

Cardinal Etchegaray and Vatican Radio: An Interview

Translated from the Italian by Betty Ann Maheu, MM

Cardinal Etchegaray, president of the Central Committee for the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000, was invited to Beijing to take part in the Italian-Chinese Cultural Association Symposium on "Religion and Peace," September 14-16. After the symposium, the Cardinal was invited to visit the Church in Beijing and Shanghai. The following is an interview given over Vatican Radio upon his return.

Q. Your Eminence, your trip to China seems to have taken an unforeseen turn, and gone beyond the personal nature initially planned.



A. Yes and No. After the symposium on "Religion and Peace," which was the first reason for my trip, and which was a real success due to the atmosphere, and the serious historical and theological exchanges, a completely new opportunity opened up for me. I wanted to take advantage of it, with the grace of God, as a Jubilee messenger of reconciliation among Catholics. Reconciliation is surely the greatest challenge that the Church in China and the Jubilee face, as John Paul II has so often said that this is the favorable time for any apostolic audacity, and all spiritual hopes.

I returned all the more convinced of the necessity and the urgency of this witness to unity, especially at the hour when China is "waking up" to the greatest social changes in its history. You have to see Pudong, the new Shanghai, as I was able to see it with its vice-governor, to have an idea of what China will be

like tomorrow, but whose exhilarating modernization makes us sense, all the more, the need for something more for the soul.

Q. Press agencies reported that the Patriotic Association, which is not recognized by the Holy See, escorted you from Beijing to Shanghai.

A. Before leaving, I had made it clear that nothing I did there was to be interpreted as an approbation of the structures of the official church. I am interested in people above all, but I could meet them only through the omnipresent Association linked to the government.

Seen from afar, certain people are tempted to want to have everything clear-cut as on judgment day. But when directly on the scene, we find that we are still in the evangelical period where we cannot “separate the chaff from the wheat.” This is all the more so in China where basically we are dealing with one church only where a common faith seeks little by little to overcome what up to now, unfortunately separates “underground” from “official.” Time is making their frontiers more and more penetrable, at least in certain regions of this immense country where all is constantly shifting.

Q. Can you mention specifically the religious contacts you made?

A. First of all, I wish to express my deepest regret, and I have made this clear—that I was not authorized to contact the members of the underground church. I also protested strongly against the new waves of arrests of faithful and bishops at the very moment of my being in China.

The most touching moment of my trip was my pilgrimage to Our Lady of Sheshan, on a hill some 40 kilometers from Shanghai. This Marian shrine is loved and frequented by all Catholics indiscriminately especially in the month of May. When I publicly celebrated the first Mass ever celebrated by a Roman cardinal in all of China since the 1949 revolution, I pondered to the point of tears the maternal tenderness of the one who is invoked precisely under the title of Our Mother of Mercy; she can do much for the reconciliation of all her children.

I had a long visit at the National Seminary in Beijing and the one in Shanghai. Each seminary has around 120 philosophy and theology students. I had an enthusiastic dialogue with these young people avid for the Gospel and passionately devoted to the Pope. These will be the moving force of a united church at the service of the Chinese people in the future. The big problem is formation and formators. Those responsible are well aware of this as Jin Luxian, the official bishop of Shanghai who spent 18 years in prison and nine in a work camp, told me. In listening to these young people, I thought a great deal about the seminarians in the underground who cannot benefit from the same avenues of formation.

Q. You stress very much the role of the Pope in the life of the Church in China.

A. I say this quite simply and with joy for it is here, without a doubt, more than anywhere else, that you have the leaven and the guarantee of a truly Catholic faith. This makes the divisions that arise from tragic and complex historical contingencies all the more intolerable. The fact that I acknowledge the fidelity of Catholics to the Pope does not in any way diminish my recognition of the heroic fidelity of the silent church. Both live unhappily in their flesh and spirit, but in different ways. The relation between faith and history are always fragile and must always be enlivened by truth. The history of the Church, throughout the ages, with its shadows and its lights, is illustrated by the words of Jesus, "Render to God what is God's and to Caesar what is Caesar's." It is bad to let Catholics bury themselves or to drive them down into the underground for non-religious motives, when many among them want to be recognized as true citizens.

Q. To be exact, one of the obstacles has been the recent multiplication of episcopal ordinations without the consent of the Pope.

A. That is a very grave matter, one that touches on ecclesiology. If this is repeated, there is a risk of widening the gap between Catholics. I had the opportunity to say this quite clearly to the

official bishops in Beijing and Nanjing. The issue of the ordination of bishops is a crucial point both for the Church and for the State. It cannot be avoided nor easily resolved given the differences in points of view. But history shows that reasonable solutions can be found in any political climate.

Q. Today there is another obstacle on the road, the imminent canonization of the China martyrs.

A. How is it possible for an event of a religious nature and intended for the glory of the Church in China to produce among the country's leaders such a negative effect? History is unfortunately filled with misunderstandings and missed opportunities (among them, I am thinking of the quarrel over the Chinese rites) and the last incident, indeed the last mishap, speaks volumes on the distance that separates East from West. If there had been some possibility of dialogue, the dossier could have been examined in all objectivity and calmly. There is also the regrettable coincidence with the date, which happens to be the national day of the People's Republic of China. Those who chose October 1 thought only of St. Therese, the patroness of the missions. I am sure that this choice was never meant as provocation or for revenge. John Paul II, the great friend of China, does not stoop to such wily motives.

I hope that Father Matteo Ricci (Li Madou to the Chinese) can be beatified. The diocesan process in Macerata is already completed. The memory of the Jesuit scholar of the 16th century well thought of in the imperial court remains very lively in the thankful memory of all the people. Twenty years ago, I went to pray before his stele in Beijing. All this can only make me hopeful that there will be a good climate of dialogue very soon where, the Church in China, an authentically Catholic and Chinese Church, can like the beautiful dragon set up in the Far East take wing and fully become an integral part of the Universal Church.