

My Journey to China

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On the basis of an oral invitation from the Chinese Ambassador in Vienna, I set off for Peking on 9 March 1980. The invitation was extended to me as Archbishop of Vienna, and the fact that I was president of a Vatican Secretariat and thus a member of the Roman Curia did not seem to have any bearing on it. I would also like to add that I did not instigate this invitation myself.

In recent years I have several times had the opportunity of having lengthy talks with the Chinese Ambassador in Vienna—talks, I must add, that I did not initiate myself. The Ambassador was particularly interested in the Catholic Church in relation to the “Idea of Europe”,² and also in the person of the newly elected Pope John Paul II. His interest was clearly more political than religious. When I reacted positively to the question as to whether I would accept an invitation to visit China, the Ambassador assured me that there would be no conditions attached to such an invitation and that I would have the opportunity of delivering a lecture on any theme I cared to choose to a group of interested persons. Before my departure I let him know that I had chosen as my theme “The Future of Religion”. No objections were raised.

My journey caused more of a stir in the world press than it might otherwise have done because two weeks before my arrival in Peking Cardinal Etchegaray, President of the French Conference of Bishops, had likewise come to Peking on the basis of an invitation arranged some time before. I am not sure whether Cardinal Etchegaray applied for an invitation to China, himself or whether the invitation was made by the Chinese. When I learned about the plans of my friend Cardinal Etchegaray shortly before my departure, I wanted to postpone my visit to avoid an unnecessary stir in the press. However, the Chinese firmly insisted on the visit taking place according to the previously agreed schedule. After conferring with the Holy Father and Cardinal Casaroli I left Vienna on 9 March. I think it important to say that I undertook this journey with the knowledge of the Pope but with no mandate from

him. My intention was, above all, to find out about the religious situation, the position of Catholics and the State's attitude towards religious and church issues. I landed in Peking on the evening of 10 March and was met at the airport by representatives of the "Chinese People's Association for Friendship with Foreign Countries"³ and given a friendly welcome as their guest. I learned while talking with representatives of this group that a comprehensive calendar of visitors expected already included many from overseas. I was driven from the airport to the Hotel Peking in an elegant car (a Chinese model).

I had not been given any programme for my visit before my departure from Vienna. The programme was presented to me on the morning of 11 March by a representative of the inviting committee, and was as follows: six days for visits and talks in Peking together with tourist trips (for example the Forbidden City, the summer residence, the Great Wall, the Chinese opera, the memorial to Sun Yat Sen, etc.); three days for a visit to Nanking; and then back to Peking until 23 March, the planned day of my departure. It is a pity that because of other commitments I had only ten days available for my stay in China.⁴

The visits and talks in which I was particularly interested began on the afternoon of 11 March. I visited the heads of the Buddhist religious association and of the Muslims, and on other occasions I was able to establish contact with the "Association of Protestant Christians in China".⁵ What I basically learned was that since the end of the Cultural Revolution and the overthrow of the Gang of Four in 1976 there has been religious liberty for the various religions in China. The Cultural Revolution did serious damage to the country and expressions of religious life were forcibly suppressed. Cult buildings were destroyed or designated for other purposes. The new government is trying to rectify the damage done in the field of religion, and cult buildings are being restored to their former status. Religious liberty is assured within the framework of the Marxist Constitution, as it is in the Soviet Union. The profession of religious belief and "atheism and its propaganda" are guaranteed legal equality and "freedom".

I was naturally especially interested in the situation of the Catholic Church, which is recognized by the government in the form of a patriotic Chinese Catholic Church.⁶ Catholics who remain loyal to Rome exist underground and, according to various sources, are said to outnumber the Catholic Patriotic Church. In the first few days of my visit I met the head of the Catholic Patriotic Church of Peking, the Bishop of Peking, at various receptions.⁷ He was accompanied by the so-called [Deputy?] General Secretary of the Catholic Patriotic Church of China.⁸ Both bishops wore episcopal insignia, as is customary in our own countries. Our meeting was very friendly and there were no indications of any reserve. However, when I asked whether a trip abroad,

to Austria for example, would be possible, I received an evasive answer. The present official Bishop of Peking was consecrated on 21 December 1979 without the consent of Rome. Thus according to Catholic canon law he is a schismatic bishop, which is also true of all the other bishops of this national Church. In Nanking I was able to attend a Mass celebrated by the Bishop of Nanking, but I had no opportunity of celebrating myself. The Mass was celebrated in the old Tridentine rite, exactly as it was before the Second Vatican Council. The Latin words came across clearly and distinctly. However, I was not able to find out whether the Bishop of Rome was named in the canon. Incidentally, I was told that for a long time nobody in China knew anything about a Second Vatican Council, and it was only in recent years that news of it reached church circles there.

I had some important discussions in Peking with Mr Xiao Xianfa, the Director of the Religious Affairs Bureau attached to the State Council, and Ulanhu, who is the government official responsible for questions concerning national and religious minorities. Mr Xiao is clearly one of the most important men responsible for religious affairs, and I was twice able to have lengthy talks with him.⁹ I would like to make the following points from these discussions:

1. It was impressed upon me that with the end of the Gang of Four's Cultural Revolution in 1976 a decisive turning point had occurred in the history of China. The so-called Gang of Four and their followers had plunged the country into economic ruin and dissolved the religious communities, using their cult buildings for secular purposes. With the new start in 1976 and the reconstruction of the economy, the government had made plans to re-establish the religious communities and to return religious buildings. According to Mr Xiao, the religious communities concerned are the Taoists, Buddhists, Muslims, Protestant Christians and the Patriotic Catholic Church.

2. With regard to the Patriotic Catholic Church in China, Mr Xiao explained that the new China was striving for total autonomy and independence in all areas of religion. This applied in particular to the Catholic Chinese Church. Union with Rome is declined.

3. My hosts noted my objection that the Vatican does not seek any political influence in a given country but envisages a supranational religious community with spiritual unity with the Bishop of Rome as a prerequisite; but they pointed out that China has had unpleasant experiences of both colonialism and foreign missions. This is why any dependence on foreign countries is declined.

4. In response to my further objection that in our understanding the Patriotic Catholic Church is a schismatic church, Mr Xiao said that his government sets great value on the national Catholic Church remaining faithful in all respects to tradition and following the faith of

the universal Catholic Church in all its outward practices. There should be no difference between it and the Roman Catholic Church. The first conference of the national Catholic Church was, he said, due to take place shortly (and this has since happened).¹⁰

5. When I asked whether informal contacts with the Vatican could be sought in order to bring the national Chinese Church out of its isolation, Mr Xiao replied that at present he saw no reason and no need to begin such discussions and contacts with the Vatican.

6. When I mentioned that there was a considerable amount of information which indicated the existence within China of a catacomb Church loyal to Rome, Mr Xiao replied that he knew about it. Some of this Church's bishops are in prison—including the Bishop of Shanghai—but this had happened, he said, for political reasons.

In Nanking I met the representatives of the religious communities of the province. All the members of this group told me (this time through an English interpreter) that since the end of the Cultural Revolution the religious communities in all the provinces have been free and that they have been able to practise their beliefs and, within certain limits, to develop their religious life. The bishop of the national Catholic Church who was present told me in a short conversation in Latin that he was fortunate to come from a family which has been Catholic for three generations.

I was able to gather from various discussions and observations that a parish structure in the national Catholic Church is almost non-existent, that Mass is celebrated in Latin according to the Tridentine rite of the Roman Catholic missal, and that the Sacraments are dispensed. I came across priests with the Roman breviary in their hands. The reply to my question as to whether religious education was ensured, and how this was done, intimated that this was a matter in which one had to rely on the family.

There is one question which I cannot answer, and that is whether the schismatic situation of the national Catholic Church is inwardly accepted by its bishops, priests and laity, or whether it is a matter of outward accommodation, of doing what is possible under the given circumstances.

It is extremely difficult to learn much about the catacomb Catholic Church which has remained loyal to Rome. I was very sorry that for obvious reasons I was not able to establish contact with the Roman Church. The loyal Roman Catholics emphatically refuse to have anything to do with the national Catholic Church, considering it an apostate and a traitor. Here and there, however, there appear to be a few alleviations for the Roman Catholics. For example, there are Chinese priests in orders and lay people living in Hong Kong who are now receiving permission to visit their relatives on the mainland. This

is also an opportunity for them to contact other members of their orders who are in concentration camps or labour camps. Thus quite a lot of news, relatively speaking, is filtering out about the fate of those exiled in labour camps and those living under house arrest.¹¹

The church policy of the Marxist national Chinese leadership is mainly pragmatic. In the education of young people and in the army, religion is denounced and attacked as an ideological deviation. This applies to all religions. However, little is to be learned about this in the general press. The relevant articles appear in journals which are not easily accessible to foreigners and the broad mass of the people. But there is much that points to a certain general relaxation of policies on religious liberty.

Nobody discussed the problem of Formosa [Taiwan] with me.

Nobody could tell me the number of bishops, priests and believers. As far as I know, the national Chinese Church does not have an episcopal conference,¹² but private meetings of several bishops may of course take place.

It is impossible to tell at this stage whether and when the Marxist policy on religion will change, or whether and when there can be a reconciliation between the Roman Catholic and national Catholic Church. In this vast country, which looks back with great pride on its history and national traditions, and where at present the utmost energy is being devoted to the acceleration of economic growth, a great deal is still possible.

(Note: All footnotes except those marked *Author* have been supplied by the Editor.)

¹The separate visits to China earlier this year by Cardinal Franz König (Archbishop of Vienna and then head of the Vatican Secretariat for Nonbelievers) and Cardinal Roger Etchegaray (Archbishop of Marseilles and President of the French Conference of Bishops) were organized on an informal private basis; but the fact that they took place at all is significant: they were the first visits to China by Roman Catholic Cardinals for at least 25 years. We are grateful to Cardinal König for allowing us to publish his report of his visit. For further information about events described in this article, see *Religion in the People's Republic of China (Documentation No. 2 & 3, July 1980)*, China Study Project, 6 Ashley Gardens, Rusthall, Tunbridge Wells, Kent TN4 8TY, England. For background to the present religious situation in China, see the article by Bob Whyte in *RCL* Vol. 8, No. 1, pp. 4-12.

²This phrase refers to the notion of a unified Europe as expounded in *A Word About Europe*, a declaration of the European Bishops' Conference dated 29 June 1977.

³This Association is a branch of the Foreign Ministry and deals with visits to China of an educational or cultural nature.

⁴Cardinal König in fact left China on 20 March.

⁵This Association is a united body of Protestant Churches in China. It is usually called the "Three-Self Movement" or the "National Protestant Church". It was originally formed in 1954 as a movement for "self-administration, self-support and self-propagation" amongst the Protestant Churches in China, with the aim of making them independent of foreign influence.

⁶Until this summer (see footnote 10), the Church functioned under the auspices of the "China Patriotic Catholic Association". It is independent from the Vatican.

⁷The Patriotic Catholic Association has been electing and consecrating its own bishops

since 1958: over 50 have been ordained since that date. The previous Bishop of Peking, Mgr Joseph Yao Guangyu, died in 1964. The present Bishop, Mgr Michael Fu Tieshan, who is only 48, was consecrated on 21 December 1979 by Mgr Michael Yang Gaojian, Primate of China and Bishop of the Changde diocese of Hunan, assisted by two other bishops. A photograph of Bishop Michael Fu Tieshan appeared in *RCL* Vol. 8, No. 1.

⁸Presumably this was the *Deputy* General Secretary of the Association, Bishop Yang Gaojian: the General Secretary himself is not a bishop.

⁹Xiao is also a member of the State Council, i.e. a member of the government. (*Author*)

¹⁰The third Synod of the Patriotic Catholic Association was held in Peking from 22 to 30 May (previous synods were held in 1957 and 1962). It was followed by the first "All-China Catholic Representative Conference" (31 May to 2 June). During this Conference two bodies were founded: the "National Administrative Commission of the Chinese Catholic Church" and the "Chinese Catholic Bishops' College". The Conference also resolved to re-open the philosophical and theological college of the China Catholic Church.

¹¹*China News Analysis*, a journal produced by Jesuits in Hong Kong, provides interesting and reliable information about religious developments and conditions in mainland China. (*Author*)

¹²Such a body has been established since Cardinal König's visit (see footnote 10). The Constitution of the new National Administrative Commission of the Chinese Catholic Church states that "the Bishops' College is formed by bishops of various dioceses. It is designed to study and expound the doctrines to be believed and the commandments and precepts to be observed, to exchange experience in propagating the Gospel and expand friendly contacts with foreign Catholics."

CORRECTION

An error on page 183 of *RCL* Vol. 8, No. 3 has recently been brought to our attention by a reader. It was wrongly stated that Garabandal is in Portugal. In fact the village of San Sebastian de Garabandal is in the Cantabrian Mountains of Northern Spain. Four young local girls are said to have been visited by the Virgin Mary some 2,000 times between 1961 and 1965 and to have received messages from her. The happenings at Garabandal are still under ecclesiastical investigation. *Ed.*