

The Organisation, Role and Leadership of the Chinese Regional Bishops' Conference (CRBC) in Taiwan

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Divine Providence

The Chinese Regional Bishops' Conference (CRBC) is the only Chinese-speaking episcopal conference in the Catholic Church, that is, it is composed of several diocesan bishops in a particular territory, while other Chinese-speaking dioceses are individual dioceses. We can attribute the existence of the CRBC to Divine Providence, for without the Communist Party, there would not have been a large exodus of Chinese and foreign clergy and religious congregations who were forced to leave the mainland and come to Taiwan to continue their mission. They established the local Church in Taiwan according to Church tradition and rules. An episcopal conference was formed with seven dioceses, and on April 11, 1967, the "Chinese Bishops' Conference" was officially instituted in Taiwan.

As the name implies, members of the original Bishops' Conference were all from the mainland. With the development of local politics, the name was changed to "Chinese Regional Bishops' Conference" (in Chinese 天主教會臺灣地區主教團 or the "Catholic Bishops' Conference of Taiwan") on December 2, 1998. Today, the CRBC consists of local-born bishops who manage seven dioceses, namely Taipei (Archbishop John Hung, SVD, 洪山川總主教), Hsinchu (Bishop John Baptist Lee 李克勉主教), Taichung (Bishop Martin Su 蘇耀文主教), Chiayi (Bishop Thomas Chung 鍾安住主教), Tainan (Bishop Bosco Lin 林吉男主教), Kaohsiung (Archbishop Peter Liu 劉振忠總主教), and Hualien (Bishop Philip Huang 黃兆明主教). Each bishop chairs a CRBC commission that

corresponds to the ecclesial goals and activities of a congregation or diocese of the Holy See—to fulfil the evangelising mission of the Church in the local place.

In addition to their own characteristics in language, culture, ethnicity and geographical environment, each parish develops its own social service undertakings, such as schools and hospitals. For over 10 years, long-term care centers for the elderly have also been flourishing. Therefore, compared with other Chinese-speaking local churches, it can be said that the CRBC enjoys relatively more resources, including personnel. Certainly, the burden of administrative management is heavier. But this is exactly the reason why CRBC's experience in Church management is worth studying by other Chinese-speaking churches. In an evangelising country, a local church cannot simply rely on parishes or religious congregations to remain in contact with local people, not to mention the fact that most Taiwan people have their own religious traditions with a long history or faith life for generations. It is necessary to evangelise in different ways that meet the physical, mental and spiritual needs of the local people in modern times and in keeping with government legislation. The content of the Gospel of Jesus Christ never changes (cf. Mt. 24:35), but the way to convey the salvation of Jesus Christ, the truth of salvation, should keep pace with the changing times. (cf. Mt. 10:1, 8)

A little seed in the Chinese-speaking Church

Some Catholics think that the bishops' conference is like a humanitarian organisation of the local church tasked with solving the problems that clergy and laypeople are unable to handle. In fact, the bishops' conference is an administrative unit of the Church—a foundation registered in accordance with the national law, thus its industrial relations and finances are subject to supervision by the government – with bishops across the country taking part in the discussion and handling of national church affairs. Usually it meets twice a year in spring and autumn. Its source of funding comes entirely from the generous benefactors and the selling of some church publications by the bishops' conference. Under the bishops' conference there is a secretariat, which is responsible not only for

preparing the biannual Plenary Assembly and implementing its resolutions, but also supervising commissions headed by the bishops and the operations of their staff, and providing the services they need, in order to help the commissions give their best performance to accomplish their unique mission.

As St. Paul the Apostle said, "As a body is one though it has many parts, and all the parts of the body, though many, are one body, so also Christ." Although each commission of the bishops' conference has different working plans every year, there is only one ultimate goal, which is to fulfill the evangelising mission of Christ. That is why as the Chinese clerics serving in the CRBC Secretariat slowly becoming fewer, gradually replaced by laypeople, the Secretariat is the only working community of the Church in Taiwan where its paid staff begins each day's work for God with a Mass, in an effort to maintain coherence and unify the disparate nature of the works of CRBC through a common goal and the common faith among the staff.

Catholics account for one percent of Taiwan's population of 23 million, while the social enterprises managed and run by the local churches make up more than half of the country's total. Although the CRBC Secretariat takes care of general administrative work, because administrative talents are few in the Church and the amount of work disproportionate, the work of CRBC often gives an impression of being "fast and highly difficult", especially when there is important news related to the universal Church, such as the Sino-Vatican agreement, or major events in the country, from disaster relief to national Church news, such as the CRBC's *ad limina* visit to Rome in 2018.

In recent years, owing to media development and the rapid dissemination of information, the Secretariat also has to present or clarify the position of the CRBC on certain social issues at once. Indeed, history is a testimony: only through the guidance of the Holy Spirit, sharing the same faith and communion with the Pope, and also fidelity of the CRBC working team to the Church teaching and the hierarchy, could the CRBC make the right decisions, comfort people, or help people get through the maze in unforeseen circumstances, or in case of crisis management (cf. Lk. 21:14). It can be seen from different staff members of the CRBC that, serving in the Church is also a kind of calling. The person who is called

should have faith, and is also required to receive professional training with their own working skills, to build the Church of Christ and through this to sanctify themselves.

Taiwan is not large, and the CRBC on this small island is more like the mustard seed mentioned in the Gospel (cf. Mt. 13:31-32). Because of its small number of people, simple organisation, no political interests so to speak, often lacking resources, but always adhering to the spirit of the Second Vatican Council, it is easier to open itself to the outside world, cooperate with other Christian denominations, dialogue with other religions in the country, and follow the Holy See. In order to translate important documents issued by the Pope, the Synod and the Vatican dicasteries into Chinese in time, the CRBC with two other local churches of Hong Kong and Macau formed the "Chinese Regional Bishops' Conference Vatican Documents Chinese Translation Cooperation Team". It aims at translating important documents of Pope Francis and the Vatican Curia into Chinese in a short period of time, so that the Chinese-speaking church communities elsewhere can keep in touch with the pontiff and the universal Church, and through this to promote the communications between all Chinese-speaking churches and the universal Church in matters concerning important evangelising and pastoral issues.

In the last few years, in collaboration with other religions including Protestants, Buddhists and Taoists, the CRBC organised different kinds of events such as international conferences and symposiums. CRBC even accompanied some of them to Rome to have an audience with the Pope. These activities are supported by the Holy See and sponsored by the Government. The quality and religious meaning of these exchanges are also enhanced by the sincere dialogue among the participants. This shows how religious freedom is important to local churches. If religious communities enjoy religious freedom, the nation and the people could reap great spiritual benefits. CRBC values and treasures religious freedom.

Both the State and the Church exist for the people. Each has its own domain: the State has to further the well-being of their citizens in this world, while the Church is to bring eternal life to the people. If the Church and the State can mutually understand and respect each other, ultimately it is the people who will benefit, and society will become more stable as people enjoy freedom of religion. What

the CRBC could give to the government is far beyond its scale: the different commissions of the CRBC are like mustard seeds in the Gospel (cf. Mt. 13:31-32), which grow up, sprout and localise in the soil of religious freedom, in such a way as to serve the local people and to help people build a future of peace and justice, which becomes an invaluable asset of the country.

A traffic light on the ethical road

Localisation of the Church is more than using a common local language to express faith in liturgies. Thanks to God, this basic objective has already been achieved through the hard work of priests from the mainland with their deep faith and profound knowledge (e.g., Rev. Zhao Yi Dan 趙一丹神父, (d. 17 December, 2015, who devoted his whole life to studying liturgy and translating liturgical books). And now, the Church has to further integrate the Christian faith we are to proclaim into the daily life and culture of the local people, so that they are also able to receive the light of faith that shines from within, to encounter salvation, and through the Church return to one God, the creator of all nations (cf. Lk. 5:4). This is a long and rugged process indeed.

When the Church proclaims Jesus Christ as the Saviour of mankind, if the Church remains faithful to the teachings of Christ, when carrying out His mission, the Church will certainly reflect certain characteristics of the Saviour, such as compassion, caring for the weak and the poor, guiding people towards goodness....Traditionally perceived as characteristics of the Christian faith, these values are reflected in various social service projects of the local Churches in Taiwan, and continue to adapt, according to the modern ways of life and the needs of the society, such as in providing long-term care services or other physical and spiritual care for cognitively impaired elderly in an aging society.

Like churches in other Asian countries, the CRBC is also carrying out its various tasks in a pluralistic society. The diversity of a democratic country can also be expressed in its social life and political culture, and can even become an agenda raised by political parties during times of election. Since 2013, “diversified family formation” and “marriage equality” have come to be a political

force in Taiwan. This has led to elected rulers' championing the revision of "Civil Law,"¹ to change the definition of marriage as that between a man and a woman, in order to show respect for a group of minority with same-sex orientation in the society; at the same time they seek to force the implementation of "gender equality" education in schools, thereby affirming the same legal status of homosexual and heterosexual relationships and its rationality. This, however, also caused fragmentation of the society and deepened political opposition.

On November 22, 2016, during its Autumn Plenary Assembly, the CRBC officially released a statement to defend the marriage of a man and a woman from the Christian perspective.² People inside and outside the Church reacted differently. Some thought that the Church is ancient, conservative, inhuman, and indifferent to the minority with same-sex orientation.

In mission territories, if the Church is to expand and the number of faithful grows, it is usual to gain recognition of the general public and as much as possible, to fulfill the needs of non-believers. Nevertheless, on ethical issues, such as marriage and family, or life and death, the Church often acts contrarily, insisting on her own position of faith and becoming the mainstay. The only reason is that the Church has to preach the constant teachings of Jesus Christ (cf. Hebrews 13:8; Mt. 28:20). While preaching the teachings of Jesus Christ, the words of the CRBC also need to clarify some truth in the Christian faith as the absolute (cf. Mt. 24:35). Like traffic lights, they signal red lines that should not be crossed in the journey of life, or the consequences would be unthinkable (cf. Mt. 7:26).

Besides marriage and family issues, the CRBC remains faithful to the Church's magisterium, in its obedience to the Pope, and also in cooperation with the Holy See, by implementing the decisions of each Synod, participating in meetings of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conference (FABC), World Youth Day,

¹ Civil Code §972 was amended from "the male and the female parties" to "by the two parties." The age of betrothal and of marriage at ages 17 and 18 respectively was made uniform for both males and females.

² <https://www.catholic.org.tw/law972/announcement-crbc-20161123.pdf>

International Eucharistic Congress, and through the formation of mainland priests and nuns in Taiwan.... On these matters, the CRBC has spared no effort to become a living stone in the body of Christ, and to promote unity of the Chinese-speaking Church.

Defend the Definition of Life

The Eastern culture has been very respectful of life since ancient times. It is no exception in Taiwan. However, because of the temptations brought by material affluence and rapid social development, the tradition of respecting life is seriously threatened by economic pressure. As a result, the purpose and value of human existence are increasingly defined by one's productivity and "usefulness"; for economic reasons, many people do not get married, marry late or choose not to have children. This has become a common way of life in Taiwan society, and seriously influences the young generation. This leads to an aging society, and the increasing number of elderly patients is causing economic burden on the government.

On January 6 this year, the Taiwan government officially started implementing the "Patient Autonomy Act." This gives rights to citizens above 20 years old or who are married to make an advance decision with the consent of family members, regardless of the cause rendering someone in a permanent vegetative state or severe dementia, to demand that the medical institution or physician "partially or fully terminate, withdraw, or withhold life-sustaining treatments, artificial nutrition and hydration."³

The CRBC (Radio Veritas Asia, Chinese Section) produced a video⁴ before the "Patient Autonomy Act" came into effect, and published related documents issued by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith as a special edition of its Bulletin,⁵ for

³ *Patient Right to Autonomy Act*, §14;

<https://law.moj.gov.tw/ENG/LawClass/LawAll.aspx?pcode=L0020189>

⁴https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=%E7%9C%9F%E7%90%86%E9%9B%BB%E5%8F%B0+%E5%AE%89%E6%A8%82%E6%AD%BB, and <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iGBHDpMoIII&t=34s/>.

⁵http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20070801_risposte-usa_en.html

Catholics and non-Catholics to freely request or download online.⁶ The Apostolic Letter *Salvifici Doloris* (On the Christian Meaning of Human Suffering) of Pope John Paul II was re-published,⁷ and the CRBC planned to organise regional and international seminars this year, to help people understand the true meaning of human life and human dignity given by God from the Christian perspective even whilst social media is actively promoting the "Patient Autonomy Act". The CRBC also introduces hospice care system in Catholic hospitals which helps to protect the life and dignity of patients in a society ravaged by secularism.⁸

Though the Catholic Church in Taiwan is small and cannot form a force in mass media or the political circle to directly influence the government or people, messages of the CRBC, especially regarding ethics and morality, are heeded and consulted by other religious groups (cf. Ps. 32(33): 16-17).

When Jesus Christ was preaching, he was already subject to "the temptation of the Messiah," which means people were forced to accept the Gospel through political power or means. But he always avoided being exalted, and always retreated to pray alone in the wilderness. He trusted God; he only appealed or invited people to accept the Good News of the Kingdom of God, to follow Him and to bear His cross with love, and at the end, he fully respected the free decision of each individual: Christian faith is not only based on the truth, but also based on individual freedom of choice. The CRBC plays a similar role in the Chinese-speaking Church. Public opinion or political pressure can affect the external actions of people, but cannot lead people's hearts towards the good. Instead, selfless messages and authentic actions can bring people's hearts closer to God and change their minds.⁹

⁶ <https://www.catholic.org.tw/crbc/7magazine/363.pdf>

⁷ http://w2.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_letters/1984/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_11021984_salvifici-doloris.html

⁸ <https://www.catholic.org.tw/crbc/6letter/crbc20191.pdf>

⁹ The word for repentance in Greek (*metanoia*) means "change of mind" (cf. Matt 4:17).

Conclusion

In a secular environment that is full of political opposition, relativism and wealth disparity, human life (from conception to natural death) is constantly threatened by secularism and individualism. The CRBC with limited means is willing to be the servant, the least (cf. Mt. 20:27). The CRBC only wants to speak up for Christ no matter in favourable or adverse circumstances (cf. 2 Timothy 2:4), dare to convey the Church teachings, especially those regarding ethics and morality, to tell people about the absolute good and evil of life, while not forgetting to dialogue with different people and groups in society, in order to help those who desire for ecumenism and unity and those who seek social justice and peace to turn to God, who is the source of human unity and world peace.

The breath of the Holy Spirit, comes and goes freely (cf. Jn 3:8). I implore the Chinese-speaking churches in other places to pray to the Virgin Mary, Mother of the Church and Queen of China, that she may accompany the Church of her Holy Son in Taiwan, to be like her, especially in these difficult times, in keeping close to our Lord, and so bring hope to the people of Taiwan to persevere.