

The Reality of Working with Two Catholic Churches



Father Michael Bauer provides views from a priest who serves expat Catholics in communist China. It was 2004 when Father Michael Bauer left his post as chaplain in the sleepy rural town of Zuelpich, Germany, to accept a new task in Shanghai.

Thanks to the commercial opportunities that abound in communist China, and the arrival of many businessmen from overseas, the German expat community - like many others - has been growing fast for over a decade. So the German Catholic Bishops Conference appointed the 44-year-old as parish priest for the German Catholic community, serving a somewhat larger region than he had been used to: the People's Republic of China.

In 2009 he also became the priest at the newly founded St. Joseph Freinademetz parish in Beijing, named after a 19th century Tyrolean missionary to China.

The theologian and philosopher priest now has a hectic schedule, commuting constantly between Beijing and Shanghai. "I spend three or four days per week in each of the two cities", he says.

"Shanghai is more open and tolerant. We have a church at our disposal. In Beijing the Sunday Mass is held inside the German embassy."

Taking a well earned break from that schedule, he joined a group of 11 German Catholic expat priests in Bangkok last week for their biennial conference. The group provides pastoral care for expats across the Asia-Pacific region, in Japan, China, Hong Kong, South Korea, Thailand, Singapore, Jakarta,

Flores, Bangalore, New Delhi and Australia.

Over a glass of wine at the conference's welcome reception, he talked about the realities and challenges of his current vocation.

The greatest challenge lies in being a Catholic priest in a country that effectively has two Catholic churches: the government sanctioned Chinese Patriotic Catholic Association and the 'underground' Church which is steadfastly loyal to Rome.

As there may well have been difficulties in obtaining a Chinese visa and work permit as a Catholic priest, Bauer applied for a student visa to pursue his master's degree in Sinology at the Shanghai Normal University. Indeed, with his unkempt hair and John Lennon spectacles, Bauer could easily pass for a student.

Yet as a priest, he openly serves the Catholic German expat parishes, holds Sunday services, prepares children for the First Communion, organizes community activities, venues and times of Sunday Masses and parish events as well as newsletters published on the parish websites.

"They know, of course, what I am doing. The visa issue is nothing to worry about. It's all about saving face," he says, unruffled about his life in the Chinese twilight zone between legality and underground, the communist masters in Beijing and the Pontiff in Rome.

"The parishes and myself are tolerated as long as we limit ourselves to German, Austrian and Swiss Christians and do not push the envelope. The authorities also tolerate the odd Chinese attending our Sunday service. But we would run into difficulties if we promoted our services amongst the broader Chinese Catholic community."

Currently 70 Catholic German priests and a few lay pastoral assistants are serving Catholic German expat communities all over the world. "As far as I know, the German Catholic Bishops Conference is the only one that provides this kind of service for expats", says Monsignor Peter Lang, head of the Foreign Secretariat of the German Bishops Conference.

Like Fr. Bauer, most of the priests have to travel extensively. Hans-Joachim Fogl in Singapore, for instance, also looks after the small German Catholic community in Kuala Lumpur; Hans Cornelsen in New Delhi is presently setting up a German speaking parish in Mumbai; and Bangkok-based Father Joerg Dunsbach covers two other cities in Thailand with large expat populations.

The priests say it is a work that none of them would be able to do without close cooperation with their colleagues in the German Protestant expat parishes. Fr. Dunsbach, who acted as conference host, pointed this out in his welcome speech at the reception.

The distinguished guests, who included the Archbishop of Bangkok, the German and Austrian ambassadors and Protestant church leaders, all agreed when Dunsbach said: "We are sitting in the same boat. Perhaps on different sides, but we are heading in the same direction."

A fine example of this cooperation between Catholic and Protestant comes from the expat community in Beijing. Says Fr. Bauer: "We even share a home page."

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