

Seven Miracles in My Life

By Bp. John Tong

According to the UN's classification of the elderly, a person from 65 to 74 is classified as young elderly, from 75 to 84 as middle elderly, and from 85 upward as old elderly. I am 67 and thus I only qualify to speak for the young elderly.

In his old age, St. John was inspired to write. I like to meditate on the Gospel of St. John. I am not the only reader who likes to divide that Gospel into two parts, with Jn. 11:44 as the mid-point. The first part records seven miracles of Jesus, all of which point to the Paschal Mystery in the second part of the Gospel. The purpose of this presentation is clearly stated in Jn. 20:31: "These signs are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name."

First I wish to consider my own life within the context of these seven miracles. Then I will report on what the elderly in all parts of China have done and suffered, and conclude by taking a second look at my favorite Psalm, Psalm 23.

The First Miracle: Jesus Changes Water into Wine at Cana (Jn. 2:1-11)

After studying at the minor seminary in Macau and the major seminary in Hong Kong, I was sent to Rome to study at the Pontificio Collegio Urbano de Propaganda Fide. Our graduating class of 1966 had 69 seminarians. We came from 25 different countries. We were like a family. It was a manifestation of the Catholicity of the Church. We were supposed to be ordained before Christmas 1965. Everything was prepared. We started our retreat in preparation for our ordination. To our surprise, the Rector came one day to announce that the Holy Father himself would like to ordain us on January 6, 1966. It was God's Providence that things happened this way. By moving our ordination from Christmas to Epiphany, I was reminded that I should be His witness to the whole world.

Traditionally, on January 6, Christians of the East have commemorated the Adoration of the Magi, the Baptism of Jesus in the Jordan, and the miracle of the Wedding at Cana. So as I offer my Mass particularly on that day, I pray that Jesus, who changed water into wine 2000 years ago, will continue to transform me into His effective witness.

The Second Miracle: Jesus Cures the Son of a Court Official (Jn. 4:46-54)

Like the majority of Hong Kong people, my ancestors practiced various forms of popular religions derived from Taoism, Buddhism, and the veneration of some historical heroes. My mother was the first in my family to accept the Catholic faith. When she was studying in a high school run by religious Sisters, she was impressed by the good witness of the Sisters, in particular that of the Principal, Sr. Mabel Anderson, FDCC, and she started to study the catechism. My mother chose

Mabel as her Christian name, as a tribute to the one who had opened her mind and heart to Christian belief and practice. As a result, like the court official and all his household, my mother and my family gradually came to believe in Jesus.

The Third Miracle: Jesus Heals a Man Paralyzed for 38 Years (Jn. 5:1-9)

In 1979, when China was beginning to open up and reform, many people in Hong Kong were of the opinion that we needed a centre concerned with the Church in China. Geographically, ethnically, and culturally, no other place has stronger links to Mainland China than Hong Kong. So the late Cardinal John Baptist Wu established the Holy Spirit Study Centre in 1980 to address these concerns, and I was appointed the director.

From the beginning, my new responsibility presented me with great challenges. At that time, I was teaching in the seminary, and I was the Chairperson of the Diocesan Ecumenical Commission. Therefore I joined Protestant study groups to visit China, and made contacts with the open Catholic Church and with officials of the Catholic Patriotic Association. As a result, the Centre received a lot of criticism. With God's help, I later realized that the government had established the Catholic Patriotic Association to control the Church. I immediately cut off my relations with the Patriotic Association. Our subsequent work at the Holy Spirit Study Centre has proven that we are concerned with the entire Chinese Church, both open and underground, and we have made known the truth that there is only one Church in China. So our Centre has won the confidence of the Catholics. Serving the Chinese Church has been a joyful experience for me. The precious experiences of Chinese Catholics have taught me how to deepen my faith and how to give witness to it. I thank God for the good example of some faithful Chinese priests who celebrated their daily Eucharist in bed under the mosquito net at midnight in the labor camps. I thank God for the good example of some faithful Chinese laity who went into a confessional room where the catechist had placed the priest's stole. One by one they voiced their sins aloud to the stole, since they were without a priest for a long period of time. Although the Church in China had been paralyzed for over 30 years, yet relying on God's grace, and with many years of effort, many Chinese dioceses have become full of vitality. This is the fruit of suffering and persecution.

The Fourth Miracle: Jesus Multiplies the Loaves (Jn. 6:1-15)

I was born in Hong Kong in 1939. When I was two years old, Japan invaded Hong Kong. My family fled to Macau. From there we went to Guangzhou, a city in southern China. I started to receive my primary school education in Guangzhou after World War II ended. Soon afterwards, the Communists started to take over China gradually. A large number of wounded soldiers and refugees fled from the north to the south. I saw many wounded soldiers and refugees who gathered in front of the church every day. I also saw my parish priest, Fr. Bernard Meyer, M.M., who was a foreign missionary, busy distributing medicine, relief goods and money to those needy strangers everyday. My mother and I quite often assisted him in the distribution of relief goods and leaflets on Catholicism. It seemed like a miracle, but he had something to distribute everyday. Moved by Fr.

Meyer's all-embracing Christ-like compassion toward the wounded soldiers and refugees, I wanted to be a priest like him in the future. Fr. Meyer's love was the seed of my vocation.

The Fifth Miracle: Jesus Walks on Water (Jn. 6:16-21)

For almost 2000 years, the rough sea and the strong wind have symbolized the challenges faced by the Church. In the years before the return of Hong Kong to the Motherland on July 1, 1997, over 100,000 Hong Kong people were scared and emigrated to various countries. Within our Diocese of Hong Kong, some well-meaning priests, Sisters and lay people wrote to Cardinal Wu to suggest moving our diocesan archives, some personnel and financial assets to other places for safety. I have been one of the two Vicars General in the Diocese of Hong Kong since 1992, so some of those letters passed my desk. After praying together, Cardinal Wu told us, "Do not be afraid." He thanked those people for their advice, but he decided against any change. Now, already nine years into this new era, our evangelization work in Hong Kong goes smoothly, and the Diocese continues to have 5000 converts baptized at every Easter Vigil. Half of them are adults; half of them infants and children.

Hong Kong received a major scare in 2003 when the SARS epidemic began to spread from March to June. Many people got sick and 299 died. We all were afraid. Some Catholics suggested to Bishop Zen that we must stop all church activities including Sunday Masses to prevent the possible transmission of the SARS virus. But after praying together, our Bp. Zen, now Cardinal Zen, replied that we needed to trust in God, and that we needed our spiritual nourishment. With this decision, our Diocese was able to continue with our liturgical celebrations even during the Lenten and Easter seasons.

The Sixth Miracle: Jesus Gives Sight to a Man Born Blind (Jn. 9:1-41)

Since the time when I was one of two Vicars General in Hong Kong, I have held the portfolio for ministry to ethnic Catholic groups in the Diocese. Thus I visited the Vietnamese detention camp in December 1996. The Christmas decorations were cheerful, but the congregation wept with anxious tears during the Mass. Why? Because they could not see any light ahead of them. Some of them were life-long refugees. As children, they were refugees during World War II. In 1949, they had fled from southern China to northern Vietnam to escape the Communist regime. In 1954, Vietnam was divided in two, and so they moved to South Vietnam. After Saigon fell into the hands of the Communists in 1975, they began to plan how to escape by boat. Some boats were lucky enough to reach Hong Kong, but the boat people then spent more than a decade, or even 20 years, in detention. They had fled four times, only to end up behind barbed wire. Now the Communists were due to arrive in just another half-year. They wept and wondered why God had treated them so harshly. I consoled them, and asked them to remember the growing Jesus as a refugee in Egypt. I urged them to have faith in God. In fact, after July 1, 1997, they were peacefully absorbed into the wider society of Hong Kong. Each Sunday they still gather at St. Joseph's Church in Kowloon. Late

in life, they do not have to run again. Jesus has opened their eyes, and they see a secure physical abode, and a spiritual home.

The Seventh Miracle: Jesus Raises Lazarus from the Dead (Jn. 11:1-44)

The Catholic Church and all religions in China have come back from the dead. Under the present policy of religious toleration, the Church in China is still highly controlled. Like Lazarus coming out of the tomb, bound by ropes and a sheet, so the Church even today is bound by government regulations. Certain topics such as abortion are off-limits from the pulpit, so clergy cannot preach freely about it. Yet deep faith in Jesus, a response to the sound of his voice, gives vitality to the church. Now I would like to tell some stories of elderly Catholics who are still very active.

We heard a report from eastern China of a **participatory** church, a church which calls its members to use the gifts of the Holy Spirit and to be active in meeting the needs of the wider society. It happened on May 1, 2005, Labor Day, a national holiday and also the feast of St. Joseph the worker. A large banner atop a church in a big city announced Free Health Screening. Ten doctors from different hospitals came at 10 AM to examine people. Why did this draw a big crowd? Because health care has been privatized in China, and free treatment from state clinics is almost impossible to find now. People work even when they feel sick, since they do not have the money to see a doctor. Many elderly people, both Catholics and non-Catholics, came to see the experienced doctors. Lay members of the parish welcomed them and gave them water while they waited. This made a good impression on everyone, and some people returned to the church later to inquire about the Catholic faith.

With the same participatory concept, many dioceses in China are responding to the need of the wider society by opening homes for the elderly operated by religious Sisters.

The Church in China is **dialogical**. This is often a dialogue of life, as in these two examples:

In southern China, a Catholic man had several younger half-brothers and half-sisters. His mother had died when he was a small boy, so his father remarried and had children by his second wife. Then his father died. His stepmother and half-brothers were all cold to him. Decade after decade passed. He became young elderly and his stepmother old elderly. Then she got sick, but her own flesh and blood children were of little help to her. It was her stepson, the only Catholic in the family, who cared for her, bringing her food and money. A couple of his half-brothers and half-sisters were short of money, and he also gave them a bit of help. His wife was not Christian, but when she saw how he returned good for evil, she was touched. She finally became a catechumen and was later baptized.

The next story comes from western China. A Catholic found a bundle of woman's clothing on the street. They were not rags but good clothes, worth 1000 RMB or \$120 US, a lot of money in the poorer provinces of the west. Who could have lost them? Rather than take the bag to the police, the Catholic took it to his bishop, who in turn made an announcement at the end of Mass. The next day, an old man came to the bishop and described his daughter's clothing in the bag. Maybe she was too

embarrassed to come and be questioned about how she lost the bag. All the items were still in the bag. Not only did the old man, who was not a Christian, say to the bishop, “You Catholics are good!” but also the news went around the whole town. This was good for the reputation of the church.

The following example comes from northern China which concerns the **prophetic** aspect of mission. Bishop Julius Jia, born in 1935, is a leader of the underground church near Beijing. The government regularly arrests Bishop Jia. In the present circumstances, he does not want to be under the control of the government. He runs two homes for the handicapped, the mentally retarded and abandoned children. Because of the one-family-one-child policy in China, many babies are abandoned and so these homes are always filled with about 100 abandoned children, many of whom are physically impaired. Others are given to Bishop Jia simply because the parents know that he will take good care of them. The government knows what Bishop Jia is doing, but does not bother him or subsidize his charitable service. However, many good families and Catholics bring food for the abandoned babies, and some women also offer nursing care. Even poor farmers bring him rice harvested from their fields and baskets of vegetables. God never lets these 100 abandoned children suffer from want or hunger because Bishop Jia trusts in God. Moved by Bishop Jia’s service and love, many people have joined the church. Some young people have even entered the convent or seminary. Bishop Jia is fighting for religious freedom and protecting human life in his own unique way.

With the same prophetic spirit, many old priests in China, who were also released from prison, still go around as much as they can, even at the age of 80 or 90, to care for the faithful. Many people, like the disciples in Emmaus, have recognized Jesus in the zealous efforts of these old priests.

In July 1990 in Bandung, the Fifth Plenary Assembly of the FABC specified three characteristics that the Church in Asia must have to fulfil its mission of service to the Universal Church: it must be participatory, dialogical, and prophetic. I trust that the above four examples illustrate for all of us how elderly Catholics in China embody these three characteristics in their own situations in life.

In conclusion, I would like to share with you a prayer, **an adaptation of Psalm 23**, which I wrote in gratitude for 40 years of my priestly life.

*The Lord is my Shepherd,
Nothing indeed shall I want.*

*In China’s ancient land and people, He gave me birth.
He led me to His Son Jesus and called me to priesthood,
For the sake of His suffering Chinese people.*

He entrusted me with a mission,

*To be a bridge of communion and reconciliation
Among China's faithful Catholics*

*Though I meet with hardships and sorrows,
Yet I fear not the challenge,
For You are with me,
My comfort and my strength.*

*When I behold the strict controls upon the Catholic Church,
You grace me with wisdom and patience.
When I meet my Chinese Catholic brothers and sisters,
You teach me the value of witness and suffering.*

*Ah, how goodness and kindness follow me
All the days of my life.
In gratitude and faithfulness, I will always bless the Lord,
Knowing the power of the Gospel
Will one day blossom on Chinese soil
Forever and ever.*