

The Quest for Normalization of Sino-Vatican Diplomatic Relations: A Conundrum of Inter-cultural Miscommunication

USCCB Webmaster's Note:

After more than a decade and a half of monitoring this issue closely, USCCB finds the following commentary to be among the most astute and sensitively formulated analysis of the peculiar difficulties which have long attended the mutually desired goal to restore normal Vatican-PR China diplomatic relations. [Text highlights added by USCCB.]

UCAN Synopsis: *China and the Holy See both say they look forward to normal relations with one another, yet their efforts to reach this common goal have not succeeded. Under the surface, something is amiss in the communications between the Holy See and China, and part of the problem is their different cultures, says a mainland-based Chinese priest whose views are shared by several other clergy in China. According to the priest, who asked not to be named, the Vatican could also enhance prospects for diplomatic relations by increasing its appreciation of China's reality, and helping to tone down unfriendly Church media overseas. These and other reflections appear in the **following commentary that the mainland priest wrote in Chinese with an eye to the upcoming pastoral letter of Pope Benedict XVI**, and sent it to UCA News.*

In 1999, Sino-Vatican relations began to thaw and bilateral talks slowly emerged. Since then, a series of pleasing and amicable developments have taken place, but so too have some regrettable misunderstandings and conflicts. While the international community has regarded the friendliness between the two sides as surprisingly hopeful, misunderstandings and conflicts have caused severe pain and harm to the China Church and to the Universal Church.

To date, China and the Vatican have forged diplomatic ties, respectively, with 169 and 179 countries, yet relations between the two are not normal. The Vatican is the only nation in Europe that has no diplomatic links with China. China and the Holy See, the world's most and least populous nations, have exerted considerable influence in the international arena. So what keeps them from restoring diplomatic relations with one another?

From the start, **China's central government** has professed a sincere desire to cultivate normal links with the Holy See, but it insists on **two fundamental conditions**. First, the Vatican must sever its "diplomatic ties" with Taiwan and recognize the People's Republic of China as the only legitimate government of China. Second, the Vatican must not interfere with China's internal affairs, including anything that might be addressed in the name of religion.

The Vatican has also repeatedly expressed the desire to establish diplomatic ties as soon as possible. In 1999 and 2005, Cardinal Angelo Sodano, the Vatican's former Secretary of State, explicitly asserted that Sino-Vatican relations are a matter of urgency. If China agreed, he declared on each occasion, the Vatican was ready to transfer its nunciature from Taipei to Beijing -- not the next day but that very night.

What do the Chinese government's two fundamental principles really mean? Why have China and the Vatican still not established diplomatic relations and, instead, why have new conflicts surfaced? The Taiwan issue apparently is just one of the government's concerns. **More**

crucial is the problem of selecting and appointing bishops, which seemingly is a power struggle whose resolution requires clearer definition of "internal affairs" and the scope of faith. **This problem essentially reflects the differing perceptions of politics and faith held by Chinese and Western cultures and results from their hostility.**

For example, both sides have appointed their own bishops without obtaining the other party's prior consent. By taking such initiatives, each forced the other to accept its own decision. China did so to safeguard its national dignity, while the Vatican was guarding Church principles. Such conflicts are clear indications of their distrust, misunderstanding and unfriendliness. In other words, China and the Vatican still cannot accurately "read" one another's expectations. **China does not understand Catholic faith and the Holy See does not understand Chinese politics.** Both sides are wary of and even hostile to each other. They say they want to establish diplomatic ties but lack the understanding and friendship such links require. **There is no basis of mutual confidence and trust.** When they talk, therefore, anything that disfavors one party's interests or fails to protect that party's face will immediately turn "friendly negotiations" into a silent but hostile confrontation, or even conflict. If there are only promises without understanding and sincerity, the road to establishing diplomatic relations will remain only a distant dream. Past conflicts offer lessons worth remembering and worthy of reflection. Viewing the current Church reality in mainland China through **the prism of history can shed light on the problem** and point to its underlying causes.

China and the Vatican undeniably have the goodwill to form diplomatic links as soon as possible. Like Pope John Paul II, Pope Benedict XVI and some Vatican officials have expressed serious concern about China. They speak highly of China and passionately about its 1.3 billion people. However, **when one examines comments made by some Church people inside and outside China as well as by Church media overseas**, a remarkable fact becomes obvious in their reports and analyses of China's "religious persecution." Even when the strong anti-communist verbiage of the last century disappears, **a skeptical, unfriendly and hostile attitude persists.**

Certain unfounded and false reports have sparked questions and confusion in the minds of Church people in China. The Church there, as elsewhere, differs from one place to another, and the country has yet to bridge its gap with Western nations as regards democracy. Even so, **the good developments that have surfaced in China and the local Church in recent years have frequently failed to foster positive reporting and recognition from Church media overseas.**

Using normal Western standards to measure the reality of China's development and its local Church would be like helping shoots to grow by pulling them upward. That would not help Sino-Vatican relations to progress. **No matter how resolute the Holy See may be to set up diplomatic ties with China, it is not helped when some overseas Church media and Church people continue to provoke China with words and deeds of hostility and distrust.** Such behavior only intensifies the clashes and deepens misunderstanding between the two sides. Moreover, the Chinese government and Chinese society lamentably get the impression that the Holy See says one thing to one's face, but does another behind one's back. As a result, the Chinese government will not trust the Holy See and new crises emerge, and **the Church in China inescapably becomes the scapegoat.** Overseas, those who enjoy press freedom may think their comments protect religious freedom and they are speaking for justice

on behalf of the Church in China. In fact, however, **their efforts run counter to their good intentions and further impede the establishment of Sino-Vatican diplomatic ties.**

The Church in China has firmly maintained its conviction in the "One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church" and has always asserted that "the pope is the highest spiritual leader of the Universal Catholic Church." Nonetheless, when conflict arises between politics and religion, the Chinese government tends to see the Vatican just as it views anti-China, anti-Communist forces overseas. If the underground Catholic community in China insists on being at odds with and confrontational toward the government, the government will persist in thinking that the "underground Church" receives covert support from the Vatican and that the Holy See is creating trouble for China behind its back.

If **the Holy See** is determined to forge diplomatic links with Beijing, it **has to treat China as a cooperative partner and friend**, not as its opponent or enemy. **The overseas Church also must learn to understand China and its limitations**, and to appreciate how the country is developing. Equally, **all Catholics in China** must strengthen themselves psychologically. They should take account of the whole situation, as well as keep the cardinal principles in mind and respond to the pope's call. They **should welcome and prepare actively for the establishment of Sino-Vatican relations.**

At the moment, **the Holy See would be wise to give the Church inside and outside China clear guiding principles, or at least a precise direction.** Any friendly gesture beneficial to Sino-Vatican reconciliation will not be misread as "interfering in internal affairs." On the contrary, it would be welcomed and appreciated by Chinese society. The hope of many is that China and the Vatican will eliminate hostility, restore faith, establish friendship and develop normal diplomatic relations as soon as possible. A sense of how great an effort is needed to attain this goal can be gauged by reviewing what happened **in 2006**, when **great events for China's five main religious communities attracted worldwide attention.**

In April 2006, the **Buddhist Association of China** and the China Religious Cultural Communication Association, which the State Administration of Religious Affairs (SARA) set up in 2005, hosted the First World Buddhist Forum in Hangzhou and Zhoushan cities in Zhejiang province. Politicians and Buddhist representatives from 37 countries and regions took part, along with national, provincial and city government leaders of China.

Between April and June, **an exhibition on Biblical Ministry of the Church in China was staged in three major American cities.** The Protestant Chinese Three-Self Patriotic Movement Committee and the China Christian Council co-organized the event **with Protestant groups in the United States.** Some senior SARA leaders visited the exhibition, as did more than 100,000 Christians overseas.

At a press conference in the Great Hall of the People in December, the China Religious Cultural Communication Association and **the Daoist Association of China** announced they will co-organize the first ever International Dao De Jing Forum, set to take place in Xi'an and Hong Kong in April 2007. Daoist sage Laozi wrote Dao De Jing (The Book of the Way and its Virtue) around 600 BC. Also last year, more than 9,600 Muslims, assisted by the **Islamic Association of China**, went on pilgrimage to Mecca.

Last year was also special **for the Catholic Church in China**. Three episcopal ordinations were held -- in Kunming on April 30, Anhui on May 3 and Xuzhou on Nov. 30. The central, provincial and city governments focused much attention and greatly supported the new bishop's ordination in each of those three dioceses. All visiting bishops who concelebrated were well rewarded. Some leaders of the central United Front Work Department of the Communist Party of China and of the SARA attended the ceremonies and gave instructions to the participants in person. **The ordinations caused shock and much bitterness, mixed with regret and a sense of helplessness by Catholics around the world.**

The Chinese government's meticulous plot and forceful command succeeded but the clash it created challenged the harmony the government professes to promote. It left a dark shadow on all involved, stunned the international community and badly damaged China's international image. The three ordinations failed to beget victory or honor, and China and the Vatican alike were losers. The conflict-tainted ordinations evidenced China's strong discontent with the Vatican for repeatedly appointing clandestine bishops and for disapproving bishop candidates elected with Chinese government support. By pressing those three ordinations in 2006, China also indirectly expressed its protest against the anti-communist, anti-China comments made by some overseas media.

For Church authorities in China and all who became involved, the result of Vatican-approved bishops ordaining new bishops without papal mandate was unspeakable bitterness. Catholic clerics engaged in the ordinations face whatever penalties the Vatican determines for the sake of Church discipline. This is like instigating someone to cause trouble and embarrassment to one's parents and then watching the parents punish the child. This kind of revenge goes too far. It is not above board. Are the individuals who felt compelled to violate their faith and were subsequently protected secretly happy, or do they bear a grudge? Will the plotters be admired or regarded with regret?

While one party in the clashes insisted on proceeding with the ordinations, the other refused to recognize their legitimacy. At such moments, claims of sincerity by both China and the Vatican fail to pass the test, and the people involved in the ordinations have become their bargaining chips. **Amid the Sino-Vatican confrontation and rivalry, the Church in China has become a sacrifice.**

The appointment of bishops by the pope is a principle of the whole Catholic Church. If this value is not respected, the Catholic Church is no longer the Catholic Church. The international community accepts this principle. Even when the governments of certain countries are involved in the initial scrutiny of candidates, the bishops are ordained only after the pope grants his approval.

[Editor's note: This commentary regrettably omits mention of the episcopal ordination on May 7, 2006 of the Auxiliary Bishop for Liaoning Diocese Paul PEI Junmin – legitimately consecrated with the consensus of both the Holy See and the PRC authorities].

China understands this, so why does it still make such unreasonable moves? According to a Chinese saying, "A drinker's heart is not in the cup," which means ulterior motives lurk in the background. The ordinations were not just a blasting fuse in the Sino-Vatican conflict. Behind the scenes, the ordinations manifested the unresolved

misunderstanding and hostility of the two sides. Why do China and the Vatican have so much mutual misunderstanding? Why is there such serious prejudice against one another? Why is their gap so wide?

For a long time, some Chinese worshipped foreign goods and fawned on foreign powers, but still blindly rejected anything foreign. This complex sentiment intensified after the First Opium War between China and Great Britain (1839-1842). In the Boxer Uprising in 1900, the Eight-Nation Alliance (seven Western powers and Japan) wantonly invaded and partitioned China, and exerted their extra-territorial rights. This history profoundly hurt all ethnic Chinese and created galling shame and humiliation that every Chinese can hardly forget.

Protected by powerful weapons and unequal treaties, the Church that Western missionaries established in China could preach freely, but it thereby became the accomplice of imperialism. From the First Opium War to the Boxer Uprising, **the Church in China and its missionaries were drawn into conflicts between politics and religion that remain a painful memory for all Chinese and their Church.** This tragic history and China's past civil wars have made the government so staunchly sensitive in matters of sovereignty and foreign religion that it still does not allow foreign missionaries to enter the country.

The Communist Party of China was born in modern times and eventually became the only ruling party in the mainland. Even without elaborating the Church's condemnation of communism in the 1930s, the anti-communist position of the Church has changed little since new China was founded in 1949. The Catholic Church in China consequently paid a high price, and many clergy and laity were seriously hurt.

In the wake of the Second Vatican Council (1962-65), **the policy of the Holy See toward China has witnessed earth-shaking changes. Every pope in recent decades has been very friendly toward China,** and all have expressed a desire to develop diplomatic relations with China as soon as possible. **Even so, it takes much time, patience and love to heal the wound of a nation and of a Church.** Once China and the Vatican eliminate misunderstanding and build trust, maneuvers considered as not interfering in China's internal affairs could still be very substantial. One can only hope that both sides will walk out of the historical shadow, leave the past behind and move into a brighter future.

This commentary appeared on the UCAN website www.ucanews.com on March 20, 2007. [Ref. CHO2136.1437]. UCAN issued an important correction of an omission in the original text [incorporated here] on March 21 [Ref. CHO2138.1437].