



A Tradition Enriched by Travel

Eugene F. Merz, SJ and Carol Ann Smith, SHCJ

[Gene Merz, SJ, is a member of the Wisconsin Province of the Society of Jesus. Carol Ann Smith, SHCJ, belongs to the Sisters of the Holy Child Jesus. The following is their reflection on giving the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius Loyola in China in 2007.]

The ways of God continue to be mysterious and providential as we become evermore sensitive to people and needs around the globe, but we never expected to land on Cheung Chau Island off Hong Kong for nearly four months of ministry flowing from interest in two books we co-authored: *Moment by Moment: A Daily Retreat in Everyday Life* and *Finding God in Each Moment: The Practice of Discernment in Everyday Life* [both books are available from [Ave Maria Press](#)].

Fr. Stephen Tong, SJ, stood by the table on which the books were displayed at a Jesuit-sponsored international meeting on *The Spiritual Exercises* of St. Ignatius in Loyola, Spain in August 2005 and suddenly became aware of a conversation between two other Jesuits, one of whom was a co-author of the books. Stephen's deeply apostolic spirit and desire to help Catholics in Hong Kong led him to invite us to travel to Hong Kong to give retreats and workshops to women and men who would gather primarily at the Xavier Centre for Spirituality on Cheung Chau Island - population 32,000 with no cars other than three small vehicles: police car, ambulance and fire truck. "You must come," he had said.

From the time of the first invitation until we landed in Hong Kong in early October 2007, we were connected for planning via email and conference call. Since we knew nothing of who would gather, we were planning without knowledge of the experience or sophistication of those who would join us. It was a new venture for the Centre as well, so we were all drawn together in a journey of trusting exploration of *The Spiritual Exercises* and of each other with all of our cultural, age, lifestyle, language and spirituality differences. When Stephen asked what we might do, we emailed descriptions of ten "modules" with the thought that they would provide a variety of ways for addressing the basic material and that the Staff would select four or five. They took all ten and had the registration filled before we arrived.

There were basically four components to the ministry week for us:

1) Meeting each Tuesday through Thursday with a group of 12, made up of women, men, lay, religious, Catholic and other Christians, representing five nations and as many languages. Each person had some experience with Ignatian spirituality in some format. The aim of this three-month in-service program was to contribute to their preparation to be spiritual directors and retreat directors familiar with Ignatian spirituality.

2) Meeting each Thursday night at the Hong Kong residence of the Canossian Sisters for a group experience of a retreat based on *Moment by Moment: A Daily Retreat in Everyday Life*. The group of

24 was comprised of women, men, lay, religious, Catholic, other Christian denominations, ranging in age from late 20's to late 60's. Their professional and life experiences were extremely varied.

3) Meeting from Friday evening until Sunday afternoon for workshops devoted to topics in Ignatian spirituality. The number of participants varied between 35 and 45. Once again, the participants' professional and life experiences were varied.

4) Directing retreats for individuals, and a short three day program for a group of experienced spiritual directors.

In addition to those weekly programs, we were the presenters at the 2nd annual Asian Conference on Ignatian Spirituality, which drew people from 15 countries as well as several Christian denominations and a great variety of ministries and careers. For two days the group engaged in personal reflection and group conversation flowing from our formal presentations on Ignatian discernment.

We were, consequently, very busy.

Everyone in the programs spoke English quite well and we soon realized the folly of thinking we might have some free time in which to learn some Chinese. The language for the daily liturgy at the Xavier Center was either Cantonese or Mandarin, depending upon the language of the retreatants or program participants. After several weeks, Gene was asked to preside on some days, which meant some liturgies were then solely in English.

Within two days of our arrival, people were telling us that the two major issues Hong Kong people are dealing with are time and space – the lack of both. During our time there we came to understand more clearly what that meant. Surely it refers to the large population, but it also refers to living in very crowded and expensive apartment buildings that afford no sense of community and increase the feelings of isolation. And it refers to the terrific demands for increased production that are felt both by those who work for the government and those employed by corporations or businesses. Those two factors especially were significantly affecting the spirituality of the people we met. The simple but lovely grounds of the retreat center were an oasis, but it took time and encouragement for people to be able to find God there in the stillness. Eventually the silence and space and vistas of the South China Sea were healing for those who could discipline themselves just to be still in that beautiful environment.

Because of the great diversity of experience, age and religious understanding in each of the groups, we found it was important to invite them into a mode of reflection and conversation for which we gave them a shared set of understandings. The universality of the experience captured by St. Ignatius in *The Spiritual Exercises* made that possible. The wisdom in that key foundational text of Ignatian spirituality became the substance of our brief input. The participants then prayed, reflected and had daily shared conversation about how God had been present to them in their experience. The format of brief, focused input, personal reflection and prayer on questions we offered for a focus, and shared conversation – regardless of the size of the group – served all of us well. We became a community. The fruits of trust, honesty and mutuality within a confidential setting were beautiful to behold as they gradually developed during that experience.

It seemed that the participants' exposure to topics or themes of Christian spirituality had been through classroom or lecture experiences, so our use of a process rooted in Ignatian discernment and of a more interactive nature was new to most participants. While it took time for them to feel

comfortable with this approach, once they understood it and experienced the freedom and action of God within and among them during the process, they loved it.

Neither of us had been to Hong Kong or to China before; our knowledge of that region and our preparation time before traveling there were limited. We were very aware as we began of the limitations in our American identity, but we hoped it would still carry a sensitivity to the region's very ancient, rich and different culture and history. We were very direct in saying to the participants that we did not pretend to understand their culture and would count on them to share with us any concerns they would have if we were insensitive or ignorant in ways that offended them or made progress in the programs difficult. Perhaps because we were focusing on a tradition of spirituality rooted in the belief that God is present and active in all people, cultures, circumstances and events, we did not experience painful dissonance with the participants.

At the same time that we were engaging in this ministry each week, we were part of the Xavier House community, sharing meals and rich conversation with them about their ministry, their country and the Church in Hong Kong, Macau and in mainland China. The group was international – from China, Macau, Ireland, South Korea, Indonesia – and short-term visitors added to the diversity as well. Once again, the universality of the Catholic faith provided a shared understanding that grounded us even as we explored sensitive matters about our different nations, local churches and dreams for the future.

China's future is bright. So is its past. Nowhere is the link more evident than in big cities where bulldozers and cranes clear the way for skyscrapers, digging up ancient sites in the process. Relics from the Han dynasty (2,000 years ago) are being discovered. Looting is a constant problem. This situation may be changing, since archaeology is a growing discipline in China. Young and middle age Chinese are discovering with joy and pride their recent and past history.

The statistics concerning religious traditions form an important context for ministry there. 41.5% are nonreligious; 27.5 % are Chinese folk believers; 8.5 % Buddhists; 8.4 % Christians; 8.2% Atheists; 4.3 % Animists; 1.5 % Muslims; 0.05 % other. In Hong Kong, only about 350,000 of nine million people are Catholic.

Shanghai's century-old St. Ignatius Cathedral comfortably seats 2,000. Even so, the four Sunday Masses are usually standing-room only. The phenomenon is not unique to Shanghai. We experienced something comparable in Beijing: a packed Sunday liturgy in Mandarin was followed immediately by a packed Sunday liturgy in English. There was some indication that many of the English-speaking participants at the South Cathedral in Beijing were employees in embassies and international companies. Still, we gathered to pray together.

According to a survey completed in 2007 by East China Normal University, 31.4% of Chinese age 16 and above say they are religious. Of those roughly 300 million people, 40 million identify as Christians, and there is ample evidence the population is much larger and growing rapidly. In 1949 China's Catholic population was three to four million; today the authoritative Holy Spirit Study Centre in Hong Kong estimates it is about twelve million. The number of evangelical Christians is growing significantly. The new fervor for Christianity does not necessarily reflect a split with tradition. The people whom we met through our ministries at Cheung Chau clearly reverence the liturgy and the Blessed Sacrament. Adoration each evening was a significant time for them.

The spiritual surge is a sharp contrast to the heavy suppression of religion characteristic of China for much of the past 60 years. "The more the suppression, the more the rebound," says Bishop

Aloysius Jin Luxian, SJ, Shanghai's 92 year old Catholic bishop, who spent 27 years in labor camps and prisons. Many older folk are part of the revival, but the survey shows a concentration among youth. Bishop Jin holds rampant materialism at least partly responsible. "Souls become ever more empty," he says, "which affords religion room to expand." A series of articles that appeared in the Chicago Tribune in June 2008 highlights the fact that many business executives and lawyers have found in Christianity a support to the values they hold professionally.

It quickly became evident to us how deeply China and Hong Kong have been influenced by the Society of Jesus from the earliest days of Matteo Ricci's service. Jesuit Schools in Hong Kong and Macau are reaching many students and their families as well as alumni. We met a sense of urgency in the Christians there – an urgency to pass on the Gospel and, for those familiar with Ignatian spirituality, to encourage others to draw on its themes and practical helps for living the Gospel in a non-Christian culture. While our contact with religious women and men was limited, we found a deeply selfless zeal in those we met from the Canossian Sisters (FDCC), the Columban Sisters (SSC) who had been founded in Ireland for mission in China, the Maryknoll Fathers (MM), the Sisters of St. Paul de Chartres, and the Missionary Sisters of the Immaculate (PIME).

Our not knowing Chinese made us keenly aware of the challenge that different languages present, not only in working together day by day, but also in grasping the significance and impact of attitudes formed by a culture with such ancient roots. People were genuinely pleased that we were interested in China and in them. The pace at which people in Hong Kong live and work has made it difficult for them to reflect on the recent history of China and Hong Kong. We were vulnerable to being sucked into the same frenetic pace, which would lead to many missed opportunities to probe the beauty and complexity of the country, the people, the history and culture – all of which unfolded before our eyes at breakneck speed.

Week after week, we found ourselves astonished at the modernity of what we saw and immediately stunned by the stark contrast of conditions of people just a few blocks away. We might see the latest modern road equipment at work a few feet from workers sifting sand manually. The complexity of the contrast between the rich and the poor became evident to us when we were taken to a very poor fishing village that the tourist industry is touting as a "must-see" place. In so many ways, people are treated as objects. Our visit was enriched by experiences both of highly sophisticated aspects of Hong Kong and Macau and troubling scenes of people barely being sustained. Never again will "the gap" between the rich and the poor be a vague reality.

Recalling some of China's recent history can serve to put current events in perspective. Since 1900, when the Boxer Rebellion swept across Beijing, every decade has included at least one major political upheaval. Usually these events were violent, ranging from the Japanese invasion to the Cultural Revolution to the massacre around Tiananmen Square in 1989. Together they made for a troubled century. The 1990's turned out differently. It became China's first decade without a major upheaval, and thus far the 21st century has also been peaceful, though fear remains a controlling factor.

Despite the lack of political change, the nation has been radically transformed. For three decades the economy has grown at an average annual rate of nearly 10 % and more people have been lifted out of poverty than in any other country, at any other time. China has become home to the largest urbanization in human history. Every day 2,000 additional cars enter the city of Beijing. Each month, a city the size of Houston comes into existence. Nevertheless, at the present time 80% of the people still live in the country but have only 20 % of available health care. An estimated 150 million people have left the countryside, mostly to work in the factory towns of the coast. By most

measures, China is now the world's largest consumer, using more grain, meat, coal and steel than the United States.

The Communist Party's main strategy has been to unleash the energy of the people – at least in the economic sense. “People, people, people” is the overwhelming impression one receives in a visit to China. This was poignantly pictured in the opening and closing Olympic ceremonies. People are China's greatest resource. In today's China, government is increasingly decentralized, and people can freely start businesses, find new jobs, move to new homes. But there are risks for a nation dependent on the dreams of 1.3 billion people living under government control rather than within a free nation with a coherent political system supported by a clear rule of law.

Unfortunately, people are often treated as machines. The gap between rich and poor has become dangerously wide. The difference between urban and rural incomes is greater than three to one – the largest since the reform began in 1978. Because government continues to severely restrict political freedom, people are accustomed to avoiding such issues. For many Chinese, if a problem doesn't affect them personally, it might as well not exist.

China is no longer a sleeping giant. This country with a rich culture and history has a future beyond our imagination. China, in its present moment of history, demands and deserves the attention and support of our world community, especially with respect to economics, justice, human-rights and religion.

Some Reading Suggestions:

“Catholic-China,” *The Atlantic Monthly*, June 2007.

“China: Inside the Dragon,” *National Geographic*, May 2008.

“Jesus in China,” *Chicago Tribune*, Sunday, June 22, 2008.

River Town : Two Years on the Yangtze, by Peter Hessler. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2001.

China Road: a Journey into the Future of a Rising Power, by Rob Gifford. New York: Random House, 2007.