

## Religious Freedom Roundtable March 25, 2002

### Remarks of Thomas E. Quigley, U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops

Thank you for this opportunity to offer some brief comments on the issue of religious freedom today, especially with reference to the Catholic Church in the People's Republic of China. I'll confine my remarks to several recent developments in China that directly touch on the role of the Catholic Church there.

**Catholics in China.** First, some numbers. Out of well over a billion people, Chinese Catholics number roughly twelve million, with some four million of these in the open or registered Church, roughly eight million in the underground or unregistered Church. The government, of course, doesn't recognize the latter, so official figures have it that there are about 100 million "believers" in the country-less than 1%, surely a gross undercount-of which 4 million, according to the government, are Catholic.

The number of Catholics is small, and growing only at a very slow pace, but 12 million is still far larger than the roughly 3 million Catholics before the Communist take over. And as Dick Madsen, one of the best China church-watchers, likes to note, that's a lot more Catholics than there are in Ireland.

**Sino-American Relations.** Let me frame these remarks by several fairly recent events. Last year, 2001, was significant in a couple of ways for the Church in China. Just over a year ago, in April, there was the Hainan Island collision and the downing of the US spy plane, which, coming on the heels of the Belgrade Embassy, plunged Sino-American relations very low indeed. But then the plane business was resolved. Secretary Powell went to Beijing in July, and President Bush planned his state visit to China for October, coinciding with the APEC meeting in Shanghai.

Then came 9/11, which caused the state visit to be postponed, but the President still went ahead with a quick Asia trip in October, enabling him to meet briefly with Jiang in Shanghai, and then finally to have the postponed state visit just a month ago, in late February. These US-China visits have a bearing on the matter of religious freedom because in both his October and his February meetings with Jiang, Mr. Bush raised quite dramatically the issue of religion, including his own faith commitment, and pressed Jiang to grant religious liberty, to free Catholic clergy, especially bishops, who are under detention, and to pursue dialogue with the Vatican, as well as with the Dalai Lama.

**Dialogue with the Holy See.** The question of encouraging China's dialogue with the Holy See is something that both the Vatican and our bishops' conference have been urging on our government for some time. The essential goal of the dialogue is the restoration of normal relations between the Holy See and the People's Republic, relations which the Chinese broke off when they expelled the Apostolic internuncio, Antonio Riberi, and arrested, imprisoned, and finally deported all the foreign clergy and religious in 1951.

But the more immediate, practical goal of such talks, aimed at allowing a Vatican representative to reside in Beijing, whether or not full diplomatic relations are restored, is the opportunity for the Vatican to explain and interpret the sometimes complex reality of the Church to the Chinese authorities. Thus, when Bishop X is accused of breaking the law, simply because he declines to have his ministry governed and controlled by the CCPA-the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association, the Papal representative could at least make the case that the bishop's arrest serves no valid purpose, that it can more likely lead to popular discontent than to dampen it, that it is in fact counter-productive to China's desire to be fully accepted into

the world community which places high value on the free expression of religious belief, and so on. And thus by persistent, diplomatic pressure, changes in this behavior might eventually come about.

The other effect of 9/11 was, of course, China's signing on in the war on terrorism, resulting in greatly improved US-PRC relations, evidenced clearly in the Bush state visit last month. The President there referred to the relationship as "constructive and cooperative."

**The Ricci Symposia.** Now, a second set of events, these specifically of the Church, were the two Ricci meetings last October, one in Beijing (October 14-17) and one in Rome (October 23-25). They were to commemorate the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the arrival in Beijing in 1601 of the great Jesuit scholar and missionary, Matteo Ricci. There was at the time a flurry of press speculation that these symposia would herald a major breakthrough in China's relations with the Church, even rumors that China was about to let the Holy See set up an apostolic delegation in Beijing. The speculation was totally groundless, of course, but the Ricci events produced one of the most dramatic developments in the centuries-long relationship between the Catholic Church and China.

On the 24<sup>th</sup> of October, Pope John Paul II issued a statement to the Sinologists then meeting at Rome's Gregorian University on the theme of *Encounters and Dialogue*. In the course of his fairly long discourse, tracing the story of Ricci's contribution, the Holy Father turned to the present:

The Chinese people, especially in more recent times, have set themselves important objectives in the field of social progress. The Catholic Church for her part regards with respect this impressive thrust and far-sighted planning, and with discretion offers her own contribution in the promotion and defense of the human person, and of the person's values, spirituality and transcendent vocation. The Church has very much at heart the values and objectives that are of primary importance also to modern China: solidarity, peace, social justice, the wise management of the phenomenon of globalization, and the civil progress of all peoples.

**Papal Apology.** Then, after expressing the Church's affection for the Chinese people and her desire to be of service for the good of all the people, and noting the "long line of generous missionaries" and the many works of human development they accomplished down the centuries, especially in the fields of health care and education, he said the following:

History, however, reminds us of the unfortunate fact that the work of members of the Church in China was not always without error, the bitter fruit of their personal limitations and of the limits of their action. Moreover their action was often conditioned by the difficult situations connected with complex historical events and conflicting political interests... . In certain periods of modern history, a kind of "protection" on the part of European political powers not infrequently resulted in limitations on the Church's very freedom of action and had negative repercussions for the Church in China... . I feel deep sadness for these errors and limits of the past, and I regret that in many people these failings may have given the impression of a lack of respect and esteem for the Chinese people on the part of the Catholic Church... . *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.*

He concluded by expressing "the hope that concrete forms of communication and cooperation between the Holy See and the People's Republic of China may soon be established.."

**The PRC Response.** What was the Chinese government's reaction? Virtual silence, one might almost say a kind of embarrassed silence, with a spokesman for the foreign ministry [Sun Yuxi] trucked out to repeat

the standard mantra of the past: "The Holy see must break relations with Taiwan" and "The Vatican must not use religion to interfere in China's internal affairs."

Interfering in China's internal affairs is the code term for China's ignoring its own constitutional guarantee of religious freedom. It is China's denial of the Church's right to exercise its normal and customary role of appointing bishops as heads of dioceses all over the world, and thus a government's interference in the internal affairs of the Church.

Why were the authorities unable to react more positively to this quite extraordinary papal apology? For the same reason that they grossly over-reacted to the October 1, 2000 canonization of the Chinese martyrs, as a smokescreen to cover over the existing divisions within the Party. The overriding factor right now is the upcoming Party Congress this Fall, which is expected to usher in a new, somewhat younger, leadership. Bishop Joseph Zen, Coadjutor of Hong Kong, holds out the hope that this new leadership, and the rising of a political class of even younger people, many of whom will have studied abroad, will gradually bring about genuine change. Gradually-perhaps over a period of three years, he thinks. And change, openness, is the only way to avoid the bloody outcome that some foresee; "there are many unhappy people in China," the bishop notes [ZENIT interview, 2/20/02].

**Religious Repression Today.** In the meantime, religious expression continues to be either repressed, sometimes brutally, or controlled, although the controls over the registered Catholic Church are showing signs of wear and ineffectiveness. The vast majority of all the registered bishops have been reconciled with Rome, which the government obviously knows. The power of the Patriotic Association is greatly diminished and given to sometimes desperate gestures, such as the staged ordination of bishops on Epiphany 2000, timed to coincide with the Pope's ordaining twelve bishops that same day.

What's the status of religious persecution of Catholics right now? Over the past months, we've been treated to a kind of good cop-bad cop reporting on the state of religion in China. *The Wall Street Journal* in February claimed that "China is rethinking its heavy-handed policies and taking a more tolerant line on mainstream groups." But at the same time, we know of the secret documents smuggled out by officials of the State Security Ministry and other government agencies that envision a still tighter crackdown on unauthorized religious groups. And at the beginning of Lent this year, mid-February, the news agency of the Vatican's missionary congregation issued a list of some 33 Catholic bishops and priests known to have been arrested or disappeared or under house arrest. The best known of these and the one for whom American Ambassador Clark Randt has intervened is Bishop James SU Zhimin of Baoding, a well-respected figure who has been repeatedly arrested, released, and re-arrested. His whereabouts is presently unknown.

**Conclusion.** Is the end game in sight- We'll have to wait to see what the new leadership is like and, if more open to change, how long it will take for them to consolidate their positions. It seems clear that Jiang's modest moves for change in 1999 lost out to the hard-liners. The PRC has now decided that two can play at issuing human rights reports and has now put out its own report on the dismal human rights record of the United States, detailing the many perceived violations of human rights in this country, including, as one chapter has it, "Wantonly Infringing upon the Human Rights of Other Countries."

Those of us who advocate for international human rights and religious freedom have our work cut out. I cite the instance of a recent and very detailed policy brief of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, "Re-balancing United States-China Relations." Amidst a wide-ranging list of issues discussed, there is not a word about human rights, still less about religious freedom.