

Reflections on My Trip to China

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by G. Gregory Gay, C.M.

Superior General

As I travel around the world, one of the most common questions asked of me is one having to do with the status of the church in China and the situation of our confreres and Daughters there. I am glad to have had the opportunity to visit them personally, and with this first-hand experience share openly their situation in my visits to the Vincentian Family. In what follows, obviously I am not able to say everything that I experienced considering the delicate situation of the church in China. There are great signs of progress and openness, as well as hope for more opportunities to support the church of China in the future.

From 31 October until 15 November I visited the Province of China spending part of the time in Taiwan and the remaining time on the mainland. I was able to visit the confreres and a number of the works in which they are involved, as well as the Daughters of Charity and other members of the Vincentian Family. I had the privilege of being the main celebrant of the Eucharist when one of our Chinese confreres pronounced vows and was incorporated into the Congregation of the Mission. In mainland China, I also visited confreres and Daughters of Charity young and old.

China is probably the most international Province in the Congregation. Its membership includes not only Taiwanese and Chinese but Korean, Filipino, Indian, Indonesian, American, Vietnamese, Polish and Dutch confreres. There are presently two seminarians, one from California, the other from Korea. They are in the process of discernment and language study.

We have four foreign confreres in mainland China. One is Tom Sendlein who has a very active and worthwhile ministry with English-speaking people in Beijing, helping them to become conscious of the reality of the poor in China and their duties towards serving them. Another is Father Pawel who also helps with the English-speaking people and is very active in other ways. The third is Father Joseph Loftus who works for a charity group in ShiJia

Zhuang and spends part of his time in Beijing. Some of his work involves the formation of the clergy. The fourth one is Father Henk who is teaching French in the university at WuHan, HuBei Province.

As we know from the writing of Pope Benedict XVI regarding China, the church's desire is to promote the reality of one universal church. The situation in China certainly is complicated. There still exists two parts although members of the underground church are encouraged to surface and become part of the official church. Processes are needed in order to help that become a reality because in any delicate long-term situation like this, there is obviously the need for consciousness raising as well as healing.

Perhaps one of the greatest needs in the church is the improvement of its priestly formation. I visited the Bishop of Beijing and his staff together with the Visitor John Wang and Father Thomas Sendlein. I specifically asked the Bishop how the Vincentians can serve the church of Beijing. I mentioned how important China is to the Congregation of the Mission considering our long tradition of presence there and the number of our people having within their hearts a desire to continue to support the church in its role of evangelization.

Among other things, the Bishop invited us to give workshops in the seminary from one week to four weeks on various subjects in the program of seminary formation. He also asked that the possibility of formation for formators be made available through scholarships in the Provinces that might be able to provide such a service.

At present, only diocesan priests minister to the Chinese in direct priestly ministry. Yet in a number of ways we are continuing our program of formation for the Congregation of the Mission.

I met a number of our younger Chinese confreres as well as a good number of our older Chinese confreres. The older confreres live, for the most part, in homes of their families or are cared for by friends with financial backing from the Province of China. I wish to speak of four visits in particular to the older confreres.

I visited the only Brother of the Province of China. He is 87 years old and lives in a nursing home run by the Diocese of Beijing. The room is just big enough for two beds, a desk, a place to store clothing, a small refrigerator, and a bathroom which also seemed to double as a kitchen. The Brother is cared for by a lay man who has been at his service for a good number of years. He knows Brother's history very well and shares it freely. At this time in life, Brother gets forgetful and cannot quite remember things as well as when he was younger.

Another confrere who visited me had spent 23 years in prison during his lifetime, being imprisoned when he was a seminarian in

philosophy. Once he was freed, and because of the shortage of priests, he was immediately ordained, having received his theological studies from the Jesuits who were with him in jail at the same time. Father's demeanor impressed me tremendously. He is a gentle man, showing no signs of bitterness or anger whatsoever. In utter simplicity he continues to live his life as a member of the Congregation of the Mission in a quiet fashion.

Another visit was with a confrere, 90 years old, who had been a pastor of a parish for 64 years. At this time he is living in the same parish with a young diocesan priest who is now the pastor. I had a delightful time with him and the staff of the parish as we shared lunch together. Afterwards he took us to the church which had been rebuilt any number of times for different reasons.

The last visit was with a confrere, 92 years old. After his release from prison he returned to his home village where he began to celebrate the Eucharist in his family's home. He did so for many, many years without any difficulty, for the most part, from the government. We arrived at the village, in the middle of farmland,



Church of the CM in Taiwan

quite a distance from the city. At the entrance of the house there were benches set up and the altar in the foreground in an open courtyard. We encountered a bit of difficulty because although the confrere was present, he was locked in the house. His nephew, who takes care of him, works during the day, so he locks him in for his own safety. The confrere is unable to walk. As we looked in the window, we could see him lying in his bed praying the rosary. I insisted that we had to enter. So one of the young Chinese confreres got a screwdriver and we removed the door handle around which the chain hung. We freed the door and entered. As the Visitor, John Wang, explained to the confrere who I was, he said, full of emotion, "Who am I to have the Superior General in my presence?" which he repeated over and over again. I thought to myself, "Who am I to be in the presence of this man who has given so many years of his life in the priesthood under some difficult situations?" It certainly was an honor to be in his presence as it was with the confrere of 90 years who has served 64 years in the parish. I asked them both for their blessings and spoke to them of the great gifts their perseverance and their commitment to follow Jesus Christ evangelizing and serving the poor are to the Congregation and to the entire Vincentian Family.

I also visited the Daughters of Charity. Three of the Sisters are elderly and cared for in a nursing home by other Sisters, a Seminary Sister, a number of postulants and an aspirant. Their cheerfulness and joy in serving was amazing, even though they cannot do it openly as Daughters of Charity. They are in a parish where the pastor is a member of the official church. Unknown to many, he is a Vincentian. One of the older Sisters gave me rosaries for myself and the staff at our CM Curia. I will cherish this gift for the rest of my life.

Leaving the Sisters I visited another group of women who live the rule of the Daughters of Charity. They were founded by a Vincentian Bishop who has since died, and belong to the official church of China. They dress in the full habit of the Daughters of Charity using even the SV pin. The priest administrator of the diocese, who cares a great deal for the Sisters, hopes that they might have greater international recognition in order to maintain the Vincentian charism that has been rooted in them. The Sisters receive support in various ways from the Daughters of Charity of the Province of China for which they are most grateful.

In concluding this sharing I want to speak about the opportunity I had to celebrate the Eucharist with the confreres in a private ceremony where one of the priest confreres made his good purposes. There are a number of diocesan priests who have expressed an interest in joining the Congregation. We have shown an openness towards them, at the same time encouraging them to be faithful to the orientation given by Pope Benedict XVI.

I ask for your prayers for these men and women who are part of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church as they grow in their efforts to be faithful to Jesus Christ following the inspiration of our founders and the examples of our Vincentian and Daughter of Charity martyrs in China. Our history in China has been long with more than 1000 members in the Congregation of the Mission, 400 of them of Chinese origin. There have been about that many Daughters of Charity, Chinese and foreign, as well. And although it has been interrupted any number of times because of the political situations, the Vincentian presence in the church continues to be desired. I hope and pray that many in the Congregation and the entire Vincentian Family nurture the desire to be part of this new and exciting work of evangelization in a fuller way when Divine Providence permits us to do so.