

Church on Taiwan Notes Disturbing Decline Pattern

By FATHER IVAR McGRATH
(NC News Service)

Taipei, Taiwan — Although the Catholic Church in Taiwan entered 1970 with an impressive 20-year record in number of converts, rapid growth in church organization, and church, school and hospital building, some aspects of this effort are being questioned.

A marked slow-down in conversions, a drop in Mass attendance and what some consider a lack of real Christian community spirit among the newly baptized, are the main reasons for the doubts raised.

The critics are answered by those who contend that routine, hard work will recoup many of the losses, and that from now on one may expect a slower but surer growth.

When Taiwan was returned to China at the end of World War II — after 50 years of Japanese rule — there were fewer than 10,000 Catholics ministered to by a handful of Spanish Dominicans and three Taiwanese priests. Today Taiwan comprises one archdiocese and six dioceses.

During the 1950s great numbers of priests and Sisters arrived here, both Chinese and foreign missionaries forced to leave the Chinese mainland. Today there are 364 Chinese and 446 foreign priests, and 701 Chinese and 422 foreign Sisters in Taiwan.

Conversions reached a peak in 1957 when there were more than 25,000 adult Baptisms. Catholics numbered more than 300,000 by 1968.

Almost 700 churches, a university, a girls' college, 24 high schools, 5 vocational schools, 10 primary schools, 44 student

hostels, 23 hospitals with a total of 1,301 beds, and 115 dispensaries were constructed.

A Jesuit-operated radio and television program service, two radio broadcasting stations, and 7 publishing houses have been established.

The fact remains, however, that conversions have slowed down considerably. In 1969, there were fewer than 5,000 adult Baptisms, and Mass attendance has dropped off.

Young priests and Sisters sometimes say the conversions of earlier years were made in great part through mixed motives, and that the converts were poorly formed. Those who decry the building program claim that it has projected the image of a wealthy Church, widening the gap between Church and people.

There are also those who complain that the Church is mainland - China oriented, in that the largest number of converts has been among Chinese from the mainland, that most priests and Sisters speak Mandarin rather than the Taiwanese dialects, and that the Taiwanese, who form the majority, are in some places neglected or even alienated.

According to Father Thomas Smith, a Vincentian from St. Louis, there were several reasons for the numbers of Chinese from the mainland becoming Catholics.

"I think there were a lot of people on the mainland who wanted to become Catholics, but because of the influence of the old folk, they could not. The old people wanted someone to burn paper money for them when they died.

"The fact that when they

came here they were separated from the security of the large Chinese family was a contributing factor. For many it was hopelessness and despair, a feeling that they would never get back to the old home. They were grasping for something that would give them a stability in life.

"There are those who say they were rice Christians. Well, we got some that way, but that wasn't the main reason. Anyone working in a parish knows that what we could give them would only keep them going for a day or two each month."

"Today the living standards have risen so rapidly that I would say a family as a unit is getting 10 times what it got before as income," Father Smith said. "The prosperity has a definite effect on conversions. Our Lord spoke of that when he mentioned the camel getting through the eye of a needle."

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"There was this tide of conversions, and for a while the converts went along with the practice of their religion," Bishop Paul Cheng of Taiwan said.

"We shall not have the same unusual circumstances leading to many conversions again. Now the mainlanders are to all intents and purposes the same as Taiwanese, with roots here and stability. Conversions will be slow, as they always were in China, and priests will have to go out, visit Catholics and seek every means of contacting non-Catholics. Priests for many years were used to the people coming to them, and some don't yet realize that from now on we must go to the people."



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