

# News In Brief

The letter issued by Pope John Paul II on January 6th invited Christians throughout the world to pray for the church in China so that it might be in "visible union with the church of Jesus Christ, which is one, Holy, catholic and apostolic." The Pope realizes that Chinese Christians "have had to face difficult and prolonged trials in the span of these thirty years. In those severe sufferings, they have given proof of their fidelity to Christ and his church; such courageous witness can well be compared to that of the Christians of the first centuries of the church." Not least, the Pope acknowledged that "for some time now, the demands of religious freedom have found a greater understanding in that great country."

This initiative from the Pope is yet another overture of reconciliation to emanate from the Vatican. In this instance, three perspectives are evident and linked to distinct political proclivities in the People's Republic of China and in Taiwan. The Pope's appeal to the world to pray for China is religious in essence and without political implications. The reactions on opposite sides of the Taiwan straits indicate that this attempt at reconciliation and unity was misconstrued.

The Chinese bishops' conference in Taiwan, on February 10th, sent a letter of gratitude to the Pope for manifesting his solicitude for the church in China: "Our compatriots all over the world thank Your Holiness for your concern with the Chinese people, especially for your fatherly affection towards our brethren in Mainland China who suffered for many years. They have no religious freedom; their human dignities are not respected. We are deeply touched by your compassion and sympathy for those suffering Christians in Mainland China."

Chinese authorities reacted angrily and accused the Pope of "vicious slander" for questioning the existence of religious liberty in China and referring to the present religious situation in China as comparable to the state of persecution in the early centuries of the church.

At the beginning of the month, the Vatican announced that March 21st would be a prayer day for China and the Pope would celebrate the Eucharist in

St Peter's Basilica for this intention. Nor did this gesture alleviate the tension which exists between China and the Vatican.

In Taipei, the March 18th issue of the CHRISTIAN LIFE WEEKLY reported that in response to the Pope's invitation, the diocese would celebrate the Eucharist and pray for China on March 19th. A special prayer was offered and this brief excerpt contains the tone of the plea:

Our heavenly Father, bless the Christians in Mainland China, strengthen them in faith and in charity, make them witnesses of the faith during persecutions, and help them stand firm in difficult trials.

Could it be that China is reacting more to the echoes in Taiwan than to the appeals for reconciliation from the Pope? What constitutes "vicious slander"?

XINHUA NEWS, RENMIN RIBAO, TA KUNG BAO and WEN WEI PO of March 20th quoted Bishop Michael Yang Gaojian, a leading member of the Administrative Commission of the Catholic Church in China, the Bishops' Conference of the Chinese Catholic Church and the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association:

"Ever since the founding of the New China, all the clergy and laity of the Chinese Catholic Church have been enjoying the right of freedom in religion. Freedom in religious belief as a policy of the Chinese government was laid down in official documents in the early years of the People's Republic and officially proclaimed in China's constitution in later years; and it has been firmly carried out in all these years except for the ten years of the 'cultural revolution', during which this and other policies were violated, but this policy has been restored since the fall of the 'gang of four'."

Following this statement the Chinese authorities emphasized that there was a limit to the patience of the Chinese Catholics and they would threaten to "launch a counter-attack if the Pope does not call a halt to his false testimonies and accusations."

The statement also defended the arrest of several priests in Shanghai in November of 1981 describing them as "counter-revolutionaries in religious clothing". A number of Catholics were arrested together with the priests and this action was deemed as a necessary move to purify the church and bring such "Pharisees" to justice.

On 21st March TA KUNG BAO carried an article by Kung Yaowen entitled "What is the Vatican's motivation?" The author expressed his belief

that the day of prayer was actually a means of applying pressure upon the Chinese Catholic Church. In conclusion, the writer asserted:

"At the present time, there are hundreds of millions of people who experience severe sufferings. Those who suffer most are the victims of hegemonic aggression. In addition, there are huge numbers of war refugees and those who suffer from hunger in the Middle East, Africa and Latin America. Why does the Vatican not 'pray' for those people rather than trouble the faithful of the world to pray for Chinese Catholics?"

According to AFP news sources in Beijing, on March 22nd an official from the Information Department of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs criticized the Pope's doubts about religious freedom in China as vicious slander. It was stated that Chinese citizens enjoy complete freedom in religion and this liberty is protected by law. It is null and void for outside observers to deliberately distort the facts.

The Administrative Commission of the Chinese Catholic Church of Guangdong province, the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association of Guangdong province and Guangzhou city and the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association of Shanghai diocese and city held meetings to declare their support for Bishop Yang Gaojian's statement. (TA KUNG BAO and WEN WEI PO, 22nd-24th March) The pattern and process of the reactions were strikingly similar to those which rejected the appointment of Bishop Deng Yiming as Archbishop of Guangzhou.