

# Cardinal calls for unity of Chinese Catholic communities

LONDON – A Scottish cardinal has told Chinese Communist Party officials there is no need for a patriotic association in their country.

Cardinal Keith O'Brien of St. Andrews and Edinburgh said he told the officials the overwhelming majority of Chinese Catholics wanted to be united in one church community under the authority of the pope and did not want to be working through the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association. The patriotic association acts as a liaison between registered Catholics and the Chinese government.

The cardinal made his remarks in a late-October visit to China during an hour of discussions with Ye Xiaowen, the director of the State Administration for Religious Affairs, and deputy director Wang Zuo'an.

"I was saying that in every country in the world Catholics are regarded as being patriotic and loyal to their country as they are to their religion," the cardinal told Catholic News Service in a telephone interview Nov. 2.

"I said that there is no need in Scotland for a patriotic Scottish church. We are as patriotic as anyone else in our country," said Cardinal O'Brien.

"I said I saw no need to have a patriotic Catholic Church in China. Catholics in China are as much patriots to their country as Catholics are in any other country in the world and, therefore, there is no need for a patriotic church in China," he added.

He said he told the officials he thought it "extremely sad" that the four Chinese Catholic bishops invited to attend the Synod of Bishops on the Eucharist at the Vatican in 2005 were not allowed to leave their country.

Cardinal O'Brien said such opinions were met mostly with awkward silences.

"There were a few contentious points raised in discussions, but that was what the visit was about, not just to paper over the cracks but to be open, friendly and honest

about ways forward," he said.

"We had some full and frank discussions," he added. "There was no way I was going to China to say everything is lovely if I didn't think everything was lovely."

The cardinal was formally invited to visit the mainland by the State Administration for Religious Affairs.

Throughout China, Catholics who suffered after the government closed churches in the late 1950s and during the 1966-76 Cultural Revolution kept their faith alive under tough conditions.

Later, they had to decide whether or not to openly worship and work within the system under restrictions imposed by the government, including rejecting ties to the Vatican. Some Catholics continued to practice their faith clandestinely.

Early in the 21st century, the Chinese government appeared to be relaxing its control.

Today, China requires that church leaders and prominent church buildings be registered with the government, although registration requirements vary from place to place. Registration usually includes a requirement for unregistered priests to concelebrate Mass with a registered bishop and sometimes compels them to profess support for the "independent, autonomous and self-management" principle that the government insists on for the church.

Pope Benedict XVI's pastoral letter to Chinese Catholics, issued June 30, called for unity between the registered and unregistered communities.

Cardinal O'Brien said he thought the pope's letter had given the church in China "renewed hope for the future."

He said that during his Oct. 19-29 visit to the Chinese mainland he witnessed a "great bustle" of "enthusiastic people and enthusiastic congregations" in a church that was busy preparing young men and women for the priesthood and religious life, catechizing the young, administering the sacraments, and helping people with AIDS and Hansen's disease.

"I think many ordinary Catholics realized that there was something wrong in their own situation in which some of them belonged to a registered church and some did not," he said. "There is that split, and the pope's letter has held out tremendous hope for bishops and priests who might be in irregular situations at this time to be reconciled."

He added, "The feeling that came through to me was that members of the church want things to be put right and put right as soon as possible."

The cardinal said that after speaking or celebrating Mass in public he would pray for the "ongoing loyalty" of the church in China to the pope.

He said that afterward his audience would invariably want to kiss the ring given to him by the pope as a sign of their loyalty to the Vatican.

"I had a great sense of the process of normalization taking place," Cardinal O'Brien said. "It filled me with a tremendous sense of hope and consolation."

He said he was also impressed by the economic progress of China but said he felt that such advances needed to be underpinned by a "sound spirituality."