

The Catholic Church in China before Normalization

John Baptist Zhang Shijiang

This is a condensed version of a talk given in Sydney, Australia, on April 17, 2004.

Greetings to all! It is my honor and pleasure to have the chance to share my thoughts with you here in the southern hemisphere. To begin with, I would like to thank all of you for your concern for the Catholic Church in China (CCC). My deep gratitude also to the Columbans and to the Chinese Catholic community for their invitation and organization of this conference.

In recent years, visitors have been struck by the amazing progress of China's economic development. But what about the development of the CCC? The Church outside of China hopes to gain a better understanding of it. As one witness, I wish to share what I know, and initiate some reflection.

Over the years, during my visits overseas, when I revealed my identity as being "from China," I have been asked, almost without exception, questions regarding the official and unofficial (underground) churches in China. "Excuse me, are you from the official church or the underground church?" or "Is there real freedom of religion in China?" or "Can relations between the Vatican and China be established? When?" Perhaps you have similar questions. I will discuss these questions in my talk.

1. The Church in China in the Process of Reconciliation

In recent years, the call for reconciliation and mutual acceptance is taking place throughout China. It is an inspiring phenomenon, a transformation, and the beginning of the road to

reconciliation.

In July 2003, an “unofficial” bishop sent a letter to all the bishops in China calling for reconciliation. This young bishop asked that “bishops of both the official and unofficial churches take more concrete action towards achieving unity in the CCC.”¹ One concrete suggestion was that we all forget the past and celebrate Mass together. He said that the “unofficial” clergy’s refusal to concelebrate with their counterparts during the Cultural Revolution and afterwards was because a group within the Church wanted to sever relations with the Pope and with the Universal Church. Today, however, a new phenomenon is unfolding within the Church, and it calls for a new strategy and new action. That bishop realized that the Pope had recognized a majority of the “official” bishops. Hence, some of the regulations in documents, like “the 13 articles” or “the 8 articles,” may no longer apply.² The Holy Father has, over the years, called incessantly for unity and reconciliation in the CCC. We must respond with concrete action.

In reality, both communities can contribute to evangelization and to the internal development of the CCC. Since normalization between the Vatican and China is being worked on, those within the two communities concerned began to reflect calmly on the concrete

¹ Bishop Han Zhihai: A letter to dear friends: “Give heed to the call of Pope John Paul II, the time for rebuilding a united Church is at hand.” http://www.catholic.org.tw/cicm/china_aug2003_1.htm

² Since the 1980’s, the Holy Father has repeatedly spoken publicly, expressing his love and concern for the Church in China, and his admiration for the 5000 years of civilization and for its aspirations. In many recent calls, the Pope urges the clergy and faithful alike to be loyal to their faith and to love their country, emphasizing that there is no conflict between being a good believer and a good citizen. The Pope’s hopes for the Church in China, and his preferential love for her and for her episcopal leaders and faithful, is clearly expressed. In other words he urges acceptance of all clergy, irrespective of their “official” or “underground” status, even those who have erred. This image of a magnanimous and benevolent father is the basis for the process of reconciliation taking place in the Chinese Church today.

reality of the future. They try to truly understand each other, to accept and recognize objectively the contribution of the other, and to take the first step towards reconciliation and unity.

Those who are concerned about the CCC know that not long ago the two communities were strangers to each other, even to the point of becoming enemies locked in struggle, making personal attacks, which resulted in the establishment of clearly divided camps. It was a clear "black and white situation." Today there is an easing of the enmity. The reduction of mutual attack signifies a relaxation of the tense confrontations of the past 20 years (from 1980's to 1990's). It marks a march out of the impasse, and a dissolution of the clear "black and white situation." This is an awakening in the local Church, and is a sure path towards development. We are now personally experiencing this upturn.

In my 15 years of priestly life, I have been working in the fields of media and social service in the Church. I have had many opportunities to contact local churches, and to acquire some understanding of their situations. I have friendly relationships with clergy and faithful from both communities.

Although the internal reconciliation process has begun, unity is still some distance away. It requires time for the enmity to dissipate completely. As for mutual forgiveness, perhaps we have to wait for the normalization of Sino-Vatican relations. We feel that it is now possible for reconciliation and unity to be realized. It is, at least, not a legal question, nor a question of theology. It only takes time and a strategy of how to proceed. Without doubt, before the normalization of relations becomes a reality, Church-State relations and issues connected with it, together with issues within the Church, such as unity between the two communities, cannot be resolved. In my opinion the future of the CCC deeply depends on the normalization issue.

2. The CCC and Vatican-China Relations

People dealing with religious matters, who are familiar with China, will testify that the ability, competency, efficacy, and the

spirit of sacrifice of bishops, priests and sisters are awe-inspiring. Unfortunately foreign relationships are so complex that one must worry about the many hurdles that lie scattered along the way, making relations all the more entangled and seemingly irreparable. The Buddhists and Taoists do not have such problems. When they propose building temples, officials will try their best to help secure the land for them, and those in influential position will pitch in to get approval and to solicit donations. In this way they will earn blessings, be assured of political promotion and possibly enrich themselves materially. There is no political risk-taking. On the other hand, when the Catholic Church tries to apply for a piece of land and seeks approval to build a church, the problems seem insurmountable. No politician will take on the responsibility. They are afraid of being reprimanded for collaboration with foreign forces, which might have unfavorable political consequences for themselves. This is simply due to the foreign background of the Church, anti-China forces abroad, and historical baggage, all of which make people distrust the Church. The most important element is the complex nature of Holy See–China relations.

Broken Holy See–China relations have not been restored for over half a century. Thus the CCC has been in a state of limbo, and caught in a dilemma. The Church is unable to dedicate all her efforts towards her own development. Instead she has exhausted much time, energy, personnel, and funds on internal strife. The state of Holy See–China relations is the decisive factor for the development of the Church. Let me cite two prominent examples: the demarcation of dioceses and the appointment of bishops.

Diocesan Demarcation

The problem of diocesan boundaries has afflicted the Church in China by putting the clergy and faithful in a quandary, and it has seriously affected the normal development of the local Church.

There are two types of diocesan demarcation: the establishment of 137 dioceses when the Holy See installed the

ecclesiastical hierarchy of the Church in China in 1946,³ and the establishment of 115 dioceses by the government-approved Bishops Conference of China in 1998.⁴ A recent revision by the government has reportedly reduced the number of dioceses to 97.

Confusion arises among believers as to which diocese one belongs. Xingtai in Hebei Province is a clear example. Presently under the jurisdiction of Xingtai Diocese are two provincial townships, 15 counties and two city districts. This includes parts of the five dioceses of Shunde, Yongnian, Jingxian, Zhaoxian and Linqing, from the 1946 ecclesiastical demarcation.⁵

Xingtai is a big diocese according to the government administrative division. If we maintain the 1946 ecclesiastical division, Xingtai has the whole or part of five dioceses. The Holy See divided the dioceses according to the local circumstances of 1946. These dioceses are canonical establishments even to this day.

The existing problem is that the dioceses that follow the

³ At the end of World War II in 1945, nationalist sentiment swept the world. On April 11, 1946, the Pope promulgated the establishment of the Episcopal Hierarchy of China, setting up 20 ecclesiastical provinces, 79 dioceses and 38 apostolic prefectures, making a total of 137 units. Three of the 20 archbishops were Chinese (cf. Ji Weimin's "Annals of the Church in China" p. 512, 2003, Shanghai Press.)

⁴ The PRC was established on October 1, 1949. In over half a century of development, the division of provinces, cities, and autonomous regions has undergone drastic changes. Many adjustments were made. From 1980's on, the government has dealt with the organization of the Church according to civil geographical divisions. In 1998, the Bishops Conference of China agreed on the boundaries of 115 dioceses in accordance with civil regional divisions, excluding Hong Kong and Macau.

⁵ The 17 counties/cities and 5 dioceses are as follows: Shahe City, Xingtai County, Neiqiu County, Ren County, Pingxiang County, Julu County, Guangzong County, Longnao County (half a county), Nanhe County (the above belongs to Shunde Diocese); Wei County, Xinhe County (these two belong to Yongnian Diocese); Lincheng County, Longnao (half a county), Boxiang County, Ningpu County (these three belong to Zhaoxian Diocese); Nangong City, Qinghe County (these two belong to Jingxian Diocese); Linxi County (belongs to Linqing Diocese in Shandong Province).

administrative divisions recognized by the government today may not be canonically legal. Other dioceses, which are canonically legal, are not recognized and accepted by the government. For example, Linxi County in Hebei Province originally came under the jurisdiction of Linqing Diocese in Shandong Province. But now Linqing Diocese no longer takes care of it. For many years priests serving the parishes in Linxi County came from Xingtai in Hebei Province. To which diocese, then, does Linxi belong today? Xingtai or Linqing? Or does it belong to another diocese? Similarly, how can the 130,000 Catholics of the greater Xingtai area and the original 5 dioceses decide on their diocesan identity?

The lack of diplomatic relations has prevented the two sides from sitting down and ironing out the problem of diocesan demarcation. Both the Holy See and the government stick to their own divisions. What are the clergy and faithful to do in the face of such a dilemma?

Since 1949, when the government was transferred from the nationalists to the communists, the problem of diocesan boundaries has not been resolved. If the Holy See wishes to resolve the problem, either by unilaterally maintaining the 1946 ecclesiastical structure, or by recognizing the government administrative divisions, she will be suspected of meddling in the internal affairs of China. Thus even if the Holy See realizes the necessity of adjusting and updating the boundaries, it is difficult to proceed in the absence of formal diplomatic relations. China may have legitimate reason to request a change in the division of dioceses, but she has no way to harmonize them with canon law. If diplomatic relations are not established, it is difficult to settle the confusing problem of “official” and “unofficial” communities existing side-by-side. Similarly the question of apostolic succession cannot be resolved. Both sides should confront the problem positively and squarely because both the government and the Church desire stability.

The Appointment of Bishops

Without diplomatic relations, there is no channel for discussion. Any incident that occurs between the two parties will be sensitive, and will have an impact on the Church in China. The public appointment of bishops, especially the consecration of five bishops on January 6, 2000, and the canonization of the 120 martyrs of China are good examples. They also affect the international image of both sides.

The open appointment of Bishop Deng Yiming as Archbishop of Guangzhou in 1981, and the revelation of the nomination of Bishop Kung Pinmei as Cardinal in 1991 are further examples. The papal appointment of a bishop in any country abroad is an ordinary event. However, in China where no diplomatic relations exist with the Vatican, and with deeply entrenched misunderstandings between them, the problem is serious. China views this kind of appointment as political and as interference in its internal affairs. Putting aside for a moment the question of the bilateral relationship, let us consider the appointment itself. On one side is the Holy See's appointment of a bishop, and on the other is the opposition of the government to the appointment. Where does this leave the clergy and the faithful? They have to be devout believers and good citizens at the same time. The Catholics are sandwiched between the Church and the State.

According to reports, in 1998 and 2003 there were at least one, maybe two, Chinese bishops elevated to become cardinals. As the Holy See did not make public such elevations, the Chinese government could not comment or protest. There was no clash due to the appointment, and so the CCC was spared any repercussions. After the "January 6" incident of 2000, large-scale consecrations have been reduced. This seems to indicate that both sides have been careful about the real situation, and are dealing calmly with ecclesiastical tradition. In fact, during the more than fifty-year period without diplomatic relations, many bishops or episcopal candidates in the "official" church had, through various channels, sought and obtained the approval of the Holy Father. The Pope has

secretly recognized a majority of bishops in the “official” church. As the report and appointment have been done in secret, no unpleasantness surfaced, and the CCC was spared inconvenience and crisis. Although this is not the best solution for the Vatican and the Chinese government, and for the two communities within the Church, it is a compromise beneficial to all. The four parties are sensitive to one another’s plight, and are trying to avoid inciting one another. The resolution of the problem of episcopal appointments will have to await the normalization of relations and the working out of an agreed upon procedure.

Although normal relations are not yet a reality, if the two sides are determined to sit down to discuss issues beneficial to the government, to the Universal Church and to the local Church, and to prepare for the normalization of relations, this would be a sign of progress. To date the talks have not been able to achieve their goal, and this may result in the re-emergence of events similar to the “January 6” incident, leading to uncompromising attitudes and unpleasantness. It shows that both the Chinese government and Rome do not have sufficient mutual understanding, and do not have an in-depth knowledge of one other. The time for normalization is not ripe. Reality calls for both sides to remain calm, to avoid extremes and to opt for mutual forgiveness, taking the social, political and religious realities into consideration. The differences will eventually be resolved.

Once normalization becomes a reality, its implementation will become the main focus.

3. The Moderates: The Force behind the CCC

A recent Internet discussion among youth on the question of the “official” and the “unofficial” churches is interesting.⁶ The youth are unlike their parents and grandparents, who were clear-cut in their views and emotional in expressing them. They analyze the

⁶ http://bbs.chinacatholic.org/forum.asp?FORUM_ID=16&CAT_ID=8

situation more objectively and magnanimously. Of course there are those who use improper words and make strong attacks. We nevertheless, welcome some sort of moderation, as demonstrated by a chat-room member named “Thunderbolt Snow”:

The dispute between the “official” and “unofficial” communities has hurt the Church. This is a product of history. It is sad that the final solution is not yet in sight. The Pope has neither excommunicated those in the “official” church nor those in the “underground.” We have no right then to make mutual accusations. We cannot afford this sort of internal strife. Time waits for no one! ...

In our Anshan region there are only a few hundred Catholics whereas the number of Protestant believers is said to number tens of thousands. Now is the opportune time for evangelization. To waste our energy in mutual recrimination would make us the worst of all sinners. On the contrary we should pray that the two communities will be united. This is what pleases God ... Let us bury the hatchet and love one another.⁷

Since the 1990’s, a group of moderate faithful and pastors have made a breakthrough. They are gradually becoming the driving force in the Church. They have a sense of fidelity and dedication to the Lord’s service. Some of the bishops have secretly obtained recognition by the Pope. The government also recognizes them, because they are locally elected. This group of bishops is able to legally hold services to fulfill the needs of the faithful, and to focus on pastoral care and evangelization.

Gradually this group of bishops are accepted and welcomed by the government, society and the Catholic faithful. They are not only true to their faith and dedicated to the service of the Lord, but they also cooperate actively with the government in the fields of politics and economic development. Adapting in this way to socialist economic development, they gain for the Church legitimate space for ecclesiastical development. In general, even when their approval from the Pope is made public, the local government does not seem

⁷ <http://www.tianzhujiao.cn/bbs/dispbbs.asp?boardID=51&ID=701>

to mind or to take measures to deal with it. This tacit recognition implies that the government takes into consideration local social and religious stability. It also indicates that the government has gradually come to understand the age-old tradition of the Catholic Church. It is a manifestation of religious freedom in China.

In other words, China hopes to have a group of clergy to lead the Church who are acceptable to both the government and the Church. This moderate group of bishops has the prestige and commands the respect of the laity. They also have the know-how for dealing with the intricacies of relations with the government, with other religions and with the general public. They will protect the interests of the Church, and lead it to develop normally and to make a contribution to society.

4. To realize a double or multiple win under the influence of two different politics and culture

Since China adopted a policy of reform and opening-up more than 20 years ago, she has achieved remarkable accomplishments in the financial and commercial fields, as well as in the technical, cultural, sports and tourism fields. The living standard of the people, as a whole, has been raised. Apart from economic success, China is more and more playing an important role in diplomatic and international affairs. For example, China has been admitted into the WTO, Beijing has obtained sponsorship of the 2008 World Olympic Games, China is cooperating with international society in combating terrorism, and is active in coordinating the six-party talks on the Korean nuclear question, etc. Such international attention is rare in the religious field. Since the government worries about infiltration, and tries to prevent and resist infiltration in religious affairs, especially in Catholic affairs, she tends to be dragged into delicate relations with the West or with the Church itself. Such questions appear so sensitive that people tend to keep away from them. In other words, the CCC is being entangled in two different kinds of politics and two different cultures.

It is clear that those who describe Chinese religious affairs as

excellent and without any defect are exaggerating and avoiding conflict. Yet those who report only negative news about Chinese religious affairs, and conclude that there is no religious freedom, are certainly unfair and biased. China is such a large populous country that it is difficult to get a complete picture of it. It is the same with religion. Religious affairs are often sensitive and diversified, with different conditions in different territories. At the same time, there is some disparity between the Central Government and the local governments in understanding and executing policies. In fact, conditions for religions in China are always changing and developing. Since we live in China, we have experienced in person the changes and developments. For example, Bishop Li Du'an of Xi'an Diocese recently remarked that after the changes and developments of the last 20 years, the present moment is the best occasion for evangelization.

I am optimistic. I myself can prove that in the recent 20 or more years some positive changes have taken place. It is the best opportunity for the evangelization in China.⁸

Why did he say this? Because he himself experienced the disaster of the Cultural Revolution, as well as the changes in the last two decades. Naturally he treasures the present moment and the hard-earned opportunity for evangelization. Yet our situation cannot be compared with those overseas.

A few years ago, the government of Beijing Municipality invested nearly 100 million RMB to remodel St. Joseph's Church in Wangfujing into a Chinese style Notre Dame. After relocating all the residents to other places, they created a square for it. The church itself was renovated, and beautifully decorated. Since Wangfujing Street is only for walkers, St. Joseph's Church is considered a shining gem in the center of the city. Reports also say that the Beijing city government intends to allocate a large sum of money to help renovate the Xuanwumen Cathedral and the Xishiku episcopal

⁸ Vatican Radio, <http://www.vaticanradio.org/cinesegb/notframe-set.html> "News Report," March 22, 2004.

residence, together with their surroundings. On March 2, 2003, the leader of the Protestant Church in Beijing declared that two new Protestant churches would be constructed in the Chaoyang and Fengtai districts. In China, the central government allocates a certain sum to build churches each year. It is also reported that in 2004 the Central government invested 450 million RMB to enlarge several religious institutes or seminaries, and improve the office facilities for religious units at the national level.

A lot of government leaders are puzzled that after the allocation of such a large sum of money, some people still complain about the situation of religious freedom in China. Some officials at the grassroots level have grumbled that they are suspected of forming "a church run by the government." Here lies a gap of understanding between Chinese and Western politics and culture.

Regarding the appointment of bishops, both the State and the Church hold firmly to their own principles, so they cannot arrive at an agreement. It seems to be a conflict between ecclesiastical law and the law of the State. However, in fact, it is a disagreement between two cultures and two different beliefs.

Today is an era of globalization. China, a peaceful and a strong country, has attracted world attention. It has learnt that it needs the world to rejuvenate itself. China and the Vatican, as well as the CCC, are facing new opportunities for cooperation and development. Although there still exists some difference of opinion between the Holy See and the Chinese Government on how to deal with the CCC, and inside the CCC there are still some conflicts between the open and the underground churches, the two have initiated contact, and are gradually moving in the direction of mutual understanding and reconciliation. As long as both the political and religious parties make positive efforts, forget past disputes, and cooperate diligently, they should be able to resolve their differences. If that happens, it is possible for China and the Vatican to establish normal diplomatic relations in the future.