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Fraternal visit and study trip in China

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Zhujiajiao Catholic church

From 29 May to 3 July brother Matteo went to China to learn better the Chinese language, for research on the history of Christianity in that country, and especially to forge ties of acquaintance and friendship with the Church in Shanghai and the surrounding area

St Francis Xavier Catholic church (Dongjiadu)

Mgr Aloysius Jin Luxian, bishop of Shanghai

Shanghai, St Ignace Catholic cathedral (Xujiahui)

From 29 May to 3 July brother Matteo went to China to learn better the Chinese language, for research on the history of Christianity in that country, and especially to forge ties of acquaintance and friendship with the Church in Shanghai and the surrounding area.

His reception everywhere was surprising: from the Catholic family that gave him space in their own apartment, to the Catholic parish of St Francis Xavier, where the pastor, father Joseph Lu Yuchun and the parishioners offered an atmosphere of daily fraternal communion, to the Protestant community, where pastor Guo Feng organized an opportunity for exchanging views with young people animated by an ecumenical spiritual search. Thanks to this warm hospitality occasions were not wanting for meaningful meetings with many persons of the city's Catholic and Protestant churches.

A meeting with the 95-year-old "official" bishop of Shanghai, Aloysius Jin Luxian, Jesuit, was especially of great emotion, as br. Matteo wrote in a letter to the community:

"This meeting, which I had been hoping to have for a long time and which took place almost without my seeking it, was a highly touching moment. For half an hour I was able to converse in Italian and French, two of the many languages that the bishop knows well, with one of the 'rebuilders' of the Catholic Church in China after the cultural revolution. I briefly described to him the community, our life as monks in Bose, our solicitude for the Church in China. He showed himself to be a man with a great capacity to listen and to be interested. To my assurance that the community prays for the Church in China every week he was visibly touched; he thanked me and added: 'Pray for me, because it is not easy to be a bishop in China...' I told him how happy I was that pope Benedict XVI had invited him and three other Chinese bishops to participate at the Synod of Bishops in 2005, a great sign of recognition of his ministry, after so many years of painful incomprehension. He said simply, with a note of regret, 'The government did not permit me to go to Rome'."

Sheshan Catholic seminary

Mgr Joseph Xing Wenzhi, auxiliary bishop of Shanghai

To bishop Jin and his unwearying ministry in guiding the Shanghai diocese is due the "rebirth" of the local Church, whose origins go back four centuries, to the times of Matteo Ricci (1552–1610), and which had developed a flourishing and structured church life in the first half of the twentieth century, but which suffered terrible trials afterwards. Thanks to bishop Jin, in fact, it was possible to reopen for the first time in China a seminary in 1982, to reactivate the prestigious Catholic publishing house Guangqi, and to reorganize pastorally the large Shanghai diocese, which today numbers 150,000 Catholics and is served by about seventy "official" priests, about fifty "clandestine" priests, and around one hundred sisters, many of them young.

Visits to some of these parishes permitted a more direct acquaintance with church life, with the most common problems, and with the most urgent challenges that the social, cultural, and political context places before it. Among these there is

the urgent need to transmit the faith to the young generations: how to preserve it in the old Catholic families in which the faith has been passed down for generations and how to reach so many who do not share this tradition and the forms it has assumed?

In this sense the visit to Sheshan in the suburbs of Shanghai was particularly interesting. There stands the largest Marian sanctuary in China and various church structures around it, among them the diocesan major seminary with about sixty students. Here br. Matteo had the chance to get to know the young auxiliary bishop Joseph Xing Wenzhi, who teaches at the seminary and is its rector. Br. Matteo tells about this in another letter:

Shanghai, Anglican cathedral

Christian Council (elder Fu Xianwei and pastor Abraham Chan)

Shanghai, Hongde Protestant church

"Bishop Xing, very hospitable and vivacious, as well as curious to know about me and about the community, invited me for a coffee, and we spoke for half an hour. Among other things, he told me that this year, on account of restrictions imposed by the government, there are no longer any foreign instructors at the seminary and that in May, which usually is the time when the largest number of people come, pilgrims to the Marian sanctuary of Sheshan were very few. Afterwards there was a good meeting with the seminarians. I showed them some photos of the community and described to them our life in Bose. I was surprised by the many questions they asked at the end, which showed intelligence and curiosity about monastic life, about which they, by the way, know very little."

Very poignant was also the meeting with the elderly sisters in the rest home of the diocese. Their faces expressed the joy of perseverance in their vocation, which we know was "tried as by fire" (1Pt 1,7), through the tormented history of the Church in China in the past decades.

A precious occasion of knowing the Protestant Churches of Shanghai were several visits made together with pastor Abraham Chan of the Center of Spirituality Tao Fong Shan of Hong Kong, whom we got to know last year in Bose and who has become an affectionate friend of the monastery. The young pastor Antony Guo Feng of Shanghai, an efficient and cordial guide, always at their disposition, accompanied them in these visits and successfully planned meetings with some leaders of the Chinese Protestant Church, among them with the president of the Shanghai section of the Council of Chinese Christian Churches, the organization that groups together the various Chinese Protestant Churches, and with the elderly Fu Xianwei, president of the Three-Self Patriotic Movement of the Chinese Protestant Churches, who turned out to be a very open, acute, and accessible person.

Pastor Yu, pastor Guo Feng and pastor Abraham Chan

Pastor Guo Feng and Protestant friends

Bishop Matthew Cao Mingde, father Zheng Jiamao, father Li Weiping

Visits to several old Shanghai Protestant churches and participation in Protestant worship in the Community Church parish of the Anglican tradition, permitted br. Matteo to touch concretely the dynamic and plural life of the Protestant churches in China, their vitality and at the same time their fragility, among which is the drift of some liberal and charismatic tendencies. A particularly good meeting was that with a group of young people. Br. Matteo wrote:

"Pastor Guo Feng received me with great hospitality, which, as I soon found out, is based also on his knowing well the monastic life, loving the spiritual life, and supporting liturgical prayer. He did not hesitate to invite me the following week to an informal supper with some young people who share with him an ecumenical spiritual search. During and after the supper I was asked to describe our monastic life and I was once again struck by the profound curiosity and spiritual search of these young people, whom I asked to share a little their stories of faith. Some came from a solidly Christian family tradition, some felt an interior call to approach closer to the church that before they had known only superficially, some have come to the faith by following an artistic and musical path..."

In the last days of his stay br. Matteo was able to visit also the nearby dioceses of Suzhou and Hangzhou. The latter is a city of old Christian presence: evangelization here goes back to the missionary labors of the Italian Jesuit Martino Martini (1614–1661), whose tomb is still preserved there and who built the cathedral in 1659. The hospitality of father Paul Zheng Jiamao and of father Francis Li Weiping permitted br. Matteo to acquaint himself with the life of this local Church, confided to the care of a very small number of priests and sisters under the guidance of the elderly bishop Matthew Cao Xiangde, whom br. Matteo assured of our prayerful support for his episcopal ministry.