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Experiencing Jesus Christ Through Chinese Eyes

Panel Presentation

Christ as Immanuel in a Church of Harmony

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Some 10 years ago the Asian bishops summarized the images of Jesus in Asia as “*the Teacher of Wisdom, the Healer, the Liberator, the Spiritual Guide, the Enlightened One, the Compassionate Friend of the Poor, the Good Samaritan, the Good Shepherd, the Obedient One.*”¹ Doubtlessly, Chinese Catholics have no difficulties accepting all these images, but, which one is the best for us? This question leads me to reflect on the history of Christianity in China and the present situation of the church there. Christianity has been in China for nearly 1400 years, but is still a foreign religion to most Chinese and a minority religion in the country. Why has evangelization been, and still is, so difficult in China? China has a rich cultural tradition in which Confucianism is ethical, Taoism is philosophical, but Buddhism is spiritual.² What in particular can Christianity offer to the Chinese people?

There has indeed been a striking revival of Christianity in China after China opened its doors in 1980s. The Church was overjoyed to gather all her strength to preach the good news, to build churches, and to reconstruct local Christian communities. The number of Catholics is dramatically increasing every year; both male and female vocations appeared so plentiful that many religious orders have gone to China to recruit their candidates. However, the rapidly developing society, with its new ideology and social system, brings challenges to the church and requires it to change. In fact, the Church in China is now changing. Some experts have already observed that the Church in China at the present moment is a transitional one.³ In this paper I would like: 1) to briefly portray the changing church in China; 2) to discuss the current needs of the people and society; and 3) to present some prospectives on the best images of Christ and the church for the Chinese people.

¹ Michael Amaladoss, *The Asian Jesus*, (New York: Orbis Books, 2006), 2.

² John C. H. Wu, *Beyond East and West* (New York: Sheed and Ward; Taipei: Mei Ya Publications, 1995 [1969]), 192.

³ Edward J. Malatesta, “A Church in Transition” in *The Catholic Church in Modern China*, eds. Edward Tang & Jean-Paul Wiest, (New York: Orbis Books 1993), 156.

A Changing Church

Throughout history the Church constantly made adjustments in response to changes in the world. This is what is now happening in China. Here I would like to examine the changes of the church from three perspectives, namely: religious education and missionary roles of the laity, vigorous engagement in social service, and the changing image of God.

First, religious education is found to be an important factor for the growth of the church in China. About twenty years ago, I heard someone from the Religious Affairs Bureau say that “most of your Catholics are women from the countryside.” What he really meant was that Chinese Catholics were poor and uneducated. It was true at that time. Fortunately, the situation is changing. There are two reasons for the change: 1) the church has put great efforts into the religious education of the laity, and, 2) there has been a national improvement of the education in the country. When the Church reopened in the early 1980s everything was the same as pre-Vatican II. Both the clergy and the laity were satisfied with having sacraments again after being deprived of them for nearly 30 years. Shortly, along with the social development, the hunger of the laity for exploring the depths of faith and the mystery of God appeared evident with each passing day. People are no longer satisfied merely with receiving sacraments. Today, there is a variety of activities being held at almost every parish on weekends and holidays. Bible study, catechism classes, marriage encounter, charity action groups, and youth camps are all good examples. Due to the present limited conditions there are not many academic theological courses open to the laity, but what is important is that people are eager to learn. In addition, the desire to seek deeper understanding of the faith is more evident among young people who have received a better education than their parents. Many new converts are well-educated intellectuals and they need far more than just sacraments.

What follows upon this improvement of religious education is a profound missionary role played by the laity. Some lay people are not only helping pastors in the parish such as teaching Sunday school and visiting parishioners, but are also trained to be lay missionaries to spread the Word. (In Chinese they are called “Chuan Dao Yuan”) The lay missionaries often sacrifice their holidays to go to different places to preach the good news. They go before the clergy, and in a sense, are like St. John the Baptist who prepared people for the coming of the Lord. In an atheistic country with very limited freedom in using media for evangelization, it is those lay missionaries’ words and deeds that have become the living witnesses of Christ for the society.

The second important change is that the Church has moved from a stage focusing on self-development to one offering social service. When it reopened, the Church was not able to offer social service. With little resources, the first task of the Church was survival. Both the clergy and the laity spared no effort to build churches and develop local communities. Yet, the Church extended its service to society as soon as the situation became better, though it is still itself in need in many ways. To my knowledge, there are now three social service centers run by the Church doing charitable work, e.g., emergency disaster relief, supporting education for the poor, and medical clinics, including caring for AIDS patients. Besides these professional organizations, many dioceses and parishes also have their own programs operating in local regions. They collect donations for natural disaster relief, run homes for the aged,

found orphanages for abandoned children, and organize charity groups to minister to the people in need in their civil areas. Doubtlessly, social service is not only an effective way of preaching the good news, but also a sign that the Church is becoming more mature and forward looking.

The third change, the Chinese image of God, is not as obvious as the previous two, and is yet developing. With religious education and a deeper reflection on the mystery of the Incarnation, the image of God has been subtly altered in the minds of Chinese Catholics. In the past, God was portrayed as a severe judge, a king high above humanity; today God is more loving and closer to human beings. I often think there was a paradox. Because of the painful history of the Church in China, Chinese Catholics very often identified themselves with the suffering Christ – they love to pray the Way of the Cross, and offer their daily sufferings to God. But on the other hand, the image of a strict king or judge formed in the Middle Ages is nonetheless deeply-rooted. Fortunately, today a loving God is gradually replacing a judge-mental one in people's minds. Yet, it should be admitted that the change is still in process because there are still a good number of people holding onto the old image. Here is an example. While American pastors may complain about their parishioners having no interest in going to confession, the priest who hears confessions in Chinese parishes, where long lines are waiting for absolution before Masses, would sigh that most of these "sinners" simply go to "wash" themselves out of the fear of hell or punishments. However slow the changing progress is, it is good to see that the people have found God more loving than judge-mental, and are able to make a close connection between their daily life and the incarnate God through Jesus.

It should be remembered that, besides the three changes I presented above, there are still other changes. The evidence includes increasingly important roles in the Church played by Sisters who are becoming more independent; attention to inter-religious dialogue which holds a significant place on the Church's agenda; and a wider use of publications and the internet communication for evangelization and so on. While these changes all seem positive, the negative changes should also be kept in mind. For example, today the news that some young priests have left the priesthood and that vocations have decreased because of the influence of materialism is no longer new. However good or bad the changes are, what is important is that through deeply reflecting on these changes we can come to know what we need and where we should go. In addition, in order to evaluate these changes and seek the best means for evangelization in the country, it is necessary to reflect more on the needs of the society and the people.

Reflections on the Needs of the Chinese People in a Changing Society:

Having drawn the world's attention, the social changes in China in the last two decades are seen everywhere throughout society, the economy, culture, ideology, and people's life styles. For example, the traditional agricultural-based and family-oriented society is no longer the same as in the previous centuries. More and more farmers from the countryside are rushing into cities to earn money and youngsters traveling with their degrees of all kinds are pursuing their ideals. Living in a dramatically changing society such as China, people are in great need of security, self-identity, and spirituality.

I once had a conversation about Chinese culture with a Maryknoll priest who had been working in China and he commented, "Chinese people lack a sense of security." I was surprised at first but immediately I realized that he is really an acute observer. He is right. Chinese are hardworking, but do not often spend their money to enjoy their lives. They carefully accumulate savings for family and their descendants in case some unpredictable crisis in the future may happen to them. I believe it is because of the long and painful history and cultural tradition that the Chinese feel the need of a sense of security. From 2100 B.C. to the last century China had gone through nearly 20 dynasties. One can imagine how many wars there had been during the interims between the old and the new dynasties, and the common people always suffered the most. The situation of the recent two centuries was even worse when the Qing dynasty, the last feudal dynasty, declined due to the implementation of the closed-door policy. China lost a series of wars with a number of foreign countries. Even after the 1950s, while other countries were summoning up their resources to develop their economies and societies, severe social disturbances were still going on among the Chinese people. In Taiwan, native Taiwanese had conflicts with the Nationalists; on the mainland, the Cultural Revolution from 1966-1976 took place. In a word, the Chinese people have never had an easy life for a long period of time. They lost any sense of security in their painful history.

If history has prevented the Chinese people from realizing any sense of security, the cultural tradition has likewise contributed greatly to the people's undefined identity. One of the Chinese cultural characteristics is sacrifice. People are taught that individuals should sacrifice for families, and families for the country.⁴ Chinese are not individualists. Their success is built upon the family and the country as a whole. Yet, overemphasizing the value of the bigger family has made the Chinese people unable to discern exactly who they are as individuals. Human rights and individual identity were swallowed up by cultural tradition and a social system. "I" disappears in the "we". As a consequence, moral teachings and social conventions have served as important factors for the meaning of life and become the foundations for individual's self-achievement. Not following the social system means having no foothold in the society. However, the need of self-identity is so basic that "who we are" cannot simply be replaced by "how to be a good person".

The needs of self-identity and security for the Chinese are no more serious than their spiritual need. Whatever belief one may have, everyone needs or has a spiritual life. Having realized that God is addressing us from the depths of our humanity, we are now trying to find spiritual meanings everywhere, from kitchen, to market, to office. The term spirituality today is no longer heard only in the church or in confessionals. It has already entered into the category of our daily life, and this down-to-earth spirituality helps people enormously in today's pressure-filled world. In fact, the need of spirituality is more urgent in China since there is a "spiritual void" due to the rapid social and cultural changes.⁵ After the country opened its doors, the Chinese people were suddenly exposed in a bright light like babies coming from the womb without any mental preparation. The attacks of materialism and consumerism appeared extremely severe on Chinese people who had no stable value system to hold onto because of the

⁴ It is not difficult to learn this as we saw today millions of people were displaced to other areas because of the Three Gorges Project and the construction for the Olympic Games in 2008.

⁵ Edmond Tang, "Chinese Theologies" in *Dictionary of Third World Theologies*, eds. Virginia Fabella, and R.S. Sugirtharajah, (New York: Orbis Books, 2000), 39.

Cultural Revolution. Some people have realized their spiritual need and began seeking the meaning of life, but without spiritual guidance many have inevitably become more greedy and selfish and have been trying to use material things to fill up their spiritual vacuum. This spiritual void can be easily recognized not only by the fast growing criminal rate and the increasing number of suicide cases among the young people, but also by some new religious practices derived from the existing religions, such as Fa Lun Gong from Buddhism, and Dong Fang Shan Dian from Christianity. Although these new practices are regarded as heresies, they have attracted many people in the country, because they are like fast food, able to temporarily satisfy people's spiritual hunger.

Having discussed the needs of individuals, we now take a close look at the most pressing need of the country which, I think, is harmony. In addition to the increasing criminal cases I have mentioned above, symptoms of the lack of harmony can also be observed in many political and economic problems such as the contradiction between communist ideology and capitalist economy, and the lack of social justice and human rights. Living in such a society, interpersonal honesty, trust, affection, and friendship have declined dramatically. In fact, the Chinese government has already acknowledged the need of harmony in the country.⁶ While the need of harmony can be regarded as the result of the individual "spiritual void" in the contemporary society, I also believe the necessity of the realization of harmony is deeply rooted in Chinese cultures. Today, the society needs to regain the traditional value.

Being versed in the Chinese cultural tradition, Chinese philosopher John Wu maintained that "*the idea of harmony is the keynote of three types of Joy*" found in Daoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism.⁷ Some Chinese intellectuals have affirmed that Christianity would lose its attraction if it relates itself with Chinese cultural tradition since the tradition is not understood by the new generations. But, it is the unique cultural background that makes a person Chinese, and I do not think that our cultural roots can be suffocated or uprooted simply by movements like the Cultural Revolution or the imports of western cultures.⁸ In fact, going back to study and the evaluation of the cultural tradition is the latest trend in China.⁹

Generally speaking, today in China there is a revival of religiosity. More and more people go to religions to seek spiritual help and the meaning of their lives. Both Buddhism and Christianity, one is traditional and the other with western cultural charms, have great attractions to the people. Therefore, how well the Church meets the people's needs is extremely important, for a religion will die out if it fails to meet the spiritual needs of the people. Reflection on the needs of the people and the country unquestionably sheds light upon where the changing Church should go because our mission obliges us to speak to the hearts of the people. As a consequence, a restricted picture of the Church in the future can possibly be forecast.

⁶ Advocated by Hu Jintao in 2004, the political slogan of "Building a Harmonious Society" now is the central agenda of the party and the omnipresent banner of the country.

⁷ John C. H. Wu, *Joy in Chinese Philosophy*, (Taipei: Wisdom Press, 1999), 2.

⁸ Such ideas can be found especially in the writings of the Chinese "cultural Christians". See Pan-chiu Lai, *Chinese Culture and the Development of Chinese Christian Theology in Studies in World Christianity*, 2001, Vol 7, Issue 2. 229.

⁹ A very good example in this regard is that many Chinese classics have come back to classrooms and are being studied through public media such as a TV program called "Lecture Room" ("Bai Jia Jiang Tan" in Chinese).

Harmony and Immanuel: a Church of Inculturation:

No one is able, with certainty, to predict either the future of the Roman Catholic Church in China, nor anywhere else. However, based on the changes in the Church and the needs of the Chinese people, my expectation for the best image of Christ is of Immanuel, and of the ideal church, Harmony.¹⁰ Immanuel reveals God's self-giving love as well as the deepest human desire for God. Harmony, on the other hand, emphasizes relationships, with God, within the Church, and within the society.

In accordance with people's needs of security, identity and spirituality, I believe that incarnate Jesus is the best possible response to our needs. Nothing can be more reassuring than to know that "Christ died for us while we were still sinners" (Romans 5: 8). Through believing in such a God who "so loved the world that he gave his only Son," (John 3: 16) both security and identity can truly be bestowed upon Chinese Catholics. It is because of the mystery of Jesus' truly taking on our humanity that we come to be sure that "God is with us". Consequently, through the revelation of the Son, we can give thanks to God the Father for embracing us as his children. We are God's children and each of us is unique in God's eyes. The lost identity and security are therefore restored. Again, it is Jesus' paschal mystery that makes every single event in our daily life meaningful. Here the need of spirituality is met. Hence, while Confucianism is ethical, Daoism is philosophical, and Buddhism is spiritual, we can declare that our good news for the Chinese people is "God is with us"!

If a Savior - Immanuel can meet the particular needs of the Chinese people, a church of harmony is likewise able to fit into the contemporary social situation in China today and to be compatible with the central theme of the Chinese cultural tradition. What we need to keep in mind is that there has been a long history of misunderstandings and conflicts between Christianity and China, especially since the Rites Controversy (1792). Today, as China is gradually opening to the world, the Church in China should also be open to society, so that people can come to see the loving Christ whom they need. Missionaries now are no longer described in military terms as before, but dialogical instead. Donal Dorr uses "crusader model" and "commando model" to summarize the missionary model of "conquering for Christ" from 1850 to 1960, and suggests "explorers" and "ambassadors for Christ" as today's new models of discovering God's spirit working in different worlds, searching for mutual understanding and reconciliation.¹¹ In 1991, the universal Church issued a document entitled "*Dialogue and Proclamation*" which, emphasizing inter-religious dialogue, validates the efficacy of dialogue for today's evangelization. Dialogue is a harmonious start. In China, the church needs to be in dialogue with the tradition, with other religions, and even with the atheistic government. Dialogue demands us to investigate the differences in each other, but also leads us to explore the core of the truths that both sides hold. Yet, harmony does not mean compromising the essence of the good news; it is the true beauty of the Church, I think, when she is able to echo the inner communion of the Trinity.

¹⁰ I also found that current theological tendency is in strong favor of the ideas of Immanuel and harmony. By studying the mystery of incarnation theologians are more confident of "God is with us"; similarly, from Trinitarian perspective the loving unity within the Three Persons is emphasized and the harmonious relationship between trinity and human beings is also in view.

¹¹ See his book *Mission in Today's World*, (New York: Orbis Books, 2000), 186-188.

Examining the cultural and social background and the needs of people, we know all the changes are parts of the process of enculturation and my discussion is, above all, about a Church of inculturation. When it comes to the term inculturation, what immediately comes to mind may be the use of native language, paintings, music, and architecture. Today there are more and more indigenous arts being used in China, but they are not being generally accepted by Chinese Catholics because people have gotten used to western arts. In fact, as the history of the Church is one of inculturation, the true meaning of inculturation is far more than using native arts. True inculturation "occurs when there is a constant search for identification between Gospel and culture, and when there is mutual correction and adjustment between them".¹² Many theologians today have maintained that, decorated with Roman and Greek cultures, the western theologies are unfit to Asian situations.¹³ If so, the word enculturation can be boldly defined as "to let Christ, not Christianity, incarnate into a certain culture".¹⁴ A Chinese Protestant scholar, Wang Zhixin, even uses John 12: 24 to suggest that the shell of Western Christianity should die like the hull of grain of wheat and let Christ be reborn in a given cultural background.¹⁵ His idea may include the danger of losing the essence and identity of the true message of Christ, but what we know for sure is that Jesus, the true messenger, did his mission in an inclusive manner.¹⁶ We need to learn from Jesus and have confidence in the power of the Word of God since he is the foundation of our faith. In his book *Jesus through the Centuries: His Place in the History of Culture*, Jaroslav Pelikan maintains that the Word of God has helped many cultures to produce their ideal self-images:

*In seeking to know Jesus of Galilee they (different cultures) have come to know themselves, not as others say that they are, but as they truly are. This does not mean they have written a new gospel or merely adjusted the gospel to fit their needs, but that they discovered aspects of the gospel that others have not noticed or emphasized.*¹⁷

According to Pelikan, the realization of inculturation, the transcendence of a given culture, begins with the establishment of its unique dialogue with Jesus.

Conclusion:

The prerequisite of inculturation is to have a true knowledge of a given culture, but it is not easy to define contemporary Chinese culture. It is a kind of mixture of

¹² Laurenti Magesa, *Anatomy of Inculturation: Transforming the Church in Africa*, (New York: Orbis Books, 2004), 144-5.

¹³ Peter Phan, *In Our Own Tongues*, (New York: Orbis Books, 2003), 182.

¹⁴ John Paul II might be the first one who uses the word incarnate to describe the idea of inculturation, *Fede e cultura alla luce della Bibbia* (Turin, 1981), 5.

¹⁵ Wang Zhixin, "Discussion of Indigenization in the Chinese Church," in *The Search for Indigenization: Cultural Theories of Chinese Christianity in the 20th Century*, Dai Xiping and Zhuo Xinping, eds., (Beijing: China Radio and TV Publishers, 1999), 236.

¹⁶ Robert Schreiter suggests that in Jesus' mission there are three principles, inclusion, judgment, and conversion. Inclusion means to kindly treat and call the public sinners, the prostitutes and tax collectors. See his article, "A Framework for a Discussion of Inculturation," in *Mission in Dialogue: The Sedos Research Seminar on the Future of Mission*, (Orbis Book, 1982), 546.

¹⁷ Virgilio Elizondo, *A God of Incredible Surprises: Jesus of Galilee*, (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2003), 5.

Chinese tradition and western cultures because of western cultural influences after the country opened its doors in the 1980s. In addition, the political situation for the local church varies from place to place. However we understand the cultural and social background, one thing is certain, namely, that the Church faces challenges at all times. The challenges are from both the inside and the outside the Church. From the outside, standing between the traditional value system and modern ideology, Chinese are often confused and face tremendous challenges of materialism, consumerism more seriously than before. From the inside, the formation system for vocations needs improvement and there is a big gap between the old generation and the new both of clergy and laity.

These are just examples. I have confidence in the future of the Church in China because it belongs to God and it is the Holy Spirit who leads it. I am also convinced that challenges are often opportunities for a transformation of the church if we reflect on ourselves sincerely and depend on God humbly. As a Chinese priest I really feel privileged to have been a witness to this transitional period of the history of the Church in my country.