

The Church in China Workshop (6th Form Religious Education)

“Will no one rid me of this turbulent priest?” is a line attributed to Henry II. Although there may be some dispute as to whether he actually uttered these exact words, it led to the death, in 1170, of the Archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Becket. This event was the culmination of an on-going war of words between the king and the archbishop, regarding the extent to which Church and State had authority over the other, or freedom from the other. Hearing what the king had said, four of Henry’s knights travelled to Canterbury where they murdered Becket in the cathedral precincts. Becket was declared a martyr and is recognised as such by both the Catholic Church and the Church of England today.

During the 16th and 17th centuries, there was a considerable amount of upheaval in the religious life of Europe. In this country, at one time it was illegal to be a priest – the punishment was death. The Catholic community had to train its priests in other European countries and then smuggle them back into England and Wales. Today, two of these priests’ training colleges (seminaries) still remain, one in Rome and one in Valladolid, Spain.

Fortunately, times have changed. Today we enjoy freedom of worship. The various Christian denominations and other religions in our country are free from day-to-day interference from the State, and are generally left to organise their own affairs. It is also the case that these different faith communities often work together, especially in social welfare projects. Such religious freedom however, is not enjoyed by everyone the world over.

In a few months time, the world’s eyes will be on Beijing, where the 2008 Olympic Games will be held. Over the last decade, China has undergone a transformation. The country has been far more open and the economy has boomed. Many countries are keen to share in China’s new-found success and confidence. It is hard to imagine that this is the same country that less than 20 years ago saw the ruthless suppression of pro-democracy campaigners in the now infamous Tiananmen Square. Critics have pointed out that many companies and world leaders are turning a blind eye to some human rights abuses that still exist in China.

Jesuit missionary priests took Catholicism to China in the 16th Century. They were originally welcomed and had prominent roles in the imperial court, bringing western scientific knowledge and philosophy with them. In later years, after the Jesuits withdrew from the country, the fledgling Catholic community suffered waves of persecution; however the faith was resilient and remained. In 1900 it was estimated that there was over 750,000 Catholics in the country.

In the 1950’s, following the establishment of the People’s Republic of China, severe restrictions were placed on both Catholic and Protestant churches and all foreign missionaries were expelled. The Government set up the ‘Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association’ to control the Catholic Church. Those Catholics who thought that this was wrong refused to accept the authority of the government sponsored Association and formed an ‘underground’ Church, effectively splitting the Catholic community in two.

Over the last 50 years, the Catholics who belong to the underground Church have had to practise their faith in relative secrecy. The authorities have attempted to suppress the underground Church, and have particularly persecuted priests and bishops, many of whom have been unjustly detained in prison for many years.

Case Study

Bishop Julius Jia Zhiguo has spent a total of 20 years in prison, and since 2004 has been arrested no less than eight times. His most recent imprisonment ended in 2007 after 10 month's detention. Arrests often coincide with major religious celebrations such as Christmas and Easter. Even when he is 'free', his house is often under surveillance and visitors have been known to have been questioned by the authorities. His diocese of Zhengding is located some 270 km south of Beijing and has about 110,000 members. Bishop Jia himself founded an orphanage for abandoned disabled children that is run by nuns and that is now under tight government surveillance. The small seminary training young men for the priesthood in his diocese often has to move to avoid the students being arrested.

Some feel that has been some softening of attitude from the authorities to the underground Church in recent years, especially after some international criticism of China's human rights record. In May 2007 Pope Benedict wrote an open letter to Chinese Catholics. In this letter the Pope expressed a desire that the present situation be resolved. He also indicated that the Church was always willing to dialogue with the leadership of the People's Republic of China. At the same time, he also stressed the need for bishops in China to be in full communion with him as the visible sign of unity of the Church on earth.

Whilst some believe that things are improving for underground Catholics (and other religious groups), other commentators are concerned that the Olympics will be a publicity spectacle for the Chinese government on the world stage, whilst human rights abuses still remain just below the surface.

Websites and Research

Wikipedia: "Roman Catholicism in China" and "Tiananmen Square"

www.cardinalkungfoundation.org

www.valladolid.org

www.englishcollegerome.org

Aid to the Church in Need – www.acn.org.uk

Questions for discussion or debate

- To what extent should religious groups be free from state control or influence, and to what extent should religious groups be able to contribute to political discussions?
- Would you be willing to go to prison for your religious (or any other) beliefs as Bishop Zhiguo and some of his priests have?
- Can/should sport be completely free from politics?
- What motivates young men to train for the priesthood when they are being persecuted for their beliefs, be it in 16th century England or as members of the underground Church in China today?