

The Church in China

Reflections of a young priest

by Joseph Peter Xu Honggeng

(The following article is a talk presented at the United States Catholic China Bureau's Fifteenth National Catholic China Conference. The Conference was held at Mont Marie Conference Centre in Holyoke, Mass. USA; March 15-17, 1996. The talk is used with permission.)

I am very grateful to the United States Catholic China Bureau for giving me this opportunity to share my personal experience of faith, my opinion of the Church in China and my hope for the future. In recent years, many people have expressed concern for the Church in China and have provided her with support and help. Many have also sought to know and to understand her better. In this presentation I want to offer a personal perspective of the Church in China. My reflections include the following four areas:

- I. a brief overview of the Church in China;
- II. her advantages and disadvantages
- III. my own future work and
- IV. her most difficult problems

I. A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF THE CHURCH IN CHINA

In the beginning of the second half of the 20th century, a great change took place in China. The Communist Party came to power. At that time and during the years that followed, especially during the Cultural Revolution, 1966-1976, the Church in China experienced a major change. The Cultural Revolution destroyed nearly everything. There were no places to worship nor were the faithful allowed to assemble to express their faith publicly. It seemed to people that everything had changed, and there was no hope for religious life in the future.

Then in 1979, an amazing thing happened--people in China could once again express their faith in public. During their first return to public worship and prayer most of the people were so happy that they

were moved to tears. Thanks be to God. This could happen not because of any power from people, but because of God's work and design. There is nothing impossible with God.

Beginning in 1979, many Christians began going to Church and many churches reopened; others were rebuilt. As we know, the Church in China faced a number of difficulties in reopening and rebuilding her churches. The people began with nothing, but through the efforts of the faithful leaders in the church, we can now see many marvelous and beautiful churches everywhere in China. For instance, in my own parish in Suzhou city, the faithful and the priest first used a table borrowed from a family to celebrate Mass on Christmas in 1980. Since then the faithful and the priest have made a beautiful new altar and have had a meaningful dedication ceremony of the church. If you go to China and visit this church, you will see something so beautiful as to be beyond description. This means that the Church has changed a great deal. There are many similar situations throughout all of China.

Besides the reopening and rebuilding of churches there was another significant change in the Church of China-- the shortage of priests to serve the Christians. As the Bible says: "the harvest is rich, but workers are few". To deal with this situation, bishops and old priests began to foster vocations in every diocese, to recruit and form young people for the priesthood. China has founded many minor and major seminaries since 1982. From 1986 until now, more than six hundred and fifty seminarians have been ordained priests and more than one thousand four hundred and fifty seminarians are studying in various seminaries. Young women are also being formed to be religious Sisters. Because of the vast and urgent need in China, both bishops and rectors have, in a relatively short time, trained many young men and women to be priests and Sisters. On the one hand, this is an excellent thing to help meet the needs of both the aging clergy and religious and the growing number of Christians. However, on the other hand, the young priests and Sisters have not had a long enough period of training or religious education. In addition, due to the historical and political situation in China, the elder priests and Sisters have a somewhat limited knowledge of contemporary theology, philosophy and religious formation. They have their own experience and what they themselves studied in their time. Many factors have

brought about the current growth of clergy and religious in China. The Church outside and the world, however, have changed and developed at a great pace. The Church especially has changed so much since the Second Vatican Council. Bishops and rectors want and need to form new professors and new leaders for the Church in China. As a result, bishops and rectors have decided to send young Sisters, seminarians, priests and some lay people abroad to study in countries such as the United States, Germany, France, Italy, Belgium, the Philippines, and Hong Kong. Chinese bishops, clergy and religious can now better understand the Church in China. We hope to renew her and give her strength so that she can walk together with the universal Church.

II. THE ADVANTAGES AND DISADVANTAGES OF THE CHURCH IN CHINA

Advantages of the Church in China

The Faith of the Christians

In this section, I want to share three advantages and three disadvantages of the present-day Church in China. First of all, her major advantage is the faith of her Christians. This is a fact, a truth, that we cannot deny and that we need to appreciate. The faithful kept their faith so strong through their difficult times. They persevered and developed it. This, no doubt, was something of a miracle, the gift of the Holy Spirit. I experienced this miracle. When I was a young boy, I saw my mother make the Sign of the Cross and pray in silence. At that time, as a young boy of seven or eight years old, I did not understand what my mother did. Now, I appreciate it very deeply. I saw my mother pray in silence during the time of China's Cultural Revolution. Although she and her family had suffered, she continued to keep faith and hope that God would be with her and her family. I know now in looking back, that her faith was the seed of my vocation. How many parents in their families continued to pray and keep their faith alive during those difficult times!

After 1979, when public worship was once again allowed, Christians began to express their faith openly. Another example of the strong faith of China's Christians was revealed to me after my ordination to the priesthood when I was working in a parish. I was

moved by the faithful who had deep faith in their lives and in their hearts. Every Sunday the faithful encouraged me to reflect on my own faith. They walked a long way, a few hours, to church to participate in the Mass. They deeply trust in God and heartily depend on God. That is why the faith will be handed down from generation to generation. I saw many old grandmothers and grandfathers bring their grandchildren to church. And I also saw how they taught their grandchildren to make the Sign of the Cross and to pray the Hail Mary and the Our Father. My heart was touched very deeply. This is something I will always remember.

The number of vocations

The number of vocations is the second advantage of the Church in China. There has been an increase in vocations since 1982 when the Church re-opened her seminaries and convents. The increase is due to the faith of the people and God's grace. Many young boys and girls answered God's calling. Group after group went to seminaries and convents. In some families, parents offered two sons or one son and one daughter or two daughters. This phenomenon is a testimony to the work of the Holy Spirit because these young men and women know the situation of the Church in China. "The harvest is rich, but workers are few." They followed God's vocation to reap God's harvest. Vocations in China keep on increasing. We Chinese should always give thanks to God who protects us, supports us, and takes care of us.

... Young Chinese people are very much interested in religion and the Church. They are longing for spiritual food because neither the Cultural Revolution nor today's worship of money can alleviate their hunger

Interest in religion and the Church

The third advantage comes from outside the Church. I would say that young Chinese people are very much interested in religion and the Church. They are longing for spiritual food because neither the Cultural Revolution nor today's worship of money can alleviate their hunger. Many young Chinese people feel a spiritual emptiness and are

looking for the true meaning of life. They want to find it, capture it and nourish it. A number of them go to different religious places and churches to seek and to find the meaning of life. This hunger of China's youth is both an advantage and an opportunity for the Church to preach the Gospel and witness to the truth that will help these young people believe that they are God's children. In this way God may lead them into the Church and help them realize their true destiny.

Disadvantages in the Church in China

The desire for money

While the Church in China has her advantages, she also has her disadvantages. Money is the first and foremost challenge to the Church. There is a policy to develop the economy in China. The government allows a few people to get rich first. Many people plunge themselves into the action of finding and making money and becoming rich. As we know money is not bad in itself, but people always tend to think of it, want to get it and often abuse it. When such a trend and its temptations get hold of people, the results are not so good either for them or for the country. If people think that money is the center of their lives, that money can do everything and change everything, then they become the slaves of money and worship it as a god.

The drive for making money has influenced and can continue to influence the church because the faithful are human beings. They have the same weaknesses as others. They have the same temptations as others. I know that many faithful already have been corrupted by this situation. They have forgotten the true God.

The weakening of education

While the economy is developing, education is weakening. This situation is very dangerous for the future and I consider it to be the second disadvantage facing the Church in China. We know that if people do not have sufficient education and the knowledge that comes with it, they cannot develop themselves and will remain ignorant of life and what life can offer them.

For instance in my hometown many children, because of the economy and because their parents do not have enough money to

support their study, have lost the opportunity for an education. This is an unfortunate and rather widespread phenomenon throughout China. Although the government spends a lot of money on education for poor children and poor families each year and calls on rich and charitable people to support the poor, the situation has not disappeared in China. This national weakness cannot but influence the Church. The Church faces this situation everywhere. Many children of the faithful do not have a good education. The challenge to the Church is that the younger generation will face their future with little knowledge of life and therefore with an inability to discover the meaning of life that the faith of their grandparents supports and upholds. Thus, the younger generation could suffer a loss of faith leaving them with little more than the name Christian.

Deficient understanding of mission

I would express the third disadvantage facing the Church in China today as the Christian community's deficient understanding of mission. From the very beginning of the Church's establishment in China, the Chinese faithful have had a passive understanding of mission. They felt it was sufficient just to receive the faith and keep it in their lives and families. They didn't have a strong consciousness of the Church's missionary dimension. The faithful in China kept the faith in a more personal manner. They did not see the faith as giving them both a right and a duty to spread the Kingdom of God or to participate more actively and publicly in the universal mission of the Church.

The two disadvantages discussed above surrounding the economy and education, are, so to speak, outside the Church. The deficient understanding of mission, however, is inside the Church. In recent years, many bishops, priests and Sisters in China have talked about the mission of the faithful and asked them to learn and to grow in understanding the meaning of mission and the meaning of Baptism. Although in some places, the faithful participate in parish ministry, the results indicate that the faithful need more encouragement. Therefore, the leaders of the Church in China are becoming more aware of their need to educate and encourage the lay faithful to take on a more active and positive role in the Church.

III. THE CHURCH'S MOST DIFFICULT PROBLEMS

Unity and relationship

The church in China must confront the disadvantages and weaknesses identified above which, are both from inside and outside the Church. If the Church is to learn from and overcome these weaknesses, the Chinese faithful and Church leaders will have to struggle against them with courage and patience.

The Church in China has to resolve her most difficult problems, namely, those surrounding unity and relationship. By unity I mean both unity of the Church within China and her participation in the universal Church. By relationship I mean relationship between the Church and government in China, that is, between the Vatican and the government in China, and between Christianity and Chinese culture. Thus, the problems surrounding unity and relationship are two-dimensional.

“There is one shepherd and one flock.” We are one Church founded by Jesus Christ. Whether in the United States, in Europe, in Africa or in China, we are one body in Christ. I wish to state strongly that there is one Church in China. This one Church lives, has survived and continues, but presently contains two parts. In other words, there are currently two parts to the one Church in China. As we know they are referred to as the official church and the unofficial church, or the public church and the underground church. We, the Chinese faithful, both in China and outside China often face, confront and cannot escape this fact: that today the one Church in China contains two parts.

This situation is difficult to describe and explain clearly because of the many historical and political factors that have brought us to this point. However, I want to say again, there is one Church in China with two parts or two groups. We need unity. We need union of the two parts into one body. The foundation of unity is faith, hope and love. Only with these three virtues can unity of the Church in China become a reality. The leaders of the two parts should know it is time to sit down and talk. It is time for them to face the difficulties and the challenges common to both parts of the one Church in China. It is

time that both parts exercise together their rights and obligations to build and develop the Church of Christ. It is time to proclaim the same Good News with one voice in China. It is time to unite.

The unity spoken of above, that is, uniting the two parts of the church in China, represents only one dimension of the problem. The other dimension we must address is concerned with the unity between the Church in China and the universal Church. Although the Church in China has developed quickly in recent years, the relationship between the Church in China and the universal Church is not exactly normal. This is due to many factors that are similar in nature to those mentioned above, namely, how political and historical realities have impacted religious development.

A certain percentage of bishops in China are in communion with the Holy Father, but they have done this in secret. I think it is time for this relationship and unity to become public. How can this public reconciliation be realized? In recent years many bishops, priests, and faithful both in China and abroad have exerted much effort towards bringing about this unity. Pope John Paul II has consistently supported and encouraged the Church in China to move toward unity and reconciliation in China as well as in unity towards the universal Church. He has always asked the Chinese faithful to unite and enter into one flock led by one shepherd. In January 1995 in Manila, he talked to China saying, "Everyday I pray for you, asking the Lord to help you remain united as living members of the one mystical body of Christ." At the end of his speech, he said, "I earnestly invite you all to seek paths to communion and reconciliation, paths which draw their light and inspiration from the truth himself: Jesus Christ." The Holy Father talked to bishops of Taiwan on August 19, 1995 saying, "All need to move; all have to turn towards Jesus Christ, Who calls us to unity and to communion. Everyone must discover the steps which lead to reconciliation. Everyone must bring along his whole self, his past, his moments of courageous witness and his moments of weakness, his present sufferings and his hopes for a better future."

Now I wish to address those concerns surrounding relationship. As stated above I consider the following aspects of relationship as crucial: the relationship between the government in China and the Church in China; the relationship between the government of China

and the Vatican; and the relationship between Christianity and Chinese culture.

Church and State relations

In the article "Church and State Relations In China: Characteristics and Trends" (*Tripod*, No.88, 5-18) Liu Peng explains that the relationship between Church and State is difficult to define clearly. It is complex. Generally speaking, the Church in China is independent and is not dependent upon the State. As independent, the Church can exercise her rights to do many things such as reopen and rebuild churches, found seminaries and convents, preach the Gospel, and offer social services. However, it is my observation that the Church is not one hundred percent independent, rather it has limited independence. Phenomena such as government leaders sometimes interfering with the Church in China, misleading the Church, or sometimes wanting to control the Church all indicate a lack of clarity in regard to Church and State relationships. That is why I emphasize the difficulties and the necessity to establish clear boundaries in the Church-State relationships. I think that the leaders of Church and government should understand clearly their own rights and duties. Church leaders are to be concerned with matters of the Church, while leaders of government are to be concerned with government affairs. Leaders of both entities cannot confuse their respective responsibilities.

The Chinese State and the Vatican

The problem is not just between the Church of China and the Chinese government, but also between the Chinese government and the Vatican. This relationship is also complex and involves many factors, having political, religious, historical, and diplomatic dimensions. I am not familiar with all that is involved, yet I, along with many others who care about this relationship, hope it can be resolved as quickly and as smoothly as possible. I hope again through the efforts of specialists that the government of China and the Vatican can establish diplomatic relations similar to those of other countries.

The Church and Chinese Culture

Deepening the relationship between Christianity and Chinese culture is another challenge to the Church in China. An important aspect of the Second Vatican Council is its emphasis on inculturation. Pope Paul VI and Pope John Paul II have stressed this need many times in their speeches and pastoral letters. Chinese culture has developed over the millennia and possesses a deep and profound spirit that has been instilled in the people of China. Sometimes even for Chinese people, her culture is not easy to understand.

*The Chinese people will see clearly
that the Catholic Church is really
a Chinese community
that can proudly extend beyond itself
and offer its uniqueness
to enrich the Universal Church*

One of the Church's major tasks is to incarnate herself into every culture. The Chinese faithful should have a good relationship with other people. The Church can change some of her ways of doing things. She can accommodate her language and liturgy into the vernacular and adapt herself to Chinese ritual worship. Then the Chinese people will no longer perceive the Catholic Church as foreign or her members as foreigners. They will see that the Chinese faithful are their brothers and sisters. The Chinese people will see clearly that the Catholic Church is really a Chinese community that can proudly extend beyond itself and offer its uniqueness to enrich the Universal Church. Secure and proud in its integration and inculturation, the Catholic Church in China also has a responsibility to enter into inter-religious dialogue with the other major religions in China: Buddhism, Taoism, Islam and Protestantism. Such dialogue will enhance the rich traditions and collective wisdom in the mutual quest for God. I realize this communication does not easily happen, but we, Chinese faithful, should do our best. This is a good way to give testimony of our faith and to make other Chinese understand that Christianity can be rooted

in our Chinese culture. Then the Church can be truly called the local church.

As we have seen, unity and relationship are difficult to achieve yet essential for the Chinese Church and her faithful. It is especially important for her young faithful, future generations and young Church leaders. However, the Church in China needs to face up to these situations, learn from them and overcome them. If the Church has unity within herself and good relationships outside herself, then she can continue to preach the Good News and prosper.

IV. MY OWN FUTURE WORK

Preaching the Gospel

Now I want to share my proposals and plans for my own future work. What can I do in China after my education in the United States? I know that I will work in a parish or teach in a seminary. Whether my ministry takes me to a parish or to a seminary, my thoughts and goals remain similar.

If I work in a parish, I see my first task as preaching the Gospel in my parish and surrounding community. This is the duty, right and privilege accorded me by my priesthood according to the documents of the Second Vatican Council, Canon Law, and the New Catholic Catechism of the Church. A priest's first task is to preach God's salvific message--proclaiming the good news to everyone. This is Jesus Christ's call and commission to his disciples. There are no conditions nor can we refuse it. We know that China is a missionary country. It needs missionaries, but there is a little hope for foreign missionaries to go to China to do the work of mission. There is a way to solve this problem. Chinese bishops, priests and Sisters need to assist the Chinese faithful to understand that preaching the Gospel is also their baptismal right and gift. They need to animate the faithful, help them to realize that Jesus Christ also calls them to preach the good news to their neighbors. The Chinese faithful need to be encouraged to believe that the Church in China needs them to plant and harvest God's garden.

Sisters need to assist the Chinese faithful to understand that preaching the Gospel is also their baptismal right and gift. They need to animate the faithful, help them to realize that Jesus Christ also calls them to preach the good news to their neighbors. The Chinese faithful need to be encouraged to believe that the Church in China needs them to plant and harvest God's garden.

Educating the faithful

I see my second most important work in a parish as education of the faithful. According to my experience, there are two ways of approaching this ministry. One way is educating through homilies. I can help the faithful to know and understand their right, duty and privilege to do missionary work. Another way is for me to found and develop mission groups. I can find and encourage young, educated people to join these groups. I can educate them in such a way that they then can help and teach others. A saying comes to mind: "One for one in a year." This means that first I establish the mission groups; the next year the mission groups expand into other groups and convert their listeners. You may say that missionary work carried out this way is too modest or too slow. You may be right but in this way the work would progress year after year and every parish would have this kind of mission group. I strongly believe that with patience, hard work and perseverance many people over the years will join the Church. If the faithful and church leaders respectfully and cordially act with the support and grace of the Holy Spirit, led by Jesus Christ, the Gospel can spread to every corner in China.

Teaching in the Seminary

If I am asked to teach in a seminary, I would like to help seminarians understand the spirit of the Second Vatican Council, the challenges facing the Catholic Church, the task of the Church, the vocation of the Church, and the meaning of their vocation. Seminarians will become spiritual leaders in the Church, fellow apostles and disciples of Jesus. It is God who elects them from among the faithful and who gives them their special mission vocation. I, as their teacher, would want to instill in these young men the meaning of their call and the necessity to be rooted in God's

of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and I am always with you until the end of the age.” This mandate of Jesus is our missionary task. I hope to be able to communicate this to the seminarians as well as my understanding of mission as informed by my study and personal experience. My aim is to help them serve as missionaries in their parishes. As good missionaries, they can educate and convert people to the faith and incorporate them into the One Body of Christ.

V. CONCLUSION

In this brief presentation on the Church in China, I have shared with you my personal opinions and my hopes. As Christians, we have reason based on faith to have hope in the future. If we lose hope we lose everything. Hope can develop our faith and faith can support our hope. The faithful of the Church in China, especially my family’s and my neighbors’ faith, encourage me to have this hope. I have this hope, and I am here to share my hope with you. It is my hope that with faith and trust, the Church in China will grow and develop in the future, that she will maximize her advantages and minimize her disadvantages. To do this, the Church in China needs your help, your support, your daily prayers and your love.

I wish to conclude with a Chinese adage, *pau zhuan yin yu*, This mean “to cast a brick to attract jade.” I hope that my few common place remarks by way of introducing you to the situation of the Church in China may attract you so that together we can move toward the future with confidence in God and with mutual respect and hope.

Ancestor Veneration within the Catholic Church, written by Beverly Butcher, published in the March-April issue of *Tripod*, was not the last chapter of her doctoral dissertation as mentioned in the Editor’s page, but another article also written by her and used with the permission of the *Asian Dictionary of Christianity*. *Tripod* regrets the error.