

The Church in China: On-going Concerns and Challenges

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The winds of openness and reform have been blowing across China for some 20 years now. The new incursions of a market economy have brought a higher standard of living for its people and a better integration of national resources. The Church in China has also gained much from a new religious policy that has allowed for her recovery and renewal. The signs of her recent development are obvious. One sees it in the many churches restored or rebuilt, in the reopening of seminaries and convents, in the increase of vocations and ordinations to the priesthood, and, especially, the dramatic growth in the number of new converts.

Introduction

Corruption is generally defined as the misuse of public power for private gain. It is the abuse of public trust, where personal advantage is placed above the common good. Official corruption breeds in societies where few or no restraints are placed upon those exercising authority. Obviously, it is not limited to authoritarian regimes, but is to be found wherever there is an over concentration of power operating without restraint and without a viable system of checks and balances.

The Church itself is no exception to this general rule. Its own history is strewn with examples of the abuse of power and of corruption from within. Such incidents have in the past diminished the luster of its grandeur and given reason to question its credibility. Fortunately, in recent years, especially with the advent of the Second Vatican Council under Pope John XXIII, the Church has awakened to a new sense of democracy and freedom. It has sought to meet the challenging situation of an expanding secular society with a lively and positive spirit of inquiry and discovery. Such an effort has been like a breath of fresh air, and it is indeed a matter for general rejoicing from both within and outside the Church.

However, the present situation of the Church in China often seems to undermine these new found hopes. This causes no small

amount of anxiety among conscientious church people, who see that, if present trends are allowed to continue unchecked, it does not bode well for the Church's future.

Church organization uncoordinated and undemocratic

Let it be said at the outset that the Church in China owes a great debt of gratitude to those bishops and priests, Sisters, and lay people who have undergone unspeakable privations in responding to the Lord's call to preach the Word of God to their compatriots. They have weathered many storms in laboring to bring so many of them to an awareness of salvation in Christ.

Nevertheless, it must be said that there are some church leaders who lack vigor and other leadership qualities. Some bishops, because of age and infirmities, are no longer capable of dealing with the simplest tasks of everyday life. As a result, their dioceses suffer from neglect, and divisions within the rank of the clergy. Some bishops complain that their priests are disobedient, whereas the priests complain that their bishops are out of touch with reality and unable to fulfil their basic responsibilities. This is a land of kings without courtiers, where the operating principle seems to be to "leave well enough alone, and don't make waves." This commitment to the *status quo* may help maintain a certain peace, but it is a peace not built on rock but upon shifting sand. Some church organizations are in a very unhealthy state, and this is due to the obstructionist tactics of certain Catholics of questionable loyalty who are constantly meddling in church affairs. Others are organizations in name only, having little or no functions. Many of these are conceived with great promise but they are quickly aborted, or if brought to term, they die shortly after childbirth.

Ranks and titles multiply in some Catholic organizations, but they have only symbolic meaning. Many have lost sight of the main objectives of any church organization, which is to promote church development, implement the government's religious policy effectively, and preach the gospel to as wide an audience as possible. There are those who, in their own mulish way, complicate church matters by manipulating them for their own personal advantage, and in order to gain a higher position and status in the secular world. Some members of the clergy and laity, when given a taste of power, become arrogant and domineering, acting arbitrarily and completely

on their own, forcing their opinions on church organizations, without any consultation with other priests, religious, or members of the laity. Egotistical and conceited, these people mislead their superiors and bully those beneath them. If people should happen to disagree with them, they take refuge in high-principled slogans bristling with ideology, threatening their critics with political reprisals. If, through their own mismanagement, they cause any damage to the church, or bring about its economic deprivation, they shrug it off as something of little consequence, and search for excuses with which to defend themselves. If this fails, they lay the blame on the church organization itself. Often in error, but never in doubt, they put themselves forward as true saints in the land of sinners. Moreover, so sure are they of their strong support and backing that even their failures are used to solidify their hold on their authoritarian form of governance.

The Church should promote justice and democracy as basic social principles, and this should always be reflected in their own internal governance. Bishops, priests, the religious and the laity should play an active part to ensure that openness and fairness prevail within a context of mutual supervision and appropriate restraint. A collective wisdom and leadership should permeate all aspects of church administration, personnel affairs and economic policies. The Church must be transparent, and it must be seen to operate in a democratic manner. Only then can it guarantee support for the fundamental rights of its ministers and the laity. Experience shows that when the exercise of authority is limited to a chosen few, the possibilities for error and abuse multiply. In short, an open and democratic administration is the best guarantee the church has against authority's erroneous decisions and abuses of power. Some dioceses on the mainland have already taken steps to put the democratization process into practice in their grass roots organizations, and they have met with excellent results.

Luxury and waste

To speak of waste in official circles is to raise another painful issue. The yearly amount of public funds spent on banqueting reaches more than 300 billion RMB. The amount of food wasted is enough to feed a country of 500,000 people for five years. A popular saying making the rounds these days attests to this kind of extravagance: "The cost of a cadre's bottle of wine is a farmer's cow; the price of a minister's dinner is three months of a worker's sweat."

While ordinary people detest the amount of public funds wasted on banqueting “expenses,” repeated efforts to curtail the abuse have failed.

The Church, too, now finds that the amount of money it squanders on banquets has risen from a trickle to a flood. Placing bishops to one side, many ordinary priests are now accustomed to hold banquets each year to celebrate their birthdays, patron days, and ordination anniversaries. Some parishes celebrate major feasts of the liturgical year with large and lavish dinners. There are groundbreaking banquets for new churches, and more banquets to celebrate their completion. One begins to wonder if these events have any real meaning in themselves or are they just excuses for organizing another extravagant dinner. In any event, it is the diocese and the people who have to dig into limited funds to pay for them.

The mainland Church is not wealthy by any means. The operational budgets in most dioceses are very tight, and achieving self-support is a serious problem. Still, these frequent and quite unnecessary affairs only increase the financial burden, and waste limited resources. They also cause a lot of pain and misery for everyone.

Let us for a moment take a closer look at a particular parish in an ordinary diocese. The parish is poor; its parishioners can hardly make ends meet. Most of them live from hand to mouth and are unable to upgrade their living conditions. Their church is small, old and in constant need of repair. Naturally, they want to replace it with a larger, more imposing structure that will meet their present and future needs. The only way they have of raising revenue is by cutting back on family food costs and other daily necessities. Through great personal sacrifice, they manage to collect a token amount of money, a sum that falls far short of the initial outlay necessary to begin construction of the church of their dreams. They seek help from other churches, those in China and also from abroad. After many trials and tribulations, they collect enough money to begin work. Only the traditional opening banquet remains to be planned. Special tables for honored guests are set aside; three days of eating and drinking commence; no expense is spared. With what result? Large amount of parish funds are depleted, and the scandal that always follows any lavish display in a community of poor farmers. The image of the Church is again tarnished. But in a world where such things are commonplace, they provoke little lasting effect, a little negative comment, and a shrug of the shoulders. Any small qualms of con-

science are laid to rest with the rationalization: "That's the way it is. What's a person to do?"

Of course social obligations must be met, and formal dinners do provide an effective way of fostering relationships, but extravagance must be avoided. Priorities must be given to provide Catholic communities with houses of worship, and indigent Catholic communities do need outside help in building and restoring their churches. So let the welcoming celebrations continue, but let them be modest tea parties instead of lavish banquets. It is the gesture of giving, and not the cost of the gift that is important. Thrift and frugality are especially necessary during this time of national recovery and modernization. In this area, the Church can set an example for society at large. Through its own efforts to economize, it can also help in the battle to change those traditional customs that continue to foster so much needless waste and extravagance. Such customs die hard. But a spirit of poverty has always been a Christian ideal and an essential part of the Christian ethic. To see this as God's will is to understand that Church teaching in this regard is not far removed from our nation's own call to its citizens for frugality and reform. On the subject of the need for reform, there are certain dispositions and attitudes among members of the clergy on which we must focus our attention. A partial list might include the following:

1. *The worship of mammon and worldliness.* The average young priest on the mainland is ordained after five or six years of post-secondary education. His educational environment in the seminary has been intense, enclosed, and isolated from the outside. The lifestyle is monastic, and encourages a spirit of zeal, self sacrifice, obedience and service to the Church. After ordination, he finds himself in a different kind of world. He is thrust into an active ministry full of conflicts and difficulties, in which temptations are many and supports are few. Problems soon begin to surface: personal, social, and ecclesiastical. He often finds himself overworked, undervalued and lonely. For the strong, these are challenges to be met and overcome, merely steps along the way of progress. Far from being obstacles, they increase awareness of responsibilities and spur them on. But for those who came to their day of ordination still hampered by unresolved ambivalence, for those who chose to become priests more out of internal or external pressures than personal conviction, these problems

are much more acute. Such young priests have the feeling that they are riding on the back of a tiger with no possibility of escape.

As the years pass, their interest in pastoral work declines, and they turn to more material pleasures for solace. They cultivate a taste for “the good life”... Soon they seek to fill the void in their lives with wining, dining, and the aimless pursuit of pleasures.

What is even more difficult to accept are young priests who, although few in number, seem to be caught up in the worship of money. These are usually found in the cities, where the pursuit of money is more commonplace. They avoid the countryside, which serves up a daily diet of poverty and destitution. The “services” of these priests come at a high cost, and they demand more lucrative stipends for their stole fees. Nor are they above soliciting money directly from Catholics of other dioceses. Not devoid of all feeling for the unfortunate, they do send money home to alleviate the poverty of their families and relatives. The sudden appearance of TV sets, washing machines and refrigerators, and other material comforts in the hometowns set these households apart from their neighbors. This has given rise to a saying among the non-Christians villagers: “The family that has a priest gains a treasury.” It is true that a priest is bound by culture and tradition to care for his parents, especially in their old age. Filial piety is an ethical cornerstone of traditional Chinese society, and this is given full support by Church teaching. However, to deploy huge sums as an extravagant display of one's “filial piety” is neither a virtuous nor praiseworthy practice. In fact, when it gives rise to questions, as it usually does, of “Where does this money come from?” There is no end of speculating, and rumors do abound.

(2) *Limited knowledge and slow progress.* When it comes to theological knowledge and cultural acumen, the younger priests tend to fall short of their older colleagues. The education of the older priests began earlier (in the minor seminaries), lasted longer (five years of postgraduate study), was more systematic and more orientated towards cultural as well as theological subjects. Also, the political and social turbulence of the times in which they lived served as a baptism of fire to harden their resolve and strengthen their faith. The young priests, who were “born into a new society and grew up under the red flag,” never got to experience the rich and varied pastoral experiences of the older men, nor to live their hard and simple lives. Their

theological training was less systematic and somewhat haphazard. They lacked proper resources and materials, and while their spiritual formation stressed “sacrifice, prayer and obedience,” their curriculum was seriously lacking in cultural studies. Of more concern was their ignorance of the new theological ideas and attitudes that emanated from Vatican II. They lacked the tools necessary to understand this new world of theological renewal. As a result, they now feel somewhat restrained and inhibited in their pastoral work, and unable to keep up with the rapid progress of the technological society, which has ushered in the age of the information explosion.

Some young priests find their time consumed by the daily round of pastoral and evangelical demands set not by themselves but by the diocese and parish. They have little or no time left for study, or anything else. This is not hard to understand when given the immense pastoral needs of their people. What is more difficult to grasp is the attitude of the few young priests who have an abundance of time on their hands, and yet show no desire to study or to learn new skills. For them, the obligatory morning Mass begins and ends their work for the day. The rest of the time they are free to travel about and indulge themselves in a variety of leisure pursuits. Needless to say, the behavior of these men leaves a decidedly negative impression on the laity.

The on-going formation of young priests must be placed high on any agenda for change and reform. Some progress in this area has been made in recent years by sending priests to Hong Kong or abroad for further studies. But even this can satisfy only a small number of those waiting to take advantage of such rare opportunities. Again it is a case where the demand far exceeds the supply.

(3) *Self-discipline in word and act.* In the eyes of the Catholic laity, priests are special. They embody, or are supposed to embody, what is sacred, holy, and pure. However, they are also human beings, and as such they are subject to all of the ordinary human needs and frailties. They must accept their role and carry out their duties within the limitations expressed by the Church. This calls for a large amount of self-discipline. If his own thoughts, words, and deeds deviate from the realistic demands of his role, he will find a growing disappointment within himself and a lessening of zeal for his work. He will also be guilty of failing to practice what he preaches to others. It is expected that the sincerity, love, and compassion of the

Gospels be made manifest in the life of the one who proclaims them. If they are lacking, the priest runs the risk of not being taken seriously as a person, or of becoming the butt of humor and sarcasm among the laity. Priests are expected to be not only models of faith, but also models of behavior. They are supposed to be men of patience and self-discipline. If they are not, they undermine the faith of the laity in the very institution of the priesthood.

I know a young priest who, when he was first ordained, was conscientious and hard working. He was capable and talented enough for his bishop to put him in charge of the financial affairs for the whole diocese. Unfortunately, the allurements of money finally brought him down. In the end, he left the priesthood, took the money, and set up housekeeping with a woman of questionable reputation in a distant city. This incident made a strong impression on me at the time. It came as a warning to me and to other young priests, how much we need to hold onto the character and principles of our moral formation and priestly training.

Bishops, priests, and the laity are all responsible for supporting young priests through the crises they meet in the early years of their ministry. They should show their care for them, love them, and make them feel wanted and of value. In this way, the young priests are encouraged to face their problems, and they are given the support to overcome them in due time. Their superiors should seek out frequent opportunities to speak with them about their needs and encourage them in their work, showing a father's love and concern for them, and guiding them along right paths to their future destination, their heavenly home.

(4) *Use of personnel for spiritual formation and development.* Society says bureaucrats are divorced from reality, and remain aloof from the masses, for whose welfare they have little or no concern. They are adept at issuing orders, often without investigating the nature of the problem, and they display few leadership qualities. It is a great evil of the bureaucratic system when favoritism rather than merit is rewarded by promotion. This is not a new problem. A pair of ancient Chinese scrolls satirizes the bureaucracy as a system for stifling human talent by stating: "If they say you can, you can, even if you can't; if they say you can't, you can't, even if you can." Above the two scrolls is written: "You must obey!" Another piece pokes fun at the bureaucracy: "Secure your position by repressing talent; for easy

management, promote the mediocre; allay fears by promoting idiots; and forestall negative reports by favoring flunkies." Unfortunately, the management of church personnel on the Mainland often leaves much to be desired. Priests who are intelligent, enterprising, good organizers and managers are often passed over. Many who are strong in faith, of proven integrity, and highly gifted are not given positions commensurate with their abilities. Many aspirations are stifled and initiatives frustrated. As a result, their commitment to the work of the Church is weakened and they soon lose their enthusiasm. The leadership's insistence on promoting people who are "safe," "reliable," and "compliant" has the negative effect of placing in positions of importance priests who are ineffectual, who have no minds of their own, and are unable to provide leadership. With such overly cautious and inflexible men in authority, it is no wonder that some parishes and dioceses suffer from a lack of vitality and spirit. It is no wonder that the laity, on their part, harbor a distrust of church organizations and of the people who run them, be they bishops, priests or other laymen. Many Catholics lose interest in the church and its work. They grow indifferent and lukewarm, deepening their alienation. Priests, who are known to be "progressive," and well able to take initiative, are often excluded from authority positions in the diocese or church organizations.

Our church is quite passive in social affairs, and we are unable to project a true and positive image of social concern to outsiders. This problem becomes most serious when we are dealing with the training of future church leaders. Where are they to gain the guidance necessary to develop their leadership qualities?

And then, there is the generation gap. Older priests have seniority and experience, but they appear to the younger priests as passive, sedate and conservative, anxious to avoid any disturbance or controversy. On their part, the elderly priests find it difficult to accept the new ideas of the young, and they tend to respond to them in a pedantic and patronizing way. They are often impatient with them, and consider them impulsive, shallow, and unreliable. Youth, on the other hand, is dynamic and action oriented. Sometimes the young priests can be quite unrealistic and rash in their behavior. They often seem to be out of tune with the faith tradition of the Church. They tend to look down on their elders, misjudge their prudent stands for equivocation, and are slow to recognize their own limitations and self-centeredness. There are some bishops and members of the older

clergy who have little respect for nor understanding of the young priests. They stereotype them and demand total compliance with their own wishes. They are particularly distrustful of the brighter, more active ones, on whom they place enough restrictions to insure that they do not act contrary to or independent of their authority. Why cannot those in authority made good use not only of limited talent, but also give full support to the highly gifted? Instead of offering them positions and opportunities to grow and develop freely, why do they place them in inconsequential roles, and back them into corners without giving them space to move in? The Church is, or should be, a community of love. We are called together to act as Jesus acts. Should not bishops treat all their priests with fatherly love and brotherly affection? Show warmth and caring when dealing with the problems of the young? Is it a proper use of episcopal authority not to go out to them when they stray? Should we allow them to walk away without making the least effort to go after them and bring them back, and with fatherly guidance to lead them along more disciplined and satisfying paths? Not to do so, would foster among the young a spirit of bitterness and rebellion, far from one of mercy and reconciliation? In a certain diocese in the north a bishop called a young priest to his side to help him in the running of the diocese. The young priest was honest and straightforward, of good conduct and impeccable character. He was also a fine speaker and soon won the love and respect of the people. As the days passed, more and more went to him for confession and attended his Mass. The bishop felt threatened by his young assistant's growing popularity. He feared that soon he would lose all his authority over him. On the pretext that the young priest was plotting to usurp his authority, the bishop had him banished to a far off parish on the outskirts of the diocese. This caused the young man great pain and anguish, and it came as no surprise to anyone when his enthusiasm began to wane and his ministry suffered neglect. This is not an isolated situation.

Now there are some priests who are constantly seen in the company of bishops and other church dignitaries, who flatter, and fawn, and wait for the opportunity to display their meager intelligence. All too often, these are the ones sent abroad on special visitations or for higher studies and garner other privileges. You will find them at meetings great and small, gadflies buzzing about the reputable and powerful. Then there are the others: honest, straightforward and truthful, gifted and loyal to the Church. These rarely hold posi-

tions of importance, and are seldom singled out for special comment or reward.

It is sad to note that ten years after the universal repudiation of the Cultural Revolution; its malevolence still lives on in the attitudes of some church people. There are those in authority who, operating from a warped sense of what is politically correct, continue to earn a living in various dioceses throughout the country by creating suspicion and distrust. These people scrutinize every action of the clergy in order to cast doubts about this one's patriotism or that one's political rectitude. They examine in minute detail every word of a Sunday sermon seeking to uncover signs of the speaker's "political intent." The results of what they gleam, they carry to the authorities, seeking to curry favor from them and receive rewards for their efforts. They write endless articles and give long-winded speeches exposing the "counter revolutionary leftists" among us. They fancy themselves to be the only true patriots. All others are not to be trusted; their patriotism is questioned, and they are to be dismissed as having evil intentions. If these people do not in fact live in the church, they live off it in other ways, charging the church and the government for their professional services and their living expenses. They send their own children and those of their relatives abroad to mine for gold, and they do this all in the name of serving the Church. When deceitful activity is promoted in the name of patriotism, and people of this ilk run the Church, then how can anyone of authentic talent and ability hope to survive? Fortunately, there are a large number of young priests who are changing the look of the Church. They bring a new light and warmth to their pastoral ministries. They are unafraid of adversity. Full of fervor and high morale, they dedicate themselves to the service of the Church and society. These young priests are the hope of the future. Through their hard work and unselfish dedication, they bring new life to the mainland Church as it faces the 21st century.

(5) *The state of finances and accounts.* These days it is the policy of the more advanced village governments to reduce expenses in order to lighten the farmers' burden, and allow them more control over matters effecting their livelihood. As a result, most village governments are adopting a more open financial system. Financial reports covering government revenues and expenditures are published quarterly in order to make government financing more transparent, to alleviate suspicions of corruption, and to insure the proper use of pub-

lic funds. Each account is accompanied by a clear and accurate explanation of when, why, and how the money was used. This system of open accounting strengthens and promotes clean government on the local level by eliminating financial malpractice and mismanagement. It is also educating the villagers in democracy by encouraging control over their own finances.

The present financial condition of the Mainland Church is of some concern to many of its members. In order to meet their daily expenses, some dioceses depend solely on the personal contributions of their laity, and the meager sums accrued from the rentals of their property. Others acquire revenue through cooperative investments. However, these investments are often poorly run and ill advised. Without experts to guide them, they often go bankrupt. In some churches an unhealthy state of finances comes from the system of placing both financial and the executive authority in one and the same person. When there is no distinction between treasurer and cashier, the entire fiscal system is at the mercy of one person who can write off any expense with one stroke of the pen. Needless to say, the system is in need of radical reform. The fortunes of the Church's finances should not be left to the whim of just one individual. Another problem: it is not uncommon to find people in responsible positions of fiscal authority who are ignorant of what happens to funds allocated by the government, or to donations from abroad, or to money earned from church rentals. There is no system of open accounting and no clear way of finding out anything about them.

In summary, attention must be paid to the Church's unhealthy state of financial affairs if the Church is to insure its own proper development, and the smooth operation of its many activities. Self-support is a matter of concern for all. The Church must protect its future by establishing a solid financial base that will enable it to continue its work of evangelization into the new century.

Conclusion

Looking at some of the negative aspects of the Mainland Church today may cause a certain amount of dismay. This is not necessarily a bad thing, if it leads to decisive action to uproot all that might hinder its unity, its growth and development. Also the Church must maintain a positive social image by raising the overall quality of its clergy and laity, if it is to be an effective force in its opposition to corruption. Corruption should find no hiding place within the

Church. We live in a time when power and wealth are seen as the dominant values of society. Such an environment is bound to influence the Church, and it will have a determining effect on how the members comport themselves in carrying out their secular and religious affairs.

My purpose in writing this article is not to disparage the Church, for I am well aware of my own weakness and ignorance to expose the faults and shortcomings of others. My only aim is to arouse the concern of both clergy and laity alike for our future as a Church.

The Mainland Chinese Church is a Church with a future full of hope. While it still has a long way to go, new strength and direction will come from the younger generation. I am convinced that in the new century it will thrive and flourish. I would like to conclude with a quote from Jin Luxian, the Bishop of Shanghai: "Only one who has self respect and works on his own self improvement can save himself. The same holds true for the local church. Only if the Chinese Church has respect for itself and strives to improve itself, will it find healing and salvation."

