

Editorial

“We come as friends, not as critics.” This is the message the three delegates, appointed by President Clinton to look into the condition of religious freedom in Mainland China, sought to give.

The invitation for this visit came from none other than Jiang Zemin himself during his trip to the United States in October 1997. Obviously, the Chinese leader had some ulterior motive. No doubt, he was hoping that the United Nations Human Rights Commission at its annual meeting in Geneva would forget about China’s human rights record this year. Furthermore, such a visit, carefully orchestrated, could help allay the fears of many Americans and the members of the United States Congress about the condition of religious freedom in China.

The members of the fact-finding mission were Rabbi Arthur Schneier, President of the Appeal of Conscience Foundation. Rabbi Schneier is no stranger to religious persecution; he is a holocaust survivor.

The second member, Rev. Don Argue, is the President of National Association of Evangelicals, a group usually at odds with the Chinese government, as they tend to operate outside government parameters. This makes them easy targets for harassment.

The third member of the group was Archbishop Theodore McCarrick of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Newark, New Jersey. Mindful of the 10,000,000 Catholics in Mainland China, half of whom are members of the unofficial church, the archbishop hoped that his visit could open up a dialogue between the government and the underground church.

The itinerary organized for the fact finding group was extensive, varied and controlled. The delegation arrived in Beijing on February 8. From then until their arrival in Hong Kong on February 28, the group followed a full schedule that included visits to Beijing, Shanghai, Nanjing, Chengdu and Tibet. In every place they met with local political and religious figures.

In Beijing, they met with the President of the Patriotic Association, Bishop Michael Fu Tieshan, Bishop Tu Shuhua, vice-president, and Anthony Liu Bainian, secretary general.

Bishop Fu stressed that the Catholic Church must adapt to the present Chinese culture and local realities. He added that the resumption of diplomatic relations between China and the Vatican is essential for the ongoing development of the Catholic Church in China. The subject of the un-

derground church, so important to many in the United States and Europe, was only touched upon briefly.

Perhaps the highlight of the visit was a one hour meeting with President Jiang Zemin. This took place on February 12 at Zhongnanhai the Chinese Government's headquarters in Beijing. A smiling Jiang greeting the delegation with warm handshakes seemed in sharp contrast to the Party leader whose track record regarding religion leaves something to be desired. Jiang pointed out that although their two countries differ on some issues, (including religious freedom), they also share many common interests. Both Jiang and the delegation agreed that the best way to narrow the gap existing between the United States and China is to increase bilateral exchanges, and view differences with respect and understanding.

The group was most intent on getting some information on the status of unofficial and unregistered places of religious activity, but visiting underground church leaders in either the Catholic church or house churches was not included in the schedule of events.

The American delegation did meet, however with members of the State Council and the United Front. When they met with Ye Xiaowen, the director of the Religious Affairs Bureau, Archbishop McCarrick presented him with a list of bishops, priests and lay Catholics imprisoned or who, because of their religious beliefs, are unable to carry out their work. The delegation hoped to secure information on the condition of those listed and the charges against them.

The delegates also met with leaders of religious circles: Buddhists, Protestants, Muslims and Daoists. All were members of the religious associations sanctioned by the government.

Two of the delegates, Archbishop McCarrick and Rabbi Schneier visited a prison in the Tibet Autonomous Region.

Many observers were quick to point out that the visit was so organized and controlled as to preclude the possibility of forming a realistic and informed opinion of the situation of religious freedom in China. The delegation did not visit any underground church, bishops, priests or laity; they did not attend any house church activities. There was no time to visit seminaries in Beijing, nor to meet with Tibetan Buddhist dissidents, and Muslim separatists.

The members of the delegation were aware that the Chinese government could be using the visit to serve its own ends. However, they felt, as we do, that any event that opens up the possibility of dialogue and friendly relations is positive. Whatever helps to open people up to each other, to increase understanding and mutual respect is worthwhile. (BAM)