

# *A Turning Point in China-Church Relations: A Commentary*

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*(The commentary below, written by one of the Centre's, researchers at the request of the director of the Centre, also reflects the opinion of Tripod's editorial staff.)*

The event of January 6, 2000, the ordinations of five new bishops in the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception (Nantang) in Beijing, has sparked a reaction from many people concerned with the Church in China. These ordinations took everyone by surprise, especially since they occurred amidst growing speculation of an imminent rapprochement in Sino-Vatican relationships. It is within this context that we wish to comment on a number of articles that have appeared recently, some before and some following the January 6 event. We wish to point out how these ordinations have undermined optimistic views on the present situation of the Church and China, and why we feel they constitute a turning point. We also hope to illustrate ever more clearly our disappointment with the Patriotic leadership in Beijing.

All the articles under discussion are concerned with the unity of the Chinese Church, and the problem of diplomatic relations between the Holy See and the People's Republic of China. In reading the articles, we notice an obvious shift: from the optimism of last Christmas to the disappointment of the Epiphany, from polemics toward the underground Church to puzzlement after the Beijing ordinations.

On December 24, 1999, JCS printed an article, entitled: "The Pope, a friend of China in the year 2000?" The title is somewhat misleading: this Pope, as well as all his predecessors, has never ceased being a friend of the Chinese people and of Chinese Catholics. We must not confuse the "official friendship" toward the regime, with the genuine respect, care, love and friendship that various Popes have expressed toward the Chinese people, Chinese civilization, and Chinese Catholics. A number of people, including myself, were puzzled by the tone of that article: the underground Catholics were, it seemed to me, unfairly pinpointed as the major obstacle to

possible reconciliation, as though they would become an embarrassment on day there is a Sino-Vatican agreement.

### **The role of the underground**

I believe that, by their present stand, the underground communities are playing an important role that the article fails to mention. These communities have not only suffered in the past, but are still suffering at present. They do not oppose the government simply for the sake of opposing it. In fact, they are not political activists. They simply want to live their faith in its total integrity. This is their right and their honor, and we must highly respect them for that. This group has clearly understood that in China there is no freedom of religion. Since Deng Xiaoping's open policy, for pragmatic reasons—not out of genuine conviction—there has been more tolerance toward religion; yet the basic dictatorial oppression of the Chinese regime has not changed. Although the communists have changed some of their tactics, their basic system remains the same as that of the 50s, the 60s and the 70s. There is one thread that unites the various fanatical political campaigns of the 50s, the disastrous Cultural Revolution of the 60s and 70s, and the massacre of Tiananmen of '89. This thread is the unchanged Marxist ideology that identifies the Communist Party with the State, that substitutes the good of the people for the interest of those in power, that substitutes the rule of law by an unaccountable one-party rule, or perhaps one man rule. I do not think we can fault the underground Catholics for refusing to compromise with such a regime on the content of their faith.

### **Freedom of religious belief**

It seems to me that the real meaning behind the 1982 official statement on religion needs clarification. China did not reintroduce “freedom of religion,” but rather repeated the ambiguous formula of “freedom of religious belief” (Art. 36 of the Constitution). We cannot miss the fundamental importance of this distinction. A believer can think what he or she wants, but certainly cannot freely practice his or her belief in freedom, as in most other places in the world. The principle of freedom of religious belief was already stated in Art. 88 of the 1954 constitution. Moreover, Article 36 of the Constitution of April 27, 1982, while it is not a novelty in itself, must be read in parallel with Document 19, that was published a few weeks earlier, on

March 31, 1982. This document, which remains the basic text of the religious policy of the Deng Xiaoping era, does not concede any value to religion. The government has made a concession toward it simply because it realized that it had failed to abolish religion with decrees and force. Religion must be tolerated as part of the present reality, since the priority at the moment is "the common goal of building a modernized powerful Socialist State." It is a given fact, according to Document 19, that religion will naturally disappear when the people are sufficiently educated and understand the secrets of science. It is useless, therefore, to forcibly eliminate religion as was attempted during the Cultural Revolution.

This is hardly a policy of religious freedom; it is rather a policy of political expediency.

### **Schism and the Holy See**

In recent articles which have appeared in the *Sunday Examiner* and the *Tablet*, we read that, "for decades the Holy See thought that the official community was schismatic." The fact is that the Holy See has never made any official pronouncement on this matter. In fact, it has always exercised restraint and moderation in this respect. On one occasion only, as far back as December 15, 1958, Pope John XXIII, while announcing the Council, did mention the word *schism*. It was right after the first illegitimate consecrations of bishops. After the pope had been informed of the special and complex situation in China, and of the personal worthiness of most of the illegitimate bishops, neither Pope John nor any of his successors ever used the word schism again.

What I would like to stress in this matter is the valuable contribution of the underground in preventing the Church in China from becoming schismatic. The permanence of the underground communities, notwithstanding the "tolerant" religious policy, has made the regime reluctantly aware that they did not solve the Catholic issue: the Catholic Church can never become independent. The underground has prompted the members of the official Church to see the necessity of seeking the approval of Rome in order to command the respect of the faithful. Without the underground, I do not believe that communion with the Pope and the Universal Church would be so prominent an item on the agenda of the Catholic Church in China, and such a worry to the authorities. The underground must be credited for having prevented the "official" Church from succumbing to

the pressure of the regime to distance itself from the Pope and Universal Church.

### **Epiphany ordinations, a turning point**

The ordinations in Beijing were a turning point that signal the washout of the official church led by the leaders of the Patriotic Association in Beijing. These “patriotic” leaders lead Catholics nowhere and sell out to the regime. They ruin young priests by putting the consciences of the best of them into confusion and by forcing some of them to accept elections that they would rather reject. This is certainly a sign that the underground had a few points correct. The fact that 130 seminarians of the Beijing National Seminary refused to participate in the state-propaganda-staged ordinations has been construed as a sign of the vitality of the official church. We must add, however, that as a consequence of their action, the seminarians have now been put under tremendous pressure and “political re-education”. Who will come to their defense? Will the leaders of the official Church all concur with the seminarians’ present harassment?

It is important to note that the seminarians of the National Seminary hardly represent the “official church.” They are rather a beautiful section of the Catholic Church in China, simply without any label whatsoever. Most of them come from traditional Catholic families from areas where the influence of the Patriotic Association is limited, or even absent. Some have an underground background. These have a clear knowledge of the political harassment against Church members. They have no illusion about the intentions of the regime.

January 6, 2000, was really a turning point. However, even within that sad circumstance, someone optimistically saw three “friendly gestures” made by the regime towards the Holy See.

### **Taking a closer look at the “friendly gestures”**

The first “friendly gesture” is worth mentioning because it regards the promise of obedience made by the five bishops to the successor of Saint Peter, as spiritual leader. We agree that such a promise was made, but we are not sure that this was the first time such a promise was made during an “official” consecration in China. However, when asked about it, the president of the celebration said

he was not sure if this did happen! This ambiguous answer certainly takes away from the credibility and dignity of this specific act.

The second “friendly gesture” is the mention of the Pope in the prayers of the faithful, and the third is a government spokesman’s declaration. These two “friendly gestures” are hardly friendly. The mention of the Pope during Mass is not a novelty. It has been widely practiced for several years. The declaration of Zhu Bangzao, the spokesman of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, “We want to improve our relations with the Holy See. But we do not want the Holy See to interfere in our internal affairs,” was nothing more than the repetition of the usual standard statement.

I acknowledge that these were not the first illegitimate consecrations in China. However, these constitute a dramatic and unfortunate turning point. I will illustrate the nature of this turning point by mentioning three “unfriendly gestures” that characterized the ceremony.

1. For more than a decade, the consecrations entailed only the consecration of one bishop. These were held in their local dioceses, and with a low profile without media or television. The January 6, 2000 mass ordinations were staged in the Beijing cathedral, and given an unprecedented high profile with authorities, police, television, media and Patriotic Association leaders giving TV interviews.
2. In the last 20 years or so the ordinations were an ecclesial affair, with the joyful participation of thousands of the people of God. This one was a state-staged, cold ceremony, with only a few faithful taking part, but attended by communist cadres, “protected” (from whom?) by a large number of policemen.
3. In the last 15 years or so, the bishop-elect was allowed, after or even before the ordination, to discretely seek papal approval. This time the candidates were hastily brought to Beijing and put under formidable pressure to accept ordination against their own will. It turned out to be an extraordinary anti-pope and anti-Church demonstration, where nothing was religious and everything was political.

The “patriotic” leaders of Beijing claimed that the dioceses needed bishops. Why then were the People of God conspicuously absent, and why did they not rejoice at these consecrations?

The Universal Church could have tolerated or even accepted the “illegitimate” ordinations as carried out before because they were still a genuine ecclesial event taking place under special circum-



stances and constraints. But in Beijing on Epiphany 2000, we witnessed pure confrontation, and a total disregard for the Church's legitimate hopes, theology and regulations. This is why I call it a turning point. It is about time to review our assessment of the "official" Church in China and our dealing with its "patriotic" leaders.

