

WORLD & NATION

Cardinal reflects on China visit

By John Thavis
Catholic News Service

VATICAN CITY — The hopes and difficulties in Vatican-Chinese relations were well-illustrated in September by the visit of a high-ranking Vatican official to Beijing, by China's arrest of Catholic activists and by a public squabble over the upcoming canonization of Chinese martyrs.

French Cardinal Roger Etchegaray, head of the Vatican's jubilee committee and a top aide to Pope John Paul II, met with a number of government officials and those of the government-approved Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association during a visit Sept. 13-21.

Cardinal Etchegaray's encounters were significant, according to church sources, and even the Chinese government described his visit as a "success" that allowed for a productive exchange of views.

In an interview with Vatican Radio Sept. 25, Cardinal Etchegaray said his trip gave him hope that the church in China was moving toward unity and that dialogue with state authorities would increase. He said he was happy to find that the pope was viewed as an inspiring leader even among the government-backed Catholics — a fact which, he said, "in no way diminishes my recognition of the heroic fidelity of the church of silence" in China.

Cardinal Etchegaray met with State Councilor Ismail Amat, a member of the executive body of the state administration, who deals with religious affairs, and with a director of the Office for Religious Affairs.

The cardinal also held talks with the president of the patriotic association, Bishop Michael Fu Tieshan of Beijing, and with government-recognized Bishop Aloysius Jin Luxian of Shanghai. Unlike several million clandestine Catholics in China, the pa-

triotic association rejects papal authority, and the patriotic bishops' conference elects its own bishops.

In the Vatican Radio interview, Cardinal Etchegaray said he expressed to his Chinese hosts his deep disappointment at not being able to meet with clandestine Catholics. He said he viewed the church in China essentially as "a single church in which a common faith is trying, bit by bit, to overcome that which, up to now, unfortunately separates 'clandestine' and 'official' (Catholics)."

Addressing a symposium on religion and peace Sept. 14 — officially the reason for his trip to China — the cardinal underlined the Catholic Church's commitment to defending human rights and religious freedom. He said "fear of the other" was often at the root of conflicts, and he urged that interreligious respect go beyond "simple tolerance."

Respect, he said, is "founded not on the right to true religion but on every human being's right to a religious freedom that is also protected by the laws of society."

Yet the same day the cardinal made the remarks, Chinese authorities arrested two bishops and a priest of the underground church. In separate raids in the southeastern province of Jiangxi, police arrested 81-year-old Bishop Thomas Zeng Jingmu of Yu Jiang, Auxiliary Bishop Deng Hui and Father Liao Haiqing, the Italian news agency ANSA reported.

Bishop Zeng, under house arrest for more than two years, yelled as he was dragged from his residence and appeared to have been beaten by police, ANSA said.

Church sources in Rome said the arrests did not appear to be directly related to the cardinal's visit, but were part of a long-running crackdown on unauthorized religious practice.

Reporting on the arrests, UCA News, an Asian news agency based in Thailand, quoted unnamed priests of the government-approved patriotic church who said that the Chinese government had "set this year as a 'year of strict control,' with the Catholic Church among its targets."

Bishop Zeng has spent more than 30 years in Chinese prisons, said the Stamford, Conn.-based Cardinal Kung Foundation, which reports on persecution of Catholics in China. Joseph Kung, foundation president, called on Cardinal Etchegaray to protest the arrests to Chinese authorities. Later the cardinal said he had done so "vigorously."

Meanwhile, a separate controversy was brewing over the Oct. 1 canonization of 120 Chinese martyrs — 87 Chinese and 33 missionaries — killed between 1648 and 1930, most during the anti-foreigner Boxer Rebellion of 1900.

Cardinal Etchegaray heard complaints on the topic from government officials and leaders of the government-recognized church. The patriotic association leaders reportedly told him that mainland bishops were not consulted before the canonization and said they would have difficulty explaining the ceremony to their faithful — especially since it was widely seen as a political event.

The government objected to those being named saints, which it said included at least one "anti-China" missionary, and to the date of the canonization, Oct. 1, China's National Day, which marks the beginning of communist rule.

Cardinal Etchegaray dismissed the idea that the pope was trying to embarrass the Chinese government by the choice of the canonization date, saying: "John Paul II, a great friend of China, would not stoop to such base calculations."

Vatican spokesman Joaquin-Navarro Valls held an unusual briefing Sept. 22 to rebut the Chinese allegations and try to smooth the diplomatic waters. He said the canonizations held no hidden political message.



Reuters/CNS

Newly ordained bishops leave the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception in Beijing Jan. 6. Chinese Bishop Liu Yuanren ordained five new state-approved bishops in defiance of Pope John Paul II, who alone has the authority for naming bishops in the church.

"This is a strictly religious ceremony," Navarro-Valls said. "It expresses the great evangelizing vitality of the local churches which sent the missionaries and a strong vitality in adhesion (to the faith) on the part of the Chinese."

As for the date, the spokesman said the reasons for choosing Oct. 1 were "so obvious that the possibility of other interpretations was not even considered." He said October was traditionally dedicated to remembering the importance of missionary activity, and Oct. 1 was the feast of St. Therese of Lisieux, patron of missions.

"Unfortunately, there are not direct diplomatic channels" with Beijing, so explaining these things becomes more difficult, Navarro-Valls said, noting that all of the martyrs being canonized died before 1930, "not in the context of the present political situation in China."

As for accusations that some of the missionaries were anti-Chinese, Navarro-Valls said people making those claims "must provide proof and documentation" if they want the allegations to be taken seriously.

"In reality, all of these martyrs, including the foreign missionaries, loved China deeply and tried to inculcate the Gospel," he said.



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