The Chinese Mainland

In the wake of Deng Xiaoping's 'open door' policy, an overture to the outside world, the Hong Kong diocese, under the leadership of Bishop John B. Wu, became more aware of the role of the local Church could play as a bridge between the Church in China and global Catholic world. China's Church was experiencing serious difficulties after many years of persecution; yet it was filled with life and hope. Bishop Wu sent theology professors to teach at Mainland seminars. Caritas-Hong Kong also became involved in many social service projects in China. Through three historic visits in 1985, 1986 and 1994, Bishop Wu promoted dialogue between the universal Church and the authorities in Beijing.

From bridge Church to sister Church

In 1980, Bishop Wu founded the Holy Spirit Study Center to facilitate communication between the Hong Kong, universal Church, and Catholic communities within China. PIME's Fr. Angelo Lazzarotto, along with Fr. John Tong of the diocesan clergy (today coadjutor bishop), and Maryknoll Frs. Peter Barry and Elmer Wurth, co-founded the center. It became the main hub for collecting information, analyzing situations and issues, and providing assistance to the Chinese Church. Other PIME fathers contributed by writing articles for Tripod, the Center's publication. Fr. Fernando Galbiati became a member of the Center's board of governors in 1999.

At the 25th anniversary celebrations of the Holy Spirit Study Center, it was stated that the role of Hong Kong's Catholic community is as a 'sister Church', on an equal footing with the Church in China, with a sharing of different gifts and talents.

Former missions revisited

With the reopening of the Chinese Mainland to the outside world since 1978, some PIME priests have been visiting and creating contacts with Catholic communities in Mainland China. Those among them, who had worked on the Mainland before the communist revolution, resumed contact with their former communities and sent them assistance. Frs. Lido Mencarini, Michele Pagani and especially Fr. Luciano Aletta had kept up contact with the Christians in Hoi Fung all along. From 1989 they were able to become more involved in helping to repair and build new Churches, some 20 in number, as well as providing them with a large quantity of sacred vessels and religious articles.



Contact with and financial support for PIME's former missions eventually reached the dioceses of Kaifeng, Nanyang and Anyang (formerly Weihui) in Henan and of Hanzhong in Shaanxi. This last diocese was

supported mainly by the involvement of Frs. Luigi Bolis, Pietro Martinelli and Narciso Santinon, who had worked there in the past. In recent years, contact and visits have greatly increased along with opportunities to help, including financially, such as by financially supporting for the formation of priests and sisters.

Committed to China

The increasing attention given to China, including the great flow of news about Church matters and social issues that kept coming from within the country, led to the creation of "Asia News – PIME Press Office" in 1986 under the responsibility of Fr. Giancarlo Politi. Fr. Politi traveled across China collecting a huge amount of first-hand information about the Catholic communities and their leaders as they emerged from detention and obscurity. Fr. Bernardo Cervellera took over in 1993 and moved the agency to Rome in 2003 from where he launched it on the Internet in three languages: English, Italian and Chinese. Its contribution and high standard of reporting were recognized by the President of the Italian Republic in 2007



Fr. Franco Mella teaching children in Xuzhou (Jiangsu) in 2007.



Fr. Luciano Aletta helped in the construction of some twenty Churches in Hoi Fung.

when it was awarded the Saint Vincent Prize, a prestigious journalistic award.

From the mid-1980's, PIME missionaries attempted the first prolonged stays in China. Fr. Ticozzi worked in Beijing from 1984 to 1991, at first, as a coordinator of a joint technical project between the Italian and Chinese governments, then as a translator at the Foreign Languages Printing House run by the Chinese government.

In October 1991, Fr. Franco Mella, who had already visited various regions of China several times, began teaching English, at first, in some towns in Guangdong province, and later in northern China. Presently, he resides in both the cities of Xuzhou in Jiangsu province and Kaifeng, in Henan province.

Fr. Bernardo Cervellera studied in Beijing from March to September 1996. Before him, Frs. Gilberto Orioli and Ciro Biondi, formerly from the Taiwan PIME mission, had studied and then helped out at the Catholic Printing House in Shanghai between the years 1988 and 1991.

Other PIME priests became involved in projects in Mainland China through various outreach initiatives run by Caritas-Hong Kong. Fr. Francesco Lerda contributed to the training of personnel specialized in the care of the handicapped and their rehabilitation. Similarly, Fr. Giosuè Bonzi served those with disabilities through the "Fu Hong Society", particularly in training specialized personnel.

While carrying out various assignments in Italy, Fr. Angelo Lazzarotto never ceased to show his multifaceted interest in China. He did so particularly through the Tianxia Yijia Association. He traveled to China dozens of times to visit Christian communities and their leaders, as well as academic institutions, where he met with and supported scholars with a special interest in Christianity.

Interest in China has grown enormously in recent years including at the PIME Milan Mission Center and has been widely covered in the PIME press and journals, such as *Mondo e Missione, Italia Missionaria, Missionari del PIME, Venga il Tuo Regno*. The Milan Mission Center, which includes the "Peoples and Cultures Museum" (Popoli e culture), was instrumental in organizing various projects of considerable ecclesial and cultural value, thanks to the contribution provided, among others, by Fr. Mario Marazzi. The center was also involved in promoting and drawing attention to the great works of Fr. Leone Nani, a PIME priest and photographer who captured the life and culture of China's ordinary people, particularly in Hangzhou, at the beginning of the 20th century. His works have been published in deluxe books in various languages, and shown in photo exhibitions held in various cities such as Milan, Rome, Macao (October 2001-March 2002) and in Guangzhou.

Pastoral work among the Chinese residing in London began with the opening of Watford House in 1966. It was run mostly by priests who had worked in Hong Kong, in particular Frs. Carmelo Orlando, Enrico Beretta, Giovanni Viganò and, later on Fr. Benito Bottigliero. In January 1989, Fr.



A group of PIME visits the tomb of Fr. Francesco Bianchi in Hoi Fung in 2005.

Nicola Ruggiero, for his part, began to minister among the Chinese residing in the Toronto diocese. His efforts ended in 1997 when he was forced to retire to Lecco, Italy, due to a debilitating illness.

The PIME missionaries who, in different capacities, were involved with China had become numerous and because of this, it is impossible to mention them all. A coordination of contacts and a system of communication among all those involved was asked for but did not materialize, and the 'China Group' operated only from 1993 to 1996.

In order to support the Church and society of China through prayer, Fr. Melchiorre Arnoldi, a missionary with an inclination for mysticism, led a prayer group with his confreres for some 15 years. They would gather monthly at the Chapel of the Home for the Aged in Choi Hung, for a prolonged adoration before the Blessed Sacrament, praying for China.

Huiling

As the result of previous contacts, in January 1996, Fr. Fernando Cagnin began woking as a volunteer for Huiling, a non-governmental organization in Guangzhou that provides services for people with mental disabilities. In 2004, Fr. Mario Marazzi joined him and resides in a family home, together with a small group of persons with disabilities. Huiling was initiated by an ingenious and courageous woman, Meng Weina in 1990, and received initial support from Caritas-Hong Kong and Fu Hong Society. Huiling underwent many financial hardships but with growing experience and the support of Frs Cagnin and Marazzi, it has become a model with a wide range of services for people with mental disabilities of all ages. In Guangzhou, Huiling has several service units, including a kindergarten, a primary school, an adult care residence and a number of family homes. Huiling expanded to eight cities across

China, including Beijing, Shanghai, Xian and Xining. Huiling has about 30 units, where some 200 operators and dozens of volunteers serve nearly 400 people with mental disabilities.

Taiwan

PIME's General Directorate, led by Fr. Fernando Galbiati (1983-1989), watched the rapid changes in China and pondered how PIME should respond. In 1985, PIME decided to establish a presence in southern Taiwan to meet the needs of the bishop of Kaohsiung who had requested pastoral help at the parish of Chishan (about 50 km north of Kaohsiung) and at the Stella Maris Center for seamen and fishermen in the harbor city of Kaohsiung. PIME also intended to train a group of missionaries to be versed in Putonghua (Mandarin), the national language of China, which is commonly spoken in Taiwan but not in Hong Kong. The first group included Fr. Pietro Martinelli from Hong Kong and Fr. Antonio Sergianni of Hong Kong. Frs. Gaetano Matera and Gilberto Orioli joined them shortly afterwards, followed by Fr. Ciro Biondi. The Hong Kong community was somewhat bewildered by this decision, and some feared it might give the impression that PIME was making preparations to flee Hong Kong if things turned sour after the 1997 handover. The Hong Kong-based missionaries wanted to avoid sending an ambiguous message to the Chinese authorities and Hong Kong society, so they publicly declared that they would remain in Hong Kong to the very end, sharing the inhabitants' fate whatever the outcome of the handover.

Once the Taiwan delegation was abolished in 1998, three PIME priests, Frs. Gaetano Matera, Paolo Spanghero and Antonio Sergianni, remained in Taiwan to serve in the diocese of Kaohsiung and in the Neo-Catechumen Way. The Fathers were incorporated into the Hong Kong PIME Region. At the present time, only Fr. Spanghero serves in Taiwan. He is the pastor of Meinung, a parish which includes various indigenous villages in the beautiful mountain area of Pingtung county, in southern Taiwan.

Looking ahead

Despite the numerous engagements mentioned above, the Hong Kong community has so far avoided committing the PIME Institute to any specific work in Mainland China. The decision was made partly because of the peculiar religious situation on the Mainland and partly because the institute could not afford to further reduce the personnel assigned to the numerous tasks in Hong Kong. Before 1997, some PIME members in Hong Kong feared that any activities by the institute in China could draw unwanted scrutiny on the institute by China's religious affairs officials. Today, this concern has been somewhat reduced on account of the easing of the situation within China, the improvement in communication, and because the feared repercussions never materialized.

The PIME community has declared its willingness to make personnel available for projects on the Mainland and furthermore, it has supported the personal inclinations of any missionary willing to serve in the vast nation. The change of the region's name from 'PIME Hong Kong Region' to 'PIME Hong Kong - China Region' and the regional statute of October 2004, reflect the change of focus and attitude.

Superior General Fr. Gian Battista Zanchi, in the course of his 2004 official visitation, stated that he had come across very industrious and accountable PIME members. He also stated that the past polarization between those who support working exclusively in Hong Kong and those open to presences on the Mainland is over.

In the spring of 2007, two young PIME members began to study Putonghua in Beijing. PIME is once again looking with confidence to China, traditionally one of the institute's major fields of evangelization.

