

The Mystery Behind the Chinese Response to the Pope's Address

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On the feast of St. Francis Xavier, December 3, 1996, in commemoration of the 70th anniversary of the ordination of the first group of Chinese bishops and the 50th anniversary of the establishment of the Chinese hierarchy, the Holy Father, Pope John Paul II gave a speech in which he made a positive appraisal of the Chinese Church and issued an appeal to the Chinese government. This essay will discuss only the Pope's appeal.

The Holy Father said: "The civil authorities of the People's Republic of China should rest assured: a disciple of Christ can live his faith in any political system...I repeat to the governing authorities...that they should have no fear of God or of his Church."¹

On 5 December, Reuters quoted an official of the Foreign Ministry who was responding to the Pope's appeal. He said: "The Vatican must stop interfering in China's internal affairs, including interfering in internal religious affairs...If the Vatican wishes to improve its relations with China it must first break its diplomatic relations with Taiwan and recognize the People's Republic as the only legal government of China."

From Beijing's response we can understand where relations between the Catholic Church and China stand at the present time. The Holy Father desires to improve relations with China so that the Chinese Catholic Church can exist in a more favorable political environment. But the Chinese government, displaying a negative attitude, turned a deaf ear to the Pope's

appeal. China requires that the Vatican refrain from trying to supervise the affairs of the Chinese Church. From a consideration of recent developments in China's internal politics and diplomatic relations, I will try to unravel the mystery behind this kind of response.

Beijing Experiences an Ideological Tightening Up

The Reuters news item of 5 December also cited the response of Bishop Zong Huaide, president of the Chinese Catholic Bishops Conference. Bishop Zong said that the words of the Pope spring from a lack of knowledge of the real situation in China. Within China's borders every believer enjoys a normal and happy religious life, he said. At the same time, in different places both the Director of the Religious Affairs Bureau of the State Council and the Director of Party Central's United Front Department declared that Christianity (including Catholicism) is an international hostile force which is an instrument for "westernizing" or "splitting" China.² Two months ago the 6th plenum of the 14th Central Committee issued the document: "Strengthen the Building Up of a Socialist Spiritual Civilization." Its decisions are being vigorously implemented in China today. This appears to signal that official Chinese ideology is tightening up. Because the Chinese young people have a crisis of faith (lack of belief in the Party), Party elder Chen Yun, in 1990, expressed concern about "religious infiltration." He warned Jiang Zemin to "Really grasp this important matter...and not let it become a new factor for instability."³ From the words of this important person in Party Central we can easily perceive a desire to restrain the present trend of religious growth. This is because young people are seeking another ideology to fill the void they feel in their hearts, and they find this in religion. At a time when Party Central is wary of religion, the Holy Father appealed for an improvement

in Sino-Vatican relations so that the Chinese Catholic Church may develop normally. This is really at loggerheads with the trends and political outlook of the official ideology. No wonder Beijing responded in a negative way.

When the country is prosperous and the people are at peace, then religion and politics can be in harmony with one another.

However, just at this time South Africa announced it would sever diplomatic ties with Taiwan next year, and establish relations with Beijing. Because South Africa and the Vatican are the two most important countries which have diplomatic relations with Taiwan, Taiwan's Foreign Minister, Zhang Xiaoyan, immediately flew to South Africa to try to salvage the situation. It would greatly please Beijing if the Vatican would break diplomatic relations with Taiwan at this time in order to further harm Taiwan's foreign relations and to inflict heavy damage on Taiwan's efforts in the international arena. Therefore in response to the Pope's appeal, Beijing repeated the old refrain that the Vatican must break diplomatic relations with Taiwan, and in exchange held out the possibility of a normalization of relations between China and the Vatican.

Even if Sino-Vatican relations were normalized at this time (I do not believe that this will happen in the near future), China has made clear from the outset that she desires to guide religion to adapt to socialist society. A whole series of rules and regulations have already been drawn up so that the government can use the legal system to supervise religion, and so that religious activity will only take place within the scope determined by the Party. Religious activity must conform to the purpose of the Party's religious work, which is to destroy religion's influence in society.⁴ Is this the way the Pope would like to see the Chinese Catholic Church develop? For the Chinese Catholic Church to experience a normal life in a tolerant political atmosphere, the initiative is in China's hands.

Church people can only re-double their efforts at prayer, praying that the nation will be prosperous and peaceful. When this happens, then the Chinese leaders might deal with religion from a more tolerant ideology, so that Catholicism and socialism can mutually respect and live at peace with each other. This is a long-term strategy. Fifteen years of mutual appeals in the diplomatic arena have proven to have had no effect.

Endnotes

¹ "A Letter of Pope John Paul II to the Church in China," *Kung Kao Po*, December 6, 1996.

² Ye Xiaowen, "The Present State of the Religious Question in Our Country," *Selected Reports From Party Central's Party School*, Series 101, 1996, No. 5, pp. 9-23. "Wang Yaoguo Requires Religion to Adapt to Socialist Society," *Xin Bao*, August 12, 1996.

³ Chen Yun, "Letter About Attaching a High Level of Importance to the Problem of Religious Infiltration," *Selections from Documents Concerning Religious Work in the New Situation*, Religious Cultural Press, p. 117.

⁴ Cf. footnote 2, the essay by Ye Xiaowen.

