

Cardinal Zen: True Dialogue Will Preserve the Authenticity of the Church

***Cardinal Joseph Zen
Interviewed by Annie Lam
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TRIPOD: In recent years, some Catholic Church personnel in mainland China, including some bishops who have both the mandate of the Holy Father and the approval of the government, have published articles in official magazines which promote the idea of “running the Church independently” as the only road for the Catholic Church in China to follow. How would this affect the development of the Church in China and China-Vatican dialogue?

CARDINAL ZEN: When we are in discussions with the bishops in China, I feel humbled because of our freedom. We can speak freely. I will not criticize the authors' remarks too harshly, because they might not be writing what they really think, and they are probably subject to the editing of the Patriotic Association or the government. They have their difficulties.

We realize the difficulties of Vatican-Beijing dialogue. I think it is also hard for the Church in China, which is under government control, to tell the government to accept the way the Church is. Therefore, we need to help convince the government that the situation of the Church in China is not as it should be. Catholicism is not an independent and autonomous Church. Why is a true Catholic Church not acceptable to the Chinese authorities? Today, numerous officials and others from China have visited the West and other places. They know that Catholicism is a religion of freedom, with the Holy See as the center of governance, and that it is not independently managed. World leaders do not see the

Catholic Church as a political issue. The Catholic Church is neither independently managed nor a political entity.

The Chinese government needs to accept the Catholic Church as it is, rather than try to control it.

There were theologians in the early Church who had ideas along the lines of independence and autonomy. As time went by, Church doctrine developed, guided by the Holy Spirit. Now, the Catholic Church has a central and strong leadership. Historically, there have been many countries who wanted to control the Church, especially countries with imperial power. Today, Europe, the United States and other countries, which accept democracy, would understand that the government should not control the Church, in a true spirit of democracy towards the Church. The Church should be independent of the regime, and in a democratic system, the regime is not required to manage it. People can choose to accept modern civilization based on the principle of freedom of religion. The Catholic Church is based on faith, and its system is evolving in history, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. The Catholic Church, led by the Holy Father, is a progressive organization, and it deserves the true respect of people.

Today, the Chinese government can take reference from other countries, and see that the Catholic Church is absolutely harmless to the state. At the same time, they can see that it a good organization. A free Catholic Church will certainly make great contributions to the country. A free Church implies that the country is open. Just as in other countries around the world, the Church is contributing to the countries in which it exists.

TRIPOD: *The articles in the magazines cited above indicate that the concept of “the democratic way of running the Church” has its roots in Vatican II’s emphasis on the indigenization of the Church. How do you evaluate that?*

CARDINAL ZEN: It cannot be understood in this way. Vatican II certainly stressed the identity of believers as belonging to a local church, but the Council provided a balanced conclusion. The Constitutions of Vatican II reaffirmed the “role of the People of God”, God’s salvation is for everyone, and for the whole people of

God, including both laity and clergy. The Church has stressed the different roles of clergy and laity in the Church, but in a balanced way.

However, some Churches have deviated from the thinking of the Second Vatican Council. On the one hand, the Council urged the Church to go into the world, but then, some clergy tended to do more of the work of the laity. On the other hand, in the liturgy, some laypeople tended to do the clergy's work. Both are wrong. There is a fundamental equality of each one's role in the church. The clergy are priests to serve the People of God, while the role of the People of God is to be king, prophet and priest. In this way, the two sides are balanced, and one can understand the truly democratic spirit of the Second Vatican Council. Misunderstanding Vatican II does not help the progress of the Church. For instance, in the Church in the Netherlands, the pastoral council, on which many lay people serve, is above the bishops. Therefore their faith and vocations are declining. On the contrary, in other places, where there is normal development, and they insist on the need of clergy, their vocation crisis is passing away. There is a gradual increase of vocations in those places. With God's blessings, the Church does not lack priests.

The Catholic Church is not run with a democratic system, but it is filled with the spirit of democracy. For instance, in Hong Kong, a synod, which is traditionally attended largely by clergy, was held after Vatican Council II, about 40 years ago. There was a great increase in the number of laypeople in attendance. The meeting ultimately did not succeed very well. Another synod held during the Millennium, however, produced many positive results. The clergy and laity, individuals and groups were represented in a balanced way. We could see that it was a fruitful outcome of the Second Vatican Council.

The Patriotic Association is an abnormal form of lay participation. Like in the Netherlands, it is placed above the bishops. It counts on the power of the government, and completely controls the Church. However, the Patriotic Associations on the local and national levels find themselves in very different situations. Apparently some bishops have authority to a certain extent on the

local level, and they can play a leading role there; whereas at the national level, the bishops seem incapable of having any influence.

Since December 2010, after the Eighth Assembly of Catholic Representatives, a new scenario seems to have taken shape, as a new leadership was formed. A former vice-chairman of the Patriotic Association retired, and assumed the role of honorary chairman of the “One Association and One Conference.” This was not a real change, since the new leadership was obviously chosen by the government and not truly elected by the representatives. This organization is above the bishops, not to mention being against the spirit of democracy.

After the Eighth Assembly, the bishops held some committee meetings in Kunming and Fujian Province. Government officials completely controlled the meetings of the bishops’ committees. This fact has not changed. The bishops seemed to fully obey the officials. There is no sign of a truly open Church.

TRIPOD: *How can Chinese Catholics actualize the spirit of democracy in the Church today?*

CARDINAL ZEN: It is simply impossible. We in Hong Kong live in a Church of freedom, and enjoy normalcy in a democratization of life. This is different from “a democratization of life under a central leadership”. Our way is an institution under a bishop without a democratic system but with a spirit of democracy; while in China the bishop cannot take the lead. How can they have democratization? The democratization of the Patriotic Association’s leadership is without the spirit of democracy.

When I was teaching in seminaries in mainland China, I encouraged laypeople to participate in Church activities, but the Patriotic Association completely controlled the whole system, which was anti-democratic, or pseudo-democratic. There was no true democracy. They did not welcome the good faithful to participate.

Mainland Church lay organizations have no authority. Just like all the people in the country, they are under a single authority. The nature of the Patriotic Association is anti-democratic. They control all the activities of the faithful and the priests. For instance,

an underground priest in eastern China, who surfaced to work in the open Church, said that he felt freer in the underground. The local Patriotic Association directed his pastoral work, including forbidding him to offer Mass in a layperson's home after administering the Sacrament of the Sick.

TRIPOD: *Are you disappointed with the bishops on the mainland who remain in the Patriotic Association? Would a ban on the Patriotic Association be helpful to the development of the China-Vatican dialogue?*

CARDINAL ZEN: I used to have the illusion that the mainland bishops could establish an episcopal conference of bishops in full communion with one another and with the universal Church, that would not be controlled by the Patriotic Association and that could exercise leadership over the Church from inside China. However, is the existing so-called bishops conference in China loyal to the ecclesial communion? No, it does not seem so, thus they cannot advocate or promote reforms inside the Church.

I admit that my view toward the Church in China is rather pessimistic. Therefore, I hold that a true dialogue between the Holy See and the Chinese government must take place. I hope our national leaders would really understand that the Church in China now is going in the wrong direction. This Catholic Church is not our true Catholic Church. Only the Holy See can help this Church, corroded from inside, because the Church in China has no strength to transform herself.

In 2007, Pope Benedict XVI wrote the Letter to the Catholics of China with a tolerant attitude. In the Letter, he did not ask the mainland bishops to dissociate themselves immediately from the Patriotic Association. At that time, it was believed that the mainland Church would reform itself from within. Unfortunately, it did not succeed, and this has left the Catholics in China very confused.

Some people find the Church contradictory. On the one hand, the papal letter pointed out that the Patriotic Association and other related agencies are incompatible with Catholic doctrine, but on the other hand it allows the mainland bishops to stay in the Patriotic

Association. Actually the Holy See did appeal to the Chinese bishops to have courage to speak and to act, but they were too weak and found it too difficult to change from inside.

TRIPOD: *Subsequent to the Vatican's announcements regarding the excommunication of the two illicit bishops ordained in Leshan and Shantou in 2011, the Chinese authorities demanded that the Holy See "revoke the excommunications." As China-Vatican relations are in the doldrums, what do you think is the way to break the impasse? Are you worried that more illicit ordinations will take place in China?*

CARDINAL ZEN: The Holy See has taken a tolerant attitude all along. It has not declared excommunications in all the illicit ordinations, such as the three cases in 2006. Then, in 2010, there were ten legitimate ordinations (some could be called "over-tolerated"). Suddenly, there was a change of attitude in the case of Chengde. The case of Guo Jincai was particularly serious. In the past, the Church in China had little chance to communicate with the Holy See, but not over the Chengde case. This Chinese move showed an absolute lack of respect for the Holy See, as it gave the Pope a slap in the face. This sudden turn of events from the Chinese side was disappointing. This created the impasse.

Similarly, in the two illicit ordinations of 2011, the two priests involved had had sufficient channels to communicate with the Vatican. But they refused to take the advice of the Holy See. Their ordinations incurred automatic excommunication. The Holy See's statements were meant to clarify the situation, so that the faithful in China would be clear about the situation. At the same time, the two cases showed the incompetence of the new leadership, which took office at the 8th Representatives Assembly. The new leaders had not seriously studied the backgrounds of the two candidates.

I do not worry about further illicit ordinations, but I am concerned about the chaos facing the faithful. The Holy See is concerned about the vacant Episcopal sees, and wishes to name candidates acceptable to both sides. But the past "easy" approvals of the Holy See could not, in the end, prevent illegitimate

ordinations and excommunications. In fact, each of the excommunications is sad and hurtful to the Church.

The Church has been wounded, but provided that the faithful still have confidence, we are not afraid. Illicit ordinations are like having a cancer, and an excommunication is like the removal of a tumor. The Holy See has been tolerant of different kinds of problems, but it cannot go further. China only wants to challenge the Holy See. The Holy See is forced to take the step of excommunication in order to protect the integrity of the Church. It takes courage, but there is no other choice. Otherwise the face of the Church would be obfuscated.

The Holy Father is gentle and patient. He encourages the faithful in China to have courage and to accept defeat for the moment. Concessions to the government for the excuse of protecting Church properties, or to prevent demolition of them, are wrong.

For the legitimate bishops on the Mainland, if they breach the discipline of the Church, the Pope can cancel their appointments, or ask them to resign. Therefore, if they had participated in illicit ordinations or concelebrated with illicit bishops, they have set a bad example. They need to ask for pardon from the Holy Father, repent and, in this way regain credibility to lead the faithful.

There are cases involving illicit ordinations still pending. The Holy See's position is now clear regarding these cases. The Holy See knows that the bishops are under pressure. For some, the pressure may include temptations to receive money, political titles, approvals of church building etc. Some bishops may be intimidated to obey, or else their shortcomings will be revealed. But I think they should be courageous in the face of humiliation. They can repent, and the Church is a forgiving community. Before God, a sinner can always begin a new life. Otherwise, it would be better for the bishops to resign, than to succumb and to keep on doing things against their consciences. We are sinners. We need to repent. Both David and Solomon sinned. David was weak but he did not abandon God; Solomon was evil and rejected God. Before God, their situations were very different.

TRIPOD: *Some authors of the abovementioned articles noted “No bishop, no church,” and that explains the urgency for self-selected and self-consecrated bishops. Do you agree?*

CARDINAL ZEN: The election and ordination of bishops without papal approval are used by the government officials to create a number of bishops for their own use. The Holy See has long been accommodating. Within the year 2010, 10 bishops were ordained with Holy See’s approval, but unfortunately, there were some among them, whom the Pope described as “opportunists”. They are not true pastors. They have subjected themselves to government control. They cannot lead our Church. We cannot allow our sacred episcopal ministries to be political tools. Sacred quotations in the Bible such as “The harvest is plentiful, the laborers are few”, “give to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God what is God’s” are often subject to misinterpretation by government officials, and abused to support absurd positions. To justify having self-selected and self-consecrated bishops in China by calling the situations “unavoidable,” is only a way to accomplish the goal of the government. This is not acceptable. If more illicit ordinations take place, automatic excommunications will inevitably follow.

In reality, the Chinese government can actually negotiate with the Vatican. The Catholic Church can only be what the Catholic Church really is. The Holy See has already been very accommodating. But, China is pushing beyond the bottom line. This is a great insult to the Pope, who has already been very tolerant. An excessive tolerance will harm the whole Catholic Church, and obfuscate her real countenance. That is why the Holy See has now taken a tough stance.

TRIPOD: *What kind of formation do the Chinese bishops need? Those articles mentioned the need of raising the political awareness of priests and Sisters. What do you think?*

CARDINAL ZEN: The Mainland Church lacks formation, especially in spirituality, and they lack role models of middle-aged clergy and Sisters. Seminaries lack spiritual counseling, and discernment of vocations. Spiritual formation is insufficient. There is nothing

wrong with political education, and it is the duty of educated people to be concerned with politics. Yet one must pay attention to the content and motivation for such education. A citizen has the duty to understand current affairs, and the political and social issues of his country; only then can he participate in politics. Catholic theology, spirituality, the history of philosophy and other subjects can help improve the intelligence, and consequently also raise the political awareness of Catholic citizens. If China adopts a free and open policy for the believers within its boundaries, Catholics from outside China can come to help in the formation of clergy, religious and Catholic laity.

TRIPOD: *This year 2012 marks the fifth anniversary of the Papal Letter to the Chinese Catholics released in 2007. What issues in the letter have been achieved? Five years ago, you struggled for the convening of a meeting on China affairs, and the establishment of the China Commission in the Holy See. Up to today, have things met your expectations?*

CARDINAL ZEN: It is painful for me to say that the expectations of the papal letter have not been fulfilled. Even more distressing is the fact that some content has been distorted. The idea of “reconciliation” was turned to mean an immediate “merger”. It was a very serious and deliberate error. Unfortunately, some persons in authority have supported such wrong interpretations. It was only two years after the release of the papal letter that this error could be corrected in the footnotes of the “Compendium”. The papal letter noted that there are certain agencies and organizations which are incompatible with Catholic doctrine, and that these agencies are above the bishops. And if reconciliation means the merging of the two Church communities immediately, then that would only cause the underground communities to lose their freedom.

The papal letter was wasted. The meeting on China Church affairs convened by Holy See in January 2007 was wasted too. The participants agreed that the Holy See would write to all mainland bishops to ask them to support and implement the content of the papal letter. But it was not done. The China Commission was wasted too. It was agreed that the Church outside should not

cooperate with the Patriotic Association, but, the consensus was not enforced in action. It is very sad.

TRIPOD: *What is your outlook for the next five years for the Church in China?*

CARDINAL ZEN: The only thing to do now is to have a temporary truce, to clean up the desolate mess, to bury the dead, and to heal the wounded. However, bad things might turn into good ones. We have to accept the failures and gather our strength to re-organize for the future. The Holy See should give clear directions, and should not compromise further with an intransigent government. The Holy See has to give support to both the open community and the underground communities, including in the area of the appointment of bishops. For Catholics outside of China, there is not much we can do. The Church in China seems to have gone into hibernation. We will wait for the miracle of a fresh spring to come soon. Someday, the Chinese government will understand the need to negotiate with sincerity with the Vatican, and then there will be hope for the Church in China to have the real freedom. In recent years, more voices are calling for the release of jailed Chinese clergy. We have to continue to keep the latter in our prayers.

TRIPOD: *Are you worried that the situation of the Church in China will influence the Church in Hong Kong?*

CARDINAL ZEN: I do not think that there is anything to worry about. I don't think there are Catholics in Hong Kong who would hope to be like the Church on the Mainland. Catholics in Hong Kong enjoy freedom of religion. They do not appreciate the control of the government over the mainland Church. Provided that the Church is united, we can be free of control, and free to follow the Holy Father and to be faithful to God.

TRIPOD: *Thank you very much, Your Eminence.*