

Documentation

We Church of God: Faithful Little Flock

Editor's note: Since our very first publication we have always tried to provide our readers with important documentation. Throughout the years we have printed all the major documents related to religion in China as well as other important documentary information. Below is a letter, whose author is unnamed, but which carries an significant message. It is translated from the Italian and reprinted here with the permission of *Mondo e Missione*, 3, 1997, pp.67-70

My dear Confreres,

Let me call you that because I have always felt a part of your family. We have a lot in common! Forty long years of enforced separation have not been able to lessen in any way the deep ties that unite us. On the contrary these ties have become even stronger, and your Missionary Society has become even dearer to us. To it, our local church and I personally, and in great measure, owe our reason for living, struggling, hoping, loving and dying.

I wish here to express my deep gratitude for what the missionaries have done for us in the past. We have forgotten none of their efforts, charity, sacrifices and sufferings. We remember the missionaries as those men and women God sent to us to let us enter into the great family of the Universal Church. For us Chinese especially, who for so long believed that we were almost the only people in the world, this was absolutely unheard of news, and it certainly contributed to the renewal of our country. This is unquestionably the most precious fruit of evangelization. Yesterday we were strangers, but missionaries arrived from afar to bring us the Good News of Jesus. Thanks to their witness, in Christ and through his blood, we have become brothers and sisters in the great family of God and members of God's holy people, that extends from one end of the world to the other. May God be blessed one thousand times for this extraordinary marvel of his love.

Here it is still winter, an extremely cold winter. Only a couple months ago I underwent a heavy trial. It lasted two months. Like Jesus, I spent Christmas in the dark and cold. You know, Herod is not dead. One of my priests fell into his hands and was confined for fifty days in his prisons. All my young people were scattered, but thanks to the mercy of God they are coming back one by one. The old refuge is not safe anymore. In order not to draw too much attention we have to divide into small groups and live in different places. But this is not something new for us. A long time ago our Lord taught us that to follow him means walking on the road beside Him, and rarely to remain in the same place for long.

In any case, these last events seem clearly to indicate that the humble community of monks that I have in mind, will probably not turn out as I would have wished, with the deep intellectual formation of its members, but rather through the simple work of our hands. In China it will be less dangerous for people outside the system like us who want to live in groups to be workers instead of intellectuals or students. The only way left to us is the one of the rural carpenter of Nazareth. I do not think it is too bad a way after all.

Why monks at the doorstep of the twenty-first century? This is a good question. The basic insight is quite simple: we have to learn to become and to live as true disciples of Christ before thinking of consecrating our lives totally to the work of evangelization. We think that in our seminaries there is too much stress on intellectual formation (and it is not always of a good quality anyway). There is also too much stress on the urgent need to ordain priests for pastoral work in parishes. In this way in-depth practice of the evangelical life and specific preparation for the evangelization of non-Christians are often neglected. These are the reasons that the monastic life is our inspiration and which have moved us to search for another *formula*.

Such a new *formula* is still to be devised. Our aim is not monastic life *in itself*, but the evangelization of the Chinese, using language understood by the Chinese. The monastery wishes to be the source that brings life to the evangelization process before it takes to the road, and the source for the refreshment and renewal of one's strength at every stage of the way. These are my monks!

By saying this I do not mean that only monks can be good evangelizers. In this country we had the experience of many years without priests and religious, without freedom and the means of formation. In such a situation we have witnessed the extraordinary evangelizing power the Spirit bestows on lay people when they are confronted with a situation that requires them to act with courage.

I would like now to make five points to outline the situation of the Church in China as I see it. In this way I hope to help you become more a part of our life and to better understand how we can become a Church with 'Chinese characteristics'.

1. We are crossing the Red Sea, a sea still really red, and we are in a very small boat. Looking from afar this boat may seem nothing but a wreck. But, until the sea-crossing is over, we think that it would be suicidal to call it into question. It has been given to us through many sacrifices and we have accepted it with great love. We do not know of a better one. In the most difficult moments of the storms this boat has survived quite well and saved us from every abyss. It did not abandon us, why should we abandon it? In such rough seas we just cannot afford the luxury of trying out something new. Therefore we are still convinced that our old boat can take us safely to the harbor. When we disembark, things will be different. Then we will have time to thoroughly examine it from top to bottom. If it is then necessary, we will rebuild it, for other crossings in other waters.

2. Notwithstanding the modernization of China and all the evil that it suffered in the attempt to make it break with its many thousands of years of history, the traditional thought of the Chinese is still alive and still deeply influences the spirit of our people. The Church has a covenant with this spirit. Unfortunately such an encounter has failed more than once. In China the Church is still perceived as foreign. Therefore, besides the challenge of the Red Sea, we must also take into account this other tremendous challenge: to translate the authentic evangelical tradition into features which are genuinely Chinese. This is an extremely delicate task, that only Chinese fully immersed in their own culture and in the Spirit of the Gospel can actualize satisfactorily.

3. One thing is clear to us, or at least to me. You cannot translate and adapt everything. The Cross of Jesus Christ cannot undergo any adaptation. It is not a part of our human categories, whether Jew, Roman, Greek or Chinese. The Cross is not for inculturation. It interferes with our plans, it disturbs and scandalizes. But, at the same time, it fascinates and attracts. Nobody can remain indifferent. It confronts the world and compels it to react. It divides history into two. The Cross really represents the end of one world and the beginning of another for all of humanity.

I think I am conservative, although I do not believe I am excessively attached to the things of the past nor to an old-fashioned Church. But I do not readily agree with that theology that opens itself up to the world in the name of the Incarnation but easily forgets the Cross in the salvific plan. "Incarnations" that go only half way and only look for dialogue and collaboration with the world are not the incarnation of Christ. The dialogue of Jesus with the world started with the "divesting" in the desert and finished with the total "self emptying" on Calvary. In these "dispossessions" Jesus is vested with the Spirit of God and meets the world with love.

We know the three faces of the spirit of the world: the love of possessions, prestige and power. These are the sources of all our evils. Jesus came to free us not only from the law, but also from the roots of all evils in the world. He does this through the cross. He replaced the law not with the love of the world, but with the Cross. On the Cross, in his own flesh, Jesus nails the love for possessions, prestige and power, things that lead to death. Then he replaces them with mutual sharing, humility and service that lead to life. It is there that the old world dies and the new one is born. It is there that our divisions, separations, alienation, and deaths end and where the Sun of Life rises. Everything is reconciled. God and humanity are one in love, forever.

As far as I am concerned that is where I find the Church of Christ. It is born from the Risen one who was crucified. Without the Cross there is no resurrection, and there is no Church of Jesus Christ either. This is what I was taught in the past and what I received from the great Tradition of the Church. On this point Paul was very clear: the Cross of Christ sums up the whole of the Gospel. Paul, in fact, is not interested in any eloquence, intellectual approach or

flattering discourse. He proclaims only Jesus, and him crucified. It is only then that the Spirit of God demonstrates power (1Cor. 2, 1-5).

Even more: Paul not only preaches Christ crucified, but he himself is crucified with Christ. He even says that he is dead, and it is Christ that lives in him. The Cross in his flesh assuredly is the revelation of the love of Christ toward him. Such love urges him to diffuse that love as a sweet odour everywhere (Gal 2, 20).

This is the point where we can touch the basic experience lived by the Church in China up to now. We are, in fact, still a young Church and, in reality, very similar to that of the early Church. We also have been treated, and sometimes still are, as 'the refuse of humanity'. We have not left the world, but we have been rejected by the world. Because we have chosen Jesus Christ, his Cross has been our lot. It could have destroyed us. But, with the grace of God and with our eyes fixed on Jesus, it has been given to us to take it on our shoulders and to follow him. Like Jesus we have been reduced to nothing, but today we stand stronger than ever.

We can truly affirm that, in spite of our weakness and sins, thanks to the Cross we have discovered the meaning of life. We have tasted something of the wisdom of God, we have touched something of the living Truth. We have, in a word, discovered that Jesus is all in all, and that he alone is the hope of humanity. We who were considered as refuse, now consider as refuse anything that is not Jesus Christ. We do not need anything else. We are free and happy. We fear nothing since we can feel with our hands at every moment that everything is possible in the One who gives us strength.

We Chinese have found in this experience of the Cross the *Dao*, the way that our ancestors searched for for thousands of years. The Cross infinitely excels everything we could ever have imagined. The living key to the universal harmony that our great and wise people hope for all along in our history is found in Christ, crucified and risen.

Like Paul we too proclaim that: through the blood of Christ spilled on the Cross everything in heaven and on earth returns to its unity in God (Col 1, 20; Eph 2,16; Jo 12, 32).

This is the reason we are not available to negotiate this treasure. Neither are we available to negotiate the precious freedom

that Jesus won for us at the price of his own blood, often mixed with ours. We have refused to renounce it for a mess of pottage. We have preferred the freedom of our catacombs to the peace offered by the god Caesar. The only thing we can expect from a false god, even if he is dressed as a lamb, is that he will devour everything. We do not accept the risk of losing the salt of the Gospel by acknowledging the right of the totalitarian and atheist state to control us. We will not accept as a favor what is owed to us as a right. On this point we are inflexible. On all other things we can come to terms.

4. A goodly number of us compromised with the excuse that there was no other way to save the Church. We are here to demonstrate the contrary. We, who did not surrender anything, and who are still subject to persecution (in which sometimes they have collaborated), are more numerous than they, and by the grace of God, are growing day by day. In fact what happened is the exact opposite of what they had anticipated. Not they but we, thanks to our resistance, have saved them from becoming totally enslaved by the state and from losing their Catholic identity. Because we did not give them one moment of respite.

In season and out of season we have challenged them not to render useless the Cross of Christ. We have used every means possible to correct them. We have resisted them to their face any time they did not act in accordance with 'the truth of the gospel,' or risked to render useless the death of Christ (Gal 2, 11.14.21).

Finally, due to the good faith of many, but also thanks to our on-going 'fraternal correction', they have had to stand up. They started to examine their positions, to become more independent from the State and to be less embarrassed in manifesting their adherence to the universal Church and to the Pope. Today we can acknowledge that the serious reasons we had for refusing any contact with them, are fading away. Although we are still far from being united, the dialogue is less difficult. On this point we are then more optimistic, but we still have no illusions.

I would like to make clear our attitude towards our brothers and sisters in the open church. We have never refused to acknowledge the presence of the Lord in them. If we have prevented our faithful from participating in the life of the communities of the

Official Church, and if we are still hesitant in encouraging them to do so, it is not because we doubt, generally, the validity of their sacraments. Neither do we think they have all deviated. Our objection should be seen as a protest, as a disciplinary measure, as solicitude for our brothers and sisters, and to urge them to return openly and at any cost, to full communion with the Apostolic See and also with us.

5. Regarding the government: we accept it both positively and critically in solidarity with our people and in the measure that it does not deny the fundamental freedom recognized by the Constitution, and in the measure that it tries to rule by consensus instead of by decree.

The Chinese authorities know that we are not enemies of the State or of the government. We simply have a different way of looking at things. What really matters is that we all work together each in our own way for the good of the people, especially of the poorest. We, because of our faith in the gospel, they because of their faith in Marxism. Of course I would like to see that what we are proposing to the government, first of all, be put into practice inside the Church which is still divided.

I read a sentence in a missionary review that pleased me very much: Today we don't go to China only to evangelize, but also to be evangelized. It was good to read this. We Chinese, among the last to arrive at the wedding banquet, sometimes have the impression that we are 'minors' in the Church, and that we still have much to learn. We are glad that it is recognized that the Lord is also with us, and that he also speaks through us. I think what he says to the world through the Chinese Church is what I have expressed in this letter. I can summarize it in these words: the life of the world depends upon the acceptance of the Gospel.

In the Gospel the rivers of life, that can regenerate the world and the Churches in difficulty, flow from the pierced side of Jesus Crucified. It is when we identify with him, that we can really be in solidarity with all the crucified ones of the world, and then to rise in a free society, reconciled, renewed, harmonized and sanctified.