

Macau: A Personal View

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The purpose of this article is to offer some indication as to how the Catholic Church in Macau might approach its future after the territory reverts to the People's Republic of China in 1999. I have been in pastoral ministry since my ordination, and for the past 20 years I have been serving as a parish priest. My pastoral experience, of course, colors my thinking tends more towards practice than theory.



After the signing of the Joint Declaration and the promulgation of the Basic Law, many Catholic began to wonder what the future might have in store for them. Will the change in jurisdiction bring about changes in the Macau Church as well? For instance, will street processions honoring Christ and the Blessed Mother be banished or allowed to continue? Some say that the Church will have to resign itself to a curtailment of its religious activities; some even ask if the Church will pull out of the territory altogether. Do such attitudes manifest basic distrust or only ignorance of the Basic Law?

I myself am optimistic about the future. I believe that not only will the Church continue to exist in Macau, but it will also be given room for further development. And I offer three reasons for saying this:

1. God is indeed the Lord of history, and in Christ human history becomes salvation history.
2. We are living in an age of increased social interaction. One element of society cannot but influence, and be influenced by, all the others. Whether or not the Macau Church is willing to

become the 'salt of the earth' in such a society will, of course, depend not on outside forces but its own determination.

3. There can be any number of changes confronting us as a Church, but if we are ready to affirm which direction to take, then, despite drawbacks and limitations, the 1999 handover can become, with God's blessing, an opportunity for our future growth and development.

To determine what direction we should take in the future, let us first take a look at our present situation. It is from the vantagepoint of the present that we can assess how to proceed and what changes can and should be made to insure our future.

Historically, especially from the beginning of this century up to now, the Church has always played a decisive role in meeting Macau's social needs, especially in the areas of education and social welfare. This is a fact well known to its citizens, and it has been a reason why the Church here has found such a high degree of acceptance on all levels of society. As a non-Catholic friend once remarked to me: "Who in Macau, especially among the elderly, has not been a beneficiary of the Church's kindness?" Another quote, this one from a local Protestant minister: "What the Catholic Church has accomplished here in education and social welfare is something that we could never have done." The impact the Church has had, and continues to have, on education and social welfare, then, cannot be overlooked, and it would be difficult to find anything comparable to take its place.

The educational contribution of the diocese of Macau to the local community is unrivaled by any other diocese in the world. As was noted in "An approach of Macau,"¹ a recent publication of the *People's Press* in Beijing: "Private schools make up 93% of all the school in Macau. The main organizations operating these schools are the Catholic and Protestant Churches, as well as some other social and private groups. Catholics run most of the schools..." Before the government opened up several Portuguese public schools to Chinese students, the Catholic and Patriotic schools had been the chief contenders in the field of education for local people. Only a few of the Catholic primary and secondary schools use English as their medium of exchange. In this relatively small city of 450,000 inhabitants, in which Catholics number only 20,000,² over 40% of

the student population study in Catholic schools.³, and the number increases each year, with the Catholic schools now educating almost one out of every two Macau students. As the millenium approaches, the Church here has not only been strengthening its existing schools, but it has also upgraded its commitment to tertiary education by opening the Inter-University Institute of Macau.⁴

For my part, I am convinced that in the future the government of this Special Administrative Region will need the assistance of the Church to preserve peace, order, and prosperity in the community, and also need it to continue to carry out its role of educating capable and talented young men and women for society. Article 126 of the Macau Basic Law provides the Church with the legal basis and right to operate schools: "Religious organizations can legally operate seminaries and other schools, hospitals, and social welfare institutions, as well as other forms of social services. Religious schools can continue to provide their students with a religious education, including offering courses in religion."

In the same way, the Church will be allowed to continue its social work among the poor and needy, especially through such organizations as Macau-Caritas, which was established here in 1951 by Fr. Luis Ruiz. Both Caritas and other social agencies work with a common purpose and cooperate with the government in addressing its reasonable requests for social services. It is quite clear that Macau-Caritas has been set up as a private organization and has been well received by the people here. We foresee that the government will continue to recognize the need for maintaining close relationships with these private agencies, since it is part of its own social welfare policy to cooperate with both the official and private sector in utilizing their services to meet the social welfare needs of its people.

A learned scholar has said: "Some Macau residents, reflecting on the actual situation there, think that the SAR should adopt a political system that incorporates both government and social organizations."⁵ If this type of political system is adopted, the Church, as a local religious group, will certainly be able to make its own unique contribution to the SAR.

Someone once described the Macau Church as "a church for others."⁶ It is hoped that it will maintain this spirit as it faces coming changes. Looking at its history, we see that it has, in the past, been able to meet various changes of a political and environmental nature.

It has set up new institutions to meet such needs, especially in the areas of education and social welfare. In the future, the Church must continue to respond in the spirit of Christ to the signs of the times, and forge ahead with confidence to meet society's needs, with a special sensitivity to the needs of the poor. Up to now I have confined my remarks to the Macau Church as a non-profit organization serving the social needs of society. If, perchance, in the future, the Church's educational and social work ministries are supplanted or taken over by the government, will the Church then disappear or cease to exist here? We must have no misunderstandings about the true nature of the Church. The Gospels tell us that wherever there are two or three gathered together in Jesus' name, he is in there among them. However, the question is not whether the Church will exist in such circumstances, but how it will function.

The Church exists to proclaim the Gospel. Macau's Basic Law, Article 160, states: "The SAR of Macau, according to the principle of freedom of religion, will not interfere in the internal affairs of religious organizations, in their existence and development. It will not interfere with religious organizations and their believers to maintain and develop relations with other religious organizations outside of the Macau SAR. It will not place limits on the religious activities of believers in matters that do not conflict with the laws of the SAR." Article 34 of the Basic Law also states: "Residents of Macau enjoy religious freedom and have the freedom to preach openly and take part in religious activities." The Basic Law, therefore, clearly protects religious freedom and the right to preach religious ideas in public. Nevertheless, it is also clear that the Church in Macau will certainly experience a certain amount of opposition and challenge as it enters the new millennium under China's control.

While statistics show that there are 87 priests currently residing and working in Macau, only 17 are diocesan priests active in ministry. Most of these are elderly and, because of the vocation crisis, there are few young priests to take their place. Moreover, of the 20,000 Catholics here, many will be emigrating, especially the descendents of the original Portuguese community. The need for restructuring pastoral priorities and delegating manpower is a matter of the utmost urgency. Clergy, both diocesan and religious, and every church organization must reassess their pastoral aims and work to bring them into an accord with the basic needs of the diocese as a whole. This is something that needs the full participation of the

clergy, the religious, and the laity alike, since all of us, as responsible Christians, are called to share in the mission of the local Church. I firmly believe that the only way for our Church to travel into the future is to have the entire laity actively involved in carrying out this mission. May it not be said that an aging clergy could well be God offering us a new opportunity for preaching the Gospel? The age when only the clergy assumed leadership in the work of evangelization has passed. Now is the time for the entire Church to shoulder this responsibility. The dawning of this new age of the laity has been brought about by many factors, but especially by parish priests and pastoral agents who have in recent years expended no small efforts to train our youth to assume more of the responsibility for carrying out the Church's mission. One example deserving of mention is the Allied Parishes Movement,⁷ who, through its biannual courses in catechesis and theology for the laity, has done much to prepare our young men and women to meet the future needs of our people.

Endnotes

¹ Huang Zhihai, ed., *The People's Press*, Beijing: June 1997.

² Macau church statistics show the following numbers of Catholics: 22,416 (1995), 19, 531 (1996), 19,015 (1998). These figures do not include foreign workers.

³ Government and official Census Bureau figures published in 1998 on the number of pre-school, primary, and middle school students are: 87,441 (1994/95), 89,913 (1995/96), 91,722 (1996/97).

⁴ The Inter-University Institute of Macau is a school with a higher level of education, a cooperative effort between the Macau Diocese and the Catholic University of Lisbon begun in 1996. The present principal is a Franciscan priest, Rev. João Duarte Lourenço.

⁵ "Questions and Policy on Post Reversion Macau", Yu Zhen, ed., *Drawing Support from Famous Policies*, Macau: Academic press, 1999, p. 355.

⁶ "The Macau Catholic Church on the Way to Reversion," *Catholic News*, Jan. 1999.

⁷ "United Parishes," a short form of the full phrase, "The Working Committee for Unified Pastoral Work among the Parishes." Six parish priests established this working committee in 1989 for a unified approach to pastoral work and the training of the laity in the parishes.