

How Chinese Catholics Renewed the Church in China

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With the advent of the New China on October 1, 1949, the communist regime implemented drastic measures to ensure the independence of the country. Mao Zedong's victory was proclaimed as a victory against foreign imperialism. In his mind, Christianity had throughout its history compromised with foreign powers. Catholicism in particular had long benefited from a French protectorate. The Pope had compromised with foreign powers, and declared communism intrinsically evil. In 1949, many priests, Sisters and Chinese Catholics felt threatened. Some felt that it was safer for them to leave the Mainland. They took refuge in Taiwan, Hong Kong, Southeast Asia and other parts of the world. Many were already overseas for studies when they heard of the political pressure put on Church people back home. They too thought that it was safer not to go back to China. They did not realize that they would have to wait three decades before seeing their homeland again. But those thirty years were not lost.

While Catholics on the Mainland were more and more paralysed, great transformations in Church life were taking place overseas. Then, from 1979 to 2009, exiled Catholics together with local Chinese brought back to the Mainland a wealth of new faith experiences. This inflow from outside was even more powerful among Protestants. Their fast growing communities were an incentive for Catholics to become more active. Foreigners, no doubt, supported this revival in the Chinese Church. But the main impulse came from the Chinese themselves. Mainland Catholics took full responsibility for their future, since all foreign missionaries had been banned. Relatives and Chinese friends, who could find their

way to even the remotest villages, provided support to them from the outside.

Hong Kong, a springboard for mission

In the early 1950s refugees from the Mainland poured into Hong Kong. The population went from 600,000 to 2,360,000 between 1945 and 1951. Many of the refugees were already Catholics when they came to Hong Kong, but others entered the Church after their arrival. So the numbers of Catholics rose to 131,698 in 1958 and 241,986 in 1968.

At the end of 1968, Rome accepted the resignation of Bishop Lorenzo Bianchi, PIME, the last Italian missionary bishop. His auxiliary bishop, Francis Hsu Chen-ping, who had been consecrated a bishop in October 1967, assumed the direction of the diocese. He was fully qualified to oversee the pastoral works of the diocese. In 1969 the Duns Scotus Society for Biblical Studies, which the Franciscans had created, published a Chinese translation of the Bible, the result of twenty years of work. In March 1970, Bishop Hsu called a Diocesan Synod to take stock of the situation of the local Church after twenty years of rapid growth, and to observe how the directives of the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) were being implemented. While the Catholics of Hong Kong were thus deeply involved in a process of *aggiornamento*, the presidents of the Bishops' Conferences of thirteen countries in Asia met in March 1971 and established in Hong Kong the secretariat of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences (FABC). The years that saw Chinese bishops taking charge of the diocese of Hong Kong, also witnessed increased contacts between the local population and mainland China. In December 1974, the population of Hong Kong was estimated to be 4,388,200. During that year the Immigration Department counted 900,000 visitors from Hong Kong to Guangdong province.

During the 1970s Catholics in Hong Kong did not as yet have a center concerned with the Catholic Church in mainland China.

From time to time informal meetings were held among priests of various religious orders in Hong Kong, during which they expressed their common concern for more contact with and support for the Catholic Church in China. Meanwhile, at a church colloquium in Louvain, in September 1974, the Catholic and Protestant delegations from Hong Kong were particularly active and organized. Through their practical experience of the situation in China, they could moderate some of the over-idealistic resolutions that had been put forward. Fr. John Tong, Lecturer in Theology at Hong Kong's Holy Spirit Seminary College, drew from this colloquium a greater awareness of, and a deeper concern for the Church in China. Six years later in October 1980, Bishop John Baptist Wu appointed Fr. John Tong to become the director of a new specialized center, the Holy Spirit Study Centre. Its aim was to promote exchanges with Catholics on the Mainland through its review *Tripod*, which was published in both English and Chinese.

More concrete exchanges developed during the 1990s. A few theology students from the Mainland could attend training sessions in Hong Kong, and lecturers from Hong Kong could give courses in mainland seminaries. Hong Kong priests and Sisters played a great role there in the liturgical renewal and in the promotion of Bible study. Fr. Thomas Law Kwok-fai celebrated the first Mass in Chinese in Shanghai's Sheshan Seminary on September 30, 1989. He used explanatory materials and videotapes to let the Chinese seminarians understand the spirit of the liturgical changes. The reform was officially approved for the whole country in 1992. Today, liturgical celebrations in China are beautifully carried out. The new liturgy, with the full participation of the faithful, also evokes a solemnity, which has largely disappeared in the West. The Catholics proclaim the Bible readings and the Prayer of the Faithful in loud and clear voices. Choir singers and altar servers are smartly dressed. A profusion of lights, incense and flowers gives a Chinese flavor to the liturgy. The golden calligraphies on huge red banners hanging along the pillars or on the sides of the gates are an added Chinese touch. However the rituals remain strictly Roman. A few

choirs in Beijing and Tianjin can even compete in singing Gregorian hymns in Latin. They do this especially around the great Christian feasts of Christmas and Easter.

Taiwan, a resource in Chinese culture and pastoral concerns

1949 marked a watershed in the Christian history of Taiwan as more than 400 Catholic priests, both Chinese and foreign, arrived on the island after that date. Conversions took place on a large scale, both among aborigines and Chinese refugees from the Mainland. In 1952 Taiwan became the 21st Catholic ecclesiastical province of China, with an Archdiocese in Taipei. Refugees from mainland China were more receptive to the Gospel than local Chinese. Thaddaeus Hang gave the following reasons:

The mainlanders had had to leave their native land; they had endured many sufferings; they felt isolated, and they were conscious of a spiritual void in their lives, whereas the Chinese in Taiwan province remained attached to the customs of their ancestral religion ...¹

Another factor was that the Chinese from the Mainland had had a taste of Communism and appreciated the condemnation of atheistic materialism by the Catholic Church. In Taiwan, bishops and priests of high intellectual calibre concentrated on trying to create an expression of the Catholic faith using the Confucian cultural tradition. In this they were close to the Nationalist government, which was searching for its own ideology. The rulers of Taiwan, reacting against the destructiveness, real or imagined, of “Communist bandits”, presented themselves as the defenders of “5,000 years of Chinese culture”. Several outstanding personalities contributed to the transfer of the cream of Chinese Catholicism to Taiwan.

¹ Thaddaeus Hang (Hsiang, Twei-Chieh), *Liming qian de Zhongguo Tianzhujiao (Catholics in China before the dawn)*, (Taipei: Kuangchi, 1963), p. 109.

Cardinal Thomas Tian only arrived in Taiwan in 1960, and his few remaining years were taken up with sessions of the Second Vatican Council. But he lent his support to the development of higher studies. After becoming Archbishop of Beijing in 1946, he had founded *Shangzhi Chubanshe* (The Publishing House of Wisdom). He had also inaugurated the Saint Thomas Institute of Philosophy at Fujen University in Beijing. Soon after the appointment of Cardinal Tian as Apostolic Administrator of Taipei, the Holy See, as the supreme authority over Catholic universities, re-situated Fujen University to a southwest suburb of Taipei. At the same time, they appointed Archbishop Yu Bin, the exiled bishop of Nanjing, as Vice-Chancellor of the university.

In May 1969, the Holy See created Archbishop Yu Bin a Cardinal. Kuomintang supporters considered this as papal approval for Yu Bin's anti-Communist stance. Others interpreted it differently. Madame Su Xuelin, a writer who had become a Catholic while studying in Lyons, France, saw Yu Bin's elevation to the College of Cardinals as the crowning point of a career in the service of intellectual development among Chinese Catholics. Like many Chinese thinkers, she considered it absolutely essential to have a Catholic presence among the elite of the country's intellectuals.

Many of the Catholic bishops in Taiwan were scholars whose work was well known in the Chinese Catholic world. One was Archbishop Stanislaus Lo Kuang, who succeeded Cardinal Tian as Archbishop of Taipei, and then succeeded Cardinal Yu Bin as rector of Fujen University. He was a priest from Hunan province, who had studied for many years in Rome. He wrote extensively on philosophy, and on the history of the Catholic Church in China. He analysed the contribution of each missionary society to the growth of the Church in China. In 1966, the Students Bookshop in Taiwan published the complete works of Cardinal Lo Kuang. Another influential bishop was Paul Ch'eng Shih-kuang, originally from Shanxi province, who had graduated with a degree in literature from Fujen University in Beijing. He was Bishop of Tainan from

1966 until his retirement in 1990. In 1974, he published a work of pastoral theology *Tian ren zhi ji* (*The Meeting of Heaven and Man*).

The priests in Taiwan, who taught or wrote books, had often studied at universities in Rome, Europe or America. They carried out a work of critical evaluation of the traditional material transmitted to them by the theological sciences of the West. Then they themselves translated or composed what suited the mentality and the needs of Chinese Catholics. The contribution made by historians was particularly significant because it shifted the perspectives away from the previous ones of the Western missionaries to those of Chinese historians. Chinese historiography brought out of the shadows persons or events which had previously been little known or whose importance had been underestimated. Fr. Fang Hao, a priest who came originally from Hangzhou, the capital city of Zhejiang province, contributed significantly to this process by establishing a comprehensive list of all those Christians, both Chinese and foreign, who had contributed in any way to the development of the Catholic Church in China.²

One missionary order, the Congregation of the Disciples of the Lord, *Congregatio Discipulorum Domini*, (CDD), has devoted itself especially to emphasizing the importance of China's cultural heritage. Archbishop Costantini had founded this order in 1930 when he was Apostolic Delegate. Fr John Liu, CDD, who had spent some time in America studying sociology, returned to Taiwan in 1963. He then spent the next 25 years in a fruitful ministry to young intellectuals. From 1973 to 1986, Fr. John Liu edited the review *Jianzheng*, (*Witness*). Then he became editor of the review *Hengyi*, (*Costantinian*), which incorporated the Chinese name for Archbishop Costantini: Gang Hengyi. He continued as editor until his death in 1989. He produced for these publications a steady stream of articles promoting Catholic education and analysing

² Fang Hao, *Zhongguo Tianzhujiào shì renwù zhuàn* (*Biographies of Personalities in Chinese Catholic History*), 3 vols. (Hong Kong: Catholic Truth Society, 1973).

Catholic Church news. Fujen University published a large two-volume work, *Jiaohui yu Zhongguo (The Church and China)*, a summary of Father Liu's thought and experiences a year after his death.

The Jesuits have been particularly successful in the area of mass communications, thanks to the various operations of their Kuangchi Society. Kuangchi has published books on a wide range of subjects concerning Christian life and thought, providing the faithful with useful tools for learning more about their faith. Kuangchi Radio and Television has consistently scored impressively high ratings. Some of their radio programs are regularly fed into Radio Veritas in Manila. A full course of theology on the air was later channelled to Shanghai, and printed there. During the 1980s and 90s, Father Edward Malatesta, SJ, now deceased, shipped a library of some 20,000 volumes, which he had carefully accumulated from Jesuit colleges and universities in the USA, to Sheshan Seminary in Shanghai.

The flourishing of many educational projects within the Catholic Church was a result of the directives given by the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965). These included an integration of the faith into local culture through the use of local languages in the celebration of the liturgy and the sacraments, ecumenism, dialogue with non-Christian religions and the service of the faithful in the modern world. The Council adopted the Constitution on the Liturgy on December 4, 1963. The Church in Taiwan responded almost immediately. On January 1, 1965, the bishops of Taiwan, Hong Kong and Macao authorized the use of Chinese for the celebration of Mass and the sacraments. The Churches of these Chinese territories soon published the first Chinese-Latin Ritual and, during the ensuing years, they composed a complete Missal in Chinese for both Sunday and weekday Masses. The traditional Chinese rites in honor of heaven and the ancestors, which had been banned for Catholics until 1939, were celebrated officially within the setting of the liturgy for the Lunar New Year. In Taipei, the Archbishop, surrounded by dignitaries in long black robes, presided over the

offering of fruit and incense before the great red tablet of wood, on which the following inscription had been inscribed in gold characters: "Honor to Heaven; Honor to the Ancestors". The pastors of some Catholic churches placed a small altar of the ancestors permanently in a side chapel.

Taiwan from the 1950s to the 1980s became a crucible for the fusion of Christian thought with Chinese thought. The various Christian groups produced a large library of books, videos and tapes. They diffused a great number of educational programs, ranging from theology lectures to children's stories, Bible commentaries, the history of Christianity, and family and sexual ethics. Videos gradually replaced collections of color slides, since most families now owned a video recorder. This range of audio-visual material, and the considerable Christian literature produced in Taiwan not only benefited the local population, it benefited the Chinese Diaspora as well, and during the 1980s, it was they who introduced such material into mainland China. The watertight division between Taiwan and the Mainland was gradually disappearing and, as it did so, Taiwanese Christians were becoming more and more aware of their calling to be a "Bridge Church".

From 1987 onwards, Chinese from Taiwan were able to travel more easily to the Mainland. Thus priests and Sisters, originally from there, were able to contact their home dioceses again, and bring them substantial help, both material and spiritual. Some of the professors from the theologate at Fujen University went to give courses and lectures in the major seminaries of mainland China.

Singapore: China Catholic communication

The Chinese Catholic communities in Malaysia and Singapore experienced considerable development from 1950 onwards through the arrival of some fifty foreign missionaries and Chinese priests who were prevented from continuing their ministry in mainland China. Moreover, since 1953 Singapore had become a

center of support for a Catholic apostolate among the Chinese throughout the whole world. The Bishop of Ningxia, Carlo Van Melckebecke, a Belgian Scheut Father, who had been expelled from China in 1952, gave himself totally to promoting this work. In May 1953, the Congregation of Propaganda in Rome appointed him as Apostolic Visitor to all the Overseas Chinese. His first urgent task was to find appointments for some 200 young Chinese priests who were studying abroad at the time when the Communists came to power in China. Bishop Van Melckebecke created the Catholic Central Bureau, which soon acquired a worldwide reputation. It consisted of a news agency and a bookshop; it offered a correspondence course in religious education and a catechetical service; it also created an association to pray for China. In 2000 the whole complex was re-named The Carlo Center. Both in Malaysia and in Singapore the priests who had been expelled from China were able to exercise an important pastoral ministry, especially by their work with young people through the Young Christian Workers, the Young Christian Students and the Legion of Mary. They could use Mandarin to instruct catechumens. The renewal which was taking place in the Catholic Church throughout the world, thanks to the reforms of Vatican Council II, made it possible for these priests to lead Chinese-language communities to a fuller religious development through liturgical celebrations, Bible study groups, a renewed catechumenate, social services and marriage encounters. Specific Chinese cultural traditions were introduced into the liturgy, especially on the occasion of the Lunar New Year. Oranges were blessed at a special Mass as a sign of mutual love and prosperity, and then distributed to the faithful. Members of the parish community came to the feeling of belonging to a larger family.

Many Chinese Catholic families felt much concerned about the plight of their relatives in China. After 1978, when it became possible to communicate, visits multiplied to the provinces of Fujian and Guangdong. Churches in the villages of these Catholics' ancestors had to be rebuilt. Catholics from Singapore, Malaysia and Bangkok showed great generosity in offering financial support.

On Pentecost Day 1981, a group of Chinese-educated university students formed an organization to develop exchanges with mainland China. Through visits to China, they became more aware of the needs of the Church there. They published an illustrated bulletin in Chinese under the title *Zhonglian Tongxun* (中聯通訊), presenting Catholic faith to the youth of Singapore, and giving news of the life of the Church in China and in the world. In 1986, the group published a *Guide to the Catholic Church in China* with the addresses of the Catholic churches in China, printed in two columns in English and Chinese. Visitors to China used this book to find the Catholic churches in Chinese cities and communicate with the local clergy and Catholics there. Up-to-date versions of the *Guide* were published in subsequent years. Later, the Zhonglian group, as they came to be known, invited priests and Sisters from China to attend retreats and short training sessions in Singapore. Meaningful Catholic activities, such as the Marriage Encounter, were likewise introduced to China.

The Philippines, a Catholic base in Asia

In 1966 at the time when the Cultural Revolution was sweeping away what was left of the Catholic Church in China, the number of ethnic Chinese living in the Philippines was 358,488, of whom 80,838 were Catholics. About 90 priests, many of them from the Mainland, ministered to them.³ Even before Communist pressure, Bishop Francis Xavier Zhao (Zhao Zhensheng), a Jesuit educated in France and Belgium, had encouraged missionary efforts abroad. In 1937, Pope Pius XI had appointed him Vicar Apostolic of Xianxian Diocese in Hebei Province. He was very attentive to the formation of his priests and wanted to give them a missionary spirit. So, he sent some of his priests to the Philippines.

In 1976 thirteen priests from the Diocese of Xianxian were managing five secondary schools and one primary school there, and

³ Carlo Van Melckebecke, *Diasporae Sinicae Statisticarum Tentamen* (Singapore: 1966), 9th edition.

five priests from the same diocese were in charge of parishes. Priests from China also produced religious broadcasts for *Radio Veritas* in Manila, thus carrying out a more far-reaching work for their country.

After China opened up in the 1980s, hundreds of priests and Sisters from the Mainland went to the Philippines to receive their religious formation. The Philippines was of great advantage to them, in comparison with the life they could have expected in Europe or America. In the Philippines, they could learn English, practice speaking it, take part in the Catholic life of a people not all that different from themselves, and benefit from convenient university resources for their theological and pastoral studies.

Theological formation in Europe and America

Bishop Aloysius Jin Luxian of Shanghai was the first bishop in China to initiate a program of sending seminarians and priests to study in Europe. He was concerned about training professors for his seminary. From 1993 onwards, with the help of Fr. Lawrence Flynn of Maryknoll, he also sent some students to the States. Fr. Flynn was then very active in recruiting students for training in the States. In France, Germany, Belgium and Italy, Missionary Institutes, which had previously worked in China, were happy to respond to requests from Chinese bishops, seeking to send seminarians and priests abroad for further study. Exchanges with mainland China represented a real breakthrough for the universal Church after four decades of separation. Major seminaries had reopened in China in 1982 and 1983. But they were serious lacking in both teaching staff and materials. At first, the welcoming institutes paid little attention to the language problems and to the academic background of the students. They were just happy to accept them, as long as they had a chance to come out of their country for further study.

However, the host institutes soon realized the awesome challenges, which these students faced. Many came from traditional Catholic families living in the countryside, and their formation in

seminaries or convents in China had been very strictly regulated. In America and Europe, the students suddenly experienced a freedom they had never known before. The students soon realized that they were left more or less to themselves. They experienced loneliness. They had to learn how to make good use of their time in prayer, study and rest, in other words, to make their own decisions. Their main problems were studying a foreign language, acquiring the aptitude to form good human relationships, learning the abstract logic of western theology, and being left without spiritual direction.

Some of them, however, managed to overcome these difficulties. In pastoral theology and through their personal contacts, they discovered how to witness to their faith in a secularized society. It prepared them to face similar challenges in the new consumer society of China.

Chinese seminaries have greatly improved over the past 12 years. While waiting for priests to return from study in the States and Europe, they managed to invite professors, both priests and Sisters from mainly Hong Kong and Taiwan. Many were Chinese, but a few foreigners were among those invited, including the late German Franciscan Father Hubert Vogt, who taught the Old Testament in several regional seminaries. Sister Maria Ko Ha Fong, FMA taught the New Testament, and her textbook was published in Shenyang. Fr Thomas Law of Hong Kong made a great contribution by promoting the liturgical reform encouraged by Vatican Council II.

Now that many overseas student priests and Sisters have gone back to China, the staff of seminaries is largely composed of young professors with an open mind. They now have the possibility of updating and improving their teaching, due to their knowledge of a foreign language. Seminary libraries have been filled with a larger choice of reference books. A year of ongoing formation for priests ordained ten years or more has been established at the national seminary in Daxing, south of Beijing. Fr. Peter Zhao Jianmin has organized a course in religious knowledge for university students, who have already mastered a foreign language. Fr. J.B. Zhang

Shijiang offers another platform for exchanges among scholars of religion through the colloquia he has organized in Shijiazhuang.

Religious students are still welcome in the West. But it might be better to save this opportunity for those with a university background in China itself. Having a poor knowledge of one's own culture prevents Chinese students from showing an interest in Western culture. They fail to discern the Christian heritage within European civilization. They are not prepared to become agents of intercultural exchange. Stays in the West would be especially useful for those specializing in Church history. In this area, non-religious Chinese scholars often do better than Church people.

The challenge of self-administration

Political independence of the country forced the Church in China to go it alone. In 1949, over half the Church leaders were foreigners. Out of 140 dioceses, Chinese bishops were in charge of less than 30. Foreigners occupied the most responsible posts. Missionary institutes contributed most of the finances. The new communist regime ended this foreign domination of the Catholic Church situation. Deprived of resources in finance and in personnel, Chinese priests and Sisters struggled to survive. Nevertheless, they stood fast in their faith. Many perhaps could appreciate the fact of being fully responsible for their Church, but they were conscious of belonging to the universal Church. They could not tolerate being cut off from the Pope, the leader of their Church. Division developed between those who seized the opportunities offered by the State, and those who rejected the control of the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association. All, however, fell victim to the revolutionary excesses of the Cultural Revolution from 1966 to 1976.

After 1978, the crucified Church in China rose again from the tomb. Back from jails and labor camps, priests in their 60s and 70s started gathering a few young men around the church to teach them Latin. They were deeply convinced that the Church must survive. A

new generation of priests had to be groomed. The political revival of the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association re-created a division among them. In fact, whatever choice they made, every priest had in mind the good of the Church. Those who worked officially struggled to make the best possible use of the narrow space of religious freedom provided by the government. Others professed their loyalty to Rome whatever the cost, and went underground. Weaknesses appeared on both sides. Some official priests and bishops were tempted to make deals with corrupt government officials. Conflicts arose over power and the control of funds. Underground priests competed for loyalties, generating splits among the faithful, not unlike the early church between those for Paul and those for Apollo. A clannish kind of rejection and resentment deeply affected Church life, paralysing attempts at reconciliation and of living according to Christ's command of love for one another. Meanwhile, prayers and spiritual exercises were carried out very intensely.

This kind of Catholicism may be too deeply "inculturated" with the Confucian tradition of filial piety (*xiao*). Understood in its patriarchal context, this tradition commands absolute fidelity to kinship. When the family or clan has been offended, vindication most likely follows. Forgiveness is minimized. On the national level, citizens must pay absolute obedience to the sovereign. This may lead to chauvinism and xenophobia. When the Confucian heritage, however, is open to the Gospel of love, these negative aspects can be overcome. Then a beautiful Way to God lies ahead. But the most recent decades have been overshadowed by resentment, due to the dominant ideology of revolutionary struggle. Catholics, despite their non-conformism, have been contaminated. Many still have to be healed in the Spirit.

A great sign of hope lies in the transformation of Chinese society as a whole. Catholics in the past were mainly poor farmers, gathered together in remote villages as a measure of protection against hostile surroundings and persecutions. In this context, fidelities tend to become blind and obstinate. Today, urbanization

opens new perspectives. There are many converts among professional people and intellectuals. In large cities, catechumens number in the hundreds. These new urban communities are better informed about the development of the Church in the world. Catholics make good use of the Internet. This technological instrument immediately circulated the Holy Father's 2007 pastoral letter to the Catholics in China, as well as the related compendium of 2009, to all the faithful. Whatever the political constraints, the Catholics in China feel one in spirit with the universal Church. Lately they proved their loyalty to the Holy Father by responding positively to the Year of St. Paul and to the Year for Priests. The Holy Father need not worry. The Church in China is still very loyal to him. In spite of all that the Chinese Catholics have been through, this might be their main achievement.