

## ***Bruno Forte lectures in China on “Christianity and Western Cultures”***

*Father Bruno Forte is a professor of Dogmatic Theology at the Pontifical Theological Faculty in Naples, Italy. Sponsored by the Italian Institute for Philosophical Studies, he visited China in March 1997, speaking at the Academy of Social Sciences and at prestigious universities in Beijing, Shanghai and Hangzhou, giving a total of ten lectures on “Christianity and Western Cultures”. His audience included undergraduate and graduate students, professors, and cadres from the Religious Affairs Bureau.*

*The following is a summary of Father Forte’s longer report, published in *Avvenire* and *Jesus* (7 May 1997). and translated by Gianni Criveller.*

Father Forte made the following points during the course of his lectures:

- The failure of both left wing and right wing ideologies in the West, distinguishing faith from ideology.
- The Catholic Church now acknowledges that linking the spread of the Gospel to the interests of colonial powers in an earlier period was a mistake.
- However, the Church was justified in resisting the militant atheism of Soviet Communism earlier in this century, but now no government in Eastern Europe, the former Soviet Union, or in China for that matter, is trying to abolish religion.
- Communion with the Pope is an element of the faith which Catholics cannot renounce, yet this does not interfere with the social and political life of a nation. Catholics throughout the world are loyal and responsible citizens, but no government can ask them to act contrary to their consciences in matters of morality and human rights.
- It should not be too difficult for the Holy See and China to reach an agreement on pastoral freedom for the Church.

To these various remarks his Chinese audience responded that:

- The government not only tolerates religion, but also recognizes the positive contribution believers can make towards building a better society.

- There are many areas of common concern where the differences between religion and socialism, belief and atheism can be set aside.
- All religions have freedom to manage their internal affairs, but they must follow official policy on social and political issues.
- Sino-Vatican ties, linked to the question of Taiwan, is not an easy problem to solve.

There was some good give and take during the question and answer periods. His visit succeeded as a dialog with nonbelievers, and with intellectuals (“Cultural Christians”) who are sympathetic to Christianity, but who are not in any hurry to join a church.

Professor Forte mentioned that:

- More work remains to be done by both sides on overcoming misunderstanding, prejudice and fear.
- There is the wider problem of inculturating the Catholic faith in China through ecumenical and interreligious dialog within the rich cultural heritage of China, a nation of different religions and ethnic groups.
- China has changed drastically under the reform and opening to the outside world begun during the era of Deng Xiaoping. This has meant both economic progress with growing disparities of wealth, as well as a crisis of identity and ideology.
- Consumerism and a spiritual vacuum plague China today.
- Cultural exchanges such as this one are helpful as a preliminary step addressing these problems and in building a common future.

Prof. Forte hopes that there will be more and better interchange in the future. □