

From Chinese Communist Militant to Underground Priest

Father Bao's China Odyssey

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BEIJING, JUNE 26, 2005 (Zenit.org).- Conversions to Christianity, along with consecrated vocations, are increasing in China, says AsiaNews.

Despite incessant atheist propaganda and the lack of religious freedom, many young people are reportedly looking into Christianity out of curiosity -- and some are joining the Catholic faith.

A survey conducted by the Academy of Social Sciences in Beijing showed that over 60% of students in Beijing and Shanghai are interested in Christianity, according to AsiaNews.

At a time when China's Communist Party is going through a crisis of identity -- few people still believe in Maoist ideals -- many members of the party are taking interest, albeit secretly, in religion and the Christian faith.

Below is a personal story reported by AsiaNews. It tells of the conversion of a Communist Party militant, a university student in the country's northern region. (The names and geographic places in the story are undefined for security reasons.)

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My name is Bao Yuanjin and I'm a priest in China's north. I entered the priesthood several years ago. I was baptized only 11 years ago. Before that, I was an atheist, and indeed an activist in China's Communist Party.

At university, I was the leader of the young Communists at my faculty. In my heart, I had many plans and ideas for the future, but none of these had anything to do with God who, for me, did not even exist.

As for my family, only my grandmother was a Protestant. When I was a child, I heard her once speak about Jesus: She said that Jesus was the son of God. But I was not interested in any religion. Education in atheism is mandatory in China from elementary school to university.

My mind was full of atheist theories and I thought that believing in God was something childish, perhaps something even a bit stupid.

Party activist

In my fourth year of university, I joined the Party. People in China sign up to the Party a bit out of conviction, but mainly to make "friends" that can one day help them find a job, and give them a hand if they get into trouble.

My life in the Communist cell was neither good nor bad. We students were good with everyone, studious and good at organizing all sorts of activities.

But I was struck by the fact that, in the Party, all these things, however good, were done not for the good of others, but for oneself, for the sake of career advancements. And then there were lies: These were the main feature among us: Everyone lied and everyone knew about the lies, but we carried on all the same.

For example: At every cell meeting there was a moment set aside for confessions and self-criticism (the exact name of the process was "criticize others and criticize yourself"). Actually, there is no self-criticism and no one really criticizes anyone else.

A formal kind of communication sets in, which can even become a form of flattery or adulation. Someone might say to the dean, for example: "Dean, I must criticize something that you did not do well. You worked too much for us. Yes, work is important, but so is your health. You must take better care of it so that you can do even better work for the community."

At times like this, a voice from my heart would say to me: "It's a lie, it's a lie!" But I too had to do this.

After some time, I became ill. I often had nightmares that even woke me from my sleep. One night, I dreamt that I found a package; I opened it and found a book in it. It was a Bible, all shining and bright. I woke up and recalled that my grandmother was the only person to have told me about the Bible. I remembered her saying that Jesus is all-powerful.

So I thought: if Jesus is all-powerful, then perhaps he can cure me! And so I looked for a church in the area and found a Protestant one.

But a Communist is prohibited from believing in a religion. Thus, I would go to see the Protestants secretly.

Fears and miracles

As soon as I graduated, thanks to the backing of the Party, I quickly found a good job in a big city. Before taking up my duties, the company allowed me to take a month to visit my family who lives in another region.

Toward the end of my vacation month, a friend -- who was Catholic, I later discovered -- gave me 10 cassettes with recordings of the sermons of a Chinese priest. After having listened to the cassettes, a battle began to rage in my heart: I thought that perhaps God really exists; perhaps the Catholic religion is really the true one. ...

But at the same time, all the theories on atheism studied at school and in university came

to mind. I was overcome by distress, also because I feared that, in accepting the Catholic faith, I risked losing my job.

I didn't know what to do. That was the day I was to return to the city to take up my job. I already had my bus ticket.

For the first time in my life, I turned to Our Lady: "Holy Mary," I said to her, "if you really exist, if the Catholic faith is true, if you want me to become Catholic, give me a sign: Tomorrow, during my trip, let something important happen, an accident perhaps, through which I survive, then I'll believe."

Now, I think that I had been very stupid to challenge God, putting him to the test that way. But, at that time, that was the only prayer that came to my mind.

The next day an accident really did occur: The front right tire of the bus blew out as we traveled down the road at high speed. The bus went off the road and turned over. We all survived, but we had to struggle to get out of the wreckage through the windows. I was shaken by the incident, but didn't give much thought to this sign.

After hours of wait, the bus company sent us another bus and we continued our trip. But the accident had made us lose time.

When we reached the train station -- my trip was to continue on rail -- it was very late and tickets for my train were sold out. There was a long line at the counter and everyone was telling us that the only tickets available were for a train in three days.

I was exhausted and distressed: I would have had to appear very late at my first job and on my first day of work. I thought of praying to Our Lady again: "Help me to get a train ticket. If you help me this time, I swear I'll follow you!"

Waiting in the long line, I lost all hope. All of a sudden, a man arrived, shouting: "This ticket is for the city of ---. It's for today. Who wants to buy it?" That was my destination. I bought it immediately.

The man said he had got the ticket for his friend who had just called him to say that he was not able to arrive in time. He asked him to return the ticket but, since the train was to leave in 40 minutes, it was too late for a refund and so he was asking around, trying to sell it to someone.

It was a small sign, but it was the beginning -- the first step of my conversion.

After having taken up my job, I went to look for a Catholic Church and there I attended Mass, but always secretly. Bit by bit, I came to understand more about the Catholic faith and, in the end, decided to ask to be baptized.

Finding peace

In finding the Catholic faith, I found a community full of simple and good people, where there's no lying. I found some real friends.

It was liberating for me: I no longer needed to lie. People really criticized themselves in this community and they even criticized the priest. I began to see the light and to understand that I had found the meaning of life.

But to be baptized, I had to overcome a big hurdle: my membership in the Communist Party.

A Communist is atheist; a Christian believes in God: being Catholic and Communist at the same time is impossible. Even the priest who was training me said that I needed to leave the Party. But I didn't have the courage to do so: I feared that, leaving the Party, I would have faced dire consequences: perhaps I would lose my job or even find myself persecuted.

The Party in China controls everything: To break ties with it means in a way losing all hopes for a life of tranquility; it means feeling like a stranger.

There's a rule in the Chinese Communist Party: Each member must give a certain monthly sum to the Party. If a person does not pay for six consecutive months, he is punished and sometimes expelled from the Party.

Since I did not have the courage to openly leave the Party, I thought to get out of it this way and thus I didn't pay my dues for six months. But nothing happened: Without letting me know, the cell leader, seeing that I wasn't paying, was paying for me!

I don't know why he did it. He was a normal sort of person, neither good nor bad. Perhaps he thought that I had forgotten and advanced the money expecting me to repay him later; perhaps he didn't want his superiors to see that there were "slackers" in his cell, for which he could have been criticized.

In the end, my only option was to go through official channels, and I wrote my letter asking to leave the Party. But I didn't have the courage to hand it in. I decided many times to present it, but in the end I wouldn't follow through. At a certain point, I summoned all my courage and went straight to the Party official and gave him my letter.

He was speechless: It was the first time he saw a person who refused to remain in the CCP. He was completely confused.

Finally, I could be baptized. And with this sacrament, I began to enjoy a profound peace.

After some time, I ran into an old friend from the cell. We had been friends even before joining the Party. He had heard that I had left the Party to become a Christian. He told me that I was very courageous and added that he would never have been able to be so brave.

Underground seminary

After becoming Catholic, I continued to attend Mass every Sunday, but with an underground community, not recognized by the government.

Once a nun said to me: Why don't you follow Jesus fully and become a priest? I said "no" right away. There are no believers in my family and becoming a priest would have been difficult.

As a firstborn child, I was obliged, by Chinese tradition, to support my parents in their old age. By entering a seminary, my first enemies would have been my parents.

Six months later, I was praying in my room when I heard a voice calling me: "Follow me." There was no one in the room. In my heart, I understood that it was Jesus calling me, but I was too frightened: Becoming a priest -- of the underground Church -- meant abandoning everything, leaving my family, my work, putting myself at risk, embracing the Cross, suffering, imprisonment.

I said no. But with my refusal, I no longer had peace as I became restless and lost all joy. I didn't want to follow Jesus since I had a good job, a quiet life. But I couldn't resist the Lord's call.

Thus, I prayed to find another job, in a city farther away. That way, I could leave my job less conspicuously and could enter the seminary. I worked in this other city for almost two years, to earn as much as possible, saving everything so that I could leave money for my parents and in the end I followed Jesus' call.

I knew that I was weak and so I prayed: "Jesus, if you want, you can make me faithful through and through, your disciple forever. This will be a very great miracle."

I spent five years in the seminary of the underground Church. Life was very difficult and very risky.

Wake-up time was 5 a.m. After a half-hour of meditation, we celebrated Mass and then lauds. After breakfast, we would clean up and then our studies would begin. We would go to bed at 10 p.m.

Life in an underground seminary is a bit hard: We lived in a country house made available to us by a member of the faithful.

But when we got news that the police had discovered us, we were forced to flee and settle in another place. In five years, we changed location three times.

We seminarians had to take care of the cleaning, but also the cooking, preparing meals for everyone. From the material standpoint, life was truly difficult: little food, few

vegetables, hardly ever meat; crowded rooms with no extra space.

But, in my heart, I felt peace and even an entirely new joy, different from what I previously felt. There was a strong friendship and sense of brotherhood among the seminarians.

Difficulties were quickly overcome since everyone was ready to love each other.

After five years of study, the day came for my priestly ordination. There was a lot of tension at that time in my diocese and we risked being jailed by police. Thus, we celebrated the ordination Mass at 4 o'clock in the morning. At that time everyone in China is asleep, even the policemen.

Even if our life as Catholics is difficult, our faith truly strengthens us day after day. And this also thanks to the example of priests in prison.

One small example: In my hometown, in 1983, when China began its great economic reforms, there were only three Catholic families. Now, after almost 20 years, there are more than 4,000. It is really true that the blood of martyrs becomes the seed of new Christians.

For me too, my strength is Jesus himself. He said, "It was not you who chose me, but I who chose you" (John 15:16). Along this path, I find the Cross, but also joy and peace. With his help, I will always follow him, overcoming whatever difficulty that may arise.
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