

# *Pope John Paul II and China*

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**W**hen we visit China, Catholics often ask us about the Pope. They want us to convey their love and loyalty to him. We reassure them by using the same words the Pope himself used often in greeting Chinese visitors: "I pray for China everyday."<sup>1</sup> In fact, John Paul II made China and the China Church one of the main objectives of his pontificate: "Concern for the Church in China," wrote the Pope as early as 1982, "has become the particular and constant anxiety of my pontificate."<sup>2</sup>

Karol Wojtyla was elected Pope in 1978, when Deng Xiaoping was consolidating his ascent to power and inaugurating the "open door policy" in China. Therefore, the new Pope closely followed events in the new China, sincerely believing that he would be able to make a breakthrough in the strained relationships.

## **1. John Paul II Speaks to China**

During the 26 and one half years of his long pontificate, the Pope has spoken to the Chinese people, to their leaders, and to Chinese Catholics, and referred to China in general (including to Chinese Catholics in Taiwan) at least 60 times. This includes at least 30 official speeches related to the Christian presence in the People's Republic of China, and to the desire for relations and collaboration between the Holy See and Beijing. Because of John

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<sup>1</sup> The same expression is also found in John Paul II's message to Chinese Catholics delivered in Manila on January 14, 1995. See: *L'Osservatore Romano*, English weekly edition, January 18, 1995.

<sup>2</sup> *L'Osservatore Romano*, English weekly edition, February 1, 1982.

Paul II's prolific literary output, it is difficult to assess the exact number of his references to China. In referring to or in making overtures to China, the Pope has repeated certain themes. I will illustrate some of the more characteristic ones.

### ***To the Great Chinese Nation***

One of the most important and significant expressions frequently used by the Pope is his reference to China as "the Great Chinese Nation." This line is present in his very first reference to China, on Sunday August 19, 1979, during the weekly recitation of the Angelus. On a subsequent occasion the Pope said:

Your country is great indeed, not only in terms of geographical extension and population, but especially because of its history, the wealth of its culture, and moral values that the people have cultivated all through the ages.<sup>3</sup>

### ***A Good Catholic is also a Good Chinese***

Another of the Pope's favorite convictions, used almost every time he spoke about China, was that there is no dichotomy between "being authentically Catholic and authentically Chinese." This is the "good Christian, good citizen" concept. He developed this concept for the first time in February 1981:

I am convinced that every Catholic within your frontiers will fully contribute to the building up of China, since a genuine and faithful Christian is also a genuine and good citizen. (...) A good Chinese Catholic works loyally for the progress of the nation, observes the obligations of filial piety towards parents, family and country. Strengthened by the Gospel message, he will cultivate, like all good Chinese, the "five main virtues" of charity, justice, temperance, prudence and fidelity. (...) There is therefore no opposition or incompatibility in being at the same time truly Christian and authentically Chinese.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> *L'Osservatore Romano*, February 25, 1981.

<sup>4</sup> *L'Osservatore Romano*, February 25, 1981.

And later:

The civil authorities of the People's Republic of China should rest assured: a disciple of Christ can live in any political system, provided there is respect for his right to act according to the dictates of his own conscience and his own faith. For this reason I repeat to the governing authorities, as I have said so often to others, that they should have no fear of God and His Church. The Chinese nation has an important role to play in the international community. Catholics can make a notable contribution to this, and they will do so with enthusiasm and commitment.<sup>5</sup>

And again in 1999:

As good Chinese and authentic Christians, you love your country and you love the Church, both local and universal.<sup>6</sup>

### ***The Gospel in China Must Be Inculturated***

Inculturating the Gospel is a constant challenge for the Church and its missionaries because they must find in the culture and traditions of the people to be evangelized an important and indeed essential point for framing the method of proclaiming the Gospel message. In this regard, the Holy Father held up Matteo Ricci as a master of inculturation and a model missionary:

It was thanks to the work of inculturation that Father Matteo Ricci, with the help of Chinese collaborators, succeeded in carrying out a work which seemed impossible: that is, devising Chinese terminology for Catholic theology and liturgy, thus creating the conditions for making Christ known and embodying his Gospel message and the Church in the context of the Chinese culture. (...) He succeeded in establishing between the Church and Chinese culture a bridge that still appears solid and safe, despite misunderstandings and difficulties, which have taken

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<sup>5</sup> *L'Osservatore Romano*, English weekly edition, December 11, 1996.

<sup>6</sup> *L'Osservatore Romano*, English weekly edition, December 15, 1999.

place in the past. I am convinced that the Church can direct itself without fear toward this route with its gaze turned to the future.<sup>7</sup>

In 2001, the Pope again praised Ricci's methodology of inculturation in China:

The Christian revelation of the mystery of God in no way destroyed but in fact enriched and complemented everything, beautiful and good, just and holy, in what had been produced and handed down by the ancient Chinese tradition. And just as the Fathers of the Church had done centuries before in the encounter between the Gospel of Jesus Christ and Greco-Roman culture, Father Ricci made this insight the basis of his patient and far-sighted work of inculturation of the faith in China, in the constant search for a common ground of understanding with intellectuals of that great land.<sup>8</sup>

### ***The Church Seeks Freedom and not Privileges***

The fourth concept is that the Church in China seeks freedom. It seeks neither power nor privileges.

The Church has no political or economic goals; she has no worldly mission. She wants to be, in China as in any other country, the herald of the Kingdom of God. She desires no privileges, but only that all those who follow Christ may be able to express their faith freely and publicly and to live according to their consciences.<sup>9</sup>

## **2. John Paul II and the China Church**

It was love for the Chinese that led the Pope to pray for China everyday, but this love is mutual. Even the casual observer who visits any Catholic community in China has been struck by the deep love that the bishops, priests, Sisters and laity had for the Holy Father. They had a profound reverence for him and a love that was

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<sup>7</sup> *L'Osservatore Romano*, English weekly edition, November 22, 1982.

<sup>8</sup> *L'Osservatore Romano*, English weekly edition, October 31, 2001.

<sup>9</sup> *L'Osservatore Romano*, English weekly edition, December 11, 1996.

deep and genuine. The Holy Father was deeply touched by the many proofs of that love:

How many testimonies of faith, how many messages of fidelity I have received from communities throughout China! Bishops, priests, religious and lay people have wished to reaffirm their unshakable and full communion with Peter and the rest of the Church. As Pastor of the Universal Church, my heart greatly rejoices at this.<sup>10</sup>

He wished to remind them that he was aware of the sufferings they have undergone which give proof of their fidelity and love:

We know very well that our brothers and sisters in China have had to face difficult and prolonged trials in the span of those thirty years. In those severe sufferings they have given proof of their fidelity to Christ and His Church. (...) How consoling it is to receive news of the constant and courageous loyalty of Catholics in China to the faith of their fathers and of their filial attachment to Peter's See.<sup>11</sup>

### ***To Visit China: An Unfulfilled Wish***

John Paul II longed to set foot on Chinese soil. Aware of the difficulties of realizing this goal, John Paul II put all his desires for "the great people of China" into the heart of the Church's prayer.

Dear brothers and sisters in China, all of us are united with you in thought, affection and especially in prayer. Through the prayer of the whole Church, you—though distant—never cease to remain in the very heart of our great Catholic family in which Christ is continually present, as he promised. In his name I bless you from my heart.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> *L'Osservatore Romano*, English weekly edition, January 18, 1995.

<sup>11</sup> *L'Osservatore Romano*, English weekly edition, February 1, 1982.

<sup>12</sup> *L'Osservatore Romano*, English weekly edition, March 29, 1982.

In order not to compromise the already slim chances of being allowed to visit China, the Pope avoided any visit to Taiwan or Hong Kong (before 1997). In 1999, after Hong Kong returned to China's sovereignty, the Pope's desire even to touch down on Chinese soil in Hong Kong was rebuffed by Beijing authorities.

### ***Only One Catholic Church in China***

The Pope and the Holy See set the unity of the Catholic Church in China as their number one priority. The Holy Father wanted to see members of both the open and underground communities work together toward reconciliation and unity. He was aware that the official-open Catholic communities in China are under the domination of the Communist regime through its organizations: the United Front Work Department, the State Administration of Religious Affairs, and the Patriotic Association. Hong Kong's Auxiliary Bishop, Bishop John Tong, always very prudent and restrained, in his message after the death of John Paul II wrote quite bluntly:

In 1986, I remember very well the ominous sentence you spoke on the occasion of receiving a group of us clergy, who were concerned about the Church in China. You said simply: Don't harbor any illusions about Communism!<sup>13</sup>

The Pope acknowledged the witness of the underground communities, which have not only suffered in the past, but are still suffering at present for their refusal to surrender to an unjust religious policy. The registration of places of worship, opposed by the underground, is not an administrative act of protection and regulation of religious activities, but rather a means of control and of manipulation, an unacceptable limitation on the rights of the Church.

The resistance of the underground communities is not without positive results. They have made the regime reluctantly

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<sup>13</sup> *Sunday Examiner*, April 3, 2005, p. 3.

aware that they did not solve the Catholic issue: the Catholic Church can never become independent. The underground has prompted the members of the official communities to see the necessity of seeking the approval of the Pope in order to command the respect of the faithful. Without the underground, communion with the Pope and the Universal Church would not be so prominent an item on the agenda of the entire Catholic Church in China, and such a worry to the authorities. The underground must be credited with having prevented the official communities from succumbing to the pressure of the regime to distance themselves from the Pope and Universal Church.

Communion of Chinese Catholics with the Pope and the Universal Church is a legitimate religious request. Chinese Catholics do not lack patriotism; neither are they political opponents. The government cannot ask them to give up something that is against their consciences.

### **3. The Pope's Sympathetic Gestures toward China**

From the very beginning of his pontificate, Pope John Paul II fixed his attention on and displayed his "anxiety" for the Church in China, by taking a number of important initiatives.

#### ***Cardinal Ignatius Gong (Kung) (1979 and 1991)***

In 1979 Pope John Paul II created a Cardinal *in pectore*, Shanghai's Bishop Ignatius Gong Pinmei, who was serving a life sentence in China. Bishop Gong spent 30 years in prison and isolation, after his arrest on September 8, 1955. More than 200 priests and Church leaders in Shanghai were arrested with him.

Bishop Gong was released from jail in 1985, only to spend another few years under house arrest. After two and one-half years, however, he was allowed to receive proper medical care in the United States (1988). He was never exonerated from the charge of being a counter-revolutionary. He remained in the United States as the guest of the Bishop of Bridgeport, Connecticut, until his death

on March 12, 2000. He was 98 years old, the oldest Cardinal at that time.

Pope John Paul II finally and openly proclaimed Bishop Gong a cardinal to the world on June 28, 1991. The encounter of these two men was exceptionally emotional. When Pope John Paul II presented Cardinal Gong with his red hat, the 90-year-old Bishop Gong raised himself up from his wheelchair and walked up the steps to kneel at the feet of the Pontiff. Visibly touched, the Holy Father lifted him up, gave him his cardinal's hat, and then stood as Cardinal Gong returned to his wheelchair. A rare seven-minute standing ovation from 9000 guests in the Audience Hall in the Vatican followed.

John Paul II created two more Chinese Cardinals: Bishop John Baptist Wu Cheng-chung, Bishop of Hong Kong, in 1988; and Bishop Paul Shan Kuo-hsi, SJ, Bishop of Kaohsiung (Taiwan), in 1998.

### ***Archbishop Dominic Tang (1980, 1981 and 1991)***

In September 1980 John Paul II sent a special greeting to Bishop Dominic Tang Yiming, SJ, apostolic administrator of Guangzhou (Canton), who was released after 22 years in prison,

which were spent, as he himself had the opportunity to specify, for his obedience to the Pope.<sup>14</sup>

The following year (1981) Bishop Tang reached Rome, where he received the title of Archbishop of Guangzhou. The Pope meant to reward a man who had suffered long for his faith, and also to indicate the close attention he paid to the Chinese Church and the Chinese people. The Chinese government, however, considered that an act of confrontation, and refused to allow Bishop Tang to return to Guangzhou, adding suffering to suffering. Since then, the much loved and respected Bishop Tang lived in exile in Hong Kong, and died in San Francisco in 1996.

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<sup>14</sup> *L'Osservatore Romano*, September 11, 1980.



Furthermore, the Pope sent messages of concern to the following Chinese bishops: Stanislaus Lo Kuang, Archbishop Emeritus of Taipei (April 22, 1984); again to Dominic Tang (May 14, 1991) and to Ignatius Gong (July 1, 1991); Cardinal John Baptist Wu of Hong Kong (June 24, 1997); Domingos Lam Ka Tseung, Bishop of Macau (December 3, 1999).

### ***Pope John Paul II Writes to all Bishops of the World about China (1982)***

Only a few people may remember that on the solemnity of Epiphany 1982 (January 6), the Pope wrote a long and passionate letter to all bishops of the world inviting them to pray for the Church in China. It was in this letter that the Holy Father affirmed that China Church “has become the particular and constant anxiety of my pontificate.”

The love of Christ (...) induces me to open my heart to share with you, dear brothers in the episcopate, my deep concern for the Church in China. (...) This letter of mine has its origin in the invocations I continually raise to Almighty God for the beloved portion of his people, and it is intended to call to prayer, through you, the Catholics of the whole world. (...) In those severe sufferings they (the Chinese Catholics) have given proof of their fidelity to Christ and his Church; such courageous witness can well be compared to that of the first centuries of the church.<sup>15</sup>

The Pope mentioned this universal prayer for China and the Chinese Church at other times in 1982 (twice on March 21; and also on September 13 and November 6).

### ***Matteo Ricci: An Outstanding Missionary and Great Scientist (1982, 1988 and 2001)***

In the same year (1982) the Pope sent two important messages to commemorate the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the arrival of Jesuit Fr. Matteo Ricci in China (1582), “An outstanding

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<sup>15</sup> *L'Osservatore Romano*, English weekly edition, February 1, 1982.

missionary and great scientist.”<sup>16</sup>

A true humanist, gifted with a philosophical, theological and artistic culture, and at the same time equipped with a noteworthy store of mathematical, astronomical and geographical knowledge and technical applications among the most advanced of [his] times, Father Ricci succeeded in acquiring, through determined, humble and respectful commitment, knowledge of the classic Chinese culture in such a vast and profound manner as to make him a true “bridge” between the European and Chinese civilizations.<sup>17</sup>

Father Ricci constitutes, therefore, a common heritage of the Church and China, and appears as a solid and symbolic reference point for a constructive dialogue directed toward the future.<sup>18</sup>

In 1988 the Pope sent a message with an important reference to Matteo Ricci to the Symposium on Evangelization held in Taipei in February 1988. John Paul II again spoke about Matteo Ricci in 2001 (see below).

### ***A Letter to Deng Xiaoping (1983)***

On November 16, 1983, Pope John Paul II personally wrote a letter to Deng Xiaoping, which, unfortunately, went unanswered. Since it was a personal letter, it was never published, and very little is known about it. There is a brief reference to it in the recent book by Cardinal Roger Etchegaray, *Verso i Cristiani in Cina*.<sup>19</sup> A longer reference to it, however, appears in *Witness to Hope*, the biography of John Paul II by George Weigel. The letter was written in English on his own personal stationary, and it is replete with expressions of the Pope’s respect for Chinese culture and its ancient history. Here are excerpts from the letter, which contain a plea for a renewed

<sup>16</sup> *L’Osservatore Romano*, November 22, 1982.

<sup>17</sup> *International Fides Service*, November 6, 1982.

<sup>18</sup> *L’Osservatore Romano*, November 22, 1982.

<sup>19</sup> Roger Etchegaray, *Verso i Cristiani in Cina. Visti da una rana dal fondo di un pozzo*. Mondadori, Milano 2005, p. 70.

conversation:

I am of the opinion that the pursuit of the common good of humanity encourages something that is also the object of my own lively desire: a direct contact between the Holy See and the authorities of the Chinese people. (...) I am moved to this also by the profound responsibility that is proper to my religious ministry as universal pastor of the Catholics of the whole world, which inspires within me a special solicitude towards Catholics who are in China. Men and women, scattered throughout the country, who feel a deep loyalty and love for their own land... and who at the same time feel united with the Pope and with the Catholic communities of all the other countries. It is a bond which, for the religious faith of Catholics, is an essential one, and which, on the other hand, cannot harm the ideal and concrete unity of their own nation or be a detriment to its independence and sovereignty. (...) [Taiwan] is undoubtedly a long and complicated situation in which the Holy See has found itself, through a series of events, not always dependent on its own will. Nevertheless, I am confident that in the context of a concrete examination of the question it will be possible to reach a positive solution.<sup>20</sup>

### ***On the 7<sup>th</sup> Centenary of the Arrival of Giovanni da Montecorvino in Beijing (1994)***

The 7<sup>th</sup> centenary of the arrival of the Franciscan Friar Giovanni da Montecorvino, first Bishop of Beijing, was celebrated with an International Symposium held at Fu Jen University (Taipei) in September 1994. In his message, John Paul II returned to the themes dear to him: his desire to visit and embrace the whole Chinese family, including Taiwan; his admiration and praise for the suffering Chinese Catholics have endured for their loyalty to the Pope; communion with the Pope as an indispensable element for Catholics; and

there can be no opposition or incompatibility between being at

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<sup>20</sup> George Weigel, *Witness to Hope: The Biography of Pope John Paul II*. Cliff Street Books, HarperCollins Books, New York, 2001, p. 596.

one and the same time truly Catholic and authentically Chinese.<sup>21</sup>

***To Chinese Catholics: an Appeal to Unity from Manila (1995)***

During the World Youth Day, January 10-15, 1995, an official delegation of Catholics came from China, and some priests concelebrated with the Pope during the historic Mass attended by five million people on January 15. The concelebration of priests from the official Church aroused intense media and ecclesial speculation. Did the Chinese priests indeed concelebrate with the Pope? How were they allowed to concelebrate? Were they asked to make a profession of faith before the Mass? If yes, before whom and when was such a profession of faith made?

I was there, in the company of these priests. There were well over a thousand priests and bishops at that Mass. The Chinese priests simply joined them, without any drama or any profession of faith. But a drama occurred during the Mass, when the representatives of the numerous delegations from around the world walked on the large platform with their flags, including a representative from the Republic of China in Taiwan. The political heads of the Mainland delegation forced their Catholics to leave the park immediately. Only a few Catholics disobeyed the injunction, and remained behind, until the end of the celebration. It was an upsetting and painful experience: petty politics prevailed over an historical event.

On that occasion, on January 14, the Pope delivered a new and heartfelt message to Chinese Catholics, appealing to them for unity, unity among themselves, and all of them with the Successor of Peter and the Universal Church:

Unity springs from conversion of the heart, and from sincere acceptance of the unchanging principles laid down by Christ for his Church. Particularly important among these principles is the affective communion of all the parts of the Church with her

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<sup>21</sup> *L'Osservatore Romano*, English weekly edition, October 5, 1994.

visible foundation: Peter, the Rock. Consequently, a Catholic who wishes to remain such and to be recognized as such cannot reject the principle of communion with the Successor of Peter.<sup>22</sup>

Later in the same year (June 1995), during a visit to Belgium, the Holy Father met a number of Mainland priests and seminarians of the official Church, studying at the University of Leuven. On that occasion the Chinese priests concelebrated Mass with the Pope.

### ***On the 70<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Ordination of the First Chinese Bishops (1996)***

On December 3, 1996, Pope John Paul II once again addressed the Chinese Catholics with a long and comprehensive message. The occasion was the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the consecration of the first group of Chinese bishops by Pope Pius XI (1926), and the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the establishment of the ecclesiastical hierarchy in China by Pope Pius XII (1946). John Paul II touched upon themes such as the necessity for Catholics to be in communion with the Pope; the need of an integral formation for priests and religious; and the importance of courageously proclaiming the entire Catholic faith in love. Pope John Paul II also appealed to the civil authorities not to be afraid of the Catholic Church.<sup>23</sup>

### ***John Paul II Invites Two Chinese Bishops to the Synod of Asian Bishops in Rome (1998)***

In April 1998 the Pope invited two Chinese bishops to attend the Special Synod for Asia held in Rome. They were Bishop Matthias Duan Yinming (he died in January 2001, at age of 92), ordinary of the diocese of Wanxian (Sichuan), and his Coadjutor Bishop Joseph Xu Zhixun. On that occasion the Pope said:

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<sup>22</sup> *L'Osservatore Romano*, English weekly edition, January 18, 1995.

<sup>23</sup> See the quotation reported above, in the paragraph entitled "A good Catholic is also a good Chinese."

At this time we are thinking of the Catholics on Mainland China and of their shepherds. In order that those bishops might be represented at this synod, besides the bishops working in Hong Kong, I have invited two bishops from China to attend. I hope that they can soon come to be with us to give a report of the life of their Christian communities.<sup>24</sup>

Predictably enough, the Chinese government refused to let Bishops Duan and Xu attend the Synod. "The appointment of these two persons as members of the Synod by the Vatican is unilateral and arbitrary," said Foreign Minister spokesperson Zhu Bangzao. Chinese Catholics were the only Asian Catholic community not represented at that important Synod.

Risking punishment for keeping relations with a foreign state, Bishop Duan sent a fax message to the Synod expressing his disappointment, but also his profound faith: "Sadly, I am unable to take part in the Synod for political reasons. My heart was so heavy with grief that for two nights I was unable to sleep."<sup>25</sup> Two empty seats were a silent witness for the whole month of Synod assemblies. The Pope, on May 14, 1998, addressed the assembly of Bishops with the following words:

To you, brothers and sisters of the Catholic Church that is on Mainland China, I wish to express, once more, my affection and tell you how sorry I am that the Bishop of Wanxian and his coadjutor could not come to Rome to take part personally in the synod. Bishop Matthias Duan Yinming's words expressing his loyalty to the successor of Peter and his communion with the Universal Church have touched our hearts. The Synod Fathers from every country in Asia have always considered their Chinese brothers as being here in spirit.<sup>26</sup>

During his last interview with *Fides* in 1998, on the 20th anniversary of the Pope's election, Bishop Duan said:

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<sup>24</sup> *L'Osservatore Romano*, English weekly edition, April 22, 1998.

<sup>25</sup> *Fides*, May 8, 1998.

<sup>26</sup> *L'Osservatore Romano*, English weekly edition, May 20, 1998.

I pray for the Pope every day, for his mission, his health, and I ask the Holy Spirit to sustain the Pope's service to humanity. I would also like to express to him my profound loyalty. On behalf of Chinese Catholics I can say that they love him deeply, they pray daily for him, and they join me in this message of congratulations. We Chinese Catholics await in fidelity and prayer his visit to China. The Pope has shown his great love and concern for the Church in China. We firmly hope he may one day come to visit our country.<sup>27</sup>

### ***The Great Jubilee: A Message to the Catholic Church in China (1999)***

In his message to Mainland Catholics on the occasion of the Great Jubilee of the year 2000, John Paul II addressed the problem of the division within the Church.

Remember that in the biblical tradition this moment always entailed the obligation to forgive one another's debts. (...) My ardent desire is that you will respond to the interior prompting of the Holy Spirit by forgiving one another, by accepting one another and by breaking down all barriers in order to overcome every possible cause of division.

The Pope also reassured China's Catholics that, even if they are not free to travel to Rome during the Jubilee Year, under their special circumstances they could gain the Jubilee's special graces simply by confessing their faith in Christ.

The Pope stressed that Jesus Christ, the Savior of the world, was born in Asia at the crossroad of the great cultural exchange of East and West, a point where Asia, Europe and Africa meet.

Recalling the first Christian mission to China in the 7<sup>th</sup> century, he affirmed:

the Gospel of Jesus was preached to your ancestors at a time when much of Europe and the rest of the world had not yet heard

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<sup>27</sup> *Fides*, October 16, 1998.

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### ***Diplomatic Relations? (1999)***

In March 1999 Jiang Zemin visited Italy. The Italian and international media could not help but notice that different from all other world leaders who came to Rome, the Chinese leader did not pay a visit to the Pope. The Holy See discreetly sought to communicate with the Chinese delegation, and asked the then Italian prime minister, the post-Communist Massimo D'Alema, to convey a message from the Pope to the Chinese leader. The Chinese delegation avoided any contact with the Holy See and simply reiterated the two usual pre-conditions: break with Taiwan and no interference in China's internal affairs. But Premier D'Alema seemed to have persuaded Jiang to do something about it. After that, for a few months, Beijing seemed interested in starting a dialogue concerning diplomatic relations. In fact, for a few months there were persistent rumors that diplomatic relations would soon be established.

But on August 17, 1999, secret document No. 26 "Regarding the Strengthening of Catholic Church Work in the New Circumstances" revealed that the Chinese authorities only saw diplomatic relations as an opportunity to eliminate the underground Catholic Church. They saw it as a means to expand government control over the official communities and over the appointment of bishops. The document called for:

a greater strengthening of Catholic patriotic organizations; (...) firmly educate and convert underground Catholic forces; (...) choose strong methods to preserve social stability; (...) strengthen the leadership of the Party and government over Catholic Church work.<sup>29</sup>

The official Catholic communities were subject to a period

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<sup>28</sup> *L'Osservatore Romano*, English weekly edition, December 15, 1999.

<sup>29</sup> For large excerpts from the document see *Tripod*, no. 116, 2000, pp. 33-40.



of spasmodic control checks, and laws and regulations were put in place for the supervision of events, convents, seminaries, bishops and priests. Meanwhile underground bishops and priests were arrested, churches were destroyed and children of underground Christians were prevented from attending schools and universities. The peak of the new anti-Catholic authoritarian turn was reached on January 6, 2000, when five bishops were illegitimately consecrated in a politically staged ceremony in Beijing (see below).

### ***The Pope Cannot Come to Hong Kong (July 1999)***

In the meantime, in the same summer of 1999, China rebuffed the Pope's most serious attempt made to set foot on a Chinese soil. Following the Synod of Asian Bishops (Rome 1998), the Holy See explored the possibility of having the Pope come to Hong Kong and deliver a post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation to the Asian peoples. The implications were obvious: the Pope wanted once again to show his special concern and affection for China. The spokesperson for the Chinese Foreign Ministry condemned such a trip on July 4, 1999. It is said that the then numbers two and three in the Hong Kong government, Anson Chan and Donald Tsang respectively, both Catholics, spoke in favor of such a visit. But the Hong Kong Chief Executive, Tung Chee-hwa, neither tried to overcome Chinese resistance nor did he apply the "one country two systems" concept to this case.

### ***Epiphany 2000***

As mentioned above, on January 6, 2000, five bishops were illegitimately consecrated in Beijing's cathedral (Nantang). One hundred and twenty seminarians of the National Seminary courageously refused the order to take part in the illegal State-staged ceremony. They were later severely reprimanded and underwent political study sessions for this act of disobedience. The leaders of the dissident priests and seminarians, including a teacher, were expelled from the seminary and from Beijing.

The mass ordinations received a great deal of attention—the authorities and the police took the event seriously, and Patriotic Association leaders gave TV interviews. For the last 25 years or so ordinations have been ecclesial affairs, with the joyful participation of thousands of the people of God. This one was a State-staged, cold ceremony, with only a few faithful taking part. Rather Communist cadres attended, who were “protected” by many policemen.

In the previous 15 years or so, the bishop-elect was allowed, after or even before his ordination, to discretely seek papal approval. But on the Epiphany 2000 it was pure confrontation, a total disregard for the Church’s legitimate hopes, theology and regulations. The candidates were hastily and deceptively brought to Beijing, and then put under formidable pressure to accept ordination against their will. It is known that the authorities had a grand plan: a ceremony with 12 candidates to be consecrated bishops. But seven of them opposed, strongly refused or went into hiding for a while. Similarly, in order not to be in Beijing, one bishop conveniently excused himself by entering the hospital, while another simply disappeared for few days (but was severely reprimanded later).

The Beijing ceremony turned out to be an extraordinary anti-Pope and anti-Church demonstration, where nothing was religious and everything was political: a bad sign for developments in the new millennium. It was, in my estimation, staged by middle level religious work cadres to abort the mild attempt of normalization by Jiang Zemin.

### ***Canonization of 120 Martyrs of China (October 1, 2000)***

On October 1, 2000, the Pope canonized 120 blessed martyrs of China (87 Chinese and 33 foreign missionaries). The Chinese government became indignant. The Chinese martyrs were labeled unpatriotic and victims of foreign propaganda. The missionaries were described as imperialists, and three of them labeled as criminals. However, the Chinese Catholics, for a long

time, both in the open and underground communities, had wanted these canonizations, and they clandestinely celebrated them in every possible way. To tear the revived unity of the Church apart, Beijing accused the Holy See of having chosen the date of October 1 in order to defy China, since it is the National Day of the People's Republic.

In the middle of this crisis, Pope John Paul II wrote once again to China's leader. A personal and unanswered letter was written to President Jiang Zemin, explaining that the canonization of the 120 martyrs of China took place with the desired intention of honoring the Chinese people.

The canonization of October 2000 caused the relations between the Chinese government and the Pope to reach their lowest point. But with these canonizations, the Pope was not passing an historical or political judgment on complex historical situations; the Church was merely remembering the holiness of these martyrs, and

wishes to acknowledge that these saints are examples of courage and coherence for all of us, and honor for the noble Chinese people.<sup>30</sup>

These 120 martyrs were beatified on 7 different occasions: 5 in 1893 (by Pope Leo XIII); 13 in 1900 (Pope Leo XIII); 14 in 1909 (Pope Pius X); 29 in 1946 (Pope Pius XII); 1 in 1951 (Pope Pius XII); 56 in 1955 (Pope Pius XII); and 2 in 1983 (Pope John Paul II). The Church, as usual, made a long and detailed investigation into the life of each one of the persons, and this was done in 7 distinct processes, over a long period of more than 120 years. The majority of martyrs were beatified before the proclamation of the People's Republic in 1949. And never before, on the occasion of the 7 celebrations, did the Chinese authorities complain.

Those canonized on October 1 were for the most part Chinese, including many simple faithful, women, teenagers and

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<sup>30</sup> *Tripod*, No. 119, 2000, p. 6.

also children. They were crushed by a situation wherein many contradictory interests obstructed their simple right to be Christians. They were victims. They were killed simply because they refused to give up their faith. To adhere to a universal religion cannot amount to a crime.

It was also regrettable that the fortuitous coincidence of the canonizations on the feast of the proclamation of the People's Republic of China has been interpreted as having political significance. Mainland authorities see it as a sign of confrontation. But the supposed challenge or concession was simply not there. In the official calendar of Jubilee 2000, published as early as May 28, 1998, the date of October 1 was already reserved for canonizations. The candidates were not yet chosen, but then it turned out to be the Chinese martyrs, the African Canossian Sister Josephine Bakhita, and two South Americans.

Let me add a few obvious points: if October 1 did not fall on Sunday that year, the chosen date would have been different. However, that Sunday is the one closest to the liturgical feasts of the Chinese Blessed Martyrs: September 28. It is the first day of the missionary month of October, and of course, it is the feast of Saint Therese of the Child Jesus, the much-loved young contemplative who is patroness of the missions. Why not consider it a fortunate coincidence, a singular occasion for joy and pride for the Universal Church as for all of China. It is in this spirit that the Holy Father John Paul II canonized 120 martyrs of China.

As for history, I want to point out that since the 1800's the Church had tried to unshackle itself from the asphyxiating "protection" of the European powers. It is a long story, and crammed with difficulties. In 1860, Pope Pius IX, who actively opposed the hegemonic plans of the Western powers, wrote to the Chinese emperor seeking to establish direct relations and effective "protection" for the Christians of China. Pope Leo XIII did the same thing. In 1885 he wrote to Guangxu, the Emperor of China, and sent Francesco Giulianelli as a special envoy to bring his letter to Beijing, and imploringly sought to establish diplomatic relations

between the Holy See and Beijing. The plan was blocked by France's veto (1886). Later, Pope Benedict XV attempted to do the same, but he also was hindered by France's veto. In 1922, Pope Pius XI was finally able to send an apostolic delegate, Celso Costantini, to China, who rejected the protection of the European powers and set up his residence far from their embassies.

### ***Asking Forgiveness for Past Mistakes (October 24, 2001)***

Pope John Paul II made his last and most heartfelt overture to China on the occasion of the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Matteo Ricci's arrival in Beijing (October 24, 2001). The Pope's message to the Chinese People is an extraordinary document, in which the Holy Father once again showed his affection towards the Chinese people, and his admiration for their long history, their great civilization, rich culture and art.

The Pope described the life of Matteo Ricci in China with remarkable accuracy, and explicitly declared that he wished to follow the way of Ricci. The first book written by Ricci (1595) is significantly entitled *On Friendship*. Friendship was indeed Ricci's program and style. The Church, affirms the Pope, does not seek privileges from China, but rather it comes as a friend, asking for mutual respect, freedom and understanding.

The great majority of the thousands of missionaries who came after Matteo Ricci were generous men and women, some of them even paid the ultimate self-sacrifice for the good of the Chinese people. They faithfully preached the Gospel, and also offered outstanding social, scientific and cultural services. Unfortunately, a few of them did not follow Ricci's example. Some of them engaged in internal struggles, fostered hostilities, displayed a superiority complex, and showed little esteem for the Chinese people and their culture. A tiny segment collaborated and served foreign political interests. The Popes, especially Benedict XV in 1919, severely reprimanded those missionaries that served their national interests rather than the interests of the Church.

The socio-political and religious situation was extremely complex, and the missionaries were, after all, children of their times. People in good faith might have done things that we today consider wrong. For this reason they must be studied with objectivity, according to the principle of "doing history for the sake of understanding history," and not out of ideological and accusatory intentions. Those errors could in no way justify the Communist regime's persecution and oppression of Chinese Christians.

Western powers were responsible for the tragic phenomenon of imperialism and its unfortunate political consequences of which the Church itself was a victim. Archives clearly show that missionaries on the whole were not motivated by nationalist or imperialist sentiments, but by religious ones.

In spite of all this, John Paul II expressed regret for past mistakes, asking only to be allowed to:

work together for the good of the Chinese people and for world peace. (...) History, however, reminds us of the unfortunate fact that the work of members of the Church in China was not always without error, the bitter fruit of their personal limitations and of the limits of their actions...I feel deep sadness for these errors and limits of the past, and I regret that in many people these failings may have given the impression of a lack of respect and esteem for the Chinese people on the part of the Catholic Church, making them feel that the Church was motivated by feelings of hostility towards China. For all of this I ask the forgiveness and understanding of those who may have felt hurt in some way by such actions on the part of Christians.<sup>31</sup>

The Chinese authorities did not respond in kind, but remained cold and indifferent: no progress has been made in the rapprochement between the Church and China. But John Paul II's expression of regret and his plea for forgiveness remain an extraordinary gesture of generosity and affection, a movement toward a future of collaboration and friendship.

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<sup>31</sup> *L'Osservatore Romano*, English weekly edition, October 31, 2001.

#### 4. China - Holy See Relations

Chinese authorities never answered the Pope's numerous calls for a real dialogue on all open questions. The same two pre-conditions were inevitably and mechanically repeated. They are well known: the Vatican must break relations with Taiwan, and the Holy See should not interfere in China's internal affairs, even in religious affairs. These two pre-conditions are just a smoke screen, an alibi for China's unwillingness to open a discussion with the Holy See.

##### ***First Pre-condition: Relations with Taiwan***

The Taiwan question is not the real problem, and the Chinese government knows it. It was not the Holy See that chose to leave China after the advent of Communism; the Holy See's representative was forced to leave in 1951. Since 1971 the diplomatic presence of the Holy See in Taipei has been downgraded to the minimum (*charge d'affaires*). It was Pope Paul VI's prophetic choice precisely to favor dialogue with Beijing.

Relevant Chinese authorities have been informed for many years that, with a comprehensive agreement, the Holy See is ready to solve the Taiwan issue in a proper manner. This offer is also included in the letter of the Pope to Deng Xiaoping in 1983. In February 1999, Cardinal Angelo Sodano, Secretary of State, said that the Vatican was ready to transfer the apostolic nunciature from Taiwan to China immediately, if Beijing would agree to the move.

Let me recall here that the recognition of the Republic of China in Taiwan was never a stumbling block to Chinese diplomacy. Chinese leaders like Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai warmly received Richard Nixon in 1972, when the United States had full diplomatic relations with Taiwan, not to mention US military assistance and collaboration. Similarly and more recently, China accepted South Korea's (1992) and South Africa's (1998) switch of diplomatic relationships from Taipei to Beijing, after the conclusion of intense negotiations, not as a pre-condition.

Demanding the break of diplomatic relations as a pre-condition is unfair on the part of Beijing; it is in fact a diplomatic blunder.

Chinese authorities should be aware, like the rest of the world, that the Holy See is a special entity, vested only with moral authority, not a state like others. The diplomatic activity of the Holy See is only a function of peace and of the pastoral mission of the Church. The pastoral mission of the Church comes before any diplomatic success. The mission of the Pope is religious. This is why the Church cannot thus far accept the diplomatic pre-conditions imposed by Beijing. For the Church, diplomacy is simply a tool to promote its legitimate freedom and rights. When the Chinese government is ready to grant the Church those long-awaited rights, the diplomatic dispute will be over.

### ***Second Pre-condition: Non-interference in China's Internal Affairs***

The second pre-condition, namely, non-interference in China's internal affairs, may be related to the appointment of bishops, and the possibility for Chinese bishops to communicate normally with Rome, including the possibility to visit the Pope *ad limina*, as all other Catholic bishops do. For Catholics, the relationship with the Pope is a matter of conscience, and has nothing to do with foreign influence. The unity with the Pope symbolizes the unity with the Universal Catholic Church, an essential tenet of Catholic doctrine.

The Church enjoys this right everywhere in the world, except in China. One hundred and seventy-two countries in the world, including countries very protective of their national dignity and sovereignty, and including Communist countries such as Vietnam and Cuba, agree that the right to choose and nominate bishops belongs to the Holy See. After all the bishops are religious and not political figures.



### ***China Opposition to John Paul II***

China's leadership is not yet really interested or ready for an historic and comprehensive agreement with the Holy See; its priorities are elsewhere. Many Chinese cadres do not really know, understand or appreciate the Catholic Church. They prefer to keep it at a distance. Besides, a meaningful accord with the Holy See would require a change of mentality, a change in administration, and in religious affairs. It might require the abolition or radical reduction of the structures of control (such as the Patriotic Association and the Religious Affairs Bureau), and a change concerning some middle level cadres.

All the ideological, administrative and repressive instruments implemented in the years of anti-religious political campaigns are basically still there: the one-party ideology, the abuse of power, corruption, torture, illegitimate detention and labor camps. The practices of these extreme measures are not as widespread as before, but they have not been eliminated. Around 25 underground bishops and priests are still in detention or have disappeared; many more are prevented from exercising their ministry.

When the Chinese Communist Party was unable to command any ideological support from the Chinese people, China's hostility towards the Pope was camouflaged by attributing the fall of Communism in Europe to Pope John Paul II. But it should be obvious that the situation of Catholic Poland with a Polish Pope cannot be compared with the situation in China, where Catholics are less than one percent of the population. Moreover, the Pope was not simply against Communism; he was against any kind of totalitarianism—political, ideological and economical. In his youth he suffered much under Nazism. He was a severe critic of the American administration for its two wars in Iraq. In any case, the Pope met in the friendliest manner with Communist leaders, such as Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei Gromyko (1979); Polish General Wojciech Jaruzelski (1987); Soviet Union President's Mikhail Gorbachev (1989), and Cuban Fidel Castro (1998).

### ***After the Death of Pope John Paul II***

The People's Republic of China alone among the nations of the world did not send any delegate to attend the funeral services of Pope John Paul II. Even the Foreign Affairs Ministry spokesperson Liu Jianchao's words of condolence for the Pope's death indicated little sorrow, followed as they were, by the decades-year-old two pre-conditions (April 4, 2005).

The same spokesperson, the day before the funeral of the Pope, attributed the absence of a Mainland representative to the participation of Taiwan President Chen Shuibian. What a poor excuse to justify, at the last moment, the fact that China was, after all, not sending anyone to the funeral! If China, irrespective of Taiwan's actions, had sent a delegate from the Chinese embassy in Rome to the funeral, the entire world would have applauded, and the Holy See would readily have expressed its appreciation. It would have been, from the Chinese side, a noble gesture in a circumstance that was indeed exceptional and unrepeatable. On April 8 the entire world put aside political and religious differences, and converged on Saint Peter's Square. China missed that opportunity.

I believe that diplomacy and diplomatic relations might be useful but are not essential to the mission of the Church, which is essentially religious and spiritual. The Chinese Church, like many other Churches in the world in different eras, has survived without diplomatic relations, and I do not see why it is necessary now to pursue that at all costs. There will be no breakthrough until the country and the political powers have changed. I see other priorities for the Church in China. We have to support bishops, priests, Sisters, seminarians and the faithful pastorally and spiritually, during this delicate period when the leadership of the Church in China is shifting from an older to a younger generation. And above all, we have to help the Chinese Church cope with the insidious challenges of modernization and secularization, which are also taking a serious toll on the citizens of China.