

## *In Honor of Holy Spirit Study Centre's 25th Anniversary*

---

*Angelo Lazzarotto, PIME*

**T**wenty-five years constitute but a fragment in the age-old history of China. But the developments, which have taken place in the New China during the last quarter century, make this short period an exceptionally important one. The four modernizations drive and the free market economy started by paramount leader Deng Xiaoping in December 1978 went much further than anyone could have then imagined. The recent amendments to the Chinese Constitution, which recognized private property, and to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) statutes, which acknowledged the positive role of entrepreneurs and capitalists, are striking signs of the changes that have occurred.

The founding of the Holy Spirit Study Centre in 1980 was not due to a lucky intuition of such extraordinary future happenings, but rather to the conviction that Christians in China could not shun their responsibility to contribute to the rebuilding of Chinese society after the disintegration caused by the ultra-leftist Cultural Revolution. It was also due to the realization that the encouragement of Catholics in Hong Kong (and through them of the West) was indispensable to help them face their formidable task. It must be honestly acknowledged that at first the Hong Kong Catholic community, including its clergy and religious, had some difficulty committing itself to such a challenging objective. Life in the People's Republic of China (PRC), though geographically next door, appeared still a world apart, almost impenetrable.

XXXXXXXXXXXXXX

In May 1978, travelling with an official Italian delegation, I had the privilege of shaking hands with Deng Xiaoping and of

talking about the role of religion with some Chinese officials. In the following two years, it was possible for me to make seven more visits with various groups or alone, spending a total of about 120 days in China and visiting some twenty cities. It was a crude immersion in a China devastated by the "Gang of Four," which brought to light not only the deep wounds inflicted by the Proletarian Cultural Revolution on the cultural and artistic patrimony of the nation, but especially on the moral values of society.

Christians, both Catholic and Protestant, who had almost disappeared and were cautiously re-surfacing, felt barely tolerated in the new uncertain situation. Still at the end of 1979, besides the Nantang cathedral in Beijing, only a few churches were ready for reopening. It became evident to me that Chinese Christians could not be left alone in that critical situation, and I felt it a moral duty to do whatever I could, though conscious of my weak position as a foreigner. So, with other friends, I pleaded with the Hong Kong Church authorities to face the challenge. Looking back now, we must feel grateful to Fr. John Tong who in 1980 courageously undertook the responsibility of starting the Holy Spirit Study Centre and *Tripod* magazine, and to the late Cardinal John Baptist Wu and his diocesan council for the far reaching decision to make available for it the necessary premises on the campus of the Holy Spirit Seminary in Aberdeen. Very soon, the Joint Executive Committee of the Association of Major Superiors of Men and Women Religious in Hong Kong, after meeting with some "China experts," also expressed their support. They encouraged their members to participate in the regular sharing sessions organized at the Centre under the name of the "Ricci Study Team."

In the early days it was not easy for *Tripod* to find its way, but the original decision of giving to the Holy Spirit Study Centre a study and research character, and of making the modest magazine a bilingual one have proved right. In these decades, the Holy Spirit Study Centre and its publication have grown to become a clear point of reference for scholars and for Christians concerned with China, including groups in other countries, both in the West and within the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences.

XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

Contacts and collaboration with intellectuals and scholars in China proved beneficial from the earliest days. I remember my timid contacts with some of them, who were faced with the task of “reopening” the Institute of World Religions at the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, which had been disbanded, along with the United Front structures, during the frenzy of the Cultural Revolution. Professor Zhao Fushan, then vice-president of the academy, was grateful for some contributions that helped him to recompose the section on religious studies in the dilapidated library of the institute. On behalf of the Italian Chinese Institute for Economic and Cultural Relations, I was able to also offer some documents related to religion and to the activities of early Italian Catholic missionaries to Professor Ren Jiyu, then at the National Library. Official contacts by Italian Senator Vittorino Colombo, founder and president of the Italian Chinese Institute, facilitated also the reconstruction of Matteo Ricci’s (1552-1610) monument. A replica of the original tombstone, with Latin and Chinese engravings, was provided from Macerata, Ricci’s birthplace. Yet, when in 1981 an international conference was convened in Trento on Martino Martini, SJ (1614-1661), and another in Macerata and Rome in 1983, to recall the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Matteo Ricci’s arrival in China, it was rather difficult to get permission for some Chinese scholars to attend.

The official cultural atmosphere was in fact still under the cloud of strict ideology. At the first conference for promoting “Scientific Research on World Religions” held in Beijing in April 1978, Zhou Yang, for many years unchallenged arbiter of cultural policies, re-emerging after the Cultural Revolution, did not hesitate to state that the task of the reborn Academy of Social Sciences was to “create a science of religions that would allow China to conduct a critical battle against theology and to develop a decisive propaganda to protect Marxist atheism, compiling from a Marxist point of view the history of Buddhism, of Christianity, and of Islam in a correct and well documented perspective.”

I remember the private conversation I had during my first visit with a well prepared official of the Foreign Affairs ministry, who

accompanied our delegation. Speaking of freedom of religion, he proudly quoted the statement made by Premier Hua Guofeng on March 6, 1978 at the 5<sup>th</sup> National People's Congress, that Chinese citizens enjoyed "the right to believe or not to believe in religion and to propagate atheism." It came as a surprise to him when I pointed out the incongruence of assuring only the right to propagate atheism, and not one that allowed the profession and propagation of religion.

XXXXXXXXXXXXXX

That restrictive clause (enshrined in the Chinese Constitution that had just been revised) disappeared only with the 1982 new Constitution, where a special article (n. 36) was introduced on "freedom of religious belief." But even then, the Central Committee of the CCP went out of its way to produce a lengthy statement (known as Document No. 19), that is still referred to as the official policy statement on religious questions. Among other things, it clearly states that in the field of religious studies the Party does not intend to give up the monopoly and control over cultural research.<sup>1</sup> It took a long time before some Chinese scholars dared to publicly challenge the "scientific" statement equating religion to opium. No doubt, such scholars were encouraged by friendly exchanges with scholars from outside of China, and on several occasions the contribution of the Holy Spirit Study Centre was highly appreciated.

Over the past quarter of a century, the constant concern of *Tripod's* team has been to follow the development of the religious aspects of life in mainland China, and I was happy to add my modest contributions now and then. When asked to write something, I tried to do it in the most fair and objective way, though I am aware

---

<sup>1</sup> Document 19 appeared as an editorial in *Red Flag* (Hongqi), No. 12, June 16, 1982, pp. 2-8. It has been reprinted in *Missiology*, XI, 3, July 1983, pp. 291-307, which contains also other pertinent articles, among which an analysis by myself, entitled "The Chinese Communist Party and Religion," pp. 267-290. By that time I had also published at the Holy Spirit Study Centre *The Catholic Church in Post-Mao China*, pp. 194, which also has a Chinese edition.

that my reading of the situation may not at times have been fully comprehensive or serene. But I must confess that a sad conviction has been growing deeper and deeper within me during these years. I believe that the full nature and the negative impact the so-called "policy of religious freedom" is having on Chinese society totally escapes the comprehension of the present day top leadership of the PRC. Such a policy, introduced right after Liberation, and following the formula practiced in the Soviet Union, makes an instrumental use of patriotism to empty religious bodies of any real religious meaning. It is totally anachronistic that such a negative view of the nature of religion is still conditioning the official "religious policy" of New China today, when other aspects of Chinese society have changed so much. This happens because the religious policy rests totally in the hands of a powerful corps of bureaucrats, whose main interest is to prove their necessary role in assuring stability and control against possible social dangers.

This became evident again and again. Great was my disappointment at seeing men like Father Vincent Zhu, SJ, or Bishop Joseph Fan Xueyan, who had already spent a large portion of their lives in detention, rearrested in 1983, and condemned again to long prison terms. And what were their "counter-revolutionary crimes"? Trusting that the new climate of freedom, created by Deng Xiaoping, was a reality, and trying therefore to propagate openly the faith they believed in. That painful feeling was confirmed by the admission of an officially recognized bishop in a north-eastern diocese, who told me that he could not heed the request of a rural Catholic community asking for religious assistance, because "the officers of the Religious Affairs Bureau did not favour the spread of religion."

When Bishop Philip Ma Ji, the "official" bishop of Pingliang in Gansu Province, in 1987 pleaded publicly that clerics who had married and persons who had abandoned traditional Church teaching be removed from the leadership of the Catholic structures recognized by the government since 1980, political considerations again prevailed. Obviously, the authorities in charge of religious policy considered such persons too useful for "managing" Church affairs along government lines. So they kept supporting them. I remember the deep discomfort of the Fuzhou Catholic community

by the fact that “patriotic” Bishop Lin Quan, elected in 1962, was reinstated in that position although notoriously married. When I personally pleaded with him to voluntarily resign (I had the opportunity of meeting him twice), he indicated that the authorities encouraged him “to continue his service.”

XXXXXXXXXXXXXX

At a European Catholic China Meeting held in Verona (Italy) in December 1992, I was asked to comment on “What is new in the Chinese Church.” I did it by especially reviewing the official decisions taken in the previous decade.<sup>2</sup>

The reconvening in 1980 of the Catholic Patriotic Association (CPA), founded originally in 1957 but disbanded during the Cultural Revolution, was viewed then with mixed feelings. What appeared rather puzzling was the fact that this 3<sup>rd</sup> CPA Congress was followed immediately by a previously unannounced National Conference of Catholic Representatives (NCCR), made up practically of the same persons as were in the CPA, and with an agenda just prepared by the CPA.

In the atmosphere of relative liberalization restored by Deng Xiaoping, the decisions of the Conference (described by the Chinese English media as a “Synod of the Chinese Church”) were judged as a positive turn in the “policy of religious liberty,” as they included among other things the reopening of some seminaries and the recovery of previously confiscated Church properties. In the new structural configuration that emerged for the Church, one could see an effort to restore the lost credibility of the CPA, since the government declared that it would recognize also a Chinese Catholic Church Affairs Commission and a College of Chinese Catholic Bishops (or Bishops’ Conference). In reality, when the statutes of the Commission for Church Affairs were published in the new official journal *The Catholic Church in China*,<sup>3</sup> while the structure and the competence of the College of Bishops were

---

<sup>2</sup> *European Ecumenical China Communication*, No. 2, Sankt Augustin, 1994, pp. 41-46.

<sup>3</sup> *Zhongguo Tianzhujiao*, November 1980, p. 51.

vaguely mentioned, it was clearly stated that the NCCR would approve its formal constitution. Moreover, authority within the Church was bestowed not on the College of Bishops, but on the Commission for Church Affairs, whose directorate included some well-known lay people closely linked with the government. It would be this Commission that would direct church affairs, under the supervision of the Religious Affairs Bureau (RAB) of the government.

Formally, the government seemed to have moved a step forward, by recognizing three Catholic "mass organizations," while the other religions had only one, except for the Protestants who had two (in October 1980 the National Christian Council was added to the existing Three-Self Movement). In reality, the misunderstanding arising from the new formula was evident also in the fact that the persons called to manage the three organizations were the same.

XXXXXXXXXXXXXX

Such misunderstandings were not clarified in the Assembly of April 1983, celebrating the 25th Anniversary of the first "autonomous" episcopal consecrations, nor at the National Conference convened in November 1986. Meanwhile not a few bishops, even among those recognized by the government and officially indicated as belonging to the CPA, stressed the need to emphasize the role of the bishops in the Church, as required by Catholic Church tradition. But the recurring talk about a possible reshuffle within the leadership of the College of Bishops proved inconclusive, with the RAB firmly in control. Twenty-two bishops called to Beijing in December 1988 were given the impression that negotiations would soon be undertaken with the Vatican. But in the meantime, a secret document had been discussed at various levels of the Party and the RAB. Approved by the United Front and the RAB on December 24, 1988, it was issued by the Party Central Committee as Document No. 3 in February 1989. It shows, along with some minor concessions, a strong determination to keep the official Church structure under tight control, and to apply a hard line policy against underground groups.

It is in this context that one should understand the initiative taken on November 21, 1989 by some secretly consecrated bishops and other clergy to draft the constitution of a proper Chinese Episcopal Conference, respectful of Church laws and free from political control. As could be expected, their "secret" meeting did not pass unnoticed, and soon afterwards all the people who had taken part in it were arrested. The heavy political climate prevailing after the tragic events of Tiananmen Square (June 1989) did not in fact bring any good to the cause of religion either. There had been talks full of optimism about a planned revision of the legislation regulating the relationship between state and religions in China. But soon, discussion about such a new law, which would have guaranteed wider autonomy to believers, stopped.

In fact, stricter controls were enforced, especially on those communities (Catholic and Protestant) which, refusing to accept what they considered an interference of political power, were classified as clandestine, and therefore illegal. This led to a series of instructions from the central authorities soliciting a more attentive vigilance for possible dangers of deviation, while some provinces and cities issued local rules aimed at regulating religious activities, but practically limiting their space.

When in September 1992 the 5th NCCR approved the statutes of the College of Chinese Bishops, downgrading the Administrative Commission and re-defining in a new 12-article statute the role of the CPA, a new balance of power emerged between them. Early comments by observers both inside and outside China rejoiced over a growing importance given to the College of Bishops. But when the content of the Party's Document No. 3 became known outside China, one could find in it the blueprint of the 5<sup>th</sup> NCCR decisions. In reality, the Church was coming out of those meetings weakened rather than strengthened.

What the bishops and genuine Catholics wanted was in fact an Episcopal Conference that would be able to work properly, independently of the CPA, but this had never been contemplated. Besides, the statutes of the Bishops' Conference repeat that it should "act in accordance with the principles of independence and self-government, adapting to the situation of China" (art. 13), and in total dependence on the NCCR (art. 4, 13, 14). In the light of



these facts, it was no surprise that the same person, Bishop Joseph Zong Huaide, was re-elected chairman of the CPA and president of the Bishops' College.

XXXXXXXXXXXXXX

In another contribution written ten years ago,<sup>4</sup> I tried to make a fresh assessment of the religious situation, taking into account "the growing number of Catholics, the properties recovered, the churches, seminaries, convents opened, the liturgical renewal," and also the efforts at religious formation, and at improving the conditions in which most bishops, priests, seminarians and nuns were living and operating. We could not but deplore the unfortunate division still prevailing among Catholic communities in some areas due to sad experiences in the past, and we all prayed that certain entrenched positions could be overcome. A real miracle was required. In this context, the encouragement given by Pope John Paul II to all Chinese Catholics had been constant. He asked them to make a sincere effort to heal their internal divisions so that they could offer a more constructive and credible contribution to the common good.<sup>5</sup>

But I cannot shake the conviction that the primary cause that is still pushing Christians and particularly Catholics to form or expand, at their own risk, "underground" communities, is the persistent "leftist" attitude prevailing among the officials responsible for the official religious policy. Zhao Puchu, for many years chairman of the Chinese Buddhist Association, speaking at a meeting in Henan on April 14, 1992, accused the cadres who deal with religion of approaching the problem in a negative way: "frequently...the right of the citizens to freedom of religious belief, and the rights of religious bodies and temples and churches are contravened," he complained. He explained that for the cadres supervising religions, the easiest thing to do is to follow a "leftist"

---

<sup>4</sup> "The Church in China: A Fifteen Year Review," *Tripod*, XV, No. 90, November-December, 1995, pp. 27-39.

<sup>5</sup> See *Tripod*, XXV, No. 137, Summer 2005, a special issue on "Pope John Paul II and China."

attitude, even to the extent of spreading crude atheistic propaganda among the masses of religious believers. Certain cadres, he added, think that “the masses of religious believers should be converted to unbelief, and that the eradication of religion should be seen as a measure of the extent of consolidation of the socialist front.” Old Zhao Puchu reiterated his vigorous criticism of the way religious policy is applied in many parts of China in the course of the 1995 Political Consultative Conference, and his comments were distributed in writing to all participants, upon the request of the deputies.

The insistence of Jiang Zemin that supervision over religious affairs should be reinforced, so as “to lead religion to adapt itself to society,” was unfortunate, as he went so far as to state that believers in religion “should reform religious organizations and doctrines which do not fit in with socialism.”

In concluding my “Fifteen Year Review,” I could not refrain from remarking that many impartial observers wonder why religion is still looked upon with suspicion in China, and why Party and State still deem it necessary to reinforce control over it. In recent years, this negative conviction has unfortunately grown even deeper, as expressed in a new essay that appeared in *Tripod* last year: “Contradictions in China’s Religious Policy.”<sup>6</sup>

XXXXXXXXXXXXXX

The basic cause of discomfort lies in the slow pace and uncertain line followed by the “fourth generation” leaders in realizing Premier Wen Jiabao’s promise of a more democratic public administration, which would lessen the despotic power of certain functionaries, making them fully accountable before the law. Such a slow pace is somehow measured by the still too narrow space left for independent thought and for freedom of criticism against vested interests and malpractices. This applies to many fields, including the administration of justice and the suppression of corruption. As *Amnesty International* pleaded again on March 23, 2004, “In spite of the positive legal development in criminal

---

<sup>6</sup> *Tripod*, XXIV, No. 135, Winter 2004, pp. 5-18.

procedures, in actual practice the Chinese system in terms of criminal justice fails to ensure equity, impartiality, or justice.” Even though a conspicuous number of Party members have been prosecuted and punished, the task of effectively fighting corruption proves an impossible one, as long as the political system remains the same. As one knowledgeable Chinese politician said: “The root of corruption in China lies in the one Party system that prevents the development of true democracy,”<sup>7</sup>

Since joining the *World Trade Organization* in 2001, China is committed to revamp, within five years, the bulk of its almost 5,000 laws and regulations. This is a formidable task. Inevitably, a deep revision of the religious sector, which has always been very marginal in the priorities of Chinese leaders, is not likely to be tackled soon. Regarding religion, the Chinese government, like any other government, obviously expects all religious groups to abide by the law. But the laws enacted in the past in China were unfair to religions, biased as they are by a basic negative perception of the religious phenomenon. To cite just one example, in the case of Catholics, the RAB (today State Administration of Religious Affairs, SARA) is empowered to press the Church to abide by a so-called “democratic administration,” which is contradictory to Catholic tradition. In fact, SARA officials, who are atheists, were given the task even “to discern the theological basis, in order to attribute a theological legitimacy” to the democratic way of conducting Church affairs.<sup>8</sup> The drafting of the three documents on Church management in 2003 smacks of such a basic misconception.<sup>9</sup>

Besides, as illustrated again in *Tripod*, the law on national security published in February 1993 (with its 1994 Regulations) perpetuates an attitude of systematic suspicion against religion reminiscent of the Mao era. It provides for a special branch of government to supervise religious groups, which is accountable to the Party Central Committee, without any legal control. From time to time, Party members are reminded that in the exercise of their public functions they should not forget their duty to “propagate

---

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 11.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., pp. 13-14.

<sup>9</sup> See ample commentaries in *Tripod*, XXIII, No. 130, Autumn 2003.

atheism.” Officers assigned to do “religious work” in the SARA or other parallel structures of the United Front and Public Security are not exempt from this basic responsibility to help stamp out what the regime still considers “religious superstition.”

These are some of the reasons that make me sadly agree with what a *Tripod* article stated a couple of years ago. It pointed out the discrepancy between a country changing very fast, with a regime still locked in a nostalgic vision of absolute power proper to a totalitarian revolutionary state of a past era.<sup>10</sup>

So long as this state of affairs continues in the PRC, the classic slogan of the separation of Church and State, which from time to time Chinese leaders love to expound, remains void of any real meaning.

XXXXXXXXXXXXXX

*Tripod's* policy over the years has been to report and comment in a friendly, though sometimes critical, manner on the cultural, social, and religious issues of mainland China, carefully avoiding the pitfall of becoming a systematic expression of negative remarks or a collection of disparaging news items on Chinese politics.

By stressing the fact that Chinese society's attention to religion has deeply changed in recent years, we join our voices with many scholars inside the PRC, in the hope of making the national leaders aware of the urgent need for a totally new approach and a thoroughly renewed policy. There are now more than 30 Chinese universities offering academic programmes related to religious or ethical subjects, in search for a moral basis that may give a soul to the fast growing market economy. A good many researchers are convinced that a more liberal religious policy would assure the wholehearted contribution of millions of believers to the stability of society and of the state. They are convinced that there is an urgent need to redefine the official understanding of religion in the present modern context. They see the government claim to decide what is lawful religion and what is not as an obsolete pretence, challenged by the international community, where China is becoming more

---

<sup>10</sup> *Tripod*, XXIII, No. 129, Summer 2003, pp. 26-36.

and more active. The government practice of making a nationalistic use of religion is out of date in the global context.

The present government mindset, which considers the growing religious manifestations only as possible dangers to national security or independence, and explains the new visibility of religion in Chinese society as the result of "foreign infiltration," closes its eyes to reality. It is a pity that such views are upheld even by the highest authority entrusted with dealing with religion. The appointment of Ye Xiaowen ten years ago (1995) as director of the RAB was at first greeted with optimism by some observers because of Ye's academic background. *Tripod* has also made known to Western scholars several of his speeches and articles.<sup>11</sup> On the occasion of the issuing of the new "Regulations on Religious Affairs" earlier this year, the RAB has been upgraded to become the SARA, and Director Ye was promoted to the rank of vice-minister.

It is saddening to find that his understanding of religion has not moved an inch forward during the last ten years. In his pronouncements one cannot find any attention paid to the specific nature of the various religions, nor any concern to ensure for even the so-called "normal religious activities" any healthy space to grow. His unexpressed aim must be to rob religions of their very soul, thus making them a mere political tool of the Party. His determination to "strengthen management" over religious groups in order to "promote adaptation" to socialism, pushing such adaptation to cause "a fundamental change in religious ideology and in its system," is very distressing. The way he addresses the gatherings of bishops and other representatives of the Chinese Catholic community leaves no doubt as to who is in charge of Chinese Catholic Church affairs.

Not surprisingly, among the officials working in the field of religion, not a few appear to be still guided by an obsolete, leftist vision of religion, while the temptation to take personal advantage

---

<sup>11</sup> *Tripod* XVI, 92 (March-April 1996); XVI, 94 (July- August 1996); XVI, 95 (September-October 1996); XVII, 101 (November-December 1997); XVIII, 107 (September-October 1998); XX, 120 (November-December 2000).

of the present policy may be too great for others. So, stressing the need to ensure stability through a more stringent “management” of religious affairs may prove, after all, an easy way to protect the corporate interests and privileges of the Party and government staff assigned to this task. For them, defending the *status quo* is therefore a precondition for implementing religious policy.

XXXXXXXXXXXXXX

Deng Xiaoping's motto, “searching truth from facts,” has still a long way to go before being fully implemented in China, where critical voices, even when well documented and intended to be constructive, are too often disregarded. A case in point is a recent courageous denunciation of some government leaders in Gao Cheng County in Hebei Province, where large sectors of the Catholic population feel unjustly discriminated against. The detailed charges point directly to the county RAB director and to the deputy governor of Hebei Province, who is also director of the United Front Department. According to the letter published in the international press, the RAB director's hatred for the underground Church and his atrocities towards the faithful are an embarrassment even for his own colleagues. Recalling president Hu Jintao's slogan “let us build the harmonious society of socialism,” the writers are pleading for a sincere effort to handle correctly the conflicts existing in society, so that justice and equity are in fact realized and protected.<sup>12</sup>

As far as I know, *Tripod* has never been officially banned from the Mainland, though scholars whom I met in China often expressed their disappointment at not being allowed to receive the magazine regularly. Last year, I had the chance of sending a copy of the article mentioned above, “Contradictions in China's Religious Policy,”<sup>13</sup> to a Chinese friend in Beijing. I asked for his opinion, as I know him to be a highly respected expert in religious affairs. In his answer he said that he agreed with all that I had written, “because it corresponds to truth.” But he regretted that my

---

<sup>12</sup> *AsiaNews Online*, June 8, 2005.

<sup>13</sup> *Tripod*, XXIV, 135, Winter 1994.

analysis sounded rather pessimistic. He reminded me that in the Catholic Church there have been positive developments, and he also mentioned that: "The majority of the Chinese bishops have already obtained recognition by the Pope, the Chinese Catholics express more openly than before their respect for the Pope's primacy, while the authorities cannot but accept this as a fact; readers should know that not everything is determined from above since there are things that escape control!"

My friend is right. The growth of the Catholic Church and of Christianity in general has been extraordinary in recent decades, notwithstanding the negative policy imposed from above. On this aspect the staff of *Tripod* has been faithfully reporting, both in the pages of the magazine and in the monthly "China Bridge" column in *Sunday Examiner*, the weekly newspaper of the Hong Kong Catholic Diocese.

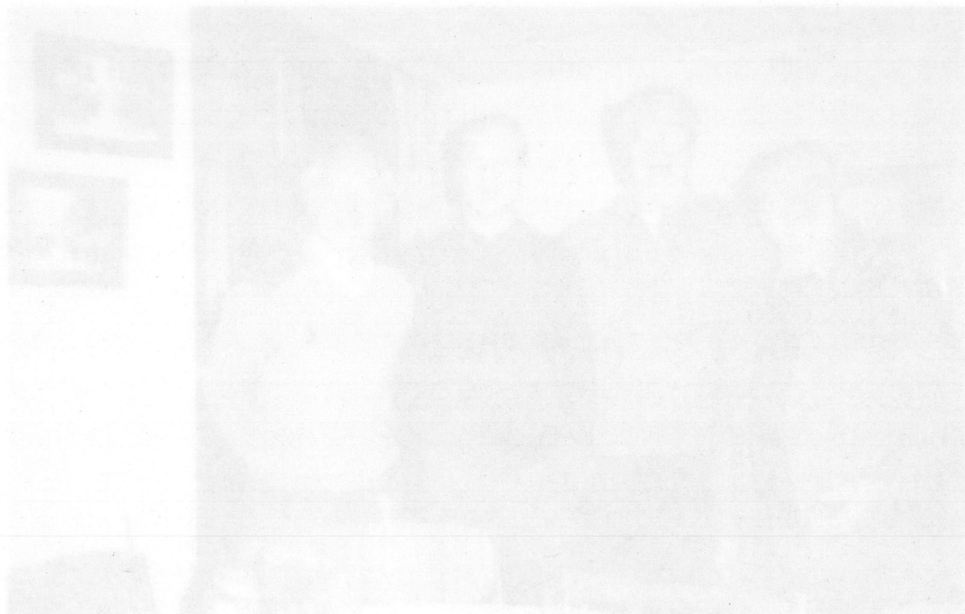
An issue closely related to the growing Catholic presence in China is the one about a possible formal dialogue between the Beijing government and the Holy See. Such a dialogue has often been mentioned in the international media as being imminent, but up to now it has not materialized. In recent months, however, particularly in connection with the worldwide attention given to the death and funeral of Pope John Paul II, and the election of Benedict XVI, a new page seems to be opening up. A recent report from Beijing mentioned that the government is planning to set up a working group on religious affairs to improve coordination on the issue. Membership would include the SARA, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Public Security, and the United Front Department of the Communist Party.<sup>14</sup>

This news seems encouraging. Yet, it must be stated that an extraordinary act of political courage would be required on the part of the Chinese leaders to go beyond their current interpretation of religion and, in reference to a possible dialogue with the Holy See, of the "two pre-conditions" they have put forward up to the present time.

---

<sup>14</sup> *South China Morning Post*, June 15, 2005.

Considering the extreme importance of the present opportunity, I would offer a suggestion. In order to make a fresh approach to the question of the religious policy possible, a team of scholars should first be asked to work out a concrete global project; in the Chinese universities there are no lack of experts in this field today. Their proposal should then be submitted to the working group made up of the politicians mentioned above. Only in this way will it be possible for the government to consider options that would never occur to the working group alone. And that, hopefully, besides helping to find a common ground for a constructive dialogue with the Vatican, could constitute a real turning point for the good of Chinese society as a whole.



The four founders at the early days of the Holy Spirit Study Centre: (from left to right) Fr. Lazzarotto, Fr. Hui, Fr. (now Bishop) Tong, and Fr. Barry.