

*The following article has been slightly edited for brevity; clarity of terms; and lapse in time since it was written in December 2007*

## **The Chinese People's Congress: Good News for the Church in China?**

The 17<sup>th</sup> Chinese Communist Party Congress was held in October 2007. The Chinese People's Political Consultative Congress (CPPCC) followed in December.

*The analysis and reflections are by CICM Fr. Jeroom Heyndrickx, an astute China Observer.*

The 17<sup>th</sup> Party Congress confirmed that religion is an important force to promote harmony in society. The CPPCC chairman, Jia Qingling, confirmed this again during the meeting of the CPPCC. The very fact that communists say this is *new*. Moreover, during the Party Congress President Hu Jintao succeeded in having his own candidates appointed to the new Politburo, strengthening his position at the beginning of his second term. One would hope that at lower levels appointments will be of persons who are ready and able to follow Hu's policy to build a "*harmonious society*". One also hopes that the decisions [taken at these meetings] create new hope for religious believers.

For five years, Chinese leaders called for the Party to "progress with the times" (*Yu Shi Ju Jin*) – a term that covers more than meets the eye. It implies Chinese communists should move beyond class struggle, a basic principle of communism! Such change is historically significant. Conservative communists, in spite of the phenomenal economic progress, persist in this basic principle. One would expect officials in the higher echelons to move with President Hu's policy. However, the more one looks at provincial

and district levels, the more one notices that many officials adamantly continue to apply traditional policies; some out of conviction; many others simply to please their immediate superiors; to avoid problems and gain merits by dedication to their job. This is especially true in the field of religion. It helps explain the contradiction between the arrests and harassments that happen in local areas, and the new direction which higher officials indicate are needed to promote a *harmonious society*.

That the new Politburo decided to discuss religion as its main topic at its second meeting (December 2007) is quite remarkable! Such signals coming from the Party Congress and the Politburo would lead one to expect President Hu will now make sure that those who are able and willing to follow the new direction must replace those who resist. One has the impression that finally a signal has come from higher echelons that a new phase is about to begin for religion in China.

Other events in recent weeks point into that direction. In February, YE Xiaowen, director of the State Administration for Religious Affairs (SARA) was in the USA to sign an agreement for cooperation in research between SARA and Georgetown University in Washington DC. Academic research in the field of Religions is good in itself, provided the research is truly academic and is not ideologically biased. More agreements of this kind between institutions in China and the West are welcome. Officials on both sides have many issues needing discussion and clarification. Both sides lack understanding about each other and official declarations are often misleading, due to historical or ideological prejudices.

The declarations made by YE Xiaowen while in the USA, and after meeting with both the Nuncio to the USA in Washington, DC and the Vatican Nuncio at the U.N., have a new tone. YE spoke as if the rapprochement between the PRC and the Holy See had made great progress and that in the near future a breakthrough was possible.

However, these declarations have to be read with the same reservations as those declarations made recently by Anthony Liu Bainian, Vice-Chairman of the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association (CCPA). Liu expressed hope that the Pope would soon visit Beijing. However, Beijing has always been good at propaganda. It is our task to separate the wheat from the chaff; and discern whether or not these nice words portend true progress in discussing the substance of problems for the Catholic Church in China. Until now, this is not evident. Nonetheless, there are some signs that progress is possible. [e.g., The ordination of five bishops in the last year in Beijing, Guangzhou, Yichang (Hubei) and Yinchuan (Ningxia), all took place with the agreement of both the Holy See and Beijing, even though these were not always officially confirmed. It is a good signal, because the appointment of bishops by the Pope has always been one *non-negotiable* principle of the Holy See for the restoration of normal diplomatic relations with the PRC.]

Another remarkable subject of much speculation in the media, was the photo of President Hu shaking hands with Mr. Liu Bainian during the New Year's reception on January 1<sup>st</sup>, 2008. It is no coincidence that the photo appeared on the front page of the People's Daily of January 2. Some speculate this was meant as a *golden handshake*, thanking Mr. Liu for his 25 years of faithful service in the CCPA. Others saw it as a confirmation of Mr. Liu's role as Catholic layman and vice-chair of the CCPA. Of course, the question arises, why would the Chinese leadership confirm him in this role? It could be a confirmation of the traditional policy of the CCPA, to encourage him to continue working for an independent Catholic Church. If this latter interpretation is correct, it would be very bad news, unavoidably leading to a collision with Catholics in China, as well as with the Universal Church. It seems most unlikely to me, that PRC leaders would opt for such a policy, contradicting their own repeated emphasis on *harmonious society*. From the positive signals mentioned above, one would rather logically expect the PRC officials to confirm the CCPA in its role as bridge between Church and State in China, while adjusting its role by amending its statutes to omit the section calling for the establishment of an independent Chinese Catholic Church. That

would be a breakthrough! Chinese bishops would be allowed to freely guide their Church. While the CCPA would sacrifice its directive role, it would continue to exist, and assume a useful bridge function between Church and State, assuring that each “give to God, and to Caesar, what belongs to each.” No one would lose face and Catholics in China would obtain a lot more religious freedom. The PRC authorities know that sooner or later the religious situation has to improve. This new direction also means that a second non-negotiable point in the Vatican position would be solved in a positive way: namely that Chinese bishops would no longer be impeded in fulfilling their tasks as shepherds of their flocks.

Reading between the lines of all these recent events in China, we should notice that, (aside from some isolated critical remarks by a few individuals) the PRC never *officially* responded to the Pastoral Letter of Pope Benedict XVI to the Church in China at Pentecost 2007. At the same time we can deduce that China is in fact answering the Letter by giving signals. Perhaps more signals and more light will follow from the People's Congress when its deliberations are closely analyzed. Some even speculate that some changes in the structures of government may be made. In that event, new possibilities for adjusting previous policies introduced by certain departments would be created. This is the way China changes and moves with the times, as all other countries do. It is incumbent upon us to observe and correctly interpret the signals and signs. If not, then just like some Chinese officials, we too would be failing to move with the times.

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