

# *A Glance at the Influence of China's Open Door Policy on the Catholic Church*

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**W**hat has the 30 years of reform and openness brought to the Catholic Church of China? In this essay, I can only share with the readers an observer's glance from the outside.

## **The succession and the Urgency of Indigenization**

The reform and openness policy has revived different dioceses to different degrees. The policy has led to bishops and priests being released from prison. They were generally in prison for from 10 to 20 years. They looked old, but their spirit was not diminished. When the opportunity arose, they contacted the Catholics who had been waiting for their return for many years, and they undertook the work of reviving their dioceses again. The first concern was to rebuild the church. Then, with this background, the most important task was to find leadership personnel, who were both capable and farsighted. In many local churches the Catholics were usually of advanced age. It was thought that the clergy whose experience was the most rich, or who had undergone the most suffering, would make the best leaders. This is how the localization, or indigenization of the church in the post-reform period was formed.

This was the time of reviving the life of the Church in China. That is to say, the nearly 30 years of turmoil had left the Church in China greatly divided. Sometimes it was difficult for clergy to communicate with their leaders in a diocese, or within a diocese for the clergy to communicate with, and to help one another, in order to

carry out the work of restoring the diocese to the state it was before the period of turmoil. The local church continually felt a sense of urgency, but it lacked a sense of replenishment or cautious preparation, as it sprouted and grew. Actually, after many years of management, many diocesan leaders still found it difficult to discuss church affairs with the leaders of other dioceses. This situation of each leader just being concerned with re-building the Church in his own diocese, indirectly killed the spirit of universality, which the Catholic Church should have. This phenomenon of quickly indigenizing, has led to organizations within the church being in competition with one another. Each one wants to display its own abilities, and it does not care about mutually helping one another.

We can also understand that the exchange of information in China, or the gathering for meetings, is subject to a high degree of supervision. Therefore, our brothers and sisters in the Church in China follow the path of indigenization in circumstances of a limitation of time and a lack of resources. These circumstances also happen within some religious communities, who have had the opportunity to start up again. Some old Sisters, who have no experience, and in the reality of no other choice, are reluctantly taking up the task of being the leader of the community. In a situation of swift indigenization, such a local church or religious community will require a lot of remedial work in the future.

### **A Generation Gap**

Following along from the restoration of the old appearance of a diocese, or local church is the matter of successors. When an old bishop, who has spent many years in prison, and who has suffered a lot, faces the question of a successor, it can be a cause of worry to him. Luckily in one area, there are one or two other old bishops, who can help and share the work. However, it is still not easy to pass over authority in a diocese to a young priest, who is 30 years younger than you, and with whom you lack the spirit of cooperation. The old bishop has a lot of anxieties. In China there is a lack of

priests in their 50's and 60's. A generation gap has appeared. The language on each side of the gap is not the same, and trust by one side for the other is lacking. On the other hand, there are certain dioceses in which the young priests have formed factions. Each faction supports its own candidate to be bishop of the diocese. Thus there is a division in the diocese. Here we do not touch upon the official or the patriotic association's interference. Some Sisters congregations have sent their old Sisters back home. To fill the void, new people have come forward to manage the community. However, those who have experienced and passed on the original spirit of the community, and have preserved the original principles of the community, are always being undermined. Do the new people, who have taken office, have the ability to preserve the original spirit and tradition of the community, and to develop it? This is a cause for worry. Not to be in communication will block the spread of the Church, and influence the Church's and the religious communities' sense of values. It will harm the faith, and the administration and behavior of communities.

### **The Chance to Train Personnel and the Slant towards Secularization**

Having experienced the suffering of a break in generations, in the middle of the 1990's the bishops of many dioceses in China began to send some young priests and Sisters abroad to study. After a period of time, there was not much news from those who had gone abroad to study. However, when they returned to China, naturally they filled the most important positions in the diocese. Unconsciously, what seemed to be a natural arrangement led to the formation of a kind of class outlook. Unfortunately, comparisons were made between those who had the chance to go abroad to study, and those who did not. Those who had studied were assigned to teach in the seminary or convent. Why were they not assigned to parish work? The ones assigned to serve in areas where the standard of living was low were not those who had gone abroad to study. Some people thought this was unreasonable. What kind of work

should priests do? Of what benefit to the Church can a group of priests, who have no experience of pastoral at the grassroots level, be? If, unfortunately, the idea of seeking a life of comfort becomes prevalent in the Church, then one can see how secularization can arise.

In a situation where all neglected matters are yet to be dealt with, money becomes very important. All the priests and bishops who have the chance to visit Hong Kong and Macao, like relatives and acquaintances, they will ask the parishes they visit for donations to build a church, or for other material things. Everyone can understand this situation and accept it. To a certain degree, everyone will do their best to help a diocese or parish in China in need. However, if one has the chance to deeply get to know some Church organizations in China, one will discover that many of them are just seeking ostentatious things. For instance, the Church managers will ask for a beautiful church, instead of help with a training program for the laity. One also sees that the priests and laity are sometimes struggling for leadership positions. Once an organization asked for help to run a short activity for 20 persons. They did not mention the contents of the activity, yet they sought RMB 50,000 to run it.

### **Lay Training**

Beginning in the 1990's, many diocesan leaders and religious congregations began to put their effort into the work of formation of the laity. Thus some dioceses and religious congregations, who had the financial means, built formation centers. They would use the Winter and Summer vacation periods to give formation in the faith to young people. This was a kind of strategy to deal with a crisis of faith. Since the time of Liberation, there has been a lack of channels for renewal programs in the faith. So, for these regional formation centers to come into existence one after the other is something worthy of praise. Once a priest, who runs a center for the faith formation of young people, sent me the previous year's schedule of activities. Thus I was able to get an understanding of the contents of

his program. This priest used the content and method of seminary courses to impart knowledge of the liturgy, moral theology and Church history to the participating high school students. The method was classroom lectures. The purpose was to train the young people in Catholic doctrine, so that they would become fervent Catholics, and help the Church to teach the doctrine to future generations of young people. Because the young people grew up in a Catholic village, they really maintained a conscientious attitude towards the faith they received from the previous generation. They happily attended classes, even during the hot weather of their Summer vacation. If they can teach the young people to face the changing circumstances of society and the Church, and lead them to experience and reflect upon them, then that Church community will definitely be quite dynamic!

### **Conclusion**

The influence on the people of the past 30 years' reform and openness program is there for all to see. What has been the influence of this policy on religion, especially on the Catholic Church? There are different studies and different explanations. In the country as a whole, the United Front Department, the Religious Affairs Bureau and the Patriotic Association all supervise and control religion. The government of each place supervises the religions within its borders differently, either strictly or loosely. In brief, it can be said, that in the 30 years since the implementation of the open door policy, the government feels comfortable with the Catholic Church. It has positively established a harmonious relationship with the Church. However, this is also used to divide the Church. From the Church's side, opportunities for development are present. However, in the past, there was not sufficient communication among the leaders of the Church. Leading the individual Churches to indigenize quickly has caused problems to arise regarding succession and the development of the Church. If the Church can strengthen its communications, and strengthen the ability to learn from one another and to support one another, and if

it can rid itself of ostentation and competition, the Church can enter the ranks of reform and openness.

China's policy of reform and openness should not be limited only to allowing more space for the people's business activities to take place. Rather, the country's leaders and the leading institutions should also undergo reform and become more open. If the thoughts and attitudes of the governing personnel are not reformed, and only the circumstances for activities change, then if the circumstances are not beneficial to the leaders and to the leading institutions, the old methods and attitudes of control will return.