

Do Not Be Afraid, Just Have Faith

PASTORAL LETTER OF BISHOP ZHU WEIFANG TO THE CLERGY AND CATHOLICS OF WENZHOU DIOCESE, 30.7.2014

Dear Brother Priests of the Diocese, Dear Christian Brothers and Sisters of the Diocese,

May the justice and peace of Christ be with you all!

When I decided to write you this tardy pastoral letter, I had mixed feelings. As the diocesan bishop, I was facing the numerous incidents of the violent removal of crosses from church buildings in many places, facing the tearless sadness of many priests and faithful, facing the attacks and wounds to the hearts and religious sentiments of so many dear brothers and sisters in the Lord, and especially facing the doubts and hesitations these incidents aroused in the minds of some of the faithful. As your pastor, I did not respond immediately to encourage and comfort you, and to bolster your faith. For this I feel deeply ashamed. I hope you will forgive this old and uneducated bishop!

Honestly speaking, although I am getting on in years, and I have undergone even more serious and cruel incidents in the past, I am frightened, perplexed and do not understand this campaign of forced demolition of church buildings. This is because I thought that up to now the open door policy has been in effect for over 30 years, and the country has had contacts with international society for the same number of years. A campaign like those which took place during the Cultural Revolution, should not be happening, nor should likely be happening. However, this movement, which is bringing irreparable harm to the religious feelings of Christians, is taking place anyway. It gets even more severe as time goes on. I have been silent and patient because I believed what some people said, that this movement would quiet down quickly. I believed that this “Three Rectifications and One Demolition” campaign would be declared a mistake and an unjust movement. Because several structures which did not break contracts were also destroyed, and the movement seems to be targeting the most sacred symbol of our Christian faith—the Cross—it clearly puts our faith in a position of opposition to the government. An atmosphere of tension has been created, and bloodshed has happened in some places. These actions have already seriously damaged the harmony between state and church, and have caused society to become insecure. If the nation allows such actions to continue, will it not go into a decline? Therefore, I silently watched, and waited. I waited for the government’s impartial voice. I waited for a clear decision to stop the removal of the crosses. However, I cannot but feel regret. I cannot but feel wounded, because even up to today, the destructive campaign continues. The performers of such actions are carrying them out even more feverishly, to the extent that their actions cannot now be reined in.

Dear workers on the front lines of pastoral work, especially my brother priests, who are deeply wounded by these violent incidents, and our dear Catholics, who are filled with grief and indignation at the aggression and shame taking place against the Lord’s temple and our glorious cross. At this time, what is the most important thing we can do? Is it to bear a grudge, and to oppose the injustice? Is it to violently

oppose a strong power? Should we be pessimistic, and hopelessly avoid this challenge to our faith? Or should we shamefully and quietly sell out our respect for the cross and our faith? We will not do any of these things! And we should not do any of them! We won't do them because we are Christians. Christians have their own spiritual character. When Christians suffer ridicule or pressure, this spiritual character should manifest itself. This spiritual character is prayer and love! This is what Our Lord, our great spiritual leader, Jesus Christ, taught us in the midst of his sufferings on the Cross. He prayed the whole time in the midst of his sufferings. During his prayer, he learned to be obedient to the will of his Heavenly Father. During prayer, he rejected the temptation to use violence. During prayer, he learned tolerance and forgiveness. During prayer, he offered all the terrible injustices he faced into the hands of a just God.

The Bible tells us: "In the days when he was in the flesh, he offered prayers and supplications with loud cries and tears to the one who was able to save him from death, and he was heard because of his reverence. Son though he was, he learned obedience from what he suffered; and when he was made perfect, he became the source of eternal salvation for all who obey him (*Heb. 5: 7-9*)." Prayer gave the crucified Lord Jesus great faith and a powerful love. "Father, Forgive them for they know not what they do" (*Lk. 23:34*). "Father, into thy hands I commend my spirit" (*Lk. 23:46*). This is just the forgiving and loving fruit produced by Jesus' prayer on the Cross, that tree of life. In the eyes of atheists, who do not know the true essence of faith, Jesus was a failure, and he failed miserably. However, faith conquered hate, and love in the end, conquered death. It was just in the mystery of the Cross, so full of pain and suffering, that through prayer, Jesus passed on his forgiveness, love and life to us. He passed them on to all those who truly believe in him, and who are believers who belong to him. The apostle Paul deeply understood that mystery. Therefore in a spirit of enthusiastic thanksgiving and incomparable pride, he wrote this: "What will separate us from the love of Christ? Will anguish, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or the sword? As it is written: 'For your sake we are being slain all the day; we are looked upon as sheep to be slaughtered.' No, in all these things we conquer overwhelmingly through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor present things, nor future things, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord (*Rom. 8:35-39*)."

Therefore, dear brothers and sisters, faced with these dire circumstances, and faced with the injustices that we are suffering, we should with a Christian conscience, bravely and determinedly maintain our faith, protect our rights, and safeguard our self-respect. While you are doing this, I, as your pastor, humbly exhort everyone: in the midst of pain, insults and grief, let us first offer up our prayers to our all powerful, merciful, and just God. Let us also pray for those who persecute, harm and attack us! We believe that the strength of our prayer will have a good result. We also believe that because God is just, he deeply loves His Church. At the same time, through fervent prayer, we can also come to a deeper reflection, such as: why is our Church suffering these misfortunes at this time? What does God wish to tell us through everything that has happened to us these days? What do these things tell us about our own local Chinese Church, its future mission, its position, its development and completeness? What does it stipulate about "Caesar and God?" What can we learn about preaching the Gospel in our culture and society, and the development of theological and social service thought? It is like in times past, when God used the Gentile peoples to attack His Chosen People. He wanted to teach them a lesson. He

wanted to teach them to reflect more deeply on their own faith. He wanted to teach them ways to manifest their faith, and about their relationship with God Himself.

Dear brothers and sisters, in the Spirit let us understand the Holy Word that God is telling us through the pen of the Apostle Paul: "We know that all things work for good for those who love God, who are called according to his purpose" (*Rom. 8:28*). Finally, I want to imitate our previous bishop and old diocesan administrator, and wholeheartedly place the Church's present difficulties into the hands of our Blessed Mother Mary, so that she can beseech God on our behalf. We also ask our Blessed Mother to offer prayers of supplication for all the church communities in Wenzhou and Zhejiang, who have come under pressure and have suffered harm. We do this because the suffering Jesus Christ on the cross invited us to turn our gaze to his mother, standing beside his cross and suffering with him. He said to John: "Behold, your mother" (*Jn. 19:27*). Only Jesus understood the greatness of his mother, and her role in the plan of salvation. Only Jesus, who was both Son of God and Son of Man, really understood that this mother, not only stood beside the Cross of her Son, but she was even more so standing there on behalf of the Mystical Body of Christ, the Church. This strong mother, full of faith, also stands at our side, and prays for us in times of difficulty for the Church. She not only prays for us, but with us. What have we got to be afraid of?

Therefore, let us imitate Our Lord, take up our crosses, and follow him along this thorny road of suffering. In this vale of tears, let us raise our mournful cries for help to our Blessed Mother. Moreover, I as your shepherd, call upon the whole diocese, and each Catholic, to say one rosary daily, and each Friday make the Stations of the Cross, for the difficulties that the Church is facing at the present time. I ask the pastors or the lay leaders of each parish undergoing attack to lead the whole parish in community prayer. Through prayer, we will protect the dignity of the faith. Through prayer, we will strengthen our determination. Through prayer, we will conquer our weaknesses and our spirit of compromise. We also fervently pray that the Lord will convert those who are persecuting us.

As your pastor, I will more deeply enter into the diocese's present dire circumstances. I will especially pray with my brother priests, who are on the front line of pastoral work, and accompany them in prayer with their Catholics. I believe that, under the wisdom of God, you will be as clever as serpents in facing the present difficulties. As for actively dealing with these, and protecting the Church's rights, you must consider the concrete circumstances of each parish or mission station.

Let us oppose the injustice through prayer, and through prayer be patient and forgiving! Pray fervently from the heart, and you will definitely gain victory. "When the just cry out, the Lord hears and rescues them from all distress. The Lord is close to the brokenhearted, and saves those whose spirit is crushed" (*Ps. 34: 18-19*).

I humbly ask our almighty and merciful God to bestow spiritual wisdom and peace upon you!

A pastor who loves you and is concerned about you, and the Lord's humble servant,

Bishop Zhu Weifang

30 July, 2014