

AN EARLY SPRING FOR THE CHURCH IN CHINA —
THOUGHTS AFTER THE WORLD YOUTH FESTIVAL

translated by Peter Barry, M.M.

At the very beginning of 1995, and beyond all expectations, someone moved a piece on the chessboard: even though diplomatic relations have not yet been established with the Vatican, Beijing gave permission for some young representatives from the Chinese Church to attend a religious event presided over by the Pope. Does this mean that China wants to join the international Catholic camp? What makes us happy is that contact with these young people gives us hope for the Chinese Catholic Church.

At the beginning of a new year all things are renewed. Spring gives life a new lease and fills everyone with vitality. This is the kind of beautiful circumstance in which the Catholic Church of China finds itself today. For over 40 years the mainland church has not participated in any international church activity, especially one presided over by the Pope

himself. The attendance of the mainland youth at this event is nothing short of a breakthrough. It carried the breath of springtime to the World Youth Festival: the persecuted Chinese Catholic Church had not been destroyed; it had only been in hibernation for a long time, and is now gradually waking up.

The Chinese representatives were all quite young, but their faith was fervent and deep. The dispute arising from the “flag question,” occasioned neither complaints nor discouragement from these young believers. One young Catholic woman said: “We completely rely on the Blessed Mother; God will fulfill our hopes.” One Chinese priest stated simply and sincerely: “We will definitely concelebrate with the Pope from whom we have been separated for nearly half a century! The clergy and Catholics want us to bring some news about the Holy Father back to China. It is a matter of our traditional faith.”

Along with the young people from other countries, the young Chinese shouted and sang and shed tears of joy when they saw the Pope. How great was the hurt they felt when, at the closing Mass, because of the flag incident, they were forced to leave Rizal Park. One Filipino seminarian remarked, “At that time many other young people shed tears of sadness along with the Chinese representatives.” Yes, how bitter and heavy was the cross they were made to bear! Can we not say

that their joys and sorrows became the joys and sorrows of the universal church? Since everyone belongs to the one Body, are we not all brothers and sisters in the Lord?

Compared with others, the young people from China seemed especially quiet and introverted. They do not have the carefree attitude that the young people from Hong Kong and Macao have. One boy from China frankly admitted, "I really admire their joyful life of faith, which is free of worries and cares." Obviously, religious faith on the mainland is subject to limitations and pressures. The young Chinese officials puzzled over doing the correct thing; they gave the impression that their concerns were many, that they were burdened and that they had to report to or ask instructions from China for everything.

The participation of the Chinese delegation in this event is clearly related to the political climate in Beijing; it is connected to Beijing's consistent practice of being either relaxed or restrictive in its religious policy. We can see the relaxed aspect from the following points: 1) By the end of 1994 over 100 priests, Sisters and lay Catholics have been sent abroad for further study, and more and more church leaders are visiting foreign countries. 2) Priests and Sisters from overseas are not only serving in universities and government offices, but also now even in church institutions. 3) Previously, Catholics were strictly prevented from publicly

praying for the Pope; they are now permitted to pray for him openly. They even acknowledge papal primacy. Last year permission was given for 15 priests on a visit to Belgium to concelebrate with the Pope. And now over 20 young Chinese Catholic delegates attended the World Youth Festival. Do not all these things indicate a relaxation in Beijing's religious policy?

On the other hand, just as the tail end of winter's cold has turned into the coolness of spring, ordinary and enthusiastic Catholics are still subject to violent attacks. For example, due to their religious faith, some people are forbidden to enter China or are expelled from it. This shows that the Beijing government still exercises control over the Church. What is most ironic is that for several decades the mainland Church has been clamoring about "Three-Self," and for this they kicked the foreigners out. But the Church has not established a real "Three-Self." Rather, the Communist Party's control over the church is much more restrictive than that of the previous *foreign church*. That the Chinese Catholic delegates were forced to leave the venue of the World Youth Festival is a glaring example of this. According to the reports, among the 24 Chinese delegates there were a number of government officials and Patriotic Association members; they had no choice but to obey the command to leave the venue. This gives credence to the old saying: *the spring cold has*

caused the cow to freeze to death.

Although the line between the warm wind of early spring and the tail end of winter's cold has not yet been clearly drawn, still some faint traces are appearing. Hopes for the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and the Vatican still have a bright future because the Holy Father will not forget the several million Chinese Catholics, and Beijing will not abandon the foreign relations network of the international Catholic Church. Actually, if only Beijing will continue on the road of openness and reform, then spring for the Chinese Catholic Church cannot be far behind.

熱情的青年爭著
接近他們的偶
像——教宗若望保
祿二世。

The crowd cheers
as the
Pope-mobile
passes.

