

Down through the Centuries: The Life of the Church in China

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For centuries the Church in China has resembled a blade of grass, bent a hundred times but never broken, found in an environment without sufficient sunshine, air or water, unafraid of strong winds and downpours, stubbornly growing in gravel or out of cracks in some abandoned ruin, weak and delicate but strong in determination. Like this blade of grass, the Church in Mainland China never fails to evoke many feelings, often contradictory; but neither does it fail to fascinate and comfort. The Church in mainland China which not so long ago came back to life is spreading and thriving despite the presence of hidden dangers and obstacles strewn along its path.

The Situation of the Mainland Church Today

The lifting of the prohibition against religion brought a renewal of faith-life in Catholic communities everywhere. It initiated a decade of growth that saw the reopening of seminaries and convents, the restoration of old churches and the erection of many new ones in cities and towns throughout the land. While it can be said that we Catholics have not yet achieved the fullness of our former freedom, we no longer need be wary of being seen attending Mass or praying in public places. And yet some feel that the image of the Mainland Church still has not regained its former vitality, that it has not yet recovered the flavor of its past, especially those years of the 1930's and 1940's when it was seen to flourish with more spirit and elan. It is true that external conditions have changed drastically since those days, most notably the communist government's penchant for interfering in the church's internal affairs, and, correspondingly, the imposition of restrictions on its activities. But granting this, what is to be said of the church

itself? Are we to be absolved totally of any blame for bringing us to our present impasse? This is something worth pondering quietly and without fear.

We are well-versed in how racial prejudice has been an obstacle to social development in such countries as the United States and South Africa, and the harm that has been done by civil disorders and bloodshed as a result. In China, to date, any news of civil unrest among our 56 distinct ethnic groups would come as a surprise to the ordinary man or woman in the street. And yet, we Chinese are not exempt from the strong emotions aroused by racial and ethnic fears, nor are we immune to the negative results of racial conflict that have happened in other countries. Yet, despite our vulnerability, we risked opening our doors to the outside influences of other nations after decades of isolation and have even invited them to come in. We Chinese continue to delight in the science and technology that have flowed in from the West, and we also have allowed certain aspects of European and American culture to enter our marketplaces. Despite this example of accepting diversity and tolerating difference, we still find among members of our own Catholic church an unwillingness to open our doors to welcome non-believers. Perhaps these people who refuse to welcome the stranger were originally well-intentioned. Perhaps they were motivated by a realistic fear of spiritual contamination, that opening the doors would, in fact, allow the dregs of humanity to invade our sanctuaries and pollute the sacred premises, as if the mere presence of non-Catholics would cause the corruption of our Catholic doctrine and the desecration of our holy places. No matter how noble the original intent, it is hard to forgive the stupidity that continues to uphold a policy so fraught with dire consequences for our future. Do these people not see how they have become obstacles in the way of those seeking truth and coming to know God?

Intellectuals Dissatisfied with Present Day Society

It is common knowledge that in recent years people in general, and especially intellectuals, have expressed a growing dissatisfaction with the present society, which they see as corrupt, and with the administration of a government which seems to have more than its share of incompetent officials. Intellectuals admit they suffer from a spiritual void, a growing sense of uneasiness and restlessness in their lives. Not knowing where to turn, they seek answers from books, both Chinese and Western, in the hope of discovering a way out of the present malaise. They are anxious to find new answers to old problems, especially a solution for China's endemic poverty and backwardness. Their reading often leads them to discover the profound influence the Catholic Church has had on Western nations in the development of their respective economies, art, and cultures. They are surprised at their discovery, and find it difficult to understand the reasons why the Church has played such an important role in the development of civilizations. How can this institution, which is viewed with such distrust and treated with such hostility by the governments of socialistic countries, still remain so firmly rooted in the developed nations of the West? They search for answers, and their search often takes them beyond their libraries to the doors of the Church itself. They come looking for knowledge and a better understanding of the nature of the Church, and how are they received? All too often they are met with discourtesy and suspicion, and the door is slammed in their faces. After this kind of reception, it is natural that such people in their quest for truth would look elsewhere. And who is to blame them?

On the occasions when I attended Protestant services to hear the sermons and sing the hymns, or when I have called on the pastor of a Protestant congregation, I have always been given a warm and courteous welcome. And yet at the doors of my own church, I am sorry to say, I have experienced more than once a cold and uninviting reception. I remember going with two friends to attend services at East Church in Beijing on Easter Sunday in 1992. The great doors of the church were opened wide to receive the large crowd that surged forward. People were laughing and smiling, full of the

joy of anticipating the celebration of the Resurrection of the Lord. Some reached out to help the elderly and others picked up toddlers as we moved towards the church entrance. My two friends, who lived in Beijing and who often come here to Mass, were known to the porter, and they entered the church freely. I was less fortunate. The porter barred my way and began shouting questions at me: Who were my parents? What was my Christian name? Where was I baptized? I could not imagine the purpose of this interrogation. Was this a church or a government registry office? And could this man not tell the difference? Such thoughts passed through my mind yet I dared not voice them for fear they would only add to the delay and, in the end, I'd be refused admittance. Then where could I go to attend Easter Mass? So I answered each question posed to me simply and directly until, finally, he did let me in. I found it difficult, however, to calm down, so angry and aggrieved had I become. This state of frustration was only compounded when I went up to receive Holy Communion and was subjected to another battery of questions by those guarding the Communion rail against possible interlopers. I returned home dispirited and depressed by my experience. All the good feeling I had brought to the church had dissipated, and my Easter joy had turned to grief and sadness. I found this to be intolerable. Had I been a non-Catholic and subjected to like treatment, I would never have darkened the door of that church again. Later, when I discussed my experience with friends, I found that I was not alone. All of them, at one time or another, had received the same or similar treatment. I'm afraid that such unpleasantness is widespread in our church, and I feel something should be done about it with no further delay. Was it not Pope John XXIII who once said to a stranger lingering by the doors of St. Peter's in Rome: "The door has been opened especially for you. We have put out fresh flowers today, just so that you might come in to see and smell them." While Pope John might have left us for heaven these past thirty years, his words remain and they are as relevant today as they were then. It is never too late to remind ourselves that the Church is supposed to be an open and loving community that welcomes all strangers. The Church wants to be known by everyone, to be understood and appreciated by them, and that is why she opens her

arms to all who draw near to her. She rejects no one, not even those who might have in the past been her persecutors.

After finishing my schooling, I helped to translate dozens of letters from Chinese churches to churches in the West. Most of them asked for financial assistance for building churches, drilling wells, or managing clinics. All of the letters spoke of the hard work and sacrifices the mainland priests, Sisters and lay people made to enable the Church to survive, while asking the organizations to give freely and generously to their support. These letters, vividly describing the hardships and difficulties of our Catholics, filled me with sadness. Such support enables us to build churches in which to pray, to establish clinics and hospitals where the sick and injured can be cared for, and wells that can bring a new spirit of hope to a poor village. These are all good things. And I do not think God begrudges us for wanting them. But one might ask, what is the point of a beautiful church if there is no one to spread the Gospel? And what value is there in attaining good health, security and comfort for ourselves if we are blind to those in our midst who are in need of our care? The pressing matter before us now is not how to raise money for our churches but rather how to raise the spiritual level of our Catholics. We must improve the quality of our service by foregoing any mistaken attitude of superiority, as if somehow we are better than others, or as if being Catholics gives us sole possession of the truth. We need to realize that the Church is not some kind of utopia existing outside and apart from the world, but is, in fact, a part of the social structures of society. Any activity which makes the Church irrelevant to the society in which it exists is a waste of time and effort and in need of reform.

Need for Renewal and Reform

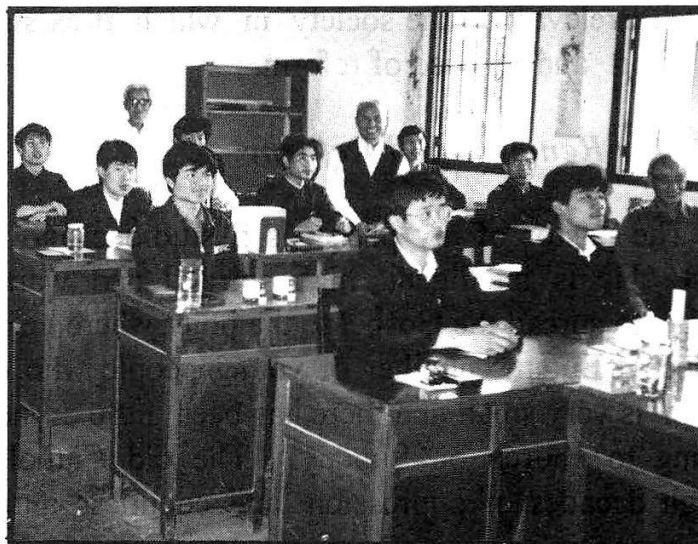
The pastor of my parish is a studious and pious middle-aged priest. He is intelligent, high spirited and warm hearted. He is zealous to spread the Gospel to the point where he often neglects to eat or sleep. But the number of young people who come to hear him preach is very small and there has been little or no increase in people coming to church on Sunday. The old Catholics have suffered though decades of oppression and countless anti-Catholic political

campaigns. They were taught their catechism by their parents in their homes, often in secret and under most dangerous conditions. Their hearts remain steadfast and their faith firm. But the young people are different. They oppose the pastor for forbidding them to watch TV and insisting they pray long boring prayers when they come to church. They grumble about parish activities and have no interest in them. They now have shifted their attention to other areas, such as gambling and watching pornographic movies and videos. They begin to wander away from the church individually and in groups, even to the extent of no longer receiving the sacraments. This troubles the pastor greatly, and he is at a loss as to what to do about it.

There are a number of factors restricting the growth and development of the Church at the present time. Some of these include:

- internal bickering which hampers the development of a team spirit;
- deficiency in the knowledge of the faith, and the unawareness of the need to do anything about it;
- the stubbornness of traditional conservatives who are unwilling to change and who are biased in their views about non-Catholics;
- an introverted attitude that sees no relationship between one's faith and working for the benefit of the larger society;
- government pressures and restrictions;
- the church staff's lack of commitment to evangelization.

*Vocations to the
priesthood are
plentiful in China*



Suggestions for Strengthening Evangelization

Given all the above, let me now put forward some suggestions in the hope that they might assist in the renewal of the Mainland church.

1. We need to establish more catechetical centers. They should be located in the cities and large towns where the Catholic population is concentrated and where transportation is convenient. We need to bring priests, Sisters and catechists in from outside, especially from such places as Hong Kong and Taiwan to supplement the teaching staff of these centers. Courses should be of moderate length, perhaps three to five months. Candidates should be selected from sincere Catholics and admitted after taking an examination. They should follow a curriculum that includes dogmatic theology, the spirit of Vatican II, scripture, ecclesiology (with special emphasis on the relationship of Church and Society), human and personal values, and the place of teamwork in evangelization. Overseas churches should be invited to help with the financing of such centers and also help to staff them with qualified teachers.
2. We should give a warm welcome to non-believers who are searching for truths to live by. We should receive them with courtesy, show our hospitality by opening our churches and shrines to them, answer whatever questions they might wish to pose, and always treat them with proper respect, even when they represent points of view that are different from our own. Before we speak to them of our faith, we should first come to some agreement among ourselves, for only then can we priests and Sisters speak with confidence and ease of manner. Our purpose is not to convince them to be converted; at first, it is enough to give them clear and accurate information about our church. The rest is up to God.
3. We should begin to take advantage of school winter and summer vacations to organize religion classes for our students. Our approach should not be heavy handed, adding more to their already crowded study schedules. Let them enjoy themselves as well as learn, teach them not just doctrine but how to sing and

how to pray, and offer them times in which they can play and relax. It is never too early to begin religious instruction classes.

4. A strong foundation of faith may be laid down as early as kindergarten age.

What does it mean to be a parish priest? Above all, he must be convinced in his heart that he is one with his people, equal before God with them in faith. Only in this way will he earn their respect and only in this way will he be able to work with them in promoting the work of the parish. He should encourage his Catholics to take a more active role in the parish and not rely solely on the clergy and religious to do the work. Without the active involvement of lay people, the church can neither make progress nor develop along modern lines. We must encourage our Catholics to commit themselves to the building up of the church. This is true especially of the young who are found on every level. They are the future of the church. And because they work responsibly and well in all phases and posts of society, they are often able to explain things and influence people far better than we priests or religious. They bear witness in what they say and do, not in the pulpit but rather in the marketplace. By carrying out faithfully their responsibilities as Catholics, they further the work of evangelization by their example.

The pastor should meet on a regular basis with the members of his parish to provide a forum for a healthy exchange of views. He should be especially attentive to the suggestions of young people and, as far as lies within his power, work with them to implement their ideas. Where conditions allow, he should organize youth associations to form young minds and healthy bodies. Activities should embrace the whole person, allowing young people to develop intellectually, physically, emotionally and spiritually. The biblical and doctrinal study should be balanced with athletic and art programs. In such an atmosphere prayer and recreation can co-exist for the benefit of the whole. Young people should develop an interest in the Church, as well as an interest in helping society, committing themselves to both for the honor and glory of God.

A major responsibility of the pastor is to direct the thoughts of his parishioners to what is good. He must help them to analyze a situation and discern what is right from what is wrong. Catholics

must be taught how to use material things properly. Money must not be rejected out of hand, nor Catholics condemned for earning it. Money of itself is neither good nor bad. The crux of the matter is how we use it.

Improving the Situation in the Seminaries

The seminary has been called the cradle of priests. It is where religious formation takes place, and its graduates become the moving force in every diocese and the spiritual leaders of the people. What kind of background do these young men come from? I have visited several of the newly opened seminaries in Hebei, Beijing, Tianjin, and other places, and this is what I found. Most seminarians come from traditional Catholic families. Most were recommended by their pastors or priests of the diocese. All had to pass an entrance examination. In theory they will return to their diocese of origin after four to six years of theological education. The curriculum of these theologates focuses on theology, philosophy, canon law, liturgy, church history and Latin. Other courses such as English composition, history and geography are electives. When I asked several seminarians who were about to graduate what they felt they had gained from their years of study, they said they felt the training and the knowledge imparted were not sufficient for their future work. When I asked how they saw that future, they seemed somewhat troubled and burdened with cares.

There is an acute shortage of text books in these seminaries. The few they do have are usually out of date, with most having been printed in the 1920's and 1930's. The contents are often negative and pessimistic; the writing style is somewhat archaic. Much of the material is out of step with the teachings of Vatican II. Teachers are willing enough but because of age and infirmity, they lack energy and vitality and are not up to the full burden of the teaching task. It is difficult to receive books and other educational materials from overseas. While the seminarians manifest great patience, still the situation is intolerable. To continue in this way is certainly no solution. In a society of accelerating change, the Church cannot afford to stand still. Problems must be addressed and solved without delay. While Latin has served the Church well in the past in

terms of scholarship and utility, it does not seem appropriate to the present situation to compel every seminarian to master it.

The rule in most seminaries continues to be very strict. It carefully scrutinizes and legislates what seminarians are allowed to read, when and where they can recreate, and even what they can and cannot wear. Books, except seminary textbooks, are banned; watching T.V. is forbidden; singing popular songs and going to motion pictures are not allowed. All of this seems too restrictive. We should take practical steps to develop a more well-rounded person. "A sound mind in a sound body" must be more than a slogan. We should strive to help seminarians develop habits of sound virtue and good judgment by allowing them more personal freedom and openness to outside influences in an environment that nurtures their mental and spiritual growth and maturity. In this way their love for God will come as a matter of personal choice from within rather than as something imposed from the outside.

While the external environment can influence the individual, it does not necessarily change a person's motivation. Students with a sincere faith in God, fervent in carrying out apostolic works, and having the strength of character to make healthy, positive decisions will always do well in their studies. But to hinder their growth and development by hemming them in an environment that hinders them from making contact with the larger society can only result in frustration, resentment and anger. Even worse, such surroundings can easily lead to depression and emotional repression. And should they manage to cope with all this successfully, be ordained priests and be sent out into society, can we really say that we have prepared them properly to cope with the complexities of the Mainland Church? Have they been given the kind of intellectual training to enable them to address modern problems and respond to the questions people will ask them about the contemporary world? They are called to a wider world than that of their small parish communities. Will they be ready to take on its challenges? Catholics do not even constitute one percent of the 1.2 billion people of China. Priests should not only care for those who are already baptized, but they should also exert themselves to enlarge the Chinese Catholic Church.

Knowing well the needs of the church on mainland China and the current state of Chinese society, I offer the following suggestions as possible aids in improving the present situation in the seminaries.

1. Stock our seminaries with up-to-date text books in philosophy and theology, and begin to edit out from the old ones anything that is not in accord with the spirit of Vatican II.
2. Seminary libraries should be filled with books that reflect the world in which we live: books on literature and language, science and psychology, history, geography, the arts and humanities. Encourage seminarians to read, absorb and master a larger body of knowledge than what may be found in their textbooks. The intellectual foundation for the work of evangelization demands an ever broadening view of world affairs.
3. The physical environment of the seminaries must be improved. Physical exercise should be part of the school curriculum, and money should be spent to purchase the necessary equipment for an athletics program. Hikes and country walks should be organized if the finances permit. A healthy body is nature's best medicine to prevent illness.
4. Particular care should be taken to insure the cleanliness of the seminary kitchen, and give special attention to providing students with a healthy and adequate diet and so help prevent disease.
5. The clothing code need not be overly restrictive. It is enough to guarantee that clothes be adequate and generally neat and tidy. During times of recreation, students should be allowed to watch TV programs such as news reports, general interest, educational and sports programs. These will serve to increase their knowledge of the modern world and help them keep abreast of current events.

Seminary formation is a confusing and complicated reality. There is no one model that will fit every situation. Changes must take into account such factors as local customs, economic conditions, teaching staff, etc. But such considerations should not forestall reforms that must be made in the system. In doing so, we must reaffirm the outstanding Church traditions of our past, but also accept the new ideas that can bring new life and vigor to the present.

Finally, it is my sincere hope that each one of us, wherever we may be, will remember always to pray for the growth and survival of the Mainland Church. As for those of us living here in China, it is for us to throw ourselves whole-heartedly into the task of building up this local church, never counting the cost, but willingly and generously sacrificing ourselves for the glory of God and for the future of the Church in China.

Right: A Young man is ordained a deacon

Below: Students of theology and philosophy at Jilin Seminary

