

The Catholic Church in Nanjing

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It was drizzling when we arrived in Nanjing. It had been drizzling ever since we left Beijing and everyone was tired after the long trip by train from Loyang. But a full afternoon awaited us. Before we left from Japan, it had already been arranged that we would pay a visit to the Nanjing Union Theological Seminary. The reception we met on that afternoon of 18 September was truly a warm and memorable one. Although we had not made any arrangement beforehand with the Catholic Church because of an uncertain schedule, we made inquiries at the Protestant Seminary about the possibility of visiting the Catholic Church later in the afternoon. One of the staff at the Seminary immediately offered his service by making a telephone call to the Catholic Cathedral. The answer was immediate and touching: a cordial welcome would be awaiting us at the Catholic Cathedral.

The Catholic Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception is situated at 112 Shigu Road, a small side-street not far from the Nanjing Union Theological Seminary. Apparently the Cathedral was not very well known to most people, including our local guide and the coach driver. In fact, when they were given the address, they thought they knew where it was but ended up at a Protestant Church on the main street. Providentially we ran into a member of the staff of the Nanjing Union Theological Seminary while we were pondering which course to follow, and he kindly walked us to the Cathedral.

Fr. Joseph Liu Yuan-Ren, the Parish Priest of the Cathedral and Mr. Zhu Shi-zhang, Secretary to the Bishop, were already waiting for us at the entrance of the Cathedral with outstretched hands. After greeting the group, Fr. Liu, who visited Hong Kong only shortly before in July as a member of the Catholic Delegation from Shanghai, took us to visit the Cathedral. After a short prayer before the Blessed Sacrament in front of the High Altar, we were ushered to the Sacristy.

In the Sacristy, there were laid open for our inspection a very finely ornamented Monstrance, two chalices, and a Reliquary. Father Liu (whose acquaintance I made when he visited Hong Kong) explained that all these vessels were antiques dating from 1812, though the Cathedral itself had only been con-

structed in 1870. Astonished, the group inquired how these items could have escaped the vandalism of the Cultural Revolution. Father Liu explained that at the height of the Cultural Revolution and just a short time before the Red Guards came to ravish the Cathedral, the priests in charge of the Cathedral were forewarned by some Government officials of the possible rampage. They immediately packed all these vessels together with the vestments and passed them onto the Government officials that very same night. The officials hid them in an underground vault at the Government office. When the Red Guards came in the next day, the usual vandalism and desecration of religious places took place, but the sacred vessels and vestments were already safely hid. When the Cathedral was reopened in 1981, the Government sent back the whole lot, untarnished, to the Cathedral.

Father Liu, who is also Professor of Moral Theology at the Regional Seminary at Zhoshe, Shanghai, was the only priest on hand for the entire city of Nanjing. From Monday to Friday he has to give lectures in Shanghai, and on Saturday and Sunday returns to the Nanjing Cathedral, the only Catholic Church in the city. With him at the Cathedral was also Bishop Joseph Qian Hui-Min, former Vicar General of the Diocese of Haiman, not far from Shanghai. (Before being appointed Parish Priest of the Cathedral, Father Liu had also served as a diocesan priest from the Haiman Diocese.) Bishop Qian was consecrated Bishop in July, 1981 in Beijing.

The Bishop greeted us in the parlor. After a brief introduction, we were given a frank account of the state of the church in the Diocese of Nanjing. Nanjing, the Bishop explained, is one of the four dioceses in the Province of Jiansu. The total Catholic population in these four dioceses is approximately 14,000; the largest Catholic community is located in the diocese of Wuxi, some 200 kilometers south-east of Nanjing. The city of Nanjing has only some 1,200 faithful and the whole of the Diocese is served by only 9 priests and one Bishop. Faced with the obvious need for more young pastors, the diocese has set as one of the priorities the promotion of vocations to the priesthood. It was consoling to learn that at present, there are five seminarians studying at the Regional Seminary in Shanghai for the Nanjing diocese. There are also some religious sisters under training in Suzhou.

Since the devastating years of the Cultural Revolution, and with the Government's implementation of the policy on freedom of Religions the very first priority of the Church is to restore places of worship for the faithful. Since the city of Nanjing does not have many Catholics, the only Church that has been reopened so far is the Catholic Cathedral. This having been completed, the next task is the training of seminarians and the formation of the faithful.

Before the Cultural Revolution, there seemed to have been little or no cooperation and meeting among the various religions. With the present policy, and under the coordination of the Bureau of Religious Affairs, leaders and representatives of the various religions have more dialogue with one another than ever before. These leaders and representatives have also been appointed to

Consultative Committees of the Government at various levels. Bishop Qian saw it as a genuine sign of Christian love and respect for the religious beliefs of others that Christians are willing to share in all aspects of social life with people of other faith or of no religious faith. He explained that even though the government ideology does not admit of a God, the government does give every individual the freedom to believe. As a gesture of ecumenism, Father Joseph Liu was invited by the Nanjing Union Theological Seminary to lecture on the Catholic church—something that could not have happened previously!

Bishop Qian, Father Liu and Mr. Zhu accepted our invitation to join us for dinner at the Jinling Hotel's Revolving Restaurant, where the exchange of ideas continued in a very informal setting under soft candlelight and looking out over the distant skyline of the Nanjing City—a very memorable evening indeed!

From what we were able to discern, criteria for the selection of candidates for seminary training are something peculiar to China. Aside from the usual requirements of age, health, academic level and good intention, candidates are also required to be from an “old Catholic family,” i.e. from a family that has been Catholic for at least for one or two generations. If a candidate is himself newly baptized or comes from a “new Catholic family,” he would first have to be observed by the parish priest for two years before being considered for entrance into the seminary. The restrictions are understandable if one recalls that for many years all signs and activities of religion had been practically eradicated from the face of the country so that religious faith and practice could only survive if passed down through family tradition and practice.

The other great task that faces the Church in China is that of the formation of the faithful. Even though there are many who kept the faith through family traditions and practice, not many knew enough of the doctrine or were able to grow in their faith. In the course of discussing this issue, the pros and cons of minor seminaries were brought up. On the one hand, it was felt that through the minor seminary system more young men could be exposed to an intensive training in the Catholic doctrine and given the chance to think more deeply about the priestly vocation. On the other, it was clear that the theology and study of religion requisite to growth in the faith should not be confined or even focused mainly on those in the seminary. To do so would create the mistaken impression that theology and the study of religion were something meant only for priests and religious. As elsewhere in the world, so too in China, training in theology and in various topics of faith need to be organized outside of the seminary for lay faithful. By participating in such courses, many more will come to know and understand their faith better and to articulate their religious belief better both in word and in deed.

It was always his wish, the Bishop told us, that one day Christianity would be accepted as part of the nation's life, and not as something alien to Chinese customs and mentality. Today, as in the past, Christianity is still considered a “foreign” and “western” religion. But by being a totally independent Church

free of all outside interference, it is hoped that Christianity will gradually become part of the wider Chinese tradition and emerge as something really Chinese, and something which the Chinese people can claim as their own.

It was on that crescendo that our conversation came to an end, leaving us sorry to take leave of one another. As we walked out of hotel together, the words of the scriptures flashed before my mind: "...Unless a wheat grain falls on the ground and dies, it remains only a single grain; but if it dies, it yields a rich harvest." Does not China point to a new dimension of this beautiful saying of the Master?

It was still drizzling when we left Nanjing...