

Hope for normalizing relations with China

COLUMBUS, Ohio – Pope Benedict XVI's top diplomat at the United Nations said the Vatican wants to normalize relations with China, which it sees as a major way of advancing religious freedom and fostering unity among Chinese Catholics.

Archbishop Celestino Migliore, the Vatican's U.N. nuncio, expressed hope that a papal letter to Chinese Catholics to be released around Easter will be seen as proof of the Vatican's good will and pave the way for Vatican talks with Chinese officials that could lead to diplomatic relations and resolution of differences over the church's status in the Asian nation.

Other church officials have said that the letter will be translated into Chinese and sent to the Chinese government several days before its publication.

"We have never severed our ties with the Chinese people," said Archbishop Migliore, at a March 2 news conference before giving a speech at St. Charles Preparatory School in Columbus.

At the same time, he said, the Vatican is hoping that a formula can be found to maintain ties with Taiwan while opening diplomatic relations with China.

The Chinese government has required severing diplomatic ties with Taiwan as a prerequisite for establishing diplomatic relations with the Vatican.

"We are ready to go back to Beijing without abandoning Taiwan," the archbishop said, without specifying whether future contacts with Taiwan would include diplomatic relations.

Archbishop Migliore said the Vatican's main differences with China involve continued recognition of Taiwan, freedom to worship and appointment of bishops.

In a March 12 e-mail reply to questions from Catholic News Service, the archbishop said he could not anticipate any specific formulas for balancing relations between China and Taiwan, but that precedents already have been set by other countries.

“We need only think of those countries that have embassies in Beijing while at the same time maintaining official commercial, scientific and cultural relations with Taipei,” he said.

Taipei is the Taiwanese capital.

Ties between the Vatican and China were cut in 1951, two years after communists took control of the Chinese government. The ousted Chinese Nationalist government moved to the island of Taiwan, claiming to still be the legitimate Chinese government. China claims Taiwan as its territory and does not recognize the Taiwanese government.

The Vatican is the only European government that has diplomatic relations with Taiwan.

In China there is the government-controlled Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association, formed in 1957, and what has been called the “underground church,” which maintains ties to the pope.

At the March 2 news conference, Archbishop Migliore said the term “underground church” does not apply any more. “There is nothing underground because everybody knows everything.”

He also said Chinese officials should not fear that full religious freedom would mean Catholics would be more loyal to the Vatican than to their own nation.

“Our policy is to recommend that Catholics be good citizens, pay their taxes and cooperate with the government for the common good,” the archbishop said.

Regarding the Chinese government’s desire to appoint bishops, he compared it to the situation in Vietnam where, several years ago, a similar disagreement was resolved, with the Vatican agreeing to consult with the government over the appointment of bishops but still having the final say. He said the same thing could be done with the Chinese.

“Our real problem is strengthening the unity among members of the church in China,” he said.

"The government realizes that getting the Catholic Church under its umbrella didn't work," he said.

On Iraq, the archbishop said that although the Vatican did not favor the U.S. invasion, it also is opposed to a massive troop withdrawal.

"Once you undertake to free a country from dictatorship and bring democracy and human rights, you have to find a way to do that and respect human life," he said. "You can't just leave and say 'Now it's up to you.'"

Archbishop Migliore described Vatican-Muslim relations as improving.

In September, the pope gave a speech in Germany quoting a medieval emperor as saying Islam spread its faith "by the sword." This angered many Muslims and the pope later distanced himself from the comment.

The archbishop said that the pope recognizes that problems exist between Christians and Muslims and that they need to be examined.

"If we don't want to resort to the use of force, there is one way to solve the problem, and that is to put all our cards on the table and recognize what in our cultures is not working," he said. "We're not going to change the Quran, and they're not going to change the Bible, but we respect each other's sacred books."

On nuclear disarmament he said the most important step now would be the start of serious negotiations among the five nuclear superpowers: the United States, Russia, China, Britain and France. He said those nations needed to set an example to justify their demands that nations such as Iran and North Korea halt their nuclear programs.

In the 1970s, the Vatican supported the concept of nuclear deterrence, the policy that the world's superpowers had nuclear stockpiles as a way of preserving peace by maintaining a balance of power, he said.

"I don't think we'd subscribe to the possibility of deterrence today," he said. "Thirty years later, nuclear weapons are not a deterrent. The potential of destruction is too great."

Contributing to this story was Agostino Bono in Washington.