

Gateway to Cultural Evolution—The Catholic Church in Jiangmen, China

Isabella Notar, Ph.D., Assistant Professor of History, Mount Saint Mary's University

Abstract:

My research offers a unique and contemporary opportunity to share how Chinese Catholics worship in churches and how inter-cultural exchange influences church-state relations.

In 2008, Mount Saint Mary's University celebrated the bicentennial celebration of its founding. As part of the celebration, University President Powell sought to reconnect with the Mount's religious past in China. Last summer, on behalf of the University, I traveled to Jiangmen, China, the town where Bishop James Walsh, the late Mount graduate, lived and established the Mount Saint Mary's Church. My objectives were to try to locate and reconnect with our sister Church and community, and to document the legacy of Bishop Walsh.

Religious policy in China is evolving. Beijing may be more open to compromise on the question of Church participation in the country's modernization efforts. Christianity has been subdued for so long that its breakout is coinciding with government enthusiasm for developing the creative economy. The local Religious Affairs Bureau (RAB) officials are implementing policies aimed at empowering religious groups to respond to social-economic development in new ways.

Outline:

This paper will begin with a brief discussion of my quest to find the Mount Saint Mary's sister church and community founded in China by Bishop James E. Walsh. It was an honor to be selected to perform this groundbreaking research and to be identified as a gateway for a network of interchange.

In the past, organized religion was considered a source of social instability. Today, the government is calling on religious believers to join in the effort to meet China's new demands for progress. In order to show signs of positive evolution, I will examine the non-stop commitment and fidelity of the native church, the growing number of converts, and the increasing commitment of the Chinese government toward achieving a pluralistic society. I will also introduce some central reasons why religion is a way of understanding both Chinese culture and the rapid social and economic changes taking place in China.

Introduction

The Mount's roots are deeply planted in the Church of the Sacred Heart of Mary in Jiangmen City thanks to the profound influence of James E. Walsh, who graduated from the Mount in 1910. Walsh's appointment to head the Jiangmen vicariate, Maryknoll's first mission, links the Mount with the history of the Catholic Church in China. As a founding father of the Jiangmen

Diocese, (then called Kongmoon) he gave it strength during its formative years and assumed responsibility for overall leadership and organization. The difficulties and hardships endured in China by Bishop Walsh, laid the foundation for mutual respect and inter-cultural exchange between the American and Chinese Church. The Catholic Church's emphasis on educational work as a tool of evangelism and Bishop Walsh's contact with the Chinese people at the end of the 1920's can be counted as a pioneering example of globalization.

Historical Background

Sister Maria Chen Chuling, the Mother Superior of the Sacred Heart of Mary Convent, lives a happy life with seven nuns and Reverend Paul Liang Jiansen in the old mission headquarters entrusted to Bishop Walsh in 1927. During the weeks I spent with the Church family in the South of China in Jiangmen City, I was impressed not only by the beauty of the mission territory, but also the local government's economic development strategies for an ocean economy.

Jiangmen is a city 40 miles west of Macao and two hours west from Canton. The climate is subtropical and the scenic highway leading to the city is surrounded by mountains, water buffalo-padding rice fields, duck farms and, of course, factories. Located on the border of tectonic plates, the city is well-endowed with underground heat. For that reason, Jiangmen is reported as the "Number 1 Home of Hot Springs in China." The city is also famous for being the "Number 1 Hometown of Overseas Chinese." As the second largest river port and hub of commercial creativity in Guangdong Province, it is home to some of the most important commodity and trade distribution centers in the country. It has been identified by overseas Chinese as the key area for future development. According to the "World Bank Report on Investment Environment in China 2003," Jiangmen ranked fourth among 23 cities under evaluation.

Jiangmen's long coastline borders the China Sea with hilly terrain, river valleys, and alluvial plains scattered-between. Yan Dun Hill, standing at the south bank of the river and Penglai Hill, standing at the north part of the river, face each other like a gate: hence the name Jiangmen City. "Jiang" means "river" and "men" means "gate" in Mandarin Chinese. The Church of the Sacred Heart of Mary was built on the outskirts of Jiangmen where the West River and Pengjiang River meet and open toward the sea, to link the mission with Macao, Hong Kong, and other cities in the east. As one of China's first trading ports officially opened to foreign countries in the 20th century, Jiangmen is considered to be the first place to welcome Westerners. *Jiangmen City Tour Guide* reports, "With thoughts of tolerance, the people of Jiangmen district bravely and actively absorb the merits of advanced foreign culture."¹ Nonetheless, I was unsure of how I would be received when I arrived in town. The Chinese government does not often look favorably upon foreigners who snoop around trying to gather information about priests—especially priests who were convicted of treason and espionage.

¹ *Jiangmen City Tour Guide*. Jiangmen Tourism Bureau, Jiangmen Office, Nanfang Daily, 2007, page 99.

With the help of Father Michael Walsh, Director of Maryknoll Mission Archives in New York, I learned the address of the Church of the Sacred Heart of Mary and names of a few people, who could, perhaps, advise me on how to proceed with my investigation.² Father Michael enthusiastically supported “this worthy cause” but felt I may have trouble getting people to talk in Jiangmen, as the local representatives of the CCPA (Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association set up by the Communist government to supervise Catholic activity) can be hard cases. He told me that the University in Jiangmen has a guesthouse, but they might be loath to let me stay there, given my research focus. Thus, I was prepared when the attendant at the Culture Exchange Center of Wuyi University asked me how I was representing myself. I responded, “I teach classes on Asia’s ancient history and I can also teach English as a second language.”

Priests go to China as teachers. Father Michael taught English at Wuyi University in Jiangmen from 1999 -2001 when Foreign Affairs officials were very strict about his contractual obligation to engage in no open religious activity. Are things any better than they were? I went to Jiangmen wondering:

- * Is religious policy in China as conservative as it was in the past?
- * Will I find signs of Bishop Walsh’s legacy and people still linked to his past?
- * Can our school reunite with our sister community in Jiangmen?

Witnessing Great Strides towards Religious Freedom in Jiangmen

Attending Mass in the Church of the Sacred Heart of Mary was a surprising experience because I saw that this church was actually the same as ours. The doors to the Church are wide open at 8:00 a.m. Sunday morning for anyone to worship. The sanctuary is arranged in a traditional manner with similar church decorations—potted flowers are on the altar; stained glass windows gleam in the sun; stations of the cross cover the walls; wooden benches form aisles just as they do in Catholic Churches the world over. Communion is offered in the midst of joyful singing accompanied by a piano. Cellular phones ring in tones with musical inflection just as they do at the Mount. Bibles can be found in every pew.³

During Mass, Reverend Liang speaks with sincere conviction that “Our peace of mind is sacrificed by time spent worrying about work and gaining more and more material things. They are not the answer to our happiness. Our eyes are small, but God’s eyes are big. The Holy Spirit will help us in the glassed modern world.” During the first half of the Mass he speaks in

² Note: Michael Walsh is no relation to Mount Saint Mary’s College graduate, James E. Walsh.

³ People who are smuggling Bibles into china are doing Christians a disservice. The Chinese government allows Amnesty International to publish a set amount of bibles each year and they are for sale in many bookstores.

Mandarin, the official language of the Chinese. For the rest of the Mass he speaks in Cantonese, the language of Guangdong province, for the older members of the congregation.

Foreign priests can now say Sunday Mass at the Church of the Sacred Heart of Mary. Father Thomas Eagan, who taught English in China for 20 years (from 2006 - 2008 in Jiangmen), says he has concelebrated at Mass with Father Liang.⁴ Father Franco Mella, who lived at the Church in the late 1990's, celebrated Mass with Chinese priests almost every day. He claims such a situation existed because the local officials were on good terms with the Jiangmen Church community.⁵ But this is not the case throughout the country. There are over one thousand local Religious Affairs Bureaus (RAB) in China and their leaders handle situations differently. Father Eagan agrees that Catholic associations in China need to build their inner strength in order to deal with the local government, but they must also try to become more active in social organizations.⁶

Priests, Sisters and Laity Assume Increasing Responsibility in Social Services

In accordance with the social teachings of the Catholic Church, Parish Social Concern Groups should bear witness to the Gospel in society through action, promote social justice, and defend human dignity. On Pentecost Sunday, 1995, Cardinal John B. Wu announced concise "Guidelines" in order to encourage and assist all parishes in establishing Parish Social Concern Groups.⁷ Parish Social Concern Groups are now allowed to respond to the needs of the Chinese society. New pastoral ideas and initiatives have been approved by RAB officials in Jiangmen, including a new approach to the sacrament of marriage. For example, rules for governing Christian marriages in Jiangmen became more compatible with Catholic doctrine in 2008.

Spirituality seems to have always been part of the nature of Chinese society. The rite of marriage goes back to tradition and is considered a channel for people to express their passion for filial piety and ceremony. The vast majority of newlyweds married in the China Church, however, have not been Christians. Nonetheless, the Catholic Church accepted wedding payments of approximately RMB 1,000 yuan (\$160 U.S. dollars) from the nonbelievers and used it according to its own discretion.

Indifference to religious creed hurts the Church as it struggled to survive in the secular community. Rules for governing Christian marriages, however, became more compatible with

⁴ Interview with Father Thomas Eagan, Maryknoll missionary and English teacher at Wuyi University. May 24, 2008.

⁵ Father Franco Mella, "Experience Sharing," Paper delivered at the Seminar on Religious Freedom in China, Justice and Peace Commission of the HK Catholic Diocese, March 2, 2003, page 2.

⁶ Interview with Eagan. May 26, 2008.

⁷ Cardinal John B. Wu, Bishop of Hong Kong, *Catholic Diocese of Hong Kong Diocesan Guidelines for Parish Social Concern Groups*, May 2007, page 12.

Catholic doctrine in Jiangmen in 2008. The following conditions must now be met before a Catholic marriage ceremony can take place in a Chinese home: 1) At least one person in the marriage must learn doctrinal aspects of Catholicism prior to the marriage; 2) one individual must willingly convince the Church that they are sincere about practicing the faith in the future; 3) the money gained from administering the rite of matrimony must be devoted to Catholic action purposes.⁸ In light of the new RAB guiding principles and policies, legitimacy is brought into the public domain.

Father Liang and the Immaculate Heart Sisters invited me to their first official house wedding in May 2008. The following is a description of the happiness I remember. It will stay in my soul forever.

The traditional Chinese house had a large entrance. Once inside, it took on a church appearance. A series of wall pictures told of the Trinity, of Christ and his Blessed Mother. A wooden cross was mounted on a homemade altar.

Before the Christian service began, the young couple acted out a number of local traditional customs. Firecrackers exploded noisily to announce the groom's family, coming to steal the bride from her family. A peasant woman quickly shuffled in carrying two baskets of fruits and flowers slung from the ends of a pole that rested on her shoulders.

In line with Western thinking, the couple wore black and white formal wedding attire, because that's what Christians do in the West. They entered the room as the wedding march played on the stereo. Wedding vows and rings were exchanged. Father Liang and the Sisters presided over the marriage ceremony that united the two in matrimony.

The bride reentered the main room dressed in traditional Chinese Silk clothing (she wore a red qi pao- a long gown with a slit skirt and a mandarin collar). The bride and groom bowed in two directions- first to the Heavens and then to their new parents. They presented tea and small candies to all the members of their extended family and received red packets filled with money in return. The feast that followed transformed the courtyard into an electric banquet hall where opinions and beliefs were drawn from two distinct cultures. It reminded me of the alliances Matteo Ricci formed over 400 years ago by recognizing local Confucian customs.

The bride's parents were both Chinese Catholics, but they were wed during the Cultural Revolution (1967-1976) when religious ceremonies were forbidden. Their daughter's house

⁸ Interview with Reverend Paul Liang Jiansen, Executive Director of the Church of the Sacred Heart of Mary in Jiangmen, Guangzhou Province. May 24, 2008.

wedding filled their empty space with deep appreciation for the increasing responsibility of the China Church.

Religious Policy is Evolving

Deng Xiaoping, China's leader following Mao Zedong, codified religious policy in the Constitution of 1982. Article 36 and Document No. 19 dictates that the Communist Party should control religion and the Church and act in accordance with the "independent autonomous and self-management principle," because the Party fears the Catholic Church will interfere in China's internal affairs.⁹ Their suspicion is rooted in history. The first serious threat to the traditional Confucian system, the Taiping (Great Peace) Rebellion, was led by a Christian convert who claimed he was the younger brother of Jesus. Maryknollers accepted the protection of unequal treaties in the first half of the 19th century. The Catholic Church hierarchy in China was outspoken in voicing their disapproval of Sun Yatsen, considered by most Chinese to be the father of the Chinese Revolution during the Republican years. The majority of Catholic missionaries, including Bishop Walsh, rallied behind the Nationalist government and Chiang Kaishek's campaign to suppress the Communists during China's Civil War. The Catholic Church opposed the establishment of the Communist regime in 1949 and the Party is acutely aware of the competition. Many Chinese people today believe Communism failed in Eastern Europe in 1989, because Pope John Paul II's mission was political.

While there has been no radical shift in religious policy since Mao Zedong founded the PRC in 1949, by 1976 popular sentiment was mounting for an end to Party policy directed at bringing social revolution by the militant vanguard. Since 1981, the Party has turned away from strengthening the practice of communal ownership and singing the praises of political figures, to addressing social-economic problems. As a result, religious policy began to receive far greater attention in China. The Constitution, revised at the 17th Congress of the Communist Party in October 2007, included the word religion for the first time. It now reads, "The Party strives to fully implement its basic principle for its work related to religious affairs and rallies religious believers in making contribution to economic and social development."¹⁰ This is not an indication that the government is cooperating with the Church or that the Church is free from government control. Rather, it suggests that Beijing may be more open to compromise on the question of Church participation in the country's modernization efforts. Christianity has been subdued for so long that its breakout is coinciding with government enthusiasm for developing the creative economy. The revision appears to be creating a more favorable condition for RAB officials to implement policies aimed at empowering religious groups to respond to social-economic development in new ways.

⁹ *Sunday Examiner: Catholic News of the Week*. Vol. LX1 No. 38, Sept. 23, 2007, page 1.

¹⁰ "Freedom of Religion or Sharing up Control?" *Sunday Examiner: Catholic News of Work*, Vol. LX1 No. 47 Nov. 25, 2007, page 3.

When asked about the biggest change in Church management in the last 10 years, Father Liang answered that the Chinese Patriotic Association, set up by the Communists, is more organized and systematic today. Before the “Regulations on Religious Affairs” Decree No. 426) came into effect on March 1, 2005, his Church could be randomly fined by local officials who had the latitude and freedom to act at their own discretion. Thanks to the improved clarity in monitoring procedures, fewer mistakes are being made and his Church is fined less frequently. The RAB organization that monitored and directed Church activities in the past rejected applications for economic subsidies; now they support such action. The Church of the Sacred Heart of Mary is receiving considerable financial support for the rebuilding of its structures. A splendid three-story convent house was built five years ago with international funding and money from the Hong Kong Catholic Diocese.

Bishop Walsh’s house, the oldest building in the mission compound, remained unoccupied and in dire need of repair for the past two decades. I was quite surprised to find that the Chinese government is allowing Bishop Walsh’s house to be rebuilt through both Church and State sponsorship. In fact, over half the money is coming from two different government agencies inside China, the Guangdong Provincial government and the Jiangmen Municipal government, as well as support from the Hong Kong Diocese and Maryknoll Headquarters in New York. I learned this summer that the Central government in Beijing strongly supports the Bishop Walsh restoration project.

My research indicates that one of the main reasons why the government is allowing a resurgence of religious freedom in China today is because it promotes economic stimulus and job growth. The restoration and construction of new church buildings and temples provides work for local builders, craftsmen, wood carvers, and other related building supplier products. Donations of up to one million Reminbi are permitted in Jiangmen as long as a legal document witness justifies how the money is being used.¹¹

One could persuasively argue that the Chinese government has taken a harsh stand against the Church’s freedom of association. Yet, this is not the case throughout the country. There are over one thousand local RAB’s in China and their leaders handle situations differently. For example, the Immaculate Heart Sisters of the Sacred Heart of Mary and Father Paul Liang have traveled outside mainland China to attend many religious seminars. Individuals who serve in the associations that monitor the Catholic Church are establishing better relations with religious leaders in Jiangmen because they are required to sit during Mass at the Open Church, and dine periodically with the Immaculate Heart Sisters.¹² Although religious leaders are not free from government control, the affairs of the Catholic Church are becoming more open.

¹¹ Interview with Reverend Paul Liang Jiansen. June 7, 2009.

¹² Interview with Eagan. May 27, 2008.

The March 2008 issue of the *Sunday Examiner: Catholic News of the Week* reports “In recent months, a tacit agreement seems to be in place, under which the government has quietly allowed the appointment of Bishops approved by the Holy See.”¹³ The validation of ordination of Chinese Bishops is recognized, but how legitimate is it? There are validly recognized Bishops in China, but their ordination as Bishops is not legitimate unless they are appointed by the Vatican. This is still in question today. This topic offers a unique and contemporary opportunity to understand how inter-cultural exchange influences church-state relations in China. The Party does not want to appear to be giving in to Western interference. If the Vatican, on the other hand, legitimately recognizes the appointment of Bishops approved by the Chinese government, it will make life difficult for the underground church, which has been loyal to the Pope since the Mao era.

There is still much ongoing debate about the newly amended Party Constitution. Some critics complain that religion is tolerated by the Chinese government as long as it accommodates the Communist Party’s goal to modernize the country.¹⁴ Reverend Sidney Griffith, Professor at the Catholic University of American, thinks the Revision basically recognizes the actual existence of citizens that have a religious interest.¹⁵ If we are to believe the words of Reverend Aloysius Jin Lu Xian, Bishop of the Catholic Shanghai Diocese, the Revision seems to be contributing to the Catholic Church’s ability to modernize. “The underground church gets a lot of money surreptitiously and they will lose that source if they join the Patriotic Church in China.” Bishop Jin of Shanghai cannot accept money from the Vatican. He can’t run a private newspaper or host a radio station, but the national obsession with social-economic development also indicates progress for Church.

Bishop Jin says the RAB in Shanghai is very liberal. He has his own printing house and he has been given verbal permission to open a hospital in Shanghai.¹⁶ The November 2008 Catholic Shanghai Diocese publication lists 105 of his charitable benefactors from countries around the world and pictures of him with the former President of European Commission, former US President Clinton, President of France, the Chancellor of Germany, former President of Olympic Games, and the Queen of Belgium to name a few. Bishop Jin confirms my working hypothesis that local variations in religious policy illustrate the extent to which the Central government is willing to share power with local elites.

¹³ *Sunday Examiner: Catholic News of the Week*, Vol. LXII No. 9, March 2, 2008, page 3.

¹⁴ Father Gianni Criveller, “An Analysis of the Current Situation of the Catholic Church in China” Paper delivered at the Seminar on Religious Freedom in China, Justice and Peace Commission of the HK Catholic Diocese, March 2, 2003, page 2.

¹⁵ Interview with Rev. Dr. Sidney Griffith, The Catholic University of America, May 15, 2009.

¹⁶ Interview with The Most Reverend Aloysius Jin Lu Xia; Bishop of Shanghai Diocese. June 11, 2009.

Challenges Confronting the Catholic Church in China Are Cultural as well as Political

The Central Government in Beijing is not open to compromise when it comes to open religious activity outside officially recognized organizations. Making a public announcement to proclaim the quality or advantages of religion is strictly prohibited. Likewise, distributing paper or pamphlets containing a declaration or appeal, especially one put out by a religious group, is against the law.

Three independent American missionaries, Shannon, Amy, and Lori, who have lived in Beijing since 1997, made it clear to me that the government does not appreciate the prophetic activities of the unregistered church. In May 2008, a group of their visiting compatriots were subject to a citizen's arrest for distributing religious tracts on a public bus. The ticket attendant, who notified the bus driver about the evangelizing efforts, virtually detained all the passengers on the bus, until the Public Security officials arrived on the scene. The eight visiting missionaries were promptly escorted to the police station, where their China visas were immediately revoked. Temporary visas had to be purchased at a high price, and the group was forced to leave the country within 7 days. They are not permitted back into the country for 5 years.

According to the American missionaries, who have observed many changes regarding religious freedom in China over the last decade, a big ticket offense is literature: where it's distributed, what's written on it, and who's passing it out. Their visiting compatriots were guilty of several serious charges: 1) They were not distributing literature in a commercial zone sponsored by an advertising agent; 2) their published statements were not designed to attract public attention to a commodity or business; 3) and they were foreigners.

A Chinese professor with whom I spoke argues that the rationale for the citizen arrest cannot be dismissed as merely successful propaganda, fear of the law, or xenophobia. She thinks the ticket taker was most likely suspicious of the missionary's true motive. How could anything good be free, she asks? The Chinese have a saying "Shaobing (the fried bread I love to eat for breakfast) does not fall from the sky." The citizen's arrest, she suggests, might be the symptom of a more general sense of discomfort. What we see here is that even though social change is more favorable towards religious freedom, people are still tied to traditional values in the environment. The missionary's method appeared strange and threatening.¹⁷ Christians do best when they reach the Chinese people as teachers. Teachers are revered and people listen to them.

China has experienced a great transformation over the last thirty years. The government advanced national independence, individual emancipation, and justice through social and economic development. Whether increasing religious freedom can be achieved through modernization remains to be seen. Things are better now than they were. In the past, religion was considered a source of social instability. Today the government is calling on religious

¹⁷ Interview with Chinese English professor in Beijing, who would like to remain anonymous. June 15, 2008.

believers to join in the effort to meet China's new demands for progress. I observed this in the summer of 2008 and the summer of 2009. The non-stop commitment and fidelity of the native church, the growing number of converts, and the increasing commitment of the China government toward achieving a pluralistic society are signs of a very positive evolution.

Bishop Walsh's Legacy Is Inspiring A New Generation of Chinese

Bishop Walsh and his Maryknoll companions pioneered the founding of the 20th century Catholic evangelization in China. His former mission became a church and its leadership was handed over to the local Catholic Patriotic Association. Despite the expulsion of all missionaries after 1949, Bishop Walsh's legacy is still readily perceivable in the physical environment. The large Oriental gate and wall surrounding the mission property is an indication of the Bishop's determination to assimilate his residence into the Chinese landscape and build a native church that now survived with or without direct diplomatic relations with outside Catholic agencies. Standing in the middle of the compound, amidst lush plumeria, papaya, lychee, and mango trees, is a cavern-like grotto filled with flowers and a statue of the Virgin Mary. The small grotto is a remembrance of the National Shrine Grotto of Lourdes in Emmitsburg, Maryland. The main entrance hall to the Sacred Heart Convent projects an overall impression of his deep spirituality put into action. Black and white photos of the founding sisters and villagers preparing for the Chinese sisterhood cover an entire wall. High above the rest, in the central position of honor, hangs a portrait of Bishop Walsh.

Sister Mary Fung and Sister Jieqing Fung appear in many of the photographs. Sister Mary is 97 years old and Sister Jieqing is 91. They told me that they were members of the first group of religious sisters to return to the convent in 1991, when no new recruits were admitted. Sister Jieqing Fung showed me a handsome picture of Bishop Walsh in his Mount St. Mary's baseball uniform. At the mention of his name, Sister Mary Fung practically leaped out of her wheel chair announcing proudly, "Of course I remember him!" Sister Mary's memory is good. She surprised me when she explained in English, "I was young, merely eleven years old, the eleventh child in my family, in fact, when I came to this place in 1923. Father Walsh was very kind. He built our house!" Sister Mary's vows were received by Bishop Walsh. Sister Jieqing voiced her opinion enthusiastically, "Bishop Walsh was a living miracle."¹⁸

I had the good fortune to meet another historical witness linked to Bishop Walsh's past, Bishop Jin Lu Xian. He was studying in Rome when the destruction of the Christian Church began. He was placed under house arrest in 1955, three years before Bishop Walsh. Bishop Jin is 93 years old and says that there are very few people left who knew Bishop Walsh personally,

¹⁸ Interview with Sister Mary Fung, Mother Superior of the Sacred Heart of Mary Convent in Jiangmen in the 1990's and her cousin, Sister Jieqing Fung, May 24, 2008. I am very saddened to report the passing of Sister Mary Fung in October 2208.

but his gift of faith and charitable work is still widely remembered.¹⁹ I learned that Bishop Walsh started the leprosarium in the bamboo grove in the outskirts of Jiangmen, when missionaries seemed to be the only people willing to help them.²⁰ The Chinese government today assumes the care and maintenance of the permanent settlement, but priests, nuns and lay people are welcome to give the lepers materials and food to improve their living conditions.

Perhaps the best indication of Bishop Walsh's legacy is in the growing number of believers who attend the Catholic Church regularly in Jiangmen. While I am impressed with the increasing dedication, as well as the site of the old mission compound, Sister Maria Chen Chuling does not agree. She is convinced that a better location for the Church would attract more attention and bring in more recruits. She thinks the isolated location – the large gate and a stone wall set back away from the street is keeping people away. She wishes the Church were located directly on the roadside.²¹ Sister Maria Chen may be correct. St. Joseph's is another Catholic Church in downtown Jiangmen. Actually it is a small house, where Father Yang lives alone on the third floor. But on Sunday morning at 8:00 a.m., two rooms on the second floor are overflowing with over 80 people, who come to hear his sermon. The crowds have grown so large that a big screen television will be installed on the first floor so that people, who have spilled out into the street, can join the service.²² I was pleased to find fifty percent more people in attendance during Mass at the Church of the Sacred Heart of Mary when I returned this past summer. Father Liang said he simply changed the time of his service from 8:00 a.m. to 9:00 a.m. to accommodate people with long commutes and support from local adherents grew over night.

A Unique Opportunity to Explore Religious Faith in China

The history of Bishop Walsh's pioneering mission provides a key to understanding an extraordinarily violent time in Chinese history and unlocks the secret to reestablishing relations between the Mount's and our sister community in China. The Chinese government has taken a harsh stand against the Church's freedom of association ever since the time Bishop Walsh was imprisoned for espionage and conspiracy in the 1960's and when he was thrown out in 1970. American nuns and priests were expelled, imprisoned and executed for their real and imagined involvement in China's political affairs.

The Bishop's vast vicariate, including seven elementary schools, a secondary school, an industrial school, ten dispensaries, five orphanages, a home for the aged and blind, and a hospital were all confiscated. His seminary was turned into a restaurant and the old novitiate was leased

¹⁹ Interview with Reverend Aloysius Jin Lu Xian. June 4, 2008.

²⁰ Jean Paul Wiest, *Mary Knoll in China*. M.E. Sharpe, Inc. Armonk: New York, 1988, page 162.

²¹ Interview with Sister Maria Chen Chuling, Mother Superior at the Sacred Heart Convent in Jiangmen. May 24, 2008.

²² Interview with Father Yang, Director of St. Joseph's Church in Jiangmen, Guangzhou province. May 29, 2008.

to the government middle school.²³ The Communist regime opposed formal diplomatic relations with the Vatican and under the Three Autonomics Movement- self-rule, self-support, and self-propagation, the Church of the Sacred Heart of Mary was forbidden alignment with its sister church in Emmitsburg, Maryland.

Consequently, I went to Jiangmen last summer expecting a chilly welcome. Instead, I found myself being greeted and treated like a prodigal daughter. Local Party officials made it clear that it is absolutely worthwhile at this time for people to visit the Church of the Sacred Heart of Mary to promote inter-cultural exchange. Hence, we have more chances now than ever since the 1980's to advance greater knowledge and spiritual intelligence with the greater community in China.

Religious policy in China today does not encourage Church leaders to move out beyond the convent or rectory to evangelize. They cannot use direct and written propaganda to organize and establish contact with those outside the church compound. How then, can we establish relations with religious groups in China? The Catholic Church survived in China because of its intensive missionary legacy. Seminarians taught Chinese how to adapt and survive without relying on outside help. The 80th Anniversary of the Church of the Sacred Heart of Mary symbolizes this dedication and perseverance. We can still help to develop well-educated leaders to take positions of responsibility. We can fulfill the function of being allies of humanity by identifying with them, sharing in their sorrows and joys, and engaging in special works of mercy in small ways. My doing so this summer is already a great comfort to them.

Conclusion

Can the Church contribute to China's ability to modernize? In the initial stage of this project, the research points to three scenarios.

1. From the top, we see positive change in the Central government's urging believers to contribute to the country's development.
2. Local elites are making their own decisions on the question of religious freedom; interpreting central policy and making it up as they go along. Lack of solidarity exists between the Central government and local Religious Affairs Bureau. More solidarity is needed to be effective.
3. No genuine or forward-looking attempt. Policy change in Party Constitution is just a tactic to maintain a hold on power and gain international acceptance.

²³ Interview with Sister Theresa Wang, Sister of the Sacred Heart of Mary Convent in Jiangmen. May 27, 2008.

Very little research has been done that confirms the flexibility of religious policy in China. If local elites are making their own decisions on the question of religious freedom and/or the Church's participation in the country's modernization efforts, perhaps our assessment of how monolithic the State is in China is wrong and needs to be reevaluated. If social policy is becoming as flexible as environmental and economic policy, perhaps religious believers will experience more freedom in the future and be able to join in the effort to meet China's new demands for progress. How will Communist Party leaders reign in opposition at the local level if they disagree with certain local initiatives? Should we expect them to become iron fisted again or are we seeing a trend toward true liberalization and/or democratization? To answer these questions, I am looking at the actual interaction of policy and people, at the actual way people exercise their religious beliefs—not just bureaucracy and how it appears on paper.

Published by the Forum on Public Policy

Copyright © The Forum on Public Policy. All Rights Reserved. 2009.