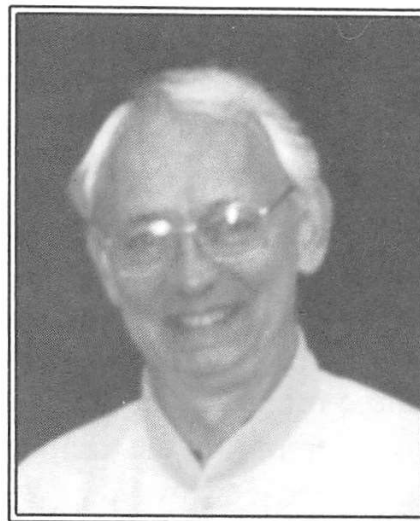


## *Their Voice Should Be Heard*

*By Peter Barry, M.M.*

The year 1999 opened on a sour note for the Catholic Church in China. In January and early February reports appeared in Hong Kong papers of the arrest and ill treatment of clergy in custody, and Catholics belonging to the unofficial Chinese Catholic Church. The news came from three sources: the Fides News Agency, the Cardinal Kung Foundation and UCAN.



### *Recent News Reports*

On January 5, the *South China Morning Post* carried the Fides report of the arrest of a Father Li Qinghua, in November 1998 in the town of Guan in Hebei Province. This news story alleged that during police interrogation female agents tried to seduce him. The report said that this was to be a means of blackmailing the priest into revealing the names of other members of the underground church.

The second article appeared in the *South China Morning Post* for February 2, 1999. The Cardinal Kung Foundation, based in Connecticut USA, reported the arrest of two priests, Fathers Pei Junchao and Chen Hekun, along with an unknown number of underground Catholics, on January 25, 1999. It is not known what charges were brought against them. More recent accounts say that Fathers Pei and Chen have now been released from police custody.

Another report came from UCAN and appeared in the *Sunday Examiner* for February 7, 1999. This account stated that an underground priest, Father Peter Hu Duo, was arrested and seriously beaten by officials in Xushui County, Hebei Province, on December 20, 1998. During the beatings, it was alleged that Father Hu's legs were broken. News of beatings of other Catholics from the Baoding area were also contained in this report. Even a 12 year-old girl who served as a lector during her village's liturgical services was

apparently not immune from attack. According to the write-up, she required hospitalization following her beating. This same account also expressed concern about Bishop Su Zhimin of Baoding and of his auxiliary, Bishop An Shuxin, as well as of the pastor of the Donglu church, Father Cui Xingang, all arrested in 1996, and whose whereabouts up to the present time have not been revealed. A recent report says that Father Cui has been sentenced to three years in a re-education camp.

### ***Reactions of Catholics outside of China***

If the reports are true, they are a cause for sadness and dismay among Catholics outside of China. They would like to know: Is there a persecution of the underground church at the present time? Can these reports be confirmed? When asked about the first incident, a spokesperson for the Chinese Foreign Ministry said that the report had not been confirmed. When asked about the priest whose legs had been broken, a spokesperson for the Catholic Patriotic Association in Beijing said that he had no knowledge of it, but added: "Even if they have committed some wrong, we request that the government handle them with leniency." However the spokesperson did not deny categorically that the incident ever took place.

For the past several years, Catholics outside of China have been helping the official church to rebuild their churches, seminaries and convents. They may now wish to reconsider their actions. For they face this dilemma: how can we continue helping one part of the church when Catholics in the other part are being arrested, jailed and beaten up?

However, beatings to force people to leave the underground church and to join the open church are against government policy. According to a speech by a high government official, carried in a recent issue of the official church publication, *Catholic Church in China*, cadres have been urged to use persuasion and patient education to make underground Catholics see that socialism is mandatory for Chinese citizens, and that an independent and autonomous church is the choice of China's Catholics. But "patient education" certainly does not include sexual advances towards priests, or the breaking of a person's legs.

In my opinion, instead of being suppressed, the voice of the underground church should be heard. Unfortunately, Catholic foreigners cannot meet, much less interview, their counterparts in the Chinese underground Catholic Church. Furthermore, visitors' questions about the underground church addressed to official church representatives are often answered with an expression of frustration, like: "Why do they remain so stubborn; why don't they just join us? We have freedom of religion. We can pray for the Pope at Mass."

### *Assessing the Position of the Underground*

It seems that more light would be shed on the matter if the underground Catholics could explain their position for themselves.

Does the unwillingness of the underground church members to join the official church simply come down to the principle that they do not wish to separate themselves from the Pope?

Is the ambiguous nature of the open church's relationship to the Holy Father a matter of conscience for them, that forbids them to attend the services of the official church?

Is it that they feel that a political party is meant to replace the Pope as the visible head of their church?

Is it that they feel that the official church is not really free, because the Party and government seem to control every aspect of the church's life?

Is it a question of different political views?

Is it a case that they cannot forgive and forget the persecutions of the past?

These and many other questions await the direct answers of underground Catholics. In the meantime perhaps we can surmise what their responses would be.

Regarding the primacy of the Pope in the Catholic Church, some government officials cite the article on religion in the Chinese Constitution: "Chinese religions are not subject to foreign domination." But can having the Pope approve the nomination of local bishops really be called *domination*? Such an act simply symbolizes the unity of the Catholic Church. That's the way the Catholic Church operates throughout the world. Some 170 countries, that have diplomatic relations with the Holy See, see no problem with this structure.

On the other side of the coin the question might be asked: Are not religions in China “dominated” by government organizations such as the Religious Affairs Bureau and the various patriotic associations? When the underground believers refuse to register their churches, are they not perhaps saying that registration does not guarantee and safeguard the rights of the church? Is registration perhaps nothing more than an instrument of control over the church, a curtailment of freedom?

On the matter of different political views, officials sometimes say that the underground Catholics do not accept the socialist system in China. But most of the underground Catholics reside in the poor countryside where they probably live socialism to a greater degree than those who live in the non-socialist big cities. Socialism is basically an economic system, and not a religious one. It is difficult to understand how it impinges on a citizen’s religious beliefs?

Sometimes the patriotism of the underground Catholics is called into question. To love one’s country is a Christian virtue, and all underground Catholics do love their country. But can a government ask some of its citizens to abandon a basic tenet of their faith in the name of patriotism? Is this not going beyond the bounds of what a government can rationally ask of its citizens?

Neither can it be a case of the underground Catholics not being able to “forgive and forget” past persecution. The ability to forgive is a distinctly Christian characteristic. Underground Catholics do not consider the problem to be just a “historical” one, but one that continues to exist even today.

Do the above mentioned incidents indicate that a systematic persecution of unofficial religious groups is taking place? What is certainly clear is that the structures for carrying out such a persecution are still in place. Under the present religious policy, religious believers seem to be treated as second class citizens, who are in need of supervision, and at times, of correction.

Government religious officials sometimes say that under the guise of religion, enemies from abroad engage in counter-propaganda to stir up underground Catholics to oppose the government’s religious policy. Rather, the opposite seems to be the case. From time to time, foreigners are accused by underground Catholics of giving too much support to the open church.

Sometimes the underground Catholics are accused of deliberately making use of religious questions to stir up trouble, create disturbances, incite riots, and disturb the social order. However, aside from the Youtong incident of April 1989, when some Catholics occupied the land of their former church to hold Easter celebrations (it was said that the government had promised to return the land to them already for a number of years, but had not done so), there has been no news of underground Catholics “creating disturbances, inciting riots”, etc. How can a few people who want to worship on their own be accused of these crimes? Even *Document 19*, the 1982 *Magna Carta* of the religious policy, allows for home worship services.

### ***Tracing Today's Religious Policy***

The present policy towards religion can be traced back to a speech of President Jiang Zemin at a November 1993 conference of United Front Work Department cadres. At that time President Jiang used three sentences to describe how the religious question should be handled. He repeated these three sentences on March 4 this year to the Nationalities and Religion subcommittee members attending the just completed Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference in Beijing. Then and now, President Jiang said that the correct handling of the religious question involves 1) a complete and correct implementation of the Party's religious policy, 2) a strengthening of supervision over religious affairs in accordance with the law, and 3) positively guiding religion to adapt to socialist society.

However, now there is a change in the meaning of adapting to socialist society (*xiang shiying*) means. In 1993, President Jiang said that it meant that religious believers should change their religious systems and *doctrines* (italics mine) which do not conform to socialism. This must have caused anxiety among some of China's religious believers, for to change doctrines, or articles of faith, would imply changing the very religion itself. At the most recent meeting, a change in the definition of “adaptation to socialism” is noted. At that meeting, President Jiang said that positively guiding religion to adapt to socialism has two important contents: 1) Religious believers must observe the laws, regulations and policies of the socialist nation. The law protects religious freedom; and religious activities must take place within the confines of the law. 2) Religious activities must



respect and serve the highest national advantage and the whole public benefit. Religious personages and religious organizations must use their influence to promote the beneficial content of religious doctrines and laws in order to guide believers to be patriotic and law-abiding, to do good and to avoid evil, and to serve society. At least a *change of doctrines* is no longer called for.

### ***Making an Open Statement***

Perhaps the Catholic underground for the most part could agree with a recent (November 1998) statement of a group of Protestant house church elders who, in it, described their attitude toward the present religious policy. After professing their love of their country and respect for its duly elected officials, the elders took up the question of why they do not join the Three-Self Patriotic Movement. The first reason was that the Three-self churches accept the state as their governing authority, and their organization and administration is in accordance with the government's religious policy. However, the house churches take Christ as their head, and they organize and govern their churches according to the teachings of Scripture. Perhaps to the "teaching of Scripture", the Catholic underground churches could add "and under the guidance of the Vicar of Christ on earth, the Holy Father in Rome".

### ***Conclusion***

At a gathering of official Catholic Church personnel on December 18, 1998 to commemorate the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the official church's self-election and self-consecration of its own bishops, a high official with the Religious Affairs Bureau said that even if the Holy See and China establish diplomatic relations, the principles of the independent running of the church and of the self-election and self-consecration of bishops would not change. These principles will never change, the official stated. People should harbor no doubts, he said, nor should they nourish dreams that such a change will take place.

However, to dream dreams and to hope for a better future is what it means to be a Christian (Acts 2:16-18). Our hope is that the voice of the members of the underground Catholic Church in China will one day be heard, and their religious convictions respected.

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### *Facts about China*

- The Chinese State recognizes 55 minority nationalities among its population.
- Minorities constitute 8.98% of the Chinese population (1,207,780,000) or about 108.46 million of the population.
- The largest minority nationalities areas are in five autonomous regions: Inner Mongolia, Xinjiang Uygur, Guangxi Zhuang, Tibet, and Ningxia Hui.
- The PRC has set up special and preferential policies for the nationalities: They are not bound by the one-child policy; they are given special tax breaks to accelerate their economic and cultural development; They may use their own language and practice their own culture and religion.
- These 55 nationalities are called minorities because their population is small relative to the Han people who constitute over 90% of the Chinese population.
- The minority nationalities hold a variety of religious beliefs. These include:
  - Ancestor worship
  - Buddhism
  - Catholicism
  - Dongba Fetishism
  - Hinayana Buddhism
  - Islam
  - Nature worship
  - Orthodox Eastern Church
  - Polytheism
  - Protestantism
  - Shamanism
  - Taoism
  - Tibetan