

Hearings on Religious Persecution in China: Fr. Drew Christiansen Oral Testimony

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(Note: These are unedited and uncorrected transcripts)

Fr. Frew Christiansen

FATHER CHRISTIANSEN: Mr. Chairman, Commissioners, I thank you for your invitation to speak before you this afternoon.

I prepared a paper to deliver to you. It is in my bag; but unfortunately, on the plane I read a communicative when I came in last night from a very trusted source that puts a different spin on things. I will share it as we go along. I don't think -- much of what I have to say is still very relevant and important, but I think the context and tone need to be shifted away from the Holy Land with the Holy Father's pilgrimage. But I will do my best to have the revised version in the hands of staff by Monday morning.

At the present moment, China policy is highly contested, and religious liberty is close to the center of the debate. In the heat of the moment, however, it is very important that we understand the complexity of the religious situation in China, especially as it relates to the Catholic Church. For the purpose of this testimony, let me cite just a few of the ways, in recent events, which we may view the complexity of the situation, and show that it's more complex than some simplistic versions have tried to render them.

First, there is only one Catholic Church in China; one church with two faces. The internal policy of the Church is to affirm that unity and contrast, to those who see one side as loyal to Rome and the other as loyal to Beijing.

Second, in many places, especially in the cities,

there is cooperation between members of the two communities and the one Catholic family; figures in the authorized church and institutions providing safe haven, education and support to members of the unauthorized committee.

Third, more than 80 percent of the bishops of the authorized church are said to have sought and received retroactive approval from Rome.

Fourth, even if the Patriotic Association and Religious Affairs Bureau put obstacles in the way of establishing relations between China and the Holy See, others in China are trying to build bridges. For example, shortly after the Vatican protested the January 6th unauthorized ordinations, Cardinal Angelo Sodano, the Vatican Secretary of State, also disclosed that informal relations with the Chinese have been established.

Fifth, while some developments are of national significance, the persecution of underground Christians continues to vary by region and is particularly strong in a few regions of Hebei.

The January 6th ordinations themselves were an example of this complexity. While the Patriotic Association organized the ordinations, many clergy, seminarians and laypeople utilized the event to exercise the margin of independence it had for some years in China. Some of the candidates hesitated for a time before consenting to be ordained. Others begged off, making excuses that could be understood and accepted in Chinese Catholic culture. The acolyte for the national seminary practiced in preparation for the event, did not appear the morning of the ordination. The seminarians from another institution had to be hurriedly brought in to substitute.

At the conclusion of the ordination, the friar, rather than singing a joyful hymn as is customary, sang a lamentation. Most important, the ordination rite included an expression of loyalty to the Holy Father, and the congregation prayed for his welfare. So recently, there's been some narrow space to take one's own position -- to display that the government orchestrated religious activity to demonstrate where one's true loyalties lie.

The situation has changed. It seems once again to be deteriorating. There's a great distance to go before freedom of religion in China exists in any full sense of the word.

Let me read to you the communication that I found so disturbing that I need to revise my comments. Again, this is a very trusted source, who has been able to travel in and out of China many times, but is relied upon by the Holy See and is relied upon by the rest of us who are interested in China. It is a very balanced source. He also tends to be somewhat optimistic in general, looking for the glass half full. This is what he says:

"I have in the past happily informed my brothers and sisters in the world church about the positive evolutions that took place in the Chinese Catholic Church. These friends now look bewildered at me when I tell them about recent events happening in the same People's Republic of China. Is China returning to the past? Sadly enough, I feel it is my duty to tell them now that things are definitely not going the way we had all hoped. "Even after the date of the ordination, January 6, the situation develops further in the wrong direction. It proves the planned policy is being followed. More consecrations are scheduled during the coming months. So-called illegal church buildings are being destroyed. The Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association is being introduced in areas where it never existed before. These days, party cadres travel to the countryside to press underground bishops, to make them promise obedience to the CCPA, not just cooperation.

"But without any consultation of the Church, sweeping changes are now being made to the division of dioceses. Dioceses, just a few years ago, were divided, and unexpectedly are now suddenly reunited again or abolished, without any previous notice. The purpose is obviously to eliminate underground bishops and force them under the control of the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association."

One of the principal concerns about the improvement of the religious situation in China from the point of view of the Catholic Church: First, there must be an end to state repression of religion in China. Second, the Catholic Church presses for an end to the interference in the internal affairs of the Church. Much of the open church accepts the restrictions as a price of being able to function as a worshipping community. Held in place by the Religious Affairs Bureau is a constant reminder that the religious freedom is highly conditional.

Thirdly, the Universal Catholic Church, including the Catholic bishops of the United States, seeks eventual reconciliation and unity of the true Catholic community in China; discourages dissensions between them. Finally, Catholics stated the establishment of relations between the Vatican and Beijing be in such fashion that there may be an official presence in Beijing of a representative of the Holy Father.

Because

there is such a backlog of false information and misunderstanding, the Vatican liaison in China would help dispel myths, construct bridges of understanding, and help the local church plan its own Chinese way to be the Catholic Church in China. The normalization of relations with the Vatican, I believe, might be one part of the diplomatic message the United States communicates to the Chinese government.

How

should the United States show that it is concerned about religious liberty in China? A beginning has been made with this Commission, the appointment of Ambassador Seiple, but those developments have not changed the overall crux of the U.S. foreign policy with respect to religious liberty.

The U.S. has a problem with priorities.

When CDs are being pirated, at trade negotiations, they go in like a SWAT team to defend intellectual property rights. But when evangelical Christians are arrested or Catholic bishops disappear, Ambassador Seiple has no SWAT team.

It is no news that there are religious prisoners in China today. When a delegation of the Religious Affairs Bureau visited a couple years ago, we asked the Chairman, Mr. Yee, about a handful of cases. Much to our surprise, Mr. Yee pulled out a small book containing details about the current state of cases. Even an expert like John Kamm was amazed to learn that there was a unified record actually being kept of political prisoners and the state in which they were currently found.

Tools of U.S. diplomacy

need to be brought to bear in a broad way to make China's religious prisoners of conscience an undeniable priority in U.S./China relations. Making policy about China's violation of religious liberty is not just a matter of using the options available under the International Religious Liberty Act; rather, that is a matter of making religious liberty a first concern of our whole diplomatic effort.

Our

European friends should be encouraged by all of our ambassadors on a daily basis to join the U.S. initiative before the U.N. Human Rights Commission. Trade representatives, as Mr. Smith suggested, business travelers on the state department of the government auspices, ought to raise these concerns as their own in private talks with their counterparts. The U.S. Ambassador to China should pose a question on human rights and religious liberty in every meeting with the Chinese government. So it is a step from the military attache to the commercial

attache.

I can't conclude without commenting about decisions concerning China this year, and in granting a permanent, normal trading relationship with China and China's acceptance to the WTO. These are difficult questions for Catholics. Catholic social teaching affirms an uncton for the poor, a right to development, and a duty and solidarity to aid developing countries. With a quarter of the world's population, perhaps 80 percent of it poor, China needs support for development. If at all possible, one should not stand in the way of the projects and the prospects of hundreds of millions of poor Chinese.

On

the other hand, the Church also teaches that the common good consists in the promotion, safeguarding, and defense of human rights; religious rights, yes, but labor rights too, for all the rights of every person. The Chinese officials again and again have made clear they will not enter the world trading system if the price is giving up internal control in any way, be it religion, labor, political association or open expression. That obstinacy puts Catholics and all Americans committed to human rights between a rock and a hard place. What should the U.S. do?

The way out is not just taking a stand on one vote. It involves, as I said, making human rights, religious liberty, a priority of the entire U.S./China relations. Only such an effort can clear the way for granting permanent, normal trading relations and acceptance to the WTO. Single gestures of a second-level priority, such as the resolution of the Human Rights Commission, are simply not enough to justify generously awarding bad behavior.

Since 1990, each time a renewal has come up, the United States has expressed its concerns about human rights and religious freedom. In 1991, called for a title of certification condition of significant improvement to human rights and freedom of religion, which at the very least should include the release of all imprisoned religious leaders and political prisoners.

In

subsequent years, the Administration's determination to renew, the Conference urged U.S. insistence on conditioning that status on the Chinese adhering to the norms governing human rights and religious liberty. The conference has not yet taken a public position on the trading relationship. I believe it is likely to adopt a similar position this time around. Why? Why allow trade to erode resistance to change over time? Trade, after all, is said to bring all things with it, doesn't it? Absolutely not.

The positive linkage of trade and human rights is a thesis that remains to be proved. Where would Eastern European countries be if we had not pushed for human, religious, and labor rights in the '70s and '80s? You would not see human rights, the freedom of the church, and the rescue of Soviet Jewry independent of improvements in trade. Is it not true that the human rights facet at the Helsinki accord was a primary factor in tearing down the Iron Curtain and demolishing the Berlin wall? Why should China be an exception?

Let me conclude by saying that advancing religious liberty agenda with respect to China does not necessarily mean offending Chinese sensibilities. The ways of American activism and the Chinese culture do not always go well together. As we advance upon the agenda of religious liberty, we should be able to seek out and utilize approaches that are more amenable to the Chinese, when we can. I don't think we always can. I've learned this from some of my Jesuit (inaudible) 17th century and from John Kamm and Gene Hurst (phonetic) and other business people I know, who work effectively in China both in business and on human rights issues.

To make progress on human rights it takes long lines at banquets. To make progress on human rights it takes long nights. If it takes working through intermediaries to free political prisoners, use them. If it takes long hours of listening to events for one right, then let's listen. If it means sounding deferential, but the message distributed is clear and sincere actions forthcoming, act deferentially.

Gandhi has taught us all, to win in a moral struggle, the adversary mustn't only save face, he must himself feel like he is the winner. As the passage from my colleague indicated, this is a time of turmoil in church-state relations in China. The situation is complex. The general direction appears to be a negative one. Today's conditions require firm, consistent determined policy on the part of the whole United States government.

Experience has shown that nothing short of a strong, concerted effort has hope of deterring the government of China from this present course. Mr. Chairman, Members of the Commission, thank you for listening.