

An Oak Tree or a Willow?

By Moira Shaw

(The following article is taken from the Sunday Examiner and used with permission.)

Four hundred and fifty years, it seems, is not long enough to sink roots deep enough into the soil of China; it is not long enough for a seedling to grow into an oak that will be able to withstand wind and rain.

Once a powerhouse of Catholicism in the Far East, a sanctuary of missionaries and training-ground for some of the greatest evangelizers in China, the church in Macau today is more a willow than an oak.



The church is more than a little concerned about its future and it appears that it has reason to be.

After 450 years of Catholicism there are only 20,000 Catholics in Macau, and while it is important to note that the enclave's population of 450,000 is made up mostly of 'new arrivals'—mainland immigrants who took up residency only over the past few decades -- the number is still shockingly low.

The church may have influence out of proportion to its size -- half of all school children in Macau study at Catholic schools -- but it appears that the church is not strong enough to take a stand in society, to become a moral voice or beacon for social justice.

This weakness, according to Father Peter Chung, the director of the Diocesan Youth Pastoral Center, lies largely with the Portuguese, who have dominated the church in Macau throughout its colonial history and failed to prepare the local Chinese Catholic population to run the church for themselves.

Bishop Domingos Lam, the first Chinese bishop in 450 years of Portuguese rule, was only appointed in 1989. "There has been little

time for the local members of the church to prepare to run things for themselves. It is only now becoming localized," Father Chung said on September 3.

"While the relationship between the church and state before the handover is close, this will end," the priest said. "The church in Macau will have to stand on its own."

Many of the Portuguese, of course, see things a little differently.

Father Albino Bento Pais, SSP, the editor of the Portuguese-language newspaper, *O Clarim*, said on September 3, that while it is easy to criticize the Portuguese, their contribution to the enclave and church must also be recognized. He said that there have been some improvements introduced by the government in recent years, particularly in the field of social services.

Father Pais thought it was unfair to put all the blame on the Portuguese administration, which he said, has had its hands tied by powerful economic forces. "It is the Chinese-owned big businesses, not the Portuguese who are really running Macau," the priest said.

"Whenever the Macau government tries to do something for the workers it draws opposition from the powerful economic influences in the territory," Father Pais said. "The Chinese- economic forces can dominate the small ineffective legislature," he explained.

"It is not possible to compare the church in Macau with the church in Hong Kong or elsewhere," the Portuguese priest, who has lived in Macau for 14 years, said.

"The church in Macau is very different from the one in Hong Kong," Father Pais said. "In Hong Kong the church was careful to build up a Chinese Catholic base that was well-educated and socially conscientized. They are Chinese who want to protect Hong Kong and the church is strong. In Macau the church has not done that"

Father Pais admits that he is not confident about the future of the church in Macau, and he agreed that the Portuguese in the church have not done as much as they should have to prepare the local Chinese element to run the church in the future. But in Portugal's defense, he said that it was not until 1987 that Portugal realized the tiny territory would be returned to China, until then it had been seen as an integral part of Portugal.

“The Portuguese in Macau are very few in number,” he pointed out. “At the same time, for most of Macau’s existence, the number of Chinese in the enclave has also been small” and this, Father Pais said, “helps explain why after 450 years, Portuguese culture has had little effect on the territory, other than to make “people in Macau more friendly than Hong Kong people... and appreciate the importance of leisure.” The Latin style of doing things is also very different from the Anglo-Saxon style, he argued.

Agreeing that the Portuguese administration had made a lot of changes in Macau in recent years, Father Chung, however, expressed discontent at the slow pace of localization.

“The Portuguese have been unwilling to give equal opportunities to all people in Macau,” Father Chung said, adding that he was happy to see the end of the privileges enjoyed by the Portuguese and that he looked forward to an end of prejudice. The Chinese and Portuguese in Macau may live in harmony, the priest said, but in truth they are two very divided communities.

Antonio Ng Kuok-cheong, an elected member of the Macau Legislature, said on September 3 that he thought religious liberty will be protected after the handover but that the church will lose certain privileges, such as the *padroado* (state salaries of some clergy) and the church's tax exemption status.

Even Father John E. Lau Im-san, a member of the joint Portuguese-Chinese Handover Preparatory Committee, while claiming to be optimistic that the church will have “room to move” after the handover, admitted that, “A lot of people are unwilling to accept the possibility that religious activities could be restricted under the new political situation. Either they do not trust the Basic Law, which promises to protect religious freedom, or do not understand it,” Fr Lau argued.

Article 126 of the Basic Law provides that: “Religious organizations can open and run religious institutes schools, hospitals, social welfare organizations and provide other social services in accordance with the law. The schools run by religious organizations can continue to provide religious education, including teaching religious courses.”

Father Lau was more practical about the difficulties facing the Macau church in the future, such as a lack of vocations, an aging

clergy and the problem of succession. Bishop Domingos Lam is now 72 years old and has publicly said that he wants to retire in a year or two. A strong replacement will have to be found to lead the church through challenging times ahead.

“Bishop Domingos Lam is a good diplomat and has attempted to build up relations with the Mainland but in a matter of one or two years there will be a new bishop in Macau and the situation could change,” Father Chung said.

“In the past the church was not eager to stand up to the government. In the future, I don’t know,” Father Chung said. “The church in Macau needs time to find its own way. The church should defend human rights, but it also needs time to work out how it will act.”

The church in Macau does not have a reputation for being outspoken on social justice issues or of challenging the government. Following this tradition, perhaps the church will be allowed to continue its social welfare role.

But Ng was more critical of the church’s stance. “The church in Macau is de-politicized,” he said. “It does not have a strong social or moral voice.”

De-politicized it may be, but it does not have its arms folded. The church has been the founder of most of the social welfare organizations and schools in the territory. Schools for the blind, handicapped, orphanages and centers for the elderly were all begun by the church, not by the government, although today the government does support many projects and services.

But, as the church has learnt in other countries around the world, today it can ill afford to keep silent in the face of ‘evil,’ in all its forms, at least according to the teachings of Vatican II.

In mainland China the government is happy to allow religious groups to offer free social and medical services, but forbids it from acting out its wider role, to speak out on behalf of the poor and suffering, against injustice and to work for the transformation of society. The future of human rights in Macau after the handover to Chinese rule is already in doubt.

The problem of crime and immorality is increasing at a frightening rate. According to Ng, 33 people have been killed in triad-related crimes so far this year. The unemployment rate has reached 6.5 percent while the profits from gambling supply 40 per-

cent of government's income. Gambling has increased in recent years with most of the gamblers coming from the Mainland. The power of big business and triad groups is on the rise.

"Rule of law is weak and the judicial system is ineffective," Ng said. "Macau people cannot rule Macau," he claimed.

The church in Macau will have to offer and be a shelter for those who are weak and windswept.



The name, Macau (Omun or Aomen in Chinese) seems to derive from the Chinese goddess A-Ma, to whom the first temple in Macau was dedicated in the early 16th century.