

# *The Church in China: New Life*

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When looking at the Catholic Church in China today, one can see both lights and shadows. Signs of light are many. From the tomb of the Cultural Revolution and years of persecution, the Church in China has indeed risen to a new life. When one considers the large number of vocations, so many young men and women entering seminaries and convents these days, one cannot help but feel overjoyed. You only have to enter the lecture hall of Sheshan Seminary, as I did in February of this year in the company of a group of American priests on a tour of China, to see in the shining, eager faces of the 130 seminarians studying there to realize that the Holy Spirit is indeed at work in his Church.



## *The Holy Spirit bringing light to the Church*

### *Dynamism in the Seminaries*

The feeling that comes over you is that the Church is in the hands of the Holy Spirit. And the open expressions of generosity, self-sacrifice and zeal in the faces of the seminarians confirm it. One is reminded of the Gospel account of the resurrected Jesus entering the upper room where his apostles were cowering "in fear of the Jews". His first words were: "Peace be with you, as the Father has sent me so I send you." The Risen Lord first wished his apostles to be at peace, and then he sent them forth to bear witness to him. As if to give them help for this task, he then breathed upon them and said: "Receive the Holy Spirit." These words recall the words of

God at the creation of the first man, when God breathed upon Adam and he became a living being. Now, after the resurrection, the apostles become new creatures, filled with the Holy Spirit and with power, and sent forth to announce the Good News of salvation in Jesus Christ.

The presence of this same Holy Spirit is reflected in the faces of these seminarians. One senses their dynamism as they crowd around to ask us questions. They show a keen interest in the universal church, and want to know if there are many converts to Christianity in the United States, and what is it that attracts people to the Church there, and are vocations to the priesthood and sisterhood plentiful? Their eager intelligence and sense of humour are on display for all to see.

The same scene repeats itself in Wuhan, Xian, and the National Seminary in Beijing. Each seminary has 60 or more candidates for ordination to the priesthood. And everywhere the young men seem bright, good humoured and eager to get involved in the pastoral work of the local churches.

### *Dynamism in the religious life*

The same can be said for the religious sisters. We met a group of 25 in Xian who were sent to this ancient capital from convents throughout Shaanxi Province to study a year of theology. It was a rare opportunity for them, and they took to the program like ducks to water. Later in the year in Kaifeng, while accompanying a group of Japanese Catholics, I met another group of young sisters. Two Sisters of Providence, who were in their 80's, were in charge of the training and formation of these young women, most of whom were in their early 20's--again all bright smiles and good humour. All these young women, eagerly and generously giving their lives to the Lord, were also signs to me of the abiding presence of the Holy Spirit and of great hope for the future of the Church in China.

### *Young priests take on positions of authority*

On our tour of the mainland, we also met bright young priests who had just returned from their studies abroad in the United States. All of them were now serving in responsible posts in major seminaries throughout the country. Some like Fathers Joseph Ni Yong and John Dou were appointed deans of studies in Sheshan and Beijing seminaries respectively.

Since the re-opening of official church seminaries in 1982, nearly 700 seminarians have been ordained to the priesthood. No one knows for sure the number ordained in the underground church. These new priests serve in the 115 dioceses of the official church (there were 138 ecclesiastical jurisdictions in 1949). At present the Church in China has 70 bishops in the official and an estimated 40 more in the underground church. Over 1,600 students are now studying in 31 major and minor seminaries, and another 70 study in seminaries and Catholic universities abroad. The number of Catholics in China is estimated to be between 5 and 6 million. They are served by 1,000 priests working in over 4,500 restored or rebuilt churches. (Perhaps several hundred more priests are active in the unofficial church.)

All of these are indications of wondrous light, life, and of a newly resurrected presence of the Church in China. But such success does not come without problems. It is time now to turn from the points of light to look at some of the problems that indicate the presence of shadows as well.

What happens to a newly ordained priest or a young sister fresh from her religious profession, when they begin work in the local parishes?

### *Shadows obscuring the light*

#### *Bureaucratic structures*

The first problem they must face is how to relate to the government structures that they meet on the local level. The Religious Affairs Bureau (RAB) and the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association (CCPA) are in control of all religious activities, and nothing escapes their scrutiny and supervision. The exercise of this control may be strict or comparatively relaxed, depending on local conditions. Sometimes it expresses itself in economic terms, as when financial control over parish monies is not in the hands of the parish priest but in those of the local CCPA. This state of affairs can be irksome to newly assigned young priests.

One wonders if the government would ever consider readjusting the bureaucratic structures which supervise religion? China must be one of the few countries left in the world that still retain such structures. Also, dismantling them would serve to simplify relations with foreign churches,

whose representatives would rather deal directly with local church leaders than having to go through government bureaucrats.

### *Implementation of government campaigns*

The periodic campaigns which the government aims directly at religion and demands immediate implementation on the local level can also raise difficulties for young priests and religious sisters. For example, last year religious groups were called upon to comply with President Jiang Zemin's "three phrases" campaign dealing with religious questions:

1. carry out an accurate implementation of the Party's religious policy;
2. strengthen legal control over religious affairs;
3. take positive steps to guide religion to adapt itself to socialism.

### *Registration of churches*

Even more problematic was the campaign at the beginning of last year that demanded the registration of all venues used for religious activities. The National RAB Director said that the aim of this campaign was not registration for its own sake, but "to use registration as a means to tighten legal control over places of religious activity, as well as over all religious activities themselves. Registration is the link in the systematic process of exerting control over such activities."

The campaign to register unofficial churches was denounced by some bishops. It only served to create more tension between the government and Church, especially the unofficial churches. Certain bishops claimed that Catholics were being forced to apostatize and students were being pressured to write letters abandoning their faith. Reports of the arrests of bishops, priests and lay Catholics, and of beatings, fines and jailings were on the increase. Underground bishops used the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the establishment of the Chinese hierarchy to implore the government to heed the teachings of Lenin who taught that religion was a personal matter, that it could not be destroyed by administrative means, and that people cannot be forced into giving it up.

It is important for the Church to speak out on behalf of Catholics who have been unfairly treated, beaten or imprisoned, whether they belong to the official or to the underground church.

*Appeal of the Holy Father*

In his pastoral letter to the Church in China in December of last year, the Holy Father also appealed directly to the Chinese authorities, telling them that they have no need to fear either God or his Church. "A disciple of Christ can live his faith in any political system, provided that there is respect for the right to act according to the dictates of his own conscience and his own faith," the Pope wrote. The Holy Father asked that authentic freedom be ensured so that believers in Christ can contribute their energies and talents to the development of their country. He also pointed out that Catholics could, if allowed, make a notable contribution to China's role in the international community, and they would do so with enthusiasm and commitment.

It is in the midst of such tensions as these that young priests and religious are called upon to serve and shepherd their small communities of Christian believers.

*The Problem of Reconciliation*

Another problem young priests and religious must face are the differences and divisions of a church divided. A young parish priest, in answer to the question: how many Catholics are there in your parish? answered: "More than those that come to church. They stay away because their way of thinking is not like ours." He was referring to members of the underground church. Their rejection of him was one of the crosses the young priest had to bear, and a heavy burden it was for him too.

The Pope addressed the problem of reconciliation in Manila in January of 1995 when he exhorted Chinese Catholics: "...to seek paths leading to communion and reconciliation, paths which draw their light and inspiration from the truth himself, Jesus Christ." He repeated this message to the bishops of Taiwan in the summer of the same year: "I know that many are wondering how this reconciliation can come about. All need to move; all have to turn to Jesus Christ, who calls us all to unity and communion. Each person must discover the steps that lead to reconciliation. What we speak of is a long and difficult journey. The goal is clear enough, but the path leading to it still seems obscure. We need to



invoke the light of the Spirit and to let ourselves be guided by his inspiration."

The RAB and the CCPA do not help the situation by continually emphasizing the independence and autonomy of the Church in China. Such terminology only heightens the mistrust of the members of the underground church who suspect that these two bodies want to cut off the Church in China from its relationship with the Pope, a position unacceptable to them. Also, they will hardly be tempted to join an official church that they perceive is run by the CCPA, a government sponsored organization, rather than by the bishops.

### *Diplomatic relations between China and the Vatican*

This brings us to another problem confronting the young priests and religious, in fact all Chinese Catholics, namely the lack of diplomatic relations between the Vatican and the People's Republic of China. One often hears the lament in China that the restoration of diplomatic ties would solve all problems. Professor Michael Mi of Beijing's Renmin University has pointed out five obstacles to the re-establishment of diplomatic relations: atheism, Marxism, underestimation of the Vatican's international status, fear of Vatican control and the nomination and ordination of Chinese bishops. While progress continues to be made in the first four areas, the fifth remains a major stumbling block. This is because the Chinese government considers the matter of the appointment of bishops in China to be a question of Chinese sovereignty. And yet, is it not possible for some concordat to be worked out whose conditions would prove satisfactory to both sides? The future will tell; but the problem remains.

### *A generation gap*

When a young priest or religious is assigned to parish work for the first time, what they need most is supervision by an older and more experienced pastor. Such simple problems as the proper use of one's time take on great significance when the pastoral demands are exceeded only by the amount of miles that must be traveled to reach those in need of care. For many priests and sisters, there is a 40 to 50 year age gap between them and those over them. Many of the older priests have died,

leaving many parishes devoid of clergy. Many young priests are then left completely on their own and without any experienced priest to guide them in coping or adjusting to their new life. Some turn to constructing new churches, a practical task that gives visible results and therefore some personal satisfaction. And yet one wonders if the same amount of energy and dedication might better be spent on building up the Christian community itself. Some young priests, because of their inadequate seminary training, are shy and reluctant to take active leadership in the community, especially when confronted by those better educated than themselves.

The opening of the Church of China to the universal Church will help to alleviate many of the difficulties mentioned above, especially those encountered by young priests and religious. The overseas church can play a role of encouraging them and offering them resources of experience and further study that will help them in their training and formation as pastoral agents able to cope with the many demands of pastoral ministry.

### *Conclusion*

When speaking of the Catholic Church in China, the experiences of the early church as recorded in the Acts of the Apostles come to mind. I think of Philip and his encounter with the servant of the Queen of Ethiopia. The eunuch was reading a passage from the scriptures, from the book of Isaiah, concerning the Suffering Servant of Yahweh. Philip, the account says, "opened his mouth, and beginning with this scripture, told him the good news of Jesus."

This passage is for me a fitting description of the recent history of the Church in China. It began with the Suffering Servant..."as a sheep led to the slaughter, as a lamb dumb before its shearers". But now it is experiencing a resurrection. Like Philip, the Chinese Church is developing a theology of its experience "beginning with this passage of scripture". The presence of the Risen Jesus is once again experienced in the Christian community, and his Holy Spirit is enlivening its members with a share in his life. No obstacle can impede the action of the Holy Spirit. Despite all difficulties, the Spirit of Jesus, active in the Chinese Christian community, will continue to bring forth good fruit. □