

Faith in China is thriving

Fr Eamonn O'Brien

It would be a disservice to truth by me not to acknowledge that there have been and are serious challenges for religious and civil society in China from sections of the State as well as the ever increasing lures of consumerism. But my sense is that too much media time is given to negative stories about China.

Yes, the communists confiscated the Church in 1949, but it was returned in 1992. Now, just last month, the tallest Church in China was opened by Bishop Joseph Xu Honggan, Suzhou Diocese, under protection of Mary and in the presence of visiting bishops, 50 priests and 6,000 faithful from local and neighbouring provinces.

More than 3,000 baptisms were celebrated during the Easter period in the Churches of China; with an expected 100,000 for the whole year.

The Catholic population has increased from four million to what is believed to be about 15 million today. Travelling on a plane one day, I had a stimulating conversation on matters secular with a woman who told me that she was the senior member of the communist party. At that time, I didn't share too easily with people who I really was, using the cover of 'teacher'. After a lull in the conversation I decided, for my first time in China with a stranger, to share that I was Catholic Missionary priest.

There was an ominous silence for a moment and then she turned and said to me: "I wish to share something too with you: I am, as I told you, a senior member of the party, but I am now in the fourth stage of becoming a Buddhist". The conversation took a new and deeper turn.

Scholars in China throughout history have played a very significant role in the State and the Chinese imperial court. Today, a priest in Beijing publishes a yearly journal of Catholic Studies, circulated to about 2,000 academic institutions. This gives wide distribution to the best of catholic theological scholarship from abroad but also from that presently developing within China.

There are more institutes for the study of religion in China than in all of the UK and Ireland. Atheism is being pushed, but a counterforce is also present in these scholars and especially in the thirst among the young for a truth to fulfill their lives. Pope Francis has referred to China "... as a great country. But more than a country, a great culture with inexhaustible wisdom".

We have a penchant in Europe for nursing bad news; but not so for many in China who suffered greatly. A very old bishop told me that the peak moment of his ministry came when a young sister came to him asking to bless her dream for a contemplative monastery. I asked him why did he say yes to such an enormous challenge in present circumstances. He replied: "I spent 25 years in jail and 10 in solitary confinement, and had nothing else to do but contemplate. I knew what she was talking about." Out of what would be described as a 'death' situation by many people, for him came a resurrection moment to which he could not have responded with out his previous experience.

Chinese people are no more perfect than we are, but in all the people I have met in China, old and young, the truth of St Paul is manifest, "I live, no not I but Christ lives in me".

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"Do I want to go to China? Of course: tomorrow! Oh, yes."

Pope Francis speaking to reporters in Summer 2014 on the papal flight en route to Korea



Praying for the future: Members of China's 12 million Catholic community attend Mass at a Catholic church in Mianzhu in southwest Sichuan province. (Photo By Zheng Duo/Color China)

High hopes of new era in global relations as China looks to West

Catholicism in China has a long and complicated history. Christianity has existed in China in various forms since at least the Tang Dynasty in the 8th century AD. Following the 1949 takeover by the Communist Party of China, Catholic and Protestant missionaries were expelled from the country, and Christianity was vilified as a manifestation of western imperialism.

In 1957, the Chinese government established the Chinese Patriotic Catholic Association, CPCA, which rejected the authority of the Holy See and appointed its own bishops.

However, there are now high hopes we may be entering a new era of more open dialogue with China. Earlier this month Bishop Thomas Zhang Huaixin of Anyang, a fierce opponent of the CPCA, died aged 90 and his replacement, Bishop Joseph Zhang Yinlin, 45, is the first Chinese

bishop with dual approval from China and the Vatican since 2012.

With China adopting a more open policy to western relations generally, *The Universe* CEO Joseph Kelly met up with philanthropist, diplomat and Chinese entrepreneur Dr Johnny Sei-Hoe Hon, who has built up an international conglomerate, with diverse interests ranging over banking, property development, financial services, education, media, entertainment and leisure, sports, telecoms, mining and biotechnology.

Currently the Ambassador-at-Large for Grenada (and with official positions with four other governments), Johnny is often consulted by presidents, prime ministers and other state leaders who value his advice and insights.

Here he gives *The Universe* his view on progress between China and the West ...



attempting to redress.

"The goal of the Chinese government is that, by 2030, 70 per cent of the population, which is one billion people, will be living where he attended Uppingham School. In 1993, he graduated from King's College London and went to Hughes Hall College at the University of Cambridge where he obtained a Ph.D. degree in Psychiatry.

"I stayed here for a bit then I worked in Asia, Middle and Eastern Europe. I moved back to live in Hong Kong about seven years ago but I still come to the UK once a month as I have a lot of business interests here," said Dr Hon.

"Back home, China has developed a lot since the reform in the late 70s and early 80s. Some 720 million people have been lifted out of poverty, and it's still a developing country, especially in the coastal areas. Some of the provinces are richer than others, so it's still an ongoing situation."

Dr Hon says that, as China emerged from poverty, the country followed a policy of rapid development of urban areas, but this created unexpected difficulties and social problems, which the country is now

– the logistics are harder and transport costs are higher."

The long term goal of the Chinese government is to build up the countryside, so that many of these problems around families being apart can be avoided. But it really all depends on whether these smaller towns can attract business for employment.

"It will happen, but it will take time," says Dr Hon. "Over the past 15 years China has been very 'cash rich' so the focus of growth has been centred on developing manufacturing industries, producing goods mainly for export to world markets. Now the government is trying to change things from a manufacturer-based economy to a consumer-driven one. The focus is now far more on providing services and consumer products.

"In China we now have a rapidly growing middle class who, simply put, need to spend money. One of the challenges that we have in China is fewer well known brands, which has led to a demand for and reliance on well known imported goods, so the government has been doing

a lot of work trying to build up our own brands."

Nowhere has this been stronger than in the entertainment industry, which is a particular passion of Johnny's. He is an active investor in media and entertainment and was recently described as an 'Asian Media Mogul'. He has acted as executive producer for various international film projects and has worked with leading directors such as Oliver Stone, Derek Yee and Gong Ying Tian.

More recently he has become involved in the theatre business, acting as the executive producer of Andrew Lloyd Webber's musical *Sunset Boulevard* starring Glenn Close in the West End in 2016.

"*Sunset Boulevard* has been a sold out event in London, so it's now off to Broadway," says Johnny.

"We plan to do more musicals and some of them we will also bring back to China. For London and the US one of the hardest things is to find theatres, to find the slots, but in China there are lots and lots of theatres up and down the country that are underused because they were only built

Bishop committed to healing old divisions

Staff reporter

When the iconic and heroic Bishop Thomas Zhang Huaixin of Anyang died on 10th May, aged 90, it was entirely natural that he would be succeeded by his coadjutor Bishop, Joseph Zhang Yinlin.

Bishop Yinlin, 45, who had previously been Vicar General of the diocese, had for some months been running affairs due to the declining health of Bishop Huaixin. If his succession is no surprise, his position within the Catholic Church in China gives cause for serious optimism, as he is the first bishop since 2012 to have the dual approval of both the Vatican and the Chinese Patriotic Association.

Ordained as coadjutor bishop of the diocese on 4th August last year, his ordination Mass was celebrated by around 100 priests, and attended by about 1,400 people, including 120 nuns.

In the liturgy, Coadjutor Bishop Zhang told the congregation that he was very touched and thanked God for choosing him, a simple and weak servant. He also thanked the ordinary, Bishop Zhang, for nurturing and guiding him patiently for years.

Born in Henan province in 1971, Bishop Joseph Zhang Yinlin studied at the National Seminary in Beijing from 1992-1996. After being ordained to the priesthood in 1996, Fr Zhang served as vicar general, assisting Bishop Thomas Zhang Huaixin.

"In April 2015, he, as the only candidate, was elected as candidate to be coadjutor bishop of Anyang diocese. A priest of Anyang diocese told AsiaNews that the ordination liturgy was "sacred, solemn, peaceful and smooth." He described it as "a special day and full of graces."

Unlike previous consecrations, none of the presiding bishops at Zhang's ordination was illicit. Vatican Radio reported optimistically that the bishops at the liturgy were "all Vatican-approved and

government recognised".

"He comes from a very traditional Catholic family," one attendee at the ordination said of the new bishop, asking not to be named as the priests had been told not to speak to the media.

"I'm glad he is becoming our bishop. He has a very deep faith and I know he will be able to accomplish his ministry well." The Anyang diocese now has two bishops, 30 priests, 120 nuns and about 40,000 members. A local priest said that the ordination was a good start for the Church in Henan and also for the Church in China. "This is a new beginning for Anyang Diocese," the priest said.

This optimism is hugely welcome, as the past few years have been difficult for the Catholic Church in China. The emergence of robust Protestant groups has seen the state respond with restrictions on civil and religious society and the last ordination of a bishop in China ended in turmoil, when Shanghai's newly installed Thaddeus Ma Daqin denounced the CPCA and was taken away.

He has been under effective house arrest in a seminary ever since the ceremony.

In Zhejiang province a campaign to remove crosses from both Protestant and Catholic churches has been running for more than a year, with some houses of worship demolished on the grounds that they violated building codes.

However, after intense background talks, China's state officials extended an olive branch to the Holy See last summer by accommodating the Vatican's wishes to consecrate Bishop Zhang in Henan province.

Chinese have a vivid saying for the situation of many Christians nowadays: "Reguo shang de mayi," 熱鍋上的螞蟻 "It's like being ants crawling on a hot wok."

But the proverbial wok has clearly been less hot for Catholics over the past 12 months. China's Catholic bloggers wrote enthusiastically about the consecration



of Bishop Zhang, and the official website of the Party's State Administration for Religious Affairs (SARA), announced that Bishop Joseph Zhang Yinlin's ordination was a great success and the article included little of the previous rhetoric, which was normally more combative and assertive of the Party's rule over all Catholic affairs in the country.

Since his ordination Bishop Zhang has maintained a discreet but determined pastoral profile, as he continues to build meaningful bridges between the state and China's 12 million Catholic community.

For the faithful, his appointment brings fresh encouragement and inspiration, and the real hope that old divisions will heal.



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“ Relations between the Chinese government and the Vatican have improved greatly in recent years ... I think we're getting there. ”