

Sino-Vatican Relations 1980 -1997

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Few topics are as important to Catholics in China and to Chinese Catholics throughout the world as the normalization of Sino-Vatican relations. It is the general feeling that the Church in China has for far too long been divided. The longer this division lasts, the deeper the wounds will be and the longer and more difficult will the healing process be. Many ask, "Has enough been done by Rome and China to solve this problem?"



Have enough efforts been made to help bring about a reconciliation within the Church in China and its reunification with the Vatican and the Universal Church?"

Naturally, we Hong Kong Catholics are deeply concerned about this situation as we ponder our future vis-à-vis the new Hong Kong Special Administration Region. This new SAR government will inevitably be strongly influenced by China. A divided church in China is also a problem for Hong Kong. If the division among Catholics in China can be healed, we in Hong Kong, who are now a part of the Church in China, will be the beneficiaries. Reconciliation is to everyone's advantage.

Overtures of friendship and misunderstandings

Who can say whether enough has been done or whether what has been done might not have been done better? Opinions are plentiful. Some even accuse the Vatican of unduly favouring the so-called underground church whose hallmark has always been allegiance to the Pope and a desire to be part of the Universal Church. However, Rome, as well as members of the Universal Church outside China, has made many overtures of friendship toward the government approved

church. Such gestures have helped bring certain members of this group back to communion with Rome and the Universal Church.

Some of the members of the underground who have always resolutely professed their loyalty to Rome have reacted badly to these outside gestures of friendship. Some were so incensed and fearful that Rome might recognize the official church they even threatened that should this happen, they would not only withdraw allegiance to Rome, but even refuse reconciliation with their brother and sister Catholics in China. This indicates the extent of the bitterness, the depth of the division and misunderstanding among China's Catholics.

The term 'legitimate' so often used in reference to bishops and ordinations has a dual connotation. As far as Rome and the non government-approved part of the Church are concerned, 'legitimate' means those in communion with Rome. As far as the government is concerned, it means those who are cooperating with the government-sponsored Church organizations. What is legitimate on the one hand is not legitimate on the other. This awful dilemma is the result of the government's insistence on controlling the Church through the structures it has set up.

Initiatives towards reconciliation

There are claims that negotiations have been going on between the Vatican and the Chinese government behind closed doors. It would seem, however, that nearly every initiative towards better relations has come from the Vatican. I am not aware of any initiative coming from the Chinese government or the Catholic Patriotic Association that suggests that past differences and problems should be forgotten and forgiven so that a new era of friendship and cooperation can begin. This, however, is exactly what Pope John Paul II was proposing in Manila in 1991. Although China had for the first time sent a representation to Manila, it was not yet ready to reciprocate with good-will to the papal overtures. In fact China's statements have been a reaction to Rome's appeals. This reaction has always been the same: "The running of the Chinese Church is an internal affair and no outside interference will be tolerated."

Papal reactions to the China situation

The official statements of earlier Popes regarding China were all based on their attitude towards world communism. Their strong statements condemning Chinese leaders for their violent revolution and atheism were a source of deep irritation. Earlier Popes were not privy to detailed information. The news they did get about the setting up of the CCPA, choosing bishops without consulting Rome and the suffering of the people for the faith drove them to react vehemently and with condemnation. Such were Pius XII's encyclicals that blamed the government and the CCPA for dividing and persecuting Catholics. His "Cupimus Imprimis" in 1952, "Ad Sinarum Gentem" in 1954 and "Ad Apostolorum Principis" in 1958 all left little room or hope for reconciliation. It was natural for the Chinese government to react just as vehemently in their criticism of the Vatican. Seldom, if ever, have papal encyclicals used such provocative language. Pius XII speaks of "the deceit and cunning endeavor." He writes, "Evil has run its course and is approaching its final stages of harm." CCPA bishops, he says "have no jurisdiction to function. Although they may have valid ecclesiastical orders, they are acting illicitly, criminally and sacrilegiously. By scriptural analogy they are also thieves and robbers." This kind of language is hardly calculated to win friends in government or among official Church leadership.

Change in attitude toward dialogue

After Pope John XXIII spoke of the Chinese Church as being in schism, he was counseled by a large group of former missionary bishops in China and by Chinese living in Rome to refrain from using that expression. They assured him that this was not the true situation. But because this word 'schism' "burned his lips" he slipped into using it again at least twice in later encyclicals. Like his predecessor he continued to criticize CCPA leaders for spreading fear, disorder and scandal among believers by following the commands of men rather than those of God. He also spoke of persecution, but his words were much less strident than those of Pius XII. John XXIII's, *China and the Catholic Church* (1961) signals a clear turning point in the Vatican's attitude towards the Catholic Church in China. The Pope wrote,

“Harsh words are a thing of the past; from now on only understanding and prayer.” Unfortunately, China did not reciprocate in kind and made no move to promote better relations.

Because of his greater contact with former China missionaries and Chinese living outside of mainland China, Pope Paul VI was able to go beyond John XXIII. Since he had the opportunity to see the China situation more clearly, he moved still further away from condemnation. He also won many friends in China especially by supporting China’s entrance into the United Nations. In 1971 after he was elected Pope, he wrote in *To Chinese Leaders*, “To belong to the Church does not weaken the love of the Chinese Catholics for the country; on the contrary, it reinforces it and makes the Catholics participate in the spirit of responsibility to the security, the peace and progress of the country. The Church does not want to dominate, but to serve.” He acknowledged that atheistic systems, especially communism, must be condemned, but he strove to understand the motivation behind the leaders of those systems, often seeing their motives as praiseworthy.

In his 1965 *Catholics in Modern Catacombs*, he wrote that he intended to continue the policy of John XXIII of refraining from harsh condemnations, not because they were not deserved, but rather out of fear that they could antagonize the persecutors and make them even more violent. He wanted to spare Catholics any further suffering. He was ready for forgiveness and dialogue at the faintest sign of reciprocal good-will. Unfortunately, the hoped-for good-will was not forthcoming, and there was no improvement in relations.

John Paul II seeks reconciliation

John Paul II realized that from Pius XII to Paul VI, the official voice of Rome had gradually become less condemnatory and more conciliatory. John Paul II lived under communism for many years in Poland and crossed swords with the government many times. He has made it clear that he does not like communism as a system of governing people. He is also credited with having used his energy and influence to help bring about the demise of Communism in Poland and Eastern Europe. Yet, he has never used the strident rhetoric of his predecessors. From the beginning he advocated the carrot rather than

the stick approach to China. He saw the stick approach as possibly exacerbating an already bad situation. And so on 19 August 1979, in *Prayers for the Great Chinese People*, his first public statement regarding China, he expressed a desire to renew direct contact with China.

He said that China was constantly in his prayers and that he sensed a new respect with regard to religion on the part of the leaders. This to him was a hopeful sign. He also hoped for developments that would lead to full religious freedom in China. He also insisted that only the external contact with China had been broken; and that all Chinese were in his heart and prayers.

Despite such conciliatory language, China continued to insist that the running of the Chinese Church had nothing to do with the Pope. The people could admire him, pray for him and consider that they had a spiritual tie with him, but nothing more. The leaders were quite firm that they would continue to choose the bishops and make all decisions regarding Church affairs. They made it clear that it was not his business to interfere. It is interesting to note that Chinese Catholics may pray for the Pope and for their leaders, but for the Pope to suggest that others join him in praying for the great Chinese people and their leaders, constitutes interference. Does the Pope need prayers, but not China? The same response was forthcoming when the Pope's *Letter to Bishops of the World* inviting them to pray for the Church in China, 6 January 1982, was made public. Catholics inside China and around the world saw this letter as a very positive expression of goodwill. The Holy Father's kind words of praise for the 'great nation of China' were seen as an initiative suitable to call forth a similar positive and conciliatory response from the Chinese government. Again his words were interpreted as unwarranted interference. As a result nothing constructive happened.

The Pope remained undaunted. He continued to look for opportunities to open a dialogue. He often said that the Chinese nation and the Catholic Church in China were constantly in his thoughts and prayers. He sought every possible occasion to say something conciliatory, some words of praise, some opening for the Chinese government to reach out and accept without losing face. Their reaction has always remained the same. They interpret all his efforts as interference and as a desire to gain a foothold in China.

All the statements of John Paul II regarding China express great warmth and heart-felt love for all Chinese and a sincere desire to help the Church community there become both better citizens and better Catholics. Most would accept this as a praiseworthy approach for any Pope to make.

John Paul II made several attempts to break the impasse. There was his first public statement about China in 1979. This was followed with his talk in Manila in 1981 urging all to forget the past, and try to understand that Catholics in China were forced to make very difficult decisions vis-à-vis the government and the CCPA leadership. He even questioned whether we would have been able to make better decisions under the same circumstances. This approach reveals a deepening understanding of the true nature of the Church situation in China and a greater sensitivity on Rome's part.

Hope for reconciliation

In receiving the bishops of Taiwan during their four 'ad limina' visits to Rome, the Pope indicated that he saw them playing a bridge role between China and the outside world. Gradually, however, he came to realize that the problem was an internal one and as such it could be solved only by those directly involved in it. More recently he has said that only when the open and underground portions of the Church stop blaming each other and both turn to Christ for an answer, will they come to a reconciliation. Both must ask Christ what he wants of them, and then turn to each other to ask for forgiveness and give the assurance that they want to be reunited. If all the elements in the Church want to be reunited, the government cannot stop this from happening. Only when the church in China speaks as one united Church can it insist on its right to be a part of the Universal Church.

The Chinese Communist government could easily fault the earlier Popes for their official documents and treatment of China as a result of their lack of knowledge of the actual China situation. They would be hard put, however, to find anything to attack in the conciliatory and kind words of John Paul II. Instead they attack his sincerity, insisting that his actions regarding China do not measure up to what he says. It is true that he seeks ways to have some pastoral contact with his flock inside China just as he does with Catholics in every part

of the world. In his eagerness to understand the situation even better, he does welcome clergy and laity from China wherever he is during his worldwide pastoral visits. By hindsight it is easy to see why Chinese officials considered the Pope's unilateral appointment of Bishop Deng Yiming as archbishop of Guangzhou an unwarranted interference. Many would say that it could have been handled with more sensitivity considering the nature of the relations. From the Chinese viewpoint it was a provocative action. Under normal circumstances it would have been considered simply ordinary.

More recently with the eyes of the world riveted on the historic handover of Hong Kong to China, people everywhere wondered what the future might hold for Hong Kong's six million people. The Pope added his voice to that of others who say that they will be watching closely to see how China will live up to its promises. All world leaders, including the Pope and every caring citizen of the world, have a right to expect China to be faithful to its word.

Conclusion

What is preventing a breakthrough in Sino-Vatican relations? Do China and the Vatican really want to reestablish relations or does each side want diplomatic relations only on its own terms? Rome has already indicated that it is open for the question of Taiwan. This has always been China's *sine qua non*. Diplomatic relations with the Nationalist government have already been greatly downgraded. Some cooperation and concessions could certainly be worked out on the second Chinese prerequisite; namely, nominating of bishops. Concessions along these lines have already been made in other countries. But on this point China has offered no concessions whatsoever. It is becoming clear, therefore, that any improvement in Sino-Vatican relations rests solely on and must wait for the reunification of the Church in China. Only when the Church speaks with one unified voice to the government will there be any hope for reunification with the Pope and the Universal Church. Such a movement towards reconciliation would surely redound to the benefit of the Catholics in China and to the government since free Catholics would show appreciation for their new found religious freedom. Their joy would no doubt spill over into even greater service to their country. Such a change would also bring great

joy to the Universal Church that has for so long prayed and hoped for unity in the church in China and unity with their brothers and sisters throughout the world. It has become clearer that just as the Church outside China has never abandoned her brothers and sisters there, so our Chinese brothers and sisters have not abandoned us. Certain outsiders may think some members of the church in China have strayed from the universal church. This may be so for some but for the large majority, whatever they have done, is due to the circumstances under which they have had to live out their faith. □

