

Some Reflections on the Church in China Since China's Reform and Opening Up

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Gabriel Ly gave the following talk to a group of Catholic Church personnel in Hong Kong in November 2005.

First of all, I must declare that this is not a piece of serious academic writing, nor is it a historical thesis, because my expertise is not in history, nor am I a specialist in the Church in China. I would rather say this is a report of my years of observation on the development of the Church in China, and of the messages and information that I received from my direct contact with and experiences of the Church on the Mainland.



I. Observing the Church in China through cultural and social information

1. Changes and influences brought about by the reform and open policy since the 1980s. The following factors should be taken into account.

(1.1) The establishment of private property and the inclusion of this in the constitution, and the question of capitalists and entrepreneurs joining the Communist Party.

According to the "Amended Constitution of the People's Republic of China" that was passed on March 14, 2004 at the

Second Session of the 10th National People's Congress, concerning public ownership and private ownership, it is stated: Chapter 1, General Principles, Article 1: The People's Republic of China is a socialist State under the people's democratic dictatorship led by the working class and based on the alliance of workers and peasants.

The socialist system is the basic system of the People's Republic of China. Sabotage of the socialist system by any organization or individual is prohibited.

Article 6: The basis of the socialist economic system of the People's Republic of China is socialist public ownership of the means of production, namely, ownership by the whole people and collective ownership by the working people.

At the early stage of the socialist system, the State insisted on a basic economic system with public ownership as the basic structure, along with the development of various types of ownership economy. The State also insisted on a distribution system with the principle of to each according to his work as the main principle, along with other distribution systems.

Article 11: The individual or private economy, operating within the limits prescribed by law, is an important component of the socialist market economy.

The State protects the lawful rights and interests of a non-public ownership economy, such as an individual economy and a private economy. The State encourages, supports, and guides the development of the non-public ownership economy, and exercises supervision and administration over the non-public economy in accordance with the law.

Article 13: The lawful private property of citizens will not be violated.

The State protects the private property and the right of inheritance of citizens in accordance with the law.

For the public good, the State can collect or take over the private property of citizens and give them compensation according to the law.

Concerning the question of capitalists and entrepreneurs

joining the Communist Party, it was said that Jiang Zeming, before he retired, expressed the hope that entrepreneurs could join the Party. However, the Party Constitution had previously declared that the Party was a Party of the proletariat. Thus it was necessary to first amend the Party Constitution.

In the Summary of the draft of the amendment to the constitution, which was passed on November 14, 2002, the following important points, which are worth our notice, were made: "The Chinese Communist Party's own guide for action are Marxism-Leninism, Mao Zedong Thought, the theories of Deng Xiaoping and the important thinking of the 'Three Represents.'"

"Maintain the four basic principles of the socialist road, the dictatorship of the Proletariat, the leadership of the Communist Party, and Marxist-Leninist-Mao Zedong Thought. This is the foundation on which our country is built. Throughout the whole process of the establishment of modern socialism, it is necessary to adhere to the four basic principles, and oppose the liberalism of the bourgeoisie."

In the first chapter concerning Party members, the first article discusses the requirements for entering the Party: "Any worker, peasant, intellectual or any progressive person at other levels of society, who acknowledges the program and constitution of the Party, who is willing to join a cell and actively work in it, and is willing to carry out Party decisions and pay their Party dues at regular times, may apply to join the Chinese Communist Party." Thus among the requirements for joining the Party, there is no requirement for belonging to the proletariat.

(1.2) The contradictory phenomena produced by unbalanced development in economic progress and political reform point out that for the last twenty years the speedy development of a market economy, which is generally acknowledged by both Chinese and foreigners alike, has shown that among China's 1.3 billion people, a small percentage has become rich. However, a comparison of the speed of the economic development and the lack of development in

political reform has led to dissatisfaction among the masses and cadres alike. Moreover, the inequality between the rich and the poor, corruption among the cadres, the lack of a spirit and system of rule by law, and the rapid increase in criminal cases have created unsettled conditions in society and in peoples' hearts, which becomes more serious everyday. Taiwan's *Human Rights Times*, in its July 9, 2005 issue announced: "According to a survey, which scholars carried out at the request of the Mainland Committee, at least 5 million people in China have property worth over 10 million Rmb. At the same time 200 million people are living in abject poverty. The richest families are 359 times richer than the poorest families. The "gini coefficient" for the income of families living in the cities on the Mainland has reached 0.561. According to international estimation, if the "gini coefficient" indicates the difference in income of residents reaches 0.600 or above, then there is danger that turmoil will happen.

According to the survey, in the area of real estate, the most expensive apartments on the Mainland are in Shanghai. One of these costs 130,000,000 Rmb (520,000,000 Taiwan dollars). At the same time, in many places on the Mainland, people are demonstrating on the streets because, due to development, they have been forced to move out of their homes and have become homeless.

Moreover, the situation of wealth being gathered into the hands of only a small portion of the population is becoming more apparent every day. The Mainland already has 5 million people whose financial worth is above 10 million Rmb. Among these, two million people have already accumulated wealth worth 100,000,000 Rmb. In comparison to those rich people who have wealth worth 10 million or more, the income of peasants in the countryside is on average only 637 Rmb per year. That is the average, so there are some peasants whose income is even less than that; thus they are living in dire poverty. If we added the 30 million people whose average yearly income is about 800 Rmb, then the statistic for those living in poverty in the Chinese countryside reaches 100 million.

If the poor living in the cities is figured into the statistics, official Mainland figures report that 56 million are living in poverty. However, the World Bank estimates that there are 200 million persons living in poverty on the Mainland. This is especially the case in the mid-Western part of the country, mountainous regions, and other isolated areas. Most of the peasants living in these areas are living in poverty. Of the poor living in cities and towns, 95% of them are unemployed or are persons who have lost their jobs. The richest persons are owners of private businesses or Party and government cadres.

(1.3) The result of the above situation is that the masses at the grassroots level are resisting, and demonstrations continually increase.

The July 2005 issue of *Zheng Ming* reported: "On the evening of June 14 the State Council called a meeting of the important responsible persons in the Party and government from all the provinces and municipalities directly under the Central Government. They reported on the violent demonstrations continually taking place in society. Mr. Zhou Yongkang chaired the meeting, and Mr. Wen Jiabao gave some instructions."

"Zhou Yongkang warned the participants: local departments and leaders cannot ignore their heavy responsibilities. If they persist in oppressing the people, and the people resist to the point of taking to the streets, then who is responsible for such an action? Zhou Yongkang acknowledged that the factors behind large-scale demonstrations are very complicated. From an investigation of several demonstrations, the most important reason for them is that concerned departments violated the law, and transgressed the rights of the masses. The masses could not obtain guarantees for their deserved rights, so they naturally organized and rose up in resistance.

Zhou also revealed that several of the mass demonstrations had the support of a wide segment of society. This should sound a critical political alarm among Party and government leaders."

“According to government statistics, from the beginning of the year up to June 12th, 341 organized demonstrations and large scale acts of resistance (with weapons) took place in 92 regions. Among these, 17 involved over 10,000 demonstrators, 46 involved over 5,000 persons, and in 112 incidents over 1,000 persons participated. Casualties amounted to 1,740 persons, among whom 102 died. From the public security bureau, the police and local cadres, 55 persons died, 232 government buildings were damaged, 114 government vehicles were destroyed, and 62 storehouses were ransacked. Direct economic losses amounted to 34,000,000,000 to 40,000,000,000 Rmb.”

(1.4) The attraction of a democratic system. The following little story most likely has a largely symbolic meaning: Su Qi reported that when Lian Zhan was in Beijing, as he was leaving Beijing University after his lecture, he saw from his car a student carrying a sign with eight Chinese characters which mean: “Look to the West for Democracy; Unite China.”

2. A New Cultural Movement overcomes the two cultural revolutions, which took place in China during the 20th century

(2.1) The New Cultural Movement, which took place in the early years of the Republic, with Hu Shih leading on the right and Chen Duxiu on the left, attacked religion in the name of science, democracy and freedom.

(2.2) After the calming of the turmoil created by the Gang of Four, the CPC declared that the Cultural Revolution was a great catastrophe in the country's history. This led to an awakening and much reflection on the part of intellectuals. They gradually affirmed that religion is objective and has universal value. Both sides of the Taiwan Straits had similar situations.

(2.3) The change in direction in policy on culture, the arts and education after the Cultural Revolution: on the one hand, it

encouraged scholars and university professors to return to China's traditional culture, and it affirmed that the Chinese people could find the wisdom they required in classical philosophy and culture.

On the other hand, it meant to prevent scholars and intellectuals from excessively tending in the direction of Western culture, because going in the direction of Western culture meant that they necessarily would come in contact with the core value of that culture, namely faith in Jesus Christ. However, this way of thinking and method contained an internal contradiction, which produced a sense of powerlessness, because it could not hold back the aspirations of intellectuals and of their consciences for seeking the truth.

(2.4) The phenomenon of Cultural Christians

Professor Chen Fucun, Director of the Christian Study Center at Hangzhou University, describes the origin of Cultural Christians in this way: "This is a group of scholars, who among the educated circles in China during the 1980s began research into Christianity (this essay will call them Scholars in Mainland China Studying Christianity)."

They come from the following areas: "1. Originally Christian universities. There are not many in this group, and their age is generally older. They include people like Fu Le'an and Zeng Jusheng. 2. History departments before the Cultural Revolution, like Hu Wangtang and Xu Mingde. 3. Young scholars who graduated from university after the Cultural Revolution, especially students who entered the university in 1977, 1978 and 1979, whose qualifications were quite high. 4. Scholars who are presently studying abroad, such as Liu Xiaofeng and Zhao Dunhua."

Later in speaking about the positive results these scholars achieved, he points out: "1. After religious circles and the government accepted the righting of turmoil and the correction of the 'leftist' mistakes in religious theory, this provided a foundation for the implementation of the religious policy. 2. They translated and introduced historical Christian writings and 20th century theological theory. They also transmitted news of research and

development about religion in today's world. (For example, 'Dao Feng Shan's Institute of Sino-Christian Studies,' under the editorship of Professor Liu Xiaofeng, published the 'Library of Historical Christianity's Thought and Culture.' This was divided into three categories, ancient, modern and research. Mainland scholars translated the texts, and scholars both at home and abroad have praised them). They have gathered, arranged and published material on the spread of Christianity in China; they have researched the circumstances and the future development of Christianity in China; and they have sought points of integration between Christianity and Chinese culture, seeking to establish Christian theological theory within a Chinese cultural context." ("Cultural Christians, the Phenomenon and the Theory," pp. 6-23, in *A Look at the Phenomenon and Thought of "Cultural Christians,"* by Chen Fucun, edited by the Institute of Sino-Christian Studies, Hong Kong, 1997.)

It can be said that the abovementioned "Scholars in Mainland China Studying Christianity" is the broad meaning of "Cultural Christian." Among these scholars, some are Cultural Christians in the narrow sense.

Professor Xu Zhiwei in "The Recent Phenomenon and Theological Thought of 'Cultural Christians'" points out that Liu Xiaofeng in 1995 gave the following definition of the Cultural Christian: "The marks of the Cultural Christian are faith in Jesus Christ, and an active exercise of this faith. But they do not receive baptism nor join a church. They transcend churches and denominations."

We can sum up what Xu Zhiwei has written in three points: "Cultural Christians and traditional Christians have the following points in common: 1. They believe in Jesus Christ, 2. They accept the Old and New Testaments of the Bible, and 3. All their words and actions are based on the first two points."

"On the other hand, the differences between Cultural Christians and ordinary Christians also concerns three areas: their path to faith, belonging to a church and the acceptance of baptism....

1. The roads to faith are different.... They gradually came to know Christ by experiencing Christianity through the study of Christian works, and by researching the history and present situation of Christians in China... 2. Cultural Christians respect the Catholic Church and each denomination of the Reformation, but they themselves eschew churches and any denomination.... 3. Most of the Cultural Christians have not been baptized.” (Ibid., pp. 24-44)

(2.5) The Phenomenon of Christianity Fever, which arose during the last decade of the last century.

From the beginning of the 1980s, the Communist Party authorities began to pay attention to Christianity Fever. One of the purposes of Document 19, issued in 1982, was to inform Party members of the reasons why, after a long period of suppression, Christianity had not been eliminated. On the one hand, the development of science and technology was in a backward state, and the people were still living in poverty. On the other hand, the document also pointed out that political power alone could not wipe out the existence of religion. Therefore, Document 19 introduced the religious policy of Deng Xiaoping. This was that, although we still hold that religion is the opium of the people and the Party cannot abandon its Marxist atheistic principles, we cannot but admit that religion still has some value. Therefore, the implementation of a united front policy towards religious believers is necessary at this time. In other words, under the conditions of certain places, persons and times, we should promote the usefulness of religion for the benefit of the country. Under the flag of positively participating in socialism, the Party should lead religious believers to help with the modernization of Chinese society.

Of course, the high point of Christianity Fever coincided with the many beneficial activities undertaken by the Cultural Christians.

(2.6) Although up to the present time, regarding basic human rights, and freedom of religious belief and publication, the Communist authorities maintain unreasonable control and

continually apply pressure, however they are still incapable of stopping scholars, experts, university professors and intellectuals from using all kinds of measures and channels to benefit the development of all religions. For example, many universities have established classes in religion, or religion departments, and even Christian research institutes, whose quantity far outnumbers those in Taiwan. In the last twenty years, many books, translations and magazines have been published on Christianity, including on religious theory, Scripture, theology, philosophy, history and other aspects of religion. They have sprung up like bamboo shoots after the rain. Relying only on administrative means, the government cannot stop them. The government's promotion of all kinds of international contacts is also a factor beneficial to these developments.

II. Some issues that affect the development of the Church in Mainland China

1. Implications of the population figures

In 1949, Catholic population numbered 3.8 million, and Christian Churches had 700,000 believers. According to Reverend Yuan Zhi-Ming of the Christian Church, at present Christian Churches have 70 million believers. The Catholic Church has 20 million.

These statistics are rather reliable, because a few years back the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences announced the following figures for religious believers in China: 220 million Buddhists, 40 million Muslims, 60 million Christians, making a total of 320 million religious believers.

Taoists were not included in the figure because Taoism has become a folk religion among the people, and it is difficult to arrive at a figure for the number of believers. It is estimated that Taoism and other folk religions together may have a total of over 200 million believers.

Among the 60 million Christians a few years ago, it was

estimated that there were 15 million Catholics; so the other Christian Churches should have at least 45 million believers.

From the late Ming period to 1949, the Catholic Church was not very successful in its missionary work. The most important reason for this was the disaster of the Rites Controversy. But in the half century from 1949 until now, the number of Catholics has increased many times. Catholics on the Mainland agree that the most important reason for their success is the guidance of the Holy Spirit. The courageous sacrifice of the martyrs is also a blessing from God, leading many people in China to believe in God.

The Christian Church has discovered a very effective way of spreading the gospel, which is the forming of "house churches." When a family is converted to Christianity, the Christian Church will train the family to become a small church community, where believers can gather and evangelical work can take place. Reverend Yuan Zhi-Ming says that "house churches" are common all over China, even in Tibet. When a "house church" in one place is suppressed, it will move to another place. Perhaps this is the reason why the population of the Christian Churches has increased from 700,000 in 1949 to perhaps 70 million today.

2. Some queries on the normalization of relations between China and the Vatican

(2.1) The mission of the Church is to preach the gospel to the world, and convert people to believe in God. In the 20th century the Vatican became an independent country, and has established foreign relations with other countries. However, this situation is only a development in European history, and is not a necessary factor for the Catholic faith.

With this background, maybe we can say that the significance of the Vatican establishing diplomatic relations with another country lies in the fact of whether or not such relations can help the Church fulfill its missionary ministry in that country. In other words, establishing diplomatic relations is not the ultimate

aim of the Vatican. It is only a tool to help the Universal Church and the local Churches to fulfill their evangelical mission.

(2.2) After the death of Pope John Paul II, the issue of Sino-Vatican diplomatic relations surfaced again. Many Church people believe that Sino-Vatican diplomatic relations will definitely take place. Many are convinced such a normalization of relations will bring many benefits. However, in my opinion, the advantages, which scholars and experts assume the normalization of Sino-Vatican relations will bring, are mostly based on subjective speculation and judgment, and lack objective and solid evidence. I would say that diplomatic relations should be established only under the normal and reasonable conditions of mutual respect and transparency. From the Church's standpoint, the Chinese authorities should guarantee the Church's right to spread the gospel freely in China, and at the same time safeguard the continuation of missionary work on Taiwan. These are conditions which we all wish to see come about.

(2.3) On January 22, 2001, when Pope John Paul II received the bishops of Vietnam, he said, "Owing to her role and teaching authority, the Church cannot be mentioned in the same breath with any political body, nor does it belong to any political system. Because of this, political bodies and the Church each have their own independent spheres of activity. Nevertheless, both parties should do their best in their respective areas of mission for the good of all humankind. This of course would be more effective if the two parties can come together and cooperate in their services. To achieve this aim, the Church hopes that political bodies can fully respect the independence and autonomy of the Church."

In the article "One shepherd, one flock: views on the prospect of Sino-Vatican diplomatic relations" by Zhou Dao, published in the June 12, 2005 issue of *Christian Life Weekly* (of Taiwan), the writer, after quoting the aforementioned words of the late Holy Father, continues, "The diplomatic relations which the Vatican has established with 174 countries are all based on this

understanding (of the Church's mission). Unless Beijing abandons its political outlook in dealing with Vatican relations, and seriously reconsider making concessions on the requirements she has proposed, it will fall into the same difficulty that Cardinal Paul Shan has stressed. He pointed out, 'Outsiders frequently regard the foreign relations of the Vatican from a political point of view only, which is a misunderstanding of the Vatican's foreign policy.' But to expect the Beijing government to make concessions on her primary requirement will not be easy. We can see this from a review of the characteristics and the historical background of communism." The first condition that the Chinese Communist Party lays down is that Beijing will elect and consecrate her own bishops, and the Vatican cannot interfere into China's internal affairs.

Concerning the matter of "the self-election and self-consecration of bishops," recently there have been concrete examples of concessions being made. But we still have to be very careful with the condition that the Vatican cannot interfere in China's internal affairs.

At this point I would like to remind readers that in Article 36 on religious belief in the "Amended Constitution of the People's Republic of China" passed on March 14, 2004, one line is added to the original constitution, passed on December 4, 1982: "Religious organizations and religious affairs are not subject to foreign domination."

(2.4) The August 11, 2002 edition of Taiwan's *China Times* reported that Cao Siyuan, a student of Mainland China's renowned economist Yu Guangyuan, was arrested on the eve of "June 4," 1989, for urging the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress to call an emergency meeting to discuss the student demonstration. He was incarcerated for almost a year. After his release from prison, he spent a lot of time studying political reform, and made concrete proposals. For example, he strongly advocated privatization, and openly suggested that the "Chinese Communist Party" should be renamed the "Chinese Socialist Party." "Cao

Siyuan thinks that one-party dictatorship by the Communist Party has no mechanism to listen to the voice of the people. Yet it is not at the stage where it can be called republican. So he suggests that at this stage the Communist Party become 'more socialist.' He said that according to Marxism-Leninism, the sole aim of communism is to completely exterminate privatization, which is totally different from China's present situation. Since China is now no longer communist, it should not be called communist," the paper reported.

In the July 2005 issue of *Cheng Ming Monthly*, reporter Luo Bing, in an article entitled "Top-level people argue about a name change for the Chinese Communist Party," pointed out the following:

At recent top-level meetings of both the Central and local party administration, Hu Jintao, Wen Jiabao, Wu Bangguo, and Zeng Qinghong emphasized "three musts" and "two necessities." The "three musts" are: we must remain clear-headed; we must increase awareness of suffering, and we must accept political and economic challenges and encirclement in the international arena. We must be conscious of crises, and be aware of intensified social contradictions, which could lead to an outbreak of social disorder. The "two necessities" are: it is necessary to be closely in line with the direction and policy of the Party Central Committee; and it is necessary that the aim of the exercise of authority be on behalf of the people. Sharp social contradictions must be solved for the good of the broad masses of people.

Hu Jintao criticized the cadres for being confused in their ideology.

At the joint meeting of the Party Committees of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress, the State Council, and the People's Political Consultative Conference, Hu Jintao pointed out that cadres were currently confused in their ideology. He also said that their disputes on the direction and policy of the Party was harmful, and would jeopardize the central government's efforts at establishing an overall comparatively well-off society.

Nine major disputes within the Chinese Communist Party

At a central secretariat meeting, Zeng Qinghong listed nine major

disputes within the Party, which included the following: Some people considered that the ideals of the Communist Party had vanished, and that the prevailing direction and policy had deviated from the Party Constitution. So they proposed amending the Constitution, to change the name of the Communist Party to "People's Party" or "Socialist Party." This would conform better to the social situation, and different strata in society would recognize and support it.

Once the Chinese Communist Party adopts Cao Siyuan's proposal, and the Communist Party becomes a more democratic "People's Party" or "Socialist Party," then the problem of China-Vatican relations can more easily be solved. Even up to the present time, most Chinese all over the world would judge the Chinese Communist Party's ideology and deeds to be too rigid. The Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party considers that its chief objective and work is to safeguard the sovereignty it acquired in 1949, and to achieve this aim, it cannot give up its dictatorship. Recently I had the chance to talk with a veteran professor of a seminary, and I asked him if he thought the normalization of Sino-Vatican relations would benefit the Church on the Mainland. He replied: "If the CPC does not give up the theory and actions of communism, it won't bring any good to the Church."

(2.5) On July 14, Zhu Chenghu, a young lively member of the Chinese Communist Party, pointed out that if the United States intervened in the Mainland-Taiwan conflict, China would attack the United States with a nuclear bomb, and hundreds of American cities would be razed to the ground. This suggestion is very different from the conciliatory attitude that the Chinese Communist Party has continuously displayed in the international arena. This reveals apparent internal contradictions within the Party. It seems that rumors about the Chinese Communist authorities' ambition to compete with the United States for world domination are not without grounds. It is worth paying attention to this, for it is obviously in conflict with Vatican foreign policy.

(2.6) At present, in the big cities in China, vocations to the priesthood and Sisterhood are becoming scarce. However, in villages where there are many old Catholics, vocations are still plentiful. On the one hand, we must thank God for his care, and on the other hand, we must thank the foreign missionaries for all the hard work they have done over a long period of time.

(2.7) We have to evaluate again the tragedy of the “Rites Controversy” of the late Ming early Qing period, and learn lessons from it. We have to seriously learn from the teaching of contemporary popes, especially that of Pope Paul VI and Pope John Paul II on the necessity for the inculturation of the gospel. The incarnation of the Son of God is the theological basis for “the inculturation of the gospel.”

III. Challenges facing the Church in China, which is developing with hope

1. Some positive signs

(1.1) Bible-study groups, formation classes, and workshops are flourishing in many places. Another encouraging phenomenon is the increase in the number of small-scale publications in many dioceses.

(1.2) Both the clergy and the laity long for reconciliation between the underground and the official church, and there are more and more incidents of interaction and mutual help.

(1.3) Activities of solidarity or protests of groups of Catholics are gradually gaining attention and receiving a measure of respect.

(1.4) Vocations of both men and women are decreasing drastically in the big cities, but look optimistic in some regions. We need to pay more attention to the issue of vocations of priests and Sisters. In my opinion, at present and in the future, the promotion of vocations is more important than erecting church buildings.

(1.5) The Holy Spirit has a way of making some cadres of the religious affairs bureau, who supervise Church affairs, serve the Church with zeal.

2. *Negative factors and challenges*

(2.1) The actions and omissions of the “One association, one conference” are disappointing. Its incompetence and unreliability are unsolvable problems.

(2.2) The corruption in the system and in the procedure for the self-election of bishops is getting worse.

(2.3) The standards of different seminaries vary, and some of the priests trained in the seminaries are not of high quality. We often hear about priests not cooperating with one another.

(2.4) In some places the Sisters generally have the respect of parishioners, but they do not have the affirmation and respect of the parish priest. In this situation, it is difficult for the priest and Sisters to establish a good working relationship. Also the Sisters are often treated unfairly in the amount of allowance they receive for living expenses.

(2.5) We often hear about conflicts in some dioceses between the bishop or administrator and the priests. This makes it difficult for the bishop to find a successor.

(2.6) It is a pity that due to a lack of courage, persons-in-charge of dioceses or parishes do not strive for their legal rights with the concerned government departments.

(2.7) In China, the market economy is developing rapidly. Money, materialism, and hedonism are increasing. This creates dangers and temptations for the clergy. We must pay special attention to this.

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August 8, 2005