

## *Loosening the Tension for the Catholic Church in China*

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**A**t the heart of the problem of the tension experienced by the clergy, religious and laity of the Catholic Church in China is the selection and appointment of bishops. According to Catholic doctrine, the consent of the Bishop of Rome, the Pope, is needed for this. This problem so far has been difficult to solve. Yet, over recent decades some concrete solutions have been pragmatically found, according to local conditions and the prevailing political interests of the moment. There have been disagreements, as well as successful efforts to resume dialogue. As a matter of fact, a year ago the situation seemed to be moving towards a possible compromise, as some ten new bishops were chosen with the tacit agreement of both the Holy See and the Chinese government.

But in the last two months of 2010 a fresh crisis developed, following the decision of the Chinese authorities to proceed with the episcopal ordination of Guo Jincai for the diocese of Chengde (Hebei) against the expressed wishes of the Pope. Then the 8<sup>th</sup> National Congress of Chinese Catholics convened in Beijing (7-9 December 2010), again against the expressed intention of Rome. The political leaders consider this body as the supreme authority of the Catholic Church in China. Should the present tension with the Vatican reach a breaking point, it would surely prove to be a mortal wound for the Chinese Catholic communities. The credibility of the Chinese government on the international scene would also be seriously affected, because 178 governments around the world maintain diplomatic relations with the Holy See.

Such a grave danger has prompted me to offer some personal considerations, in the hope that they will help clear up some

misunderstandings and start to bridge the gap between the two sides. I use Deng Xiaoping's motto of "searching for the truth from facts" as my guiding light.

1. As mentioned above, the choice of bishops is at the root of the present problems. The problem can be traced back to the early years of the People's Republic, because the Patriotic Association of Chinese Catholics (PACC), established in 1957, a year later was pushed to choose and ordain the first Chinese bishops not having papal approval, to take the place of the European ones who had been exiled and forced out of the country. Numerous similar "autonomous" elections and ordinations took place in the following years, when China was in the process of cutting herself off from the rest of the world. The misunderstandings continued even after Mao's death. The Holy See in fact extended to China a privilege previously granted to Eastern Europe, allowing old legitimate Chinese bishops to choose their successors without consulting Rome. However, the government ignored them. After Deng Xiaoping's new policies came into effect, the majority of illegitimate bishops, ordained in the meantime, were able to contact the Holy See, and obtain papal recognition of their episcopal status.

A Catholic bishop is just a religious figure for his local community. But in certain contexts his social prestige cannot be ignored. Church history recalls not a few cases of conflict also in the Catholic countries of Europe. Civic authorities tried to push for the ordination of candidates, who would support their interests and policies. However, the Catholic Church considers bishops to be the successors of the Apostles, who were entrusted to share with Peter the care of the community of believers in Christ.

The official *Catholic Catechism*, which is made up of the decisions of Vatican Council II and the age-old Catholic tradition, is very clear on these points: "Each bishop exercises his ministry from within the Episcopal college, in communion with the Bishop of Rome, the successor of Peter and the head of the college" (n.877). And again: "In our day, the lawful ordination of a bishop requires a special intervention of the Bishop of Rome, because he is the supreme visible bond of the communion of the particular Churches in the one Church and the guarantor of their freedom" (n.1559).

And the Pope's responsibility in this regard is so expressed: "The Roman Pontiff, by reason of his office as Vicar of Christ and as pastor of the entire Church, has full, supreme, and universal power over the whole Church, a power which he can always exercise unhindered" (n. 882).

2. On the Chinese side, the Country's *Constitution* (renewed in 1982) affirms the right of belief, adding this specification: "No State organ, public institution or private individual can force citizens to believe or not to believe in a religion; neither can they discriminate against citizens who believe or do not believe." This obviously also means that no one can be forced to change his or her religious belief. A final sentence in that paragraph of the Constitution states: "Religious organizations and religious activities cannot be dominated by any foreign power." Catholic believers also feel at ease with this phrase, as the Pope's authority does not constitute a "foreign power". His position in the Church is simply part of their religious creed. Thus, when this constitutional clause is invoked to force them to choose their bishops with no reference to the Bishop of Rome, they feel betrayed, as this would mean asking them to go against their faith.

The third edition of the *Blue Book of Religions*, published in Beijing by the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences in autumn 2010, carries a detailed study on Catholicism, in which updating and pastoral courses held in various dioceses are mentioned, as well as recent statistics. With reference to the official structures set up by the government and particularly to the long delayed National Congress of Catholic Representatives, the article recalls that the foundation act (1957) of the PACC included a commitment to "obey the Pope in the teachings of faith, doctrine and rules to be practiced", adding that this phrase was not taken seriously enough. Academician Wang Meixiu, the author of the article, suggests that the specific responsibility of the Chinese Catholic Bishops Conference (CCBC) in guiding the Church should be stressed, while the institutional competence of the PACC is to serve as a "bridge" between State and Church. It would also be important to clarify the meaning of such expressions as "church affairs" and "the democratic running of the churches", in the context of various

Vatican Council II documents dealing with such matters. It seems that the authorities have so far not paid much attention to these suggestions, which are aimed at a better enforcement of the official religious policy, and to make the relationship between the Catholic minority and the State less contentious.

3 After the 8<sup>th</sup> Congress of Catholic Representatives, a spokesperson of the State Agency of Religious Affairs (SARA) offered this statement (*Xinhua*, 22 Dec 2010): “China's Constitution grants Chinese citizens freedom of religious beliefs, but requires independence of religious organizations and affairs in China from foreign influence. Under this constitutional provision, the Catholic Church and other religions in China adhere to the principle of self-governance and self-support.” Referring to the Holy See's complaints (*Vatican Information Services*, 17 Dec 2010): “It was a misinterpretation by the Vatican to declare the incompatibility of Catholic doctrine and the Chinese Catholic church's principle of independent self-governance.” The spokesperson quoted from the new statute of the CCBC, which states that this body is “in union with the Successor of St. Peter, the Head of the community of the Disciples” with regard to the dogma and the moral teachings of the Church.

It is really unfathomable that a government structure should decide what is or is not compatible with the Catholic faith, and more so when such statements come from a secular State professing as its doctrine “scientific materialism”. In fact, the statute in question fails to concretely commit the Chinese Church to act according to the current laws of the Universal Church, as expressed in the Code of Canon Law and in practice all over the world. This explains why the Pope cannot give his approval to the Bishops Conference of China. As for the statute of the PACC, it appears even more deeply at odds with Catholic doctrine and praxis. Such interference in the religious beliefs of Catholics subverts the nature of the Church, and causes great suffering and division in our Catholic communities all around the country. And it surely does not contribute favorably to the growth of a “harmonious society”, advocated by President Hu Jintao.

4. However, even more regrettable events weighed heavily on the life of the Catholic communities during the past year. These are unquestionable facts witnessed by so many people that the public authorities cannot deny them. I refer to the many incidents of moral and physical coercion used against bishops whom the public authorities summoned to take part in the National Congress and in recent episcopal ordinations. Nowhere in the free world would the political power so interfere in the ordination ceremony of a Catholic bishop by actually organizing it and forcing participation in it with such a display of the police force.

This confirms, unfortunately, that in present day China the declared religious freedom is conditional upon achieving the State's political objectives, with no respect for the legitimate tradition of believers. Such behavior harms China's prestige in the world. As both foreign and Chinese scholars have recently pointed out, the preposterous attitude of applying force to impose specific religious positions seems to prove that leftist groups now prevail within the government. Such actions raise the question if this is not a return to infamous methods of the "cultural revolution".

Sadly, over the summer months, the situation has worsened with episcopal ordinations imposed by the public authorities in the dioceses of Leshan (29 June 2011) and Shantou (14 July), after the Holy See had informed the responsible parties of the reasons why the Holy Father had to withhold his approval of them.

After the events, the Holy See found it necessary to declare that the two candidates had incurred excommunication, for seriously violating Church law (*VIS*, 4 and 16 July 2011). On their side SARA responded by declaring the "so-called excommunication" of the two bishops an "extremely unreasonable and rude" act, and asked for its revocation (*Xinhua*, 25 July 2011).

The SARA spokesperson confirmed the government's determination to continue choosing and ordaining bishops "independently", while stating that the Patriotic Association's intention in doing so is "for the sake of managing the country's Catholic work and spreading the faith". The prospects for the future appear worrying, as the PACC announced that at least seven new bishops' ordinations are on the calendar (Cf. *China Daily*, 22 July 2011).

5. Unfortunately, also inside the Catholic communities some unhealthy signs are coming to light. While we know of a number of bishops and other church delegates forced to attend the abovementioned official events, there have also been bishops and priests who went along without resistance, thus abetting the PACC's plans. It is difficult to know how willingly they appear to comply, because many are concerned to ensure the essential church structures continue functioning, as quite often control over diocesan finances are not in the bishop's hands. It should not be forgotten that "money flows through the PACC to a growing number of dioceses, seminaries and parishes, while those who do not cooperate with the government have to pay a heavy financial price. Moreover, as is true everywhere in the world, accepting money means a loss of independence" (*China Bridge*, H.K., 16 Jan 2011).

Another serious danger for administrators of any church community is the temptation to strive for a successful career. Pope Benedict XVI has publicly admitted that this may happen even in the inner circle of those helping him in the Vatican. He was referring to this danger when, during his recent German trip he warned (in Freiburg, 25 Sept) that the Church, in order to meet her responsibilities, should always renew efforts to overcome worldliness. In the concrete Chinese situation, such temptations are particularly strong, because for one eager to have a successful career the road is easy: he only has to go along with the government priorities regarding the Church.

The present situation in this regard is difficult to assess. It has been a long standing United Front policy to have religious leaders appointed to important public positions, e.g., as members of the Political Consultative Conference or even the People's Congress at various levels. Even within the official Church structures there are the "democratic elections" to leading posts, sometimes presuming the consent of the concerned person. This of course never happens with secretly ordained bishops, who are ignored by the authorities. As for those illicitly ordained in the past, who obtained papal recognition, the authorities appear so far to have closed their eyes.

But early this year Bishop Li Liangui of Cangzhou (Xianxian), who by going into hiding had avoided attending the National Catholic Representatives Congress of December 2010, was

dismissed from his post in the Political Consultative Conference of Hebei province. More recently, Bishop Paul Pei Junmin of Liaoning (Shenyang) was punished because (after he was forced to participate in the ordination of Father Guo Jincai as bishop of Chengde), he refused to preside at the ordination of Father Huang Bingzhang as bishop of Shantou. He was able to resist Beijing's orders thanks to massive public support and protection from his clergy. The authorities have now confined him to his residence and have not allowed him to meet other priests or to visit parishes. He has also been "suspended" from his position as vice-president of the state-sanctioned Bishops Conference and as head of the Patriotic Association and of the Church Affairs Committee of Liaoning Province.

Let us hope, as premier Wen Jiabao said in his recent speech on 1 October, that everyone will strive to solve with more internal democracy the problems confronting people. Among these problems those of a spiritual nature cannot be overlooked, if the aim is to build an authentic harmonious society.

6. Pope Benedict XVI, following the policy of his predecessor, never misses an opportunity to express his trust in the Church in China, together with his admiration for the Chinese people and respect for the government overseeing them. He has also expressed his desire to reach a settlement with the authorities, through a constructive dialogue, regarding the outstanding questions affecting the life of the Catholic communities. He repeated this point in the important letter addressed to "the bishops, priests, consecrated persons and lay faithful of the Catholic Church in the PRC", which he signed as Bishop of Rome, and therefore as head of the Universal Church, on 27 May 2007. Out of deference to the government, a copy of it was sent to the authorities before it was made public. The Chinese officials did not underestimate the importance of this document for all Chinese Catholics. Although the letter has not been officially banished in the country, its circulation has been severely curtailed in various ways.

In the letter Pope Benedict clarified Catholic truths, which cannot be renounced, and he did not hesitate to denounce the conditions, which are unacceptable for the Church in China. He

referred specifically to “the claim of some entities, desired by the State and extraneous to the structure of the Church, to place themselves above the Bishops, and to guide the life of the ecclesial community” (n. 7, 5).

He thus stresses that it is the responsibility of the bishops to guide the Catholic community, and that the choice of candidates for the episcopal ministry is a central point for the Church. Those chosen must be suitable priests with regard both to their personal life and the ministerial requirements. The Holy See, in view of the particular Chinese situation, has already made some practical concessions about the way to reach “democratically” a consensus on the candidates. It has proved to be open to accept the conclusions reached, in the absence of grave reasons to the contrary. But it cannot tolerate that an unsuitable candidate is imposed by force on the Church through the rigging of local voting procedures.

The law requiring that an episcopal candidate be finally approved by the Pope has often been declared by the Chinese authorities as “interference in China's internal affairs”. With such a “political” reading of the Catholic practice, which is followed today all over the world, the SARA spokesperson stated on 25 July: “If the Vatican is sincere about improving relations, it should rescind the so-called ‘excommunications’ (of the last two bishops ordained).”

One can understand that government officials, whose education emphasized historical materialism, may be less familiar with Catholic doctrine. But, as experts in the religious field, they should realize that the Pope cannot disown the traditional Church doctrine on such a central theme, thus jeopardizing the specific nature of Catholicism.

7. In the past, during recurring contacts between Rome and Beijing, one of the primary goals of the Chinese side was the breaking of diplomatic relations, established in the middle of the 1940s between the Holy See and the “Republic of China”, and the transfer of the nunciature (the Papal embassy) from Taipei to Beijing. With the gradual improvement in relations between the communist government and the “Rebel Island”, this priority has faded away. Yet, the Beijing authorities appear not to ignore the international prestige enjoyed by the Pope. The SARA



spokesperson in the statement mentioned above repeated that “The Chinese government is willing to improve Sino-Vatican relations through constructive dialogue.” With readiness already expressed by both parties, the main point would be to find firm opportunities to move ahead, searching for possible ways to resume the dialogue, which would have some chance of success. Ancient Chinese wisdom teaches that only a perspective, which allows both contenders to feel in some way winners will ensure a lasting peace. In the present situation, it's not easy to believe that a “win-win solution” is possible.

A constructive dialogue should be sought, in my opinion, on the practical level, aiming at a series of regulations respecting the authority and prestige of the State, without creating new divisions and tensions within the communities of believers. To ensure this, the interlocutors should be recognized delegates of the two parties, capable of negotiating with mutual confidence and respect and capable of signing agreements acceptable to both parties.

The *Regulations on Religious Affairs* approved by the State Council at the end of 2004 marked an improvement compared to the previous situation. But several points were still left vague, such as the meaning of “religious belief”. Moreover, some unduly heavy burdens are placed on believers expressing their convictions, even when social harmony or the common good is not jeopardized.

Concerning the Catholic Church, it is to be hoped for that the Beijing government may take the further step of assuring that Catholics may manage their own affairs according to their traditions, and not tolerating local cadres to overstep their authority in this field. Catholic communities are united in their determination to enforce social peace by following the common law and contributing to the common good. They have no difficulty registering, as requested, with the respective Offices for Religious Affairs. But coercing individual Catholics or Catholic groups to join or to become members of the Patriotic Association should never be allowed to happen. Nor should they be blackmailed in order to make them sign up. It is in the very nature of an association that applying for admission should be free. All too often in China certain methods are adopted, which bring discredit to the work of those responsible for the government's religious policy.

8. A final remark. The leaders of the State Agency for Religious Affairs and of the Party's United Front department, when dealing with the Catholic Church are known to busy themselves in organizing frequent up-dating courses and study trips for bishops and other officers of various dioceses, in which political and patriotic education is the core issue. It is also well known that in China the bishops cannot organize study sessions among themselves to deal with pastoral, theological or moral topics, without the presence of "political inspectors", usually in the person of members of the Patriotic Association, or in some cases by government officials directly. At the National Congress last December a decision was taken to establish some working Committees to help the Bishops Conference in their pastoral duties. This could prove useful. Unfortunately, once again the bishops have to share with members of the Patriotic Association leadership over such committees, thus exposing them to become possible political stages.

This is what happened some weeks ago, when the Committee for Pastoral Care and Evangelization was convened at Ningde, in Fujian province. Some 30 persons (bishops, priests, a sister and lay people) were invited by Bishop Vincent Zhan Silu of Mindong (illegitimately ordained on 6 January 2000) to discuss specific evangelization aspects and to exchange experiences. To the great surprise of observers, Vice-minister Zhu Weiqun of the United Front Department decided to make a special trip from Beijing to Ningde to join the meeting. In the talk he gave, he underlined once more the importance of being patriotic, of adapting the religious practices of the faithful to China's "socialist society" and of strengthening the "principle of an independent Church".

A Chinese priest, who signed himself with the pen-name "Shanren", remarked: "It is a great insult to the Chinese Catholics to say that they do not love their country and that they need a patriotic association to guide them" (*Ucanews*, 12 Oct 2011).

The experience of the Catholic Bishops Conferences the world over confirms that the Church leaders feel the need to gather periodically among themselves for study sessions, to analyze in full freedom of expression some theological, spiritual or pastoral questions, and to agree on common lines of action. In free countries they have no problem meeting without interference from any

political observers. This unfortunately is not yet the case in the People's Republic of China, where the obsession with patriotism seems to justify any excesses. It is not difficult to see that at the root of such an inconsistency the uncontrolled power given over the years to the Catholic Patriotic Association, which does not miss any opportunity to prove itself indispensable to save the honor of the country, and it does not hesitate to place itself "above the Bishops", as Pope Benedict lamented in his pastoral letter.

9. In such a complex and tense situation, it is hoped that all interested people may adopt a realistic view, and sincerely search for solutions, which would render to Catholics, as also being citizens of the People's Republic, the opportunity to offer their wholehearted contribution to social harmony.

As mentioned above, past efforts to start a positive dialogue lacked consistency also from the Catholic side. The Letter of Benedict XVI in 2007 set out important guidelines, but did not specify a methodology to make the dialogue progress successfully. Understandably, the approach suggested by concerned people diverged sometimes, and this had negative effects also on the attitude adopted by some Catholic communities in China. The Study Group called by the Holy Father to monitor the situation has proved useful. It is to be hoped that it may offer the Holy See prudent and constructive suggestions also in the present emergency, taking into account all aspects of the problem.

Some commentators are convinced that the Holy See should ask, as a pre-condition for a lasting agreement, that the present structures created by the government to "guide" the life of Catholics in China be scrapped altogether. My viewpoint is that this is not realistic.

Yet, I would dare to propose an equally important step. In my opinion, it could perhaps be suggested to the Chinese authorities, as a conciliatory gesture, to empower the existing leadership of the Conference of Chinese Catholic Bishops to study and approve a number of amendments to their statutes, to make them fully consistent with universal Catholic doctrine and praxis. The Catholic Patriotic Association should also carry out a similar work on their statutes, cancelling the rule that requires all important decisions of

the Bishops Conference to be approved by them also. Such revisions would open the door of the Bishops Conference to all Chinese bishops, and would facilitate the Bishops Conference's recognition by the Holy See. If such were the case, I am convinced that acceptance of the Patriotic Association would also become less problematic for the consciences of the Catholic faithful.

I am quite aware that this proposal would face huge obstacles, as it may appear provocative. But it is my deep conviction that, if accepted, it would allow the two parties to meet half way. By applying democratic principles, the prestige of the Chinese authorities would be safeguarded; in fact the SARA spokesperson has already accepted the principle that the CBCC adheres to Catholic doctrine.

Once the nature of the Catholic Church is not undermined, discussion on concrete issues could be afforded in order to find suitable solutions with a greater possibility of success.

10. During the month of October Catholics reflect more specifically on the mission given by Christ to his disciples to announce his Gospel to the whole world. To ensure that Christ's message may act as a positive leaven in Chinese society, the recent Roman appeal should not be forgotten: "The Holy See reaffirms the right of the Chinese Catholics to be able to act freely, following their consciences and remaining faithful to the Successor of Peter and in communion with the universal Church. The Holy Father...once again deplores the manner in which the Church in China is being treated and prays that the present difficulties can be overcome as soon as possible (*VIS*, 16 July 2011).

Equally important and urgent is the request made by Pope Benedict on 18 May 2011. He asked the crowd gathered in St. Peter's Square to join in prayer with the Chinese Catholics (through the intercession of Mary the Mother of Jesus, venerated at the Basilica in Sheshan near Shanghai), that "those who are in doubt may have the light, those who have erred may be reconciled, those who suffer may be consoled and all who feel attracted by opportunism may be given strength."