

CHALLENGES TO A NEW GENERATION OF CHURCH LEADERS

Rev. Paul WANG LiMin

Change, change, and more change, China is ever changing. In 2001 Beijing was selected to host the 2008 Olympics games. Immediately the whole country is excited about the decision. People are crying, smiling and shouting everywhere. In this moment, people are excited, happy, grieving, and expressing the belief of historical pressure. From 1949 to 1979, the Olympic movement developed slowly in China because of years of civil war, foreign aggression, weak national power and a sluggish economy. During this period people never felt that China would host the world sport events in any way.

Change, change, and more change, China is ever changing. To take a closer look at what has changed: In 1999, the GDP (Gross Domestic Product) was 1 trillion US dollars. In 1952, The GDP was only 8 billions dollars. The GDP growth rate in 1999 was 7.1%. In 1999, the annual per capita net income of rural residents was 280 US dollars (50 US Dollars in 1985). The annual per capita net income of urban residents was 733 US dollars (93 US dollars in 1985). Education: There are 104,250 Colleges, universities and high education institutions. There are 94 million college students. There are 300 million students in high schools, elementary schools and kindergartens. It has been a big change in China and it is continuing changing. However, at the same time, I can see people who dress up with an iron face without smiling, because they also need spiritual food.

Change, change, and more change, our church is changing. There were more than 12 millions Catholics among 1 billion people in China in 1999. There were only 3 million Catholics in 1949. In 1999, there are 138 dioceses, 114 bishops, 2,500 priests, 3,150 sisters, 2,350 seminarians and 2,560 novices. There are 5,000 Churches and Chapels. Because of the rapidly changing society, many problems have arisen. It puts heavy burdens on the church, particularly for the younger generations in the church today. (I can imagine that other religions are the same.)

As believers, we know that God created men and women to build families. St. Paul said, "Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ loved the church and gave himself up to her..." (Ephesians 5:25.) In the Catechism, # 1662 states, "Marriage is based on the consent of the contracting parties, that is, on their will to give themselves, each to the other, mutually and definitively, in order to live a covenant of faithful and fruitful love." In Chinese, we say, "Jia he wan shi xing -- harmony in family brings prosperity." Now, looking at the divorce rates in China, you will have a good idea of how much work the young priests and sisters have to do, and the challenge for our church. For example, in 1997, while, 9.1 million couples got married, but there was 1.2 million people divorced. In 1984, there were 8.3 million couples married and only 450,000 families formally split. (Around the Coalition -- Kevin Platt) the catholic families also follow this trend. Many bishops and priests feel a lot of pressure on this issue. Why has this problem risen up so rapidly? Did we (or how can we) counsel these people before the marriage? What can we do after the divorce? We almost do not know how to cope with this trend of divorce. There is no church court to conduct a trial for these problems in China. The divorced people might choose to leave the church or stay in the church as single people because they do not have any idea where they can get help to solve their problems. Sometimes, we feel guilty

because we did not help these broken families enough, or perhaps not at all. Other pressures are at work as well:

Pressure one: We know that we love God, our people, and our country. We left our families and desire to be the instrument of God. We enjoy leading people to work for peace, justice and to achieve the common good. I love looking at God's images through the people I served. Doesn't this mean that we love our people, and our country? Why do we have to join the CCPA (China Catholic Patriotic Association)? Can people get what they want after we join the CCPA? Why does some religious bureau force or beg clergies or ministers to become members of CCPA? In some places, lay people think that the CCPA members are betrayers in history. They killed priests in the past. As the young generation, we feel very challenged and have no answers when confronted by these arguments. The only answer is that this condition uniquely exists in my country; we have to carry it.

Pressure two: Why does the religious bureau need to control the procedures of selecting seminarians to get into seminaries? Some seminaries ask seminarians to hand in an approval letter from religious officers before they get into seminaries. Do they know that this letter sometimes costs a lot?

Pressure three: Before young priests were ordained, they might go to seminaries after they graduated from college, high school, or even elementary school. Not only teachers feel pressure to teach these sundry students, but some students also find it very hard to catch up the theology. Chinese theological books are scarce. Most of the professors are priests and they graduated from the same seminary. They too are struggling with what to teach and how to teach.

Pressure four: Most of sisters never have the chance to attend theological school. They might learn theology either by themselves or from the preaching of priests' or bishops'. Although the bishops and priests want to teach them, they are very busy administering sacraments and the church events. If they teach, the teaching shows pre-Vatican II thinking. When the young generations from our church look at the changing society, and their childhood friends, they need to learn how to balance of their faithful lives and the temptations from the changing world. This pressure can be unconsciously carried by so many of us. We need a good spiritual director. We have experienced the weakness of ourselves.

Pressure five: We do not have church schools except seminaries. We do not have large hospitals. We do not have any money-generating company. We need these institutions to help and educate people and ourselves spiritually and financially. Before we build up these institutions, we need to be trained and to obtain the expertise from somewhere else. The poor culture revolution (persecution) made a huge two generations gap. The younger generation feels very difficult to work with the older generation because of the different thinking.

Pressure six: One child policy has made many families struggle between their traditions and faith. The problematic thinking that boy is more valuable than a girl makes us feel difficult to preach. Can these people see the only child may become a little emperor in the family? They probably do. What is the moral standard for them to teach their children? To spoil children is not healthy. The traditional Chinese moral teaching of Ren, Yi, Li, Zhi, Xin almost have been pushed under the rug 25 years ago. The crime rate scars people. Our church teaches, "The natural law, present in the heart of each person and established by reason..." (Catechism: #1956) Everyone is the child of God. Church has the

responsibility to teach them the morality and to avoid committing crime. How much can we do for them in reality? We have no school, no institution, no books, even freedom.

Pressure seven: There were more than 600,000 people who carried HIV disease in 2001. If they cannot be controlled well, the number will go up to 10,000,000 in 2010. Some of them may be Catholics, how do we counsel them? We have the obligation to stand up and to ask people to accept them and take care of them. Also we need to learn more about this issue.

Pressure eight: Many people are addicted to drugs and alcohol. Can we help them freely? How do we start this ministry? Old generations of clergies are over 70 now and they feel tired, and yet the young generations of clergies are so young. There are thousands and thousands things are waiting for us to work on. We feel that a huge burden and guilty because we cannot do it all. Sometimes we even do not have freedom to do it, or we do not have the chance to do it. Facing these stresses, the Chinese church feels so heavy about this burden. Many young priests and sisters are living in depression, even major depression. Some of them left and got married. Some of them became heavy drinkers, eating disorder or smoking. They need a place to relieve the pressure. They need a spiritual director and counselor. We want to shout loudly: "Lor...d...we feel too much pressure...we cannot breathe, Lord...d...we suffer very much, Lor...d...please give us a hand, we feel drowned, Lor...d...we want to shout out as we win to host the Olympics games as on July 22, 2001.

Hope: I have some therapy suggestions for the people who need it from Chinese Church. 1) You need to talk to one another or with someone as best as you can. 2) To share your feelings with your friends and be conscious of why I feel this way and what I feel? 3) To build up in intimate relationship with God and people. 4) To be conscious that too much eating, drinking and smoking are kinds of diseases, and they need to do something else instead of seeking oral pleasure. 5) You have to try to think positively rather than negatively.

Hope: The stress truly exists in our church and is living with us. We hope that we can overcome them as we win Olympics games. First, our church itself must stop quarreling and achieve harmony; To study and learn forgiveness though we were wounded in the past. Second, the Chinese church must give a good education to the young generations, and must train lay people to serve church and society as missionaries if they want to. In short term, to serve Chinese people through Chinese would be a good idea. (I hope WTO structure can make Chinese people think that the value of globalism is much wider than only economic.) Third, Our church itself has to strive to look for opportunities in many areas, not just wait for them to occur. Our church should tell people who we are by serving them because many of them never heard the word of "God-Tian Zhu." Fourth, Matthew Rici would be a good example for us to follow, "I am the one to serve you. I am the one to become a member of your nation, your family. I am the one to help you live a good life materially and spiritually rather than I am going to convert you.

Thanks to Maryknoll and all theological schools throughout the country, you are educating us; you are nourishing the Chinese church. Please keep up the good work.