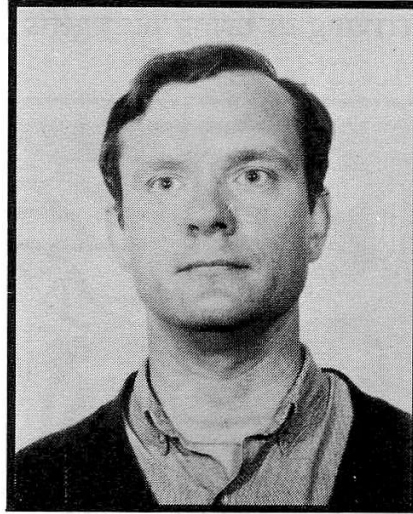


Christmas in China

by Michael Sloboda, M.M.

Christmas is no longer a public holiday in China, but it once was. In 1946, Dr. John Wu Jingxiong (1899-1986), a Catholic, drafted a new constitution for the Republic of China, headed by Jiang Jieshi (1888-1975), a Protestant. The National Assembly in Nanjing adopted this document on December 25, 1946, making the day a national holiday. However China was in the midst of a civil war and the Communists denounced this as illegal.¹ The choice of date could hardly have been a coincidence. Three years later the Nationalist Constitution was a dead letter throughout the Mainland, and the holiday was switched to October 1, the founding of the People's Republic of China. However, Christians continued to observe the birth of Jesus as religious feast.



The origins of Christmas

December 25 has been a festive day for a long time. By 300 B.C. at the latest, Persian priests, called Magi, worshipped Mitra, the god of light who was born in a cave. His birthday was later fixed on December 25.²

As Mithraism spread through the Roman Army, Emperor Aurelian in 274 A.D., proclaimed December 25, the feast of the sun god, the principal patron of the Roman Empire. The birthday of Jesus is not recorded in the Gospels, but Christians wanted to celebrate his birth. Probably to pre-empt the feast day of the sun god, Christians by the year 300 were celebrating Christmas.³ Some churches reject December 25, the Christmas tree (a medieval addition from Germany)

and the gift-giving as being of pagan origin. Christians in the fourth century had no problem incorporating December 25 into their church calendar.

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The Nestorians brought Christmas to China with them in 635 A.D. The Nestorian tablet of 781 A.D., tells of the Messiah who was born of a virgin, with angels proclaiming the glad tidings and Persians arriving to bring him gifts.⁴ After all, Nestorius was a Persian. Dur-



ing the Yuan Dynasty, John of Montecorvino in Beijing and other European missionaries along the coast in Fujian led the Christmas celebrations in their Catholic congregations. When the Ming Dynasty came to power in 1368 and foreigners were expelled, Christmas was forgotten for over 200 years. Then Matteo Ricci and other Catholics arrived by sea, followed by Protestant missionaries in the

nineteenth century, and December 25 became a special day for a sliver of China's population.

The theme "Christmas in China" is as broad as "Christmas in Europe"; customs vary greatly from one place to another, and generalizations do not hold everywhere. All the events that happen somewhere at Christmas could not happen in any single church. The remainder of this article is a composite picture.

The departure of foreign missionaries from China in the early 1950's left many churches shorthanded at Christmas and all the other major feasts. Still, religious activities continued with restrictions, then took a sharp downward turn during the Great Leap Forward (1959-61) and came to a halt during the Cultural Revolution (1966-76). What someone said of religious freedom in the Soviet Union of the 1930's applied just as well to China during the Cultural Revolution: "You are free to pray, so long as no one but God hears you." Yet some people still gathered to sing Christmas carols softly during the most silent of those winter nights.

Christmas once again

In the late 1970's, things improved markedly for the general population, not just for religious believers. With the new government policy leading to the release of church workers and the return of church property, many congregations chose Christmas Eve as the time to celebrate the first Mass in over a decade in their church. Often this meant a flurry of mops and brooms, finding a vestment in a closet here and a chalice in an attic there. It meant, unearthing a buried statue or Stations of the Cross and removing the dirt with a toothbrush, locating old Catholics scattered across the city. It meant copying a few hymns by hand or writing them down from memory, hasty choir rehearsals and training of altar boys, and holding a brush thick with black ink over red strips of cloth to make banners.

The cross above the steeple had disappeared long ago, white-wash that had long since turned gray from coal dust covered the wall frescoes. The concrete floor was chipped from heavy factory machinery or stacked warehouse pallets, and stained in the corner from a leaking roof. The wooden confessionals and pews had disappeared without a trace, as had the organ, Communion rail and altar. A folding table served for an altar, with tin cans for candle sticks and (in a wealthier congregation) threadbare quilts for kneelers. So what? Why should little things like these spoil the joy of Christmas? The important thing was that for the first time in what seemed like an eternity the faithful were free to gather under the roof of their church. One old woman arrived early. As she was about to walk up the steps, she overheard one pedestrian say to another: "Only old women are

interested in religion.” She retorted: “But God has a secret plan to make more old women.”

Inside the church, people were lined up for two hours to confess to a priest on the other side of a curtain. Then Midnight Mass began with incense. Those close to the altar saw the burnt edge of the Latin sacramentary, which someone had dared to rescue from a bonfire before outrunning the Red Guards. The old priest preached forever, making up for missed homilies. There was not a dry eye in the church by Communion time. Merry Christmas! Peace on earth! As people were finally leaving, they compared notes on what furnishings and fixtures the church (“our church” once again, thank God) needed for next Christmas.

The decor improved year by year: a tabernacle box, a string of Christmas lights above it, not only plugged in during the Christmas season but at every Mass throughout the year. Now there was an altar, pews, new paint, another statue, the Communion rail, a cross for the steeple, a podium and PA system as well as new vestments.

The priority list varied from place to place, but all over China Catholics made sacrifices to recreate the churches that they knew when they were young, or as they had heard about from their parents. The introduction of Mass in Chinese and other aspects of Vatican II happened gradually, with no revolution in furnishings.

The number of churches, or small country chapels, increases year by year. In some years recently an average of one Catholic place of worship has opened each day. While not enough to meet the growing demand, a number of priests are ordained, and Sisters professed, on December 8, the feast of the Immaculate Conception yearly. This date is chosen so that they will be in their new assignments by Christmas.

To the surprise of skeptics, new people, many of them young adults, are entering the church. The Easter Vigil is the most fitting time for a baptism, but it makes pas-



toral sense to have more than one class of catechumens a year, so some converts and children are baptized during the Christmas season.

Others hear about Christmas from reading about the West, or from a friend, or from the non-religious "Season's Greeting" cards which have appeared on the market in recent Decembers. Some are confused about that fellow Santa Claus - when did he rise from the dead? They are curious to see the inside of a church. This presents a problem at Christmas, as the churches are not big enough to hold all the faithful, let alone newcomers. Some churches issue passes to regular members, but then those who are in town temporarily are excluded. Other churches station ushers at the door to ask: "What is your Christian name?" One man took a guess and said: "Maria," only to be rudely told to get lost. The best solution seems to be to issue tickets to parishioners, then print flyers which explain the Christmas story, apologize for the lack of space, and give the church's phone number for future reference. It is also advisable to have well-mannered ushers hand these out at the door. Because busses do not run at 2 AM and taxis are scarce, Midnight Mass has largely died out in the past few years, having been moved to 8 or 9 PM. In a village in the country where everyone walks to church this is no problem. All the celebrations are held on church property. There are no religious processions through the streets anywhere in China. Offices and universities are not supposed to have Christmas parties, although some will still be held this year in the guise of English classes. In the USA, the customary Christmas or New Year's Party at the office has been partially suppressed by insurance companies which fear alcohol, auto accidents and/or sexual harassment and subsequent lawsuits. In China, the Communist Party, which fears unregulated and "abnormal" religious activities, plays a similar regulatory role.

Christmas morning is definitely anticlimactic, since most people have to work that day.

What of the underground church, those Christians who do not want to register with the Religious Affairs Bureau and cooperate with the bureaucracy? In one city the underground church is on the fifth floor. Wherever they meet, those Catholics and Protestants celebrate the same feasts as their brothers and sisters in the official church, although with a low profile.

Migration to the city and secularization are problems common to both the open and the underground church. Young Christians on Christmas Eve have other options than prayer. They can go to a disco or karaoke, or stay home and watch TV. Some even seek fulfillment in alcohol, drugs or prostitution. Church leaders are worried.

Yet Christmas means that light has shown in our darkness (2 Cor. 4:6), the Word was made flesh and dwelt among us. (John 1:14) The Incarnation also means, as Pope John Paul II once said, that "Peace will be the final word of history." By accepting the peace of Christ, and living the joy of Christmas, China's Christians preach to their neighbors about the Prince of Peace, not only on Christmas day but throughout the year. □

Endnotes

¹ Immanuel C.Y. Hsu, *The Rise of Modern China*, 3rd ed. (Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1983), pp. 630-631.

² *Encyclopedia of Religion*, (1987), vol. 9, pp. 579-580.

³ *Catholic Encyclopedia*, (1967), vol. 3, p. 656.

⁴ "1200th Anniversary of the Erection of the Nestorian Tablet," by Peter Barry and Beatrice Leung, *Tablet*, #4 (1981), p. 50.

*A very Merry Christmas and
a Holy and Happy New Year
for all of us at the Holy Spirit Study Centre*