

Evangelization in the Chinese World

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As part of their preparation for the coming Synod of Asian Bishops, all churches in the area are undergoing a period of reflection upon their present situation and their methods of evangelization.¹ The Pre-synodal Council appointed by the Holy See has already published Guidelines (*Lineamenta*). These Guidelines urge church members to get involved in the evaluation process by responding to a series of questions dealing with the state of the Church and its present commitments on the local level. It is in this context that I offer some suggestions on how to go about the work of evangelization in the Chinese world. I also hope that my own reflections will stimulate others to respond in kind.



1. The need for a comprehensive approach to the Chinese world.

On 1 July, 1997 Hong Kong was reunited with the motherland; Macao will follow suite in December, 1999. While Taiwan is keeping its political future open for the present, it will undoubtedly, continue to be part of the Chinese world. Even as the political scene remains unsettled, the practical realities of economic exchanges among these Chinese areas already show the existence of a growing entity that may be called "Greater China". Sharing a common cultural identity and a strong sense of belonging to the same race, communication among these areas intensifies and mutual exchanges daily multiply. This includes Taiwan's relationship with the mainland, which is rapidly improving with an increase of visits, trade and investments .

As a result of these close contacts and frequent exchanges, we cannot begin to discuss the issue of evangelization in a Chinese context without reference to this larger Chinese reality. Although attention must first be directed at the individual Chinese and his or her immediate environment, the larger Chinese scenario must also be addressed in all its diversity and complexity. From a religious point of view, the problems are the same everywhere in the Chinese world: the shared religious cultural tradition; the rising tensions between tradition and modernization; the on-going process of industrialization and urbanization; the gradual improvement of educational standards along with a growing sense of communal responsibility; the increasing trend towards secularization and materialism; the large proportion of youth in society; and the all pervasive influence of the mass media, which shortens distances and ignores borders.

All of the above point to the urgent need for the churches who locate themselves within this world of "Greater China" to establish a more binding unity and solidarity. Catholics living in these areas must open themselves to a broader vision and wider concerns to enable them to see beyond their immediate workplace and begin to build bridges that reach out to other communities and groups different from their own. Efforts to build solidarity require the breakdown of parochialism and institutionalism in all their forms. Church groups must develop methods for more functional cooperation and a sharing of services and resources. They must work together to overcome obstacles to the inculturation of the Christian faith. In reflecting on their faith local theologians and other thinkers should begin with their own situation, then move on to a consideration of the larger sphere of "Greater China" and the world.

Unity and solidarity do not mean uniformity or interference. Cooperation is based on mutual respect. Special care must be taken to insure against unwarranted meddling in another's affairs. This applies not only to relationships between churches but also within the confines of the same community, especially where sensitive racial or minority issues are concerned. For example, in liturgical matters, the characteristics particular to ethnic minorities, which are found throughout all of "Greater China", must be respected, nurtured and given room to develop.

2. The main responsibility and primary role in the evangelization of the Chinese world belongs to the local Chinese churches.

In the wake of anti-colonial feeling and the rise of a spirit of nationalism in the newly independent countries of the developing world, the Catholic Church has opted to give a more autonomous role to local churches. This process reached its apex with the Second Vatican Council which recognized the relative autonomy of 'particular' or 'local' churches, i.e. dioceses, "in which and from which exists the one and unique Catholic Church" (Canon 368). From this point forward, it might be said that "the young churches of Asia have come of age with their own hierarchy, clergy, religious and laity. They have the necessary structures, such as seminaries, pastoral and formation centres, theological facilities and journals, qualified formation and teaching personnel...." (*Lineamenta* p. 17).

The particular churches of Taiwan and Hong Kong have, according to this trend, moved steadily towards a mature and appropriate autonomy. On mainland China, the Communist government has also advocated autonomy for the church, playing upon the feelings of patriotism of the Chinese people. The "official" church, while under a certain government control, still claims an autonomy that is "self-governing, self-financing and self-propagating". The "unofficial" church, for its part, is moving towards autonomy in practice because of the difficulty of maintaining direct contact with the Holy See and other churches. Ironically, it seems that God is leading all the churches to the same end but by different means--by reflection and renewal in the universal Church, and by the external pressures exerted on the churches in China.

It seems obvious, that the particular Chinese churches in order to nurture their maturity and autonomy should assume the leadership and initiative for the evangelization of Greater China. They should try to make the best possible use of their resources: their personnel, including clerical, religious and lay, and devote their energies to the work of evangelization. They should strive to form their members, by nourishing the growth of their faith in small basic communities and associations, encouraging them to increase their contacts with people

outside their group, to get more involved in social issues, and to commit themselves to building a more just and equitable society.

They must come to understand that their evangelizing spirit, directed towards their own compatriots and the world outside, is indispensable for their own personal Christian vitality and maturation. This spirit will also be the main stimulus for religious vocations which are essential to an authentic autonomy. On the other hand, preoccupation with the self, or even a concern that is limited exclusively to one's local church, will soon stifle that generosity of spirit which nourishes every vocation.

3. The religious congregations and religious institutes play a secondary but specialist role in the evangelization process.

The establishment of the "official" church and the process of maturation towards autonomy experienced by both sectors of the Chinese local church have created a new ecclesial situation. In the past, religious orders and religious institutes worked from within these churches, but now they have been relegated to the outside where they must rethink how best they can continue to be of service. Obviously, their role will be secondary, placing the needs of the local churches first and their interests above those of their own orders or societies, even where vocations are concerned.

They should encourage the local churches to take the initiative, and humbly offer to cooperate with, serve and stimulate the local communities.² They can also, on occasion, serve as specialists, depending on their particular charism or specialty and in conformity with the needs and requests of the local churches. Their presence as foreigners working in the local church can serve as living signs of the communion of the universal church. Those Chinese who belong to the religious congregations and institutes should be allowed and encouraged to play a special role in this respect. Foreign personnel must take care to avoid any semblance of a neo-colonial attitude.³ All should take every care to act with professionalism in offering their skills and services to the community, especially when called upon to exercise their expertise under less than ideal conditions.

It is not only the religious congregations that are called to cooperate willingly with the churches of China. Other foreign local churches should also show their solidarity and support for these sister churches many of which still struggle to maintain themselves in rather difficult situations. What is needed here is a concern that is both respectful and enlightened. Because foreign local churches are not fully acquainted with the existing conditions in China, they would do well to make good use of the experience of the so-called 'bridge churches'---the Chinese churches of Taiwan, Hong Kong and Macao. Also, when it may seem necessary to exert pressure on the Chinese government in, for example cases involving human rights, legal protection for religious activities, a clarification of law, it would be better for the foreign churches and their representatives not to request the intervention of their governments. They should instead allow their own members to deal with these matters as ordinary citizens. In so doing, they would avoid many serious mistakes made in the past.⁴

Unfortunately, old habits die hard, and it may take a long time to effect this change of mentality.

4. The best evangelical method would be for all particular Chinese churches, out of a sense of solidarity, to help each other achieve a common maturity, which is a prerequisite for attaining authentic unity and autonomy.

The Chinese churches must cooperate in building up a truly mature local church, eminently capable of assuming her responsibilities, of establishing right relationships with the government, other local churches, and the universal church through the Holy See. All this should be done in an atmosphere of unity and catholicity. The best evangelical method is the witness of a Christian community that is truly one and catholic.

What are the characteristics of an authentic and mature church?

Firstly, her life must be Christo-centric and all her actions must emanate from Christ. The preface to the *Lineamenta* includes the following: "In highlighting the centrality of the person of Christ, his

mission as mediator, and One and Only Saviour in God's eternal plan of salvation, the Church in Asia and all her members will be better prepared to fulfill Christ's evangelizing mission of love and service in Asia that they may 'have life and have it more abundantly.'"

If Jesus Christ is understood by Christians and introduced to non-Christians by his radical experience of God as Father, and of himself as the *first born* or as our elder brother, who brings us all the Father's saving love, then people of good will everywhere, including members of other religious beliefs, will not see anything irrelevant or hostile in him. Seeing Jesus not as a destroyer of traditional cultures and religions, but one who seeks to bring them to perfection will go a long way towards resolving the thorny question of Christ's uniqueness, which is of major concern for many Asian theologians.⁵

Secondly, the Church should present the world with an "alternative way of living". A way of being in the world, with the people of the world, but not of the world. The concerns of the church may begin in this world but they go beyond it. The church should show its solidarity with the minority, the marginalized and the poor. It should show prophetic courage thereby becoming a reference point for public conscience and social morality. It should manifest love for the motherland, respect for diversity and pluralism and encourage *Da Tong*, the Great Harmony, the global village, or, in Christian terms, the Family of God.

The true maturity of an institution is not measured by power or the number of its members, but rather by becoming a community in which people live in true communion with each other, and whose actions radiate light to all "like a city placed on a mountain."

At present "the signs of the times" seem to indicate (even in Europe) that the future of the Church will be to return to its minority status. This must not be seen as a painful setback, but rather as a grace from God. This can make the church more open, and willing to dialogue on a more equitable basis with other people, their cultures and their religions. Such a Church will eschew the non-biblical medieval model of might and power bearing witness in the world to eschatological values. Every local church should seek to become a witness to the Gospel, without rank or privilege, but with courage and determination directly concerned with the problems of the society in which it finds itself. However, the church must guard against being

reduced to just another socio-spiritual welfare agency controlled from the outside, wrapped up in its own petty concerns and closed in on itself.

There is much in our present society for Catholics to challenge and confront. They must bear witness to spiritual and religious values in a society dedicated to materialism. They must advocate self-giving over selfishness, a spirit of poverty and detachment over a consumer society that worships only money and corrupts its members. Catholics are called to help build a community, a communion of citizens who love the motherland, and are dedicated to the service of others, a community that fosters respect for human rights, protects the powerless, rejects any form of authoritarianism or despotism and upholds the rule of law, one that produces a new style of leadership and a new way of exercising authority.⁶

In short, a mature Church is one that keeps the lines of dialogue open to all individuals and groups and at every level of society: religious, social, cultural, political and artistic. It is one ready to get involved in social issues, helping and giving support to people struggling to resolve the ordinary dilemmas of their daily lives.

The 'bridge' churches of Taiwan, Hong Kong and Macao must also strive to attain authentic maturity in their relationship to China.⁷ They must be creative in their efforts to find new ways and promote new initiatives in continuing to help the local Chinese church communities on the mainland. A spirit of respect, cooperation and a willingness to work within the limitations of local requirements are all necessary if their help is to be effective.

Fields of action can be enlarged and extended. Not only should the present range of activities continue, such as the exchange of visits, providing religious materials and financial assistance, sending seminary and university teachers and spiritual formators, providing specialized forms of social services, encouraging religious research and studies in inculturation, but new paths should also be opened, especially in such fields as education, mass media, publishing, and all manner of other such joint ventures. For example, in January of 1995 the Beijing government issued its "Temporary Provisions for Sino-Foreign Cooperation School Planning". This document makes allowance for and appeals to overseas Chinese and also foreigners to help in running schools on the mainland. To quote the new legislation

directly: "Chinese and foreign cooperative partners may run educational institutions of various kinds at varying levels."⁸

Hong Kong, it seems to me, is now in a very special position to become a centre of cultural and religious dialogue. It can fulfil a very needed role by opening its doors wide to welcome local and international religious, thinkers, scholars and experts to a free exchange of views that, ultimately, would enrich everyone's faith.⁹

All local churches should give priority to the witness of Christian unity and solidarity, nurturing within themselves a spirit of communion that should permeate all their contacts and become the foundation for all their services.

If the object of evangelization is the Chinese people, then the subject-agent is the Church. In a Chinese context, the subject-agent must be a church that is a communion, and one which also represents a communion of all its members.... This communion of members must be realized on the local church level, and extend beyond to include all other local churches in the universal church.¹⁰

To conclude, I wish to quote from a prayer composed by some young Hong Kong academics:

Our Father in Heaven,
 May the Heavenly Kingdom,
 which You proclaimed through Jesus Christ,
 become our vision of today...
 May Your Kingdom come,
 May Your will be done in China,
 As it is in Heaven. Amen.¹¹

Endnotes

¹ The intention to call a Special Assembly of the Synods of Bishops of Asia was expressed by Pope John Paul II in his Apostolic Letter *Tertio millennio adveniente* (The Coming Third Millennium, 10 November 1994). Later, he appointed a Pre-Synodal Council and fixed the topic for the Special Assembly, "Jesus Christ the Saviour and His Mission of Love and Service in Asia:...That they may have Life and have it abundantly". The first meeting of the Pre-Synodal Council of the General

Secretariat of the Special Assembly was held in Rome on October 24-26, 1995, with the participation of 16 representatives, almost all presidents of the Bishops' Conferences of Asia: the purpose was to discuss and decide the directives of the *lineamenta* (Guidelines). The second meeting was held on February 26-27, 1996, to approve the draft of the *Lineamenta* with the final Questionnaire. In Autumn, 1996, the *lineamenta* was distributed and opinions solicited from the local Churches, to be forwarded before August 1, 1997. On the basis of these responses an *Instrumentum Labori* (Working Document) will be drawn up for the Special Assembly. Meanwhile, the third meeting was held on February 25-27, 1997. The Special Assembly is to be held probably early in 1998.

² This is just what I intend to do by writing these notes.

³ It seems to me quite obvious that God, by allowing in recent times the rise of strong nationalist and anti-colonialist waves among many peoples, is giving a negative judgement upon several of the past evangelization methods and means used by foreign missionaries, and is reminding all Christians to try their best to avoid them. Dealing with mission work in China, the *Hong Kong Standard* wrote: "As a legacy of past days, the church still has to do more to convince not only the Beijing authorities but the public at large that Christian missionaries from the West have no other agenda in China apart from spreading the faith." (12 September 1994).

⁴ Personally, I wonder about the true motivations of some Western governments, politicians or news agencies, in their interventions on behalf of the "prisoners of conscience" and "human rights" in China. Their words seem to lose their true value, since usually they are not followed by any effective action. Sometimes, I have the feeling that history is repeating itself, like last century, some political powers or politicians fought to defend Christians in China while they fought the Christian Churches in their own countries.

⁵ The *Lineamenta* states: "The mediation of salvation by Jesus Christ does not exclude that other forms of mediation share, in different ways and degrees, in His one and only mediation. Instead from this perspective they acquire a new meaning and value. It must be stated, however, that they are not a mediation parallel or complementary to His." (p. 28)

⁶ Personally I consider this point very relevant. The Chinese Christian Churches should contribute to help people in the whole of East Asia to distinguish clearly between the secular and the religious, or the spiritual and the temporal spheres in human life, both individual and social, each with its own autonomy but in cooperation for the problems they share in common. Neither of them should show the pretense of having absolute authority above everyone and everything, since the supreme authority is only in God. This distinction would help to overcome the sense of aberration Prof. Michael C. Mi has written about: "The Western concept of a distinction between political and religious authority, each vested respectively in the persons of kings and popes has been regarded by China as an aberration. 'It comes down to having two suns in one sky, two masters in a single kingdom.' These kinds of beliefs are still common in some literary circles today. The only

difference between them is the language style. The old words are imbued with a strong superiority complex found in the oriental autocratic monarchy of the Ming Dynasty, but the new words are brimming over with an even stronger superiority - that of the proletarian dictatorship of Mao Zedong" (*Tripod*, No. 95, September-October 1996, p. 18). And if such a contribution should be carried out in a peaceful way, that is avoiding the hard conflicts experienced in the West during the Middle Ages (the so-called Lay Investiture Controversy), it should be even more meaningful for the true modernization of the nations and peoples concerned.

⁷ Beatrice Leung, in her book, *Sino-Vatican relations: problems in conflicting authority 1976-1986* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1992), characterizes the role of Taiwan's Church as a "cultural bridge", while that of Hong Kong as a "political bridge" (pp. 231-256). However, this should not be taken in an exclusive sense.

⁸ See the explanation of the contents of the provisions in *PRC Yearbook 1995/96* (N.C.N. Limited, Hong Kong, 1996), p. 489-90.

⁹ The Protestant theological circles, seem more sensitive in this field than the Catholic Church; see the opinion of Liu Xiaofeng and He Guanhu, who consider Hong Kong a place suitable for dialogue, because it has a concentration of talented minds, and enjoys freedom of thought (*Ching Feng*, Vol. 39, No. 4, December 1996, p. 321).

¹⁰ Aloysius Chang, "Evangelization in a Chinese Environment", in *Tripod* March-April 1991, p. 50. The article underlines the necessity that only a church that is indeed an ecclesial communion and not just a community can be the subject-agent of evangelization on mainland China where the old pyramid model is still quite prevalent. In my opinion, in our approach to the evangelization in mainland China, we must keep always in mind this reality, aiming all the time at building up a Church as communion. This however does not necessarily mean to preach in any way "reconciliation", because, sometimes doing this, we can be like the false prophets of Jeremiah's time, preaching "Peace, peace, when there is no peace."

¹¹ See the whole prayer at the end of their statement "A Christian Quest for a Hong Kong Vision", published in *Ching Feng*, Vol. 39, No. 4, December 1996, pp. 327-332.