

Archbishop Li Du'an: A Great Model for Young Bishops in China

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“There is a missionary spirit within the Chinese Catholic Church, and I can give you many examples. But our Church is still growing slowly, and we are incapable of satisfying every interest found in society. We will do a better job at it. I am optimistic. I can personally say that in the last twenty years there have been changes for the better. This is the best time to evangelize in China. People have never been so open to, and in favor of, the Christian faith.”

Photo taken in 2003 when Fr. Criveller visited Bp. Li



With these remarkable words, the kind and smiling Anthony Li Du'an, Archbishop of Xi'an (Shaanxi), one of the most remarkable figures in the Chinese episcopate, described with hope

¹ I had the privilege of meeting Archbishop Li Du'an on various occasions, especially on December 23, 2003, when he spent the whole day talking to me. I would like to take this opportunity to express my gratitude, devotion and admiration for this great man of faith.

the situation of evangelization in China, in spite of serious difficulties and challenges, as the present article will illustrate.

The opening statement is taken from an exceptional and long interview given in December 2003. It was jointly released to the PIME's magazine *Mondo e Missione* and Hong Kong review *Tripod*. On that occasion, Bishop Li not only kindly agreed to be interviewed, but also carefully reviewed his answers, which were subsequently published in Chinese, English,² and Italian.

With his life, thought and choices, Archbishop Li has indicated the golden way for the Church in China: the Catholic Church is one; is united with the Pope and the universal Church; she does not have a political agenda and is ready to collaborate with civil authorities; however the Church defends its freedom even before the political authorities; the Church exists for evangelization and must be missionary; the Church is in service of the society, especially of the poorest.

These principles are very simple, even too obvious. But it is exactly the coherent commitment to observe these principles, even in the difficult Chinese situation, which made the witness of Anthony Li so exceptional and precious. No wonder that Archbishop Anthony Li was mourned by thousands in China and throughout the world when he passed away on May 25, 2006.

This Chinese bishop has left us a splendid legacy through his goodness, zeal, strong courage, steadfast faith and exemplary leadership. He was a man in deep solidarity with the Holy Father and with his brothers in the episcopate. Chinese Catholics, belonging to both registered and non-registered (or underground) communities, held him not only in great respect, but even in veneration.

His tomb, located inside the village church of Gongyi (Lintong, in the Diocese of Xi'an), has become a place of pilgrimage for many Catholics devoted to this saintly man.

² The English version of the interview was published in *Tripod*, No. 133, Summer 2004.

In communion with the universal Church

Father Peter Barry met the Archbishop in the hospital a few months before his death. To anyone who visited him, as Fr. Barry remembers, Mgr. Li Du'an would show the ring Pope Benedict XVI gave him after the Synod on the Eucharist (2005). "This is the ring of my communion with the pope," Bishop Li told visitors.

Archbishop Li was very explicit in affirming the office of the Pope in the Catholic Church:

The pope is the head of the Catholic Church. The apostolic nature of the institution of the Church consists in the fact that its governance descends from the apostles, starting with Peter as its first leader. The pope has the right to govern and supervise all Church activities, including the nomination of bishops. We will never deny that the pope has the right to do this, since this is an essential element of our Catholic faith. The pope's right to govern is real and true.

In the last ten years or more, Bishop Anthony Li was definitely the Holy See's most trusted man in China. When John Paul II named a cardinal *in pectore* (whose name is known only to the pope himself) during the consistory of October 21, 2003, many observers believed that he might have been Bishop Anthony Li.

Working for unity and reconciliation

Anthony Li was respected by the open and non-registered communities because of his hard work to build unity and reconciliation within the Church. In fact his life and legacy is a wonderful statement that there is one Catholic Church in China, united in all matters of faith, occasionally divided by the atrocious religious policy of the communist regime.

The people in both communities when they fulfill the call of the Holy Father and the example of Bishop Li, work for unity and reconciliation, show a truly Catholic heart.

It is even obvious that divisions within the Church weaken the Catholic communities and enhance the chances of Party and

government officials to perpetuate and extend their control. Reconciliation is a powerful tool to defeat such a religious policy. Archbishop Li Du'an promoted reconciliation and unity not at any cost, but always while upholding the full Catholic doctrine:

All Catholics in China are united under the same faith. As far as I know, the pope respects both communities and urges us to move in the direction of reconciliation and unity. Some members of the underground Church say we have rebelled against the pope. I belong to the "open Church," but I am not rebellious, since in no way whatsoever do I deny the pope's primacy. We have the same faith, and we both support the Holy Father. Therefore we should join together under the traditional structure and doctrine of the Church.

Eighteen years in prison without bitterness

Li Du'an was born on June 13, 1927 in the Diocese of Xi'an (Shaanxi). In those days the territory was evangelized by the Franciscan friars of the Italian province of Tuscany. He was ordained a priest on April 11, 1951. He has been detained on three occasions for long periods of time. The first, without any sentence, lasted from October 5, 1954 to June 3, 1957; the second, with a sentence of three years, was from April 1958 to April 1960; the third, longest detention, with a sentence to 20 years, lasted from March 1966 and to December 29, 1979. In spite these long and unjust detentions, he was a man of serenity and optimism, one that felt no resentment towards those responsible for inflicting so many sufferings on him.

From 1980 till 1987, Anthony Li served as parish priest in Gongyi Parish (Lintong), in the Diocese of Xi'an. On April 5, 1987, he was consecrated bishop of the Diocese of Xi'an, and was recognized by both the Holy See and the Chinese government. He accepted, for the good of the Church, to collaborate with the political authorities of his country, but without compromising his dignity as a human being, believer and bishop.

Archbishop of Xi'an

Thanks to his great charisma, Archbishop Li Du'an transformed Xi'an, if the expression may be allowed, into a model diocese. There are no internal divisions between open and underground communities; the Christian life is fervent; the clergy well trained and united; the vocations are numerous. Bishop Li, as a father, welcomed into his diocese good seminarians who had difficulty in their original dioceses; and in turn provided priests for more needy dioceses.

Xi'an, the metropolitan see of the eight dioceses in the province of Shaanxi, is the ancient capital of the former Chinese empire and the cradle of Christianity in China. Shaanxi is a province with one of the largest number of faithful (260,000) and vocations (270 priests and about 600 religious sisters), and churches (400, restored and of recent construction). Numerous religious sisters, seminarians and priests from the province go to serve in dioceses in need all around the country. One of Bishop Li's priorities was to build a large regional major seminary and one minor diocesan seminary, with 150 and 50 students respectively.

Bishop Li had high esteem for the charisma and the service of religious women. In 1997 he inaugurated a training division for women religious at the Xi'an Regional Seminary.

Active and determined in seizing new opportunities, Bishop Anthony Li was the first bishop to open a Catholic Social Service Centre in 2002, now headed by Fr. Stephen Chen Ruixue. With the support of the German *Misereor* and other international agencies, the Social Service Centre sponsors small projects in poor villages throughout Shaanxi Province, like digging wells and irrigation systems; health and educational services (e.g. for cleft palate operations and building schools); care to orphans and relief to families following natural disasters. Bishop Li has employed full time personnel and engaged a number of volunteers to collaborate with the various projects.

Bishop Li has also welcomed, on premises belonging to his diocese, the Guangzhou based and non-governmental organization

Huiling, which supports persons with disabilities. In Xi'an numerous nuns and Catholic volunteers are successfully collaborating with this charitable organization. The social service of the Church is a new and promising development in China, and the Diocese of Xi'an is in the forefront of this field.

In Shaanxi the number of conversions is growing amongst intellectuals, university students, and professionals. When people pointed out that Protestants were growing more quickly than Catholics, he said without any regrets that it was a good sign.

Many young people are attracted to the Christian faith. Even a certain number of intellectuals are open to Christianity:

[The Protestants] are growing at a faster rate. They are more active than we are; (...) they have greater contact with students and intellectuals. These become enamored with a biblical faith, which does not require too many duties and obligations of them. However, we must be happy with their success. In one way or another the people hear the words of Christ. And when some of them want to deepen their faith, they end up appreciating the treasures of Catholic tradition and doctrine.

A smiling and courageous bishop under duress

Bishop Anthony Li was a man of great spirituality and this enabled him to face any problem with serenity. As the moral leader of the open Church in communion with the Holy Father he had to stand up to the intimidation and manipulation by the officials implementing the religious policy.

Bishop Li courageously refused to participate in a January 6, 2000 liturgy in Beijing during which five bishops were illegitimately ordained. He showed the same courage the following October, refusing to join the government campaign against the canonization of 120 martyrs of China. As a consequence, Bishop Li has been subjected to numerous and long interrogations, strict control and various other limitations to his freedom, including the halt of foreign teachers to teach in his seminary and the prohibition to travel to Rome for the Special Synod in October 2005, to which

Bishop Li Du'an was invited together with three other Chinese bishops.

As a prudent pastor, Bishop Li has been open in working with government authorities. He was vice chairman of the Administrative Commission of the Chinese Catholic Church, but without compromising his views on fundamental matters of faith and the rights of the Church. In commenting on the "Three Documents" (March 2003), which aimed at tightening control over the open church communities, Archbishop Li Du'an declared:

If these documents are in line with Catholic tradition, then we can accept them. Yet the role of the Church hierarchy must absolutely be preserved, just as Christ wanted. The power of the bishops, as successors of the apostles, is a true form of governing. Certainly each bishop has his limitations, and he must lead the Church as God's servant. Yet his power is real, not symbolic. No one can take the place of a bishop in leading the Church. Vatican Council II promoted the participation of the laity in the Church. While a bishop must open himself up to and accept their contribution, yet he is still their leader. His role [as leader] can never be deprived of its significance!

Even if he had to accept the existence of the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association (CCPA), Archbishop Li had steadfastly defended the freedom of the Church against the claims and attempts at control by the Patriotic Association:

Under the present circumstances we acknowledge the existence of the CCPA. If its whole purpose was to act as an association of Catholic faithful, then there would be no problem with it. However, the Patriotic Association cannot act above the Church. It must act within the Church, and answer to the bishop.

In November 2005, several nuns living in the convent next to the Cathedral of Xi'an were severely beaten because they opposed the confiscation of their school by the authorities. Many people in China and around the world protested against such a barbarous action against innocent and defenseless nuns. Bishop Li was sick in the hospital, yet he exercised leadership, moderation

and pragmatism: he bought back the school and the land, so that the Sisters could continue and develop their precious presence in the heart of the city of Xi'an, near the Cathedral.

In 2004, Bishop Li was diagnosed with liver cancer and had been undergoing therapy in hospital. On July 26, 2005 he provided a smooth succession in his diocese, consecrating Mgr. Anthony Dang Mingyan, 38, as auxiliary bishop, with the approval of both the Holy See and Chinese political authorities. Archbishop Li died on May 25, 2006, surrounded by Mgr. Dang, several priests and dozens of faithful. In spite of the local government's attempt to limit access to the funeral, many thousands of faithful walked long hours in an interminable procession to participate in the Requiem Mass on May 31 in Gongyi Parish (Lintong).

Facing the challenge of modernization

Modernization and secularization are posing a serious challenge and threat to the faith and practice of the faith of Catholic faithful priests, seminarians and Sisters in China. Li Du'an was conscious of and worried about the phenomenon, which appeared in China only recently:

Secularization is a universal challenge, one which now both the Church and China must face. Society is quickly moving toward a culture based on money and hedonism. We Christians, even priests, religious and bishops, live in society, and are therefore naturally influenced by it. This is especially true for young priests, who observe persons of their own age getting rich and living comfortable lives. On the contrary, the lives of priests in China are very hard. They lead lives of poverty, without most human comforts and compensations. It is easy for them to become discouraged. The same holds true for young Sisters.

The historical process of transformation toward modernization is being experienced everywhere in the world, but the China Church has one more problem to cope with: a religious policy that hampers real freedom of formation, pastoral activity and spiritual growth. The political pressure bishops, priests and Sisters

are subjected to prevent them from properly and serenely dealing with the challenges of a society in rapid transformation. Archbishop Li Du'an, was particularly aware of this turn of events:

Once upon a time the faith was successfully passed on from parents to children. Today this still happens, but not as easily. Nowadays families need help in carrying out this duty, since they cannot tackle the dangers of secularization all by themselves. In recent years we have organized Catholic catechism courses for Chinese youth, as well as children's "summer camps." However government authorities have forbidden us to organize such activities in the future.

After the boom years of the 1980s, since the 1990s vocations have progressively gone down in number, and some families even discourage their children from becoming priests. The situation is quite bad in the coastal provinces. In Shanghai, for example, there are hardly any vocations. Some of our seminarians went to be formed, and to serve in those dioceses.

The challenge of a new leadership

The Catholic Church in China is going through a crucial moment in its history: the change of leadership. The old bishops, like Li Du'an, are dying out, and the leadership is passing into the hands of very young bishops, some of them not yet 40 years old. The new bishops will govern the church for almost 40 years, therefore it is very obvious that the choice of the candidates is of vital importance for the Church. Archbishop Li, in the years of his life, sometimes in an ingenious manner, provided Xi'an and other dioceses of the province, with young and suitable bishops.

From June 2000 to April 2006 all the new bishops in China were ordained with the agreement of both sides. But the circumstances of these ordinations have something in common, namely, the permanent conflict between the bureaucrats of the government and the Catholic communities. Where the clergy and the faithful have stood firm, united, and courageous, they were able to express publicly the bishop-elect's communion with the universal Church and with the Holy See.

The experience of these years clearly shows that the Chinese Catholics are not willing to be governed by an illegitimate bishop. An illegitimately ordained bishop will become, in fact, a deserted bishop, a shepherd without a flock. It is quite dismaying to observe how the officials of the regime and of the Patriotic Association are unable to acknowledge that their policy does not work, and incredibly proceeded with the ordinations of Joseph Ma Yinglin and Joseph Liu Xinhong, which took place on April 30 in Kunming (Yunnan province) and on May 2, 2006 in Wuhu (Anhui province) respectively. The situation seems to have gone back six years, to the Epiphany of the year 2000, when Bishop Li Du'an refused to go to Beijing to ordain bishops without papal approval:

The most urgent problem now involves selecting new bishops. Under today's circumstances we cannot go ahead and consecrate new bishops without government authorization. If the government is not against the candidate, we then proceed to present him to Rome for approval. Should the pope not give his consent, then the candidate cannot be consecrated as a bishop.

After the statement of May 4, 2006, on the part of the Holy See, it is even more urgent to exhort priests to resist illegal ordinations. The candidates should be strong and free as Bishop Li and resist unreasonable pressure. It would be better for the candidates to renounce (sometimes only temporarily) the episcopacy rather than compromise their consciences.

We are believers, and we think and act as such. As believers, we should spare no effort in supporting bishops, priests, Sisters, seminarians and the faithful pastorally and spiritually, in this delicate period when the leadership is shifting from an older to a younger generation. I would like to conclude this contribution in honor of Archbishop Anthony Li Du'an by ending on the optimistic note he started with:

In ten years there will only be young bishops leading the Chinese Church. I won't be here, but I have well-founded hopes that they will do a good job. I believe that God will help them out.