

THE CHINESE CHURCH UNDER COMMUNISM¹

A. SOHIER

THE Holy See, ten years ago, re-established the Catholic hierarchy in China, shortly after the creation of the first Chinese cardinal, His Eminence Cardinal Thomas Tien.² Three of the nineteen archbishops, including those of the capital, Nanking, and the national cultural centre, Peking, were native Chinese. Twenty-nine of the hundred and forty-five ecclesiastical territories (dioceses and apostolic prefectures) were governed by native Chinese.

A long, exhausting war had just ended; a war from which the nation had emerged morally enhanced but materially handicapped. The native clergy were comparatively numerous (2,500 priests) and able to assume ever-increasing responsibility. The missionaries who had been interned by the Japanese resumed their work with fresh enthusiasm and missionary reinforcements began to arrive. It was easy to imagine that the evangelization of China, whose population represents a quarter of humanity, would continue to receive the fullest support from nearly all missionary congregations and societies.³ The members of these missionary groups come from all the European countries, except the Orthodox ones, from North America, and even from South America (Colombia). The chances for the increase of Christianity seemed good, in spite of the civil war and the Communist occupation of vast northern and central areas where religious activity was restricted.

The existence of the Catholic Church was generally very much better known than before the war, and, in spite of the survival of old prejudices concerning *yang-kiao* (foreign beliefs), it often received sympathetic consideration. Reliable periodicals began to appear again and new ones were successfully launched. The latter included a Chinese monthly and an English bi-monthly for the clergy. The Internuncio organized the Catholic Centre Bureau in Shanghai. Its function was to co-ordinate ideas on the missionary

1 Translation of an article from *Vie Intellectuelle* for July 1956.

2 We say 're-established' because, without counting the period of Jean de Montcorvin in the Middle Ages, there had been bishoprics at Peking and Nanking since the seventeenth century, until they were eliminated by the spreading of the system of Vicars Apostolic last century.

3 Excluding, of course, the specifically African societies like the White Fathers and the African Missions of Lyons.

approach and to try to achieve, on a grand scale, the publication of sound, well-written Catholic books.

Cardinal Tien founded the St Thomas Institute at Peking, and the Jesuits set themselves to modernize their publications. More and more missionary congregations could be seen in different towns, and notably in Peking, working easily with the diocesan clergy instead of retaining an exclusive apostolic field for themselves, as had happened in the recent past. An improvement through this sharing of experience was bound to lead to greater efficiency.

At the end of 1947, however, the Communist armies advanced into new regions and began to occupy the towns. The end of October, 1948, saw the taking of Mukden and this was followed by the 'liberation' of the whole of Manchuria. The Christians knew that elsewhere in the Red zone churches had been destroyed or converted into public halls and shops. Priests, they knew, had been molested and publicly accused; most of the nuns had been dispersed and many of them had been forced to marry. All the big northern and central towns were crammed with refugees, who included priests and nuns. Despite the continuance of religious practice in certain areas and despite the proclamations concerning 'the protection of religions' made by the Popular Army chiefs, the military successes of the latter were no more reassuring to the Protestants than they were to the Catholics.

Nevertheless, the Catholics accepted in principle the directive to remain where they were. The only evacuations that took place—southwards and then abroad—were of sick missionaries, some new arrivals as yet unfamiliar with the language and traditions of the country, and, to prevent the interruption of their studies, a fairly large number of seminarians. Some Chinese priests who had been in trouble with the Communists or with their secret agents also went abroad; others, already abroad, stayed there, as happened to Cardinal Tien, who had been seriously ill for some months in Hongkong.

At the end of January, 1949, the Communist troops entered Tientsin and Peking. Before the middle of the year they seized Nanking, Shanghai and the whole central area. A few months later Canton and Szechwan were taken over, and with the Nationalists now in Formosa, the Communist Party was virtually master of the Chinese continent. It proclaimed itself, on October

I, the government of the Popular Republic of China.

Here and there, during this time, some missionary residences and churches had been occupied by the troops and by the administration. Nuns had been expelled from their convents and schools. But, by and large, there had been no particular difficulty for the clergy, no notable violence, and very little disorder. It was just what was expected by those who knew Communist tactics and quite contrary to what was feared by the people. If disorders arise, they are usually well planned in advance.

Religious instruction, however, became quite impossible in the secondary schools where the imposed 'teachers of politics' gradually took over all the education and switched to an atheistic approach. There was, temporarily at least, more scope in the primary schools, but the trend there too was towards the suppression of every religious element. The system of study circles was introduced into offices, the civil service and the like. Criticisms of reactionary and middle-class ideas often assumed an anti-religious bias; open hints in the country, more subtle ones in the large towns, tended to scare those who frequented these centres of culture.

After a brief moment of confusion, Chinese Christianity closed its ranks again. It took advantage, after this stock-taking of its beliefs, of the possibility of action which still remained for propagating the faith with more enthusiasm. The rôle of the laity in these schemes can never be praised adequately. They took the lead in organizing religious courses, in eagerly seeking out books on doctrine, in reading these books themselves and in persuading non-Christians to read them. Retreats increased and everyone became aware of the responsibility of the apostolate. Many reacted to Communist pressure like the young woman, a teacher in a non-Christian school, who declared to her parish priest: 'Religion was criticized in our study sessions. They wanted to draw us away from it. Then I thought about my grandfather who was martyred in the Boxer rising. I wanted to be worthy of him. I shall never again miss Mass on Sunday as I have often done in the past. Please help me to learn more about our religion.' And she added, 'My brother-in-law is still a pagan. I'll bring him to you. He must be converted and baptized.' He was, in fact, received into the Church a year later.

The clergy, too, improved its methods, particularly in increas-

ing the number of libraries and in encouraging more frequent reception of the sacraments.

It was in this climate that the Legion of Mary took on an extraordinary development. This organization of the direct apostolate, based on a strong devotion to our Lady, is of Irish origin. It had established some small groups in central China shortly before the Japanese invasion. Scattered groups had appeared just after the war in different towns, notably at Tientsin. In 1948, on the instructions of the Internuncio, Mgr Riberi, Fr MacGrath toured the country to make the Legion of Mary better known. It was only a beginning. In Peking, for instance, there were fifteen *praesidia* (groups of twelve to twenty members) at the time of the change of the régime; by the end of 1949 there were sixty; in March, 1951, their number had reached one hundred and five, not counting those which, still in their infancy, had not been officially recognized by their superiors. One *senatus* of the Legion for each nation is the general rule, but in China there have been six *senatus* since the summer of 1950.

The Church, meanwhile, had increased numerically and improved in organization. The creation of a new bishopric entrusted to the Chinese clergy at Funing (Fukien) before the 'liberation' had been followed by the creation of the diocese of Soochow (between Shanghai and Nanking). Chinese prelates had been appointed successively to the archbishoprics of Shenyang (Mukden) and Canton, as well as to the very important see of Shanghai (Mgr Kong). There was little delay in transferring the diocese of Siwantze to the Chinese clergy, while the same was proposed for the archdiocese of Chungking, etc. The problem of becoming truly indigenous doubtless remained in several religious bodies, even in those where there was a strong proportion of Chinese members, but good progress had been achieved among some, particularly in the Society of Jesus. Besides all this, although a truly Catholic daily paper or periodical had become practically impossible, the publication of books of apologetics multiplied; a weekly parish bulletin was still published in Peking between October, 1950 and April, 1951, with a circulation of more than 5,000. Small picture books (the New Testament, lives of the martyrs, etc.) appeared with great success in the autumn of 1950.

The atmosphere became heavily charged for the Christians at this time. The 'Movement of the Three Autonomies' (autonomy

of administration, of finance, of propaganda) had been launched that summer among the Protestants. Official circles hinted that the Catholics would also be receiving it. During the summer vacation, as a result of a dispute between the Divine Word Fathers and the Rector of Ch'en Yuan, a pagan influenced by Communist elements, concerning atheistic theories proposed by four of the professors, and also as a result of the ensuing agitation directed by the Communist Party and the League of Neo-democratic Youth, the government had taken over the Catholic university of Fu-jen at Peking. The police, at the end of September, arrested the Japanese Yamaguchi and the Italian Riva on the highly improbable charge of plotting a trench-mortar attack on Mao-Tse-Tung at the Tien-an-men gate during the October 1 parade. Mgr Martina, the Internuncio's representative for northern China, was also involved in the allegation. Finally, in December, an appeal for the 'Three Autonomies' in the Catholic Church, launched in an obscure village of the Szechwan, was heralded everywhere by the Press, dutifully obeying well-prepared Party orders.

In January, 1951, important members of the Government, including the Chancellor and Minister for Foreign Affairs, Chou-en-lai, invited the representatives of the Chinese clergy of the capital to the Peking town-hall. The refugees present in the town since before the 'liberation' were also included. They discussed the need for 'resisting' the 'imperialism' in the Church. This discussion of the possibility of obtaining a 'proclamation' from the clergy went on for more than a month without achieving anything.

In February, a spy 'plot' was denounced in the Catholic university of Ts'ing-ku and in the Legion of Mary at Tientsin. An inspired agitation developed among the students. One of the 'proofs' published by the newspapers was the photograph of the empty hiding-place of an alleged radio-transmitter.

The Internuncio had inspired a brochure by Fr Ch'en, which contained an exposition of the question of the 'Three Autonomies'. A joint pastoral of more than twenty-four bishops had treated of the same subject. Both were condemned as reactionary.

Then, in several important towns, as had happened in Mongolia and elsewhere, life became impossible for the Catholic pupils of secondary schools and for members of the Legion of Mary and others who did not march in step with the official purification

and naturalization of religion. By the middle of May, attacks were organized by the League of Neo-democratic Youth at secret meetings in Peking. Violence and savagery in the latter town reached a notable peak of ferocity. Several pupils were brutally tortured in public. Then Committees of Reform, generally made up of luke-warm Christians, interested parties and even public apostates, began to inflict themselves on the churches and keep them under observation. The faithful were expected to sign petitions demanding the recall of the representative of the Holy See, Mgr Riberi, which had already been virtually decided by the authorities. There were evasions, on the plea of a choice of the lesser evil. At the last moment, the bishop of Peking withdrew the proposed painfully-elaborated text. It was now that the famous Chungking incident took place. The clergy had allowed itself to be deceived by equivocal declarations; the 'reform' seemed to have triumphed. Then Fr John Tong's speech caused an examination of conscience of the gathering of local Christians, who were patriots unquestionably but Catholics first and foremost. The Internuncio was arrested in June and, finally, expelled on September 3.

On the afternoon of July 25, 1951, strong forces of police took over the bishopric of Peitang, the seminary and a large number of religious houses in the capital. At least seventy priests, Chinese and foreign, diocesan and regular, were imprisoned, soon to be followed by many of the laity. The cruellest tortures were applied to them: exhausting interrogations, heavy chains on their feet, their hands tied behind their backs for days or weeks, hanging by the hands tied behind their backs or by the thumbs, repeated blows, standing up straight for days on end, etc. The diplomatic corps, including the oriental countries, accredited to Peking was impelled to protest against these inhuman actions. Certain priests, like the Lazarist Fr Peter Sun, were to die in prison. Soon after in Shanghai, the death of Fr Bede Tsang, a Jesuit, occurred in similar circumstances. Sporadic raids and arrests were carried out elsewhere at the same time; the faithful were obliged to take part in all kinds of accusation meetings. The film of the 'trial' of the Manchurian missionaries, accused of sabotage and spying, was shown in the cinemas, along with a hoard of pornographic material.

The government had discovered, since the end of December, that the orphanage at Canton was an imperialist institution for

killing Chinese children and for undermining the resistance of the Chinese people. The same ridiculous and odious theme, without further fantastic variations, was used successively in attacking all the orphanages run by the nuns from the orphanage at Peking, in the spring of 1951, to that of Jen-ts'e-t'ang at Peking the autumn of the same year and, to finish off, the Seng-mou-yeu of Shanghai in July, 1953.

The foreign missionaries were systematically eliminated through arrests and expulsions; life was made impossible by the many government pin-pricks; their food and fuel were cut off. By the spring of 1956 only five foreign priests, it seems, remained at a restricted liberty; another seven or eight were in prison. Eleven nuns in the capital were allowed to remain in their school for teaching English, which was attended by embassy children.

At Shanghai, in 1953, there were mass arrests on two occasions, March 25 and June 15. Catholics were forced to attend monster accusation-meetings; they were made to pass through study-circles, through displays of 'incriminating' evidence; they were shown a film about the 'criminals'.

Despite the schismatic position of the former vicar-general of Nanking who continued, though removed from office and finally excommunicated, to govern the diocese as self-styled 'pro-archbishop', only a tiny group of Christians and very few priests declared themselves progressives. The official propaganda soft-pedalled the attacks against the Pope (which had been intensified by the use of caricatures for more than a year since the inauguration of the 'Three Autonomies Movement'). The Department for Religious Worship and the local Commissariats set about encouraging a new phase in a much more subtle attack, the movement of 'love of religion, love of the fatherland': its object was the purification of religion so that it might develop in the new society. The slogan was superb! But in actual fact the criteria for the 'purification' of religion were not to be found in its own principles but in the current political directives and in an anti-religious ideology. It can be seen that the real and spontaneous success of this new approach was not sufficient because it was bolstered up by many new arrests, like the clean sweep at Peking on March 3, 1954; many of the laity, many priests and religious were imprisoned or kept under house arrest. The central seminary of Chala was closed, the seminarists scattered. In the autumn the

diocese was able to reopen a house for clerical training in the quarters of the former ecclesiastical college of the Fu-*jen* University, though Marxist study circles were made obligatory and no theological reviews were permitted. The Marian year, despite the bitter attacks in some places, was marked by a remarkable enthusiasm and, wherever possible, by large pilgrimages.

1955 opened in relative tranquillity for the Church, but the general atmosphere was threatening. The struggle within the Party, which had begun the previous spring, for the enforcing of discipline and the imposing of the executives' views ended in the liquidation of the former vice-president Kao Kang. It had its repercussions on the masses, especially on the intellectuals, through the attack on the writer Hou Feng and against all opinions critical of the men in power.

In the summer, the suppression of 'anti-revolutionaries' struck again, and, in the murderous fashion of 1950-1951, at the Buddhist and Taoist sects like the *Ikwan-tao* (Way of Unification). Once again, on September 8, large police forces took over the ecclesiastical establishments and seized the bishop, Mgr Kong, as well as many secular and Jesuit priests.⁴ That day, and on the following days, several hundreds of the Catholic laity were arrested in Shanghai. Raids on a grand scale were carried out in many dioceses of the province of Kiangsu, Chekiang (the arrest of Mgr Hou, one of the first six Chinese bishops), Sukien, Kwantung, Kiangsi, Hupeh, Szechwan, Anhwei, Shantung, Hopeh etc. This was followed by a repetition of the interminable reunions for those not in prison; study circles; pressures of all kinds. The seminarists of Zikawei (Shanghai) were immediately subjected to 're-education'. Six months later some of them were sent home; others were taken to prison or to 'camps of reform through labour' (concentration camps).

The complexity of the resulting situation is underlined by the following incident; in April 1956 a group of Shanghai priests sent a telegram to the Holy See, in other respects deferential, with the news of the election of an administrator of the diocese to replace the bishop 'imprisoned on account of his imperialist crimes' (this qualification, as anyone who has lived under the Communist régime in China appreciates, was a necessary literary

⁴ Mgr Kong, although he was taught by the Jesuits, does not belong to the Society of Jesus, as many seem to think; he belongs to the diocesan clergy.

device so that the message might get through with the hope of avoiding reprisals). The Holy See was obliged to reply emphasizing the injustice of the accusations against the bishop and requesting that the prescribed canonical forms be adhered to; the administrator was to be the person nominated in advance by the Ordinary.

Up to the present, then, there is no sign of any improvement of the rigorous conditions that affect the Catholic clergy and laity. If foreign visitors meet men who defend the religious liberty permitted by the régime, it is all too clear that this stereotyped denial of the problem is no way to solve it. The small periodicals published by the 'patriotic Christians', like the 'Dove of Faith' (Hsin-ko) at Shanghai, have aims so transparently foreign to religion and contents so obviously dictated by the Department for Religious Worship that they induce little confidence in souls that have a spiritual ideal.

The way stretching out before the Church in China will still be very hard. Yet the hope remains that, sooner or later, through the very force of things, the régime will have to mitigate the violent attitude towards nature and humanity in its present way of acting (and this, it must be remembered, applies to many others besides the Christians). Above all we have confidence in the deeply-entrenched faith of the Chinese Christians and their clergy, a faith which has shown its vitality in recent times as it has done in the past.

We notice, too, that in spite of everything conversions still take place in the Chinese continent. The diocese of Peking, for instance, claims 94 adult baptisms for the labour of 1954-1955; if this is slight compared with the statistics of 1949 and 1950, its value is nonetheless very significant.

Moreover, the increase in the number of Catholics at Formosa and at Hongkong follows a rhythm rarely achieved in the Far East; at the end of 1955, the numbers of baptisms for each respectively were 50,000 and 80,000 as against 8,000 and 35,000 in 1949, the increase being due particularly to the events of the past three years. At first there were only a few of the faithful among the refugees who supplied a large portion of the conversions (though not all).

Beyond any doubt the day will come when there will be a resumption of contact between the Church of the interior and the Catholics of these regions or of the Chinese 'diaspora'. For them, as for the seminarists evacuated in 1949 and ordained priests

since then, there will clearly arise the serious problem of adaptation to the new conditions, as Father Dufay indicates in a recent article.⁵ 'There is not once chance in a hundred', he writes, 'that the China which will emerge from its agony will resemble the former one. In politics, economics, culture, sociology, its appearance will have completely altered. This disorder plays its part in the religious field as elsewhere and the signs of it are increasing. The relations of the Christians to their priests, the organization of the parishes, apostolic methods, the "sociological" way of living the Faith, the manner of considering the relations between Christians and pagans, all that already takes on a new aspect, whose strangeness surpasses the most meticulous western researches and initiatives in relation to traditional Christianity. And, one must say, in the overall picture this change indicates progress. It will be no more possible on the religious level than in any other sphere, to advance retrogressively; it will be impossible to take up again from the historical point where Marxism seized the Chinese Church, for Communism is not just a phase to be blotted out . . . '.

We are not yet in sight of the application of these warnings. We are, though, still very much in the period of reflection particularly on what has a bearing on a certain number of past mistakes.⁶ We should try to achieve an improvement of the situation of our oppressed brethren by denouncing the hardships to which they are subject, although these hardships contribute nothing to the sum-total of the happiness of the Chinese people. We should sympathize, too, with their difficulties; we should try to understand the attitude, which may sometimes seem surprising, of those who search for a *modus vivendi*, so that they may avoid the danger of schism and the destruction of true Christianity. Above all we must keep the spirit of charity, even in regard to those who proclaim themselves its enemies, showing them by our attitude that it is not a word without sense or meaning.

5 *Bulletin de la Société des Missions étrangères de Paris*, no. 91, p. 404. We are happy to note our agreement with the author on this point, though indicating respectfully that he is by no means alone in thinking this. His caricature of the *missiologues* and other enthusiasts for adaptation, with the aim of further discrediting them, appears less welcome to us. Other passages misinterpret obvious facts. For instance, the architectural style known as 'Chinese Renaissance' is due as much to the Chinese themselves as to the foreign missionaries. The Communists have sometimes used it; they insist on the value of certain traditional artistic elements and seek to appropriate to themselves the Chinese-style artist Pai-Shih, etc.

6 This observation, though completely Catholic, is not understood by all. The reactions to the *Vie du Père Lebbe* by Chanoine J. Leclercq (Casterman) shows this all too clearly.