

Today's Church in Mainland China

by Bao Sidong

translated by Norman Walling, S.J.

The reason some people these days follow the fortunes of the Church on the China mainland with special interest is due to the peculiar set of circumstances under which it now exists. There are among them those who commit their impressions to paper, and their comments come from their deep love and respect. One such person is Ye Shengjun, who lives on the mainland and does not hesitate to write about what is happening to and in the Church there. He speaks from first hand knowledge and understanding, and he offers not a few suggestions about the way the Church in China should proceed. While this is all to the good, however, it must also be said that the current situation of the Church there is not as simple as Ye's writings would infer. The present divisions have their own peculiar historical background, specific character and unique set of circumstances. Because of this, an authentic reconciliation must wait upon the future, and the arrival of a more propitious time and condition. This article, then, will limit itself to a frank analysis of the current situation there, outlining a number of present problems, but not without faith and hope in their ultimate resolution.

Communists deny the existence of God. This atheistic ideology has its source in Marxism. When the Communists came to power in China, they saw religion as a relic of feudalism. They considered it as an ideology that had to be destroyed along with all the other non-proletarian based ideologies, as a necessary step in establishing the final stage of socialism. The Communists began almost at once to attack the mainland Church. Persecution became part and parcel of a way of life for the older generation, who bore historical witness to the ferocity of the Communist policy.

There has been no fundamental change in the Communist attitude towards religion. Their post-1989 actions only tend to verify this. They still consider religion to be a major destabilizing element in society. They still claim that religion is an imperialistic force working from within society, attempting to modify through non-violent means

the evolutionary process of socialism. In their view, the Catholic Church has had an 'especially sinister effect' on the tremendous changes that have taken place recently in the Communist countries of Eastern Europe. And China's authorities have, therefore, taken necessary steps to bring religion back under their 'lawful control'.

In 1989, Communism's senior statesman Chen Yun wrote a letter to the newly elected Party Secretary, Jiang Zemin, warning him of the danger of religion, and how it was competing with Communism for the hearts of the people, especially the young. He pointed out to Jiang that this was the usual ploy of their enemies, both foreign and domestic, and steps must be taken to curb them.

Recently, the Communists have tightened their surveillance over religious festivals, most notably the Christian celebration of Christmas. Some local officials consider young people who take part in such festivals as a destabilizing element in society and have moved to curtail their future participation. Some officials have set as their main goal controlling the Church's numerical growth. Certain Party members in Xianxian, Hebei, stated in public that the increase in the Catholic population was visible proof of the rapid expansion of Catholic power in the area. The official response to this kind of talk is to call more meetings of local bishops and priests, and, by using the prestige of these Church leaders to intimidate the Catholic populace to be even more circumspect in 'observing discipline and obeying the laws'. By such subtle means, they aim to control before it starts any movement towards active proselytization.

In summary, it must be noted that the basic religious policy of the Communist Party towards the Catholic Church is one of 'divide, attack, and divide again'. While the open Church is the object of their United Front policy, the underground Church remains the target of a more direct offensive. But their goal for both is the same in that they aim to control both the open and the underground Churches, and to contain all their activities within the scope of their own designated and narrow confines.

The Three-Self Movement and the Patriotic Association

The Three-self Movement and the Patriotic Association originated in the 1950's against the background of the failure of the

Communist Party to destroy the Christian Churches. Both organizations were born of a 'hate religion' campaign.

At the beginning of the 1950's Hu Yaobang, the Provincial Secretary of northern Sichuan Province, placed Father Wang Liangzuo of Guangyuan under an obligation to follow the example of the Protestant leader, Wu Yaozong, and sign his name to the "Three-self Patriotic Manifesto". In the face of the refusal of the majority of Catholics to comply with this measure, the authorities made up a bogus list of around 200 names (including the names of a number of little children and some people who were not even members of the Catholic Church). This fraudulent document became what was widely proclaimed as the "Guangyuan Manifesto" and it marked the beginning of the so-called Catholic 'Three-self Patriotic Movement'.

The real nature and purpose of the Catholic Patriotic Association as the offspring of Communist power politics became clear when the government set about arresting Church leaders and lay Catholics who refused to join it. The Communists desired to make Archbishop Zhou Jishi of Nanchang into a "Chinese Pope". He, naturally enough, resisted. The day before Bishop Gong Pinmei of Shanghai was condemned to life imprisonment, the government issued its final ultimatum with words to the effect that if he renounced the Pope and joined the Patriotic Association, all charges would be dropped and he would, instead, be offered a high office. Bishop Gong refused.

It is evident that the Patriotic Association is an instrument of the government to dissolve the Chinese Church's state of communion with the Pope, the successor of Peter in Rome. To accept this would be to sound the death knell for the Church in China and initiate its rapid dissolution.

To this day, the Patriotic Association remains loyal to the government and continues to take responsibility for tight supervision over the Church, setting itself above the Church, issuing orders and decrees that demand the Church obey. Further, some of its own members have apostatized and others have been found guilty of criminal activity as well. But there are other members who, without doubt, have striven to maintain some semblance of their former faith and who still endeavor to serve the Church sincerely wherever it is possible.

A clear distinction should be made between members of the Association and those brothers and sisters who have kept the true faith.

We must also be aware of the fact that most of those Catholics who attend Mass in the open Church have no personal dealings with the Association. Their purpose is merely to worship God where public worship is possible, and their motivation is not to be confused with members of the Association.

The Open Church

While the open Church is not to be identified with the Patriotic Association, it is, however, in varying degrees controlled by the government as well as the Association. This has resulted in a state of affairs that does not meet with the general approval nor receive universal acceptance in the Church as a whole.

Father A.B Chang has made a special study of the structures and the character of leadership found in the open Church. His appraisal is reasonable, factual and substantially correct. He helps to clear up much confusion and misunderstanding. His articles enable one to understand and appreciate better the narrow confines and limited freedoms under which the Communists allow the leadership of the open Church to function. Father Chang's writings deserve serious reflection.

In the open Church, the thinking of the leadership is not necessarily the same as that of its membership. Its leaders reflect more the structure and character of an institution which is directly under Communist control. The way it uses legal language and other 'political' terminology makes this abundantly clear. On the other hand, the ordinary members of the open Church are defined more by practice than ideology. They are believers who exercise openly their religious beliefs in places where this is officially allowed.

The majority of both clergy and laity in the open Church have a strong faith. They spare no effort in serving their local communities.

They, too, have been the target of discrimination and bias, and they have become inured to difficulty and persecution. They profess their faith openly and courageously by bearing witness to the Lord through lives of self-sacrifice. They are most worthy of our respect. We must not, however, be naive, about the open Church. It does enjoy a better social position than the underground Church in virtue of its acceptance

by the government. It is not improbable, then, that some may have taken advantage of this favorable situation, especially those in power. Leaders in the open Church are chosen by the government, and they have been selected according to norms often at variance with what the Church itself might need or desire.

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The Underground Church

Many Catholics were left bewildered, confused and angry by the government's use of force, by the Patriotic Association, and by the public display of weakness on the part of some leaders in the open Church. They were unwilling to accept the government's intervention. They resented being subjected to the whims and fancies of uninformed outsiders who sought to manipulate and control their Church, and who were given to insulting, humiliating and debasing them in the process. They were upset by and concerned about the direction their Church was having to take.

The underground Church grew out of such circumstances as those described above, and it is still growing. The reason is that the underground Church still meets the needs of Catholics. Moreover, their leaders, who have given heroic witness to the Gospel under the most difficult of circumstances and with no thought for their own personal safety, have offered sublime examples of the spirit of sacrifice that has won the esteem and respect of Catholics everywhere. For their followers, these leaders were, and still are, like lights shining in the darkness, radiating everywhere the brightness of a lively and lovely faith!

Many of these leaders were arrested in the past and some suffered martyrdom. The blood of these martyrs became the seeds of faith that would produce a great harvest: tenfold, a hundred fold, a

thousand fold, and more. They wrote a mighty hymn of victory for the Catholic Church in China, and they wrote it in their own blood.

Under such circumstances, their faith was tried. They confirmed in their lives that kind of faith which "riches and honors cannot corrupt; poverty and derision cannot sway; and all the world's might and power cannot intimidate." Their faith overcame the imperiousness of despots and the allure of this world's temptations. I, and many others, like to think that theirs was the true spirit of Catholicism.

We should also respect the present leaders of the underground Church who continue in this tradition to confront persecution with a firm faith. Let us pray to God to protect them and to strengthen them, and to allow them to experience in their hearts the blessing reserved for those "who are persecuted for justice's sake."

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Conclusion: Hope for the Future

Faith must be alive in us, that is, our lives must show forth what we believe; our faith must direct our lives and guide its choices.

Jesus Christ is our head; we are members of his body. Members of this body must be united as one, for in unity there is strength.

Jesus Christ is the foundation of our unity as Christians. It is he whom we confess as Lord. Jesus should be our Centre, the centre of our thoughts, our words and actions. It is on him alone that we take our stand.

We believe in Christ and we follow him, obeying his representative on earth, our Pope, who is the successor of Peter. We are joined with him in a communion with the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church.

God's ways are inscrutable, but they have are not without meaning and purpose. God has allowed the Chinese Catholic Church

to undergo decades of persecution. In doing so, we have shared in Christ's redemptive work, making us worthy of merit along with his Son.

We must clearly discern, accept and obey the will of God in all things. Let us join together, then, in offering our prayers and indeed our very selves for the reconciliation of all the members of the Chinese Church, and also for its complete reunification with the universal Church of Christ throughout the world.■

In Memoriam

China, the Church in China and all who hold the best interests of the Chinese and China at heart have lost a dear friend with the death of Father Edward Malatesta.

Father Malatesta died suddenly in Hong Kong on January 27, 1998. He was 65 years old.

Father Malatesta was the director of the Ricci Institute for Chinese-Western Cultural History, at the University of San Francisco in San Francisco, California. He was a noted scholar, sinologist, devoted priest and dear friend. We will all miss him.