

# The Catholic Church in China: A New Chapter

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Throughout the turbulent history of Christianity in China, Christians have never numbered more than one per cent of China's total population, but Christianity has never died in China as many predicted it eventually would. One could argue that Christianity's influence in China has been greater than the proportion of its Christians might warrant. Some have argued that Christianity became strong when Chinese governments were weak. What we seem to be witnessing today in China, however, is a renewal of Christianity under a vital communist regime. That Christianity is in some ways becoming stronger today under a communist regime than it was before the communists is an irony of history which highlights both the promise and the burden of Christianity's presence in China. Today China is no less important in the history of Christianity than she was during Francis Xavier's or Matteo Ricci's time. There are one billion Chinese in China today and 25 million overseas Chinese. These numbers alone tell us of China's influence on and beneficial role for the future and the part that a culturally indigenous Chinese Christianity might play in that future. There is a new look about China today. What does Christianity look like? What has it looked like in the past?

## *The promise and burden of history*

The Nestorians first brought Christianity to China in the seventh century. The Franciscans John of Plano Carpini and John of Montecorvino followed them in the 13th century. An abandoned, half-starved, and freezing Francis Xavier died on China's doorstep in 1552 at Shangchuan Island, a Chinese-Portuguese trading post in the China Sea just seven miles from China's coast. Xavier's only companion at his death was a Chinese labourer. After Francis Xavier, twenty-five other Jesuits succeeded in gaining entrance to China, but the Chinese permitted none of them to stay.

One of the most famous westerners in China has been, and still is today, Matteo Ricci SJ. In 1583 Ricci succeeded in opening China's door to Christianity by means of western science and culture, but more

importantly by his own sensitive listening to Chinese scholars and his research into China's culture and heritage. In 1610, as he lay dying in Beijing, Ricci made a guarded prediction regarding the future of Christianity in China. To his Jesuit companions he said: "I leave before you a door open to great merits, but not without numerous dangers and much labour." When Ricci died there was a Christian community of 2,500 and the promise of a Chinese Christian church.

In the 19th century Buddhist clockmakers invoked Ricci as their patron. The contemporary Chinese press has often cited Ricci's beneficial influence upon China and his astute approach to Chinese culture. In so doing, the press and Chinese scholars changed their previous judgements. Some years ago the Chinese government restored Ricci's tomb in Beijing. The Chinese are fond of historical analogies. China's message to the West has been that westerners should learn from Ricci, for in Ricci there was and still is promise for sino-western rapport.

After Ricci's death, there was great promise for the church in China. Many influential Chinese became Christians. Among them was Paul Xu Guangqi, Grand Secretary to the Ming emperor. In March 1692 the Emperor Kangxi issued an "Edict of Toleration" establishing Christianity as a religion indigenous to China on a par with Buddhism, which had come to China from India. Kangxi's edict exacerbated a controversy which was going on within the Roman Catholic Church at that time known as the Chinese Rites Controversy, a conflict which centred around the religious or civil character of rituals honouring Confucius and ancestors. Angered by the papal legates Charles Tomas Maillard de Tournon (1703) and Charles Ambrose Mezzabarba (1720), both of whom the emperor judged to be interfering in China's state affairs, Kangxi revoked his edict in 1720. On 11 July 1742, after a long, complicated, bitter and tedious controversy, Benedict XIV issued *Ex Quo Singulari*, in which he suppressed the rites honouring Confucius and ancestor reverence. In his book *Generation of Giants*, George Dunne SJ, states: "... the Roman decisions came as a death blow to the cause of Christianity in China." Lacking imperial approval, Catholics in China suffered persecution from the mid-18th century to the mid-19th century. Due to the heroic efforts of the Chinese clergy, the church survived persecution.

On 29 August 1842, China signed the Treaty of Nanjing and reluctantly opened its doors to the West. Aided largely by unequal treaties, extra-territoriality, the opium trade, and gunboats, both Protestant and Catholic missionaries came to China in the 1840s and thereafter. In their desire for converts, Catholic missionaries often invoked Matteo Ricci's memory without necessarily following his missionary approach. Missionaries aided the Qing Dynasty against the millenarian Taiping rebels in the middle of the 19th century. The church survived the Boxer

Uprising of 1900 and the anti-Christian movements of the 1920s. On 28 October 1926, in an effort to render the church in China more indigenous by means of a native clergy, Pius XI ordained six Chinese priests as bishops. Japan's invasion of China during the 1930s brought incredible suffering to the whole of China. Pius XII solved the Chinese Rites Controversy in 1939 by declaring that the rites honouring Confucius and ancestors were civil ceremonies and not religious ceremonies. After the Second World War, the church began a vigorous effort to increase the influence of Catholicism in China, but when Mao Zedong established the People's Republic of China on 1 October 1949, the church entered yet another period of suffering.

What the church did for China may perhaps have helped in its own undoing, for it helped bring about Mao's revolution even though it opposed Mao and Mao opposed the church. As John King Fairbank has remarked, missionaries were pioneers in literacy movements, education, equality for women, the abolition of arranged child-marriages, new agricultural methods, hospitals, public health and public service organisations, and the dissemination of western knowledge whose purpose, as the Chinese themselves acknowledged, was to transform Chinese life and thus create a modern China. The church served the Chinese people. Mao Zedong challenged China "to serve the people". Mao Zedong, however, had a different philosophy and a different worldview.

#### *The Catholic Church in China: 1949-1985*

During the past thirty-five years, the Catholic Church in China has passed through five different periods, a fact which must be kept in mind in order to give an accurate interpretation of the various positions taken by members of the Chinese Catholic community. By keeping these five periods in mind, one may be able to catch a glimpse of the efforts which have been made within China to resolve the critical issues which confront the church at the present time. Great fear and anxiety characterised the first period, from 1949 to 1956. The Chinese government considered all Catholics to be reactionaries and enemies of China. In those days communists were anti-Catholic and Catholics were anti-communists. Both before and after 1949, many foreign missionaries and Chinese Christians were tortured, jailed, and killed.

The second period, 1956-1966, marked the beginning of the Three-Self Movement and the foundation of the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association (CCPA). The government instructed Catholics to accept the principle of the "Three Selves", self-government, self-administration, and self-propagation, in order that the church might be totally Chinese and totally independent from any foreign interference. During this period

communist authorities labelled the Vatican not only as a foreign political power, but also as a foreign power which within the recent history of China had worked in alliance with colonial powers against the interests of the Chinese people and the Communist Party. Under the aegis of patriotism the Chinese government forced Catholics to sever relations with the Holy See and to join the CCPA. Those who rejected the CCPA were either put in jail or went underground to become the "Church of Silence". Out of 28 Chinese bishops, five joined the CCPA. Of these five, some joined the CCPA because of pastoral expediency, in order to spare the Catholic faithful greater suffering. In their consciences they maintained their fidelity to the Holy See. Without Rome's approval some of these bishops ordained other bishops.

During the third period, 1966-1976, the period known as the Cultural Revolution, all members of the Catholic Church, and also members of other religions who had not been in jail, underwent persecution not because of their political views, but simply because they were believers. Religion itself became the target of the Red Guards. For ten long, chaotic years all Catholics, in fact all Christians and believers, because they were Christians or believers, embraced together the Mystery of the Cross.

The fourth period, 1976-1984, called a "New Era" by the United Front Department of the Chinese government, marked a liberalising change on the part of the government regarding religious activities. The Communist Party recognised freedom of religion, but remained firm within their communist ideology and ultimate atheistic objectives. The government sought to unite all believers as productive forces for the reconstruction of China. Party authorities forbade all activities they considered to be illegal and undercover, particularly all attempts by the Vatican to contact underground Catholics. At the same time, the government permitted friendly relations and fraternal exchanges with other local churches in foreign countries through open channels.

The fifth period, August 1984 to the present, inaugurated a period of even greater freedom. There were more open activities on the part of the Catholic Church, as well as a more positive stand on the part of the government toward religious people. "Document 19" (1984), issued by the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party on the "Religious Question", reflected the classical atheistic ideology of the party, but also reaffirmed the freedom of religious belief and gave three positive, practical directives to Catholics which are now being more fully implemented: (1) the rehabilitation of the Catholic faithful; (2) the restoration of places of worship; (3) the training of religious workers.\*

Soon after being liberated from prison and labour camps, or after

\*See *RCL* Vol. 12, No. 3, "Religious Policy in China and its Implementation in the Light of Document No. 19", by Peter Morrison.

observing their faith in the privacy of their homes, some Catholics began to worship in public. A greater number of bishops and priests resumed their pastoral ministries and cooperated with the Four Modernisations Movement (the modernisation of agriculture, industry, science and technology, and defence — *Ed.*). Some bishops and priests did not join the CCPA. More than three hundred churches have been restored and some buildings formerly belonging to religious groups have been returned for religious purposes. Seven CCPA seminaries in China are now in operation; vocations have increased. On 12 May 1985 the Sheshan Seminary, Shanghai diocese, broke ground to build a new seminary. Sheshan has over ninety seminarians and more young people have asked for admittance. Among the members of the Sheshan seminary faculty there are priests and at least one bishop who have spent long years in prison, but are not CCPA members.

China's Bureau of Religious Affairs has indicated that at present its main function is to facilitate the implementation of Document 19's practical directives and to provide the legal framework within which Catholics and other religious groups may publicly exercise religious freedom. All religious groups must contribute to China's economic development. The Bureau of Religious Affairs has opposed all undercover religious activities, and yet has recently been eager for more open dialogue in order to understand more fully the complexities of China's religious questions.

The CCPA has also indicated that it wants neither to be the embodiment of the Catholic Church in China, nor to be a schismatic movement attempting a formal separation from the universal church. Prominent members of the CCPA have tried very hard to be recognised as agents who stand for unity, mutual understanding, and reconciliation, not only because the government desires such a posture as being in the best interests of China, but also because CCPA members realise that this posture is in the best interests of both the local and the universal church. Some members of the CCPA are extremists, but a number of CCPA leaders have shown genuine pastoral concern and have given clearer signs of living, at least in their consciences, in communion with the Holy See. Their formal public statements against the Holy See do not always mean a formal rejection of the Holy See.

#### *Ways of being Catholic in contemporary China*

In the light of the most recent information, we see Chinese Catholics trying to respond to the calls of their consciences in a number of different ways. There are those who still practise their faith in the underground with great fervour and dedication. For doctrinal and canonical reasons, they avoid contact and liturgical participation with those whom they

suspect are illegitimate representatives of the Catholic Church. There are those who until very recently were in the underground, but now publicly participate in liturgical services offered in the open churches, services which in most cases the CCPA supervises. There are some bishops and priests who have never been members of the CCPA, but who are now allowed publicly to exercise their pastoral ministry. A few years ago this was not possible.

There are now more members of the CCPA who are actively involved in their organisation, but who at present display a greater concern for the integrity of their faith and the importance of communion with the church in Rome. For practical and pastoral reasons, many others prefer to practise their faith openly, but remain discreet in expressing their fidelity to the church in Rome. Finally, among the Chinese as in any other nation of the world, there are those elements, supposedly Catholic, who stay with Catholic organisations merely for material profit or for a variety of selfish motivations. Moreover, there are a few among the CCPA members who, out of conviction, or because of unfortunate past experiences, still bitterly resent the Vatican and strongly oppose any interference by the Holy See in Chinese church affairs.

Two major issues divide the church in China. The Beijing government has always insisted that the Vatican break its diplomatic relations with Taiwan, while the Vatican has maintained that it has the right to choose bishops for China. In spite of the old scars, unhealed wounds, and certain symptoms of internal malaise, the overall impression of the church in China is that Chinese Catholics today live in a climate that has slowly begun to bring them closer to one another by means of greater pastoral collaboration, mutual support, and Christian fellowship. The full story of the Chinese church remains to be told. It is a church which has suffered greatly. Some priests in China still remain in jail. Union among Catholics remains a delicate matter, but although their ecclesial communion may appear in different shades and with different visible manifestations, recent events have shown that Chinese Catholics are seriously engaged in a renewed and consistent effort to remain one church.

#### *China: A new challenge to the whole church*

The extremely delicate situation of the church in China, where the unity and integrity of the Christian community on Chinese soil is at stake, brings a new challenge to the universal church. The situation of the church in China is complex, multi-faceted, and open to contradictory interpretations. The contemporary situation of the church in China has perhaps no precedent in the history of the church. Here we have a small but vital Catholic community in the midst of an immense, non-Christian world with a philosophy and culture so different from our own, and yet

this Catholic community exists and continues to grow under a very progressive and vital communist regime.

Regarding this unique ecclesial situation of the church in China, certain questions must be asked. What are our perceptions of the changes taking place in Chinese politics and what is actually taking place? How do the Chinese understand the relationship between religion and politics? What type of relationship is to be expected between the church and the Chinese communist state? How are we affected by those incidents of pre-communist China which linked the church to colonial powers? To what extent are we still affected by the suffering and death of both missionaries and Chinese Christians? As westerners, are we able to set aside our own assumptions regarding the means Chinese Catholics choose to effect reconciliation among themselves? What are our ecclesiological assumptions about the ways by which the local church of China can become truly culturally indigenous? When and where must caution be used and when and where must trust be offered and accepted? To what extent are all of us as a Christian community able and willing to forgive one another?

The answers to these and other questions call for creativity, imagination, and a great vision. A partial answer to these questions, as well as a source for creativity, imagination, and a great vision, can be found in the example of Matteo Ricci. Commemorating the fourth centenary of Matteo Ricci's arrival in China, Pope John Paul II addressed the concluding session of the International Ricci Studies Congress held in Rome at the Gregorian University on 25 October 1982. The Pope praised Ricci as a "true humanist, gifted with philosophical, theological, and artistic culture, and equipped with a notable store of mathematical, astronomical and geographical knowledge and techniques which were among the most advanced of the times. He succeeded in acquiring, through determined, humble and respectful commitment, such a vast and profound knowledge of the classic Chinese culture as to make him a true 'bridge' between the European and Chinese civilisations." Ricci's success, John Paul II continued, came as the result of "a long and demanding period of cultural preparation and a profound process of inculturation in the Chinese world." The Pope concluded his address by stating that, "despite the misunderstandings and difficulties which have taken place in the past," the bridge between the church and China "still appears solid and safe," one which can be employed for "adequate structures" in order to "resume dialogue" between the church and China. The Pope appealed to Ricci's restored tomb in Beijing as a symbol of dialogue: "The tomb of Matteo Ricci in Beijing brings to mind the grain of wheat hidden in the earth in order to bear abundant fruit. It constitutes an eloquent appeal, both to Rome and to Beijing, to resume that dialogue begun by him four hundred years ago with so much love and so

much success.”

Chinese Catholics themselves have begun to write a new chapter in the history of the church in China. The signs we now see may well be the first fruits of the many seeds scattered underground by hundreds of Chinese Catholics all over Chinese soil during the long years of their Paschal Mystery. Chinese Catholics have determined that “the grain of wheat hidden in the heart of the earth”, referred to by John Paul II, will in the future be Chinese grain in Chinese earth. They desire not the church in China, but a Chinese Church. Franklin C. Woo, Director of the China Program of the United States National Council of Churches, has put the matter well. The Chinese desire to be “truly Christian and truly Chinese”, “truly Chinese in a Christian context”.

John Paul II has continued his overtures to China. On 24 July 1985, an American television crew filmed the Pope as part of a documentary on the West which will be shown on television in China during the spring of 1986. Speaking in English, the Pope said: “The Church is sympathetic to the commitment to modernisation and progress in which the Chinese people are engaged. This was the attitude of the famous Matteo Ricci when he came into contact with China. I am sure that those Chinese who are followers of Jesus Christ, as was Matteo Ricci, will contribute to the common good of their own people by practising the virtues which are taught by the Gospel and which are highly esteemed in the centuries-old Chinese tradition, such as justice, charity, moderation, wisdom, and a sense of fidelity and loyalty.” The Chinese government appeared not to have remained deaf to the Pope’s overtures, for when John Paul II visited the tiny African country of Togo on 8 August 1985, among the diplomats who greeted him at the airport were the First Secretary of the Chinese embassy, as well as the North Korean ambassador to Togo.

There continue to be other signs of reconciliation. In 1984, Cardinal Jaime Sin of the Philippines and Mother Teresa visited China. In 1985, Hong Kong’s Bishop John-Baptist Wu, the first Hong Kong bishop to visit China since 1949, went to China at the invitation of the Bureau of Religious Affairs. A delegation of eight Chinese, led by Bishop Jin Luxian SJ, auxiliary of Shanghai, visited the Philippines from 18-29 June and Hong Kong from 15-25 July 1985, another first since 1949. In June 1985, Beijing and the Vatican agreed to share their astronomical expertise and technology. On 3 July 1985, 84-year old Bishop Ignatius Gong Pinmei received a parole from the Shanghai People’s Supreme Court. Appointed Bishop of Shanghai in 1950 by Pius XII, Bishop Gong had been in prison for thirty years. At the invitation of the Shanghai diocese and the government’s Religious Affairs Bureau, a delegation of three Maryknoll priests, led by their Superior General, Father William Boteler, met Bishop Gong in October 1985, marking the first time the bishop had met a foreign group since his release from prison. Bishop



Gong served part of his sentence with Maryknoll's second superior-general, Bishop James Edward Walsh, who was released from a Shanghai prison in 1970. These same Maryknoll priests were also the first foreigners permitted to speak to the Sheshan seminarians of the Shanghai Diocese. Also in October, Bishop Arquimínio Rodrigues da Costa of Macau visited China and met Bishop Gong.

At the invitation of the Catholic University of Louvain, CCPA Bishops Tu Shihua of Hanyang, Francis Wang Xueming of Huhetot and the Autonomous Mongolian Region, and Michael Fu Tieshan of Beijing visited Belgium from 1-13 November 1985. In December 1985, Father Jerome Heyndrickx, CICM, former Vicar General of the Scheut Fathers and now of the Verbist Foundation in Belgium, gave lectures on Vatican II to the Sheshan seminarians, the first time a foreign guest lecturer had been invited to speak on a theological topic. At a meeting with the bishops of Taiwan on 8 November 1985, John Paul II said he hoped obstacles to union among Chinese Catholics would be removed. There have been and will continue to be academic contacts and exchanges, as well as those small but important people-to-people contacts with China by overseas Chinese and foreigners.

Forecasting China's future has in the past led to disappointment. Reconciliation within the Chinese community and without will be a slow process. Differences still run deep and time is needed for flexibility to develop. Setbacks may occur. Political styles in China change. Very important for the Catholic Church is the success of Deng Xiaoping's economic and political reforms. For some, forgetting the traumas of the past will be very difficult, and yet, if one looks carefully at what is happening in China today, one cannot but see the beginnings of a new situation of the Catholic Church in China. Many signs point toward a greater readiness on the part of many Chinese Catholics and Catholics of other local churches for greater harmony and reconciliation. Drawing upon the insights of Francis Xavier, his Jesuit superior Alessandro Valignano, and his own experience in China, Matteo Ricci, very early in his 17-year journey from China's coast to Beijing, perceived that the Chinese would never accept a foreign or a foreign-seeming religion. That insight was one he maintained during his nine years in Beijing and which he left to his Jesuit companions. Ricci's insight still holds true today. Of the task confronting the Roman Catholic Church in China today, Father Jerome Heyndrickx has written:

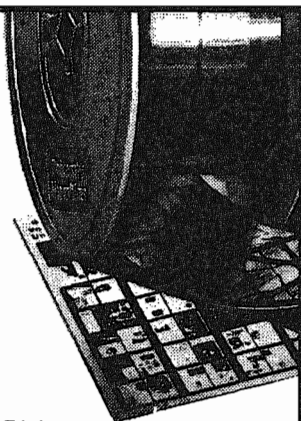
The Church is entering a new era. Her opportunities today are of a different nature than those of the time of Matteo Ricci, much different even from those of the time before 1949. Yet, what are the opportunities that the present offers? They are to be found in the picture of history that lies before us at this

moment. We must learn to interpret that picture well.<sup>1</sup>

The door Matteo Ricci opened in China is still "open to great merits, but not without numerous dangers and much labour."

<sup>1</sup>Jerome Heyndrickx, CICM, "Jesus Bent Down and Started to Write on the Ground with His Finger," *Tripod*, 13 (February, 1983), p. 86.

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