

**Seed of the Church:
Telling the Story of Today's Christian Martyrs**
University of Notre Dame, South Bend IN, November 4 - 6, 2012

China: the Country Has Changed, Religious Policy Has Not

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Thirty years of policy on religious freedom

In 1982 the Chinese authorities, under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping, produced two of China's most important religious policy documents: *Document 19* and Article 36 of the *Constitution*. After 30 years, there has been little further progress in that field. In particular, there is little improvement in religious freedom.

If it cannot be denied that religious suppression as seen during the decades of Maoism campaigns has lessened considerably, the ideological arguments and instruments are mostly still there.

Today, there is little open persecution but a great deal of unwarranted control, manipulation and harassments. According to Ye Xiaowen, the former Director of the Religious Affairs Bureau: "The long-term goal of the government regarding religion remains to eliminate the impact of religion in China" (1998).

"Adaptation" is a central concept of the present religious policy of the Communist Party of China. The believers are considered second-class citizens that need the exhortations and guidance of the Party's officials; their activities need constant and strict control, correction and supervision.

In the last 30 years the country and the world have changed, China religious policy has not. The government's control over religion has been fluctuating between periods of relaxation and periods of tightening. This alternation had more to do with internal power struggles than external factors. The paramount concern of the government remains control and submission. Even when it relaxes its grip on religion, the government does so only to safeguard its control. Since late 2010 there has been worrisome regression in the application of the religious policy toward the Catholic Church.

The Catholics might be about 12 million, less than one per cent, (six million for the authorities). There are about 110 bishops in China today, a dozen not recognized by the Holy See, three of them publicly excommunicated. Nearly 40 Bishops are not recognized by China authorities. The priests are around 3300 (1300 in the non registered communities). Religious sisters are around 5000, including 1600 belonging to non registered communities.

Patriotic Association extends control

In 2003, the joint conference of Chinese Catholic bishops and the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association released three documents on Church management. They advocate independence from the Universal Church, a move that would destroy the very catholicity of the Catholic Church. The most serious departure from Catholic tradition and practice is the recurrent call for the clergy and faithful to uphold the leadership of the Communist Party, to adapt to Socialist society, and to "democratically" run Church affairs. Patriotic Association has to "support the leadership of the

Communist Party” (Article 3 of its Constitution) and responds to the policies of the United Front Work Department of the Communist Party.

One wonder if ever before self proclaimed Catholic institutions had declared that a specific political system should be supported, that the believers must adapt themselves to a political ideology, and that Church is “democratic” in nature.

Underground, or better non registered, communities are mainly dealt with by public security officials. The practices of extreme measures against members of the underground communities are not as widespread as before, but they have not been eliminated. Around 25 underground bishops and priests are still in detention, confined, house arrested or have disappeared; many more are prevented from exercising openly their ministry.

Central power fears that the Catholic Church, with its universal character and its reference to the authority of the Pope, might interfere in China’s internal affairs. As a consequence, many cadres do not really know, understand or appreciate the Catholic Church and how it works.

Some members of the Catholic Church are invited to attend meetings and symposiums abroad, but they are not permitted to go.

Pope Benedict XVI’s letter to Chinese Catholics (2007)

Time does not allow to talk about the unfortunate reaction of China authorities to the canonization of 120 martyrs of China on October 1, 2000; and of Benedict XVI Papal historical letter (June 30, 2007). Pope Benedict asks the authorities not to unduly interfere “in matters regarding the faith and discipline of the Church” and to recognize the underground bishops, in the hope to open a new season of normal life of the Church.

The reactions of Catholics to the letter were of great joy and appreciation. This does not come as a surprise, as all the Catholics in China, belonging to both open and underground communities, have a great devotion to the Pope. The words of the Pope really carry weight among Chinese Catholics more, I believe, than in most other countries.

2010-2011 the *annus horribilis*

Catholic condition began to deteriorate in late 2010, when Beijing, dismissing the Holy See’s objections, pushed through the ordination of the Bishop of Chengde and the celebration of the Eighth National Assembly of Catholic Representatives in Beijing (December 2010). Bishops Joseph Ma Yinglin and John Fang Xingyao were elected as the new leaders, and they stated that China would continue to elect and ordain bishops, with or without the Pope’s approval. These two men are closely tied to Liu Bainian, who for decades was delegated by the regime to manage the Catholic Church and to guide the Patriotic Association. He is still the one running the Church business in China for the regime.

Beijing forced through the ordination of two more bishops without the Pope’s approval in Leshan and Shantou in June and July 2011. Then, for the first time since 1958, the Holy See publicly declared that these last two illegitimately ordained bishops had incurred excommunication. On July 25, 2011, Beijing firmly denounced this grave sanction as “extremely unreasonable and rude”, and demanded its cancellation.

As an act of obvious reprisal for the Holy See’s actions, since July 2011, a number of Church people, mostly based in Hong Kong, have been blocked from entering the mainland. They belong to a blacklist of around 20 names. Some of those blacklisted are laypersons, most of them are priests

that Beijing appears to consider as having some sort of tie with the Vatican. Some of them have opted for not speaking publicly not to further aggravate the situation. I was working at a university in Beijing, after obtaining a working visa and a foreign expert certificate when I was also forced leaving China.

2012: Another difficult summer

On July 6, 2012, Yue Fusheng was ordained bishop in Harbin (Heilongjiang) despite the request made to him by the Holy See not to accept. At that time, two priests of the underground community were detained by officers and taken away to avoid that their presence might create disorder.

Seven priests who had refused to participate in the ordination Mass were forced out of their parishes in punishment. To avoid being expelled from the diocese, they were asked to write a letter of apology to the illicit bishop and to concelebrate with him.

The Holy See announced publicly the excommunication *latae sententiae* of Yue, who was known for his weakness and proximity to the government. Yet, as a young priest, Joseph Yue showed devotion to the Pope. He concelebrated with John Paul II (and thousands of other priests and bishops) at the unforgettable Holy Mass on January 15, 1995, in Manila, on the occasion of World Youth Day. Father Yue did not leave the Luneta Park as the rest of the Chinese delegation did in protest against the flag of Taiwan. At the end of Mass, he asked a European priest, it was me, for the gift of a stole that was specially prepared for the occasion with the pontiff's coat of arms. Unfortunately, Yue is a case in point of how the authorities are able sometimes to pull to their side good priests, making them lose their authentic sense of belonging to the Catholic Church.

Two ordinations in April were approved by both the Holy See and China. But both bishops had to accept at their consecration the presence of bishops in seriously irregular situations. The government's aim is clear: no one should be clean in front of the Catholic people; each must have some stain so as not to deserve the respect of the community and thus be more easily manipulated by the government.

These ordinations, even when approved by "both sides", make it evident that the conflict between the government bureaucrats and the Catholic communities is far from being resolved. The attempt to add one or more illegitimate bishops at the ordination Mass is a very serious abuse of Catholic tradition, showing that the officials, far from pursuing a dialogue with the Church, are determined to humiliate it.

Moreover, even in these recent Episcopal consecrations, there was the intimidating presence of many dozens of public security personnel. There are other acts of interference and manipulation, such as having the letter of appointment by the so-called Bishops' Conference (a canonically irregular body) read publicly, rather than the mandate of the Holy Father.

We are also aware that the officials attract bishops and priests with gifts (such as entertainment, easy traveling and even a political career) rather than using imprisonment, threats and violence. It is sadly known that those who are ordained or actively participate as consecrators are encouraged by a substantial financial reward. Many give in when the government promises assistance for their family and church structures, such as reparations and construction of buildings.

One has to be really good to renounce to these rewards. After all, it is easy to justify oneself with the excuse of the "good of the Church". Some resist, offering a splendid example to the universal Church, showing a virtue unknown to those ecclesiastics throughout the world, who turn their life into the pursuit of an ecclesiastical career or a search for power and money.

Experience proves that whoever surrenders to government pressures (and unfortunately they are

not few), condemns himself to a life of moral misery and new defeats. Once these people have given in, control of their life is seized by cadres deciding everything for them. We have known such bishops and priests, ever more sad and isolated, unable to free themselves from the grip forcibly controlling their activity or from the traps of the regime to implicate and blackmail them. Those who succumb to the pressure might be ordained almost against their will. Even in the decisive hours, as at death, they are prevented from behaving as true Catholics: deprived of the comfort of a confessor, of the sacraments and of a truly religious funeral (my memory goes back to the very sad case of Michael Fu Tieshan, the illicit bishop of Beijing).

Is there the danger of a *de facto* schism?

Some China observers (among them Jean Charbonnier and Angelo Lazzarotto) are concerned that a number of Chinese bishops and priests, oppressed by a sense of loneliness and helplessness, may be lured on by the persuasion of government officials. On the other hand, the Holy See occasionally fails to communicate with them in a significant and concerned manner. In some places, even among clergy, the conviction is gaining ground that the Chinese Church is doing fine without Rome. This trend leads far away from an authentically Catholicism and opens even to the danger of a *de facto* schism. Some Chinese priests ask whether is still necessary, in order to be loyal Catholics, to resist authorities, or whether this is not. So there is an urgent need for Rome and the Catholic world to multiply effective signs of solidarity to encourage Chinese pastors and faithful to live fully the common Catholic faith, which looks to the Roman pope as the leader to whom Jesus entrusted the guidance of his Church.

The standpoint of the Catholic faithful is quite clear: they are not willing to be governed by illegitimate bishops. An illegitimate bishop will become, in fact, a shepherd without a flock. It is quite dismaying to observe how the officials are unable to acknowledge that this policy does not work. There is no national Church or any “patriotic” Church in China, and the faithful, religious, priests and bishops do not want an independent Church.

Some observers argue, in favor of allowing government interference in the election of bishops, that in the past the Church allowed political power to have a say in the nomination of bishops. This is true: in the long history of the Church various regimes imposed their will on the Church. Now most Catholics are ashamed of those compromises. How can a mistake of the past justify an injustice of the present? Other people argue that the Church needs to be democratic, and therefore support the ‘democratic election’ of bishops. But a political power cannot impose this on the Church. It is up to the Church to decide how to choose its own leaders, and the authority of the Holy See is supposed to be a guarantee of freedom from political interference.

If I can appeal to the young bishops, priests and religious in China in China, I would say: Rome is not perfect, but it remains the centre of our Catholic faith. The Holy Father is on your side: many people in Rome, and indeed in the entire Church, are sincerely eager to support you.

From China there are some moving witness of fidelity and integrity, and that of the bishop Ma Daqing of Shanghai gives reason for hope.

Shanghai Auxiliary Bishop Thaddeus Ma Daqing is under detention

The story of Bishop Thaddeus Ma Daqing, who is just 45 years old, marks a dramatic change for the Catholic Church in China. What he did during his ordination Mass is considered by many to be a prophetic gesture, potentially loaded with important consequences. On July 7, 2012, in the Cathedral of Shanghai, the new auxiliary bishop was ordained with the approval by both parties. However, once again the authorities imposed the presence of one illicit bishop, for the dismay of many priests,

religious and lay people who decided not to attend the ceremony.

Thaddeus Ma Daqin, with an unusual stratagem, prevented the illicit bishop from imposing hands on him during the ordination Mass. Then, at the time of the reading the appointment letter of the bishops' conference, the audio stopped working. Towards the end of the Mass, the new bishop surprised everyone by declaring that he will be the bishop of all faithful, and therefore he will cease to be member of the Patriotic Association. An amateur video of Bishop Ma's short speech, strongly applauded by the people in the cathedral, appeared for a few days at various websites until it became a victim of censorship.

Government officials present at Mass became very agitated: they did not join the banquet and forcibly took him away that same evening. Thaddeus Ma is still under "house arrest" at the Sheshan seminary (Shanghai), which is now closed even for the seminarians. Bishop Ma cannot contact anyone, his website occasionally runs verses of traditional texts or Christian prayers. Bishop Ma's passion for Chinese classics is known: those texts may indicate his willingness to endure in a Christian spirit his difficult condition. Many Catholics in China show support to Bishop Ma through the internet. PIME website *missionline* has launched an online campaign of support to Bishop Ma, which received many messages of encouragement from all around the world.

Shanghai Catholics believe that the detention of Ma may last for a long time, perhaps years, if he does not yield to pressure from officials. They have put the diocese under investigation, questioning priests and nuns who had refused to participate in the ordination.

Tension remains high in Shanghai, and the event is on the lips of all the priests and faithful. Everyone realizes that this is a turning point; for the first time a bishop of the official community has rebelled publicly to the government impositions. Many went back to the events of September 8, 1955, the most tragic day in the history of the Shanghai Church, when hundreds of priests, religious and lay leaders were imprisoned with the heroic bishop Ignatius Kung Pinmei (later created a cardinal by Pope John Paul II). The bishop publicly and firmly refused to abjure the pope, suffering as a result 30 years of imprisonment. Certainly the case of Bishop Ma is less dramatic, but nevertheless it fits well into a story of strength and pain already familiar to the Church in Shanghai.

Diplomatic effort is not sufficient

The attention given so far by the media is almost exclusively to the question of diplomatic relations between the Holy See and Beijing. High officials in Rome, both political and ecclesiastical, have made efforts in attempts, so far always unsuccessful, to come up with a result. It is evident that Beijing has no interest in establishing diplomatic relations with the Holy See. Beijing will not have Taiwan, currently under the leadership of friendly Ma Yingjiu, to suffer the humiliation of losing the nunciature of the Holy See. Consequently, the question of diplomatic relations is put off indefinitely. It would, in any case, be unrealistic to expect that the diplomatic relations with the present regime would solve the problems of Catholicism.

China Church rather needs solidarity and new efforts for pastoral growth; evangelization and spiritual life.

Archbishop Savio Hon Tai-fai, the Chinese theologian appointed by Benedict XVI in December, 2010, to be the secretary of *Propaganda Fide*, may hopefully contribute to the realization of this task. We can also hope for positive reactions to Cardinal Fernando Filoni, the prefect of *Propaganda Fide*, call for reopening of dialogue recently affirmed through an article appeared on the last issue of Hong Kong based journal *Tripod*. Filoni was for eight years responsible for the Holy See's Study Mission in Hong Kong. However, some Chinese members of the clergy have expressed little hope that even this gesture will bring about an opening from China authorities, especially during this time

of epochal transition of leadership.

Modernization challenges for evangelization

As elsewhere in the world, also in Chinese society, the quick and all-encompassing modernization now taking place has become a challenge and a serious threat to the practice and the spread of the Catholic faith. In the decades of the violent Communist persecution, the community was assisted and strengthened by the example of several martyrs and courageous believers. Parents today find it difficult to hand on their faith to their children who are leaving the village for the city where they are tempted and overwhelmed by the prevailing materialism.

Secularization is having a negative impact on Catholicism. The number of faithful is not growing at a significant rate (contrary to what is happening in the evangelical groups); candidates to the priesthood and religious life are getting fewer; churches in the cities are not well frequented, especially by young people. Some priests, coming from families with a long Catholic tradition, confide to us that their young nephews don't go to Church any more, confused as they are by the drastic social changes. Luckily, there are happy exceptions in cities like Beijing, Shanghai and Xi'an, as well as in the Hebei province.

In facing such a widespread problem, the Chinese Church does not have the possibility of organizing adequate formation programmes to meet the challenges. Bishops, priests and religious sisters, under constant pressure from ever present cadres in charge of the religious policy, often feel hindered from responding adequately to the needs of their communities, while society is fast changing.

There are efforts to witness Christ's love for the poor, but they are still small to have significant impact on such a vast and complex society; almost totally absent are study and research centers capable of analyzing the situation and preparing the faithful and their pastors to deal with the future of Catholicism in that great country.

The enthusiasm and zeal of priests, sisters and bishops are put to a heavy test by the lack of true freedom. Several new ideas and pastoral initiatives are boycotted rather than being approved by conservative and old fashioned officials who are determined to avoid any risk: they prefer to err by forbidding rather than by permitting. Such an unfortunate situation sows discouragement and lack of self-confidence in young Church leaders, to the point that a number of priests leave the priesthood.

Matteo Ricci and Paul Xu Guangqi: a friendship and a hope

In recent years, we have had several opportunities to remember Father Matteo Ricci, the founder of modern Christian mission in China, and his best disciple, the great Paul Xu Guangqi, a scientist and statesman from Shanghai, who contributed greatly to the scientific, cultural, religious and social progress. I have been called to help with the causes of beatification for Matteo Ricci in Macerata (Italy) and of Xu Guangqi in Shanghai. Both are a shining example: their friendship and collaboration show eloquently a possible way also in the present situation. They show that it is possible to be excellent Catholics and excellent citizens, contributing to the progress of the country. The way of friendship, which is an evangelical value and a Confucian virtue, is the only way capable of curing the present difficulties and opening up a season of mutual respect and collaboration. Government authorities should allow the building of bridges if a more harmonious society is to be built. Let Xu Guangqi and Matteo Ricci inspire us with their brilliant story of friendship and collaboration.