

An International Conference on the Boxer Movement and Christianity in China: Opening Ceremony

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Translated by Purple Kwong***

On October 1 of the Jubilee Year 2000, Pope John Paul II canonized 120 martyrs who sacrificed their lives in China. It was a great honor for the Chinese Church, and no one would ever have imagined that such an occasion would be the cause of so much turmoil. The Beijing government in a move, reminiscent of history fifty years ago, launched a massive campaign against the canonization.

The antagonism was clearly apparent when the Communist Party promulgated a document on September 26, 2000 entitled: "Declaration by the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association and the Chinese Bishops Conference on the Vatican's ignoring of the sovereignty of the Catholic Church in China and canonizing the so-called saints."

The government gathered the bishops and priests, organized indoctrination courses for them, and even provided them with a predetermined conclusion. "Make known the fact that Western powers used the Catholic Church to invade China, and boycott the canonization by the Vatican." The government made the church people mouth this "declaration."

The "declaration" said that the canonization had distorted and altered history, and that many among those canonized had been guilty of wrongdoing. *Wen Hui Daily* even said that they had committed "serious crimes." Government officials said that they had robbed, killed, and raped.

The "declaration" said that the missionaries that were canonized collaborated with the imperial powers to invade China.

At the time, I wrote an article for *Ming Pao Daily News* of Hong Kong to respond to those accusations.

“That the imperial powers invaded China is an undeniable fact, and the way the Holy See handles matters is not always correct



Paul Cardinal Shan and Bishop Joseph Zen delivering opening and keynote addresses.

or prudent. The Chinese Rites Controversy is regrettable. Imperial powers imposed their “protection” upon the missionaries, which in fact dragged them into trouble. They used the death of the martyrs as excuses to invade China, which was definitely not the wish of the martyrs. These imperial powers prevented the Vatican from having direct diplomatic relations with the Chinese government. Finally when Archbishop Celso Costantini arrived in China as Apostolic delegate, he declared a distinct separation from the imperial powers, and did not even live in the ambassadors’ residential area.

“People have sharp eyes. Catholics in China knew who were the imperialist invaders, and who were their friends. They trusted the missionaries and accepted the good news brought by them. They believed in Christ, trusted in Christ, and were even willing to sacrifice their lives for Him.”

In the article I asked: "Is it wise for the Communists to 'canonize' the Boxers?" Both Chinese and foreign scholars are not so definite on this complicated issue in history. Can it be said that it was merely a patriotic movement? Obviously the government has made its stand from an ideological perspective.

The year 2000 marked the centenary of the Boxer Uprising, and scholars had organized a large-scale conference in Shandong. I heard from participants that the scholars were originally allowed to study the history objectively, but at the opening ceremony a number of officials came and they put much emphasis on the traditional view (perhaps to coincide with the anti-canonization campaign). Fortunately the conference was still able to proceed smoothly.

During the homily at the canonization Mass the Holy Father mentioned that among the martyrs, 85 of them sacrificed their lives between 1648 and 1930, "very complicated and difficult times in history."

The Pope continued to say that the canonization Mass was not the right time to judge this period of history. The judgment of history could and should be made on other occasions.

At the symposium commemorating Matteo Ricci's arrival in Beijing 400 years ago, the Pope said that: "The Church is not afraid of the truth in history; it sincerely hopes to find out the objective and complete truth. Of course this requires the help of scholars."

During the Jubilee Year 2000, the Pope invited all people in the Church "to purify their memories." In St. Peter's Basilica, he courageously apologized for all the wrongs that Church people have committed in the past. In the ruins of the Coliseum in Rome, he remembered the martyrs of all times, and how they forgave those that persecuted them.

I do not have sufficient scholarship, and time and again I have avoided answering questions about the historical background of the martyrdom. I sincerely hope that scholars can help me clarify the historical facts of this period. Today my wish comes true. I particularly wish to thank Bishop John Tong, director of the Holy Spirit Study Centre, and several researchers of the Centre for responding to my aspirations. Special thanks also goes to the Research Centre of Catholic History, Fu Jen Catholic University, Taipei, and the Centre for the Study of Religion and Chinese Society, Chung Chi College of the Chinese University of Hong

Kong. These three centers collaborated to organize this International Conference on the Boxer Movement and Christianity in China.

History is an important area of study. After careful research and the collection of materials, we still have to analyze and discern the cause and consequences carefully, so that past experiences can be a guide for future generations.

May I express my gratitude to all the speakers! We all look forward eagerly to listening and learning from you. May the Spirit of Truth bless you all!

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