

*Caesar's Bidding and Apostolic Injunction: The Church and the
Winds of Change in China: Lamin Sanneh, Yale University,
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Exactly 47 years ago this month, Pius XII issued an encyclical reflecting on the state and future of the church in China. Saying how he had hoped when he established the hierarchy in China that it would have been fruitful of the encounter between the Gospel and China's great civilization, he added grimly that events had proved otherwise, with the developing serious challenge to the church in the country a cause for great concern. He continued:

alas, after a few years the sky was overcast by storm clouds. On your Christian communities, many of which had been flourishing from times long past, there fell sad and sorrowful times. Missionaries, among whom were many archbishops and bishops noted for their apostolic zeal, and Our own Internuncio were driven from China, while bishops, priests, and religious men and women, together with many of the faithful, were cast into prison or incurred every kind of restraint and suffering. On that occasion We raised Our voice in sorrow, and, in Our Encyclical of January 18, 1952, *Cupimus imprimis*, rebuked the unjust attack. In that letter, for the sake of truth and conscious of Our duty, We declared that the Catholic Church is a stranger to no people on earth, much less hostile to any. With a mother's anxiety, she embraces all peoples in impartial charity. She seeks no earthly advantage but employs what powers she possesses to attract the souls of all men to seek what is eternal. We also stated that missionaries promote the interest of no particular nation; they come from every quarter of the earth and are united by a single love, God, and thus they seek and hope for nothing else save the spread of God's kingdom. Thus, it is clear that their work is neither without purpose nor harmful, but beneficent and necessary since it aids Chinese priests in their Christian apostolate.

Pius XII proceeded to spell out the crux of the problem facing the church in China.

He said in his Encyclical Letter, *Ad Sinarum gentem* of October 7, 1954, he refuted accusations against Catholics in China. He stressed that “Catholics yielded to none (nor could they do so) in their true loyalty and love of their native country. Seeing also that there was being spread among you the doctrine of the so-called "three autonomies," We warned - by virtue of that universal teaching authority which We exercise by divine command - that this same doctrine as understood by its authors, whether in theory or in its consequences, cannot receive the approval of a Catholic, since it turns minds away from the essential unity of the Church.”

By state fiat the authorities in China had instituted a Patriotic Church with the goal of advancing certain national objectives. Their aim, they said, was

to join the clergy and the faithful in love of their religion and their country, with these objectives in view: that they might foster patriotic sentiments; that they might advance the cause of international peace; that they might accept that species of socialism which has been introduced among you and, having accepted it, support and spread it; that, finally, they might actively cooperate with civil authorities in defending what they describe as political and religious freedom. And yet - despite these sweeping generalizations about defense of peace and the fatherland, which can certainly deceive the unsuspecting - it is perfectly clear that this association is simply an attempt to execute certain well defined and ruinous policies. For under an appearance of patriotism, which in reality is just a fraud, this association aims primarily at making Catholics gradually embrace the tenets of atheistic materialism, by which God Himself is denied and religious principles are rejected.

Pius XII warned that under the guise of a Patriotic Church dedicated to defending peace persisted the false charge the Catholic Church was promoting schemes for earthly domination and for colluding with those committed to the exploitation of the people. Another

reason given for the creation of the Patriotic Church was that it would make mutual relations between the ecclesiastical and civil powers easier; but that was a stratagem to muzzle the church. Proof of that could be seen in the measures adopted under which missionaries were cast into exile, and bishops, priests, religious men, nuns, and the faithful in considerable numbers thrust into prison. The government demanded consent to those measures by which the jurisdiction of many legitimate pastors was persistently obstructed; a defense of wicked principles totally opposed to the unity, universality, and hierarchical constitution of the Church; an admission of those first steps by which the clergy and faithful were undermined in the obedience due to legitimate bishops; and a separation of Catholic communities from the Apostolic See. No one could mistake what was afoot, Pius XII insisted. A comprehensive plan was being devised to strip the church of its apostolic warrants, all in the name of a proud and authentic China that in the event would not itself be spared. It was not just the motive of self-preservation that moved the Catholic church to oppose the policy of political repression; it was genuine love for all that was true and noble in China and for its future security and prosperity.

In that regard, the cause of the Catholic church was indeed the cause of all who loved truth and justice and desired peace and harmony with all their neighbors. Accordingly, a call should go out to rally all like-minded people to reject policies and methods that violated the principal rights of the human person and trampled on the sacred liberty of God's children, a call to all Christians from every part of the world, indeed to all people of good will to summon them to raise their voices in real horror and protest at the attack on the church and on the conscience of all Chinese people.

The basis of the Catholic encounter with China lay as much in the church's commitment to the Gospel as it did in what would fulfill China's own intrinsic moral potential. It did not lie in a foreign mandate, such as a Western colonial stratagem designed to dispossess China and to commandeer it for an alien power. Pius XII persisted, saying the Church called upon Chinese Catholics to love their country with sincere and strong love; to give due obedience in accord with natural and positive divine law to those who held public office; to give them active and ready assistance for the promotion of those undertakings by

which their native land could in peace and order daily achieve greater prosperity and further true development. It was eminently congruent with these values for the Church to counsel the importance of doing the bidding of Caesar in the light of affirming what was due to God. Accordingly, doing the bidding of Caesar carried with it a compelling obligation that Caesar not confiscate what was due to God. Adverse political consequences would follow state expropriation of things of the ecclesiastical sphere. A state that mandated the elevation of political expedience to the status of dogma would act soon enough against the church as the domain of religious injunctions. Thus would be born the overweening state. The fact of the matter is, Pius XII observed, Christianity never opposed or obstructed what was truly useful and advantageous to a nation – any nation.

This critique was reserved not only for China; it applied with the same penetrating force to Europe, too. Pius XII underscored that when he opened his pontificate in 1939 by referring to the forces that were conspiring to plunge Europe into the abyss. There was a time, he noted, when “Christian teaching had once given spiritual cohesion to a Europe which, educated, ennobled and civilized by the Cross, had reached such a degree of civil progress as to become the teacher of other peoples, of other continents.” But sadly, he concluded, Europe now had abandoned its spiritual roots, at grave peril to itself and to others. (*Summi Pontificatus*, 20 October, 1939, #29.) Pius XII was right that on grounds alone of cultural coherence Europe owed an incalculable debt to the church and to the papacy, a theme that John Paul II developed on the occasion of his own elevation to the papacy. On June 3, 1979, he enunciated his vision “that this Polish pope, this Slav pope, should at this precise moment manifest the spiritual unity of Christian Europe.” The subsequent fall of the Iron Curtain in 1989 did, indeed, bring about the greater unity of Europe in its political life, but that has not been reflected in the renewal of Europe’s spiritual heritage. On the contrary, Europe continued to suffer massive decline in church attendance, in the priesthood, in the religious vocations, and in enrolment at seminaries, while in Asia and Africa the Catholic Church has gone on to experience explosive growth amounting to the post-Western shift in the church. Catholicism has embraced many of the episcopal implications of that shift, and the role of John Paul II in that historic process cannot be stressed enough, however the future shapes the outcome.

For his turn, Pius XII committed the church to the way of reconciliation and to hopes for the peaceful dwelling together of the nations. The Church expected all nations to preserve that degree of dignity which was proper for international solidarity. It was part of the Church's commission to defend the sovereign right of nations. As Pius XI expressed it to the Apostolic Delegate to China in August, 1928 (*Acta Apostolicae Sedis* 20 (1928) 245), "full recognition [should] be given to the legitimate aspirations and rights of the nation, which is more populous than any other, whose civilization and culture go back to the earliest times, which has, in past ages, with the development of its resources, had periods of great prosperity, and which - it may be reasonably conjectured - will become even greater in the future ages, provided it pursues justice and honor." It is relevant to this theme to recall that in 1950, two years after the revolution that brought Mao to power in China, Cardinal Celso Constantini, then Secretary of Propaganda Fide, and earlier the Apostolic Delegate in China from 1922 to 1933, organized an exhibition at the Vatican called 'Art in the Missions.' Constantini was persuaded that a new generation of Asian Christian artists presented a fresh vision of creation and of the Christian faith, and that Western art could profit from contact with them.

Pius XII witnessed in Europe the ravages that unbridled nationalism was wreaking on the church and on all society, and was persuaded that the same forces in China would produce similar regrettable consequences. In the face of adversity he remained unflinching in his dry-eyed view of that truth. The source of the problem was not, as the officials claimed, an untrustworthy church, but the ideology that demanded that the church remain a target of repression. We do not often think we can go to Pius XII or to any of his predecessors for a stringent account of the nature and limits of ideological nationalism, but there are few places where we encounter a more lucid and a more uncompromising statement, made all the more poignant from the proximity to the events that he was describing. The list includes Hungary and the Soviet repression there in 1956.

In his apostolic statements, Pius XII points to a grave problem that dominated the entire landscape of the twentieth century, namely, the toll taken on millions of lives by the extravagant claims and excesses of the sovereign nation state. As a consequence, the 20th

century became the most violent century in human history, such being the bitter price exacted for repudiating the Gospel and the church's teachings. Whether in China or in Europe, any society that felt threatened by the organized call to heed the voice of conscience was likely to trample on those powerless to defend themselves in spite of their holding the key to society's future tranquility and well-being. It was a harmful and reckless policy, Pius XII declared from bitter experience, to do battle with Christianity, for the props used to replace the religion "are not strong enough to support the edifice of human worth, freedom, and well-being." (*Meminisse Iuvat*, "On the Persecuted Church," 14 July, 1958.)

Against the grim realities of repression, persecution, hostility, and suspicion, Pius XII called for dauntless courage and perseverance in witnessing to hope and charity. He assured the faithful that the seeds of new hope were being sown and tended by present trials and tribulations: "If one remembers that the infant Church at that time was devoid of all natural means and was exposed to hardships, trials and persecutions, [one] must be deeply struck with admiration at the sight of a handful of unarmed Christians overthrowing what was perhaps the greatest power that ever existed. What happened then, will undoubtedly often happen again, just as the youth David, who puts his trust in God's help rather than in his own sling, laid low the armor-clad giant, Goliath, so the Divine society, which Christ founded, can never be overcome by an earthly power, but is destined to come forth the serene conqueror of all persecutions." (*Evangelii Praecones*, 2nd June, 1951, #14.)

Pius XII made an important distinction between the cause of freedom in the church's mission and the destiny of free nations. While there was a crucial overlap between the faith community and the national community, there was no question of making the two synonymous in terms of a single jurisdiction. The boundaries of politics demarcate a sphere of responsibility much narrower than the boundaries of our moral life, as William Ernest Hocking of Harvard set out in his book, *The Coming World Civilization*. Politics is comprehended in the moral life without exhausting it, and the moral life is implicated in politics without surrendering to it. The overlap between them is the overlap between the yeast and the dough. The bidding of Caesar cannot rise higher than its source in obedience to God – the dough cannot exceed the potential of the yeast at its core. In a statement in 1944

Pius XII declared: “The herald of the Gospel and messenger of Christ is an apostle. His office does not demand that he transplant European civilization and culture, and no other, to foreign soil, there to take root and propagate itself. His task in dealing with these peoples, who sometimes boast of a very old and highly developed culture of their own, is to teach them and form them so that they are ready to accept willingly and in a practical manner the principles of Christian life and morality...Catholic inhabitants of missionary countries, although they are first of all citizens of the Kingdom of God and members of His great family, do not for all that cease to be citizens of their earthly fatherland...The Church is no obstacle to the native talent of any nation, but rather perfects it in the highest degree.” (*Evangelii Praecones*, #60, #63, June, 1951.) The Gospel existed not to alienate or to deny but to integrate and to invigorate. It conflicted only and unavoidably with idolatries of race, nation, and power. In any case, the historical process spares no nation or society from the contradictions and shortcomings implicit in all earthly endeavors. No ideological contrivance to try to bypass the historical process can evade the swings of fortune that the winds of change blow upon all life.

The degrees of perfection involved in the transformation of culture and society to which Pius XII referred were a recognition of the responsibility history placed on us. But the degrees of perfection were also aspects and phases of the dynamic reception and inculturation of the gospel, not simply of its mechanical organized transmission and imposition. As Pope Gregory in 601 put it in a letter to the Abbot Mellitus of Canterbury, “it is impossible to eradicate all errors from obstinate minds at one stroke, and whoever wishes to climb to a mountain top climbs gradually step by step, and not in one leap.” That was even more so when the mountain in question was not thrust up by a recent volcano, nor followed by the aftershock of alien occupation. In targeting the Catholic church for surveillance and control, however, national authorities ignored the fact that the church was not the monopoly of any one country or culture.

Yet it is important to observe as a matter of historical reality that Christianity in the West has long ceased to provide the framework of public life and of the conduct of affairs, and so has lacked the power, and perhaps the appetite, to corral a secular West to accept a religious vision of world solidarity. In their pastoral letter on war and peace called *The Challenge of Peace: God’s Promise and Our Response* (Washington, DC: United States

Catholic Conference, 1983), the U.S. Catholic Bishops observed that the fundamental premise of world order in Catholic teaching is a theological truth, namely, the unity of the human family grounded in common creation and united by moral ties of rights and duties.

While Catholic moral theology has allowed a real value to accrue to sovereign nation states in the structure of the international order, still that is only a relative value because the boundaries of the sovereign state do not dissolve the deeper relationships of responsibility in the human community (*The Challenge of Peace*, 74). Relations among states mirror those among individuals, the pastoral letter contends, yet the actual situation is far from the case. The modern West restricts religion to personal life and conduct and excludes it from the jurisdiction of the sovereign nation state. The abatement of religion is thus the *raison d'être* of national and international relations even if that means ignoring large swathes of the world, including parts of the West, where religion has public merit.

The international system of nation states has set up a firewall in the gap between personal life and conduct, on the one hand, and, on the other, the secular mandate of public order. International declarations on peace, justice and human rights, for example, require the sovereign nation state as the engine of implementation, with personal civil agency and its religious underpinning discounted.

In calling attention to the limited range of the Christian worldview in a secular West I do not wish to diminish the pertinence of the Gospel to contemporary challenges, especially in light of accelerated globalization. In respect, for example, to the ethical obligations of the wider human family, the sovereign nation state is riddled with chronic limitations, as the nuclear threat revealed. Nuclear weapons also prove that the nation state is not only the relative value of Catholic teaching; its sovereignty is relative, if not illusory. In an increasingly interdependent world where resources, opportunities, and burdens are unjustly distributed, the isolated nation state has scant chance to survive or flourish, or to deal with the seeds of conflict and instability such maldistribution sows. By the same token, the unity of the human family is meanwhile threatened. In light of the shrinking effects of accelerated globalization on the introspective nation state idea, the fundamental contention of the new world order that technology and the free market can attain the unity of humanity without need of religion seems reasonable, and perhaps even desirable, unless, that is, technology and market forces create new sources of mistrust and conflict, which does not at

all seem an unreasonable possibility. The sovereign nation state has become a controversial partner in the common cause for human rights and for the dignity of the human family. Without rejecting its importance in human affairs, the nation state must be reconceived now against the standards of peace and justice and the claims of human freedom and personal dignity. The church is a natural ally, and the source of great strength, in that struggle. Pius XII concluded his message to the church in China with these words: “These tears, these bodily pains and tortures, the blood of the martyrs of past and present - all will bring it about that, through the powerful intervention of Mary, the Virgin Mother of God, Queen of China, the Church in your native land will at long last regain its strength and in a calmer age, happier days will shine upon it.”