

A Discussion with Ye Sheng, A Fellow Catholic

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I was happy to see in the latest September-October issue of *Tripod* the article, "We Must Understand" by Ye Sheng, written in response to my own "Can Mainland China's 'Official Church' Still be Called 'Catholic'?" (*Tripod*: March-April 1995). While Ye's seeming disregard of my original intention took me somewhat by surprise, I am still delighted to have this opportunity to engage in an exchange of ideas with someone from the mainland church whom I see as a kindred spirit in pursuit of the same goals and objectives as myself. My own response falls into three categories: first, a clarification, then a reflection on the three church documents at issue and, finally, some random thoughts on Ye's essay as a whole.



Clarification

I made an effort in the preamble of my original essay to state clearly that my theological reflections were limited to the structural and institutional features of the official church on the mainland, specifically related to the three important official church documents promulgated in 1992 and 1993. Ye himself acknowledges that "these three official documents do contain questions of grave concern."¹ While I thought it fitting at the time to point out the value of raising such questions concerning structures and institutions,² in no way did I intend to lay such questions to rest. It was out of my own personal involvement in working for reunification of the Chinese Catholic Church that I felt it necessary to mention "a challenge from within".³ And does not Ye himself indicate in his response his own recognition

of the importance of such a question? I meant merely to point out certain inadequacies in the original written documents. And my intention was simply to make an appeal not to allow these three documents to become an impasse in resolving questions of ecclesiology, but if it should happen despite the warning, then let those responsible for creating the impasse work out a way to resolve it.

Ye quotes from another article of mine where I wrote in more detail about an ecclesiological impasse in the Chinese Catholic Church (*Tripod*: May-June 1992), and he asks: "Has not Father Chang himself been caught up in what he himself describes as a 'legal impasse'?"⁴ First of all, I think that these three church documents are not concerned merely with matters of church law. The two promulgated in 1992 also relate directly to the unity and catholicity of the Church. I took pains to point this out in my preliminary remarks in the original article. While matters raised in earlier debates were different from those now under consideration, I do accept the view expressed in Ye Sheng's question when he asked: "Will not the use of legal documents conceived under normal circumstances to judge those formulated in a highly stressful situation only cause more confusion and stress to those under such pressure?"⁵

Reflections on the Three Documents

The three documents under discussion, according to Ye, were written by and for those living in an abnormal situation. He also states: "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 non-public churches find unacceptable, and which they work constantly at trying to correct."⁶ Now I do not know whether the majority of Catholics mentioned by Ye as belonging to the official or unofficial church are now living in an "abnormal situation" or not. If they are, it follows that my words should not lead to "more and more confusion and stress" on their part; but if they are not, then one wonders if this "confusion and stress" might not arise from an "abnormal situation" of their own making, since the impasse mentioned has existed in the mainland church from a very early date.

What I find more interesting, however, is Ye's section on

the "Background of the Church Documents".

My own theological reflections were based on *The New Catechism of the Catholic Church*, *The Documents of Vatican II*, *The New Code of Canon Law* and Pope Paul VI's exhortation *Evangelization in the Modern World*. The dogmas and theological teachings found in these documents are by no means new. Papal primacy, the authority of an ecumenical council, the catholicity of the church, the authority of diocesan bishops, the appointment of bishops, all these teachings and more are present in the Scriptures, or have already been defined by Vatican I, or are to be found in the old Code of Canon Law (1917).

Vatican II revived and revitalized the traditional notion of a Bishops' Conference, something the mainland church was already aware of during the 1980's. Did the three official church documents somehow manage to forget this fact? The Catholic Church's deposit of faith has always contained something old and something new, but the decrees of the Magisterium defining its constitutive elements date back to its very early history and they continue to find universal acceptance by Catholics in our present day. If this were not so, we could hardly call ourselves the true Church of Christ.

I agree fully with Ye's assertion that the three church documents were written under pressure and shaped by political realities. As I mentioned in my own article: "The structural and institutional situation of the 'official' church on mainland China should not continue on forever, despite the continuing massive pressure of the political situation there. Otherwise there is a real danger that the present 'special' situation will, in time, become normal and permanent."⁷ It is for this reason that I framed the title of my article as a question and not as an assertion of fact; and this is also why I offered no resolution of the questions raised in my concluding remarks.

Ye went on to raise a question about "acting in good conscience within the context of specific concrete situations". I admit that I did not deal with this directly, but rather, I limited my focus to the main issue at hand, namely, the three official church documents. It was not my intention to judge anyone in individual situations, nor did I wish to get bogged down in concrete particulars. However, if Ye Sheng is interested in my views on this subject, I refer him to another article of mine "Fundamental Attitude of the Bridge Church" which appeared in

the January-February 1991 edition of *Tripod*.⁸ Speaking generally, let me state here that I do not think my words will in any way "cause some Catholics who hitherto have been leading a peaceful and openminded spiritual life to falter, putting them under uncalled for psychological pressure." The problems I dealt with in my article are ones that these good people will seldom encounter in the daily practice of their religious beliefs.

In short, my words are not as weighty as Ye would suggest. As to the question of whether I am adding "stress or confusion" to those already under pressure, or am causing the present "impasse" to become even more of an "impasse", my answer is in the negative. First of all, the present impasse has been around for a long time; secondly, my essay is meant only to serve as a challenge to those who framed the official church documents, to urge and support them in finding a way out of "the present structural impasse".⁹ The overriding question is, then, how are we to remove ourselves from a dead-end situation, one that the three church documents have helped to get us into?

Ye's remarks in the section on "Politics and the Sino-Vatican Impasse"¹⁰ are quite forceful. I am not going to touch on this matter here, but only wish to ask my colleague a question. Is the Sino-Vatican impasse directly linked to "the publication of compliant documents by the official church and to a whole series of other problems: 'above ground' and 'underground' disputes, arguments about legitimacy and illegitimacy, barriers to dialogue, reconciliation and unity?"¹¹ And if so, in what ways, and, even further, what specific and practical approaches can be taken to help resolve it?

Random Thoughts and Reflections

Ye's section on the "Never to be Forgotten Experience of the Chinese Church" traces its history from the time of the Rites Controversy to the present day by using snippets of history and brief critiques of persons ancient and modern, native and foreign, religious and secular, who are all trotted out and put on display to be evaluated, interrogated and exhorted in the gravest of terms. Being bombarded by such a variety of literary genres leaves me breathless and feeling inadequate to cope with it all. It would take a company of research specialists to get to the truth of the many complex and controversial topics which Ye

mentions in passing. And even after they have expended much effort and time, it would still be difficult to bring the work to a satisfactory completion. However, reading between the lines, we can see that Ye's article is, in the end, a plea to Rome: "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 position? Chinese Catholics live on the horns of two dilemmas, namely, between Rome and Beijing, between faith and politics. Of course the normalization of relations between China and the Vatican is fundamental to solving all these problems."¹²

Finally, after reading Ye Sheng's conclusion, I hesitate to make any specific or concrete comments, but since it was my article that initiated this exchange, I would like to say that I share his hope and I second his concluding words addressed to the official Chinese Church on the mainland: "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 the 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."¹³

Thus we may see from Ye Sheng's hope, which issues from his faith in Christ, that the future of the church in mainland China has already been placed in the hands of God.

Endnotes

1. Chang, A.B., "Can Mainland China's 'Official' Church Still Be Called 'Catholic'?" *Tripod*, #86 (March-April 1995), p. 34.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 34.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 34.
4. Ye Sheng, "We Must Understand," *Tripod*, No. 89 (Sept-Oct. 1995), p. 35.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 35.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 28.
7. *Op. Cit.*, Chang, pp.34-35.
8. Chang, A.B., *Tripod* 61 (Jan-Feb. 1991), pp. 6-16.
9. Chang, A.B., "Can Mainland China's 'Official' Church Still Be Called 'Catholic'?" p. 34.
10. Ye Sheng, *op. cit.*, pp. 32-33.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 33.
12. *Ibid.*, pp. 37-38.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 39.