

SOME REFLECTIONS ON THE POPE'S LETTER

by Angelo S. Lazzarotto

1. On the occasion of the Chinese New Year, celebrated by Chinese people all over the world, the Holy Father addressed a letter to all the bishops of the world, inviting them to join him in prayer with and for the Catholics in China. Asking the universal Church to be in solidarity with China was a warm gesture indeed. It is a positive sign that no matter what happened in China, the Holy Father regards the Church in China as a whole to be in fraternal unity with the universal Church. This unity is expressed in the form of prayer.
2. The address does not bring up for discussion any of the concrete problems related to the Church in China. It is not the Holy Father's purpose to discuss such concrete matters with the bishops of the world at this moment. Rather, he brings the Chinese Church to the awareness of all the bishops, thus indirectly reminding them not to forget their brethren in China.
3. Since the appointment of Archbishop Deng Yiming, the Holy Father has remained silent in the face of the complaints and accusing fingers directed towards him. The Vatican has neither argued with nor replied to the retaliatory actions taken by the Chinese Church, such as consecrating bishops without notifying Rome and publishing harsh articles in the Chinese Church publication, "Catholic Church in China." The Holy Father goes beyond such things with a gesture of good will and understanding. He gently reminds all Catholics that the tie with the see of Peter and its apostolic ministry is an indispensable condition for participation in the union of the vast Catholic family.
4. Through his letter the Pope also wishes to make it clear that the role of the Church of Rome is to help the local churches and is not aimed at hegemonism. Moreover, he humbly admits that there have been human deficiencies in the Vatican's dealings with China in the past. Above all, the Holy Father points out that, after the Vatican Council II, Bishops' Conferences have great flexibility and autonomy in carrying out their pastoral work.
5. The Holy Father expresses his pleasure in the knowledge that there is a good measure of religious freedom in China. He expresses his confidence and asks all Catholics to join him in prayer, that religious freedom will continue to grow, so that Catholics in China will be able to give full expression to their faith, while remaining in the Catholic unity of the Church.