

**‘CHINA- SOME THOUGHTS ON THE WAY AHEAD’ BY CARDINAL O’BRIEN
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I concluded my previous words on my pastoral visit to China by saying: I think that the rest of the world must respond in every way possible ‘to life in the Church and in the State in China at this present time’. It is easy to say that I am now looking at China through rose-tinted spectacles. Perhaps I am – but I am indeed wishing all the peoples of China, religious and non religious, every blessing in the struggles which she is now facing.

I now write with three things in the forefront of my mind:

1. The history of the civilization of China and the present situation;
2. The history of the recent persecution of the Catholic Church in China;
3. Modern developments and how they effect the situation.

History of civilization of China and its effect on the present situation:

With regard to civilization in China – this is something well known by most people. Perhaps China was one of the greatest of the world’s civilizations in earlier times. One has only to walk along the great Wall of China, built in the 3rd Century BC; one has only to visit the Forbidden City completed in 1420 AD and opened gradually to the people of China as recently as 1925; one has only to look in awe at the treasures recently unearthed (1974) under the city of Xian including the vast army of ‘terracotta’ warriors, with much more excavation to be undertaken – to realize that China had been a civilized nation many centuries ago. China has always appeared to be ‘different’. There has been a certain ‘mystery’ about China which continues to this present day.

And what of China at this present time – particularly its ‘spirituality’. The question was raised as to where the ‘soul’ of Shanghai lay as we looked at its city plans for the future? I would continue to ask where is the ‘soul’ of China in the face of increased secularization of society and a wealth hitherto unknown. A daily newspaper I read while in China said: “China is expected to overtake Germany as the third largest economy of the world only behind the US and Japan. And in China itself there is increasing concern for the needs of the ‘poor west’ of China as compared to the ‘rich east’ and for the situation of the migrant workers flocking to the cities. The ‘rule of law’ is also struggling to replace ‘rule by law’.

In the face of all this we must continue to ask “where is the soul of China”? Some indication was given at the closing session of the Communist Party of China (CPC)17th National Congress held while I was in China. For the first time in its history the Communist Party of China mentioned the word ‘religion’ in an amendment to its constitution. A resolution on the amendment indicated that the insertion has been made in response to the demand posed by the new situation and the new tasks. Is this a genuine attempt of looking forward to finding the ‘soul’ of China – or simply a tactic to hold on to power? It is not for me to make a judgment on this – I leave that to those who are more knowledgeable than myself – but it could be taken as a positive step for further dialogue.

Spirituality seems to have been part of the nature of the Chinese people. When Christianity was brought to China by the great Jesuit missionary, Father Matteo Ricci, he indicated that he sought no privileges from China. The Church has its proper role to play in strengthening and developing the spirituality of the people of China. As stated by Pope Benedict XVI in his letter of May 27 2007: “Let China rest assured that the Catholic Church sincerely proposes to offer, once again, humble and disinterested service in the areas of her competence, for the good of Chinese Catholic and for the good of all the inhabitants of the country”.

The History of the recent persecution of the Catholic Church in China:

The history of the recent persecution of the Catholic Church is well known and documented. In the 1950's there was the expulsion of valiant women and men from Europe who had come to China as missionaries – this expulsion leaving the Catholic Church without many of its experienced leaders. We saw the birth of the ‘unregistered Church’, basically working underground to hand on the Catholic Christian faith; while the ‘registered Church’ worked more closely in collaboration with the State. This led to the formation of the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association. This association was resisted by many people as a matter of conscience, while others felt that membership of it was necessary to keep the Church alive. This caused a “painful situation of serious difference and caused division both among the clergy and among the lay faithful” as indicated by Benedict the XVI in his recent letter.

I have met many people who suffered grievously at and since that time. All sectors of the faithful suffered, including bishops, priests, nuns and laity. I was told of how the father of one family taught the members of his family their prayers by night at separate times; only later could they pray together; and only after that could they unite with other Catholics in their villages and towns.

Pope Benedict XVI acknowledged that faith and indicated: “With intense joy I acknowledge your faithfulness to Christ the Lord and to the Church, a faithfulness that you have manifested sometimes at the price of grave sufferings”. I constantly witnessed that same faith in the many thousands who prayed with me and came forward to greet me. It is my firm conviction that the Church world wide has a great lesson to absorb from the experience of those suffering and faithful people.

Modern developments and how they effect the situation:

There have been many important modern developments in the situation of the Catholic Church in China.

In recent years, there has been the reconciliation of many Bishops ordained without the mandate of the Holy See. This represents a wonderful step forward, and has strengthened the faith of the priests and lay faithful and built up unity in dioceses. I have met some bishops who are still seeking the legitimation of the Holy See. I know that the bishops of the unregistered Church are denied recognition by the civil authorities and freedom of association. I can only say that we all look forward to the day when all bishops will be in full communion with the Holy Father in their own Episcopal conference. As the Pope says: “Such an Episcopal conference expresses the fraternal

communion of all the Bishops of nation and treats the doctrinal and pastoral questions that are significant for the entire Catholic Community of the country”.

3.

In his recent letter, the Pope acknowledged the faithfulness of the people of China to Christ and his Church, but he did indicate: “There are some important aspects of the ecclesial life of your country which give cause for concern”. Many have accepted this letter joyfully, others have been hurt by certain phrases, but there is a desire which I have clearly seen that this letter be used as a major step on the way forward to the building up the unity of the Catholic Church in China and its challenging work of evangelization, while recognizing the legitimate role of the civil authorities.

When I was in China I was made more aware of the present response of the civil authorities of China to the present religious situation, especially following the Pope’s letter. Although there are challenges still to be met, religious freedom has grown over the past years – hence my own visit to China. I did visit the three cities of Xian, Beijing and Shanghai. I met the Bishops of these cities and prayed with them; I united in prayer with priests and convents of religious sisters; I spoke to members of staff, students and sisters in the two diocesan seminaries in Xian and Shanghai respectively and to all at the National Senior Seminary of Beijing. I think that for the good of the Church and the whole country of China further ways forward must be found in line with the teaching of the Church as promulgated by Pope Benedict XVI without denying the legitimate rights of the civil authorities there and the Chinese character necessary to find new avenues for the way ahead.

Conclusion:

Pope Benedict XVI summed up for me what we should be doing at this present time. In his recent letter, he used the words of Jesus to first apostles: “Launch out into the deep” and he said: “These words ring out for us today, and they invite us to remember the past with gratitude, to look at the present with enthusiasm, and to look forward to the future with confidence”. During my own visit I was able to thank God for that wonderful past. I witnessed the enthusiasm of the people of God in China for myself as a Cardinal in the Catholic Church and for Benedict XVI, our Pope. I became aware of the sterling work being done to prepare the thousands who are seeking baptism each year. I was introduced to the social gospel contributing so much to the poor, people with AIDS and lepers. Despite the hurdles that have to be got over, with all in China and with friends of China throughout the world, I look forward to the future with confidence, remembering the call of Pope Benedict XVI for the Catholics of the whole world to be united in prayer with the Church which is in China. The Pope asks us to pray especially for the Church in China on 24 May, the day dedicated to the liturgical memorial of Our Lady, Helper of Christians, who is venerated with great devotion at the Marian Shrine of Sheshan in Shanghai, a shrine which I myself was privileged to visit and to lead the people gathered in prayer there. In doing this we will show our own fraternal solidarity and solicitude for the peoples of China, helping them to be ever more close to Jesus Christ and to his Vicar on earth.

