

Interview on the Church in China with A.B. Chang, S.J.

Question One

The preparations for the Sixth National Congress of Catholic Representatives are now underway. Reportedly it will be held sometime before Christmas. This is a good opportunity to reflect on what you wrote in 1995: "It seems that the 'Official' Church in China would need a challenge from within to come out from its present structural impasse." (Tripod, March-April 95, No. 86) Could you explain a bit more how to understand, under the present circumstances, such a challenge from within?

I was talking about a challenge that may be understood either as coming from within the Local Church of Mainland China or from within the Universal Church. In the article I wrote in 1995, under the title *Can the Official Catholic Church of China Still be Called Catholic?* the challenge I was referring to is the challenge posed by its structural and organizational system and the structure of the Universal Catholic Church. For example: the supreme authority in the Universal Church resides in the Holy Father, the Pope. In the Official Church it resides in the National Congress of Catholic Representatives. Such a situation continues to be a challenge from within. But perhaps one can also talk about the challenge from within the local Catholic Church on the Mainland. I believe that the very existence of the non-official church is in itself a constant challenge to the official church. Moreover in recent years a bishop from the non-official church has twice appealed to all the bishops, both of the official and non-official church to get together and openly declare their unity as "a flock under one shepherd". Is this not also a challenge from within?

For someone like myself who does the work of a theologian outside the Mainland, the only thing he can do is to expect that during the forthcoming meeting, the authorities will allow the Conference of Chinese Bishops to replace the Chinese Catholic Represen-

tatives Congress. Let the Bishops' Conference in direct dialogue with the government take care of the various problems regarding Catholic doctrine, religious practice, etc. With this as a starting point, let both sides dialogue in good faith. The rest of us will just have to wait and see.

Question 2

Some people believe that such a challenge, if accepted by the leaders of the "official" church (perhaps during the sessions of the NCCCR) will certainly result in greater repression and restrictions and possibly provoke deeper divisions within the church. Such being the case and following the principle of "lesser evil", would it not be better to tolerate for some time the existence of those "structures" which we know were not the creation of the Chinese Bishops but an imposition of the Communist Party? After all some of these structures, like the National Congress of Chinese Catholic Representatives, which only meets once every five years, do not have much relevance for the day to day pastoral care of the Catholics?

In my response to the previous question, I have just said that all we can do is to expect that the authorities will allow the Bishops' Conference to replace the Chinese Catholics Representative Congress. The word "expect" is very elastic. Can it really generate all those troubles mentioned in the question?

In my article quoted above (*Tripod*, No. 86, 1995) I presented various ecclesial problems existing in the official church. The structural and institutional dimensions, though not to be underestimated, are not the only important problem actually existing in the official church.

It is true the NCCCR meets only once every five years but the fact that it decides the positions and responsibilities in the Bishops' Conference is enough to make its influence felt. Besides I believe that the NCCCR must have an Executive Standing Committee to follow-up the decisions of the Congress.

I am relatively optimistic towards the members of the official church. I believe that the Holy Spirit is at work in them and because of this they are already reconsidering their structural and

organizational problems in order to be more in accord with the Second Vatican Council. Regarding what could be a “lesser evil”, it is better for those of us living outside the Mainland not to get involved in these questions. Sometimes we underestimate the courage of the Mainland Catholics to the point of making them wonder about us.

Question 3

In a recent article, Fr. Jeroom Heyndrickx said that, “This is the time for seeking a common ground with the civil authorities. The Chinese Bishops will be able to secure the future of the Catholic Church in China to the extent that they succeed in creating an open and truthful dialogue with the civil authorities. Their challenge is to work out a modus vivendi seeking the common ground through careful dialogue and mutual understanding, so that the Catholic Chinese Bishops can be legitimate both by the Law of the Church and by the Chinese Civil Law.” (J. Heyndrickx, “Give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God.”)

What are your comments regarding this suggestion?

I don't know what the concrete form of this “modus vivendi” suggested by Fr. Heyndrickx will be. Among the expectations included in my answer to the first question is the proposal regarding the Bishops' Conference as the starting point for a “modus vivendi”. Perhaps, in line with the orientation presented by Fr. Heyndrickx vis-a-vis the civil authorities it will be possible to obtain the two desirable objectives he indicates.

Question 4

Modern China is on the way to becoming one of the most influential world superpowers. There are there about 10 million Catholics out of a population of 1.23 billion. In the midst of such a giant nation, under an atheistic regime, the Catholic Church appears as a battered boat in a vast ocean of people who are heirs of thousands of years of history and a remarkable culture far removed from the Judeo-Christian tradition. The officials of this tiny, battered boat are approximately 140 very elderly Chinese Bishops who

are in conflict with one another mainly because the plan of the Communist Party is to keep them divided. As expected, the civil leaders of Communist China look at these bishops with suspicion and seriously question their allegiance to the Chinese government. Some of these Chinese bishops have reported that during their years in jail, they were reminded by their judges of things long forgotten, like the Portuguese Padroado, the French Protectorate, the Foreign Concessions, the long struggles to establish the Chinese Catholic hierarchy, sad incidents of the past during which the Church's authorities did not always appear to act in favor of China's national interests. Even today, in the eyes of the Communist Chinese leaders, the Pope is just the head of a sovereign foreign state which so far does not have diplomatic relations with the PRC and who in some ways influenced the collapse of Communism in Europe.

Given such a history and culture in such a complex socio-political situation how should we respond to those bishops in the open Church who say: like the rest of the Catholic bishops of the Universal Church we are all in communion with the Pope. But here, in order to have the freedom to better attend to the pastoral needs of the faithful, it would not be prudent to declare that we are under the Pope?

This is a difficult question to answer. I will try calmly to share at least a few reflections.

1. We can learn many things from history. History helps us to envision the future. However, to stick too rigidly to historical material, while ignoring the new signs of the times, is not the way to create the future.

2. Colonialism is now over. At present the People's Republic of China wants everybody to participate in building the nation and that includes the 10 million Catholics. The Chinese Catholics have always loved their country. They are certainly not responsible for the incidents of the (colonial) past. In fact they were also victims. And this will not be difficult for the Chinese leaders to verify when they pass judgment over that period of history. What could then be the reason to shackle them with the burden of those dark days and keep them under suspicion? The underground Church was born not for

political reasons but for questions of faith. Between their faith and their love for the country there is no room for conflict.

3. The church in China is just a tiny boat in a turbulent sea, really a small flock. The government of the People's Republic ought to welcome the service that the faithful can offer to the country. I don't understand why you are so sure that the plan of the Communist Government is to keep the Chinese Bishops divided. What good will that do for society? Will not that be in contradiction with their so called "Socialism with Chinese characteristics?"

4. For the Chinese Communists the role of the Pope in the Catholic Church is quite embarrassing. The Pope's social doctrine is not really supportive of Capitalism. It also reaffirms the importance of social factors. And for the sake of world peace, the Pope wishes the People's Republic of China to progress and prosper. On December 3, 1996 in an exhortation to the Chinese Bishops, the Pope addressed a part of his talk to the Chinese government which manifests clearly enough his sincerity. The Chinese government ought to think about this and move at the same pace. Dialogue and mutual interaction can improve the present situation. The role of the Pope is spiritual, not political. In today's world none of the governments of other nations are worried about this. What is it that the powerful government of China is afraid of? Though there may be points of friction between faith and politics, the present Pope has learned how to act with ability and discretion.

5. In line with what I have said so far, all we hope is that the Chinese Bishops' Conference will have something to say and say it.

Regarding the last portion of Question 4 about what to answer to those who say: "Like the rest of the Catholic Bishops of the Universal Church we are all in communion with the Pope. But here (in China) in order to have the freedom to better attend to the pastoral needs of the faithful, it is not prudent to declare that we are under the Pope," let the Pope answer it.

During his exhortation on December 3, 1996 the Pope urged the bishops "Not to yield to conceptions of the Church which do not correspond to the will of the Lord, to the Catholic Faith and to the

sentiments and convictions of the great majority of the Chinese Catholics.” On my part I would like also to ask: How many bishops are there, in the final instance who reason in the way the question is presented?

Question 5

Some of us have noticed a change in the way you now approach the situation of the Church in China. For example, in your article on the Ecclesiological Impasse you expressed the opinion that the Church in China seemed to be too much centered on questions of hierarchical structure and on the role of the episcopacy: that the structural problems could be more properly resolved through an ecclesiology clearly reflective of the mystery of the Trinity and of the mystery of Christ; that the internal ecclesial conflicts could be better approached through dialogue between the leaders of the “official” Catholic Church in Mainland China. Why?

I have published a number of articles in *Tripod* magazine, all related to the Church in Mainland China. The one I published back in 1986 *Ministry of the Pope and the Communion of the Catholic Church* (*Tripod* 36, pp. 54-74) and the one published nine years later in 1995, *Can Mainland China’s official Church still be called Catholic?* (*Tripod*, No. 86, pp 34-46) both are theological studies in line with the ecclesiology of the Second Vatican Council. I have also written some studies which are more directly concerned with pastoral orientation, like the one published in 1991 under the title *Fundamental Attitude of the Bridge Church* (*Tripod*, No. 61 pp. 6-16). The one referred to in your question, was published in 1992 under the title *“The Church in China: Ecclesiological Impasse? In search of a solution through a Christological and Trinitarian Approach.”* This article is also a pastoral-theological reflection and in its conclusion I wrote: “At heart what I intend is a pastoral and missiological approach.: It was not my intention then to solve the “structural” impasse of the official Church. Therefore the assumption implied in the question, (that I have changed my way of thinking regarding the Church in China) is not correct. I try to explore the situation of the Church in the Mainland through a multi-level

approach and under many aspects. The readers must understand under what aspect I am approaching the problem. Thus the 1995 article, *Can Mainland China's Official Church still be Called Catholic?* clearly asserts the problem under another aspect. I don't accept therefore that I have changed my position. Rather I discuss problems from different points of view.

I have also asked myself whether it was possible to resolve the structural and institutional problem of the official church through a Trinitarian and Christological approach. The official bishop of Shanghai, Jin Luxian, tried to do so in an address given in Germany in April 1986. The text of his lecture and my answer to him were published in *Tripod*, No. 36, 1986. pp 36-53 and pp. 54-74. I hope some experts can give a better answer but I felt that the ideas expressed by Bishop Jin Luxian can not easily be harmonized with the ecclesiology of the Second Vatican Council.

Question 6

In a few more years most of the leaders of both the official and unofficial Church will be gone. The administration of the diocese, seminaries and convents will soon be in the hands of relatively young and inexperienced pastors, and a new generation of Chinese bishops will emerge. Humanly speaking one would say that the future of the church in China depends on how these new leaders will lead in promoting reconciliation between the two factions within the church, in asserting their communion with the Pope and in dealing with the government. It is probably correct to say that the transition from the old bishops to a new generation of younger leaders is presently the most critical issue facing the Church in Mainland China. And the question is: What can we do to help them?

The question deals with a very important problem and already points out some of the main responsibilities of the new generation of bishops and priests. Free from the heavy burdens of the past, they will probably be able to be more creative.

To the question: What can we do to help them? My answer is very close to what Fr. Jiang Jianqiu wrote in a recent article (*Tripod* No. 98, 1997, pp. 30-33, Chinese section). We could of

course assist in the formation of some of the young priests sent abroad for special studies to enable them to assume the direction of the dioceses. But perhaps the most practical way of preparing the future successors of the old leaders will be to help them to organize in the seminaries of Beijing, Shanghai, Xian, Shijiazhuang and Wuhan short courses aiming at updating and renewing the young priest in theology, spirituality and church administration. In this way most of the young priests can benefit from this renewal and in the process get to know each other much better. I also feel, that the younger priests and bishops, will continue to need a lot of encouragement from us and to be in close contact and dialogue with the rest of the Universal Church. On our part we must seriously discern how to be of better service to them in the future. Moreover we must reflect more about the many things to be learned from the Catholics of the Mainland.

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