

China Church and News Update 1998

A Review

The importance of China for Asia and the world continued to be evident during 1998. In spite of natural disasters that devastated large areas of the country and the worst flood since 1954, which claimed over 3000 lives, China continued to make tremendous progress in development and to consolidate its position on the world's political and socio-economic stage. It also managed to escape much of the Asian economic crises that began in Thailand in 1997. In fact its economic stability has been the envy of other Asian countries caught in the economic downturn.

There were, however, also signs of unrest as unemployment soared as a result of restructuring China's unproductive state agencies. Thousands of dismissed workers organized public protests in several locations in the country. **Zhu Rongji**, China's economic wizard, has made it clear that this reform is essential to China's on-going modernization process

On the social scene, China reiterated the need for population control and its stand on the One-Child policy. On several occasions it expressed its concern for changing family models, and the consequent increase in the number of divorces.

China also continued to emphasize the need to keep building its spiritual civilization by stressing ethical behavior and values, and emphasizing their importance to stem the tide of deteriorating moral standards and to cleanse the contaminated atmosphere of money worship and profit taking.

In spite of the fact that China's human rights record, including the right to freedom of religion, were often challenged by various rights organization, and its practices at times erratically inconsistent, we must admit that China also gave signs of being more open to discussing its human rights record and practices with the outside world

Human Rights and the Exercise of Religious Freedom, 1998

◆Three US clerics: **Reverend Don Argue**, president of the National Association of Evangelicals, **Archbishop Theodore McCarrick** of the Archdiocese of Newark, New Jersey, and **Rabbi Arthur Schneier**, president of the New York-based Appeal of Conscience Foundation, arrived in Beijing on February 8. **President Jiang Zemin** met with them for one hour on February 12. It was Jiang who in October 1997 had invited **President Clinton** to send a delegation to see the situation of religious freedom in China for themselves. After visiting Shanghai, Nanjing,

Chengdu and Tibet, they reached Hong Kong on February 28. "We came as friends, not as critics," they said. They raised a number of questions about human rights and government regulations while in China.

◆ **Rabbi Schneier** was back in Shanghai on June 30, accompanying **President Clinton** and his wife **Hilary** on their state visit. **Bishop Jin Luxian** discussed human rights and religious freedom with them. The next day, the bishop and four other Chinese religious leaders (1 Protestant, 1 Buddhist, 1 Daoist and 1 Muslim) met **Secretary of State Madeleine Albright**. She asked about the registration of places of worship and contact with foreign religious believers.

◆ From September 5 to 15, **Mary Robinson, the UN Commissioner for Human Rights**, visited Beijing, Shanghai and Lhasa, Tibet. She termed her visit a success, although some dissidents were not satisfied and complained that she had not been forceful enough and had not met with political prisoners.

She did, however, obtain China's promise to sign the UN Convention on Human Rights, which it did in fact sign on October 5.

◆ The signing of the United Nations' International Convention on Human Rights constitutes one of China's most important gestures in 1998. The signing was to signify that the People's Republic of China is now ready to join the international community regarding respect for and promotion of human rights. Yet China did not sign without certain reservations on freedom of association, the death penalty and freedom of movement within the country. Many people remain skeptical that China will honor its word in all areas of human rights, including religion.

◆ The impasse on Tibet continues. Beijing and the Tibetan exiles are as far apart over the future role of the Dalai Lama in Tibet and the practice of Buddhism there as they were at the time of the revolt in 1959. Although the **Dalai Lama** met with **President Clinton** in November, no substantial statement was issued afterwards.

Arrests and detentions

The frequency of arrests and detentions seems to have increased in recent months. This may be due to more complete reporting, possibly connected with the increasing number of telephones, mobile phones and e-mail in the Mainland, or possibly officials want no incidents in 1999 that would mar the 50th anniversary celebrations for the People's Republic of China.

◆ A priest, **Father Wei Jingkun** of the unofficial church, was detained on August 15, while offering Mass in a village near Baoding, Hebei Province. Six other church members were either detained or fined. **Sister Zhang Yanzhi** was arrested and held for 15 days for teaching

catechism to children. **Xie Suqian**, who permitted the class to meet, was also taken into custody. Police also stopped a group of about 100 persons from attending morning Mass. Some of these were fined up to 1,000 yuan (*SCMP* 15-10-98).

◆ On October 26, in two separate places in Henan Province, police arrested 140 Christians and beat their leaders in a new crackdown on worship outside places of state control. On November 5, police in Nanyang city broke up a house church service and arrested leaders **Lu Lianquan** and **Zhang Fushan** along with more than 100 worshippers (*SCMP*, AP, 9-11-98).

◆ Authorities also detained two dissidents and put a third under surveillance in a sweep against members of a would-be opposition party, according to rights groups. Two of the dissidents, **Xie Wanjun** and **Liu Lianjun**, had reported receiving vaguely encouraging signals two weeks before, from the Government about setting up the CDP (China Democracy party). But the police have now begun to interrogate and detained anyone connected with the party. At least 20 dissidents have been held since the group began trying to register the would-be political party in late June. (*SCNP* 23-9-98; 25-9-98).

◆ Two other democracy activists were detained and their homes searched by police as French **Prime Minister Lionel Jospin** arrived for an official visit. Police took **Qin Yongmin**, in Wuhan from his home along with another dissident, **Chen Zhonghe** (*SCMP*, 25-9-98).

◆ Chinese scientist, **Hua Di**, who has lived in the United States since 1989, and who has written about military issues in China, was arrested and charged with divulging state secrets when he made a visit to China recently although he had been assured that the visit was safe. (*Herald International Tribune*, 3-11-98).

Social groups also come under tighter controls

New regulations tighten controls on setting up non-government groups, according to New York based Human Rights in China. New rules prevent anyone from representing people who have conflicts with the government or want to express dissent. A group must also have at least 50 members and funding of 30,000 *yuan* (about USD\$4,000) for a local group and USD\$13,000 for a national group. The rules also allow official interference in the day-to day affairs of social groups (*SMP* 15-11-98).

Hong Kong rights safeguarded

In 1997, the eyes of the world were riveted on Hong Kong and its return to China's sovereignty. Many experienced uneasiness wondering whether the One Country, Two Systems would work; whether China would honor its pledge to let Hong Kong people rule Hong Kong. It is safe to say that Hong Kong survived its first year of transition with its human rights intact. The adverse consequences people expected in the political arena never materialized. Unfavorable conditions, however, did find their way in the most unexpected place: the economy. Hong Kong has not remained immune to the economic downturn affecting the rest of Asia. Numerous people have gone out of business; unemployment has soared to over five per cent, the highest in the last twenty-two years, and the livelihood of the sandwich and laboring classes has been seriously affected.

In the realm of religion, it was business as usual. In fact, foreign missionaries with at least seven years of residency in the territory were able, along with all other foreigners in Hong Kong, to apply for "Right of Abode." This new classification confers certain privileges that were not included in the previous "unconditional stay" granted by the colonial government for long-term residency.

Other Church News

Conference in Beijing

The Sixth Chinese Catholic Congress was held a month late, from Jan. 17-21. The 250 delegates had to fill the gap left by the death of **Bishop Zong Huaide** in June 1997. **Bishop Michael Fu Tieshan**, of Beijing, born in 1932, was elected chairman of the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association. The new president of the Chinese Catholic Bishops Conference is **Bishop Joseph Liu Yanren**, of Nanjing, Jiangsu Province, born in 1924. The government hopes that the new Catholic leadership will continue to work for China's rejuvenation while loving their country and their religion, and also work with people of other religions.

Synod on Asia in Rome, April 19 – May 14

Pope John Paul II surprised the 240 delegates at the opening Mass by announcing that he had invited the bishop of Wanxian, Sichuan Province, **Duan Yinming**, and his auxiliary, **Xu Zhixuan**, to attend the Asian Synod. But China denied them exit visas, citing the lack of diplomatic ties with the Vatican. The situation of the Church in Mainland China was on everyone's mind at the synod. **Bishops Joseph Ti-kang** of Taipei, **Andrew Tsien** of Hualien, **Domingos Lam Ka Tseung** of Macau, **Joseph Zen** and

John Tong of Hong Kong, all mentioned the Mainland in their Synod interventions.

As part of the preparations for the third millennium, the Synod looked at Jesus Christ as Saviour and at the reality of Asia.

There are rumors that the Holy Father plans a visit to Asia in 1999 as a follow-up on the Asian Synod. Some speculate that he will visit Hong Kong; others even suggest Beijing, but nothing has been confirmed yet.

Episcopal Appointments in Taiwan:

Jan. 18, **Paul Shan Guoxi, SJ**, of Kaohsiung [Gaoxiung], one of 22 new cardinals created by Pope John Paul II. Born in 1923 and ordained in 1955, he was ordained Bishop of Hualien in 1980. He is the fifth Chinese Cardinal in history. **Ignatius Gong Pinmei, SJ**, of Shanghai, now in the USA, is the only other living Chinese cardinal.

Aug. 29, **John Baptist Tseng Chien-tze [Zeng Jianzi]**, born in 1943 and ordained a priest in 1972, became the Auxiliary Bishop of Hualien. He is the first Aborigine [Gaoshanzu] to become a bishop in Taiwan. That ethnic minority in Taiwan is heavily Christian.

Sept. 26, **Philip Huang Chao-ming**, born in 1954 and ordained in 1983, became the Auxiliary Bishop of Kaohsiung.

Deaths of Three Bishops:

Feb. 15, **Philip Yang Libo** of Lanzhou, Gansu Province. Born in 1918 and ordained a priest in 1949, he spent almost 30 of his last 50 years in prison. After being released from labour reform, he was secretly ordained Bishop of Lanzhou in 1981, and imprisoned from 1983 to 1993. In addition to sacramental ministry, he did some poverty relief work in his arid diocese. About 6,000 people attended his funeral.

July 21, **Li Weidao** of Changzhi (Lu'an), Shanxi Province. Born in 1919, he was ordained a priest in 1949, and the underground bishop of Lu'an in 1982. In 1992 he managed to be installed as the bishop of Changzhi without having to join the CPA.

Oct. 25, **Liu Xianru** of Chengdu, Sichuan. Born in 1917 and ordained in 1947, he became bishop of Chengdu in 1992. Until his death, Bishop Liu resided at the Immaculate Conception Church in Chengdu.

No new bishops were ordained on the Mainland through mid-November.

First Diocesan meeting in Mainland China sets priorities for Shanghai.

Bishop Aloysius Jin Luxian of Shanghai, 50 priests, eight deacons and five nuns attended a meeting, held from Sept 21-26 in the new

diocesan Guangqi Formation Center in suburban Shanghai. The purpose of the meeting was mainly to address local church needs.

The pastoral needs were listed as translation of prayers into modern language, standardizing catechetical materials, catechist training, promoting Bible study and formulating parish pastoral plans.

The meeting also heard reports on diocesan religious vocation formation, finances, real estate and relations outside the mainland during the past 10 years. All the participants were very enthusiastic about the meeting and found it most helpful. Such meetings will now be held every few years (UCAN, CH1099.0996, 6-10-98).

Seminary Spiritual Directors attend National Course

The Bishops' Conference of the Catholic Church in China, (CBBBB) and the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association, (CCPA) sponsored the "Spiritual Directors Advanced Course" from October 7-November 6, 1998.

According to **Fr. Ma Yinglin**, secretary general of the BCCCC, the aim of the course was to strengthen spiritual directors' ability to deal with matters outside the traditionally stressed areas of faith such as general and cultural knowledge, sound thinking and physical health.

The guest speakers who conducted the course were **Frs. Frans De Ridder** of Belgium, **Robert Tantai** of France, **Lawrence Yiu Shun-kit** of Hong Kong, and **Peter Chu** of South Korea.

A course for Sisters who are novitiate instructors is being planned in the near future (UCAN, CH1362.1001 10-11-98).

Formation Programs

Bishop John Tong was in the USA from August 15-31. He gave a seven day retreat to young priests from China who are currently studying in the USA. The Auxiliary Bishop of Hong Kong also visited the Chinese community in New York City.

Eight young priests who teach at eight major seminaries in China were in Hong Kong from March 25 to June 20 for a course at the Holy Spirit Seminary. The subject matter of the course dealt with the organizing of seminary courses in dogmatic theology using standardized teaching materials.

The Catholic Institute for Religion and Society hosted two groups of Mainland visitors interested in learning more about pastoral work. From June 13 to July 3, 18 Sisters were in Hong Kong. Then a lay man and 15 parish priests, mostly from northern China, were here from October 19 to November 12. They were interested in finding ways to deal with marriage problems, since the changing mores and rising divorce rate are impacting Catholics also.