

John Paul II, the Pope of Dialogue and of the “Unfinished Encounter” with the PRC

Jeroom Heyndrickx, CICM

This article was written on April 11, 2005, in Beijing. The author had the chance to accompany the Catholics in China at the historic events of the death and funeral of Pope John Paul II.

A Young Pope Searching for Truth and an Opening for Dialogue with China

On December 6, 1980, I stood, quite unprepared, in front of the still “young” Pope John Paul II. I used the unexpected occasion to greet him in the name of a Chinese bishop who had asked me to bring greetings to the Pope. Pope John Paul II listened attentively, thanked me for the message I brought, and added immediately: “If ever you have any news about the Church in China, please let me know, because here in Rome we know virtually nothing.” From the way the Pope spoke, it was clear that he had a keen interest in the Church in China as he spontaneously added: “I pray every day for the Church in China.” Soon afterwards I started to visit China in the name of our Verbiest Institute of Leuven University, and personally met with several Chinese bishops and priests during the early 80s. In long conversations with them I learned much about their attitude and their faith. I became aware, first of all, that even if a few bishops and priests were not faithful, the Chinese Church as a whole was certainly not unfaithful. Secondly I realized that we in the Universal Church outside of China were quite ignorant about the real situation. Thus I took the initiative to go to Rome almost every time after I returned from China. I considered it my duty to

do so. Pope John Paul II was anxious to learn first hand about the situation of the Church in China from those who had communicated personally with bishops, priests and lay people there. He wanted to seek the truth and understand the attitude and faith of both the “unofficial church community” and the “official (patriotic)” one. I was happily surprised that the Holy Father invited me to jointly pray during the Eucharist, and afterwards listened for a long time to facts and experiences which I, a simple missionary, brought from China. I shared these with him in my own style while eating breakfast, or in another conversation. When hearing good news he praised the Lord. When hearing some bad news he shook his head, showing his understanding and empathy for those who suffered.

The interest of the Holy Father in China and his personal and fitting approach in speaking about and to the Chinese Catholics became clear very soon. In his allocutions the Pope expressed his support for all those who suffered, but at the same time he clearly expressed his true desire for dialogue in view of normalizing diplomatic relations and breaking the impasse. The most important of his early allocutions to the Chinese people was probably the speech to Chinese Catholics that he made over the radio from Manila in February 1981 on the theme “Be true Christians and authentic Chinese.” He insisted that a true Chinese Catholic must also be a patriotic Chinese. In that same speech the Pope also referred to misunderstandings of the past, referring to events of the 19th century, but he added: “Forget the difficulties that may have occurred. They belong to the past. Today we must turn towards the future.” From the beginning of his pontificate, Pope John Paul II was deeply aware of the many misunderstandings of the past, and he wanted to pass beyond them by engaging in open dialogue with China. Towards the end of his Manila speech, he said: “It is my sincere and profound hope that one day in the near future, we will be able to meet and pray to the Lord, saying: ‘See, how good it is to live together as brothers. (Ps.133)’” It certainly was not a coincidence that shortly before, this same phrase, quoted from Psalm 133, was used by the (official) Chinese bishops themselves

in a pastoral letter to all the Chinese Catholics in the PRC. This was a friendly and brotherly sign, seeking common ground with these brother bishops who, at that time, were still all "illegitimate" in the eyes of Rome. The movement of illegitimate bishops to apply to the Holy See to be recognized and appointed by Rome had not yet started.

Pope John Paul II believed that dialogue could break through the impasse between Beijing and the Holy See. This became clear when, at the occasion of the commemoration of the fourth centenary of Matteo Ricci's mission in China in October 1982, the Pope said to the participants of a study congress at the Gregorian University:

The tomb of Matteo Ricci reminds us of the seed of wheat hidden in the heart of the earth in order to bear abundant fruits. It constitutes an eloquent appeal both to Rome and to Beijing to resume the dialogue started by him with so much love and success four hundred years ago.

He added:

We hope to overcome all the obstacles and find an appropriate way and adequate structures to resume dialogue and keep it constantly open. This way, all Chinese faithful will feel at home in their own national community as well as in the Church. We are sure that this will be for the good of the whole Chinese nation, which the Church deeply esteems and loves.

The Church of Taiwan: A Bridge Church

The *ad limina* visit of the Taiwan bishops in 1984 was historical. During the late 70s, whenever the "China Question" was discussed in Rome, it was treated as if it did not really concern Taiwan directly, until the Taiwan bishops, during their *ad limina* visit in 1984, clearly voiced their disagreement about this one-sided interest of the Holy See. It was also during that visit that the bishops told the Holy Father: "As far as the relation with the PRC is concerned, please decide whatever you consider necessary for the good of the Universal Church. We accept your

decision.” These words were the fruit of long reflection and prayer on the part of the Taiwan bishops among themselves, and also of quite frank and brotherly exchange between the Taiwan bishops and Vatican authorities in Rome; the latter previously might have failed to appreciate the patriotic feelings of the Taiwan bishops for their motherland. From this exchange a new understanding between the Church of Taiwan and the Holy See was born, sealed by the historic call of Pope John Paul II to the Church of Taiwan to help him open the road towards the Church in Mainland China. The Pope reminded them of their “beautiful task of being a bridge-Church for your compatriots in Continental China.”

Human Failures Happen Today also

The PRC broke off the dialogue with the Vatican by openly ordaining five Chinese bishops on Epiphany 2000. And then, while the Pope was already sickly and old, some failures of planning and organization caused the canonization of the Chinese martyrs to receive unfavorable coverage in China. By choosing October 1 as the day of canonization and by including 33 foreign missionaries along with the Chinese martyrs, all hope for restarting the dialogue soon was then lost. During the final two years of his life, the Pope was not able to take any new initiatives. Yet it is clear that the seeds of his dialogue remain alive today and hopefully will bear fruit soon.

Pope John Paul II Apologized for Events of the 19th Century and Suggested to “Dialogue in Mutual Respect”

On October 24, 2001, Pope John Paul II impressed all Chinese, Catholics as well as non-Catholics, by admitting candidly that the Catholic Church evangelization effort in China in the past had not been without error. Complex historical situations and conflicting political interests, and even theological disputes, had caused bad feelings. “Protection” on the part of European political powers had negative repercussions on the

Church in China. The Pope expressed his deep sadness for the errors of the past and said, "I ask forgiveness and understanding of those who may have felt hurt in some way by such actions on the part of Christians." To speak these words to the Chinese people was a courageous and historical act on the part of the Pope. The importance of it was not publicly recognized by the Chinese government at that time, although we all know that by making this statement the Pope touched the core of the misunderstandings between the PRC and the Catholic Church. He certainly touched the hearts of all the Chinese. I consider it as an historic contribution to normalizing Sino-Vatican relations.

A Warm Embrace for PRC Priests in Brussels

In 1995 Pope John Paul II came to Brussels for only one day, for the beatification of Fr. Damian de Veuster. Young Chinese priests, scholarship students of the Verbiest Institute, hoped to meet him personally. It was impossible to include such an encounter amidst the tight official schedule. We did not make any promise to the priests, yet we prayed for it during a Eucharistic celebration expressing our full unity in faith with the Universal Church by praying together the Credo. I had privately informed friends at the Holy See of our wish to have the Chinese priests meet the Pope. We received no answer but I knew the "special concern" of the Holy Father for China and trusted that "it" would happen. The evening the Pope arrived, we stood with the Chinese priests on the third row behind a crowd of Belgian faithful who lined up along the way, all hoping to shake hands with the Holy Father. As the Pope came out of his car, he started to shake hands. Amidst all the "long live the Pope!" calls of the people, I called out loudly from behind: "Here are the Chinese priests." Pope John Paul II obviously heard it, looked up and picked out each of the priests to shake hands with them over the heads of so many others. The following day, after concelebrating Mass in the pouring rain, we were privately ushered into the extremely narrow room of the

caravan that stood behind the open-air altar and where the Pope took off his alb and chasuble. As he turned towards the priests, I introduced each of them to the Pope, and quickly jumped a meter backward to take a picture. The Pope not only shook hands but also embraced each of the priests warmly, taking time for the picture. As he noticed that one or two priests failed to have their picture taken on time, he spontaneously did the embrace once again "for the picture."

The Pope of Dialogue and of the "Unfinished Encounter" with China

I felt privileged to be in Beijing and to accompany the Chinese Catholics at the historic events of the death and funeral of Pope John Paul II. The whole Chinese Church was in prayer. Catholics of official as well as underground Church communities gathered in churches to pray, and around TV sets and Internet screens to watch the funeral liturgies in Rome. Those who were unable to watch it go around to borrow CD-ROM from friends. Such outpouring of sympathy for a Pope was historic and new for the whole world, but in a very special way also for China. The unity in faith of the Chinese Church with the Universal Church and with the Pope has never been so clearly demonstrated by spontaneous real life events as during those days. It is as if good old Pope John Paul II gave this experience to the Chinese Church as his last souvenir. It is as if he wanted to say: "See, you are more united than you realize," a unity of which he was the pioneer.

Pope John Paul II will be remembered as the Pope who pioneered dialogue with China after years of confrontation. He wanted to pass beyond the misunderstandings of the past and showed that he was ready to take all necessary steps to reach that goal. His apology to the Chinese people about some mistakes of the 19th century will remain an historic event in Chinese Church history. But then the brief dialogue that got started was broken off by unexpected events and human failures on both sides during the past

15 years. The Pope's much hoped-for visit to China never materialized. The encounter that he dreamed of remained an "unfinished encounter." We imagine that this was one of the main regrets of this great Pope. Nevertheless the merits of his efforts remain as the basis for new efforts, which we expect to take place in the near future.

At the death of Pope John Paul II, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Beijing published in the People's Daily a short note of condolences for the death of the Pope. A spokesman of the ministry, Liu Jianchao, expressed appreciation for statements made by Pope John Paul II in the past, that Catholics living their authentic faith would not affect in any way the autonomy and independence of China (apparently referring to a letter written by the Pope after the canonization event, which was never published,) and that the Pope asked for forgiveness for certain events of the 19th century in which the Church was implicated (statement in October 2001 at the Ricci commemoration). He added that these statements "are helpful for the cause of normalization of Sino-Vatican relations" and that the Chinese government looked forward to improving these relations with the new Pope. The seeds sown by the dialogue of Pope John Paul II have started to grow already, and hopefully we will soon see a harvest from them.