

Editorial

Numerous articles have appeared in the media recently about the Pope not being able to come to Hong Kong and the situation between the Holy See and the Chinese Government. These may have been a source of confusion and even apprehension for many Catholics. They may have wondered whether their Catholic Church is nothing more than a political entity, playing a diplomatic game.

I would like to offer some elements that will, hopefully, help clarify the matter, and put it in its proper perspective.

First of all I must say that we have witnessed some shoddy journalism on this issue recently. When we are made to read that “The Vatican is enthusiastic because right now the Pope is in very ill health,” we cannot believe that the writer is serious. One would be hard pressed indeed to find anyone enthusiastic about the Pope’s illness. Neither can we believe that anyone actually said this. This little quote tells us a lot about the seriousness, reliability, and accuracy with which the reporter treated the matter.

Furthermore, the fact that the Pope is not coming to Hong Kong is hardly news. The difficulty of a papal trip to Hong Kong had already been reported by the local Catholic media (*Sunday Examiner* and *Asia Focus*) in early July.

Asia Focus (of *UCANEWS*) quoted a spokesperson of the Chinese Foreign Ministry who spoke about the matter on July 4th. Why was the issue now blown out of all proportion?

As loyal Catholics, we regret that the Pope cannot come to Hong Kong. We also believe that the Holy See’s recognition of the Republic of China in Taiwan is not the real issue here. The diplomatic presence of the Holy See in Taipei has been downgraded to the minimum level since 1971, precisely in order to favor dialogue with the Beijing government. Relevant Chinese authorities have for many years been informed that the Holy See is ready to switch its recognition as soon as Beijing expresses the will to engage in meaningful dialogue. The diplomatic ball is entirely in the Chinese court.

We might recall that the recognition of Taiwan was never a stumbling block to Chinese diplomacy. Chinese leaders like Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai warmly received President Richard Nixon in

1972, when the USA had full diplomatic relationships with Taiwan. Furthermore, at the time, because of the Korean and Vietnam wars, USA-China relations were at a very low ebb. Only in 1979 did the USA, thanks in part to that trip, switch its relations from Taipei to Beijing.

It is obvious that the mission of the Pope in the world cannot be reduced only to the diplomatic activity of the Holy See. Almost all countries in the world are eager to receive the Pope even when they don't have diplomatic relations. The Holy See and the USA established relationships only in 1984. But the Pope visited that country much earlier. Everyone understands that the mission of the Pope is religious. In fact the diplomatic activity of the Holy See is only in function of peace and of the pastoral mission of the Church. The pastoral mission of the Church comes before any diplomatic success. This is why the Church cannot thus far, accept the diplomatic pre-conditions imposed by Beijing. For the Church, diplomacy is a tool to promote its freedom and legitimate rights. When the Chinese government is ready to grant the Church those long-awaited rights, the diplomatic dispute will be over.

Let us point out here that the Church already enjoys these rights in most of the world, to the benefit not only of the Catholic community, but also of all society. The Church cannot be dealt with through state to state diplomacy. Every attentive observer can understand the simple fact that the Vatican State is subsidiary to the life and freedom of the Church. It is not of its essence. The Church, founded by Christ, is 2000 years old and it will last until the end of time. Vatican State is an earthly institution, 'only' 70 years old—although succeeding to another entity—without promise of eternity.

It is also frivolous to reduce the issue of the papal visit to the insatiable desire of an old and ill Pope to "preach on Chinese soil" before he dies. Many will remember Pope Paul VI's visit to Hong Kong, in 1971. At that time there were no diplomatic relations with the United Kingdom and the local government was very cooperative. During that visit, the Pope delivered a moving message to the Chinese people. It is ridiculous and somewhat offensive to say that the Pope is interested in China because Christianity is decreasing in the West. The Church is open to all people in the world, to carry out the great missionary commission of Jesus Christ. The first historically recorded arrival of Christian missionaries in China was 1400 years ago. It would be much more correct to say that the Pope,

together with the universal Church, would like to express to the Chinese Catholic community his deep gratitude and appreciation for its long-standing witness of faith amidst persecutions and sufferings.

The presence of the mission of study in Hong Kong is known to the Church, and is a sign of the Pope's solicitude. The study mission began in 1989, when Hong Kong was under British rule. It was established when Deng Xiaoping was opening up the People's Republic of China, and that was a very promising time for the Church in China. Authorities were informed and the study mission was allowed to continue after the return of Hong Kong to China. It is useless then to seek the presence of this mission among other diplomatic missions, and then to speculate about its "mysterious and secret" nature. As the statement of the Holy See said, "it is a discreet presence that respects the situation." This presence is an act of concern, interest and friendship on the part of the Pope, for the current unresolved state of relations between the Holy See and China. And it is also a sign of hope, the hope that after 50 years of unnecessary division, the whole issue can be finally resolved for the benefit of all.

