

COMMENTARY

An Olive Branch for China

Jerome Heyndrickx

On October 24, 2001 Pope John Paul II delivered the most significant China-related speech of his papacy. After all the years of China's repeated accusations of Church imperialism during the 19th century, Pope John Paul II said humbly: "I ask forgiveness." He offered an olive branch to China and apologized for "errors." This speech may very well go down in history as the most significant China speech ever given by any Pope. It is the culmination of Pope John Paul's 20-year pilgrimage towards Beijing and the beginning of a new, hopefully successful, phase towards normalizing relations. This means not just normalizing diplomatic relations, but normalizing the life of faith of Catholics in China. Is China, after all its allegations against the Holy See for so many years, now satisfied? Is it ready to respond positively to the Pope's humble plea? Will its longstanding cold war with the Vatican finally end? And, will the Pope succeed in realizing his dream to visit China during his lifetime?

Contrary to what some newspapers reported in Beijing, the Pope's apology did not refer at all to the "errors" of the canonization of 120 martyrs in 2000, as China reportedly had requested. The Pope referred to "a kind of 'protection' by European political powers" which "had negative repercussions" and "may have given the impression of a lack of respect and esteem for the Chinese people." The Pope said, "I feel deep sadness for these errors and limits of the past" and "for all this I ask the forgiveness and understanding of those who may have felt hurt in some way by such actions on the part of Christians." Nothing more! We all know, and China also knows that it was these "European political powers" who were the real cause of China's humiliations in the 19th century, though these powers have never been asked by China to apologize nor did anyone of them ever do so spontaneously. By candidly and

generously admitting the “errors” which he referred to and by expressing his “sad feelings” about it, the Pope showed himself to be a great Christian leader motivated by Jesus’ gospel and by true respect for China. Chinese Catholics will be inspired by the deeply Christian attitude of our good old Pope, even though many who suffered during the Cultural Revolution inside China, understandably are still bitter about those “errors” that made them suffer and for which they were never offered any apology.

PRC authorities remain speechless and internally divided

China knew about that forthcoming speech and was even aware that the Pope would express some kind of apology. Still, China seemed unprepared and speechless after hearing the Pope’s friendly and humble gesture. China only managed to repeat prosaically the old conditions for normalizing relations which the PRC has now repeated like a refrain for 20 years, namely: the Holy See must break with Taiwan and it should not interfere in China’s internal affairs.

The reason for the poor reaction of the PRC to the Pope’s generous and magnanimous gesture is that Chinese leaders are internally divided on this issue. Some of them wish to normalize relations with the Holy See, while others oppose the move. In 1999 President Jiang Zemin himself, after returning from his visit to Europe, decided to normalize relations. The highest political leaders in Europe, some of them belonging to leftist parties, had warmly recommended this move to him. Authorities of the Chinese Religious Affairs Bureau were then told to meet at all levels with bishops and priests to tell them the news and prepare them for the change. Some of them confidently told us at that time: “Soon things will be much easier for your work in China because China will normalize its relations with the Holy See.” But our hope soon faded. By the end of 1999, we learned about a “secret document” (of August.17, 1999) of the Chinese Communist Party stating that indeed China would normalize relations but at the same time it would strengthen the official Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association (CCPA) so as to keep full control over the Chinese Church, thwarting thereby the Vatican’s influence on Chinese Church affairs. To prove their point they openly snubbed the Holy See on

Epiphany 2000 by self-consecrating five bishops without any agreement with Rome. We know that this move was staged by a leftist group in China that disagreed with Jiang's move and successfully undermined it, much to the disappointment, so it seems, of President Jiang Zemin himself and also, I'm sure, of the Pope.

Then there was the canonization of 120 China martyrs by Pope John Paul II in 2000 followed by a fierce anti-canonization campaign in the PRC (by the same leftist group?). About one hundred articles in newspapers, dutifully drafted by some Chinese scholars—some of them having earlier written “Rome-friendly” articles—strongly criticized the martyrs as well as the Holy See in the wildest Cultural Revolution slogan language. The cold war with the Vatican was on again. The very name “Vatican,” in the mind of many Chinese, became synonymous with “imperialism.”

Therefore we all wonder today, after all this, even after the Pope's historic speech: how could the atmosphere for normalizing Sino-Vatican relations now suddenly be right again? And how could China get ready for it even in the near future given its internal division on this issue and the important political change of leadership scheduled for 2002? Some recent comments, given by highly respected politicians or Church leaders in the West, seem to overlook these problems. But there is much more.

To normalize relations one must first agree on the role of the Patriotic Association

In October 2001 three Ricci meetings were held: one in Hong Kong (Oct. 13-17), another in Beijing (Oct. 14-17), which I attended and still another in Rome (Oct. 23-25). While these meetings were being prepared in September, a news magazine in Hongkong and news agencies in Italy launched the unbelievable story that Rome and Beijing would normalize diplomatic relations on that occasion. Other newspapers all over the world simply copied the story. A high level delegation from Italy—including former Premier Andreotti and Mr. Janucci (also the name of Card. Etchegaray was mentioned)—would attend the “Ricci Commemoration” in Beijing. Later a prominent Chinese (patriotic) bishop would travel to Rome to attend the “Ricci Commemoration” there. The newspapers created the impression that these mutual

encounters and exchanges on the highest level would perform the “magic trick” of normalizing Sino-Vatican relations. Was this realistic? Did they not once again rather disturb and deceive Chinese Catholics by creating false hopes?

Even experts find the issue of Sino-Vatican relations very complex. The Holy See’s diplomatic relations with any country must be in service of the local Church community of that country. If not, what purpose would they serve? In the case of China the issue at stake is not just normalization of diplomatic relations but normalization of the life of faith of Chinese Catholics in Communist China. This is what motivates us to write about this issue because that is what matters for the Church.

Normalization of the life of faith in the Chinese Catholic Church, however, presupposes important changes in the present situation that will require much dialogue between communist diplomats and those of the Holy See on issues that directly affect the life of faith of Chinese Catholics, as for example, how to elect and appoint bishops and allow them to be true spiritual leaders of their local Church community? In this process of election the rights of the local Church community and their religious freedom as well as the rights of civil authorities of the country must be respected. The Holy See has made agreements on the assignment of bishops with dozens of other countries, including communist ones. This makes us believe that the Vatican will be able to agree more easily with Beijing on this matter. But they must also agree on the future role of the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association and this is a thorny problem, much more difficult to agree on. To accept and confirm that role as it is practiced at present—and as it was redefined by the Communists in their document of August 17, 2000—would be a disaster for the local Chinese Catholic Church. Bishops would no more be bishops and the Church would no more be the Catholic Church. One can expect that it will take much dialogue for both parties to agree. We believe that an agreement is possible. But if no agreement is reached, then why normalize relations?

The bold step of Pope John Paul II

Pope John Paul II remains undisturbed by the events of Epiphany 2000 and the anti-canonization movement. Faithful to his old priority to normalize relations with the PRC, even in the present

situation, he went as far in his speech as to explicitly and publicly express his wish to dialogue with the PRC in search of a way to do this. A Chinese friend of mine—who might be a Communist Party member even though he denies it—said that our good Pope sounds a bit too eager to normalize relations. “Why should the Pope beg for normalizing relations? Moreover it weakens his position to bargain with the PRC.” He then added: “The Communists will take advantage of this!” I think he has a point and I admit that I had the same initial reaction.

On the other hand I feel that Pope John Paul II has scored his own historical goal. By his candid and magnanimous speech he has taken the lead in the process towards normalizing Sino-Vatican relations by leaving Beijing not only speechless, but even undecided as to which card to play next. They are hard-pressed by this speech. Looking at it from their point of view, they all realize that normalization of Sino-Vatican relations would do away with Taiwan’s only embassy in Europe. On top of that, it would enhance the PRC’s international image and serve China’s interest, especially since they recently joined the WTO and are preparing to stage the 2008 Olympics. But their internal division prevents them from accepting the Pope’s olive branch and the conditions implied in it.

Observers repeat that the Pope is anxious to realize at any cost during his lifetime this historical event of normalizing Sino-Vatican relations. But the Pope knows better than anyone the complexities of realizing this issue as described above. He may be anxious, but not naïve. After walking for 20 years on this barren desert road towards Beijing, repeatedly being confronted with allegations of “past imperialism” and interference in internal affairs today, Pope John Paul II has now gone on record with his gospel-inspired apology and his very explicit wish to normalize diplomatic relations.

It would seem that the Pope, by this humble gesture, wants to pass beyond all political rhetoric and slogans and put his honest intentions boldly on the table. His olive branch speaks louder than all Chinese cold war slogans on “imperialism.” More than anyone else the Pope regretted that the efforts of President Jiang Zeming in 1999 have failed. As a result, I imagine, he realizes that he may never see the “land of his China dreams,” because he sees the difficulties that still lie ahead. But his speech candidly puts his

intentions on the record of history. If he cannot realize his dream himself, he will leave it to his successor, bearing in his heart the deep regret that not only did the Holy See miss a chance in 1999, but China did also. And China regrets it too, but cannot afford to admit it.

Dialogue is an act of strength, not weakness

While the Holy See keeps the line of dialogue with the PRC open, we in the Chinese Catholic community should do the same, for the good of the larger Chinese Catholic Community. We trust that a solution even to the thorny problem of the CCPA can be found that can satisfy both sides. While holding fast to our basic principles, we favor openness, avoiding blurring the atmosphere of dialogue. To promote another canonization of Chinese martyrs at this moment—as was already proposed—would do more harm than good. Canonizing martyrs is an act of faith of the community of faithful guided by the Pope. Such a project needs many more years to ripen. If canonization is used as an instrument of confrontation it loses all its significance. And to allow an outsider to abuse canonization for political purposes, is to bring disgrace on the martyrs themselves.

Evangelization is understood today as dialogue. Our ability to dialogue is put to the test in China: dialogue with society, with other religions, and also with atheists. By offering his olive branch to China, Pope John Paul II has proven that dialogue is not an act of weakness but of strength.