

# Blessed are the Peacemakers: The Search for a Chinese Reading

BENOÎT VERMANDER  
TAIPEI RICCI INSTITUTE  
TAIWAN



*The Sermon on the Mount tells us that making peace is a creative process, and that engaging in such a process is to continue and to accomplish God's work. Each creative process is unique and must be analyzed in context. What are the peacemakers expected to do in today's China? Taking inspiration from a set of life experiences and biblical readings, this lecture will try to give a comprehensive account of what peace building is to be in the Chinese context.*

After Fr. Ed Malatesta suddenly passed away in January of last year, I found in the eulogy contributed by Professor Barbara Bundy a sentence that I liked very much. It describes Father Ed's special gift perfectly, a gift that enabled him to achieve so many things during the twenty years or so that he devoted to the Chinese apostolate. Professor Bundy said: "When others would see barriers, Fr Malatesta would discern bridges, and when he couldn't find bridges, then he would build them himself." This reminded me of the evangelical blessing central to Fr Malatesta's lifework: "Happy the peacemakers, they shall be called children of God" (*Matthew*, 5,9). In the Biblical setting, especially in the New Testament, peace is indeed a business of craftsmen, of people who mobilize their energy, their creative power, their mind, heart and imagination for the coming of a state of things — peace — that was not yet, but is, called to life. The crafting of peace was one way through which humankind, created in God's image and likeness, shared in the nature of its own Creator.

This conviction is at the heart of what I intend to say today. Willing to promote peace and justice in China, we have to imagine bridges and venues, to discern opportunities where one usually sees obstacles, to mobilize all the resources of the Chinese and the Christian tradition in order to hasten the coming of the Kingdom. For the coming of the Reign

of God is about hope and reconciliation, the sharing of goods, an exchange of words, growth through fulfilling human relationships; it is about reconciling with the past, living the present to its fullest and dreaming the future together. Happy the dream-makers, one day they shall awake to see their dreams fulfilled beyond what they ever could have imagined.

To the name of Ed Malatesta, allow me to add here the one of Yves Raguin. Fr Malatesta, founder of the San Francisco Ricci Institute, died in January 1998. Fr Raguin, who founded the Taipei Ricci Institute in the year 1966, died in December 1998. This was a challenging and painful year for the Ricci Institutes, a time also to remember in hope that “unless a wheat grain falls on the ground and dies, it remains only a single grain; but if it dies, it yields a rich harvest” (*John*, 12, 24). In the last article that Fr Raguin wrote, and that he gave to me three days before he died, he stressed a fact that is extremely relevant for our topic. Justice, he said, is not only about the sharing of goods, it is also about the sharing of words. Doing justice to someone means, among other things, to enter into his/her beliefs and convictions, to try to gain an inner understanding of what makes up the core of his or her life. I think this is an epistemological as well as a moral starting point, and this is why, in yesterday’s presentation, I first pointed out a few things that Chinese intellectuals themselves underline when it comes to issues of justice and peace.

Actually, it is in the very act of *listening* that new venues can be opened and new bridges built. At one stage or another, making peace means to be actively engaged in listening. I just pointed out that peacemakers are indeed makers, do-ers, craftsmen. But another aspect has to be kept in mind. Listening to others and to God is the activity through which we accept to look beyond our own power of creation. Listening is the activity through which we discover that the state of peace and justice that we hope and prepare for, ultimately comes as a gift. As God did on the seventh day, we create a time and a space for others just by limiting our creative power, our initiative. In order to make peace, we have also to create an empty space, a void, and we can only do so by non-action, *wu wei*. I think indeed that the Taoist approach of *wu wei* as a basic existential posture provides us with the basic pattern of what non violence is meant to be. Peacemakers have first to reconcile in themselves the active and the passive side and, in the act of listening, they

give birth to the gift of peace, a gift that far transcends their own power — and nevertheless comes through them. The same psalm that tells us “Justice and Peace now embrace” also states, “I am listening. What is the Lord saying? What God is saying means peace.” (*Psalms* 85) Listening in the dark, awakening to God’s promise, perceiving that such a promise does not separate the coming of peace and the struggle for justice, all this is part of the same spiritual journey.

Therefore, I will first invite you to listen with me to what God tells us about peace and violence, justice and disorder, in today’s China — but also to look upon the tree of the Kingdom which grows upon the Chinese earth. Then we shall confront what we see and we hear in China with some of the interpretative resources that the Biblical tradition offers to us. Finally, drawing lessons from this confrontation, we will try to discern the kind of contribution that Christians (be they Chinese in China, Chinese outside China, non-Chinese working with Chinese), are called to offer in order to hasten the coming of that “[j]ustice which preced[es] God, [that] Peace which follow[s] his footsteps” (*Psalms*, 85).

### *A Contemplation of Place*

You might not be surprised that, as a Jesuit formed by St. Ignatius Loyola’s *Spiritual Exercises*, I start (after many others) with a kind of contemplation based on the one that St Ignatius proposes to the retreatant to help him enter into the mystery of Incarnation. Sharing in the vision of God, looking down upon the whole expanse or circuit of all the earth (*SpEx*, 102), especially on the great extent of the Chinese soil, we contemplate the Chinese people whom we meet and we know. We contemplate the Chinese people who are of our family, by blood or by affinity, some being at peace and some in trouble, some weeping and some laughing, some well, some sick, some making money and some laid off, some filled with projects and some with despair, some covered by the scars of a long history and the younger ones seemingly entering into a new world.

As St Ignatius invites us to do, we take the time to experience such great diversity, diversity in dress and manner of acting, diversity in thought and destiny, and we are the more struck by it because such diversity is often overlooked. Memory and imagination help us not to rely solely on generalities, but instead to concentrate on concrete situations

and real people; they also help us to go beyond the abstract character of words such as peace and justice. We feel and share the sense of loss of the forty-five year old laid-off worker who was thrown out of school in the *Cultural Revolution* and is now thrown out of work in the aftermath of the state enterprises' reform. (This same forty-five year old worker knew a time of widespread starvation when he was five and probably married at the time when the one-child policy started to be rigorously implemented.) We feel the revolt of the ordinary citizen who does not obtain his residence permit or cannot get his case brought to court because he does not have the right connections. We feel the sense of helplessness of the villagers who have seen the waters of the nearby river completely polluted by a chemical factory, to the extent that many of their children were born handicapped. And we have to take time also to feel the dedication of some teachers doing the best they can despite the complexities and limitations of the system. We also take time to appreciate the growth of Buddhist or *Qigong* associations that start initiatives for the cleanliness of their neighborhoods or even launch a petition on community issues. We take time to rejoice because, even in the midst of a ferocious competition that seemingly deprives human relationships of all flavor and meaning, the miracle of the sharing of goods and words happens every day in China. Watching the seeds of peace and violence, righteousness and inequality, growing together on the Chinese earth, we are reminded of the parable: "When you root out the weeds you might pull up the wheat with it. Let them both grow till the harvest" (*Matthew*, 13, 29). Or we might recall the numerous Chinese parables on the control of the waters: *you do not limit the strength of water, you direct its stream, for everyone's benefit*. Likewise, you do not restrict the turbid stream of Chinese society, where the worst and the best of human genius combine. You might rather try to direct its flow towards more meaningful pursuits, you might try to dig irrigation channels through which new encounters, new goals, new communication networks, can slowly emerge. In Chinese philosophy as in Biblical imagery, peace is often described as a state of things where plants grow strong and firm near water streams. Contemplating today's China in its search for peace and justice means to look upon muddy waters, the grasses and weeds. At the same time, this contemplation helps us to learn from the nature of things, to learn that waters have to run and to

fertilize the land, and the seed has to grow into a tree so big that the birds can shelter in its shade.



I already mentioned the state enterprises' reform as raising in a particularly acute way issues of peace and justice in the present Chinese context. The laying-off of millions of workers and civil servants and the end of the subsidized housing system managed by the working units are not merely economic reforms. They change the way people perceive how to act in society, what they can get from the system and what they are requested to give back. These millions of public workers were the backbone of the system; they epitomized the stable though modest benefits that allegiance to the social contract was providing to the common folk. Economic reform is about social linkage. In today's China, when a worker is asked to retire a few years earlier than should have been normally the case, it is not his own life that is changed but also that of his son or grandson who was expected to walk in his steps and inherit his benefits. In other words, a whole system of allegiances and networks is being shaken to the foundations. The reforms of the Deng Xiaoping era, the will of the present government, the new challenges brought by changing economic circumstances, all of this challenges the State to transform the social contract upon which it relies for legitimacy.

The remodeling of the social contract is causing major problems that may lead to civil unrest. It is easier to enumerate the windows that are closing down than the ones that are opening up. Unlike those who, a decade ago, were voluntarily embarking upon the sea of economic initiative, the vast majority of today's laid-off workers lack the entrepreneurial skills necessary for starting new ventures. A stroll through a Chinese city reveals that most laid-off workers only end up adding new foodstalls to the hundreds that already exist. By some semi-official estimates, only half of the twelve millions workers laid off in 1998 were able to find new jobs. Not only is the State unable to give these people the formation that the new challenges would require of them, but education might well become the first loser in the game now being played. First, getting an education costs a lot of money these days and people being laid off will be unable to invest in their children's future. Second, as low-level administrative services become one of the targets of the

lay-off policy, and since other windows of opportunity seem totally out of reach, the quality and attendance level of education in the poorest areas is at risk to fall even further. For most people, the new opportunities that are opening up are a far more abstract reality than the disappearing incentives. And this is even truer when such changes occur as recession is threatening.

The dismantling of the safety network in order to enter the era of economic initiative supposes the development of civil society. Responding to new social needs, making a fair analysis of risks and opportunities before starting a new venture (rather than relying on a power network as is the rule until now), developing an innovative and flexible formation system — all this requires the empowerment not only of individuals but also of free, spontaneous associations. And this is precisely what a new, emerging social contract ought to be about. Unfortunately, this is what the State remains most reluctant to allow. Individual initiative is encouraged only for as long as it does not develop into collective organizations and civil empowerment. The avowed fears of the central Party-State — the formation of free trade unions, ethnic separatism, religious activities — are to be taken in terms, not so much of their literal meaning, as of the deep-seated panic triggered by the prospect of any collective initiative not started and controlled from above. In other words, economic fairness, political development and cultural creativity are related issues. Analyzing issues of peace and justice as a whole is to look at human development as a global process, in which technical issues and questions of meaning are constantly interacting.

### *Marginalization — The Case of Liangshan Prefecture*

I would like now to give a more personal accent to this contemplation on the seeds of peace and violence, righteousness and injustice, in today's China. I wish to evoke an area that I happen to know well, and whose problems exemplify what is really at stake when we speak of peace and justice considering the present state of Chinese society. Let the following be a narrative reflection on the way the wheat of justice grows together with weeds.

For the last several years I have done research on a minority area, the prefecture of Liangshan, in southwest Sichuan. The majority of its inhabitants are part of a so-called "national minority" that the Central

Government defines as “Yi.” The Constitution of the People’s Republic of China defines the country as a “unified State made up of diverse nationalities.” Altogether, 56 “nationalities” are officially recognized in China, the Han and 55 “national minorities.” The Yi nationality is one of these national minorities. The various subgroups belonging to this centrally-defined entity are spread throughout the provinces of Sichuan, Yunnan, and Guizhou, totaling around seven million people. The basic problem lies in the very definition of the “Yi” people, as the subgroups it includes can differ very much in traditions, social structure, and language. People supposedly belonging to the Yi nationality speak six different languages, all part of the Tibeto-Burman linguistic family, but which hold only 25 to 50 per cent of words in common. In fact, a number of the subgroups today comprising the Yi nationality were generally known as Luoluo, which in Chinese is even more derogatory than the “barbarian” Yi character. Nuosu is the word that the “Yi” people of the Liangshan area use to designate themselves. The history of the Yi and, among them, of the Nuosu people, is strongly linked to the colonization of the remote parts of Western China by the Han nationality. It can be said that the reforms of 1956-1958 truly marked the end of the *de facto* independence of the Liangshan area. This marked also a time of denial and harsh repression of everything that constituted the social, economic, religious and cultural system of the Nuosu. Antagonisms were created or revived and the ancient social structure was described as forming a “slave society” thus fitting into the historical model drawn by Engels. The Nuosu society was certainly a caste society, although its formative process is not clear. Nevertheless, the use of the expression “slave society” by media and most Han scholars alike is misleading and unjust in many ways.

What struck me at first about Liangshan was the contrast between the impressive richness of the cultural and religious tradition (with a wealth of written sources) and the sense of loss, the lack of perspective of the majority of the Nuosu population. Striking also was the denial of this culture and history by most Han scholars, or their sheer ignorance of it. Typical also of the situation of structural injustice in Liangshan is the systematic destruction of the forests, the waste of the natural resources, the ever-growing consumption of drugs and alcohol. I do not want to present an overly pessimistic picture, as government policies in the area are far from being universally bad. Besides, Nuosu

cadres are often the first to neglect or oppress their own brethren. However, the Liangshan prefecture certainly offers a strong example of what Han chauvinism, sectarian policies and mismanagement together can produce.

Another thing that dawned on me later on was the dedication, sense of mission and sophistication of a few Nuosu intellectuals who I have become close friends with. Together we have developed a few editing projects for assessing the wealth of the ritual tradition. And our present dream is the development of a pilot primary school in a very destitute area. Such a school could be a tool for the development of bilingual education (Chinese and Yi) as well as for social change, making it possible for students and friends from abroad to come during the summer, to help with health care and technical projects. I do not as yet know what we will be able to achieve, but I know for sure that “justice” and “peace” in such a context transpire in and through the contact and sharing of life stories inspiring inventiveness, pragmatism, and cultural cross-fertilization — amounting to an exchange of gifts that, for all concerned, is truly unexpected.

### *Biblical Insights on Peace and Violence*

The contemplation on the incarnation has led us to the heights of Liangshan. We were far away from the great cities of Beijing or Shanghai, but people who are being marginalized are often the ones able to tell us best what the coming of a reign of peace and justice is about. On the one hand, they tragically experience what they are deprived of; on the other hand they mysteriously know that the Kingdom is already in their midst.

Until now, the vision of peace and justice on which I have relied is very inchoate. I have not elaborated a “theory of justice,” a “strategy for peace,” and it is not what I intend to do now. I propose instead to confront this inchoate, existential approach to peace and justice in China with a number insights inspired by Biblical texts. This should help us to go from contemplation to discernment. We enter here into the second stage of listening. We started by listening to something of a stream-like flow of Chinese voices, traumas, and hopes. Let us now listen to other voices, prophetic voices, voices announcing a renewed message as they travel through time and space. Following this, we shall make the



effort to hear the voice sending Christians out to sow the seeds of peace according to what time and circumstances require of them in today's China.



So much has been written on a topic such as "peace and justice in the Bible" that I really do not know where I should start. I will then tell you a simple little story that happened when I was around eleven, because this story came back to my mind several times during my stays in Mainland China. At that time, I was going once a week to a catechism class, and one day the topic was "The *Beatitudes*." The textbook was proposing this perfectly stupid question: "What do you consider to be the greatest beatitude? And the smallest?" Now, that was an easy one: we all choose on the spot "Happy the pure of heart, they shall see God" as the greatest, and "Happy the gentle, they shall have the earth for their heritage" as the least exalted beatitude. First of all, "possessing the earth" could surely not be compared to "seeing God." Second of all, we had a kind of disdain for "the gentle" or "the meek," which the modesty of the reward promised to them seemed, after all, to corroborate. The catechism teacher seemed satisfied with our answer. However, I must have felt that something was not entirely right with this understanding of the *Beatitudes*, because, two or three months later, during a walk I was taking with my father, I abruptly asked him: "Dad, why do they say that the meek will inherit the earth?" My father thought about that for a while and answered: "Well, I suppose, this is because it actually works the other way around: the ones who exercise strength and violence are the ones who possess the earth, and Jesus promises us that God wants to change that." I think that, from that day, I began to understand something of the Bible. When you reflect upon Chinese history, upon the concrete history of the Chinese peasantry, you might indeed suspect that the best "Good News" to start with is just to say that the meek will have the earth for their heritage. Only the one who understands that such, indeed, is the desire and the promise of God, can dream with a pure heart to see the face of God, because He is the God who dreams that dream. Was the God presented to China really the one who wants the meek to inherit the earth?

The strength of the Biblical text is to speak so deeply, so precisely and so profusely about violence and injustice that what it has to say

about peace, meekness and justice becomes at the end almost credible. What the prophets tell us about eschatological justice, love and peace sounds like a dream, like the one of Zhuangzi becoming a butterfly, but the dream of people who, when they are awake, know for sure that they are not butterflies yet. Through a series of key episodes (the covenant of the Garden of Eden, the murder of Cain, the covenant with Noah, the establishment of the Mosaic Law), the Biblical narrative describes the very structure of the violence working its way about our hearts and society. It also provides the means through which violence might in some way be identified, domesticated, converted. Idolatry, sacrifice, the dominance of men over women — all those things witness to the structural violence which affects even the image of God. Covenants and the Law are means for “muddling through” violence. Setting up a Law is to open the world of symbolism, interpretation and meaning. Law and Covenants channel and assert the divine revelation not by ignoring but by assuming violence. God’s meekness will prevail by working its way within the structure of violence, never outside violence. In this light, Peace is not the negation of violence, but its conversion, as the same inner strength, the same inner energy can be used for death or for life (here again, the water metaphor is fully relevant). Love is “as strong as death,” asserts the *Song of Songs*, and this verse tells us much about what could be called “the violence of the Spirit,” the violence that disrupts and exceeds our fears, our lies and compromises. In other words, only the one who experiences the compelling power of violence in his or her heart, memory and body will let the Spirit transform his/her into a “peacemaker,” into a person fully engaged in the paradoxical struggle for dialogue and reconciliation.



I just said that the Bible was bringing to light a “structure of violence.” In several respects, understanding what violence is, and denouncing it, is a prerequisite. The coming of a reign of peace and justice appears as the very opposite of this structure of violence. Such a structure is not abstract. By necessity it possesses an historical character that accounts for its fluidity. At the same time, the prophetic characterization of violence has striking similarities, pointing towards a kind of “nucleus” that may transcend times and cultures. Ezekiel might be the prophet whose

vision is most vivid and farsighted: "O City shedding blood inside yourself to bring your hour closer, setting up idols on your soil to defile yourself. You have incurred guilt by the blood you have shed, you have defiled yourself with the idols you have made. Near and far, they will scoff at you, the turbulent city with a tarnished name: where all the princes of Israel live, each one busy shedding blood, and a law to himself; where people despise their fathers and mothers; where they ill-treat the settler; where they oppress the widow and the orphan; where you have no reverence for my sanctuaries and profane my Sabbaths" (*Ezekiel*, 22, 3-8)

In this passage as in many others, three dimensions are underscored that, together, tell us about the nature of violence:

The first dimension has to do with blood and sacrifice. It is not only that blood is shed, but that, ultimately, it is blood shed against oneself; in the prophetic literature, the sacrifice of first-born children (attested to in the Near East civilizations, and by the Bible itself) is emblematic of this. "As for the children they had borne me, they have made them pass through the fire to be consumed" (*Ezekiel*, 23,36). Sacrifice combines blood hatred against others and hatred against one's own. The anti-sacrificial stance of the prophetic literature ultimately denounces the amalgam between violence and religion. To satisfy unto death under the garb of devotion is to commit violence against God. Taking satisfaction in shedding blood, in bloody sacrifice is a way to alter, to caricature, to negate one's origin, to proclaim oneself as source of life by the very fact of being agent of death. Ultimately, the sacrifice of one's child establishes one as source and end of his/her Self, as absolute life-giver and death-giver.

Idolatry constitutes the second dimension of the structure of violence and is obviously connected very much to the sacrificial theme, as bloody sacrifices are often directed towards idols or towards an idolatrous image of the true God. An idol is a projection of our self-image. It is an image of ourselves to which we confer the imaginary power of being law-giver and life-giver. In the biblical tradition, the primacy given to the Word is an acknowledgment that the Other calls me to life, that I am not the source of my own existence but am called to live by a voice external to my own self. Making an idol is a way to negate the gift of life. Violence negates the gift, negates the reciprocity of desires, violence

ultimately negates the Other. Idolatry is the act by which I make myself blind to my own Origin, blind to the fact that my being is constituted by reciprocal relationships, that I really live only through the endless process of giving and of receiving.

The profanation of Sabbath is another recurrent theme in the prophetic literature and points to another specific dimension in the structure of violence. The seventh day is by essence an empty time, the space let open for relating to one's origin. It is a space let open for restoring the original covenant, the Garden of Eden alliance that precedes the shedding of blood. The biblical narrative progressively enriches the theme of the Sabbath as it develops the meaning of the Alliance. The space laid open and free is the one within which liberation can occur; it is a space for Passover. The alliance concluded between God and Israel reveals its meaning through the concrete relationships that men build among themselves or even through the way men treat animals. And this set of relationships is regulated by the observance of the Sabbath: "For six days you shall labor and do all your work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath for the Lord your God. You shall do not work that day, neither you nor your son nor your daughter nor your servants, men or women, nor your ox nor your donkey nor any or your animals, nor the stranger who lives with you. Thus your servant, man or woman, shall rest as you do. Remember that you were a servant in the land of Egypt, and that the Lord your God brought you out from there with mighty hand and outstretched arm; because of this, the Lord your God has commanded you to keep the Sabbath day" (*Deuteronomy*, 5, 12-15). There, again, the profanation of the Sabbath amounts to a negation of one's origin, one's liberation from death, it means maintaining oneself, other people and the whole living universe in the bonds of servitude.

In contrast, a living understanding and observance of the seventh day opens the road towards a reign of peace and justice. It means to recall a history of suffering and liberation. It means to set laws and rituals that limit the weight of bondage, even when bondage remains a reality. It means to strive towards a state of things where blood is not shed and idols not worshipped. The seventh day is the time when peace and justice can flourish as a free gift and, yet, as the wondrous fruit of

creative human relationships liberated from the servitude of hatred and venality.



Can these biblical insights help us to reach an inner, more spiritual understanding of the structure of violence in China today, and, therefore, of what the coming of peace and justice in the Chinese context is meant to be? As a matter of fact, I was struck by the “prophetic” undertones of two texts that appeared last September. The *Declaration on Civil Rights and Freedom* and the *Declaration on Civil Rights and Social Justice* were both conjointly signed by Ding Zilin, Lin Mu, Jiang Qisheng, Jiang Peikun and Wei Xiaotao. They describe China in a vein that, at times, resembles Ezekiel’s description of eschatological times. Shortly after the Communist Party came to power it declared, “evil conduct such as hatred, cruelty, false accusations, betrayal, lies and deception reached unprecedented proportions, justified as being in the interests of a certain class. People witnessed and suffered the most blatant desertion of humanity since the beginning of history, the most shameless trampling on the morality and values of humankind.”

I even find a striking similarity between the three biblical dimensions of violence that I have underlined and the way through which the five signatories analyze China’s present situation.

“Blood and sacrifice” could serve here as a metaphor of the “self-devouring” process of China’s flesh and soul. The two documents describe how power-holders quickly adapt to changing circumstances in a way that allows for the continuing pursuit of exploitation of resources. True, the reform era brought positive changes but, as the 1990s continued, “those who controlled enterprises with links to power and connections turned their businesses into an ever-lasting feast. Once they had consumed the enterprises, they gobbled up the loans, once these had disappeared, they devoured collective investments, then they dumped the crisis on their employees and local peasants, leaving these areas in a desperate situation with enterprises folding all around, and people barely able to make enough to survive.” For fifty years, much blood has been shed indeed, and many “sacrifices” required in a way that recalls one how ancient Near East deities required the sacrifice of the first born males.

Likewise, Idolatry here refers to the urge for an absolute monopoly of power, to an image of the ruling elite as life-givers, death-givers, as fully controlling the origin and the purpose of social life. This was true from the start of the new regime, and the process continued during the era of reform and open-door policy. The *Declaration on Civil Rights and Social Justice* states: "The alliance between power and money quickly enlarged the power of the privileged from the political field into the economic field, and turned that power into a social resource with enormous potential."

Finally, the profanation of Sabbaths could be read as a metaphor pointing to the negation of any free space, empty space through which a person can fulfill human destiny: to establish living, peaceful relationships with other people with the universe, with the Creator. "(China's rulers) take a *laissez-faire* attitude towards the crude, the mediocre, the evil, the vulgar, and the base, but adopt an attitude of intolerance toward serious creativity and individuality. They coerce scholars and artists into self-censorship, and induce people in academic circles to concern themselves only with their wallets, abandoning their sense of responsibility and conscience. This has not only reduced the pursuit of higher values among the people, but has also led to a widespread deterioration in the quality of national education and culture."

As is the case with all prophetic messages, the two "*Declarations*" might lack in nuance and balance. However, they strike a chord very similar to the Biblical *leitmotif*. Peace and justice are about the restoration and fulfillment of humanity within humankind. Such a fulfillment requires that men first come to terms with their history and the violence it reveals. In this process, men discover that violence is the lie through which we caricature our own nature, build up our idols, making impossible the setting up of just relationships with God, with our own self and with other people. The Word is what constitutes my identity, and, consequently, what constitutes human and social relationships. Violence is that which destroys the Word. In contrast, Peace is to enter into the seventh day, a day where we just "let go", where we loosen the burden that weighs upon your donkey, our servant and ourselves, a day where we choose life rather than our preferred idols, be they called Money, Power, Nation or Law. "Letting go", we fully enter the space of the Word, the space of Language, as Language is what makes our

common humanity come to light. Peace is to let the Word bloom in our flesh, in our midst.

### *Christian Convictions for Peace and Justice in China*

We started with a meditation on peace and violence in today's China, taking the diversity of people and situations into account. We have just contrasted our vision of China with insights provided by the Biblical tradition. Can these images and words be reconciled and transmuted into a specific calling? Can Christians concerned with China assess in a more precise way what the Spirit today calls them to do to prepare for the coming of a Kingdom where peace and righteousness embrace? I do not pretend to have an overall answer to such a question, but I do have a few convictions to share with you.

First of all, if there is one mission shared by all Christian communities, not only in China, but also in the whole of East Asia today, it is indeed that *these communities have to be communities of peacemakers*. They have to let the prophetic call for peace be heard loud and clear. Taking seriously the challenge to become communities of peacemakers might change the order of priorities that most Christian communities harbor at present. When it comes to China, the evidence, of course, is that as long as these communities remain divided their skills in the field of peacemaking will not seem very convincing. On the other hand, the path to reconciliation that they hopefully will undergo might have a true social impact if Christians realize that reconciliation among themselves has a meaning that goes far beyond the boundaries of the Churches.

My second conviction is that Christians can be peacemakers because they have the potential of *crafting a culture of peace* that could be of immeasurable value for China. They can do so because they have within their tradition tools and values that can be used for redefining the style of human and social relationships. Here, I am going to specify what I mean by "culture of peace" not by referring to Mainland China but rather to Taiwan. I will do so, first, because I know better Taiwanese Christian communities; second, because these communities have presently more room for being actors of social change; third, because what is said for Taiwan can be easily adapted to the Mainland China context.

Broadly speaking, Taiwan is in the midst of a cultural crisis, and does not know how to confront it. Taiwan was living under a culture of war, or at the very least of intense competition and has now to invent a culture of peace. The former one was built on a few simple imperatives: prepare yourselves against the Communist threat, be ready to win the economic war, memorize what is needed to pass the exam, use your fists to make your point at the Legislative Assembly. Everyone is now discovering the limitations which follow upon this set of attitudes. A culture of war emphasizes short-term perspectives, while the building of confidence measures across the Strait, the strengthening of a genuine civic culture, the opening of minds to creative thinking are all objectives that require the assessment of long-term perspectives and taking into account values often disregarded.

What would be the values that a culture of peace would emphasize in Taiwan? Five of them can be mentioned:

Words matter: Leaders are too quick in trading promises or abuses. In any society, as in the international arena, the respect for the given word and the refusal to manipulate the language are the basis for dialogue and confidence.

Forgiveness shows more inner strength than revenge. Most features in contemporary Taiwan, Hong-Kong or Mainland China culture, especially movies, make one think that the exaction of revenge is the ultimate proof of manhood. That individuals and societies need to experience forgiveness for healing and for renewal might sound almost trivial for us, even if Western societies have huge blind spots in this area too. In any case, it still remains an almost revolutionary message in the Chinese context.

Public discussion takes everyone's voice into account. Why is it necessary in Taiwan to be so vocal in order to be heard? Cannot politicians and other leaders of opinion reach out to the ones who have not the means to make their voice, their needs, their desires better heard? Obviously, the question is even more acute in the Mainland China context.

Inter-religious dialogue is conducive of peace. The religious wealth of Taiwan is a wonderful asset for building a culture of peace. When religious communities learn to know and appreciate each other, they slowly develop the capacity to engineer common actions for social



reform. I discovered that the same sometimes is true in Mainland China, and that, for instance, inter-religious contacts and appreciation are one of the grounds on which a true environmental movement could develop in the future.

Peace is a creative process. Peace requires more inventiveness than war does. I stressed this point in my introduction. In the Taiwanese context, inventiveness requires first to be able to slow down, to take distance from the flow of scandals, from the ups and downs of the stock exchange or of the cross-strait relationship. Taiwan needs to pause and reflect on its achievements and failures, it needs to be reconciled with itself in order to be reconciled with others. Again, the same statement could be done, with a few qualifications, when it comes to Mainland China

Christians have to be peacemakers, and this requires that they develop and enhance a culture of peace within the present Chinese context. My third conviction is that, for fulfilling this task, *we all have to strike a balance between pragmatic compromise and prophetic protest*. We first have to strike a balance within our Church organizations: some people have the gift of prophetic charisma, others are called to be caretakers, and each generally has difficulties appreciating the specific contribution brought by the other. Nonetheless, they have to learn to engage in a dialogue of truth. More importantly, each one of us working in or for China has to find this balance in the definition of his/her mission. Some are dissidents, or directly working for the release of dissidents, some decide to take advantage of openings that local governments or other official structures provide. Both sides have to try to enter into a global vision. Truly prophetic witnesses know how to make use of sudden windows of opportunity and to avoid caricaturing the people they confront. Caretakers have to be able to discriminate among the projects they are asked to support (starting clinics, churches or schools, giving lectures in seminaries) and to select the ones whose prophetic impact might ultimately be the strongest. As a matter of fact, enhancing a culture of peace goes through this discernment and dialogue *ad extra* and *ad intra*.

My fourth conviction is that Christians will be agents of peace and justice if they *value and support grass-root initiatives that flourish in the soil of Chinese civil society*. Most of the time, they cannot start such initiatives, they are called to listen and discern in order to support what is

most creative, what enhances China's diversity and pluralism. I have mentioned a project dear to my own heart, a model primary school in a deprived minority area, a school conceived in such a way as to enhance bilingual education and to serve as an agent of social change for a larger community. Generally speaking, education is a gold mine in today's China, as the needs are so strong that inventiveness is especially welcome. True, we have to recognize that every initiative will be watched and somehow controlled, but experience proves that the windows of opportunity that open in the education sector are not just imaginary ones. I think that, even in the field of media, there is room for openness and collaboration. Quality programs, programs with a focus on peace and justice issues, can be conceived and implemented, provided one works with the right partners and accepts the constraints and the language specific to the Chinese system.

Finally, *Peace and Justice are not abstract notions; their flourishing is part of a narrative that needs to be expressed and written down.* Peace and Justice happen in space and time. Interpreting anew the quest for harmony typical of Chinese culture, recalling the sufferings endured during the last fifty years as the ones that led to the victory of the post-Maoist regime, listening to the voices of the Christians who suffered for their faith during this ordeal, recalling the diversity of the Chinese world and paying special attention to the minorities largely deprived of their own identity, recalling innumerable stories of hardships, traumas, forgiveness, failures, survival and hopes ... All these contribute to the setting forth of the narrative. Within the narrative, peace and justice take the form of blood and flesh, through the images and the words that come to surface, the body of the New China slowly takes shape. Here, we certainly experience the limitation of what we presently can do. Words and images are not allowed yet to flow down, and this not only for political reasons but also for psychological and cultural ones. Diffidence is strong also within our Christian communities. In any case, words and images are not able as yet to coalesce freely into what could be called the *storied body of China*, and this certainly is at the root of violence and injustice.

What we presently do looks very much like the scattered fragments of a mosaic. It is composed of small-scale initiatives, a few words, timidly uttered for most of us (and those who speak louder often pay it dearly), a limited number of gatherings. However, I discovered in the

course of my very limited experience, that these little things were indeed of immense value, simply because they sow *meaning* where there is none. Meaning has a strength of its own that largely escapes us. Meaning has its ways and its tricks. Meaning germinates in a strange fashion. The coming of peace and justice takes shape through little stories or events of which none knows the strength beforehand. Each of the words or initiatives that give meaning today to the words “justice” and “peace” in China are like the mustard seed in the field or the yeast in the flour. Let us then take comfort in the story recounted by a “Taoist” sage: “A man throws seed on the land. Night and day, while he sleeps, when he is awake, the seed is sprouting and growing; how, he does not know. Of its own accord the land produces first the shoot, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear. And when the crop is ready, he loses no time: he starts to reap because the harvest has come” (*Mark*, 4, 26-29). ↪