

*Reflections*

*from  
the  
Founders*

# *The Power of Witness*

*by Bishop John Tong*

**T**he Church in China is very much alive in spite of all the oppression it has undergone. Widely differing figures are quoted for the number of Catholics. Official sources report only about 4 million Catholics. This is partly due to the fact that many believers are in unregistered churches, and partly because it would be an embarrassment for the Communists to admit that large numbers of people are en-

tering the Catholic church year after year. Regarding the number of priests and Sisters, a few years ago these numbers almost exclusively represented older religious, but now those under age 40 outnumber those over 65. After being closed for about 30 years, all formation programs have been reopened for the last 15 years.

Catholics in China have sown the seed of hope with much



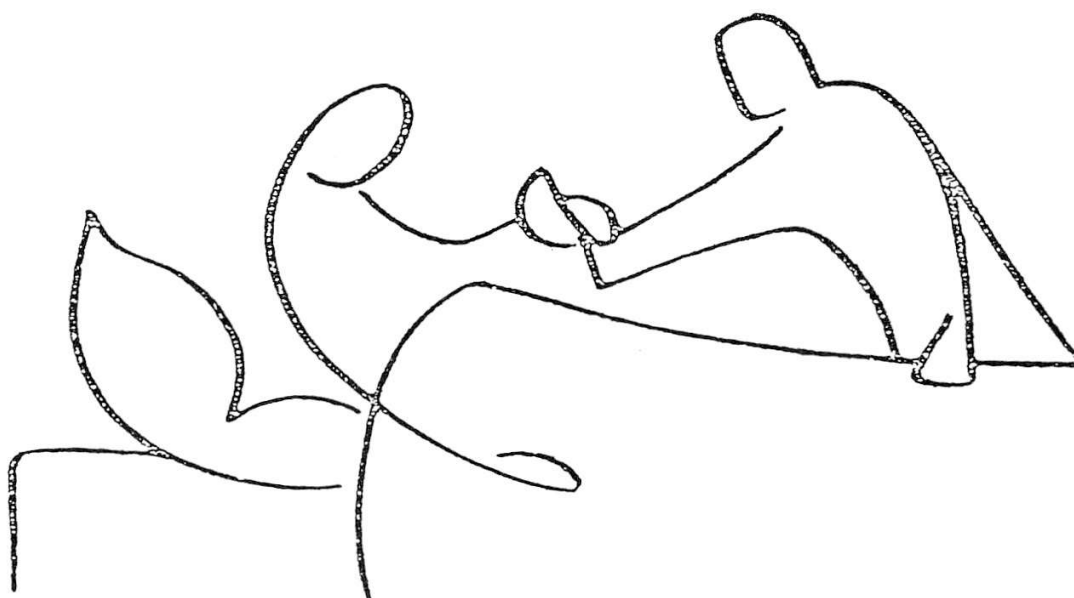
*Jesus changes water into wine at Cana*

love and suffering. To illustrate this point, I would like to tell seven stories from China, stories which parallel the seven miracles recorded in the first part of John's Gospel. These stories show the reason why there has been a big increase in the number of new Christians and in vocations.

The first miracle is Jn. 2:1-11, *Jesus changes the water into wine at Cana*. This episode reminds me of Sheshan, the famous hill outside of Shanghai, with its seminary and Marian shrine. A number of non-Christians often climb to the top of this hill simply to enjoy the scenery. The seminarians sometimes place water and tea pots on tables along the route, as well as leaflets explaining the meaning of the shrine and some basic Christian teachings. They hope in

this way to quench both the physical and spiritual thirst of curious travelers. Later on some of these tourists approach the church and become believers in Our Lord as the way, the truth and the life. In this instance water for physical life has been transformed into waters for the spiritual life

The second miracle is from Jn. 4:42-54, *Jesus cures the son of a court official*. As a result someone high on the social scale and his whole family became believers. Healings attracted attention 2000 years ago and still do today. Strange as it may sound, most conversions in rural China can be attributed to exorcisms. Doctors are unable to diagnose and treat the problems of people who are possessed. Such unfortunate persons are apt to behave in strange ways. In the past,



*Jesus cures the son of a court official*

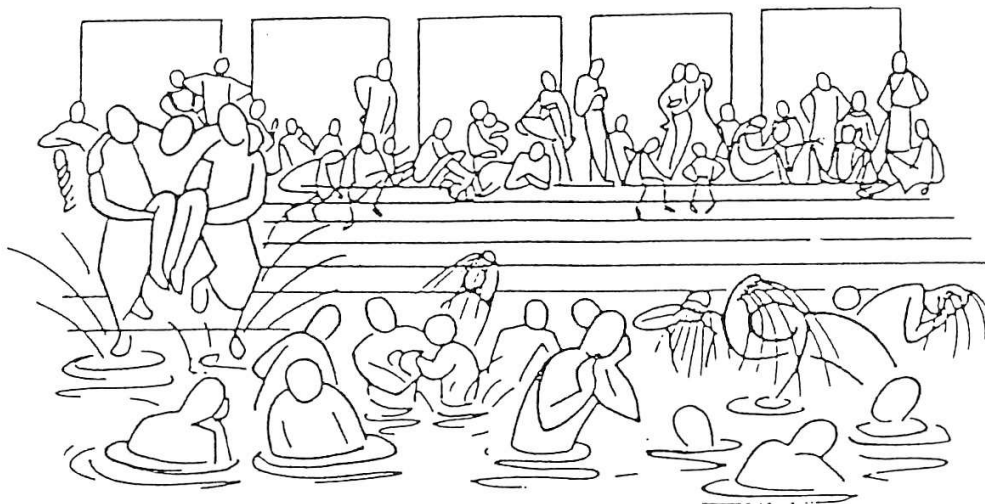
people were accustomed to call upon their shamans and witches to cast out devils. Today such methods are no longer effective, and people are turning to the church for help. According to certain reports, some who have called on Christians for assistance and entered the church have been healed of their affliction. These neophytes have urged others to do likewise.

For example, in Jilin Province in northeast China, in a village not far from Changchun, there was only one Catholic family in 1981. When a possessed person was healed after entering the church, 300 other people were moved to conversion.

The third miracle is *the cure of the paralyzed man at the pool of Bethzatha*, Jn. 5:1-9. One priest who was arrested tells this story: "A secret agent of the Nationalist

Party was one of my fellow prisoners during my years in prison. He had to wear leg chains day and night because he was both a soldier and a secret agent. He also had to endure an exhausting interrogation.

*I sympathized with him but how was I able to diminish his sufferings, even a little bit? The words of St. Peter kept coming to me: 'I have neither silver nor gold, but I will give you what I have' (Acts 3:6) I could really say that my only possession was Jesus Christ. Finally I said to him: 'You are suffering so much. I really believe that only Jesus Christ can alleviate your pain.' Then I briefly explained the Church's teaching to him and taught him to make the sign of the cross. The next morning I watched him make the sign of the cross. Silently I prayed together with him*



*Jesus cures the paralysed man at the pool of Bethzatha*

*asking the Lord to strengthen his faith. Gradually he became more relaxed. One evening he spoke softly to me: 'Jesus Christ is really wonderful! He has actually changed my suffering into joy!'*

The fourth miracle is *the multiplication of the loaves*, Jn. 6:1-15. There was a Chinese priest who had a small parish of 200 Catholics before Liberation. Sometime after 1949, he could no longer function as a priest. Instead was assigned to carry charcoal. That was a hardship for an educated man unaccustomed to heavy manual labor. He asked himself: *"Why am I doing this? Is this the reward I get for remaining a priest, to carry a heavy load on my shoulders all day long and deliver charcoal to people's houses?"*

But after awhile he adjusted to his new job, and decided to work as a Christian. He could not preach to people when he delivered his charcoal, of course, but he could have a Christian attitude towards all those he met.

In the 1980's he was finally allowed to return to his church and to resume his sacramental ministry. But he could only preach and pray on church property. Yet 800 people now crowd into that church every weekend, four times the number of the old days, to learn the catechism and to hear the Word of God. The people remembered him as the old charcoal carrier. He gave a convincing witness to Jesus by carrying countless baskets of charcoal. He was once as inconspicuous with his basket of charcoal in



*The multiplication of the loaves.*

that city as the boy with his basket of two fishes and five loaves was in the huge crowd by the Sea of Galilee, yet he now feeds a crowd of new Christians with the Bread of Life.

The fifth miracle followed immediately afterwards, when *Jesus walked on the waters* (Jn. 6:16-21). People have reason to be afraid of water, as whoever invented the water prison realized.

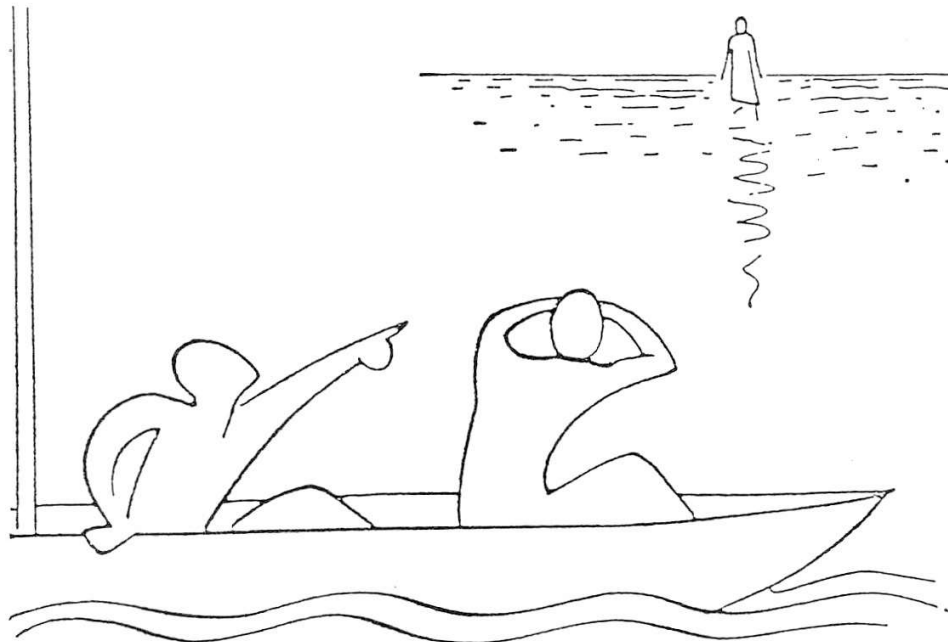
What is a water prison? Imagine a small, dark dungeon with a narrow concrete table or altar in the middle of it. The room is flooded so that only the table is above the water level. The guards take two stubborn prisoners who need to be taught a lesson and put them on the table every morning. The prisoners sit on the concrete, back to back with no space to move

until bedtime.

After 40 days the men should either be crazy or ready to sign any confession, if they have not already fallen into the water and drowned.

A Catholic priest was put into a water prison. His companion complained and cursed from the first day, but the priest decided to meditate and make a private retreat. Before long the non-Christian became curious as to how his partner could be so serene. He began to ask him questions. The priest took the opportunity to explain the Gospel and Catholic doctrine to him.

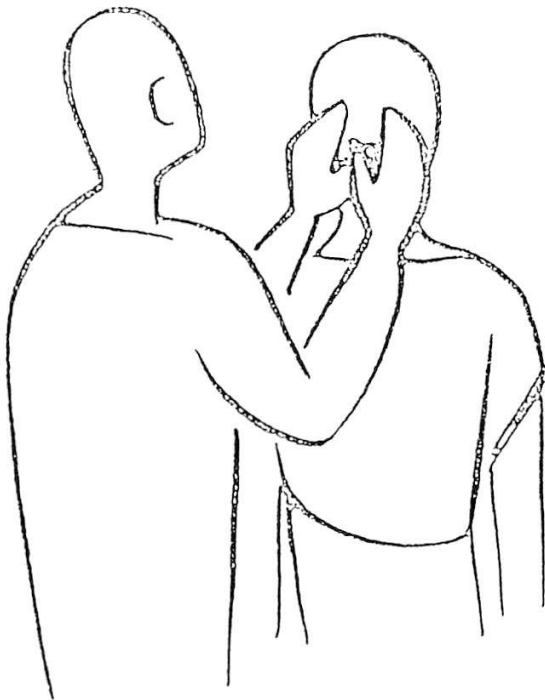
Eventually the catechumen asked: "*There is water here, what is to prevent me from being baptized?*" And so the priest baptized him just as Philip baptized the



*Jesus walks on the waters*

Ethiopian eunuch in chapter 8 of the Acts of the Apostles. The non-Christian had at first been as afraid of the water around his small table as the Apostles were afraid of the heaving water around their small boat, but when Jesus comes, there is no longer any need to fear.

The sixth miracle is from John 9:1-41. *Jesus gives sight to a man born blind.* Let me tell another amazing story from China about an old couple whom I met on a visit a few years ago. Both of them are medical doctors. They had studied together in medical school, fell in love and married. She was a Catholic, he was not. She wanted to be married as a Catholic couple and tried to convince him



*Jesus gives sight to the man born blind*

that he should become a Catholic, but he did not wish to be baptized. A short time later she had a child.

During one of the political movements, the husband, along with many other intellectuals, was sent to a labour camp. The separation was very difficult for the wife. She had to work long hours during the day and care for her son at night. In addition to her loneliness and her hard work schedule at the hospital, she was under pressure from the government to divorce her husband and to renounce her religion so that she could gain political advantages. But she refused.

Each night after she returned home, she and her son knelt down to pray and ask strength from the Word of God to endure the difficulties.

One day at the end of the 70's, she heard that her husband and other intellectuals would be allowed to come home. When the day came, she went to the railway station to welcome him. When the train arrived, she and her son were the only family members on the platform to welcome the men. None of the other women had been able to endure the long separation. They had divorced and remarried. When her husband learned all this he was so deeply moved that his eyes were opened to God, and he

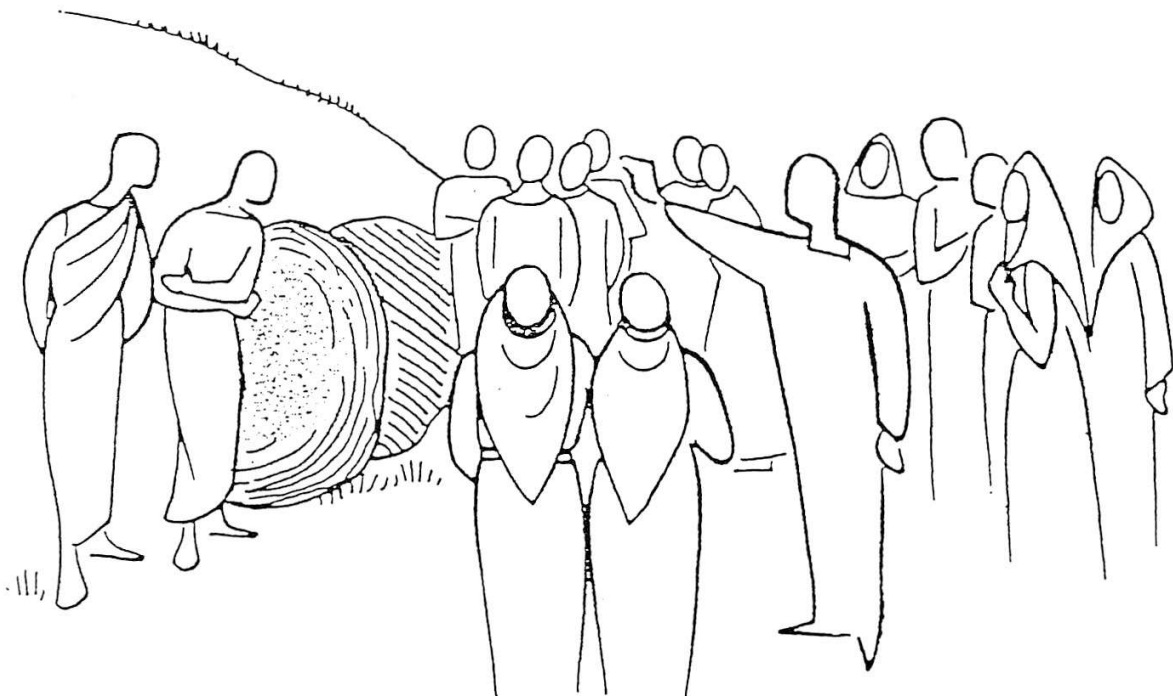


took instructions and was later baptized.

The seventh miracle is *the raising of Lazarus from the dead* Jn. 11:1-44. A seminarian in China once told me when and where he heard the call. His uncle was a priest. During the Culture Revolution (1966-76), he was put on public trial and sentenced to death. He himself, who was then only a boy, was present in the crowd of spectators. He heard the rifles fire and saw the bullet enter his uncle's heart, followed by a fountain of blood. At once he heard a voice

inside himself say: "*I must become a priest to finish my uncle's work.*" That boy already sensed the truth of what Jesus said. His uncle's life, like Lazarus', would not end in death but in God's glory.

Just as we read at the end of the Gospel of St. John, 20:30-31, that Jesus worked many other signs 2000 years ago, so also Jesus has worked and is still working many signs in China. They all mirror the signs recorded in the first part of St. John's Gospel and point to the greatest sign, the Paschal Mystery, which is recorded in the second part



*The raising of Lazarus from the dead*



of St. John's Gospel.

All the signs worked in China, both those mentioned above and those not mentioned, reflect the truth pointed out by Pope John Paul II in No. 42 of his encyclical *Redemptoris Missio*:

*People today put more trust in witnesses than in teachers, in experience than in teaching, and in life and action than in theories. The witness of a Christian life is the first and*

*irreplaceable form of mission: Christ, whose mission we continue, is the 'witness' par excellence (Rev. 1:5, 3:14) and the model of all Christian witness. The Holy Spirit accompanies the Church along her way and associates her with the witness he gives to Christ. (cf. Jn. 15:26-27).*

(The illustrations in this article are taken from Good News for Modern Man: The New Testament in Today's Chinese. Used by permission of Hong Kong Bible society.)

