
THE MISSION OF THE LOCAL CHURCH IN CHINA

SECTION VI. IS DIALOGUE POSSIBLE?

Angelo Lazzarotto, pime.

(This is the third and final extract from Angelo Lazzarotto's paper on China, presented at the Sedos Mission Research Seminar. Looking to the future he examines the possibility of dialogue with Rome and the need to elaborate new types of relationships. He sees that it is prudently possible to work towards the removal of old misunderstandings and to develop new understandings. He concludes with some positive proposals for ways in which the Church could contribute to China's future.)

In March 1980 an article signed "Dong Tai" appeared in the "People's Daily", analyzing various types of foreign press comments on the political developments in China and particularly on the so-called "demaoization process". The author dismissed the slanderous attacks coming from both the "soviet revisionists" and some "vicious imperialists". He then said that wrong comments also often came from journalists with a bourgeois view-point, as well as from some "self styled communists or radical leftists, who are unhappy about the overthrow of the gang of four". And he added: "Many writers in foreign countries or in Hong Kong are our friends and they say some things which we do not say. It won't hurt us to listen to them".

Nobody can blame the Chinese Christians for being rather sensitive to comments made by outsiders on problems regarding their situation. My only claim to speak my mind on this difficult matter is the conscience of doing it as a friend. And I hope the remarks made in this paper may be perceived as coming from a friend, even when something is said that may not conform with the official statements there.

Foreign Catholics consider that they have a duty to express their concern about the fate of believers in China, particularly of people who share the same faith in God and in Christ. They feel that through a fruitful dialogue in which both sides can give and receive, they may be able to understand better the reality of Chinese society and perhaps contribute to building bridges of friendship and cooperation among peoples of different cultural and social background. A true Christian in fact cannot be purely interested in the welfare of his brothers in the faith; he must have at heart the prosperity and progress of all people. But first of all we consider of great importance to be able to communicate with our Chinese Catholic friends on the common issue of our faith.

DIFFICULT ROLE OF OFFICIAL STRUCTURES

Will such a dialogue become possible in the new Chinese political climate? Bishop Zhong Huaide was quoted at the opening of the 3rd congress of the PACC, as crediting the Association with "efforts to develop friendly contacts with Catholic figures of foreign countries", adding that it "had received foreign bishops and Church members" ("Xinhua", 22 May 1980). On the other hand the "open letter" issued at the end of the congress repeatedly denounces the "reactionary elements in certain Churches abroad, who rashly carry out destructive activities in order to control the Chinese Church, and are still able to confuse the thoughts of some people". Does this mean that the Patriotic Association aims at monopolizing and controlling all contacts with foreign Catholics and Churches abroad? If that was the case, I would consider it a great mistake. For two reasons.

First of all, our Chinese Catholic friends would be deceiving themselves if they thought that the PACC, with the image it has created for itself in the past through an attitude of outright confrontation with the Holy See and the rest of the Catholic world, was the right instrument for building up good will and friendship towards China. As things are today, it might be better if contacts with "Catholic figures of foreign countries" and particularly "foreign bishops" were left to the newly established "Chinese Catholic Bishops Conference" or to the "Church Affairs Committee", dropping the political overtones which have so far characterized the pronouncements of the Association: most Catholic representatives from other Churches cannot accept the confusion of politics and religion prevailing so far.

The second reason comes from a consideration of facts. Chinese leaders are today stressing again the principle that truth must be proved by praxis. A realistic approach could be a good guiding principle also in re-evaluating the current religious policy. Innumerable accounts by overseas Chinese visitors confirm the sincere attachment of the Catholics to their faith, while they contribute with loyal dedication to the progress of their country. One of the most remarkable facts emerging today in China appears to be the new sense of maturity and self-confidence expressed by most Catholic communities (and it would perhaps be more correct to say Christian communities in general).

The tremendous trials they had to undergo in the past, particularly under the rule of the ultra-leftists radicals, brought many of them to experience the inexplicable peace and inner strength and joy which Jesus promised to those who accept to carry the cross out of love of God. These Christians, through suffering that tended to separate them and to destroy their faith, have developed a deeper sense of belonging, a greater confidence in the power of prayer, a remarkable sense of values. The great majority of these Catholics, having learned the hard way to be true to their conscience and to treasure what really matters in life, show clearly that they are not prepared to forego important points of the faith and the tradition they have inherited.

People returning from home visits in rural areas of the Mainland confirm the unshaken devotion prevailing among the overwhelming majority of Catholics they met, to the "Holy Father", the Pope in Rome, who is seen as a symbol and rallying point for their faith. In union with the faithful of all nations, Chinese Catholics consider him as the legitimate successor of the Apostle Peter, to whom Jesus entrusted the universal care of his Church (Mt. 16,18; Jo.21,17). They do not find any incompatibility in this stand with loyalty to their country, convinced that it would never interfere with their duty as good citizens. Moreover, they cannot accept the implication that adhering to the Patriotic Association is to be considered a sign of greater love for the country: they simply do not feel that they were aptly represented by them.

Only taking into account this new situation, one can explain certain clear positions taken recently by local Catholic communities in some parts of China, like the refusal to attend Mass or to receive the Sacraments from priests or bishops who had married, or to accept the religious leadership of people who, though "waving the patriotic banner", had in the past gained positions for themselves through denunciations and false accusations of other members of the faithful. It would indeed be naïve to attribute similar unconventional facts to "destructive activities" of some "reactionary elements in certain Churches abroad". It rather happened that overseas Catholics, wishing to contact and greet old friends who had become exponents of the PACC, were often dissuaded from doing so by their families, in their home villages or cities.

Nobody could induce so many people of all walks of life to stick out their necks, after the terrible experience of the past 30 years. Facing these facts squarely, the only logical conclusion the authorities concerned could draw is that the Chinese Catholics are determined to remain truly Catholic, keeping the legitimate beliefs and traditions common to the whole Catholic family around the world.

A CHURCH STUCK IN THE PAST?

Foreign tourists attending Mass in China today are easily tempted to cast a negative judgement on what appears to be a stifling pre-Vatican Council II liturgical atmosphere. I think they are wrong. They forget perhaps that, while the Council was still in progress, Chinese society was undergoing a thorough campaign of "socialist education" which muffled all other cultural expressions. Then the Cultural Revolution's deluge came. The Nan Tang cathedral, reopened in November 1971, was the only one in service in the whole country until the autumn of 1979.

Unchanged liturgy? In this context, keeping the Tridentine liturgy may rather be seen as an effort to preserve the proper identity of the Catholic community. In fact, the priests following the official line would find themselves in a peculiar position with regard to the liturgy. On the one hand, the logic of the often repeated self-administration principle would push them towards an autonomous choice of language and rites. On the other hand, these Church leaders appear as conscious as the grass-roots faithful of the danger of moving further off on a road of unilateral differentiation from the universal Church.

Prevented for so many years by divisive tactics in a tightly controlled society from consulting one another, most priests and Catholics felt compelled to stick firmly to the concrete expressions of the faith handed down from the past. There has been no time for free theological debates, nor opportunity for sharing and profiting from the experiences of local Churches in other parts of the world, which are trying to implement the Vatican Council's renewal.

It is for a rather different reason that one gets the impression, in China, of a Church stuck in the past. Whenever the spokesmen of the official Catholic structure touch on the vexing question of the relations of the Chinese Church with the rest of the Catholic world and with Rome, they seem unable to go beyond a bitter negative reading of history.

Missionary effort of the past: The whole missionary effort is seen only in the light of the "imperialistic aggression" from the Western world, although they concede sometimes that among the foreign missionaries there were good friends of China. Church historians today would acknowledge with regret that missionary activity in the past century was to a great extent caught in an unhealthy confusion of roles. The bitter fruits of past shortsighted strategies are all too obvious. But world history is marching on and new situations have developed on which to build the future. To justify the decision taken 23 years ago to elect and consecrate their own bishops for the Chinese Church, it was repeated that at the time of the "liberation" the Church in China was still in a semi-colonial stage, with "over 90% of the bishops" being foreigners. This reason was given again on the occasion of the "autonomous" consecration of Bishop Michael Fu Tieshan of Peking ("Xinhua", 20 December, 1979).

Lack of "indigenization": It is only fair to acknowledge the unduly slow pace of the "indigenization" process of the Chinese Church before 1949. Unbiased historical research would however show that this was not due to any anti-Chinese attitude on the part of the Holy See. One would find in this situation a series of human factors, among which unfortunately we have to acknowledge a high-handed paternalistic attitude on the part of some long-established religious orders and missionary groups. Re-appraising today these past developments, one might speak of a lack of maturity in the old missionary world in general. Certainly, some prophetic voices were not enough, unfortunately, to bring about the deep renewal of the evangelization methods that would have been necessary. However, in the past few decades, particularly since the 2nd Vatican Council, the missions all over the world have experienced a dramatic change. Just as China has dramatically changed since 1949.

It would therefore be important not to build a useless confrontation on the past, but rather concentrate efforts on seeking new solutions for the future.

NEED FOR A NEW TYPE OF RELATIONS

When asked by foreign friends whether and how they might be helped, Chinese Christians, both Protestant and Catholic, often reply: "Just keep your hands off". Then, in the same breath, they may simply add: "We need

understanding, friendship, a new type of relationship...". I think this should not be dismissed as a "boutade", but taken seriously. Christians in China surely do not need any help offered in a superficial, activist or paternalistic way. And we should, conversely, ask ourselves how we could be helped by them. Speaking about relations of Western Christians with the Christians in China at the Interchurch Center in New York in April 1979, prof. Zhab Fusan, deputy director of the Research Institute on World Religions in Peking and himself a Christian, stressed mutual understanding as "the most basic thing" ("China Notes", no.2, 1979, p.70). Western Christians need to make a serious effort if they wish to understand the complex reality in which their brothers live in the P.R.C. This may mean going beyond certain stereotyped pictures portraying their extraordinary Christian experience either all gloomy or all rosy.

An active and evangelizing Church: Considering the Chinese Church as a whole, all evidence points, as already mentioned, to the astonishing fact that it is an active and evangelizing Church. Although deprived of thousands of foreign missionaries and of most of its local priests, religious and lay leaders, it has developed a great capacity to witness and propagate the faith. This is surely not due to any organized plan to implement one of the "three autonomies". It is rather a gift of the Spirit of Christ, guiding its faithful followers.

Western Christians may benefit from fraternal contacts with the Chinese Church; they may learn to appreciate better the value of our common faith and its capacity to motivate life and endeavours under the social pressure of a materialistic society based on capitalism, considering how it helped our Chinese brothers in their own socialist environment. Although coming from different social realities, Western Christians talking with their Chinese friends should not hide their own convictions. Even when touching on hot issues, or in front of some personal expressions that appear at variance with what is normally considered the common deposit of faith, we should treasure any possibility to carry on a fruitful dialogue. What matters is that such dialogue be animated by respect and attention.

One Church: Knowing that the Holy Spirit is at work in every person who opens himself or herself to his guidance and grace, I think that it would be presumptuous for individual foreign Christians to pin "a priori" a label on their Chinese fellow believers, and also to judge too lightly their stand with regard to the challenges confronting them. It would be dangerous trying to classify them according to our own categories or even according to normal standards of ecclesiastical discipline and Canon Law. It might be more constructive to work on the assumption that Catholics in China want to have but one Catholic Church. Even Western friends who insist on speaking of the patriotic movement among the faithful as if it was a "Patriotic Church" of its own, should thank God that most of these Catholics also appear determined to keep the basic common heritage: faith, sacraments, episcopal structure, priesthood, prayer life...

The Chinese Church, on the other hand, as any other local Church, could not afford to stand by itself in isolation from the rest of Christianity. Our Chinese friends, after all these years, would find direct contact with new pastoral experiences of other local Churches encouraging and enriching. They would be able to discover, for instance, that the principle of self-administration is being implemented in a number of ways

by many local Churches. Some visiting Third World bishops or lay leaders could share precious experiences on how their own local Churches are struggling to find a way of living and presenting the common faith that, while remaining the same, may be deeply embedded in their own culture. This could prove a mutually enriching exchange.

Self-financing: As for any offer of material help, Chinese Christians are likely to answer politely that all their needs are already met: in fact, besides the money made available by the Government through unfreezing and returning the rent of the Church buildings taken over in the past years, the Chinese faithful themselves are proving most generous towards their priests and the upkeep of Church buildings. This policy (of self-financing of the Church) corresponds to the official stand of the country, born out of a past experience in which financial or material help from abroad appeared to be always connected with a dependence on foreign interests. This attitude is not likely to change till, not only the Chinese Church authorities, but the Government authorities as well are convinced that a new relationship of equality and mutual respect, based on the principle of reciprocity and not on paternalism or disguised interests, is established.

VII. FACING THE FUTURE

In June 1980, soon after the PACC congress, Bishop Fu Tieshan of Peking was interviewed by the correspondent of "Ansa" news agency on the situation of the Church in China. With regard to relations with Rome, the bishop acknowledged that the question is "very complex". Then, echoing what Xiao Xianfa had just said at the PACC meeting, he added that it is now up to the Vatican to make concrete proposals to bridge the gap. The Chinese Church, he specified with a characteristic Confucian touch, does not intend to be considered the son on whom other Churches exercise authority as the father does.

Up to the Vatican to make proposals?: It is difficult to imagine what kind of initiative by the Holy See might effectively help to solve the existing difficulties. It can be assumed that two different levels of action have to be considered. A spokesman for the PACC, commenting on the appeal made by Pope John Paul II on 19 August 1979 for direct contacts with the Church in China, noted that the Vatican is a government as well as the centre of the Catholic Church, adding that if the Chinese Government normalizes its relations with the Vatican, contacts between Rome and Chinese Catholics might follow (UPI, 20 August 1979). Since then, no indication was given that such normalization might be forthcoming; Hua Guofeng, in an interview with the press before his visit to Europe at the end of 1979, pointed to the fact that "the Vatican still has relations with the Kuomintang in Taiwan, which has a so-called ambassador there", as a major obstacle to such normalization ("Xinhua", 7 October 1979).

In the spring of 1980 a surprise invitation was issued by the Chinese authorities to Cardinal Etchegaray of Marseille and Cardinal Koenig of Vienna to visit China (as foreign friends, not as representing the Vatican).

Speaking to the press in Peking, Cardinal Koenig said that "for the moment it seems to me that China is not yet ready for official relations with the Vatican" (UPI, 13 March 1980, quoted also by the communist press).

Links with Taipei the problem? The fact that since 1952 the Vatican maintains a direct diplomatic link with the Taipei Government has been often given as the cause of all difficulties of the Catholics in the continent. The fate of all other believers in China during the past decades proves this assumption wrong. As for the future, it is not at all certain that the main problems would disappear, if only the Holy See would decide to break off diplomatic relations with Taipei. Leaving it to better informed people to speculate on such a thorny subject, it is fair to note that when formal diplomatic relations were established in 1946, it was not the specific government or the political regime of that time that was sanctioned. Diplomatic relations were simply set up between the Holy See and China. The efforts of the Papal Inter-nuncio A. Riberi to remain in the Mainland after the Kuomintang Government had fled, should not be lightly dismissed. Those efforts failed for a number of reasons, which should be studied in a more impartial way than has often been done up to now.

In the past 25 years it has become evident that the Vatican never endorsed the "theory of two Chinas". On the other hand, Pope Paul VI in his address to the general assembly of the United Nations made a clear appeal for the admission of the PRC to UNO, and on 6th January 1967 expressed the desire "to speak of peace with the leaders of continental China" ("L'Osservatore Romano", 8 January 1967). Vatican diplomacy has been accused of ambiguity on this issue. Today, with Peking set to solve in a "peaceful way" the "Taiwan problem", it should not be impossible to find an acceptable solution. Yet, this diplomatic complication adds a sense of urgency and frustration to all efforts at dialogue with the Chinese Church, as it can be assumed that the Peking authorities will continue to bargain tenaciously before making any concession to the Catholics.

An acceptable solution? The common interests of the two parties coincide only to a limited extent. The Peking Government, following its international opening to the West, cannot discount the weight of the moral authority enjoyed by the Holy See, and particularly by the present Pope. In their global diplomatic strategy, a Vatican link may be considered positive; but their immediate concern appears to be with the unacceptable presence of a second "Chinese embassy" in Rome. The Holy See, in the diplomatic relations and in the formal contacts with the leaders of different countries, envisages a means to contribute to world peace and to the solution of common problems.

Diplomatic links without the assurance of an acceptable measure of religious freedom, including some direct contacts with the Church in the country, would have no meaning for the Holy See. Therefore, Rome is unlikely to take any diplomatic initiative unilaterally, without a specific pledge in this sense from Peking. The Holy See is obviously afraid also of the reaction that an untimely diplomatic move might have on the fate of the Catholic communities which in recent years have developed with considerable freedom in Taiwan. On the other hand, a Mainland priest commented sadly on this difficult issue: "It may be all right for the Vatican to be concerned

with the few hundred thousand Catholics of Taiwan. But why shouldn't it have the same concern for the over three million Catholics who live here? Time may be running out, unless some bold solutions can be found..."

SEPARATION OF CHURCH AND STATE

In a regime claiming to be for the separation of Church and State, which is the correct dialectical relation between the political and the religious field? The government of the PRC for historical reasons considers the existence of the Catholic Church, besides the Protestants, as a reality to be "protected". The authorities should then realize that their present position, with regard to the Catholic Church and to the acceptance of the spiritual role of the Pope, tends to evolve necessarily to certain consequences. The logical conclusion of the present "independent" trend is in line with what happened in the XVI century in England, that is a sort of "Church of China" dropping out of the Catholic community of Churches united with Rome. In fact, if ever the Catholic Church in China declared itself formally separated from the Holy See, it would necessarily cease to be part of the one "Catholic communion" as it exists in the whole world. This would be a disastrous event from the religious point of view, at a time when the whole Christian world is slowly walking back on the road to unity.

But this matter deserves also the attention of the Chinese authorities. A formal break of the Chinese Catholics with the Holy See would in fact defeat the purpose intended by the Government in the present "policy of religious freedom", of allowing also the "Catholic Church" to exist. Keeping the old name would not be enough to cover the reality of a schismatic stand.

The role of the Pope: The basic question is obviously the following: is it possible for the Pope to exercise any religious authority over the local Churches of a specific country without seeming to interfere in the internal matters of that country? Concretely, the first big problem that arises in this connection refers to the right to choose the bishops for the Chinese Catholic Church. The government wants, understandably, to have certain guarantees on this matter. Church history offers examples of special "privileges" enjoyed by secular powers in the past; and there is the tradition of the Oriental Churches, where the elections done by the local Catholic communities are presented to the Pope for approval. Along the same lines, a compromise solution might be found for China also, provided the Government does not expect to impose its own choices on the Church; obviously, the Holy See would also have to agree not to favour persons who are likely to build up a systematic confrontation.

In order to facilitate the desirable dialogue, it was suggested that the Holy See should volunteer to extend its recognition to the Chinese "patriotic" bishops elected and consecrated in defiance to the praxis established by Canon Law. Obviously, the question cannot be treated from a purely juridical point of view. One delicate aspect of the question is this: the great majority of the faithful, who for many years suffered for their loyalty to the Holy See, should not feel that their genuine faith was a waste or that they are now "sold out" for political considerations. This concern is strongly felt in large sectors of Western Christianity,

Profession of faith and patriotism: We are faced once again with the wider question of the possibility for a Catholic to combine the profession of sincere patriotism and of his whole faith. In particular; is it possible for the Chinese bishops to be considered truly patriotic and at the same time live in communion of faith and ecclesiastical discipline with Rome and with the rest of the Catholic world?

It is to be hoped that during their recent visits to China Bishop G. Moser of Rottenburg and the two cardinals were given the opportunity to explain what are their own experiences in this matter. Perhaps even more revealing would be the experience of some bishops of countries like Jugoslavia or Poland, where a constructive though not always easy dialogue between the Socialist Governments and the Church has led to some acceptable "modi vivendi". The example of Vietnam may be also revealing: Cardinal Trinh van-Can from Hanoi and the other Vietnamese bishops are allowed to a certain extent to communicate with Rome; they have in fact been able to go to Rome again recently for their formal "ad limina" visits to the Pope, and they had representatives at the Episcopal Synod in October 1980. In a speech to a group of them on 11 December, 1980 John Paul II recommended: "show more and more how much you love your country". At the same time he said: "Remain with the Pope, whatever may happen. 'Effective and affective' communion with Peter's Successor is the 'sine qua non' condition of unity among you, unity that the people vitally needs".

Against any form of colonialism: One Catholic bishop (appointed by the Patriotic Association) told me one day: "Chinese Catholics feel the need to openly declare themselves against any form of colonialism. This, of course, applies also to Church life. We cannot tolerate to be treated by Rome or by other Churches as minors. It must be proved that it is possible to establish new relations with the Chinese Church on the basis of friendship and equality". To make his thought more clear, he then jotted down on a piece of paper a few characters: "It is necessary to respect the country's independence; respect the dignity of the Chinese people; overcome colonialistic attitudes; outgrow a 'father-son' relationship, in favour of fraternity and equality". Going beyond the polemic tone, these present "needs" of the Church in China do not seem to be much at variance with the new style of work which the central structures of the Church are developing since the Vatican Council II, in the "service of unity".

"Atheistic materialism": To clear the ground of the main causes which led to conflict in the past, another point should be mentioned, that is the long standing condemnation by the Holy See of the atheistic materialism upheld by communism. The complaint of the authorities in the P.R.C. was that the papal representative and the bishops in China warning the Chinese Catholics to resist communism, did in fact incite them to oppose the newly established government and the cause of revolution, thus forbidding them to love their country. It would be worth studying in depth the historical evolution of that contrast, particularly in the first momentous ten years of the new People's Republic. On the other hand the Chinese authorities are consistent even today, underlying their atheistic stand. In this sense a deep contradiction between the official worldview and that of any religious believer in China is obvious. But here again, while studying past experiences, it is most important to consider future opportunities.

The Christian voices heard today in China seem to show no doubt about the gulf separating Marxism and Christianity. When challenged by some Western visitors about theological reflection on possible points of encounter, they seem to shy away from the issue, stating that they see a more urgent task in searching for ways of practical cooperation to solve the big issues of Chinese society and to contribute their share to the four big modernisations. The experience of the past has led both sides to a more realistic approach. The government, recognizing the fact that religion does persist within the Chinese society, is again enforcing his "long standing" policy of religious freedom.

It can be said that also the Catholic Church has learned to live with the reality of Marxist regimes in many parts of the world. Growing to a more mature attitude, most Catholic leaders insist now more openly than before on the duty of the faithful to shoulder wholeheartedly their responsibility towards their country.

Patriotism: Patriotism is clearly spelled out as a duty under whatever social system. As Pope John Paul II said on 7 September 1980, when expressing his joy for the release of Bishop Dominic Tang from prison: "While keeping the Catholic faith in the gospel, they (the Catholics of China) show at the same time love for their country and they work with greater good will for its prosperity. The Church in fact has always been anxious that her confessors should contribute to the good of each worldly country. We find proofs of this fact in the history of many peoples of the world. I, as a son of my own nation, know how much I owe my love for (my) country to the teaching of Christ and to the mission of the Church in the history of my nation" ("L'Osserv. Romano", 8/9 September 1980). The same concept was repeated by John Paul II when receiving the bishops of Taiwan in their "ad limina" visit on 11 November 1980 and those of Vietnam the following month.

In the present circumstances, a visit abroad and to Rome by some Chinese Catholic bishops would help assess the real dimension of the new atmosphere which has been developing since Vatican Council II and hopefully would offer the opportunity to bring back some new insights useful to make the dialogue progress.

THE IMPORTANCE OF ACADEMIC EXCHANGE

Will it be possible for the Church, in the new climate of China, to make its voice heard and to offer its contribution also to the solution of the big problems which are the concern of everybody today? In fact, Christians are upholding many of the values which the present Chinese regime underlines, like strong morality, honesty in private and public life, peace and social reconciliation, a healthy family, concern for the elderly, as well as obedience to public authorities and generous cooperation to building a stronger and better developed country. Today this opportunity is not offered, since the Christian Churches have only a token access to the public media and to the field of academic research. Yet, on several issues Christians also could contribute some constructive comments and suggestions for the common good.

Youth: There are the problems of youth. During summer 1980, Chinese newspapers were flooded by letters of young people discussing on the basic issues of human life. The debate had been sparked by the passionate personal account of a 23 year old girl, Pan Xiao, published by the official magazine of the Communist Youth League "China Youth" (May 1980).

The Church does not pretend to have any obvious answer to concrete problems. In fact, the new interest that many young people show for religion does not mean that they will be easily satisfied with the answers offered by the traditional apologetics. Their inquisitive mind and the rational approach to reality to which they have been introduced will certainly demand much reflection and perhaps a new presentation of the basic Christian truths. But their yearning for higher spiritual values underscores the shortsightedness of the policy enforced so far.

The prohibition to teach religion to people below the age of 18 is justified by the need to protect the immature mind of young people from the pernicious influence of "feudalistic superstition". This policy is backed up by the constitutional definition that "the guiding ideology of the P.R.C. is Marxism-Leninism-Mao Zedong Thought" (art. 2; see also art. 14, 16). The principle of "scientific materialism" has therefore permeated the entire Chinese educational system for the past three decades. Being considered an unquestionable scientific truth, necessary for everybody's life, it is to be taught as early as possible, in an exclusive way.

But the curious mind of China's youth, as that of many other countries, seems to grow more and more allergic to "dogmatic" affirmations. To be convinced of the scientific validity of Marxism they may need, more than protection against alien "poisonous thoughts", the possibility of testing its value against "praxis", that is against its historical accomplishments. Should such tests prove convincing, there would be no need to preclude the possibility of considering also the "religious hypothesis": a forbidden fruit looks always more attractive. As Zhou Enlai said already 30 years ago, why should anybody be afraid of letting people free to discover the truth by themselves?.

Birth control: Another big worry of the Chinese authorities is birth control, because of the tremendous problems posed by unchecked population growth. The small and scattered Catholic community has been particularly hard hit by the ruthless way in which the official policy was so far enforced, without any regard for personal moral objections. Considering that certain methods are strongly objectionable to Muslim national groups and to other religious people as well, it would be indeed very important to consider also all other means which are today available, to implement the national plan, without hurting the legitimate feelings of many people. A vast experience and scientific research has already been gathered to develop effective ways of family planning by natural methods: could this not be made available to the Chinese researchers and experts, to further study the issue for the benefit of mankind?

Superstition and science: Again, the Chinese authorities are understandably concerned about the rapid growth of crude superstitious practices. The Christian Churches are also convinced that superstition is a negative phenomenon, and are continually preoccupied to purify the faith of their followers of possible superstitious attitudes. Though this may sound strange to the common Marxist thinker, it has been a consistent fact in Church history and may also provide the opportunity of useful dialogue.

China is opening today to a wide exchange of scientific knowledge with the outside world. Although, obviously, the stress is on technology and other fields directly related to the "four modernizations", social sciences are not excluded. Moral issues which are of public concern in every society are now open to discussion also in China. Many scholarly journals are now produced in China on human sciences; most of them are available to the outside world, with the obvious understanding that scholarly exchange is possible and welcome. Among the Chinese researchers going abroad for further studies, quite a few are also concerned with a variety of human sciences. Prof. Ren Jiyu, director of the Peking Institute of Atheism and of the Institute for Research on Great Religions, spent one term in 1980 as Scholar in Residence at the Centre for Religious Studies in the University of Toronto. According to Prof. Zhao Fusan ("China Notes", XVII, no. 2 1979, p. 70), in the future there might be also the possibility of some foreign scholars studying at the Institute of World Religions.

World religions: Since the Institute for the Study of World Religions was established in 1978 at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in Peking, other Chinese centres of academic research have been encouraged to pursue studies in the field of religion. The one at Nanking is of particular significance, as it is the only one, so far, staffed by Christian scholars, formerly working at the (Protestant) Nanking Theological College. Incorporated into the Nanking University, for the past two years it has offered some lectures on the Bible and the origins of Christianity; the attendance was good in this experience, probably the very first for the whole of China, of letting university students approach the religious problem outside the official optical perspective.

Chinese scholars are today asking and hoping for more academic freedom to explore and communicate in all fields of scientific research. It is to be hoped that believers also may again be granted the possibility of entering the arena of current debates on vital human issues.

In the West, so far, hardly any serious effort was made to analyze the evolution of the Chinese marxist understanding of religion. The possibility of better defining the objective and positive value of the theistic interpretation of reality is crucial in present day China. It would be important indeed, if scientific contributions from Western scholars would take more seriously into consideration the problems confronting Chinese society and a dialogue could develop on issues of common interest. This would be a positive step towards understanding the basic needs of mankind, thus contributing also to world peace.

- end -

Congratulations to Sister Marion Carabott, a native of Malta, elected as Superior General of the White Sisters at their General Chapter now in progress.

THE S.V.D. IN MISSION TODAY

(Immediately following the Sedos Research Seminar on Mission, the Society of the Divine Word held a Seminar on "The SVD in Mission Today". This is the final document produced at the Seminar. We are grateful to the SVD for sharing it with us. Ed).

Introduction

The Risen Christ gives life in its fullness to the Church so that she may be the sign and instrument of the Kingdom of God in and to the world. Our Society sees its place within the Church as a special participation in this life-giving sending by Christ to all peoples. Mindful of the particular charism of our Founder and with prayer for the guidance of the Holy Spirit, we have tried to discern the signs of the times in order to discover those priorities that should govern our missionary work today.

Our conclusions are gathered under the following topical areas:

1. Above all, we commit ourselves anew to the universality of Christ for all peoples and for all times.
2. This universal mission demands dialogue with the peoples of other religions and cultures.
3. The Incarnation of the Divine Word inspires us to witness to the Gospel message in the historical-cultural context of those with whom it is shared.
4. As bearers of the "Good News to the poor" we commit ourselves to a preferential option for the poor and oppressed.
5. As members of a pilgrim Church we are called to a spirit of missionary detachment.
6. We see our own missionary vocation as part of the essential missionary nature of all the People of God.

I. UNIVERSALITY OF OUR MISSION

- 1.1. The SVD finds its identity and activity in a spirit of universality which emphasizes the world-wide mission of the Church to reach out to all peoples and celebrates the riches of their diverse cultures in a Church that is truly Catholic.

1.1.1. The identity includes:

- a) actualization of our Founder's charism, i.e. openness, listening, guidance by the Holy Spirit, Christ-centredness;
- b) internationality in personnel, engagement and outlook;
- c) mobility in answering urgent needs.

1.1.2. The activity includes:

- a) pioneering in frontier situations;
- b) promoting missionary dimension in the local churches;
- c) formation of engaged Christians, religious vocations, training of missionaries, and promoting world-wide responsibility in education programmes and through the choice of personnel.

These activities are part of our prophetic service as a religious, missionary society that reads the signs of the times. An overall sign of the time is a growing global cooperation of all peoples, without which the current forms of nationalism will continue to isolate men from one another and from sensitivity to responsibility for one another.

1.2. The stress on contextualization and inculturation should not let us forget our charism of universality. To correspond to this charism we must make the world-wide mission of the Church central to all the undertakings of our communities and members.

- a) Although we are committed to the local Church, this commitment should reach out to work that transcends the local churches; presenting the universal Church in local churches.
- b) We should re-examine our existing activities and be open to alternatives, such as the needs of refugees, migrants, foreign students. We encourage those engaged in such activities.
- c) We should foster international exchange among our members, both during formation and later. Nemi is a good opportunity to experience the universality of our society and of the whole Church.

II. MISSION IN DIALOGUE

As God has called all humanity to His Kingdom we believe that in our encounters with people of other faiths and convictions His love and grace precede us. Therefore we humbly seek to discover His particular presence among them as we witness to our own personal relationship with Him in Christ.

This belief of ours calls for a new emphasis on dialogue in our contact with all the religious traditions of humanity.

Among other things dialogue demands:

- 2.1. The search for the face of Christ in the spiritual heritage of peoples of other faiths in order to discover the as yet unknown fullness of Christ.
- 2.2. In our formation programmes all members be trained in an attitude of dialogue, that is, in the ability to listen to and learn from others as well as to articulate simply their own experiences of Christ. Such in-depth exchange will lead to fuller insight into God's presence in historical events as well as to on-going conversion of the partners in dialogue.
- 2.3. In areas where other religions predominate more members of our Society be provided with specialized training in order to carry on the dialogue at a deeper level.
- 2.4. Our attitude of dialogue will encourage the promotion of a positive and critical appreciation of the spiritual riches to be found in popular religiosity both within and without the Christian religion.
- 2.5. By cooperating in a dialogical attitude with the people of other faiths in facing the problems of the world, such as the devastation of the earth by careless waste and pollution and the spiritual impoverishment of certain scientific-technological modes of thought, we shall come to a deeper faith encounter with them.
- 2.6. We should consider the creation of missiological institutes and centres of encounter in various parts of the world.
- 2.7. Besides dialogue with people of other faiths, we also recognize the importance of other types of dialogue, particularly the privileged place of exchange and cooperation with our separated brothers and sisters in the Christian faith. Whenever feasible, particularly in and through our universities, dialogue should also be carried on with people who profess purely humanistic, even atheistic philosophies.

III. MISSION IN CONTEXT

In accordance with the principle of Incarnation and the reality of many cultures we recognize that the universal Church finds its expression in multiple and diverse particular churches. Being in the service of particular churches the SVD promotes pluriformity in theology, spirituality, formation programmes and structures.

In the same way this principle demands of each member of our Society continuous efforts to insert ourselves into the particular situation and group of people among whom we live and work and to relate this reality to the person and message of Christ who enlivens and judges all things. In this way the Society achieves authentic pluriformity.

Specifically:

- 3.1. Formation personnel should be trained as far as possible in the cultural context in which they will work.
- 3.2. Formation programmes should be rooted in the local cultures.
- 3.3. Short special courses should be offered to help members contextualize their work.
- 3.4. All existing institutes - especially Anthropos, universities and graduate schools - should re-evaluate their activities in the light of the need for contextualization.
- 3.5. Efforts should be made to avoid any harmful effects of imported structures and finance on local churches.

IV. . SOLIDARITY WITH THE POOR AND OPPRESSED

- 4.1. In a world deeply scarred by injustice and the dehumanization of the majority of mankind, our faith in Christ calls us to discover His presence among the poor and the oppressed and to work for the establishment of His kingdom through the healing of social relationships. To this end we commit ourselves to a preferential option for the poor and to social justice. This will lead us to a confrontation with sinful structures of social, cultural and economic oppression, a confrontation that will be guided by the Gospel principle of overcoming evil with good.
- 4.2. This commitment shall be realized by:
 - a) efforts towards the immediate amelioration of conditions of poverty;
 - b) the struggle against the structures of injustice and the denial of human rights;
 - c) by self-reflection on our own complicity in many structures of oppression;
 - d) by separating ourselves as far as possible from structures of injustice.
- 4.3. Where it promotes the Gospel principle of overcoming evil with good, we should carry out this commitment by cooperating with existing organizations working in this field.
- 4.4. As a Society we should make better use of the instruments already at our disposal.
 - a) In our publications and ~~communications media~~ we will focus on justice and peace issues.

- b) In all our institutes of education we will promote conscientization in this area; this applies both to the third world and to the first world.
- c) We should rethink what solidarity with the poor means for our life-style.

4.5. The Society should also take new initiatives:

- a) We should promote interest among all our members in economic, social, and political analysis. We should train also some experts.
- b) In line with the Gospel principle of overcoming evil with good, seminars for non-violent action should be organized to study the theological basis of and give practical courses in this strategy.
- c) In order to foster the Society's awareness and to encourage action in the various Provinces some office at the Generalate should be particularly responsible for the issues of justice and peace.

V. MISSIONARY DETACHMENT

5.1. Our Society should develop a spirit of flexibility and mobility. With the pilgrim Church we should not want to be settled, so that we may be alert to the signs of the times and to the promptings of the Holy Spirit.

5.2. We should give preference to frontier situations where there is genuine need rather than fill the gaps in already established institutions. As a result of continuous re-evaluation we will be ready to move on and to turn over well established institutions to others.

VI. MISSIONARY PEOPLE OF GOD

6.1. We affirm the Missionary vocation of all the People of God and promote their rightful place in the ministry of the Church.

6.2. In addition to promoting the full independent role of lay people in mission, we, SVD priests and brothers, should consider the possibility of integrating into SVD teams lay missionaries who wish to work with us.

6.3. We welcome the growth of Basic Christian Communities and will promote them in any way we can, particularly the training of leaders.

6.4. We will make positive efforts to encourage and train the laity to assume the whole range of tasks which belongs to their vocation of building up the Kingdom of God and the local ecclesial community.

Conclusion

The six priorities presented here represent the common concern of all eighteen participants, who come from fourteen countries of five continents. Such consensus provides some clear guidelines for the activities of our Society in the immediate and near future.

In addition to the above conclusions, several other important topics, such as cooperation with other Christian Churches and the challenge of an adequate apostolate among young people today, were not able to be discussed sufficiently to reach clear guidelines.

Perhaps the most significant mission however, was the issue of re-evangelization. This problem needs to be dealt with by some other group within the Society.

We trust that the work of this present commission will be of help not only to the groups working on the revision of the Constitutions, but will also find resonance among our confreres in all parts of the world and will be a source of encouragement to them as they meet the challenge of Mission today.

- end -

THE POPE'S MESSAGE TO AFRICA

Walbert Bühlmann, ofm-cap

(In the last issue of Sedos Bulletin (81. No. 11.) we printed a short evaluation of the Pope's visit to Africa by Walbert Bühlmann. In this and the following issue we give his analysis of the Pope's message to Africa as he traveled through the six countries selected for his African tour in May 1980.

Fr. Bühlmann has followed the missionary thinking of the Pope both before and since the special closed circuit television message broadcast direct from Rome to the missionary congress held in Knock, Ireland in 1979.

In the course of his visit to Africa the Pope gave seventy speeches. Here, Fr. Bühlmann attempts to single out the keynote ideas stressed by the Pope in these speeches delivered in the course of his visit. Ed).

...."The Pope made a remarkable effort at 'contextualization'. This is a term which expresses a concept preferred by the Association of Third World Theologians, founded in 1976. They are not looking for a "universal theology" but rather a "localized econtextualized theology" which announces the universal message in such a concrete context that it gives to a given people the light and understanding to change for the better their concrete situation.

It is clear that in each country the Pope wanted to develop in a particular manner an important principal idea, even if that was not intended exclusively for that country. It's easy then to find a principal idea for each city visited:

I. CHURCH AND AFRICANIZATION (KINSHASA)

In 1974 President Mobutu launched a campaign for "authenticity". At the Synod of Bishops in 1974, while the Latin American bishops were concerned with basic communities, the Asian bishops with dialogue, the African bishops gave their attention to the Africanization of Christianity. Since then the Zaire bishops in particular have stressed this and have put it into practice with the Zairean liturgical rites.

In his discourse to the bishops of Zaire the Pope developed this theme:

While the Gospel is not confined to any one culture, man is. "You wish to be at one and the same time fully Christian and fully African". True catholicity is attained in a reciprocal, universal exchange. It is up to the bishops to "promote and to guide developments in this domain". The Pope expressed his full confidence in the bishops.

Africanization should be achieved in theology, catechesis, liturgy, while guarding the 'substantial unity of the Roman rite', all being done in union with the local churches...and always with the agreement of the Holy See". So will be achieved, "the Catholic authenticity of the Church of Zaire... The Holy See does not take your responsibilities from you...rather it gives you new responsibilities."

One feels in these texts the tension inherent in this problem of inculturation. The pope said, "yes, yes...but". In theory all is clear, even if "it is the Holy See that must have the last word. But what will happen if the Holy See prefers unity (uniformity) to the needs of Africanization? The bishops will have to defend their point of view more strongly.

II. THE CHURCH IN A SOCIALIST COUNTRY (BRAZZAVILLE)

....In his two discourses to the people the Pope spoke only of the religious role of the Church and of Christians. In addressing the President he offered loyal cooperation and affirmed that "religious liberty is at the centre of respect for all freedoms".

The Pope didn't go into the problematic of the Church in an African Marxist-Leninist state. Was this because of lack of time or expressedly? It is more surprising that he spoke of Zimbabwe as a positive sign that "patient efforts can be founded on realistic hope". These "patient efforts" were full of violence and Robert Mugabe was commonly referred to as "that Marxist Mugabe" until the day of his victory. This question remains to be clarified.

III. THE CHURCH AND MISSIONARIES (KISANGANI)

In every country he visited the Pope recalled the missionaries as the first heroes. "They imitated the Fathers of the Church" (Kinshasa), "they built local churches" (to the people of Kinshasa), "they have still an indispensable role for the well appreciated services which they have given, and as witnesses of the universal church; they are an integral part of your church" (during the Mass at Abidjan).

It is interesting to note that the Pope stressed the idea of Ad Gentes (no. 20): the young churches must not only be the object of missionary activity, but the subject in their own countries and elsewhere. To the bishops at Kinshasa, "Become missionaries in your turn, in particular to other African countries". To the bishops of Ghana, "The missionary dimension must be developed with regard to the needs of sister Churches on the Africa continent and beyond".

- To be continued in Bulletin 81/No. 13 -

Reference: SMA, 47 - February 1981.

Because the human person is created
in the image of God and redeemed in Christ,
every individual has an inalienable dignity and worth.
