

Growth of Christianity in China: A Protestant Perspective of Ecumenical Challenges and Opportunities

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Dear Brothers and Sisters of Christ,

I am glad to have this opportunity as a Protestant pastor to share with you at this Catholic sponsored conference. It shows the presence of ecumenical communications between the Catholic and the Protestant in China, because "one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all." (Ephesians 4:18, ESV).

As a Protestant pastor, I have never felt strange among Catholic brothers and sisters while in Europe. In China, however, it seems to me that we Protestants and Catholics belong to entirely different religions when we consider how common believers comprehend or think about the Catholic Church, I also have found it strange and surprising that even so many overseas Chinese Evangelical Churches in the US consider the Catholic Church in a very negative light.. Even many pastors feel this way. Historically this kind of the misunderstanding was caused by the different missionary policies of both Catholics and Protestants during the 19th and early 20th Centuries in China, and is seen in the obvious phenomena of the different Chinese terms for the names of the Old Testament prophets and the names of the Books of the Bible, and the like. Now the situation is changing. Nanjing Theological Seminary encourages the students to do the ecumenical communications with the Catholics and also to study the theological thoughts of the Catholic theologians. And there are also Catholic sisters who followed the Biblical courses in our Seminary.

At the present, as a small step toward improving ecumenical communications I would like to share my understanding as a Protestant pastor of the Catholic Church in China. I want to present my perspective in three parts: 1) My view of the situation of the Catholic Church in China, her weaknesses and strengths. 2). A brief overview of the Protestant Church in China. 3). My suggestions for a possible path toward ecumenical cooperation.

The Catholic Church in China

Socio-politically, the Vatican-Beijing relationship is the critical issue for the Catholic Church in China; any analysis or activity must first and foremost consider this very real factor. Catholic Church ties with Taiwan further complicate the issue. The Taiwan issue is historically connected with the national sufferings and the terrible memories from the Japanese violence and massacres in China during the last World War. So I urge all of you to be prudent about the issue of Taiwan. For Chinese the issue is very strongly related to national sentiments, and is not solely a political problem of the

political systems or of the regimes. In short, the situation of the Catholic Church in China is not simply a matter of religious or denominational affairs. Politics affect the Catholic Church more than any other religion in China and we should always remind ourselves of this point while discussing the Catholic issue in China.

Ecclesiastically, the Catholic Church has not been active in evangelical works and many limitations to Church growth come from the structural nature of the Church itself. Its weak points are rooted in the inner-looking tendency of its mission which keeps it from effective communications with the different aspects of the society. While I recognize the positive historical importance and need for structure, the hierarchal nature of Catholic Church administration, has led to negative results in China. In the common impressions, the image of the Holy Father is very easily misperceived and misunderstood as a manmade Lord or divinity, and this is especially so in this modernized, increasingly democratically oriented world. Theologically I believe that there is an urgent need to initiate within the Catholic Church in China systemic changes in the spirit of the Vatican II.

On the other hand, in the eyes of Protestant pastors, the Catholic Church in China has a number of very particular and great merits or advantages. Its Priesthood is very firm. It maintains a reasonable distance from the secular society and retains relative independence in the world of diverse and competing spiritualities. It is a Church based on Doctrines and it is a Sacramental Church too.

The Protestant Church in China

The evangelical "Mass" movement is spreading the Gospel fastest among the Chinese at nearly all levels of society. Its success is the result of the spirit of the Reformation, the principle of the Universal Priesthood by Martin Luther. I'm sure that the Protestant Church is very successful in the sense of the evangelization as well as the diaconia works through the Amity Foundation in China.

But what are the weak points of the Protestant Church in China? I think there are the following four points:

1. There are no authorities for doctrines or standards for the interpretation of the Faith, and this is even true in many Overseas Chinese Churches. There is no place or sense of the Creed during the worship in so many families' gatherings and worships in the rural areas. Personal authority has replaced Church traditions handed down from the Historical Church.

2. The Sacraments have become superficial due in large part to the extreme nationalism or identification with particular subgroups in society such as that found among some small extreme indigenous China sects, which have no affiliation with the so-called Imperialist Missionaries of the 19th Century. Furthermore, the phenomenon of the cult of Gurus feeds the pride of many leaders with their own political agenda and intentions.

3. The "Mass Movements" have no doctrines with the result that while there are more believers, there is a decreasing sense of the Sacramental and Doctrinal elements from universal Christianity. The central role of "*Sola Scriptura*" has led individual interpretations of the Bible to be considered the only true form of interpretation. This means that individual interpretations are based on pragmatic and arbitrary requirements of individuals.

4. The top leadership of the TSPM/CCC lacks ecclesial nature, and therefore has little or no spiritual and sacramental or even Kerygmatic basis.

That is why our Bishop K.H. Ting has led us to do the theological reflections and the theological thinking about those above weakness in the Church. The name of the theological movement is "the Reconstruction of Theological Thinking", which was launched by Bishop Ting in 1998. The final aim is to build the Church well in China according to the correct Biblical view and the theological doctrines from the Historic Church and also connected with the Chinese traditional culture.

The possible path ahead

Protestants and Catholics at all levels should begin to try to communicate by the way of dialogue and sharing together in the Holy Spirit.

Church leaders should promote the development of an ecumenical edition of the Bible, initiated by Chinese Christians both in China and abroad. The effort should especially focus on developing common uses of the terms in the Bible and respecting the Chinese traditional cultures regarding the use of language. The effort should pay special attention to the weakness and the lack of the Christian values not found in the traditional Chinese vocabularies. For example, compare this lack of Christian terms with so many Buddhism contributions to spoken and written Chinese over the past ten centuries.

Try to establish a vehicle for ecumenical exchange and dialogue on Scriptural based theological and ethical issues, the traditions of the Historical Church and the ecumenical texts that have appeared in the West since the Second Vatican Council;

Encourage believers of both faith traditions to join with all people to work for the modernization and progress of Chinese society.

Through emphasis on Divine Reconciliation, Protestants and Catholics could contribute our shared Christian faith to the process of developing the "Harmony Society" promoted by the central government of China. Finding ways for Protestants and Catholics to jointly encourage the reconciliation between Vatican and China for the interest of the Christianity and the good of the Chinese people in China will be the long term task from our Lord by His grace, wisdom, mind and agape.

For our Protestant Church, there are four basic elements which compose the theological foundation of the Church, i.e. the Bible, the Creeds, the principles of the Reformation and the *raison*. I'd like to emphasize here that the heritages of the Reformation is really very, very important for China Protestant Church. In my vision, the China Protestant Church must be the Kerygmatic Church, the Diaconia Church and the Sacramental Church in the coming future. In a word, the future of China Protestant Church will be one of the parts of the Historical Church, in the theological understanding of the Unity by Diversity and the Diversity in the Unity. That will be also the final step of the Reconstruction of Theological Thinking with the deep concern to build well the Church in China.

Our ecumenical dialogue must face the political and ecclesiastical situation as it exists in China today, but in order to overcome the obstacles created by historical differences and disagreements, both Protestants and Catholics in China should employ the hermeneutical principles of separating and distancing ourselves from most of the negative aspects of the ecumenical history of the Universal Church and look toward building common bonds based in working to meet the spiritual needs of all Chinese.