

## Expert: OLYMPIAD MADE CHINA WORSE

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BY Edward Pentin, National Catholic Register  
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As the world looks forward to the Olympic Games in Beijing, little is known about the human cost of staging the event.

That's why Father Bernardo Cervellera, the director of Asia News and a veteran expert on China, has published a book in Italian on just that subject. Called *The Flipside of the Medals*, it is a no-holds-barred account of the continuing human rights violations in the country, and how the games are having none of the positive impact on Chinese society that many had hoped for. Father Cervellera spoke June 13 with Register correspondent Edward Pentin in Rome about the book and current Vatican-China relations.

Are there changes going on in China?

There are, and it's the worst kind of change. Nowadays it seems that the Communist Party of China doesn't have any more ideals of harmony, justice and so on. It's just a group of people in power who are trying their best to collect as much money as possible to send it abroad and to exploit the Chinese population with their corruption.

People whom I have met are defining the Olympic Games as a national disaster because they have suffered exploitation in the workplace; they have no health care, no pension funds, no housing and so on.

So they're getting no benefits from these Olympics at all?

None. Also, there are 1.5 million people in Beijing who have been evicted and left homeless. Their houses were destroyed in order to build these new constructions for the Olympic Games.

On the one hand, there are the pleasant new buildings, new hotels, new facilities in the city of the "New Beijing, Great Olympics" — one of the slogans they have used. But, on the other hand, there are issues of betrayed human rights relating to working conditions that are appalling, both during and before the Olympic Games.

So China's actually getting worse?

China is portraying herself as the center of the world for these Olympic Games, and they're claiming to have renewed their country, that they are now a different and modern country.

In reality, from my reports, experience and also the witnesses I have met, China is still a very, very violent country towards human beings and towards freedom of religion. Perhaps we should say one more thing: that where the Olympic Games really are changing China, and where the Games are really a historical turning point for the country, is in the area of politics.

The political power of the Chinese Communist Party is transforming itself into an oligarchic and economic power in society with all the consequence of this: injustice, corruption, violence against human beings and violation of human rights.

In the book, do you criticize the International Olympic Committee for not taking a firmer stand against China?

Yes, the Olympic Committee has been a failure in some ways. They supported the candidacy of Beijing, believing that through the Olympic Games, China would have to face a new situation and acquire a new respect for human rights.

But when China is accused of repressing Tibetan monks, of arresting human rights activists, of arresting bishops and priests and so on, they say: "Oh, we are not an NGO [nongovernmental organization], we are not a social organization, and we are not a political organization. We are just a society interested in sports."

But in the past they have said sport is useful for human rights. Now they are washing their hands, just like Pilate.

Do you think it's because their underlying motivation is purely one of economics?

I think so. My impression is that to give the Olympic Games to Beijing was just a kind of economic plan to exploit China's cheap labor and large population. The sponsors for the Olympic Games are people or companies who want to enter the Chinese market, so it has this economic attraction. I don't know how much their plans will succeed.

Would you say this was a huge missed opportunity on the part of the international community to pressure China into making necessary changes?

I would say, in terms of the political international community, yes. But on the other hand, we can see that China's civil society is growing, which is very, very important because more and more activists are denouncing the corruption, the injustice, and they take care of the poor.

Secondly, there are, for example, volunteers who try to help people who are in need. So in China there is more and more a civil society who speak about the situation in China, helped by the ideal of the Olympic Games, and that has brought some improvement in human rights.

So you're hopeful something good will come of the Olympics?

I don't think the good will come through the games. It will come only if people in the international community start having a normal relationship with civil society in China.

I am not for boycotting the Olympic Games, but I am saying to those who go to the event not to stay only in the Bird's Nest stadium or in your seven-star hotel. Go into the streets and meet the people to know their real

situation and try to have friendships with them.

Turning to Vatican-China relations, do you see any improvement, especially after some recent friendly gestures from Beijing?

To be honest, I don't really see an improvement in the relationship between the Vatican and China, although in this period before the Olympics there have been some small gestures, such as the concert in the Vatican offered by the Chinese embassy in Rome, and the invitation of Bishop John Tong to Beijing for the Olympic opening.

But these things, it seems to me, are more of a kind of advert for China to show that they are changing. They have been offered to the Vatican just when the image of China was tarnished by the repression in Tibet and by the persecution of its people. So they are trying to put themselves in a better light through these gestures.

I don't see any new gesture towards the Church in China, for example, because bishops are still in prison, priests are still in prison. The Shanghai authorities and the Patriotic Association [state-recognized Catholic church] used the World Day of Prayer for the Church in China as a warning not to follow the indications of the Pope.

So it seems to me China's policy towards the Vatican is still schizophrenic.

Yet China recently seems to be working hard on improving relations with Taiwan. Is this a sign of hope?

This is part of a plan by the Chinese government to try to reduce tensions just until the Olympics because they fear Taiwan could do something against the Olympics or against China.

Also, I have data that shows that China is not in a good state from an economic and general point of view. They have inflation, which is growing; they have a lot of riots, a lot of social tensions. So China is in a very tense situation.

This is why they are trying to appease, to put at peace, every aspect of and every relationship they have with Taiwan, with the Vatican, and in some way, with the international community.

So could this be good for the Vatican? Could these tensions result in better relations with the Church?

We will have to wait and see until after the Olympics. I don't think China will move any closer before the games.

Edward Pentin is based in Rome.

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