

## *The Church in China A Fifteen Year Review*

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It is impossible to assess the extent of the changes which have taken place in the People's Republic of China over the past couple of decades without recalling how things were immediately after the fall of the Gang of Four.

I still have very vivid memories of the religious situation in early 1978. The Nantang was the only church open in Beijing. Besides a few foreigners, the scanty and guarded congregation was made up mostly of elderly people.



In May, 1978, the Jade Buddha Temple in Shanghai was opened specifically for a visit of Italian guests, but no monks were to be seen. When a few of us, who were accompanying the head of the Italian delegation, had the privilege of meeting 85 year old Bishop Louis Zhang Jiashu at a secret dinner meeting in the Jin Jiang Hotel, I discovered that this was the first time in over ten years that the "patriotic" prelate had spoken to foreigners<sup>1</sup>. After dinner, and after looking at the books I had brought the bishop as a gift, the official accompanying us allowed me to give them to him. Later, however, the bishop told me that on the way home the gift (Vatican Council II documents and a few liturgical booklets in Chinese) were taken from him "to be examined" anew. He never saw them again.

Credit is due Deng Xiaoping for the turning point in Chinese politics approved by the Third Plenum of the Eleventh Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP), in December 1978. Since then, tremendous changes have taken place in China not only in the area of economics but in religion as well. The Holy Spirit Study Centre owes its origin to the awareness that these rapid changes needed to be carefully followed by Christians outside mainland China. *Tripod*, since it began

publication fifteen years ago, has observed the changes in the life of the Catholic Church in China, providing both encouragement and at times, friendly criticism.

The growing number of Catholics, the recovery of church properties, the opening of seminaries, convents, efforts at liturgical renewal, the need for new methods of religious formation, the quality of life, the conditions in which most bishops, priests, seminarians and nuns live and work have all received ample coverage in *Tripod* and in other publications.

Today, the focus of many, especially among those interested in the China Church situation, is on the lack of unity and harmony among believers. This is a phenomenon which, unfortunately seems more marked among the Catholic communities than in other religious groups. Like many friends of China, I have refrained in the past from speaking about this unfortunate situation. Recently, the issue of the "underground" and the "official" church has come up for discussion more frequently. The present situation of the China Church is so complex that the church itself can rightly be referred to as a "pluralistic" church. "There is wide variety among Patriotic Association Catholics and underground Church members and even among the groups of Catholics in between."<sup>2</sup> This sad reality needs to be addressed but given the scope of this article, I can only touch upon it.

In speaking of the underground movement, we must distinguish two historical moments: before and after the Cultural Revolution. Many Catholics became dissenters after Mao Zedong began to impose an overdose of patriotic zeal on all religious believers. Initially, "some clergy and lay leaders attempted to compromise with the [patriotic] association, but very soon the Communists gave notice that this was not satisfactory and continued to exert even greater pressure."<sup>3</sup> But until the end of the Cultural Revolution the voices of those who dared to disagree with the official "policy of religious freedom" could hardly be heard. They were silenced, ostracized from the communities, and in many cases, punished with prison, labour camps and even death.<sup>4</sup>

In looking at the past fifteen years, it is difficult to pinpoint exactly what has led to the present situation. Recently, some have referred to the underground church as a "new group...with a clear confrontational posture." If we consider it

as such, it may not be historically correct to trace its birth back to the special exemptions granted by the Holy See to the Church in China in 1978.<sup>5</sup> When the Holy See extended "faculties" to China--as has been done in other exceptional situations--the reason was simply to help the Church survive the complete crackdown, by allowing religion to be practiced without following certain canonical laws of the Church. At the time, no one could begin to imagine the changes in Chinese politics, or even think of an "opposition church".

## **Growth and Contrasts**

After 1979, thinking that religion would eventually be allowed to grow in freedom, most clergymen and lay Catholics, even those who had spent years in labour camps, took the new course initiated by Deng Xiaoping seriously. A goodly number agreed to offer their services in the churches that were being opened. Others, though keeping apart, adopted an attitude of non-confrontation or silent acceptance of the situation. I was very much impressed with the attitude of Fr. Vincent Zhu of Shanghai when I met him in the early 80s shortly after his release from twenty-five years of detention. Although his personal convictions regarding the CCPA remained the same, he spoke with enthusiasm of the new social climate and his recovered freedom. For others the relief from the terrors of the Cultural Revolution was the occasion to venture forth on a new road. The decision, first taken by Bishop Joseph Fan Xueyan of Baoding, secretly to ordain bishops and priests outside the official structure, was a momentous one. The Holy See has often been accused of appointing the dozens of bishops ordained since then.<sup>6</sup> Actually, in most cases the choice of these non-conforming pastors was presented to Rome as a "fait accompli". Looking back on the developments of those years, we must admit that some of the choices were ill-advised and imprudent.

Obviously, Vincent Zhu and other Church leaders went too far in trusting that the basic attitude of the regime towards religion had really changed. In the short period between 1981-1983, Father Vincent along with several other priests and bishops, including Bishop Joseph Fan Xueyan (who had spent most of his life in detention), were rearrested and condemned again to long prison terms for "counter-revolutionary crimes".<sup>7</sup> The

harassment of the defiant church leaders, marked by brutal methods, also involved at times the repression of large sectors of the population by security forces and has continued unabated throughout the years.

The atmosphere in which Christianity and other religions have grown in China since 1979 has been marked by a mixture of confidence and fear. Many achievements of the official as well as the underground church have been made possible by political decisions which have also deeply conditioned the development of both groups. Someone intimately involved recently told me that in the Northeast several women representing a rural Catholic community which had no religious assistance whatsoever, kept petitioning the bishop of the official church in the provincial capital to send them a priest to visit them. The bishop finally told them that since the officers of the Religious Affairs Bureau did not favour the spread of religion, he could not heed their appeal. The women then went to another province to find a priest from the "underground". The community naturally joined the underground group.

Some time ago, at a provincial meeting of religious leaders in Sichuan, it was pointed out that, in those dioceses where the cadres in charge of the RAB and of the CCPA showed an understanding and cooperative attitude, no underground movement had developed, but where religious affairs were "managed" with ideological fervour and arrogance, underground groups were growing at an alarming rate. In the mid '80s I had the opportunity to meet with some Chinese prelates, recognized by the government but also anxious to preserve the integrity of the Catholic faith. I heard several express the conviction that cooperation with the CCPA would be much easier if it were staffed by persons more respectful of religious priorities.

Bishop Philip Ma Ji, soon after his appointment in 1987 as "official" bishop of Pingliang, Gansu Province, pleaded publicly for clerics who had gotten married and others who had abandoned traditional Church teaching to be removed from leadership posts in the three Catholic structures recognized by the government since 1980: the CCPA, the Administrative Commission and the Bishops' Conference. Those who hoped that his courageous statement would mark a turning point were disappointed. Although the law of celibacy was publicly restated by the official church, political expediency prevailed and several

church leaders, very unpopular with the faithful because of marriage or political orientation, retained their positions. Obviously, they were most useful for managing church affairs along government lines.

## **1988-1989: The Crucial Years**

The high hopes of 1988-89 were soon transformed into shocking disappointments for the whole of Chinese society. Many well meaning citizens and even Party members pressed for change in the exercise of authority, but the tragic events of 4 June revealed that the hardliners were still in charge.

Along religious lines the dynamism of many Protestant and Catholic communities served as encouragement that church affairs would in the end be managed without too much interference; they were under the impression that a new religious legislation which was more comprehensive and understanding would soon be enacted.

It was obvious that a debate was going on among the Party members entrusted with the supervision of religious affairs, particularly among the United Front members. As far as the Catholic Church was concerned, a new line had already been drawn up in the second half of 1988. The directives, known as Document No. 3, were approved by the United Front of the CCP and the RAB on 24 December 1988. It was issued by the Central Committee of the Party in February 1989. A draft of this important document, which was to remain secret, had been discussed at various levels during the second half of 1988. The meaning was clear from the title: "Stepping up Control over the Catholic Church to meet the New Situation".<sup>8</sup> Although the document makes some interesting concessions, it also shows a cool determination to keep the official church structure under tight control and to apply the hard line against underground groups. The text opens with a reference to "the new situation of reform and liberalization", without specifying anything further. Some could read in this a hint of an impending dialogue with the Holy See and the government wanting to be ready to negotiate from a position of strength. In December 1988, twenty-two bishops representing different provinces were said to have been called to Beijing and asked their opinion about resuming diplo-



matic relations with Rome; their answer was both positive and unanimous.

Some positive concessions were undoubtedly due to "gentle pressure" put on the political leaders by many of the bishops recognized by the government. These concessions included a recognition that even the Patriotic Association members of the Church had not been treated fairly regarding the return of church properties and means of self-support. Document No.3 also addressed the need to rethink the role and structure of the Catholic Patriotic Association (which in the past had proved "highly useful"). It stated that the Conference of Bishops, which still had no constitution of its own, should be strengthened and its power spelled out. It also decided that the Administrative Commission should be a simple committee under the Bishops' Conference.

The freedom, however, was rather limited since the Document also stated that "the supreme power structure in the Chinese Catholic Church would be the National Congress of Chinese Catholic Representatives". The National Congress was to be responsible for the election of the President, Secretary General and Executive Committee of the Bishops' Conference as well as for the reorganized CCPA. Document No.3 restates the need for ideological formation of the clergy and lay faithful, and underlines the government's firm decision to keep the Catholic Church independent of the Holy See. "The Vatican must not interfere in the internal affairs of our country, not even in religious matters."<sup>9</sup> As regards the underground, "effective measures" will be applied aiming at "uniting the majority, isolating the minority and hitting hard at the reactionary elements." Patriotic elements would be entrusted with the task of helping to win back the clandestine clergy, etc. In all this, the grip of the party was to be reinforced: "Party and government are to strengthen their leadership over the Catholic Church."

## **Party Leadership Strengthened**

Since 1989 the highest authorities of the Party and the State have concerned themselves with religious issues. According to Buddhist leader Zhao Puchu, "All of this is without precedent in the history of religious work since the inauguration of the People's Republic".<sup>10</sup>

Since then several instructions issued by the government were all intended to reinforce the leadership of the Party and to apply administrative control.<sup>11</sup>

There were veiled indications of the content of Document 3 during a national meeting of representatives of the three official bodies of the Catholic Church, held in Beijing in April 1989.

Raising the status of the Bishops' Conference and assigning a secondary role to the Church Administrative Committee were seen as good steps forward. In reporting on the gathering, the media mentioned the Bishops' Conference first, thus putting the CCPA in second place. The make up of the participants also provided a hopeful sign: 50 bishops, 10 priests and 15 lay people. Then the June 4th massacre occurred.

It took three years to draft the new constitution for the revised Catholic Church structures. These revisions were presented and approved during the Fifth Chinese Catholic Representatives Congress convened in Beijing, September 1992, under the official media and with the participation of political leaders.<sup>12</sup> All was done within the framework defined in Party Document No 3. In its new constitution the Bishops' Conference was described as the "structure which guides the affairs of the Catholic Church in China at the national level" (art. 2). But this definition is quickly voided by articles 4, 13, and 14, which state that the Bishops' decisions are completely controlled by the Chinese Catholic Representatives Congress which holds all statutory powers over the Bishops' Conference. Besides "important questions" should be decided together with the CCPA (art. 8). The approved statutes of the Bishops' Conference assure that the Chinese Church will strive to uphold "the principles of independence and self-government". There is no reference whatsoever to adhering to the apostolic tradition, accepting the universal Canon Law and no mention of recognizing the role of the Holy See. The composition of this Chinese Catholic Representatives Congress (272 delegates) was carefully designed to assure that there would be no surprises in the final decision making process. Of the 67 bishops invited 50 participated; there were also 13 Sisters, 101 priests and 91 laymen.

After the dramatic events of spring 1989, there emerged a pattern of more open confrontation with the dissenting groups within the churches. The setting up of an independent Catholic Bishops' Conference on November 21, 1989, marks a breaking

point. The security forces were swift to act against this daring decision of this small group of clerics. As radical positions get more and more entrenched, deplorable mistakes and cases of intolerance can be found at both ends of the spectrum of the Christian communities. Today, unfortunately, there is a lack of the spirit of forgiveness on both sides of the division<sup>13</sup> putting into jeopardy both the vitality and credibility of the Church. Without doubting the good faith and sincerity of most pastors who accept the limitations imposed on the structures of the official church, there is still a need for responsible Catholic leaders to answer some fundamental questions.<sup>14</sup>

The division afflicting the Catholic Church cannot be reduced simply to a dispute of loyalty to the Holy See. There must be sociological factors common to both Catholic and Protestant dissenting groups.<sup>15</sup> Yet, it does seem a bit too simplistic to condone the repressive measures by putting the blame squarely on the underground groups, as if the CCPA were more or less forced to harden its stance in order to counter the troublesome, disruptive underground forces. More likely the growth of underground groups and the birth of the new Bishops' Conference are due to the restrictions imposed by the official structures.

## **Reconsidering the Social Context**

To understand the roots of the problem it is necessary to examine, though briefly, the social context in which the churches in the People's Republic of China must operate.

The enlightened and courageous new policy introduced by paramount leader, Deng Xiaopeng, succeeded in putting China's economy in motion and accelerating the modernization drive. But the dramatic shift from a socialist economy model to a market economy has contributed to blurring previously honoured social ideals. Not surprisingly, sobriety and service to the people are now perceived by large sectors of Chinese society, and particularly by the youth, as out of fashion.

Since the early '80s, the authorities have periodically made efforts to counteract the negative fallout. Besides promoting nationwide campaigns such as the "Socialist Spiritual Civilization", they have emphasized ideological indoctrination, promoted the popularity of former hero models and taken drastic steps



to curb corruption. These campaigns have not been too successful. Negative trends persist and some speak openly of a crisis of confidence. The revolutionary movement on which the New China was built seems to have lost its moral strength and authority thus making leadership nearly impossible. The power is firmly in the hands of the government and the CCP which determines policy decisions, but President Jiang Zemin's recent exaltation of Confucian values would seem to be an admission that the official ideology may not be sufficient to thrust China into the new technological age.

In China one cannot expect to read or hear dissenting voices in the public media. Yet, according to the United Front policy, representatives from different groups in society--including some religious leaders--are present in the consultative and legislative structures at various levels. Without these structures it is possible, even for religious groups, to express legitimate criticism, reservations and concern. Unfortunately the prevailing attitude among the Catholics of the open church is one of total conformism.<sup>16</sup> But the voices of some well known non-Catholics help us to better understand the basic issues.

Old Zhao Puchu, chairman of the Chinese Buddhist Association, cannot be accused of not being patriotic, yet he has often felt the need to speak up in defense of religious rights. During the Political Consultative Conference held in Beijing last spring, his strong criticism of China's treatment of religion was distributed to all participants upon request of the deputies. The policy of religious freedom, already spelled out by Document 19 (1982), is compatible with the conviction expressed by Li Wei-han in 1961, that it intends to accelerate the decline of religious beliefs rather than promote their development. Zhao Puchu, speaking at a meeting in Henan on April 14, 1992, warned the cadres dealing with religions not to approach the problem in a negative way, "frequently...the rights of religious bodies and temples and churches are contravened," he complained. Zhao Puchu argued that the easiest thing for cadres supervising religions to do is "to promote the 'leftist' attitude, going so far as to spread atheistic propaganda among the masses of believers." Certain cadres, he added, think that "the masses of religious believers should be converted to unbelief and that the eradication of religion should be seen as a measure of the extent of consolidation of the socialist front."<sup>17</sup>

Bishop Ding Guangxun, chairman of the China Christian Council, is convinced that the presence of religion in China is not incompatible with socialism on both the political and moral level. This well known Protestant leader has often denounced the spread of a "wind of suppression" against religious activities. Recently, he reported that a number of Chinese scholars have come to discover the positive values of religions, by examining the phenomenon of the growing number of conversions to Christianity.<sup>18</sup>

Some Party members share the same conviction. A Hong Kong magazine recently reported that the CCP Central Commission on Discipline and Control had discovered that the number of Party members who had joined one of the five main religions is as high as 7 to 9 percent. What is striking about this figure is that 39.2 percent of these have a high school or university education; 27 percent are professionals or intellectuals and 18 percent live either in some major city or in the more developed eastern zone. The Commission on Discipline is quick to remind these comrades that they must resign or be expelled from the Party.<sup>19</sup>

## **Can There Be a New Start?**

The leadership of the People's Republic of China is often the target of criticism by the international media for its totalitarian, dictatorial and authoritarian rule and its violation of basic human rights. Knowledgeable critics of the system, like Hong Kong Professor Chang Kuo-sin,<sup>20</sup> however, are right in saying that "the Chinese government has displayed tremendous resolve and wisdom in meeting the many major problems endemic in the job of ruling 1.2 billion people...."

The way religious issues are handled in China is deeply conditioned by the prejudices inherited from old fashioned Marxism. This is making the task of governing such a huge country unnecessarily complicated. The 1982 Constitution (art. 36) acknowledged the right of each citizen to believe or not to believe in religion. This would seem to imply that each religion has its own nature and tradition. Adding that only "normal" religious activities can claim protection under the same constitutional law means that certain forms of religious activities can be targeted as "abnormal" or "illegal". At a meeting of

the United Front cadres on Hainan Island in November 1993, Party General Secretary Jiang Zemin is quoted as saying, "The purpose of implementing the party's policy of religious freedom and of increasing its supervision over religious affairs in accordance with the law was to influence religion to adapt itself to society." Unfortunately he added that although believers in religion were not required to abandon their "idealism, theism or religious faith" still religious organizations and doctrines "which do not fit in with socialism should be reformed."<sup>21</sup>

This was also the gist of a long article which appeared in the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, *Studies in World Religions* (1994, No. 4, p. 83). The article pointed out that religion must adapt to the developmental requirements of a socialist society; not the socialist society to religion. Fortunately, more constructive views are expressed from time to time by experts of the same institution.<sup>22</sup> Mr. Liu Peng, a member of the same Academy (*Tripod* XV, No. 88, July-August 1995, pp. 5-18) affirms that Church and State relations in China are one of "State dominance over religion." Liu interprets Zhao Puchu's suggestion that China should put into practice the separation of Church and State to mean that the state should give full rights to religious groups. He does not think, however, that the basic pattern of state dominance will change. He is also convinced that "fundamentally the government no longer believes that religion is a hostile power to be forcefully combated." On the other hand, "due to their constant and rapid development, autonomous religious groups cannot be eliminated." In light of this Liu believes that "the government may begin to communicate to some extent with the underground religious bodies."<sup>23</sup>

Many impartial observers wonder why China still looks upon religion with suspicion and why the party still deems it necessary to reinforce its control over it. Worldwide experience indicates that religion can be a valuable force contributing to the growth and health of society.<sup>24</sup> It is worth noting that the Pope, in his various messages to the Chinese people, has always stressed that it is the duty of Chinese Catholics--as Catholics everywhere-- to be good citizens and contribute to the welfare of their country. The Holy See has refrained from approving or condemning any group in the Chinese church. In fact it has never endorsed either publicly or privately the underground Bishops' Conference. The Holy Father's constant plea has been

for unity based on fidelity to Christ and on the need to acknowledge the primacy of the Pope in the universal Church.

Recently, the media have reported new openings in dialogue between the Vatican and Beijing in view of reaching an agreement over diplomatic relations (*South China Morning Post*, 30 September 1995). This may or may not be true. In any case, there should be no obstacle to this mutual diplomatic recognition. Over one hundred countries, big and small, which have formal diplomatic relations with the Holy See do not appear unduly worried about the Pope's role vis-a-vis the Bishops and the faithful in their own countries. Let us hope that the Chinese leaders will see in this worldwide experience and in the various Concordats signed by several countries, the possibility of finding a formula acceptable to the dignity of the Chinese nation and also respectful of the very nature of the Church.

## Notes

1. He had been chosen to head the Shanghai Church by the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association (CCPA) in April 1960, soon after the legitimate Bishop Ignatius Gong Pinmei had been sentenced to life imprisonment.
2. John Tong in the *Catholic Church in Modern China - Perspective*, (E. Tang and J.P. Wiest Eds.), New York, 1993, p. 25ff.
3. Ibid., p. 22.
4. See James T. Myers, *Enemies Without Guns*, New York, 1991, pp. 334, *passim*.
5. "It is undeniable that the present underground church took shape in late 1979, when the Vatican gave a series of exemptions to underground pastors... This extra-canonical permission was seen by some as a green light to build an opposition church...." Edmond Tang, in *The Catholic Church...*, p. 33.
6. The official CCP Document No. 3 of 23 February 1989 is explicit in attributing to the Pope the appointment of 25 clandestine bishops, by whom some 200 priests had since been ordained in different provinces.
7. *Amnesty International Report 1962*, London, p. 192, ff. *Amnesty International Report 1984*, 218ff.
8. *Cina Oggi* (suppl. of *Asia News*), Milan, 1 March 1989; *Eglises D'Asie* (Docum), Paris, No. 83, 16 March 1989.
9. It specifies: "Whatever may be the development of the relations between China and the Vatican, the Chinese Catholic Church will continue to follow the line of the triple autonomy and to elect and consecrate its own bishops."
10. He recalled: "Last December (1991), important speeches were made by Party General Secretary Jiang Zemin and Prime Minister Li Peng at the National Conference on Religious Work called by the State Council. At the beginning of last year (1992), General Secretary Jiang invited leaders of the five main religions to Zhongnanhai and made an important speech there. Afterwards the CCP Central Committee and the State Council



- issued the 'Statement...' (Doc. No. 6). Early this year (1992), General Secretary Jiang Zemin again invited leading persons of the five main religions to meet him in Zhongnanhai", *China Study Journal*, VII, no. 3, Dec. 1992, p. 27ff.
11. These include the important Document No. 6 of Feb. 1991. On the way to tackle particular problems with regard to all religious groups; two orders (No. 144 & 145) signed by Premier Li Peng in January 1994 to "Manage Religious Activities of Foreigners: and "Places for Religious Activities", and a further document on "Registration Procedures for Venue of Religious Activities" (May, 1994). A growing number of local Regulations is also being issued, at provincial or lower level, all aiming at tightening control over religious activities.
  12. *UCA News*, Hong Kong, 21 Sept. 1989; *Eglises d'Asie*, Sept. 1992; *Cina Oggi*, 15 Feb. 1993.
  13. John Tong, in *The Catholic Church in Modern China - Perspectives*, p. 25.
  14. See Aloysius B. Chang's theological reflections in *Tripod*, No. 86, March-April 1995, p. 34ff.
  15. *The Catholic Church in Modern China - Perspectives*, p. 38.
  16. At the National Conference of September '92, contrary to the expectation of many, Bishop Zong Huaide was formally appointed to head both the Bishops College and the CCPA, position which he had covered for several years as Acting President.
  17. A summary of the Zhao Puchu's remarks, reprinted in the Protestant *Tian Feng* magazine, has been translated in *China Study Journal*, op.cit. pp. 26-32.
  18. Cf. *Bridge*, Hong Kong, n. 60, Aug. 1993, p. 4. The progress made by many Chinese social scientists in reassessing the role of religion was indeed helped by the new approach given to scientific work by senior leader Deng with his famous words: "searching truth from facts."
  19. For this study conducted by *Cheng Ming* in May '95, cf. *CNCR*, 2 June, 1995; *Asia News*, No. 6, 1995, *Eglise d'Asie*, 1 June, 1995.
  20. Mr. Chang thinks that "like totalitarianism, communism disappeared with the death of Mao Zedong in 1976 and China's present rulers are showing no hesitation in shedding it", *Hong Kong Standard*, 11 Sept. 1995.
  21. It is even more disturbing to find that the news report of such speech by Secretary Jiang, which appeared in the *People's Daily* (6 February, 1994), was reproduced without commentary in the official Catholic Church journal in Chinese *Catholic Church in China*, 1994, No. 1. pp. 25-26.
  22. See Mr. Zhou Xinping's lecture at the symposium of the Committee on Religion at the Chinese Political Consultative Conference, June 18, 1992, in *CSJ*, VIII, No. 1 (Aug. 1993).
  23. He adds: "The power of the underground Churches is so strong that the government has to work through organizations like the Trade Union, the Young Pioneers and the Women Association, as well as the Religious Affairs Bureau and public security sectors, in order to deal with the issue comprehensively." According to Liu Peng, "It is very hard for the government to stomach the situation".
  24. Even in China, a leader was quoted two years ago as saying that the rate of crime is lower in strongly Christian areas (*Time* magazine, 10/5/93, p. 67).
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