

The Underground Church and Sexual Harassment

An Interview with Sergio Ticozzi

Many people all over the world were shocked by recent newspaper reports describing the use of sexual harassment to intimidate young priests in the underground church in China. Tripod sought an interview with Father Sergio Ticozzi, PIME, a well-known expert on the Church in China, in order to assess the possibility and truthfulness of these reports.

Tripod: Father Ticozzi, you have a long acquaintance with both the underground and the open church in China. It seems that arrests in the underground most frequently take place in Baoding. Can you explain this?

Ticozzi: Certain places in China such as Baoding in Hebei Province, Shanghai and Fujian have a long Catholic tradition and history. There were thriving Catholic communities there at the end of the last century. In fact, in some villages of Hebei Province the entire population is Catholic. Because of this situation, many priests and people feel strong enough to stand up against the government regulations, to act and pray openly without feeling the need or the desire to register with the Patriotic Association. Baoding would seem to be the centre for underground church activities.

Tripod: Why do these Catholics refuse to register with the government? It seems to me that churches everywhere, even in the free world, are all required to register. Why should these particular people object?

Ticozzi: You are correct. Churches in most countries do have to register with their individual governments, but there is a major difference. Registration in most countries is designed to promote, foster and safeguard religious freedom and activities. In China, registration is meant to control them.

Tripod: Father, in this issue of *Tripod*, we are “revisiting”, so to speak, the situation of the underground church in China. In your opinion, do you find the story regarding the sexual harassment used against young priests in the underground church true or exaggerated?

Ticozzi: No, I do not find it exaggerated. In fact, I find it quite plausible. I would dare add that Catholic priests are not the only ones harassed. I have been told by very reliable sources that the same tactics have been used against Buddhist monks.

Tripod: Is the fact that these actions are coming to light a sign that the government is getting stricter in enforcing its directives that all churches must register with the government.

Ticozzi: In these last months the government does seem to have become less flexible in this regard. The government is becoming increasingly nervous and is taking any measure it can to safeguard its power and ideology, even if it means throwing people into prison. There may be a number of reasons why the government seems jittery at the moment. China cannot afford any instability, especially during this year when it celebrates the 50th anniversary of the founding of the republic and commemorates the 10th anniversary of the June 4 incident. China also faces huge economic problems. There are large numbers of unemployed. Should they become restless, they could easily destabilize the country.

Tripod: Do you think that the strong insistence on registration is something new?

Ticozzi: The regulation to register is not something new. Catholic churches as well as all other religious groups have always been required to register with their proper political organization. In 1994, Beijing introduced new norms regarding the registration of all believers, and even sent groups of government agents to try to convince Catholics to become a part of the ‘official’ church.

Tripod Do you think that Catholic communities such as those in Baoding can actually survive if it keeps refusing to register?

Ticozzi: Survival depends very much on local authorities. Government reactions vary greatly from place to place. Baoding is generally seen as the “seat of power” of the unofficial church. For that reason, the government tends to be stricter and less tolerant. In other places where the unregistered Catholic Church is less radical, such as in the northeast or among ethnic minorities, the government seems to be more tolerant and lenient.

Tripod: Do you think that the Public Security groups that raid, fine, and imprison non-registered Catholics and members of other denominations are taking their orders from the Central government?

Ticozzi I would not be so quick to blame the Central government for some of the worse cases of intolerance and persecution of Christians. The Central government does emphasize, of course, that all Chinese must obey the law, but I think they tend to show greater tolerance. I do not believe that the excessive violence used against Catholics that you describe is due to orders of the Central government. I believe it to be mostly the work of the second and third level echelons of cadres, Public Security officers that want to show off their authority and think that they are answerable to no one.

Tripod: Father, after the publicity about the young priest, certain leaders in the Catholic Patriotic Association in Beijing, said that they had no knowledge of the incident. Do you find that at all believable?

Ticozzi: Yes, I dare say that it is highly probable that the central authorities in Beijing only found out about this incident from the newspapers. It is very difficult for the

Central Administration to know precisely what some of the lower echelon leaders are up to.

Tripod: According to some newspaper reports, certain government authorities recently denied the existence of an underground church in China. Is this possible?

Ticozzi: Yes, I believe it is possible. The government is very reluctant to acknowledge the presence of an unofficial church. They wish the situation would go away. This is the reason that the government keeps quoting the number of Catholics at 4 million instead of giving the more accurate figure of 10 million, which includes the members of the underground church.

Tripod: Thank you, Father.

