RETHINKING THE ROLE OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH IN BUILDING CIVIL SOCIETY IN CONTEMPORARY CHINA: THE CASE OF WENZHOU DIOCESE*

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Introduction

In sociological literature, researchers consider that the Catholic church is instrumental in civil society building and makes a contribution to democratization (Gagnere 1998, Casanova 2001a, 2001b, Sullivan and Leppert 2003). For example, José Casanova holds that the Catholic church plays a prominent role in civil society formation in three aspects. First, the church serves as an autonomous public space and as a countervailing force to state power. Second, the church becomes an institution of civil society when it gives up its monopolistic claims and recognizes religious freedom and freedom of conscience as universal and inviolable human rights. Third, the church enters the public sphere of civil society to raise normative issues, participating in ongoing processes of normative contestation (Casanova 2001b: 1041–1050). Although the condition of the Catholic church in Chinese society is different from the west, Casanova’s observation is useful in understanding the possible contribution of the Catholic church in civil society building in a Chinese context.1

Richard Madsen’s many writings on the Chinese Catholic church are valuable for researchers to understand the relationship between the Catholic church and civil society building in contemporary China (Madsen 1998, 2000, 2003, 2004). In his China’s Catholics, he uses Robert Putnam’s republican model of civil society to examine the “civility” of the Chinese Catholic church, assessing whether the church could contribute to the making of a civil society. In his conclusion, he asserts that the

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1 For example, the Catholic population in mainland China is only 12 million, which occupies only a small portion of the Chinese population, and the theology and ethical teaching are from the tradition before the second Vatican Council.
Chinese Catholic church is “uncivil,” because most of the Catholics he studied are focused on vertical relationships of authority and dependence more than on wide horizontal relationships of reciprocity and cooperation. Furthermore, Catholics exhibit a great deal of solidarity at the village level, but are hostile to outsiders. They are concerned more about their personal salvation than being alive to the interests of other (Madsen 1998:22). Madsen admits that his studies were limited in terms of data collection, northern bias (pp. 11–21) and, in my view, the chosen conceptual framework and his political philosophy of European tradition (pp. 126–128). If one rigorously uses the same conceptual framework to examine the Catholic church in Hong Kong, the findings will also be “uncivil,” a conclusion contrary to what he had described in the book (pp. 142–144).  

Notwithstanding the problematic conclusion he draws from his studies, I consider Madsen’s many observations and analyses of the Chinese Catholic church to be insightful and significant, from which we can stand on the giant’s shoulder to look farther and clearer. What we need to do is to rethink the same issues with a different conceptual framework, methodology and object of study, to avoid the same problems Madsen encountered in his research project in the 1990s.

This paper is a study of the Catholic church in Wenzhou, examining its contributions to and limitations of building a civil society in contemporary China. The research questions are: what is the role of the Catholic church in building a civil society in Wenzhou? What are the limitations of the Catholic church in playing such a role? In the following, I shall discuss the conceptual framework of civil society used in this paper, and explain the three hypotheses I formulated with reference to the theory. Then I shall provide a historical account of Wenzhou diocese, and examine the case of the Wenzhou Catholic church with reference to the three hypotheses. In conclusion, I shall discuss the limitations of the Wenzhou Catholic church, and suggest how these limitations can be overcome in the future.

Civil Society and the Catholic Church in China

There are many discussions regarding what is a civil society and how to conduct such research in Chinese society. Generally speaking, three

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2 This judgment is based on my discussion with members of the Justice and Peace Commission of Hong Kong Catholic Diocese.