidst the pressures to which the Chinese Church is subjected. It is common knowledge that official political releases as well as popular religious documents, are all subject to the supervision of the Party and government, and for their benefit. In other words, religious documents must receive government approval, or they will never see the light of day. When religious personnel are formulating public documents they are always subject to pressure.

Of course, when we speak here of the times, their limitations and pressure, we do not mean to lessen the Chinese Church's responsibility to observe the laws of the universal church. As a local church, the Chinese Church, of course, has a grave duty to obey the laws and teachings of the universal church. However, if we use the new church documents and laws to criticize and judge documents formulated by church personnel whose theology and ecclesiology are still rooted in pre-Vatican II times, isn't this being overly strict and unfair?

Having said that, it is now easier for us to address the problem of conscience. A untroubled conscience can be dealt with on two levels. The first is the level of those in authority who compose the documents. If, given the exceptional circumstances existing in China, they formulate documents for the sake of expediency, then it is understandable and forgivable. If they also continue in their communion with the universal church, there is nothing more to discuss. There is another problem, one of a more practical order. When it comes to relations with the Pope, acknowledging papal primacy, and the appointment of legitimate bishops, before the normalization of China-Vatican relations, you are still forbidden from having any open contact with Rome. People make use of friends to maintain links with Rome. They do this quietly and without fanfare. As for the Beijing government, if church documents preserve its face, then bishops who have secretly expressed their loyalty to Rome and have sought legitimization, or those clergy who openly preach union with the Pope in the parishes, will be left alone so long as they do not oppose the government. The officials close one eye,

and let life go on.

The second level involving conscience has to do with those who receive and must implement the documents. Most of the clergy and Catholics in the open church consider the documents to be mere formalities. What is useful, they implement enthusiastically. They consider them as convenient and protective devices, and their consciences are at peace. Here a clarification should be made: church documents of the official church do not necessarily represent all the church organizations or personnel who are engaged in public religious activities. Official memos, directives and written communiques from Party Central do not represent the beliefs and spirit of all political factions.

Here, I would like to draw the attention of the reader to two relevant facts. In the early days to the Catholic Patriotic Association, two archbishops, both of whom had been appointed by the Pope: Pi Shoushi of Shenyang and Zhao Zhensheng of Xianxian, explained the reasons behind their decision to join the Association in this way: if the Holy Father lived in the Chinese situation, he would understand and agree out of concern for the well-being of the Chinese Christians. It is a matter of history that during the 1950's the Chinese bishops exerted a great deal of effort seeking Rome's understanding of their situation, and they regretted that the Vatican did not understand. Father Geoffrey King in analyzing in detail the Chinese bishops' course of action from various aspects including politics, pressure and urgent need, showed a great deal of understanding and sympathy (cf. *Tripod*, no. 69, pp. 3-6).

The second fact we must consider here concerns the background to the word *implementation*. It is a fact that in China there is a broad scope of response regarding the implementation of directives and instructions. This is not only true in the political arena, but in the church as well. Sometimes local governments support local churches' decisions to ignore official church documents and act more in favor of traditional church rules. A reality on the mainland is that most of the faithful in the open church still assiduously observe church traditions and laws. Many still do not accept the new teachings and spirit of Vatican Council II, following the dictates of their consciences in their decisions and actions. They do not consider the three above mentioned official church documents to be binding. Everyone understands that they are expedient measures that

must be taken in the heavy political atmosphere of these "critical times."

### III. Politics and Sino-Vatican Impasse

The "critical times" bring us to the level of politics. Since 1949, the Chinese Church, as well as all political parties and civil organizations have been placed under the Party and the government, that is, under political control. Therefore, the formulation and publication of official church documents likewise must follow the political climate and change with it. Church documents with heavy political flavoring, such as the above, do not by any stretch of the imagination represent the attitude of all the members of the open church! Conversely these documents, and the process of their formulation, are good measures of the degree of the government's tolerance towards religion and act as thermometers of the political temperature. For instance, during the 5th Conference of Chinese Catholic Representatives held in 1992, when the representatives were discussing the "constitutions" of the Bishops Conference and the Patriotic Association, many of them argued bravely and unstintingly in favor of papal primacy and why the Chinese Church could not break relations with Rome. The government officials "tolerated" everyone's opinions.

Shortly after this, when the document appeared, while it repeated much of the old Party line, yet for the first time a change was made in the structures-- the Church Administrative Committee became subordinate to the Bishops Conference, and apostolic succession was emphasized. At the same time, although official documents do not discuss the question of papal primacy, many books and prayer pamphlets now published openly in China emphasize it in black and white, and contain prayers for the Pope. And these books are published with government permission (cf. the *Daily Prayer Book* published by each diocese and the *Book of Meditations* published by Faith Press in northern China). All this clearly shows that Beijing has a new and friendly attitude towards the Vatican. After the 1992 meeting the government approved the plan to send abroad for further study some young priests, seminarians and Sisters. Later, a number of priests were allowed to participate in the

World Youth Conference sponsored by the Vatican and were allowed to concelebrate Mass with the Pope. This seems to demonstrate that China-Vatican relations are, to some degree, warming up. Also, after the 1992 representatives meeting the government encouraged the church to initiate all kinds of fund raising and socially beneficial schemes. In 1993, at the first joint meeting of the Bishops Conference and the Patriotic Association, a "Committee for Economic Development and Social Service" was formed. It became one of the six committees under the Bishops Conference. This underlines the government's concern for its policy of economic reform. As a social (religious) entity in the country, the Chinese Catholic Church should also respond positively to the national call for modernization and involve itself in economic development and reform.

The conveners of meetings of national official church representatives happen to be lay persons. It is they who in accordance with which way the political wind is blowing, force the representatives to approve and accept the official documents. They even publish the documents using the name of the clerical representatives only.

In the past Father Aloysius Chang has written another article entitled, *The Church in China: Ecclesiological Impasse*. Actually, behind this "ecclesiological impasse" is the key impasse of Sino-Vatican relations. The former stems from the latter, and the existence of the latter is cause and effect of the former, resulting in the unfortunate situation that we have today. It is just this impasse of Sino-Vatican relations which leads to the publication of compliant documents by the official church and to a whole series of other problems: 'above ground' and 'underground,' divisions, disputes, legitimate and illegitimate, difficulties in achieving dialogue, reconciliation and unity.

#### **IV. Yesterday's and Today's *Ecclesiological Impasse***

In 1992, at a seminar on the Chinese Church in Hong Kong, Father Aloysius Chang presented a paper entitled, *The Church in China: Ecclesiological Impasse? A Christological and Trinitarian Approach towards a Solution*. The author said that he took a theological, rather than a phenomenological approach to

the question. The paper was published in *Tripod* (No. 69, June, 1992). The paper caught the attention of two theology professors, one Chinese and one Western. The westerner was Father Robert Schreiter, a teacher in the Graduate School of Ministry at the Chicago Theological Union, and the Chinese was Father Joseph Zen, who teaches in Hong Kong's Holy Spirit Seminary College. Papers by both of these seminary professors appeared in *Tripod* (No. 75, 1993), under the titles, *Ecclesiological Challenges for the Sake of Service: Towards a Renewed Sense of the Church in China*, and *Ecclesiological Challenges: A Response to Robert Schreiter*. Both made reference to Father Chang's 1992 article, and raised the level of interest in the discussion about the church in China.

The main point of discussion for all these theologians is the ecclesiological impasse. Father Schreiter summarizes Father Chang's analysis in this way: "The Catholic Church in China is far too absorbed with internal church matters in its contemporary life. Recurring questions about who has been faithful and obedient to legitimate authority, who can be trusted, and a preoccupation with external observance of church laws all have a constricting influence on the Church's spiritual life." (Schreiter, p. 5) Schreiter also pointed out that an ecclesiology which is preoccupied with external observances, juridical relationships to the hierarchy and internal church affairs is one that has prevailed in the Chinese Church for the last 400 years because the missionaries themselves were deeply influenced by this ecclesiology, and passed it on to their converts. Father Joseph Zen thought that to describe the Chinese Church as being in an "ecclesiological impasse" was too one-sided, and does not give the complete picture. He wrote: "The Chinese Church...has an excessive concern about and preoccupation with ecclesial-hierarchical questions, but there is also in evidence another side of the picture. On both sides of the divide can be found a strong faith in God, a deep devotion to the Blessed Sacrament and to Our Lady, a daring missionary zeal courageously expressing itself within the narrow confines allowed by the civil authority, and a constant lively witness to the spirit of Christian charity. While tensions may have arisen from the ecclesiological problems, they have in no way paralyzed the inner life of the church." (Zen, p. 15) This led to a further response from Father Aloysius Chang, an essay entitled, *More on the Fundamental Attitude*



*of the Bridge Church: A Commentary on the Essays of Fathers Robert Schreiter and Joseph Zen*, which appeared in *Tripod* (No. 77). (Father Chang stated that the *Impasse* article was written for the bridge church.)

Rather than continue a discussion of more of the above mentioned authors' various opinions and attitudes, I only wish to mention a few causes for apprehension. Previously Father Chang was of the opinion that the Chinese Church emphasized internal affairs too much, e.g., laws, authority, legitimacy and illegitimacy, etc., and that this caused it to fall into an "ecclesiological impasse." Now in a new article, he has devoted much time and attention to a detailed analysis, from the structural, institutional and legal aspects, of three documents of the official church on mainland China, making clear comparisons with legal documents of the universal church. As mentioned above, we acknowledge that these three official church documents do contain many grave questions, but, will not these discussions (my present essay included and Father Chang's legalistic theological reflection) cause those in the "self-conscious" mainland church to be drawn back into "internal church affairs," and even into another "ecclesiological impasse?" Will we not become once again overly concerned with church matters such as legal statutes? Has not Father Chang himself been dragged into what he has described as an unfortunate legal "impasse"? Will not this repetitious discussion of mainland internal matters and questions of legal church documents only increase the divisions? To use legal documents conceived under normal circumstances to judge those formulated in a highly stressful situation, will this not cause more confusion and stress to those under such pressure? Will it not cause the "impasse" to become even more of an "impasse?" Should not all of us reflect with greater care on these questions and learn to handle them with more delicacy?

## **V. The Chinese Church: An experience never to be forgotten**

Someone has used the example of the continuous 300 year history of the "Rites Controversy" to describe the dispute between the underground and above ground churches today.

Actually, this is not completely accurate nor suitable, since the times and backgrounds of both are different, and the people and issues involved are not the same.

The "Rites Controversy" arose because of the attitudes of missionaries towards Chinese culture and traditions. It was a conflict between the church on the one hand, and a feudal dynasty and the Chinese people on the other. The dispute between the underground and above ground churches is unfortunately rooted in the disharmony between the church and Chinese citizenry, planted by foreign colonialism and imperialism in this century in the 19th and 20th centuries. Its main cause is political. The two sides of the present conflict are an indigenous Chinese church and a government led by the Communist Party. During the "Rites Controversy" the conflict arose due to the different missionary policies of the Jesuits and the Dominicans and other religious orders. The dispute between the under and above ground churches arose because of the different choices made, in the absence of Western missionaries, by China's clergy and Catholics with regard to the relationship of faith and politics. In the previous conflict the main source of outside support for those involved was from Europe. Today's conflict arose because Hong Kong and Taiwan, taking advantage of their favored geographical position and possessing the same racial and cultural characteristics, have given new life to both sides and have provided intellectual and moral support from behind the lines.

During the "Rites Controversy" the church authorities at first displayed a "ambiguous" attitude, before finally taking a hard line attitude. At first they forbade the Rites (1645), and then they permitted them (1656). Later the Rites could be practiced or not, according as one's conscience viewed the situation (1699). Afterwards the Rites were forbidden to all Catholics for over 200 years, until the 1930's when it was declared that the rites to Confucius and ancestors did not constitute superstitious practices. In the meantime how many Chinese Catholics were offered up in sacrifice to the Rites Controversy? The cost to the Chinese Church during that 300 year period was quite high! Do people around the world know how high? Is the attitude of the church authorities once again "ambiguous"? Are we going down the same road again? Will the same tragedy be reenacted in our time? Amidst the differences some things are the same: Rome first tolerated (supported?) the ordination of a large

number of bishops and priests in the underground church (the real situation is very complicated); later, she recognized the legitimacy of several above ground bishops. This year in Manila the Holy Father concelebrated Mass with some open church priests. Today in China several dioceses lay claim to having two or more legitimate shepherds. What is tragic is that these particular bishops use the legitimacy conferred on them by Rome to extend their authority, and each does things his own way. And bishops, theologians, clergy and Catholics from Hong Kong, Taiwan and abroad, consciously or unconsciously, continue to give both economic and theoretical support to both camps in China.

If we claim, as some do, that the government uses these internal divisions to weaken the church, then what are the church authorities themselves doing and what role are foreign supporters playing in these disputes?

During the 17th century the Rites Controversy stirred up a lot of interest in the academic centers of Europe. The new controversy, taking place in Hong Kong, Taiwan or anywhere Chinese people come together, seems to be steadily getting worse. Catholics are making statements or writing reports about it. What's more, Sisters, priests and bishops are teaching or holding seminars about it. The discussions are taking place within democratic political systems, where people enjoy basic human rights. However, we in China, who live in a closed political system, are left confused. If in a "free and democratic" society, where people are in direct contact with the universal church, such violent arguments persist and with such hostility and stubborn refusal to give ground, how can you call upon us in Mainland China to be even-tempered and follow the path of unity and reconciliation? Within the Taiwan Bishops Conference itself, one group has already taken a clear-cut stand. At home and abroad Catholics publish the words and attitudes of these bishops as proof of support for one side over and against the other. An example of this is the article on the World Youth Conference by Xiao Fang, published in a recent *Gong Jiao Bao*. Such trends cause sadness and anxiety.

If, as in the settlement of the Rites Controversy, reconciliation and unity in the Chinese Church is something to be desired, should not Rome adopt an unequivocal and clear stand? The Chinese Catholics live on the horns of two dilemmas: between

Rome and Beijing, and between faith and politics! Of course, the normalization of relations between China and the Vatican is fundamental to solving the problem.

At the same time, while calling for reconciliation in China, ought not the church abroad also carry out its own "reconciliation" and reflection? Churches should not only debate what path to take towards reconciliation on the mainland, suggest remedies, and determine who is right and who is wrong. They should also examine themselves about their own role as Christians in the dispute: what is our function, our value? What is our attitude? Are we rigid and unyielding, or are we compassionate, warm, understanding and hopeful? Of the two attitudes, which one will do more to promote reconciliation and unity? Is more study and more contact at all levels required before one can understand China better? This writer does not wish to judge, but he does hope that the problems mentioned and the conditions described will arouse everyone's interest and serve as sound material for reflection and study. We cannot overlook the experience of history, but we must learn important lessons from it.

## Conclusion

These thoughts seem to me to have mostly a negative flavor about them: defensive and full of argument. We have not yet looked into the positive side. We do not intend to deny the value and usefulness of debates and seminars, along with the painstaking and generous support of the foreign church. Actually, this reflection is only meant to give a broader analysis of the mainland reality, and to help us reexamine our methods, attitudes and strategies.

In fact, many of our dogmas of faith were born out of historical arguments. In ancient times, St. Augustine spent his whole life defending church doctrine; later his writings became a pillar of the church's theology. In more recent times theologians such as Karl Rahner, Edward Schillebeeckx and Yves Congar faced the challenge of outdated and mistaken theories, and taking into account the needs of modern men and women and the development of society, made outstanding contributions to the Second Vatican Council. Of course, the research about

and support of the Church in China at various levels by the church abroad, especially in Hong Kong and Taiwan, has done much to effectively promote reconciliation and unity for the past several decades.

I hope that the reflections of Father Aloysius Chang will remind people that we are not to forget church traditions, and that a legal church document will one day be formulated that will show forth the spirit of the universal church. I hope that our reflection will spur government into recognizing that outside pressure cannot change church traditions or people's faith, and that it ought to cease using military force to solve church matters. I hope that all of us, including church authorities, will treasure the value of self-sacrifice. I also hope that people will not vent their anger at the arrest of church members on the open church. Aung San Sun Kyi, the human rights activist in Burma, can serve as a model for us Christians, and for all citizens of China. Released after 6 years of house arrest, she did not criticize nor display any hatred towards the despotic military regime. Rather, in a peaceful manner, she exhorted the Burmese people to work in harmony for reconciliation. This indeed showed forth a Christian spirit.

Latin America has Liberation Theology; North America has feminist theology and black theology; South Korea has Folk (minjung) theology. I think that the Chinese Church not only needs traditional theology, it also needs a liberation theology, in order to liberate our people from poverty and backwardness. We also need feminist theology, in order to save our women from the injustices of unequal treatment. We also need a folk theology, in order to foster more democracy, more freedom among our people, and to allow Jesus to be received into our midst as humble and poor. And yet, all these things do not seem to be enough. Among the most important needs of our millions of people is a completely new theology, one which will communicate the Good News of salvation to our people without reserve. What kind of theology might this be? What the Chinese Church needs primarily is understanding! And so, is it a theology of understanding that we need? A theology of reconciliation? A theology of family? Such topics are beyond the scope of this brief essay. It is for our theologians and our people to work on, to search for and to create together!