

THE CATHOLIC CHURCH IN CHINA

In an era of transition

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Introduction

When Sister Janet Carroll asked me to give this reflection on China, I reminded her that my role at the Holy Spirit Study Centre was administration and not research or writing, and that I really didn't know much about China. Having lived in Hong Kong, the doorstep of China for 40 years, which is now part of China, I am more and more convinced of how little I know about China. When I arrived as a young missionary in Hong Kong in 1959, I thought to myself: in a few years I will learn the Chinese language, live with the people and become a "native." What a dreamer! After 44 years, I have to admit I feel further away from that dream now than I did then. That's not humility; that's the truth. I feel the cultural gap a lot more now than I did then. China for me will always remain a mystery. As a consequence, and as a non-Chinese, I feel more and more reluctant to speak with any finality on China or the Church in China. Yet, from the vantage point of my long years in the midst of Chinese culture, I am not content with being only a disinterested observer. As China takes its responsible place on the world's stage, I feel the need to keep trying to understand the many facets of the mystery. And so I now take the liberty to express some of my observations.

The Church within the socio-economic reality

First of all, I don't think anyone can just start off by simply talking about the Church in China as though it were an isolated entity. To talk responsibly about the Church in China, I think it is essential to know something about what is happening in the country as a whole. That way we can see how the Church in China today fits into the whole picture. The Church in China, like the Church anywhere else in the world, does not exist in a vacuum. It moves among the people shaping and being shaped by the country's culture, it becomes part of the nation's moral heritage, and a significant page of its history. This leads me to situate the Church in China today within China's socio-economic situation. I am quick to add here that there is no way to talk about that without touching on China's political situation.

Globalization, urbanization, World Trade Organization membership, the 2008 Olympics all feature in our China scenario, but the engine that is clearly the driving force

in China today is the *economy*. The pace of China's economic growth is nothing short of phenomenal with a continuous GDP of over 7%, for the past 10 years—the largest of any nation in the world. Yet, I, and many people much better informed on China than I, cannot help but feel that all is not quite right with China. What then might be the underlying gnawing problem? I believe the problem is a political one. Can China remain ideologically *communist* (socialist) with its rapidly developing economy based on capitalism? The political leadership, aware of this, talks around the subject, and is deeply fearful of its possible consequences. These drastic changes in ideology all began when Deng Xiaoping decided to open the country up to Western style economic reform in the early 80s. "To be rich is glorious," he said. The genie was out of the bottle. The question now is: how will China deal with this?

Relevant statistical data

I heard a talk recently by Mr. Leo Goodstadt, a former Board Member of the Holy Spirit Study Centre, and one of the previous advisers to Chris Patten, the last Governor of Hong Kong. In the talk, he gave some statistics, which startled me. He said that China is a poor country, and will remain that way for a long time. I never realized that China's economy is smaller than that of Germany and France, 1/8 the size of the US, and 1/6 that of Japan. It will catch up with Japan only in the year 2050. China's average yearly per capita income by the year 2020 will reach HK\$4,000. Hong Kong's present average yearly per capita income is HK\$26,000.

In another recent survey I read that there are now over 420 Kentucky Fried Chicken outlets in China and 560 Mc Donald's with 100 more opening every year. US\$150 million of foreign investment moves into China each day; motor vehicle sales are up 52% over last year, and 230 million mobile-phone accounts have made China the No. 1 market. Students study on the Internet and do their homework on computers. This year 80% of China's youth graduated from junior middle school, and 15% went on to post-secondary studies. Researchers say that with rural migration 60% of China's population will be urbanized by 2020. These statistics are mind-boggling. The new leadership is confronted with some major challenges so it is no wonder that they are worried. With such a variety of competing signals, we should not be surprised that interpretations of where the mainland is going vary so much. No one wants to revisit the terrible disorder of the past two centuries or to compromise China's present day improved living standards.

Threats to China's stability

Some analysts predict chaos in China and even total collapse. That might be too severe a judgment, but earlier this year the newly formed State Development Economic Reform Commission put out a shocking list of 13 pressure points that could derail China's economy. [This commission is something like America's Rand Corp. or Brookings Institution. Former Premier Zhu Rongji used it as his think tank.]

The 13 pressure points listed in the report are:

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| 1. | China-USA relations | 8. | Villages as Socio-Economic Units |
| 2. | The Taiwan Question | 9. | Income Gap |
| 3. | Border Security | 10. | Unemployment |
| 4. | Foreign Trade | 11. | Social Order |
| 5. | Financial Risks | 12. | Public Security |
| 6. | Agriculture as a sector | 13. | Environment |
| 7. | Farmers' Livelihood | | |

Mr. Laurence Brahm, a political economist and lawyer based in Beijing, comments on these issues in a July issue of the *South China Morning Post*. He selects three issues as priorities that President Hu Jintao and Premier Wen Jiabao will have to deal with in the next five-year plan. First, since rural instability is a formula for national chaos, he maintains that agricultural development must top the agenda. Second, while he applauds the nation's leap from poverty to prosperity, he says the State must build safety nets into the system through government-dispensed welfare programs to plug the gaps not filled by the market. Thirdly, he sees the need for a drastic overhaul of China's health-care system.

He goes on to give some alarming statistics saying that the Sars crisis pales next to China's emerging AIDS crisis. UNESCO estimates that by the year 2010, AIDS will have infected 10 million people in China. Moreover, AIDS is only one health hazard among many. Already 80 percent of the world's new tuberculosis cases are in rural China. There is concern that the problems related to health could turn-off foreign investment. Another challenge for China is to find work for 400 to 700 million people over the next couple of decades. In 2002 more than 600 million people in China lived on less than US\$2.00 a day. In addition there is the rapidly growing gap between the rural and urban income. Some wonder if the bubble will burst; for others the question is not if but when.

A shadow on Deng Xiaoping's theory

Confronted with these issues, the new leadership is questioning some of Deng's basic tenets. Deng called for "one centre and two bases"—the centre being economic construction, and the "bases" being adhering to socialism while "furthering economic reform and opening." Now, there is discussion about changing Deng's formula by replacing "the center" with a call for improving people's livelihood, and making the new bases "economic construction and social development." Would some people say that Communism has expired and has been replaced with free a market economy in a national security environment?

Jean Luc Domenach, a Sinologist and founder of the Cultural Institute in Beijing is much more optimistic about China than he was previously. Although he believes that a major economic crisis would derail China completely, he is also of the opinion that China will try with all its might to prevent such a crisis. He cites that the environment today is better than it has been in the last 200 years to do this. The international mood is unusually favorable towards China. China has been invited to the international bargaining table. Most Western countries give China special treatment, offering considerable financial help

and generous business deals. China, of course, still lags far behind in many domains. Its present power is very limited, and it often lacks power altogether, but given the present climate of development, indications are that with the passing of years China will seize the opportunity to become a responsible key player on the world's stage.

This is a rather lengthy presentation of some of the challenges facing China today in the socio-economic political arena. I have highlighted these because I think they are also challenges for the Church, and in our consideration of the Church, we should look at what it can do in the context of such a situation despite all of its own limitations.

The search for meaning

In a society, which is becoming more and more capitalistic and less and less communistic, what is happening in people's lives? The great fear now, even of government propagandists is that China's "crisis of faith" leaves people with no framework by which to judge right from wrong. Some older Chinese still believe in the traditions of Buddhism and Confucianism, and a few middle-aged people still cling to Marxism and Communism, as a meaningful ideology. But today's young people have written off Communism as a viable belief system, and they have found nothing to take its place.

In a talk given to the China Forum in Hong Kong a few years ago, Professor Zhou said that China today is experiencing the greatest moral confusion in its history. Challenges are present in all areas of moral concern: in politics, in the work place, in the family and in religion. He demonstrates how the leadership's lack of political integrity, rampant corruption, lack of ideological beliefs, the disintegration of the family and commercialism have led to frustration, disillusionment and the awareness of a spiritual void and moral confusion.

Professor Bo Yang of Taiwan, and author of *The Ugly Chinaman*—a very popular book in China—writes, "The deterioration in morality may not be the deepest crisis. The real crisis is the fact that Chinese culture has so far been unable to find from within itself an answer to the moral challenges of modernization." Interestingly he alleges that Chinese culture itself harbors some inherent characteristics or elements which make it difficult for China to adapt to the modern world.

After Mao came to power in 1949, he was seen as quasi divine; his photo was everywhere. People worshipped him and his little Red Book. Deng changed much of that. Money, business and technology became the new gods. But people are beginning to see through these gods and to lose faith in them too. And it is not just the peasants. The upwardly mobile Chinese, the modern yuppies, are the ones who are being drawn to deeper values, religion, prayer and various forms of meditation. Many, having attained a measure of commercial success, are dissatisfied with defining their lives by how much they earn and what they own. One young woman said, "I had tried to let money fill my life, but it was always a race for the nicest shoes, the newest cell phone, a larger

apartment. I just got tired of constantly running around without anything to believe in.” She studied the Bible during her lunch break and was baptized a few months later.

A young student said, “We live in a world where people cheat and lie. They lie to themselves and to others and no one believes the other’s lies. We deal hypocritically with each other. Leaders are corrupt and everyone tries to make money on the back of everyone else. I feel so sad, I don’t know where to turn.” The lack of moral guidance and inspiration from those in positions of authority, and from the elders leaves the younger generation frustrated, floundering and angry.

Increasingly, people are turning to Christianity, which is the mainland’s fastest-growing religion. Still viewed with suspicion by the Government as an agent of Western imperialism, the faith now attracts some urban Chinese precisely because they think of it as foreign. According to Hong Kong Protestant groups, over 2 million Chinese are secretly baptized each year. Philip Wickeri, who was ordained as a minister in China many years ago, and who is presently working in China, estimates that there are about 30,000 Protestants in China today.

Challenges facing the Church

One of the things we will be doing during this gathering is to consider what the Church in China has to offer, and how it can help the country in this time of transition. There is no doubt in my mind that the Church has a role to play, not large, perhaps, but a significant role nonetheless. It doesn’t take much yeast to leaven the dough. It is the quality of the yeast that is important. I sense I am on shaky ground here. I don’t want to appear judgmental, but I think we all know the recent history of the Church in China: fifty years of persecution, and constant harassment by the Government; yet filled with heroes and martyrs. I have the greatest admiration for the Chinese Catholics. There are very few who have missed out on the persecution, whether in the registered or unregistered church. As the Holy Father has said so often, “We will never know what they have suffered.”

The greatest challenge for the Church in China today is probably to become “The Church in the Modern World.” Can it do that in the present political climate? I really don’t know, but the starting point is surely located in the seminaries and convents. Spiritual and theological formation are key. Much has already been done, but much more is required. The seminaries still have large numbers with over 1,700 in both the open and underground seminaries. There are close to 2,500 young women studying in convents. I was recently in Europe, and was happy to hear that today there are over 200 seminarians, young priests and Sisters studying overseas: in Europe, the US, in the Philippines and even in Latin America. Hopefully these young men and women will be a catalyst for the next generation of Church leaders.

In the Catholic Church in China today the figure generally given for the number of Catholics is 12 million. From recent official Church reports the number is closer to 8 million. But that might not include many from the underground. In any case, that is 1

percent of the total population of China, or 1.2 billion. In 1949 at the Communist takeover, there were 3 million Catholics, which was also about 1 percent of the population at the time. Today, there are about 2,200 priests, 1,200 of whom were ordained since 1980 (65 percent are under 50 years of age) and around 3,600 Sisters.

Following the Vatican's delineation, there are 144 dioceses in China (including Hong Kong and Macao) and 124 bishops or administrators. The Chinese government gives the dioceses a different geographical division and the number as 130. Seventy-nine of the Bishops are in the open church and 49 are in the underground. A significant number of Bishops are legitimate, or have been legitimated: about 40 are recognized by the Holy See, but not by the Government. The average age of the bishops is 79. Six underground bishops are in prison. Many of the older bishops, especially the underground bishops, simply haven't been able to keep themselves updated on Vatican II, and the recent teachings of the Church. As a result, they find it difficult to understand many of the recent trends in the Church such as ecumenical and inter-religious dialogue, justice and peace, reconciliation and Church unity.

The statistics above are a thumbnail sketch of the Church in China today. One question is whether in recent years there has been any change in the attitude of the government towards religion and the Catholic Church in particular? My assessment is that other religions have not fared any better than the Catholic Church, and religion is still a worry for China's leadership. Frank Lu, a human-rights advocate based in Hong Kong said, "The government does not want anyone challenging its power, especially a religious group that has more control over its followers than the Communist Party has". However, at a meeting in December 2001, President Jiang Zemin and Premier Zhu Rongji gave speeches in which they declared the constructive role religion could play in society. Worried about all the social problems they see looming on the horizon, which leave citizens rootless, they admitted that religion might have a salutary role. However, we haven't seen much fallout from that meeting. On the contrary the Government is exercising more control over the Catholic Church than in the past.

Three documents: codification of control

In March 2003, the Government published the famous three documents giving it further control over all aspects of life in the Catholic Church. The documents do not really present much that is new, but they do codify the government's control by stressing the function of the Patriotic Association as the "entity that governs the Church." The purpose is to control the Church, and to make the bishops and clergy mere servants. In the 1980's the Catholic Patriotic Association (CPA) was presented as a type of bridge to help the clergy. Now, the CPA is the entity that supervises, controls and governs the Church. The recent documents implement a revised system of combined meetings: (1) the Bishops' Conference and the Patriotic Association: at the provincial level, (2) the Patriotic Association and the Church Administrative (or Affairs) Committee, at the diocesan level, and the Bishop and priests plus the Patriotic Association at the local level. Whatever the CPA does not know, or has not agreed to, is not permitted. This goes from the smallest details of parish life to the appointment of Bishops, and the reorganization of

dioceses. Now, the Patriotic Association is placed first in any listing of church organizations. What was formerly the “Bishops’ Conference and Patriotic Association” has now been revised to the “Patriotic Association and the Bishops Conference. Throughout all of China, everywhere and in all things the CPA is to be the final word.

Bishops in China, caught in this maelstrom, have asked that their friends abroad publicize the existence of these documents, indicating the significance of their contents. Needless to say, the Holy See is very much saddened by this new turn of events. One Chinese bishop, who long ago warned that the Chinese government was determined to make the Catholic Church a National Church, sees these documents as a definitive step in the process.

Following the illicit ordination of the five bishops on January 6, 2000 and the canonization of the martyrs of China on October 2001, the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association has come on full force. The three documents were the last straw. Since 2001 many churches have been razed, parishioners harassed and priests and bishop jailed or sent away to “study camps”. One bishop in China said that the time has come to draw the line between “cooperation and opposition.” On the positive side, he commented that since many in the open Church opposed the ordinations, the two sides have come closer together which he felt was a good thing.

Mr. Leo Goodstadt in the talk mentioned above gave several reasons why the Church continues to be persecuted. First, the Communist Regime fears competition from the Church on influencing peoples minds, ideas and values and eventually their actions e.g. Falun Gong. Second, they are realizing more and more that religion is important in people’s lives and is not going to go away. Third, the growing numbers of believers frightens them. Fourth, from the events of 9-11, they realized that people are willing to go to war for what they believe, and finally, that the new administration must show that they are loyal Communists. The end result is, they will continue to persecute the Church. I would add one more point: the Central Government, after seeing the influence of the Church in Hong Kong on July 1 regarding Article 23, is now even more wary of the Church. The Chinese Government feels that it is losing face. Although it set up a registered church, people still continue to defy the government by going to unregistered churches, and although almost all of the countries of the world have diplomatic relations with the Vatican, China does not.

A small but significant contribution

In this context, can the Church contribute anything to social change in China? At the USCCB 19th National Catholic China Conference, held in Chicago in April 2002, Fr. Wilhelm K. Muller, SVD, presented a paper on this specific topic. Very briefly his conclusions were: 1. It is essential that people have one absolute, ultimate point of reference. By their faith Christians can provide a beacon of hope in the darkness, which seems to invade their Chinese contemporaries. 2. Christians can share their conviction of the dignity of the human person, created by God in his likeness. 3. Christians, acknowledging that human beings are basically good, can face the reality of evil, of sin,

of guilt in each of us and in the world with the possibility of forgiveness and amendment. 4. Christians can share their faith in God who is Love and in Jesus Christ offering forgiveness to all who believe, and finally, 5. Christians making love the leading principal in their lives can generously involve themselves in human development projects and works of charity for the good of all.

What about Hong Kong?

Having said so much about China—by that I mean Mainland China—I should also say a few words about Hong Kong, which after all is part of China, and my home for over 40 years. It has been a very difficult year for Hong Kong. Although the official handover took place six years ago, I believe it is only now that the full impact of the “one country two systems” is hitting home. For many years Hong Kong had a robust economy, a healthy budget surplus, well developed government structures and efficient civil servants. The place ran smoothly so it is no wonder that everyone in Hong Kong became complacent: students, parents, the old, the young, teachers and business people. “Let the good times roll” was our theme song. But then when it all seemed to unravel, people began to panic.

It started with Hong Kong following the rest of the world into recession experiencing a dwindling economy, increased unemployment, and thousands holding mortgages with negative equity, increased bankruptcies and a plummeting stock market. Most importantly there was no end in sight and things seemed to be going from bad to worse.

Then a second blow came in March of 2003 when Sars hit Hong Kong with full force sending the Territory reeling. One single infected person from China, who stayed in a local hotel, passed the disease on to hundreds of others both from Hong Kong and overseas. Hong Kong ended up with having the highest number of Sars cases after China with a death rate higher than anywhere else in the world. To say the least, the mood was somber.

Fortunately, Hong Kong is very resilient, and has a fine medical system. After a few initial blunders, with a great deal of understanding and cooperation from the whole community, calm was restored and the process of healing began. To the credit of Hong Kong’s people everyone obediently wore masks, avoided crowds, reported symptoms and did all the right things. The streets were empty, restaurants and cinemas and schools closed, tourists canceled vacations, and hotels were down to single digit occupancy. There is no question, people were frightened. One newspaper article said that Hong Kong was experiencing “collective depression”.

Within a few months, however, the disease was under control, and the WHO declared Hong Kong SARS free. China soon followed. Interestingly, control in Hong Kong came about because of the civil sense and concern of the people. In China the battle was top-down. One billboard read: “Sars will be conquered by our government under the leadership of the Communist Party of China.” It worked. Where else in the world could you have a 1,000-bed Sars hospital completed in a week? The battle in Taiwan was chaotic and Canada’s success in a democratic society came from a team of good professionals and administrators. The way the SARS crisis unfolded in various areas reflects very much their respective political cultures. This would make an interesting subject for a doctoral thesis.

The last patient had barely been released from hospital in Hong Kong when the controversy over Article 23, on national security legislation hit the papers. The situation heated up and reached a climax when on July 1 a half million people took to the streets demonstrating against the governments attempt to steamroll the provision into law. The government was caught off guard. Neither the local nor Central government anticipated the size of the turnout. Beijing was livid that they had not been informed despite the fact that they have over 100 Central government officers posted in Hong Kong. The lack of communication from the HK government didn't help. After a lot of traveling back and forth between Hong Kong and Beijing and several resignations, Mr. Tung backed down. At first he deferred the date, and later declared that there is no fixed time by which the draft law has to be passes.

The situation has been diffused for the time being, and a great lesson has been learned. The people voted with their feet, and the government felt "People power" for the first time. (Let me add here that despite the large numbers that took part in the July 1 March, the March was orderly, peaceful and well-mannered. The same is true of the police.) While the anti-subversion question was the starting point, the real issue is how to obtain a more responsive government as well as a voice in government decision-making. Ultimately, the hope is for the Chief Executive Officer and the legislators to be directly elected. In all of this the major question now is how will Beijing respond. For Beijing what happens in Hong Kong is most important, because Taiwan is watching. If the "one country two systems" "doesn't work in Hong Kong, there is not much hope for Taiwan.

Bishop Joseph Zen the Ordinary of Hong Kong, has been a major player in this whole process. He took a very strong stand, and spoke out vigorously on the Article 23 issue. When questioned he insists that he is not advocating the overthrow of any government, but is concerned that the rights and freedoms of the people be preserved. He has a great deal of popular backing, but also faces some opposition from his own flock. He is not afraid of controversy, and openly speaks out on whatever issues he feels affect the lives and rights of the people. Last year he defended the rights of the illegal residents in Hong Kong. Presently, he is questioning legislation that will curb the control of religious bodies of schools that they have been running for decades. People ask whether his actions will affect the Church's relations both here in Hong Kong and on the Mainland with the PRC government. I believe that is an open question but so far there is little indication of any change.

CONCLUSION

As I was finishing this paper, I asked myself what is the problem with the Church in China? Why do we agonize over it? Why is it so divided? Why so hated by the Government? Why do they hate the government? What are the obstacles that keep the Vatican and China from coming together? Why do some of us take sides? Why aren't communications more effective at all levels? It seems to me that the answer to these questions is the same as the answer to the question of division in the Holy Land, the Iraq war, family quarrels, squabbles between siblings and most other problems in the world.

Just what is the problem? I think it is simply that we, and by that I mean all of us, both inside of China and outside of China are just not Christian enough. That sounds simplistic, I know, but then Jesus' words were pretty simple too: Love your neighbor—no not just your neighbor but also your enemy. If he asks you to go a mile with him, go two. If he offends you, forgive him up to 4,900 times. Don't judge, deal justly and above all have charity. I suppose the big question is who will take the first step. Nothing else seems to have worked, why not give it a try? I began by saying that for me China will always remain a mystery, but then perhaps all of life is a mystery, too.