

Scottish Bishop urges all to support China

Following his visit to China Church, Scottish Cardinal Keith O'Brien calls for solidarity and support for Catholics in China as they face challenges of modernity and secularization of their society.

"I think the rest of the world must respond in every way possible to life in the Church and the state of China at this present time," reflected Keith Cardinal O'Brien, the archbishop of St. Andrew's and Edinburgh, Scotland, on completion of an October 19-29 visit to the mainland.

The cardinal said that he set foot in China for the first time "with a mixture of excitement and trepidation." He noted that the excitement came from what has been an increasing interest in the vast land spurred by relations between his home town and the mainland, especially with the crucial role currently being played by Edinburgh University.

However, he was left with some trepidation when he learned that his planned private and pastoral visit had suddenly been given an official status by government personnel. Nevertheless, he said that he, together with Monsignor David Gemmell, who travelled with him, and the organiser of his itinerary, Father Eamonn O'Brien from the London-based organisation, Cultural Exchange with China, went ahead with their pastoral plan, "in much the same way as I have accomplished on previous pastoral trips abroad—in Africa, Central or South America and Asia."

Cardinal O'Brien said that he brought a message to the Catholics of China that they are missed by the universal Church, and had the opportunity to tell Bishop Anthony Dang in Xi'an, Bishop Joseph Li in Beijing, and Bishop Aloysius Jin Luxian in Shanghai, that their absence is especially felt at worldwide synods of bishops.

The cardinal said that he was struck with the professionalism he witnessed among priests, religious sisters and seminarians and the academic and pastoral skills that they are developing, as well as their profound interest in world affairs. However, the deep faith of the laity that he witnessed and heard about is something that will always stay with him.

He said he knew of the persecution of the Church from afar, but listening to first-hand accounts of "the painful situation of serious difference... both among the clergy and among the lay faithful" caused by the birth of the unofficial Church communities and the decision of other members of the Church to register their places of worship and relate to the state and finally the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association, gave him an insight into the depth of that suffering.

"I have met people who suffered grievously at that time and since," he commented. "All sectors of the faithful suffered, including bishops, priests, sisters and laity." He said he was especially touched by an account of the father of a family, who taught the members of his family their prayers by night at separate times; only later could they pray together; and only after that could they unite with other Catholics in their villages and towns."

The cardinal with the broad smile and jovial laugh said that exposure to such faith as well as the visits to centuries-old cultural treasures led him to ask himself where the soul of this vast and sophisticated land lies. He said that the glassed modernity of Shanghai, the increased secularisation of society and the hitherto unknown wealth further prompts the question, as spirituality seems to have been part of the nature of the Chinese people.

He reflected that the age-old words of Father Matteo Ricci SJ saying that the Church has its proper role in strengthening and developing the spirituality of the people of China, remind him of the recent words of Pope Benedict XVI in his May 27 letter, "Let China rest assured that the Catholic Church sincerely proposes to offer, once again, humble and disinterested service in the areas of her competence, for the good of the Chinese Catholic people and for the good of all the inhabitants of the country."

"So where is the soul of China," he asks. He said that maybe there is an insight in the closing session of the Communist Party of China 17th National Congress mentioning the word "religion" in an amendment to its constitution to respond to new demands posed by new situations and tasks. "Is this a genuine attempt of looking forward to finding the soul of China," he questioned, "or simply a tactic to hold onto power?" While admitting that this is a question he cannot answer, Cardinal O'Brien reflected that spirituality seems to have been part of the nature of the Chinese people and said that he constantly witnessed faith in the many thousands who prayed with him and came forward to greet him. "It is my firm conviction that the Church worldwide has a great lesson to absorb from the experience of those suffering and faithful people," he concluded.

Cardinal O'Brien said that he found the same fidelity among people of other faiths. He was touched by the hospitality of a Buddhist monk and surprised at the gentility of an iman from an Islamic mosque, who told him that during the Cultural Revolution when the soldiers came they realised that they could not resist, so they simply welcomed them and walked away.

While aware that he only had the opportunity to visit the rich east and not the poor west of China, the cardinal noted that there is a growing consciousness of the responsibility to pay more attention to just distribution of the nation's economic resources and that both civil authorities and people in the Church appear open to new ideas.

"All seemed to be looking forward to ever more open relations with the rest of the world and in a special way seemed to be playing a more important part on the world stage," he said. Consequently, Cardinal O'Brien said he wants to encourage the rest of the world to welcome China and to wish all peoples of China, religious and non-religious, every blessing in the struggles which they are now facing.

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