

# *The Church in China: Signs of Hope in the Third Millennium*

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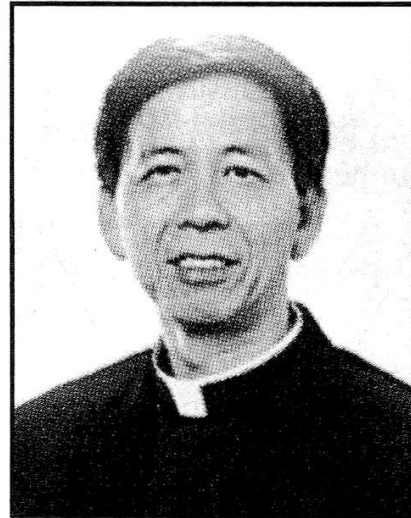
A few years ago I met a young priest in China who told me about his vocation. He was brought up in a Catholic family, but did not know anything about religion until he was 20. He was baptized in the late 70s when reform and openness were just beginning in China.

During the years of the Cultural Revolution he was taught that China was the strongest nation in the world, and given the impression that famine and starvation were rampant in many neighboring countries like Korea, Thailand, Taiwan, Hong Kong, and even in Japan. Later, he discovered the truth and learned that lying was a way of survival. He found this hard to accept so he clung to the Catholic faith of his parents.

Later, he even entered the seminary. The more he studied, the more he understood that since the turn of the century, China's institutions and socio-economic life had never enjoyed a normal course of development

Furthermore, to his great surprise he found that there were a lot of lies even in the seminary. These generated conflicts, masked hypocrisy, fostered misunderstandings and betrayals of all sorts. He learned that the Church was divided into the underground and the open church, that the seminary was used as a vital power base with the patriotic associations, bureau of religious affairs, diocesan leaders, the clergy and even people from overseas all competing with one another. He was confused and did not know what to do.

Before his ordination he was greatly disturbed, wondering whether his bishop could ordain him validly or not. Fortunately, he



was able to seek some enlightenment from a good spiritual director who helped him solve his problem of conscience.

“With so many questions and uncertainties, why were you ordained a priest at all?” I asked him.

“I don’t have a straightforward answer. You know, I have a lot of mixed feelings about the earnest hope of my parents and relatives, people who need priestly care, the expectations of my bishop and the diocese, my expectations for the future, my livelihood and so on. But ultimately I assume that if I become a minister of God’s Word, the power of God’s promise will not let me down.” He then paused for a moment and asked, “Does God also lie?” We both laughed.

## **Hope for the Church in China**

Now let me proceed with the subject assigned to me. I must confess, however, that I think it would be better to have the topic of signs of hope in the Church in China addressed by someone like the young priest I have just spoken about above, one who wants to know whether the Word of God is powerful enough to win out in the end. But let me concentrate on what I as a professor from Hong Kong teaching in the seminaries of China, see as signs of hope for the Church in China in the new millennium.

## **Hope defined**

Hope is basically of two kinds. One is that which you can actually hope for because there is something you can do about it. Let’s call that the hope of expectation. Another is what you can only hope for because there is nothing you can do about it except simply to rely on God. This is hope against hope (Rm. 4:18), and you don’t know where, when and how it can possibly come to pass.

## **Challenges**

Today, we find that the Church in China is facing many challenges: lack of resources, conflicts among groups, deficiencies in clergy and religious formation, irregularities among the hierarchy, pervasive corruption and so on. In confronting these issues, we must certainly embrace hopes of both kinds, though a distinction between them may vary from one place to another.

When the Church is in difficulty, it is Christ who is put on trial. He, however, with the power of his resurrection will win the battle. As long as the Church draws energy from Christ and preaches his Gospel faithfully, the Church will unfailingly share his triumph in evangelizing hearts, consciences, ethos and cultures.

The Gospel I am speaking of here is not an ideology or religious belief of any kind; it is rather something stemming from revelation, something that must be received with faith and reverence. It is that power (Rm. 1:1-16) which gives expression to the Church as mystery, communion and mission. In this sense the Gospel has three ecclesial characteristics.

### **Ecclesial characteristics of the Gospel**

First, the Gospel comes from the historical Jesus event. Nothing can be certified as evangelical unless it derives from Christ, the Incarnate Word, the unique and only Savior of humankind, who died and rose again, and now lives and is at work in the world, and in a more particular way, in the Church he founded. The credibility and efficiency of the Church in our society stands or falls according to whether the Church is the place and memorial of Jesus that preaches his Gospel, and defends his cause in public and in private. In this perspective, the Church is considered *mystery*.

Second, it is the experience of those disciples of Christ who are endowed with the charisms of the Holy Spirit. They form a community of faith, hope and love. In this sense, the Church is considered *communion*.

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Third, the Gospel can never be “dis-incarnated;” rather it tends to penetrate all aspects of life. It comes to people profoundly linked to a culture and who have the realization that Gospel values cannot avoid borrowing elements from human cultures, which in turn constitute an embodiment of the Gospel. There is always room for

dialogue, as it were, between the Gospel and culture. In this sense, the Church is *mission*.

### **Signs of hope**

The more we embrace hope against hope, the more easily we can detect the signs that point to the hope of expectation in China today. Allow me to explain.

First, there is the increasing openness of China to the world. Obviously, China plays a much more important role on the international stage today than it did 50 years ago. It no longer makes any sense for China to remain isolated given today's economic globalization. Besides, China needs to establish ties with other countries, if it wants to have any real influence on them. In this perspective Beijing may be more willing than before to let the Church in China have more and deeper relations with other churches.

Second, there is a gradual normalization of the diplomatic relations between China and the Vatican. To Beijing, it would not really matter whether the local church were also universal; the bottom line is whether Beijing can gain anything from establishing diplomatic relations. For the Church, normal Sino-Vatican relations could, hopefully, open up possibilities for a solid implantation of the Church in China, and afford greater freedom for the work of evangelization.

Third, there is a strong sense of unity. First and foremost is the need to restore unity, namely, the unity between the local Church and the Universal Church, the unity between the open and the underground Church. There are more and more young seminarians, priests, and Sisters (of both the open and underground Church) presently studying abroad where they can be sensitized to the need for unity. In addition, overseas professors of theology and philosophy can also contribute in this regard.

Fourth, there is the increasing exchange between the Church in China and other local Churches. The restoration of the freedom of religious belief in 1978 was really done to provide an answer to another set of government preoccupations. Religions, and Christianity in particular, are today becoming preferred pipelines for conveying large amounts of foreign currency from the developed countries into the Chinese economy. After years of persecution for their overseas ties, Christians today are urged to make use of their foreign connections, and to put them in service to their country. In

some cases, the extent of religious freedom depends on the amount of money raised.

Fifth, there is a good relationship among the different religions. Forty years of religious persecution have created solidarity among believers of different religions. Many religious people suffered together and often were even tortured together. The problem of suffering became a lively and acute issue among the believers of different religions. In one way or another, they have had to engage in dialogue to shed light and understanding on the meaning of life. Thus, the solidarity among them is the result of their mutual experience.

Sixth, there is the engagement of the laity. The Communist Party set up the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association that empowers lay people to administer the running of the Church. The CCPA operates solely as an instrument to promote the political interests of the government. This can hardly be considered a lay ministry of the Church in the true sense of the word, but it does fill the gap usually found in the Church between the clergy and the laity.

Last, but certainly not the least is the concern of Pope John Paul II. In 1979, a few months after his election, he visited a Salesian Parish in Ponte Mammalo where I stayed at the time while studying theology. I was able to shake hands with him and tell him that I came from China. He embraced me warmly assuring me that China was constantly in his prayers.

The Holy Father has always assumed a conciliatory attitude towards China in his speeches and messages to the Catholics of China and Chinese authorities. Even though the response has not always been friendly, the Pope has remained undaunted. He has kept looking for new opportunities to open a dialogue. I would like to close with his words he addressed to the Catholics of China in India in November 1999.

On many occasions the Synod Fathers turned their thoughts to the Catholic Church in China, and prayed that the day may soon come when our beloved Chinese brothers and sisters will be completely free to practice their faith in full communion with the See of Peter and the Universal Church. To you, dear Chinese brothers and sisters, I make this fervent exhortation: never allow hardship and sorrow to diminish your devotion to Christ and your commitment to your great nation (Apostolic Exhortation, *Ecclesia in Asia*, No. 28).