

# *The Expansion of the Church in China during the Last 30 Years*

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**I**nformation on the Church in China disseminated by the media, in general, gives a rather negative image of the religious situation in that country. The control over religious activity in China is, without doubt, quite strict. Nevertheless, it is also clear that, in spite of numerous limitations, Christian activity has developed considerably in the last three decades.

The policy of openness and modernization, inaugurated by Deng Xiaoping at the Third Plenum of the Party's 11<sup>th</sup> Central Committee in December 1978, has given rise to this expansion. Believers in the five major religions in China, namely Buddhism, Islam, Daoism, Protestantism and Catholicism, have been invited to actively participate in the modernization of the country. These religions are carefully distinguished from blind superstition and subversive sects in as much as they are based on canonical scriptures, and teach a moral discipline. Christians, moreover, have been able to make a much-appreciated contribution, either because of their professional competence and the dedication of many among them, but also because of their ties with the developed countries of America and Europe. Since 1985, these international links have no longer been criticized. On the contrary, they have been exploited to encourage investment, and to lead to a flow of foreign currency into the country. By way of contrast, the independence of Chinese Christianity is jealously protected from all foreign interference. Article 36 of the Constitution, which warns religions that they are not subject to any foreign power, is especially aimed at Catholics and their allegiance to papal authority. The spiritual link with the

Pope is, however, admitted. Papal primacy, in as much as it is an article of faith, is not denied. Yet the Holy See is denied all authority to intervene in the affairs of the Church in China. For reasons of political sovereignty, the Chinese government has rejected up to now every attempt at establishing relations with the Vatican.

### **1. Faced with government pressure, a wide range of Catholic positions are taken**

The official rejection of the authority of the Pope explains the permanence of “underground” Catholic communities, which refuse to submit to the requirements of the Catholic Patriotic Association. The underground Catholics denounce, more or less harshly, the Catholics who collaborate with the civil authorities, and submit to the directives of the Patriotic Association.

The conflicts, which continually take place between the official and underground Catholics, vary in sharpness and intensity according to the region. It is manifestly regrettable if they lead to mutual exclusion. It then becomes a counter-witness, a negation of the Gospel command of mutual love, preached by Christ. On the other hand, the bubbling up of diverse orientations is significant of the Christian message, which demands a faith that is both present to the world and in retreat from the world. The underground Catholics maintain the importance of the primacy of faith and of fidelity to the Church. The official Church Catholics try to integrate their faith into society and its culture. It is possible that they can radiate Christian values among the masses of non-believers.

### **The immense effort of a new generation of believers**

Protestants in China also have their problems, but they are perhaps less dependent on their pastors, and have fewer arguments about canon law. They concentrate their message on the acceptance of Jesus Christ as one’s Saviour, rather than on the laws of the Church. Their hymns are simpler and in touch with the life of the

people. Their traditional churches are also saddled with the Three-Self Patriotic Movement. However, evangelists, supported by America and Taiwan display an extraordinary spirit, even greater than that of the underground Catholics. They are also subject to police raids on their numerous assemblies, which are not officially registered. Their leaders are often forced to pay fines or go to prison. In 1950, the number of Protestants was well below that of the Catholics. Today they are much more numerous, and more well known among the general population.

Young Catholic priests, for their part, have successfully, and in a remarkable way, put into practice the liturgical reforms of Vatican Council II. And yet, it was only in 1982, beginning at the Shanghai Seminary, that they began to discover the documents of Vatican Council II. Father Thomas Law of Hong Kong had been invited to be the messenger of the new liturgy in the major seminaries of China. Being an internal affair of the Church, worship is generally not subject to government interference. It is enough that the priest does not touch upon political topics in his homilies. Besides worship, it is also possible to organize church choirs, teams of altar servers, or Bible study groups. These groups of young people love to organize visits to other dioceses, especially to the famous shrines dedicated to the Blessed Mother.

The animation displayed in these groups attracts numerous converts, and catechumenates are flourishing, especially in the big cities, beginning with Beijing, where many university students are being instructed in the Christian faith. Christianity is generally well regarded, and is more attractive than the other religions of the country. Why is this? First of all, Christianity is no longer considered to be a foreign religion. The Communist regime has provided an immense service in causing the religions of China to be made up entirely of Chinese personnel. Secondly, Christianity is considered as being linked to modernity, in that it makes an appeal to individual consciences and to respect for the human person. Some intellectuals also think that Christianity is the indispensable antidote to the moral deviations caused by modernization.

The energy of the young priests is likewise spent, even to the point of excess, in the construction of prestigious churches and multiple grottoes of Our Lady of Lourdes, which are as ornate as traditional Chinese pavilions and gardens. In spite of the poverty of the Catholic population in the villages, the priests desire to build churches with towers and spires as high as possible in order to give face to the Catholic Church. They want to build a church at least as beautiful as the Protestant church or the Buddhist temple. Their reason is that the more imposing the church building is, the more it will attract catechumens. Bishops and priests consider the construction of a church or the restoration of an old church to be a priority expense. For, they say, if there is a church building, Catholic life will revive and organize itself. It is true that the ritual assembly of a religion plays a great role in the cultural tradition of the people.

Young religious Sisters are more numerous than the young priests. There are some 40 novitiates for training Sisters situated around the country. Coming generally from poor peasant families, the Sisters are the beneficiaries of an education, which frequently does not include graduation from secondary school. They belong to local congregations, founded in recent years by Chinese bishops, or even to Chinese communities founded in the past by international congregations, such as the Franciscan Missionaries of Mary, the Helpers of the Holy Souls, the Presentation Sisters, the Sisters of the Sacred Heart, and the Holy Spirit Sisters. They do not have the right to officially belong to international congregations having a superior general, who is a foreigner. Their superior is the bishop of their diocese, and also the local pastor in the parishes they are assigned to. The authority of the Sisters' religious superiors is frequently quite reduced, and the tasks assigned to the Sisters are often those of humble servants. For the requirements of social service, a certain number of Sisters have been trained as doctors and nurses.

Distinct from many priests, who are still largely supported by foreign subsidies, the Sisters have a more independent spirit, and

are less influenced by foreigners. They are gradually becoming more and more able to support themselves, due to their management of kindergartens and clinics. They manifest an independence modeled on the West. For instance, they wear clothes more adapted to their daily work and to local custom, than their usual long robes. Without power in the ecclesiastical hierarchy, they draw less attention from the government than the priests. They have more freedom to take part in diverse activities, which make them leave the closed atmosphere of the church, and to be open to the non-Christians. Close to local families from their contact with the children, the sick and the elderly, the Sisters frequently visit homes and are welcomed by the people.

### **The difficulty of getting free from excessive political restraints**

The dynamism of the religions is a cause of anxiety to the Chinese Communist Party's traditional way of doing things. The more the country opens up due to the economic reform and its entrance into the World Trade Organization, the more internal policies tend to tighten up for the purpose of maintaining social stability and cohesion.

The general body of Catholics do not listen to the official Bishops Conference because it is too compromised by the civil authorities. It is the Bishops Conference, which officially nominates the bishops. But the young priests, who are elected by their confreres in the diocese, and who are approved by their local governments, seek by all means possible to obtain the approval of the Holy See. Three bishops even went a step further in 2003. They not only obtained an appointment from the Holy See, but they were also willing to announce this appointment publicly. They thus reduced the authority of the official Bishops Conference in making nominations. This in turn led to a sharp reaction from the civil authorities.

In 2005, Bishop Jin Luxian of Shanghai consecrated Bishop Joseph Xing as his auxiliary bishop with the approval both of Rome and of the Chinese Bishops Conference. There had not been any

previous agreement. This happy event was unfortunately followed the next year by the consecration of three bishops without Rome's approval. Those ordinations took place in Yunnan, Anhui and Jiangsu Provinces. The Holy Father's letter of 2007 clearly states that the appointment of bishops cannot take place without his approval.

### **Solidarity with the universal Church**

The opening up of China in the last 30 years has permitted encounters and religious exchanges to take place, which have certainly contributed to maintaining the morale of a Church, which finds itself in a false situation due to the fact of its isolation. Thanks to the initiative of the Bishop of Shanghai and the support of several missionaries familiar with China, several hundred priests, seminarians and religious have been able, since 1993, to pursue theological courses of study in America, Europe and the Philippines. These sojourns in foreign lands have not been free from difficulties for many reasons. Such reasons are: an accumulated lack of knowledge of the religious sciences, due to a poor formation in the seminaries since their re-opening in 1983, a gap between the fervor of traditional Catholic communities and the very secularized life of the Church in the West, and the intellectual conflict between the intuitive manner of the Chinese way of thinking and the abstract and critical way of Westerners. On the other hand, what is successful about their studies is that students of theology in foreign lands can experience a more reflective faith in a secularized milieu. They can thus learn to better understand the support the Christian faith gives to human life, and to prepare themselves to bear witness in the materialistic society that is developing in China today.

Professors of theology, liturgy and Sacred Scripture, capable of teaching in Chinese, have been invited from Taiwan, Hong Kong and other places to give courses in Chinese seminaries. They have been able to fill a need for teaching personnel, and to spread the reforms initiated by Vatican Council II. One of them, the Salesian Father Chen Rijun, a native of Shanghai, has taught philosophy and

theology at the Sheshan Seminary in Shanghai. Father Zen, according to the Shanghaiese pronunciation of his name, has since gone on to become bishop of Hong Kong and a Cardinal.

Upon their return to China after a sojourn in America or Europe, the young priests, new diplomas in hand, sometimes experience great difficulty in recapturing the rhythm of traditional communities and of facing political pressure. But most of them render great service, often as professors, or even rectors, of major seminaries. Some have put a lot of energy into promising initiatives. In Beijing, Father Peter Zhao Jianmin, possessing a doctorate from Louvain University, has begun a course in Christian culture at 40 universities, which offer a Masters degree in foreign languages. The 10 professors he employs are for the most part young priests, who have degrees from America. In Shijiazhuang, the capital of Hebei Province, Father Zhang Shijiang, educated in the Philippines, directs the Catholic Faith Press, and posts his journal on the internet. He has also launched a social service arm, similar to Caritas in Europe. On the national level, beginning in 2003, an updating course for priests ordained 10 years or longer, is held each year from March to December on the vast grounds of the National Seminary, located in Daxing, south of Beijing.

### **A multiplication of exchanges**

Direct exchanges between foreign and Chinese believers have multiplied in many different ways. Examples are the “China Service” desks of several missionary institutes, the Holy Spirit Study Centre of Hong Kong, and the publication since 1986 in Singapore of the *Guide to the Catholic Church in China* in parallel columns of English and Chinese. The seventh edition of the latter, which appeared in June 2008, has been enriched by the inclusion of e-mail addresses and internet websites. Moreover, the internet, as a network of exchange, has developed at a dizzying rate. Chinese Catholic websites in service today can be found listed either in Shijiazhuang, the Centre of Christian Studies at Taofengshan in Hong Kong or at the Catholic news agency, U.C.A. News.

The process of globalization, stimulated by economic imperatives, ought at the same time, contain human, moral, social and cultural aspects. Pope Benedict XVI, in his letter to the Catholics of China, precisely mentioned this point. In this point of view, a richer and richer dialogue between the Chinese world and the West would give greater weight to the forging of a fundamental ethic, which could be accepted by the whole world. The official freeze in Sino-Vatican relations does not in the least impede the multiplicity of fraternal exchanges between the Christians of China and those of the outside world.

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