

Challenges and Perspectives for the Church in China: A Theological Reading

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First Part: A Second Chinese Council?

This year [2024] many of us are reflecting on the legacy of the First Chinese Council, also known as the Council of Shanghai, celebrated one hundred years ago [1924].

It was an important event for the Catholic Church in China and it is meaningful even today for the Chinese and universal Church. It opened the way to the Church's indigenization, i.e. entrusting its leadership to the local clergy; and inculturation, i.e. expressing the faith through local cultural forms. It is also an anticipated exercise of Synodality, the path in which Pope Francis wants to lead the Church today and for the future.

I found remarkable the very name of the ecclesial event: "First Chinese Council." Synod and Council, even if today have different canonical connotations, have in reality the same meaning: the first is a Greek word; the second is a Latin one.

When, then, will there be a Second Chinese Council? I mean: when will the people of God, bishops and other members of the Church, meet, in communion with the Bishop of Rome, to discuss matters of the life of faith?

I understand that this might sound like a dream. Similarly, one hundred years ago many, or most ecclesiastics considered the Council of China not necessary and impossible. Yet it took place, thanks to courageous persons that today we describe as prophets. And today there is a great need for them, as there are urgent challenges that call for action by the people of God.

1. Young People

Many observers, parents, teachers and educators say that there is an emergency today: the young people. All over the world, young people experience fragility and emotional instability. The Covid crisis has had a major impact on people's lives, especially the younger generation. Or maybe the pandemic has accelerated and amplifies the process: in cities and

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nations around the world, young people are emotionally, psychologically and structurally fragile. The young people know also that in China as in many countries, supporting the aging population is falling on their shoulders.

Friends teaching in Beijing recently told me that, unfortunately, discontentment, inner anger, hostility towards the world and depression leading occasionally to suicide are widespread among young people in their early years of university. They are the ones who have emerged from an adolescence spent in Covid lockdowns.

Many of them know that they will not find a job after graduation, and face their university years with deep uncertainty. Until a few years ago, this was not the case: it was difficult to get into university, but then you came out with an assured career. The authorities now recommend teachers not to be too strict towards students, but rather to evaluate their academic performance with great generosity.

All modern metropolises around the world, including the Chinese metropolises, share the fatigue of these difficult years and the uncertainty of a generation struggling with the difficulty of continuing to live.

Some social and existential emergencies have no boundaries, and even transcend political systems and their ideologies. Chinese children are more like their peers around the world than their older compatriots. The issue that needs urgent action: Church, faiths and public institutions should collaborate on this critical matter.

2. Migration, Emigration and the Transmission of the Faith

Talking about the life in the metropolis. Large-scale, rural-to-urban migration has generated a certain gap between rural and urban Catholicism. The former, which tends to be traditional and devotional, often cannot cope with the disorientation generated by moving away from one's own Catholic village. Away from their familiar liturgical schedule and from their village church, some faithful loose the practice of their faith.

Christians in the cities are more open to modernity and attentive to the spiritual dimension of life in crowded metropolises. Two different sensibilities of living Christian faith that must be in dialogue.

I wonder if the number of persons attending the Mass, in the past few years, is decreasing in Chinese cities. As in other world metropolises, churches are crowded not only by locals, but by foreigners as well. And I fear that the transmission of the faith to the younger generations is rather difficult, as it is everywhere in the world. Secularization is the major cause; Covid was an accelerating factor.

Innovative initiatives for evangelization should be devised for many Chinese living or travelling abroad, where the opportunities to encounter the Christian faith are much greater.

3. Interculturality

In 1994, Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger suggested to the Asian bishops gathered in Hong Kong to consider the complexity of the relationship between faith and cultures, describing evan-

gelization as inter-culturality. Indeed: the relationship between faith, mission and cultures is made even more difficult today by the complexity of cultures.

In the same village, in the same town, in the same community, in the same family, many cultures coexist. Not only that, post-modern and post-human contexts suggest that different and ever-changing cultures co-exist within each of us. We are multi-cultural persons.

The gospel has to be announced in cities and societies where many cultures and many religions coexist. With some exceptions, there is little creative blending of today's cultures, the manifestations of the faith and the liturgy. There is a need for theological and pastoral reflections and renewed practices, to facilitate the faithful to express faith in a way congenial with their daily lives.

4. All Missionaries in the Synodal Church

The destiny of the mission and of the Church is the same. The mission generates the Church, not the other way around. The challenge of today is no longer entrusting leadership to local clergy, like 100 years ago in Shanghai, but rather a profound reform of the Church's mission: mission needs to be given back to those to whom it belongs, namely to the baptized, to the holy people of God.

All members of the people of God, every baptized person, no matter whether they are women or men; young, little or old; no matter their ministry or charism; all have the same dignity, the dignity of children of God and of disciples of Jesus. Thanks to the grace of baptism, we are all conformed to Jesus king, priest and prophet. The grace of baptism is the beginning and the source of all vocations, charisms and ministries. The rest comes after, and is secondary. Each baptized person is a Christian, i.e. has the same name of Christ, is another Christ.

We are all kings, priests and prophets. Christians are kings, that is, authoritative leaders in the community, in imitation of Jesus the good shepherd. Christians are priests, that is, capable of giving our lives to God, in imitation of Christ, the one and only priest. Christians are prophets, that is, missionaries who proclaim the word of the gospel of peace. As the name implies, to be a Christian is to be another Christ.

If the Church were to act consequently on this doctrine, which is unassailable because inscribed in the faith of baptismal grace, the Church would already be entirely different and live an entirely different mission. It would be a synodal Church, where all are treated equally, because imbued by the same dignity.

Even if there are fewer traditional missionaries today, even if there are no foreign missionaries to China, mission will not die, as it comes from God and belongs to God: it is *missio Dei*.

Mission is not a "machine that makes Christians" (Blessed Paolo Manna) and is not taking people from the camp of the adversaries and bringing them into ours. Mission is sharing the joy of friendship with Jesus with people. Mission is a gift, and its beginning is our friendship with Jesus.

I like looking at the widespread, spontaneous and the diffused nature of various forms of mission. Young persons who study abroad have a chance to be missionaries, even without preaching. Caregivers who enter into foreign families have the chance of entering into

the heart of people as well. Merchants who travel to foreign countries to place their products can be missionaries as were early Christian missionaries, who often were merchants. Workers who migrate from one country to another should not forget their faith but share it. Mothers who connect with other mothers should share about their faith. Young people who have even only one summer, can offer it as volunteers to help disadvantaged people, as Jesus suggests in Matthew chapter 25.

There is only one way to be disciples of Jesus: being missionaries. To be missionaries before being ready; before being sure of one's faith; before the Church is good as we hope for (I am paraphrasing here don Lorenzo Milani). Missionaries simply because we are Christians and trust in Jesus.

Second Part: Inspiration and Reflection from the Recent Past

1. Is Christianity Fever Over?

We mentioned above about the transmission of the faith in China. Let's look at what happened in the past decades, hoping for something new that will respond to new challenges.

Observers on Chinese religious affairs have recorded the phenomenon of "Christianity fever," i.e. the growing of Christian presence in the midst of the exponential growth of religions, recorded since the 1980s. Government scholar-officials such as Li Pingye adopted the term to describe the new phenomenon. The peak of the "fever" was in the last decade of the last century and the growth continued in the first years of the present one. The PEW Research Center (Washington), an authoritative Study Centre for religious demography, stated that Christianity, in its various forms, especially the irregular, charismatic and Pentecostal ones, reached nearly 70 million, or about 5% of the over 1,400,000,000 inhabitants. Christianity grew especially in the cities, among young university students and the new entrepreneurial class.

Bible sharing groups were thriving in universities, while one of the most enterprising and wealthy cities in China, Wenzhou (in Zhejiang province), is called the "Jerusalem of China," Christians exceed 20% of the population, and represent the group most committed to economic success. The expansion of evangelical Christianity in that city is proportional to that of business.

The Christianity fever had raised hopes in various circles of international Christianity for a Christian future for China. Even with misplaced hopes and narration not supported by evidence. A fantastical and largely unlikely and unproven narrative was proposed by books such as *Jesus in Beijing* by *Time Magazine* journalist David Aikman (2003). The subtitle of Aikman's book was quite significant: *How Christianity Is Transforming China and Changing the Global Balance of Power*. The transformation of China into a Christian country is a fantasy that responds more to the ideology of the American right-wing Christian groups than with factuality. Yet, it serves the ideologies of both those who consider Christianity a tool of conquest; and those within China who suspect plots and conspiracies beyond those who genuinely believe in the Gospel of peace, and only wish to share it without ulterior motives.

Christianity was growing not thanks to, but despite government policy. In fact, since 2015, and especially 2018, Christian groups have been on the receiving end of attention by authorities, starting with the symbolic city of Wenzhou, where many crosses and churches were removed. And now, as I mentioned above about the decline of church attendance, I am afraid the phenomenon of Christianity fever is significantly diminished.

2. Cultural Christians

We mentioned above the issue of inter-culturality. From the 1990s until a decade ago, centers for the study of Christianity flourished in China, led by so-called “cultural Christians,” i.e. scholars who were sympathetic to the Christian faith and adhered to it spiritually and ideally. It was a season of openness to faiths, and to Christianity in particular, and it was truly promising. Many of them stayed out of the church, just like Simone Weil, their prototype (even if the present author believed that Simone Weil was baptized before her death).

The irregular and anti-institutional character of Simone Weil’s Christian faith attracted the attention of the intellectual Liu Xiaofeng. After studying in Switzerland and meeting Christianity, Liu directed the Tao Feng Shan Institute of Sino-Christian Studies in Hong Kong (early 1990s). He himself invented the term “Cultural Christians,” and elected Simone Weil as their prototype.

The term Cultural Christian has today almost fallen into disuse, after a considerable success for twenty years in the last decade of the last century and the first of the current one. Cultural Christians were touched by Christianity on a personal level: it became an orientation for personal, moral and even spiritual life. They did not necessarily join a Christian church asking for baptism. Some, instead, privileged the mystical dimension of faith. Others, influenced by liberal readings, consider the church a product of history, an institution that kills the spirit. They remain “cultural” Christians rather than “ecclesial” Christians, because they know that the official Christian communities, both Protestant and Catholic, are under political supervision.

Christian scholars promote Sino-Christian theology and its spiritual, ethical and social tasks with great commitment. In the search for a new morality and spiritual society, not all the answers were coming from socialist civilization. While Cultural Christians talking about religion in the streets or in the university no longer provoked mockery or ridicule; on the contrary, it was considered respectful and fashionable.

Scholars belonging to academic centers of the People’s Republic of China had preferred not to give themselves this title, so as not to incur the suspicion of the political authorities, who allow the development of such studies as long as they remain within the scope of exclusively academic activity. The intellectuals concerned preferred to adopt the term “Scholars of Christianity in Mainland China.”

In the last few years, the government distrust for religion and new limits to religious activities, placing it under strict control, have lessened the space for these overtures.

Political Confucianism claims, today, to be the only expression of the Chinese thought, creating new difficulties for scholars of Sino-Christian theology. The prospects of theology in China are therefore hopeful and uncertain at the same time, yet I hope this will not be the end of a season of academic and theological exchange.

3. A Man of Dialogue

I would like to conclude by remembering a man of dialogue, hoping that more persons like him will continue to connect China and Christianity.

Last year [2023] many of us mourned the passing of Professor Ren Yanli, from the National Academy of Social Sciences, a man I considered a friend. He was a protagonist of dialogue between China, Catholicism and the Vatican. He was not a Cultural Christian, but rather a scholar of Catholicism within Mainland academia. He was a member of the historical commission for the beatification of Matteo Ricci (2010–2013) which I presided. He was respected for his sincerity, cordiality and tenacity in a territory not without pitfalls and difficulties. He did not believe that dialogue means to give up or give in to one's principles.

He worked unsparingly to shorten or reconcile differences between China, the Catholic world and the Vatican: a mediator, a man who united rather than dividing. More than ever, we need men who unite and not divide; we need bridge-builders and not saboteurs. We need believers in the common humanity that unites men and women “under the same heaven.”

Finally, let me turn to Mary Help of Christians, venerated by Chinese Catholics at the Shrine of Sheshan, in Shanghai. To her we entrust freedom justice and peace in China and the world.