

The Vatican's Dilemma

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The year 2002 is a very significant year for the Republic of China in Taipei. It marks the sixtieth anniversary of ROC's diplomatic relations with the Holy See and the ninety-first founding anniversary of the Republic of China, thirty-eight years the PRC's senior. The Holy See conducts its foreign affairs to propagate religious faith in contrast to ordinary states whose objectives are to advance their political and economic interests. The Holy See, therefore, adheres to the principles of religious freedom as a norm for diplomatic recognition.

By Raymond R.M. Tai

The Holy See is currently the only European 'state' that does not officially recognize the People's Republic of China (PRC), but maintains diplomatic relations with the Republic of China (ROC). For the Vatican, I am recognized as the Ambassador of all China as the Holy See's diplomatic list so identifies me, despite the ROC's lack of control over the Chinese mainland for more than fifty years. Furthermore, according to the Vatican, the Church in China as a whole is a 'province' of the Universal Church just as the Church in the United States is a 'province' of the Roman Catholic Church.

From a religious point of view, the Holy See wants to see a 'united' Chinese Catholic Church consisting of the churches in Taiwan, Hong Kong, Macau, and mainland China. More importantly, the Holy See wishes to have a united Church in mainland China – the two communities of the 'Patriotic (official) Church' and the 'Church of silence' together in communion. Since unity is the objective of the Holy See, so I use the wording of 'Taipei "and" Beijing'.

From a political point of view, the Holy See has been forced to make a choice between Taipei and Beijing. The Communist government in Beijing has

set 'two preconditions' for the establishment of diplomatic relations with the Holy See. Tang Jiaxuan, the PRC's Foreign Minister, has officially stated that the first precondition is that the Vatican must break off its diplomatic relations with Taiwan, (actually with the ROC), and must adopt the official position that the PRC is the 'sole' legitimate Chinese government and that Taiwan is an inseparable part of China. Therefore, I use the wording of 'Taipei "or" Beijing' to describe the Vatican's dilemma whether to be able to maintain diplomatic relations with both sides of the Taiwan Strait. Beijing's second precondition is that the Vatican must not involve itself in matters Beijing deems to be domestic affairs even where those matters relate to religious concerns, such as the Church's social teachings and the naming of the Bishops. For example, the Church would not be allowed to preach against Beijing's 'one baby' policy, even though this policy is not in conformity with the Catholic belief of respect of life. To understand this complex Chinese problem, one needs to know Beijing's Communist leaders' way of thinking, their approach to relations with the Catholic Church and the Holy See, and how the Church and the government on Taiwan can contribute to Communist China evolving into a freer society.

Beijing's leaders do not believe in God or hold any religious faith. The PRC President, Jiang Zemin, reiterated this on many official occasions; he even openly claimed himself to be 'atheist' in Rome in early 1999. Beijing's leaders want all religions to be under the control of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) so that no religion will lead towards 'social instability'. According to them, the CCP is the 'Saviour' of the Chinese people, and their authority should not be challenged. President Jiang made it clear to Chinese religious officials at all levels on 13 December last year,

'Communist party members do not believe in any religion but treat religion with a scientific point of view [...] religions should never be allowed to be used for opposing the Communist Party leadership [...] The principle of independence must be followed and foreign interference in China's religious work should be absolutely prohibited [...] the Party's leadership over religion should be strengthened. The work on religion is closely linked to social stability, national security and reunification, as well as China's relations with foreign countries.'

In addition, Article 36 of the Revised PRC Constitution of 1982 states that,

'Citizens of the PRC enjoy freedom of religious belief [...] No religious affairs may be dominated by any foreign country.'

Under such circumstances, the Holy See can hardly normalize its relations with Beijing. As Cardinal Roger Etchegaray, former President of the Pontifical Council of Justice and Peace, said quite openly in a recent interview, 'It is a long road from Bethlehem to Beijing, one strewn with advances and retreats.' What then, is the Holy See, a special religious entity, trying to do?

To the Holy See, the existence of 'diplomatic' relations with Taipei is no longer an obstacle to the establishment of diplomatic relations with Beijing; Cardinal Angelo Sodano, the Vatican's Secretary of State, indicated on 11 February 1999 that if there were freedom of religion on the Chinese mainland, the Holy See would move its 'Nunciature in China' from Taipei to Beijing, rather today than tomorrow. It was evident that the Holy See was trying to initiate immediate talks with Beijing on all Church matters regardless of the existing political system.

It seems to me that the present priority for the Holy See should be to reopen a 'constructive dialogue' with Beijing in order to minimize their differences over religious freedom. To some observers, this is an extremely sensitive issue at a time of an imped-

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ing leadership succession and transition in Beijing.

H.E. Most Rev. Msgr. Jean-Louis Tauran, the Vatican's Secretary for the Relations with States, explained in an interview with the *China Times of Taipei* on 3 June 1999, 'For the Holy See, the first aim of diplomatic relations, with China as with other countries, is that of fostering the life of the Church and of promoting peace in the international context through dialogue. With Taiwan our relations are marked by mutual respect: thanks to the guarantee of the principle of religious freedom, the Catholic community has not encountered difficulties, and it has, moreover, contributed efficaciously to the material and spiritual good of the country.'

It is apparent that the Holy See would like to have good religious as well as political relations with both Taipei and Beijing if at all possible. I was told by Vatican officials that the Holy See prefers not to make gestures that could be interpreted as 'hostile' by either side. They added at the same time, however, that His Holiness Pope John Paul II 'does not fail to express his appreciation for the various initiatives and steps which the two governments take for a better mutual understanding.'

After Beijing's and Taipei's simultaneous accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO), the Pope made an encouraging statement in His annual address to the Diplomatic Corps accred-

ited to the Holy See on 10 January of this year,

'I am also pleased to mention the good news [...] Since last November, delegations of the People's Republic of China and the Republic of China have taken their seats in the World Trade Organization. May this positive development help prosper all the efforts which have been made on the difficult path of rapprochement!'

In a letter from 30 January this year to support the Pope's World Day of Peace Message, President Chen Shui-bian of the Republic of China on Taiwan thanked the Pope for His consideration and encouragement. In the same letter, President Chen also assured the Pope by affirming 'freedom of religion will always be our primary concern in the cross-strait's peace process.'

Two Dilemmas Rather Than One

The Vatican faces two dilemmas: first, how to reconcile the 'official' Church with the 'Church of silence' on mainland China with the assistance of the Catholic Church in Taiwan as a 'bridge' Church; second, how to maintain a balanced cross-strait policy - in order not to make a choice between Taipei and Beijing - in conformity with the teachings of the Church - justice and peace.

In the final analysis, the stumbling block for the normalization of Beijing-Vatican and Beijing-Taipei relations lies in Beijing's demands towards the Vatican and Taipei. Furthermore, Beijing's own political system of one-party rule does foster change.

On resolving this problem, I explained in the 2 November 1997 issue of *The Washington Times*, in an article entitled 'The Holy See and the "other" China on Taiwan',

'If only China were free, there would not be the conflicts and problems besetting Beijing-Taipei relations and Beijing-Vatican relations now [...] It is worth noting that in this Eternal City - Rome - there are two Chinese Embassies: the Embassy of the People's Republic of China in Italy and the Embassy of the Republic of China to the Holy See. They coexist in the same peaceful manner as the Vatican and Italy do.'

Beijing's explanation for the current absence of democratic ways in its political life is that China is still a developing country and its people are not ready for Western democracy. In his speeches at Harvard in 1997 and Cambridge in 1999 as well as in his interview with *The Times* in London in 1999, President Jiang Zemin said Beijing's leaders wish to achieve the major goal of building China into a prosperous, strong, democratic and culturally advanced modern country by the middle of the twenty-first century. Thus, according to President Jiang, China needs another fifty years for political democratisation.

In his recent interview on 7 April with the German newspaper *Welt am Sonntag*, President Jiang reiterated his position on normalizing relations with Tibet, Taipei, and the Vatican. Taipei is to accept Beijing's so-called 'one-China principle' and its 'one country - two systems' approach to cross-strait unification; in the case of the Holy See, President Jiang reiterated two precondi-

tions: severing diplomatic relations with Taipei and non-interference in China's domestic affairs.

To the long-suffering Catholic Church in mainland China waiting for another fifty years is not a short time, although a Vatican official told me that the Holy See has 'eternal patience'. Is there something to do about this situation in the meantime?

I remember some twenty years ago in 1982, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, Nobel-prize winner in literature, visited Taiwan and inspired us in his speech entitled 'To Free China'. He said,

'...Your island is a "bastion of national recovery". So be it! Not only defence, not only self-preservation should be your goal - but help, but the liberation of your compatriots suffering on the mainland [...] In time of crisis, you have the most formidable ally in the world: one billion [now 1.3 billion] Chinese people. Their sympathy is your moral and spiritual support.'

I wish to conclude by quoting the brief conversation I had with His Holiness Pope John Paul II on the occasion of the presentation of my Letters of Credentials more than 5 years ago. The Pope said to me, 'Taiwan is free!' I responded, 'Let's join hands in making mainland China free!' The Pope replied, 'Our common desire! Our common desire! It is our common desire!'

It is my firm belief that, with God's blessing and our common efforts, the people on the Chinese mainland will regain their freedom and democracy. <

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Editors' note >

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