

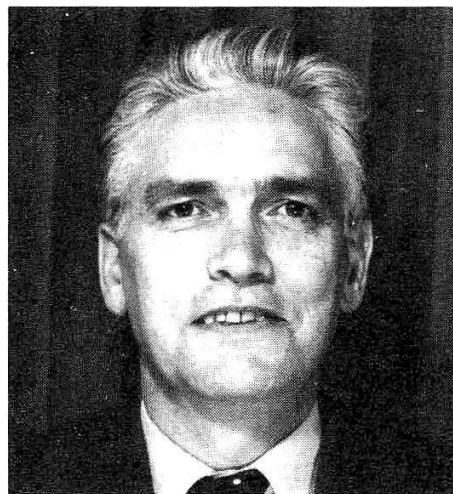
Commentary

Keeping Faith through Communion

by Nestor Pycke, cicm

The following commentary is another reflection on A.B. Chang's article, "Can Mainland China's Official Church Still be Called Catholic?" published in the March-April issue of Tripod, No. 86, 1995.

In his study, *Can Mainland China's Official Church Still be Called Catholic?* the well know theologian A. B. Chang, S.J., refrains from making any judgments about the subjective religious dispositions or personal attitudes of the Catholics in China. Moreover, he hardly mentions that for more than forty years, the Chinese Church had to live in isolation and to suffer persecution for the Christian faith.



All his attention is focused on the structural and institutional aspects of the present day Catholic Church in China. Father Chang points out the differences between the doctrine and praxis of the universal Church and that of China's official Church. He does this on five levels:

1. the universal Church,
2. the Catholic communion among local Churches,
3. the local Church,
4. the appointment and consecration of bishops and
5. "Can the official Church still be called Catholic?:"

First of all, I would like to make some observations on the present situation of the official Chinese Catholic Church. By official, I mean the one recognized by the Communist Party and Beijing.

DOCUMENTS OF THE OFFICIAL Chinese CHURCH

To understand the present situation of the Church in China, we must recognize that we are not dealing with something akin to the Arian controversy, prevalent in the third and fourth centuries. This controversy which divided the Eastern church for more than fifty years, originated in misconceptions on the divinity of Christ. The present division in the Church in China did not originate from doctrinal disputes or differences of opinion. The division in the Chinese Church was imposed from outside the Church. The result of which is the polarization among Christians reacting in two different ways to pressure and persecution.¹ If this situation continues for any length of time, there is a real danger that both sides will stick stubbornly to their positions.

Chinese Catholic Representatives' Congress

The highest authoritative body of the official Church in China is the Chinese Catholic Representatives' Congress. It is "convened once every five years.... The convening of the Representatives' Congress, the quota and manner of naming delegates are matters decided jointly by the standing committees of the Bishops' Conference and the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association"²

The Bishops' Conference of the Official Church

The Bishops' Conference of the official Church is "the leading national structure for Church affairs of the Chinese Catholic Church. In accordance with the Bible and based on the traditional spirit of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church, its purpose is... to examine and approve the election and ordination of diocesan bishops, and ... to implement the principles of independence, self-government and administration which is in accordance with the situation in China"³ The Bishops' Conference is "accountable to the Chinese Catholic Representatives' Congress"⁴ and the Constitution of the Conference

must be approved by the Congress of Representatives.⁵ There is no mention of the Pope, or the Church of Rome in this document.

The Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association

The Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association is “a mass organization made up of Chinese Catholic clergy and laity of the Catholic Church in China who love their country and religion. Its purpose, under the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party and the People’s government, is to unite the clergy and Catholics of the whole country, to manifest a patriotic spirit, to support the Socialist system, to observe China’s Constitution,... and to assist the Church in implementing the principles of independence, self-government and self-management.”⁶

The election and consecration of bishops

In May 1993, the Standing Committee of the Chinese Catholic Bishops’ Conference laid down six regulations for the election and consecration of bishops. The whole procedure would seem to be entrusted to the provincial Church administrative committee and local government. The procedure requires the new bishop to swear to be faithful to the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church, to be loyal to the motherland and to observe the Constitution...⁷ Again, there is no reference to the Pope as Successor of Peter.

THE MEANING OF THE SENTENCE “THE CHURCH IS CATHOLIC”

Father A.B. Chang refers to the documents of Vatican II, the *Apostolic Exhortation Evangelii Nuntiandi* of Paul VI (1975), and the recent *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, to explain what is meant by “the Church is catholic”. “The Church is catholic in a double sense: First, the Church is catholic, because Christ is present in her. In her subsists ‘the fullness of Christ’s body united with its head; this implies that she receives from Him the fullness of the meaning of

salvation' which he has willed: correct and complete confession of faith, full sacramental life, and ordained ministry in apostolic succession".⁸

Secondly, she is catholic "because she has been sent out by Christ on a mission to the whole of the human race" (cf. Mt 28:10). This is explained in the *Constitution on the Church, Lumen Gentium*, 13. The Council emphasized the unity of the church and its universal presence. The origin of this unity is actually the unity of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

The diversity in this unity is also mentioned in the same number of the *Constitution*. The church accepts and welcomes diversity in customs, races, cultures and nations, insofar as they are good. "It is no secret," Mgr. Philips wrote in his commentary on this text, "that the missionary bishops especially spoke out in favor of this broadminded view⁹ against the accusation of Europeanization. "This characteristic of universality which adorns the People of God is a gift from the Lord himself. By reason of it, the Catholic Church strives energetically and constantly to bring all humanity with all its riches back to Christ, its Head, in the unity of his Spirit" (*Lumen Gentium*, 13).

"THE CHURCH TAKES NOTHING AWAY"

The Council emphasized that Christ is the foundation of authentic catholicity. "Since the Kingdom of Christ is not of this world (cf. Jn. 18:36), the Church (or people of God), by establishing the Kingdom, takes nothing away from the temporal welfare of people. Rather, insofar as they are good, the church fosters and takes to herself, the ability, resources, and customs of each people. She purifies, strengthens, and ennobles them. The Church is always mindful that she must work with that King to whom the nations were given for an inheritance (cf. Ps 2:8)" (*Lumen Gentiun*, 13). Shortly after the Council, a French Jesuit, G. Martelet, in referring to this text wrote: "such a spiritual integration of values has nothing to do with a political-religious deprivation of autonomy.... Even though the visible Church is really fostering the universal integration of worldly values

in the unity of Christ, she only does it ‘to Christ its Head, in the unity of His Spirit’.¹⁰

In speaking of Vatican II, we should not forget that the Chinese Catholic Church could not participate in the conciliar activities. Even when the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* was being prepared in the early nineties, the China Church could present no opinion about matters related to her own cultural background because there are no diplomatic relations between China and the Vatican.¹¹

Furthermore, the Chinese Catholic Church, because of her universal and international character, is in a more delicate situation than other religious bodies, e.g., Buddhism, Taoism, Islam and Protestantism. These religions have no comparable centralized leadership: The Communist Party and Chinese Government feel threatened by the Vatican’s apparent political organization, and the primacy of the Pope.¹²

The divisions within the Chinese Catholic Church raise the question of possible levels of communion within the Church.

COMMUNION WITHIN THE CHURCH

There are different levels of communion within the Christian community. The issue is not “Catholic or not Catholic” since different degrees of communion already exist within the Church.

a) The autonomy of the Official Church

Autonomy is a key word in the confrontation between the Catholic Church of China and Rome. This confrontation has a long and painful history.¹³

In 1954, Pope Pius XII wrote an Apostolic Letter against China’s Three-Self-Movement, and warned against the establishment of a national Church. China for its part wanted a completely independent church, one brooking no foreign interference whatsoever. No doubt, this hard position had its roots in China’s frustrating past experiences with Western powers, the Opium War and the Unequal Treaties, for example..

“We regret the official Church’s independent way of acting,” writes A.B. Chang, “at least on the level of law - and its break in hierarchical union with the Successor of Peter. We are also aware that the official Church is to some degree responsible for this state of affairs, and as such, cannot escape all blame. We hasten to add that the Church’s independence, self-government and self-support can be implemented while remaining within the bonds of Church Laws. These three aims are an ideal for the Church and should in no way constitute a reason for breaking hierarchical communion”.¹⁴ Autonomy, apparently, is not necessarily all bad. As understood here, it is not only acceptable but it is even proposed as an ideal, provided that it is lived within the hierarchical communion.

The reality, however, is somewhat different:

b) The Congress of Representatives

The Congress of Representatives is the highest authority within the official Church. According to Chang’s article, the official Church allows no foreign interference; she implements the policy of independence and autonomy and elects and consecrates her own bishops. Recently, however, there has been a noticeable attitudinal change. Previously, the official Church manifested a certain hostility towards Rome. Today, she publicly recognizes and acknowledges that the Pope’s pastoral primacy is part of the deposit of faith. The Chinese Church even prays for him daily.¹⁵

Unfortunately, there still remains incomplete communion between the Chinese official Church and the Holy See. Particular churches are only fully catholic through communion with the Church of Rome, which, according to St. Ignatius of Antioch, presides over all in charity,

c) The Bishops’ Conference

The Bishops’ Conference of the official Church is accountable to the Congress of Representatives. In 1992, the Church Administrative Commission formerly separate from the Bishops’ Conference, was placed under the Conference’s authority. This signaled considerable progress on the structural-institutional level of ecclesial life.

The Constitutions of the Bishops' Conference and the Patriotic Association, both approved by the Congress of Representatives, contain nothing about the universal dimension of the Church. *Lumen Gentium* 23, however, citing very ancient traditions maintains that particular Churches are constituted after the model of the universal Church. They are not segments that together constitute the universal Church in a kind of federation. Each local Church, on the contrary, *is* the Church of Christ, present in a certain place, and possessing the fullness of the means of salvation given to her by Christ.¹⁶ But the question remains: how does the Chinese official Church see herself within the universal Church.

d) Spiritual and liturgical communion

A.B. Chang mentions that certain members of the official Church sincerely believe that, through the same faith in God the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, prayer, liturgical celebrations, reading of the same Scriptures, and so on, the official church in China is in spiritual and liturgical communion with other particular churches. These elements may not necessarily be on the structural/institutional level of ecclesial life, but they are certainly related to them. They are authentic components of the Catholic community of faith.

The fact that many official bishops have asked to have their present situation regularized is a sign that the division in the Church--at least at this moment - is not really a doctrinal one. It also means that, in terms of the Successor of Peter, a clear distinction should be made between the level of law and that of conscience.

The unofficial Church, for its part, has rejected the Communist Party's demand that it be independent and self-governing. This church group firmly maintains its union with the Holy See, safeguarding the hierarchical structure and loyalty to the primacy of the Pope. Then there is, a third church group, an "open church", somewhere between the official and the unofficial Church--priests and lay people who practice their faith in public, administer or participate in the sacraments, but they do not participate in church organizations supported by the Government. They are labeled members of the official Church, but in fact, they remain detached from both groups.¹⁷

CONCLUSION

I would agree with A.B. Chang: that many levels of communion already exist within the Christian Community, that both the official and unofficial Church belong to the same Church of Jesus Christ; that both share the same Trinitarian life of grace and both have received the same baptism and read the same Scriptures. There is a difference however, in terms of hierarchical communion.¹⁸ I wish to stress that the levels of communion apply only to the level of law, not to that of conscience. This is important since the question of possible levels of communion in the Church cannot be separated from the actual situation of the church in China, a situation replete with restrictions imposed on the freedom of religious belief and on all groups, although not to the same extent.

Recently, there seems to be a movement towards more tolerance, more mutual understanding and conciliation on all sides: the Vatican, the Chinese Catholics and Chinese authorities, as well as the Patriotic Association.¹⁹ Essential to solving the problem, however, is the normalization of relations between China and the Vatican.

Endnotes:

¹ cf., J. Zen, Ecclesiological Challenges, Response to Robert Schrieter, in *TRIPOD*, 13 (May-June 1993) no. 75, pp. 62-63.

² Constitution of the Chinese Catholic Bishops' Conference (BCCCC), Art 4, in *TRIPOD*, 13 (May-June 1993), no. 75, pp. 62-63.

³ *Ibid.*, Art 2, p. 62

⁴ *Ibid.*, Art 4, p. 6

⁵ *Ibid.*, Art. 14, p. 64.

⁶ Constitution of the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association (CCPA), Art, 2, in *TRIPOD*, (May-June 1993), no. 75, pp. 64-65.

⁷ See Regulations of the Chinese Bishops' Conference Regarding the Election and Consecration of Bishops, in: *TRIPOD*, 15, (Sept-Oct. 1993), no. 77, pp. 52-54.

⁸ Catechism of the Catholic Church, London, 1994, no. 830; see also *Lumen Gentium*, 14.

⁹ G.. Philips, Dogmatische Constitutie over de Kerk "Lumen Gentium", Part I, Antwerp, 1967, p.188

¹⁰ G. Martelet, De kerk en het tijdelijke. Naar een nieuwe opvatting, in: G. BARAUNA (ed.), De Jerk van Vatican II Commentaries op de Concilieconstitutie over de Ker, Part I, Antwerp, 1966, pp. 576-577.

¹¹ Cf. Ye Sheng, We Must Understand. Reflections After reading "Can Mainland China's 'official' Church Still Be Called 'Catholic': A Discussion of the Mainland Church's Three Documents and Other Matters, in *TRIPOD* 15(Sept-Oct. 1995), no. 89, p. 29.

¹² Cf. A.B. Chang, Fundamental Attitude of the Bridge Church, in: *TRIPOD*, 11 (Jan.-Feb. 1991), no. 61, p. 7.

¹³ Cf. J. Heyndrickx, Godsdienstvrijheid in de Chinese Volksrepubliek, in *Wereld en Zending*, 24(1994), no. 1, pp. 22-33.

¹⁴ A.B. Chang, art., cit., pp. 214-15.

¹⁵ Ibid . p 8.

¹⁶ Cf. G. Philips, op. cit., pp. 322-324.

¹⁷ Cf. Ye Sheng, art. cit., pp. 28 en 31.

¹⁸ A.B. Chang, art. cit., p. 13.

¹⁹ Cf. T. Van Bijnen, Zijn pausen dan toch bruggebouwers? in: *Christnen en China*, 5 (Sept. 1995), pp. 2-3.

