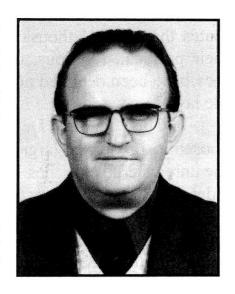
By Jeroom Heyndrickx

Chinese reporter asked me to write down my opinion on "Dialogue with China after Epiphany 2000." I hesitated at first because I have already expressed my opinion, as a foreigner (Cf. Jiaoyou Shenghuo, January 2000). What seems to me more important at the moment is dialogue among Chinese Catholics, priests, and bishops. However, I decided to respond in writing to the reporter's request. I write as a friend



and a brother who, though a foreigner, feels very much part of the Chinese Church. I do not intend to impose my views. Exchanging views is healthy, and to dialogue about how to build a local Church makes us grow in our faith.

Our "sense of Church" must help us appreciate the Pope's concern

We along with the Chinese Catholics from Taiwan, Hong Kong, the Diaspora as well as those on the Mainland, the underground, as well as the open church, the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association leaders as well as the Catholic laity, all need to dialogue together in order to understand more clearly the complex situation of the Church in China strictly from the point of view of faith in Christ. Christ united all Chinese Catholics in one faith through baptism. He is the only one who can reunite them again. His Spirit is stronger than all the political prejudices that have caused divisions in the past.

We can look at the efforts of the Holy See to normalize diplomatic relations from a Taiwan political and patriotic point of view, but I hope that as Catholics we can go beyond that. A sense of Church should help us to appreciate that the Pope has made efforts to normalize the life of faith of Catholics in China for the last 20 years. By sense of Church, I mean the ability of Catholics to care not only for their own needs or the needs of their own local Church but also for the needs of the whole Church. After what happened in Beijing on January 6, the discussion on the normalization of Sino-Vatican relations is muted. But are we Catholics in Taiwan concerned about what happens to our Catholic brothers and sisters in Mainland China? If we just continue to do business with China without worrying about the religious issues there, is this not a sign that we Catholics in Taiwan are not concerned enough about the whole Church?

We should think beyond such issues as Taiwan independence, or the Mainland-Taiwan political confrontation, or any other political issue. Taiwan Catholics, who are members of a political party, may have their own party-vision on whether to confront or to dialogue with the PRC. This, however, does not enter into our present reflection. If we as Catholics mix politics with our reflection on how better to understand the situation of the Church in China, I as a foreigner will remain silent. Furthermore, such a discussion will be very complex. I wonder whether we, outside, as well as those inside Mainland China, who so often fail to separate politics and faith, may not be responsible for much of the confusion about the Chinese Church. The Church in China today is experiencing changes unparalleled since the Cultural Revolution, and these are definitely not for the good of the Chinese Catholics. Are we aware of this, and as Catholics, are we concerned?

Modernization in China prompted the Pope to take an attitude of dialogue

The illegal consecration of bishops in Beijing on January 6 should not cause us to change our attitude on dialogue. For the last 18 years we have dialogued with Catholic authorities in Beijing, with bishops as well as lay leaders of the Church. After the Cultural Revolution the PRC itself changed its attitude of confrontation. It became willing to co-operate with capitalistic countries that hold a totally different world view from that of China. That was the beginning of the open door policy of the PRC. China officially reintro-

duced "freedom of religion" in its constitution (1982) and proved it with facts: the opening of churches, of seminaries and Sisters' novitiates, printing of bibles, praying openly for the Pope, patriotic bishops asking and obtaining recognition from the Pope etc. Even though the Church was still very much controlled, no one could deny the changes.

Deng Xiaoping's Four Modernizations were fundamentally changing the economy, agriculture, industry, and scientific research in the PRC. Many were hoping that this policy would also lead to a modernization in the field of religion. Pope John Paul himself took a positive attitude of dialogue and hope as evidenced in his speech to Chinese Catholics over Radio Veritas in Manila in 1981. He said: "Look to the future, not to the past!"

Dialogue is more in line with the gospel than confrontation

We, Church people, therefore, also took on an attitude of dialogue. In 1987, after visiting China several times, I wrote in the Italian weekly, 30 GIORNI: "We are optimistic, yes, but not naive." Optimistic because of the positive changes which I have described above. But not naive, because we observed that the government, assisted by the CCPA, strictly controlled even the internal religious matters of the Church. Chinese bishops were not given full authority over their own dioceses." All this was against the law and the theology of the Church.

In articles for readers abroad I expressed much praise for the progress taking place in the field of religion, but, not being naive, I also added some critical remarks. For this, I was refused a visa and became *persona non grata* for three years. In spite of that, I continue to believe that in our work, we Church people should observe the same policy of dialogue that the Pope observes in leading the Church. This attitude is more in line with the gospel. It is better to remain in communication even if only to express disagreement. Confrontation will not help to normalize religious life in China, nor is it through confrontation that the PRC will be able to impose its own will on the Catholic Church.

After Epiphany 2000 underground and patriotic Catholics should enter into dialogue

I always find it difficult to understand why some Chinese friends continue to speak as if Chinese Catholics can only be considered good Catholics if they oppose the PRC government. This may have been true during the Cultural Revolution when the PRC tried to eliminate the Chinese Catholic Church entirely. But after China introduced its policy of openness, it seemed advisable to try to dialogue also in the field of religion. We all know that many underground Catholics suffered much in the past. We fully understand why they find it difficult to follow our logic of dialogue with communist authorities. They know much better than we do the situation of total control over religion that has continued to exist.

I regret, however, that they are not able to distinguish between the bishops, priests, and Catholic laity of the official (patriotic) church community on the one side, whose attitude of faithfulness to Rome has been very clear ever since the eighties, and on the other side the leaders of the CCPA whose faithfulness to Rome is ambiguous. Friends of the underground community keep identifying the official Church community with the CCPA. These are two different realities, two different groups of people. I clarified that distinction for myself and expressed it in an article in 1986. The events of Epiphany 2000, in Beijing recently revealed to the Universal Church and to the underground Chinese Catholics that priests and Catholics of the official Church community are united with the Pope and refuse to be identified with policy of the CCPA. This makes the Universal Church happy and should also bring the unofficial (underground) Catholics closer to the official Church Catholics, priests, and bishops. Since both communities now know that they are united in faith, what keeps them from entering into a dialogue that could gradually lead to unity? Politics has disrupted their unity in Jesus Christ, but politics will not and cannot reunite them. It is the privilege of Chinese Catholics themselves to re-establish that unity. This will require a heartfelt decision of faith. Neither government pressure nor obedience to the CCPA can impose unity in faith on Catholics who refuse it.

On Epiphany the PRC opted to cut off dialogue and appoint atheistic cadres to lead the Church

China made progress in modernization only after 1980 when Deng Xiaoping stopped party secretaries from running the economy and replaced them with experts. We started to hope that this simple and evident logic could also be applied to the field of religion, that Church experts and not atheistic cadres would make the decisions related to matters of the Catholic faith. Epiphany 2000 destroyed this hope.

Atheistic communist cadres, with the help of untrained CCPA Catholics, decide who have the qualifications to become bishops, and where they are to be assigned, who can be ordained to the priesthood, who can take religious vows etc. How can a policy that China publicly recognized as a disaster for its economy be less disastrous for religion? Or is this perhaps the hidden agenda?

I have in the past happily informed our brothers and sisters about the positive evolution that has taken place in the Chinese Catholic Church. These friends now look at me with bewilderment when I tell them about recent events happening in the same PRC. They wonder aloud: is China returning to the past? Sadly enough, I feel that it is my duty to tell them now that things are definitely not going the way we all had hoped. More episcopal consecrations are scheduled during the coming months. So-called illegal church buildings are being destroyed. The CCPA is being introduced in areas where it never existed before. Party cadres are travelling to the countryside to put pressure on underground bishops to promise obedience to the CCPA (not just cooperation). Without any consultation with Church leaders, sweeping changes are now being made in the division of dioceses. Dioceses, which just a few years ago were divided unexpectedly, are now suddenly reunited or abolished without any previous notice. The purpose is obviously to eliminate underground bishops and force them under the control of the CCPA.

This follow-up to Epiphany 2000 shocks Chinese Catholics and also the Church outside. The authorities that enforce this negative transformation render a bad service to China's already very vulnerable international religious image. We have reasons to doubt whether the attitude of confrontation carries the approval of all official authorities in China.

Imposing a "One Church Two Systems" policy creates an obstacle for unity with the Universal Church

The Epiphany event in Beijing collapsed the Sino-Vatican bridge which was under construction. Of the 192 countries in the world, 171 have relations with the Vatican and find no problem in respecting the laws of the Church. China is the only country that rejects these laws. It also tries to impose a policy of One Church Two Systems on Rome. Yet China knows very well that this goes against the identity of the Catholic Church and that the Pope can never accept this. If that policy were accepted and implemented, it would create a false impression of unity because it would be an impeded unity, a unity without *communio*. That means a *de facto* separation.

Chinese bishops, prevented at home from directing their own Church, would also remain physically cut off from contact with the Holy See. What then is left of their function as Catholic bishops? After a number of years, what would be the difference between this unity without communio, as imposed by the One Church Two Systems policy, and a real schism?

Are CCPA leaders, who promote this *de facto* separation of the Chinese Catholic Church from Rome, aware of the grave historic error they are committing? This matter calls for open and frank discussion and dialogue by competent people in our Church. These people should strongly object to this policy of the Chinese authorities. By refusing Chinese bishops and their Catholics the freedom that Catholics enjoy in all other countries of the world, Chinese authorities make life very difficult for them. Strictly speaking it means that in China Catholics are not allowed to be Catholics.

To dialogue is not to be naive

In spite of all this, I remain convinced that as Catholics we should continue to keep an attitude of openness to dialogue. What means does the small Catholic community in China have in terms of power and strength if it enters into confrontation? If all Chinese Catholics unite to dialogue and to defend the point of view of their one faith in Christ, they are strong. Of course it is more difficult to disagree openly and frankly and to search for an agreement through dialogue than to break off relations and enter into confrontation. Chinese Catholics who dialogue about these problems take a positive

attitude towards their country and also towards their Church. Their dialogue lays the foundations for a united Catholic Chinese Church.

To remain optimistic but not naive, is part of evangelization in China today. This implies that sometimes we have to take the blows of such disappointing events as Epiphany 2000, when our hopes for dialogue are dashed. But as Catholics we must, in our pastoral and missionary planning, follow the Pope's pilgrimage of dialogue in hope and optimism towards the future. This dialogue could include encouraging experts to study Church and State relations. These efforts could contribute invaluable data to Chinese experts as they try to develop a new law on religion. Joint research is also a way of dialogue.

Although little may be left of our past optimism, we now must show that, as Catholics, we remain willing to dialogue in an attitude of mutual respect, but because we are not naive, we are also very much concerned about the situation of our Catholic brothers and sisters in China today.

