



Catholic Social Teaching, Human Rights, China and the 2008 Olympics from Education for Justice by Jane Deren

As the 2008 Olympics begin, there have been concerns that the choice of a host country charged with many and repeated human rights violations cannot be reconciled with the Olympic Spirit set out in Article 1 of the Olympic Charter, which seeks “respect for universal fundamental ethical principles.” Such concerns have been voiced by a wide range of sources, from the Vice President of the European Parliament to groups advocating freedom for Tibet. The following information seeks to provide a Catholic context for reflecting on this issue.

Why Should Catholics Be Concerned About Human Rights?

In 1971, the Church declared in the Synod document, *Justice in the World*, that “the Church has the right, indeed the duty, to proclaim justice on the social, national, and international level, and to denounce instances of injustice, when the fundamental rights of people... demand it.”

In 1975, the Vatican’s Pontifical Commission on Justice and Peace declared: “The Church is obliged to work for peace and human rights at the same time because both are the fruit of love and liberation which Our Savior came to bring to all... Christians should be ever more conscious of the dignity of the human person, the unity of the human family, the liberty and equality which all humans share.”

What Human Rights Does the Church recognize?

In the 1891 papal encyclical *On the Condition of Labor*, Pope Leo XIII stated that every human being has the economic rights to food, shelter, clothing and a living wage. Later popes affirmed these economic rights and also called for civil and political rights for all.

The Church recognizes the 29 rights in the United Nations' *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* proclaimed 60 years ago in 1948. These include the right to freedom of thought and freedom of expression, the right to join trade unions, the right to a fair trial, the right to travel freely and the right to live in freedom and safety.

Pope John Paul II declared that the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* was “the 20th century’s highest articulation of human dignity” and “one of the UN’s principle titles to glory” (1968). On his 2008 visit to the U.S., Pope Benedict addressed the UN on the subject of indivisibility and interdependence of human rights all serve as guarantees safeguarding human dignity... the rights recognized and expounded in the *Declaration* apply to everyone by virtue of the common origin of the person, who remains the high-point of God’s creative design for the world and for history... The merit of the *Universal Declaration* is that it has enabled different cultures, juridical expressions and institutional models to converge around a fundamental nucleus of values, and hence of rights.”

What Human Rights violations have been documented in China?

The many violations of human rights have been documented by respected organizations and news sources, such as the United Nations, Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, Time, Newsweek, The New York Times and the BBC. The information below has been repeated in these sources. Violations include the denial of:

Basic Legal and Social Rights

1. Freedom of expression is denied to most Chinese citizens.
2. Chinese journalists are restricted in who they can interview and what they can interview and what they can write about.
3. Chinese citizens who criticize the government and call for reform have been jailed or put under house arrest, often without trials.

4. Lack of judicial independence and due process for prisoners make fair trials extremely difficult.
5. Many Chinese citizens are restricted in terms of both internal and foreign travel.
6. Censorship limits access to internet information for the majority of Chinese citizens.
7. Monitoring of internet and phone communications of both Chinese citizens and foreign visitors is the norm in China
8. Freedom of religion remains a problem in China.

Labor Rights

1. Chinese workers are denied the right to form independent trade unions.
2. Violations of minimum wage rules and forces, uncompensated overtime are common for workers.
3. No laws exist to regulate unhealthy and dangerous working environments, which are often the norm in Chinese factories, agricultural and construction industries.
4. Disability or any other supports are not available to workers injured on the job.
5. Instances of forced labor have been documented.

Children's Rights

1. Under the guise of "work and study," an estimated 400,000 students from 12-16 work at heavy agricultural and unsafe manufacturing jobs during the school year.
2. Large numbers of students have been sent to factories to work during the summer school break.

Tibetan Human Rights

1. Since China invaded Tibet in 1950 and claimed it as Chinese territory, suppression of most basic human rights of Tibetans, often through state-sanctioned violence, has been reported.
2. The right to freedom of worship has been violated through the closing and destruction of Buddhist temples and monasteries and through threats and exile of Buddhist monks and nuns.

Environmental Rights

1. China does not have appropriate regulations to guard its citizens from serious pollution, toxic materials, biohazards, etc.
2. China is a leading contributor to global pollution.
3. On the ground reports from July, 2008 indicate that Beijing has been so polluted that even the pre-Olympic cleanup has not been very effective. Polluted air will impact the right to health of Olympic athletes and visitors to the 2008 games.

Has China worked to improve its Human Rights record for the 2008 Olympics?

Unfortunately, more human rights violations have occurred in China during the preparations for the 2008 Olympics. Many Chinese citizens were moved forcibly from their homes to make way for Olympic construction. They were denied any means of challenging the destruction of their homes. Additionally, instances of forced labor on Olympic construction sites have also been reported.

Despite temporary regulations in effect from January 1, 2007, to October 17, 2008, giving correspondents freedom to interview any Chinese citizen who agrees to talk, foreign journalists reporting on preparations for the Olympics have been harassed, intimidated and even detained by Chinese governmental and police officials who do not want anything negative reported.

Reflection and Discussion Questions:

- Why does the Church promote Human Rights?
- How does the Church's perspective on Human Rights relate to the current situation in China?
- Given this particular perspective of the Church, should people of faith support or challenge the Chinese-hosted 2008 Olympic Games; discuss reflectively and respectfully.

Pope Benedict XVI's Prayer for the Chinese People

May Mary Most Holy, Mother of the Church and Queen of China, who at the hour of the cross patiently awaited the morning of the resurrection in the silence of hope, accompany

you with maternal solicitude and intercede for all of you, together with St. Joseph and the countless Holy Martyrs of China.