

Tactical Changes in Vatican-China Relations During the Past 30 Years of Openness and Reform

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On October 16, 1978 the Vatican College of Cardinals met and elected the Cardinal Archbishop of Warsaw, Poland, Cardinal Karol Józef Wójtyła, as the new Pope. He took the name of John Paul II. At the same time, China's Communist Party was in the process of preparing for the Third Plenary of the 11th Central Committee. Deng Xiaoping regained substantial political power at this meeting. At it, he proclaimed a new and open reform policy to put China on its historical journey into the modern age. Both the accession of Pope John Paul II and China's reform and openness policy would have a profound influence on the following 30-year development of the Catholic Church in China. This historical coincidence brought both China and the Vatican into close contact with each other.

Inimical Attitude During the Eighties

From early on, the Chinese government had no understanding of the role its opponent in the Vatican played. Throughout the whole period of the 1980's, Chinese officials were imbued with a hostile attitude towards Pope John Paul II. We will try to discover the reason for this from articles found in the government-approved Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association publication, *Catholic Church in China*. This government-approved magazine, published jointly by the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association and the Church Administrative Committee, first

appeared in 1980. It proclaimed: "Love the Country and Love the Church." At first there was no regular date for its appearance, but beginning in 1983 it was published about 3 times a year; in 1987 it was published 4 times a year; and finally, in 1994 it was decided to publish it 6 times a year, and that is the case even today.

Below we shall cite a few articles from this publication representative of Beijing's attitude towards Pope John Paul II.

Bishop Tu Shihua (涂世华): wrote an article in the first issue, dated November 10, 1980, entitled, *Develop the Apostolic Spirit of the Independent Management of Our Church*. He wrote:

The Vatican Pope in order to establish a basis for his spiritual power and control fabricated the story that since Peter was the first bishop of Rome and the chief of apostles it followed that whoever became Bishop of Rome would be Peter's successor and the highest authority in the church. Therefore each successive Pope emphatically insists that since Peter was the first apostle who came to Rome and established the church there, the present Pope in Rome is his successor. In fact, did Peter go to Rome at all to preach? Up to now no one has found unassailable historical evidence to prove that this was so. But it is certain that Paul, under arrest in Rome had preached the gospel there for two years. We read in chapter 28 verse 30 of the Acts of the Apostles, "He spent the whole of two years in his own rented lodging. He welcomed all who came to visit him, proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching the truth about the Lord Jesus Christ with complete fearlessness and without any hindrance from anyone." After Paul was released from imprisonment he went to Spain to preach the gospel after which he returned to Italy. On that occasion, using his authority as church leader he wrote his Letter to the Hebrews. He said: "God's holy people in Italy send you greetings. Grace be with you all." Here there is no mention at all of Peter. From this we can see that Peter was not in Rome. Furthermore,

Paul's consistent practice in his preaching was not to go to places where other apostles had preached. He himself wrote: "It is my boast that I go to those places where no one knows Christ lest I build upon somebody else's foundation." This shows clearly that before Paul went to Rome no other apostle had preached the gospel in Rome. All this leads us to make the following conclusion: St. Paul was the first apostle to preach at Rome and not Peter. Since this is so we have no reason to say that later bishops of Rome were the successors of Peter, much less to speak of any Primacy. Therefore our church in China is heir to this apostolic spirit of preaching the gospel as we implement our policy of autonomy in running our church. This is the obvious conclusion.

Tu Shihua's article contains so many falsehoods that they are unworthy of refutation. The great danger is that he not only attacks the person of the Pope, but that he goes further and attacks the very notion of a papal primacy. This is much more serious than the chanting of the ordinary slogans that commonly appeared in articles written during those years. Therefore we must take special note of this.

In the October 30, 1981 issue of *Catholic Church in China*, Fang Zhigang (方志剛), the so-called "Bishop of Wenzhou", wrote an article entitled: *Develop the apostolic tradition of preaching the gospel, while insisting on independence and keeping the initiative in one's own hands*. He wrote:

'The tree may prefer calm, but the wind will not subside—Class struggle is inevitable in class society.' Just as we are stabilizing and unifying our present very favorable situation, and making good progress in implementing an independent, self-reliant and self-governed church, the Vatican as usual has adopted a hostile attitude and taken a reactionary stance towards our socialist new China. It has once again been up to its old tricks by illegally appointing

Deng Yiming (鄧以明) as Archbishop of Guangdong. By this means it seeks to cause disunion by disrupting the renewal our Chinese Catholic Church is undergoing and destroying our legitimate enterprise of establishing an independent and self-governing church. The Vatican once again desires to control and use the Chinese Catholic Church for its own purposes. Facing this fact all of our church leaders and the faithful who love their country and their church feel a deep resentment—all, one after the other, have issued statements on this matter. All with one voice denounce and protest this illegal appointment of the Vatican. The standing committees of the two national Catholic bodies and the Bishops Conference — are now in agreement and keenly understand that the time when imperialistic powers could arbitrarily manipulate and control the Catholic Church is gone forever. The vain hopes of the Vatican and all other reactionary foreign powers to meddle in or destroy the Chinese Catholic Church's independence and autonomy definitely will never succeed. All their shady dealings will meet with determined resistance and a counter-offensive on the part of the Chinese Catholic Church. All will fail miserably.

The third article on this matter is authored by Niu Ximeng (牛西蒙) and is entitled: *The Sacred Right to an Independent and Self-governing Church Admits of No Infringement*. The sub-title is: *A Critique of John-Paul II's Talk in Manila Addressed to the Catholics of China*. This article also appeared in the October 30, 1981 issue of *Catholic Church in China*. He wrote:

Listening to John Paul II in his Manila Address to Chinese Catholics we have this to say: The purpose of his address is to oppose the independent governing of our church. We all also know that the independent Chinese Catholic Church does not recognize the primacy of the Pope.

Niu Ximeng's statement here is eminently clear. However, in another part of his article, he appears somewhat enigmatic. On the one hand he says that the Chinese side pays no attention to John Paul II, yet on the other hand, it wants him to agree with China's position.

After John Paul's visit to the Philippines and return to Rome, he immediately ordered his representative in Taipei, Paul Giglio, to visit the Nationalist Party's Assistant Foreign Affairs official Qian Fu (錢復) in order to assure him that the Vatican will continue to maintain its diplomatic relations with Taiwan. This is sufficient evidence to show that John Paul II is an enemy of the Chinese people, and that his speeches are a deceitful sham. If the Roman Curia really wants to dialogue with the Chinese government and the Chinese church, it must first of all own up to its past errors, that is, its erroneous policies towards the Chinese government and the Chinese church, by adopting practical measures to prove its sincerity.

The softening of China's Attitude in the Latter Part of the 1980's

Although the above 3 documents used very harsh language to deny the Pope's primacy, yet there were still many in China who spontaneously upheld that primacy. On April 27, 1989 more than 50 bishops of the open church in China convened a meeting in Beijing. There were also some priests and Sisters present. That Bishops' meeting reached a common agreement expressed in three decisions. The most important of these was Bishop Ma Ji's (馬驥) statement which served as the basic document. It reads as follows:

1. As soon as possible implement Document No. 188 of the Central Government to return Church properties to the Church.
2. Except for four of those present at this meeting, the remaining

delegates uphold the dignity and authority of Pope John Paul II's Primacy.

3. All bishops and priests who have married must leave their churches. (Anthony Lam, 1994, page 223-224)

It seems that since the Chinese government had recognized this open meeting of the Bishops, the bishops must have reached an understanding with the government; namely, that the government had changed its attitude towards the Pope's primacy. For if the government had not "blessed" this meeting it would have been impossible for the majority of bishops in the open church to openly declare that they recognize the Pope's primacy.

At the beginning of the 1990's, the Catholic Patriotic Association and the Catholic Church Administrative Committee themselves began to moderate their stand towards the primacy of the Pope. These two bodies began to refine the speeches of the above-mentioned personages by publishing a collection entitled: *Collected Works Concerning an Independent and Self-governing Church* (afterwards to be referred to as *Articles on Independence #1*). This was shortly followed by another work with the same title but specified as the second collection. The *Articles on Independence #1* was published on March 3, 1990, jointly edited by the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association and the Catholic Church Administrative Committee.

All 15 chapters that make up the *Articles on Independence #1* had been previously published in the *Catholic Church in China*. It also contained the above-mentioned three articles. Despite the fact that the forward to this book asserts that the editors: *used articles appearing in the Catholic Church in China and published them in book form*, what is interesting to note is that the three articles from the *Catholic Church in China* mentioned above have been carefully edited. The texts attacking Pope John Paul II have been skillfully deleted.

The article that Niu Ximeng authored *The Sacred Right to an Independent and Self-governing-church Admits of No Infringement*

has been changed to *An Independent Self-governing Church: the Mind of Jesus Christ*. The original subtitle *A Critique of John-Paul II's Talk in Manila Addressed to Chinese Catholics* has simply been removed. (Anthony Lam, 1992, pg. 57)

In 1992, when some priests who were seminary professors in China came to Hong Kong, they told us that many seminaries had already begun to teach on the question of the Pope's primacy. However this subject was not taught from the aspect of Canon Law or Dogma, but was placed in the category of Church History, and taught as part of an historical development. Even so, this was a definite improvement.

The Influence of the Revolution in Eastern Europe

The major work undertaken by the government sponsored "Two Bodies" took a sudden step backwards in mid-1990. This was tied to a letter, dated April 1st that year, written by the Party elder statesman Chen Yun (陳雲). The content of this short letter sent to Party General Secretary Jiang Zemin (江澤民) said:

Comrade Zemin:

Recently I have been reading several materials regarding the increasingly disturbing news concerning religious infiltration, especially on new activities of counter-revolutionaries who act under the cloak of religion. These activities are daily becoming more rampant. I am deeply concerned about this. This use of religion to win over the masses, especially the youth, has been a trick habitually used over the years by class enemies hostile to the masses both here in China and abroad. This has been a bitter lesson for some former Communist Parties who have lost their political power. Now is the time for Party Central to take practical steps to control this most serious matter. Viewing the situation from this aspect we must not allow it to become a new element for instability.

Possibly you have read these reports. I shall forward them to you for your consideration.

Chen Yun

April 4, 1990

This letter of Chen Yun was afterwards jointly published in August 1995 by a study committee of the Central Communist Documentary Research Office together with the Religious Affairs Bureau of the State Council Policy Making Department. The title of this document was *Some Select Documents Concerning Religion at the Present Time*. Its main topic was Chen Yun's *A Letter Concerning Paying Close Attention to the Problem of Religious Infiltration*. There was an explanatory footnote stating:

This concerns the letter written by Comrade Chen Yun to Comrade Jiang Zemin. On April 24, 1990 Comrade Jiang Zemin authorized that it be passed along to several other comrades to read. He pointed out that the problem that Comrade Chen Yun mentions is of vital importance and urgently calls for all Party Committee Members and government officials to attach great importance to it and be on their guard. In no way should they lower their vigilance. They must at the earliest opportunity adopt effective measures otherwise serious consequences will be the result.
(page 177)

The close attention to *counteract religious infiltration* was evidently at that time the central concern of high government officials. The need to mend foreign relations was of secondary importance.

As a result the "Two Associations" within a very short time republished the *Independent Self-governing Church* in a second document (briefly, *Articles on Independence #2*). We discover that this second document very assiduously focused on this question of

“infiltration”. The topic pervaded the entire collection so that we can readily see that there is a connection between *Chen Yun’s Letter and Articles on Independence #2*.

The government’s support of the “Two Associations” shows that the government’s attitude towards the Pope vacillated. This reflected the fact that its own policy lacked any coherence. After the 1989 *June Fourth Incident* China’s foreign relationships entered into a glacial period. The Beijing Government, wanting to open up some space for its foreign relationships, hurriedly improved conditions for a *Chinese-Vatican Rapprochement*. It vastly changed its way of speaking about Pope John Paul II. However in 1990 when the radical change of the situation in Eastern Europe became a fact, the Chinese government, worried that the influence of the Catholic Church would spread to China, hastily closed the door again. This explains the revision of *Articles on Independence #1* to *Articles on Independence #2*.

A Fine-tuning of Chinese-Vatican Diplomatic Relations During the Nineties

The Chinese government in dealing with the Vatican, but especially in its relationship with the Pope, regularly maintains a “dual tactics approach”. From one side the Chinese party shows that it wants better relationships, but from another side it presents conditions that are difficult to attain. Nevertheless, after the beginning of the 21st century, these conditions have undergone a subtle change. A look Hong Kong’s pro-Beijing newspapers and magazines reveals their interpretation of conditions for a China-Vatican rapprochement.

First, let us recall some high Chinese government officials views of Chinese-Vatican relations during the 1980’s. On November 29, 1988 the vice-premier of China’s State Council Wu Xueqian (吳學謙) spoke of two conditions:

The attitude of the Chinese Government towards this question is as follows: First, the Vatican must break its

so-called "Foreign Relations" with Taiwan and recognize the People's Republic of China as the sole legal government. Second, the Vatican must desist from interfering in China's religious affairs. (The Wen Hui News 文匯報, Nov. 30, 1988).

This can be said to be the standard statement made during the 1980's, and it lasted up until the mid-1990's. On November 10, 1994 China's Ministry of Foreign Affairs once again repeated these two demands:

Shen Guofang (沈國放), Foreign Affairs spokesman, said today that the Vatican need only break its so-called foreign relations with Taiwan, recognize the People's Republic of China to be the sole legal government of China and acknowledge that Taiwan is part of China's territory. It must cease to interfere in China's internal affairs (including Chinese religious affairs), then all other questions can proceed along correct paths to reach a solution. (Da Gong Bao (大公報), November 11, 1994)

But on July 9, 2000, Premier Zhu Rongji (朱鎔基), on a visit to Italy, spoke about this matter. At first he seemed to be making the same demands, however, they were phrased in a slightly different way:

First, Taiwan must be recognized as part of China and that the government of the People's Republic of China is the only legitimate representative of all China; second, the Vatican should not make use of religious matters to interfere in China's internal affairs. (Wen Hui Bao (文匯報), July 10, 2000)

In an address given in October of 2001 at a meeting commemorating the fourth centenary of Matthew Ricci's arrival in

Beijing, Pope John Paul II solemnly apologized to China for all the faults missionaries committed in China in the past. On October 25 of the same year, a spokesman of the Chinese Foreign Affairs Bureau Sun Yuxi (孫玉璽) in his reply to the Pope's apology said that China will give "serious study" to it. He said:

The two principles that China has been insisting on have not been changed in any way.

First, the Vatican must completely break off all so-called foreign relations with Taiwan, and recognize that the government of the People's Republic of China is the sole legitimate government of China, and that Taiwan is an inseparable part of China. Second, the Vatican must not use religion to interfere in China's internal affairs. This includes using religious matters as a pretext to interfere in China's internal affairs. (Ming Bao (明報) October 26, 2001)

On April 2, 2005 (in China the date was April 3) Pope John Paul II died. On April 19, the college of Cardinals elected the new Pope who took the name of Benedict XVI. The new Pope continued Pope John Paul II's efforts to renew relations with China. The spokesman of China's Foreign Affairs Bureau Kong Quan (孔泉) on June 17 of the same year said "The government of China in regard to its developing relations with the Vatican has continually adopted a sincere approach, and an openly positive attitude." (Wen Hui Bao (文匯報), June 24, 2005). Kong Quan also mentioned the two conditions for establishing diplomatic relations:

The Vatican must uphold the principle of one China, recognize that Taiwan is part of China, and that it cannot engage in activities that maintain "one China, one Taiwan" or "two Chinas." At the same time the Vatican must not use religious pretexts to interfere in China's internal affairs.

This subtle distinction seems not worth mentioning. However it is of great importance to the universal church. Prime Minister Zhu Rongji (朱鎔基) seemed to have made a subtle change in the second item from what it was before the year 2000: “(The Vatican) *should not make use of religious affairs to interfere in China’s internal affairs.*” He seemed to be making a distinction between “*Religious Affairs*” and “*China’s Internal Affairs.*” That is to say that the Vatican can exchange views on religious matters, but it cannot use “Religious Affairs” as a stepping stone to interfere into “China’s Internal Affairs.” As far as the Vatican is concerned, this interpretation may be far easier to accept.

In March of 2006, when I was being interviewed by a television reporter, I indicated that I had perceived a difference between the two conditions. There is no problem in requiring the Vatican not to interfere in China’s internal affairs. But for an organization like the Catholic Church, not to interfere in religious matters, is an absolutely unacceptable demand. If the Catholic Church is not allowed to take any part in discussing religious matters, then what is there left to discuss at all? But if the Chinese position is “*not to use religion to interfere in China’s internal affairs,*” then as far as the Vatican is concerned, there should be no difficulty at all. For the Vatican itself also requires that religious matters be above board and sincere and that they not be used for other purposes. So we can say that Premier Zhu Rongji (朱鎔基) opened new space for Vatican-China relations to develop further in the 21st century.

Ye Xiaowen’s (葉小文) Obstructionist Tactics

However, no matter what adjustments the Central Government might be willing to make, there is still within the government a force that is determined to prevent the possibility of any China-Vatican détente. This force lies hidden within the National Religious Affairs Bureau. If we review all the speeches on this topic in the 21st century, we shall find only one speech that questions the possibility of the Vatican establishing diplomatic

relations with China. This speech was given by Ye Xiaowen, the director of the Religious Affairs Bureau. The occasion was at a religious celebration in Hong Kong on September 15, 2005. Responding to a reporter's question concerning the future of Chinese-Vatican relations, he reiterated the previous two conditions:

If the Vatican shows sincerity, observes the principle of one China and does not interfere in Chinese religious affairs, then I believe that this will effect a breakthrough in China-Vatican relations. (Ming Bao 明報, September 9, 2005)

Note that Ye Xiao Wen's words do not say not to interfere in China's internal affairs, but not to interfere in Chinese Religious affairs. This is equivalent to negating the Central Government's efforts, made over the years, and forfeiting the space created by China's diplomacy, solely for the benefit of the Religious Affairs Bureau.

In March of 2008 when a reporter from the *Southern Weekend Report* (南方周末) inquired of Ye Xiaowen his appraisal of the Pope's *Pastoral Letter to China* of 2007 he replied:

From what this Pastoral Letter states; namely, that it revokes some of the instructions it gave the Church in China in the past, cancelled some so-called privileges to the bishops of the Underground Church, and wants to establish a creative dialogue with China, it seems that the Vatican's attitude manifests a more positive outlook. Yet looking at the entire speech, it is negative, holding over some elements from the past. It is just like what a long term experienced observer of the Catholic Church in China says regarding the Pastoral Letter: 'what this Pastoral Letter states clearly shows that the Pope is going in the direction of direct confrontation with Beijing.' This Pastoral Letter creates a new division and

confusion within the Chinese Church, provoking Catholics to take an absolute stance on the side of the Pope. It forces them to choose once again between the Party and the Church. What is more dangerous is that the Pastoral Letter openly rejects the Patriotic Association, the Bishops Conference, and the principle of the independent administration of the church. The former Pope said that the Holy See and Chinese Catholics "enjoyed a religious bond, that would not harm the unity of the Chinese people." Even though this bond amounts to little, one sees that it will weaken the independence and autonomy of the Chinese Church. In comparison with the former Pope, the present Pope has taken a step backwards.

As a matter of fact, both Popes have the same respect for China. Ye Xiaowen's style of speaking belongs to the Chinese Communists' traditional united front manoeuvre that pulls one over to your side in order to attack another side. But to interpret Pope Benedict XVI's expression of good will to China as "*going in the direction of direct confrontation with Beijing*" really makes one shudder. (Lam Suikui (林瑞琪), 2008, pg. 3-5)

Ye Xiaowen's unexpected praise of Pope John Paul II is naturally not a bad thing, but we cannot but ask, why didn't he do so while he was still alive!

The Chinese Philharmonic Orchestra's visit to the Vatican in 2008.

On April 7, 2008 the Chinese Philharmonic Orchestra and the Shanghai Academy of Music's choral group, altogether numbering 150 members, held an historic performance in the Paul VI Auditorium. They played Mozart's 安魂曲 *Requiem* and Chinese Folk music 茉莉花 *The Jasmine Flower* in the presence of Pope Benedict XVI. The Pope gave the performers his undivided attention, highly enjoying their performance. After the performance he personally shook hands with each member of the orchestra and

choral group. Addressing the invited guests he praised the concert as displaying “*the highest value and meaning.*” For by the performance of these Chinese artists “we have experienced the vivacious and lively nature of Chinese society.” The Pope then went on to express the hope that China would stage a successful Olympic games.

What was more surprising was that, in addition to these two musical groups coming to the Vatican to perform, the Phoenix Satellite Television Company, which has close connections to the Beijing government, successively produced a collection of five special documentaries on the Vatican television station. This gave the Beijing leadership an opportunity to see a very much alive and up-to-date Pope.

What the Chinese leadership never previously realized was that the leader at the center of the Vatican government—an 81 year old man—actually rises every day at five o’clock to begin a day filled with arduous duties.

These arduous duties should not have been his to bear, rather he should have enjoyed his waning years in retirement. However unexpectedly, at 78 years of age, he was elected to be leader over the world’s 1.1 billion Catholics taking on his shoulders the weight of those millions, along with 2000 years of tradition. The burden is now beginning to weigh heavily on his shoulders.

In the past the Chinese government was accustomed to understand the Vatican from the viewpoint of conspiracy, but now it must begin to see it as a partner in dialogue. Despite the fact that the central government disagrees with the Vatican, or the Pope’s viewpoint and way of acting, it should at least recognize that this old man of 81 years is not acting from his own selfish and stubborn interests to oppose China.

Conclusion

Both China and the Vatican have always had leaders who have been responsible and committed persons. In addition to the two top leaders on the Chinese side now, there have also been in the

past other highly respected leaders—such as Deng Xiaoping (鄧小平), Hu Yaobang (胡耀邦), Zhu Rongji (朱鎔基), and Zhao Ziyang (趙紫陽)—all of whom did their best for to work for a better future for China. Why has it happened that the leaders on both sides have never had the opportunity to talk face to face!

Looking back on the past 30 years, and over all the Chinese government's talk about the Pope and the Vatican, and at the same time studying the changes that took place over these years, we can come to understand that the Central Government passed from an ideological stance to a more rational handling of actual events. Of course, the government always maintained control over these events. Yet there were times when we can also discover a certain good will manifested by the Central Government.

Nevertheless, despite sufficient good will, when things came to a head, then the “Contradiction of Benefits,” pops up which creates all sorts of problems. The major earthquake in Wenchuan, Sichuan (四川 汶川) Province, that destroyed the “bean curd construction” (豆腐渣) schools, resulting in an enormous number of dead and wounded is a case in point; the “tainted milk powder scandal” that caused a national health crisis, is another.

The religious policy of the Chinese government, particularly its policy towards the Catholic Church, is no different from these two scandals. The problem is that middle-rank cadres, together with local self-seekers, create obstructions. They deceive their superiors and bully their inferiors. Their own selfish interests harm the nation's normal progress.

We can say that the relationship between China and the Vatican is “important but not urgent.” Precisely owing to the fact that this relationship is not urgent, the Central Government has not considered this question as requiring a top priority solution. Furthermore the Chinese government is facing many challenges both local and foreign—problems on the local level such as those touching the nation's food supply, assured industrial and farm production, and the international problems created by the American banking industry's financial crisis, influencing the entire globe. We

can foresee that it will be impossible for the Chinese government in the near future to put China-Vatican relations on their immediate agenda.

However this writer's hope is that "the establishment of diplomatic relations" becomes one result of China's opening up to the world. Improving relations is the only way to ensure harmony. Even if it is not possible within a short time to establish diplomatic relations, yet high officials must take direct part in working out a blueprint for improving relations. Otherwise permitting mid-level Communist officials to continue wreaking havoc, will only encourage them to repeat the difficulties of the past 30 or more years. The selfish interests of individuals will ruin China's chance to take its rightful place on the world stage.