

COMMENTARY

The Pope Offers a Gesture of Affection and Generosity

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The Pope's message to the Chinese People is an extraordinary document. It is a sign of the Holy Father's affection towards the people, and his admiration for their long history, their great civilization, rich culture and art.

The occasion for this exceptional message was the commemoration of the 400th anniversary of the arrival of Matteo Ricci in Beijing. Since that moment, despite so many difficulties, conflicts, mistakes on the side of missionaries, as well as hostilities and persecutions, the Catholic faith has never left China. Matteo Ricci, the most renowned missionary ever to enter China, was also a great scientist and humanist. In October 2001, three major international symposiums were held in his honor in Hong Kong, Beijing, and Rome. It was on this last occasion at the Gregorian University on October 24, 2001 that the Pope delivered his message.

The first book written by Ricci (1595) is significantly entitled *On Friendship*. Friendship was indeed Ricci's program and style. His was a serious, profound, and authentic friendship with the Chinese people. The Pope, who described the life of Matteo Ricci in China with remarkable accuracy, declared explicitly that he wished to follow the way of Ricci. The Church does not seek privileges from China, he said, but rather it comes as a friend, asking for mutual respect, freedom and understanding.

The Pope also spoke of the extraordinary dedication of thousands of missionaries who came after Matteo Ricci. The great majority of them were generous men and women, some of whom even paid the ultimate self-sacrifice for the good of the Chinese

people. They faithfully preached the Gospel and also offered outstanding social, scientific and cultural services.

Unfortunately, a few of them did not follow Ricci's example. Some of them made mistakes, engaged in internal struggles, fostered hostilities, displayed a superiority complex, and showed little esteem for the Chinese people and their culture. Some even made compromises with foreign political powers. These were the unfortunate failings of a minority, whose regrettable mentality was not limited to the China mission. In any case these errors should not be confused with the generalized, ideological and unjust allegations the Communist regime has used against Christians to justify persecution and oppression.

Western powers are responsible for the tragic phenomenon of imperialism and its unfortunate political consequences of which the Church itself was a victim. Missionaries on the whole were not motivated by nationalist or imperialist sentiments; but a tiny segment collaborated and served foreign political interests.

The Popes tried several times to escape the "protection" offered by France, whose aims were commercial and political. That "protection" was reluctantly suffered rather than explicitly requested. As a consequence, various popes, starting with Pius IX, opposed imperialism, and tried insistently, but unfortunately without success, to have the Emperor offer the same "protection" to the Christians. The popes, especially Benedict XV in 1919, severely reprimanded those missionaries that served their national interests rather than the interests of evangelization. The socio-political and religious situation was extremely complex, and the missionaries were, after all, children of their times. People in good faith might have done things that we today consider wrong. For this reason they must be studied with objectivity, according to the principle of "doing history for the sake of understanding history" and not out of ideological and accusatory intents.

The Pope is not afraid of the truth; therefore, he acknowledges that there were mistakes, misunderstandings and injustices. His expression of regret and his plea for forgiveness must be understood and appreciated as an extraordinary gesture of generosity and affection, a movement toward a future of collaboration and friendship.

This is not a turning point for the Pope. In his long years he has often spoken to China with openness and affection, and has already on several occasions expressed regret and admitted failings.

What will be the reaction of Chinese authorities? The first ones are not encouraging. The out-dated two preconditions are repeated, seemingly oblivious that the Pope is asking for a real dialogue on all open questions.

The Taiwan question is not the real problem, and the Chinese government knows it. It was not the Holy See that chose to leave China after the advent of Communism; it was forced to leave in 1951. Since 1971 the diplomatic presence of the Holy See in Taipei has been downgraded to the minimum. It was Paul VI's prophetic choice precisely in order to favor dialogue with Beijing. Relevant Chinese authorities have been informed for many years that, with a comprehensive agreement, the Holy See is ready to solve the Taiwan issue in a proper manner. Demanding the break of diplomatic relations as a pre-condition is a diplomatic absurdity. We might recall that the recognition of the Republic of China in Taiwan was never a stumbling block to Chinese diplomacy. Chinese leaders like Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai warmly received Richard Nixon in 1972, when the United States had full diplomatic relations with Taiwan, not to mention US military assistance and collaboration.

The second pre-condition, namely, non-interference in China's internal affairs, relates to the appointment of Bishops. For the Catholic Church this is essentially an issue of freedom and autonomy. The Church enjoys this right everywhere in the world. Since it is clear that bishops are religious and not political figures, their nomination belongs to the Pope and to the Church rather than to the government. In any case, even on this point, the Holy See is willing to make reasonable and legitimate concessions.

The ball is entirely with the Chinese government. It is possible that China may not yet be really interested or ready for an historic and comprehensive agreement. Many Chinese leaders do not understand or appreciate the Catholic Church. They prefer to keep it at a distance. The priorities of the leadership are different. Besides, a meaningful accord with the Holy See would require a change of mentality, a change in administration, and in religious affairs. It might require the abolition or radical reduction of the

structures of control (such as the Patriotic Association and the Religious Affairs Bureau), and a change in some middle level cadres. Are the authorities ready to take this new path? I hope so, but I am not confident that they are. I am afraid that they will take the easy way out with the alibi of the pre-conditions and accusation of insincerity. The Pope, with his humble gesture, challenges the authorities to have the courage, the vision and the wisdom to walk on a new path of freedom and collaboration.

