

Reflections on the Institutional Crisis in the Church in China from the Perspective of Ecclesiology

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Introduction

The purpose of this article is to review the basic structure of the Catholic hierarchy from the perspective of ecclesiology. It is also hoped that this article may help the Church in China, which practices the principles of “independence and autonomy, self-management of the Church” and “the self-election and self-ordination of bishops” (episcopal ordination without papal mandate), to ponder these questions from the perspective of Catholic doctrine, or dogma.

The purpose of this article is neither to accuse nor to judge the faith and morality of individual clergy or lay faithful, but to objectively explain the basic elements of Catholic doctrine concerning the hierarchical structure. Indeed, the Church, being a human community as well, may make some external changes to the institution, in order to adapt to certain social circumstances and to effectively proclaim the Gospel.

However, when dealing with the essential and core institution of the Church, changes cannot be hastily made. Otherwise, such changes will do harm to the basic characteristics of the Catholic Church and distort its image. A local church may gradually cut ties with the universal Church, leading to an essential separation from the Church. In the Church in China, the principles of “independence and autonomy, and self-management of the Church” and their interpretations, espoused by some clergy and faithful, deeply trouble all those who are greatly concerned about the Church in China. They fear that the Church in China will pass the point of no return, keeping a distance from sister churches around the world, and finally ending up in a state of irreversible separation, and even

becoming another religion (church). This is because the interpretation of “the independence and self-management of the Church” may profoundly contradict the four marks of the Catholic Church, especially its “unity, catholicity and apostolicity.” (Pope Benedict XVI has mentioned this point in his 2007 “*Letter to the Bishops, priests, consecrated persons and lay faithful of the Catholic Church in the People’s Republic of China*,” n.7.)

Apostolicity consists of the traditional element of “apostolic succession”: the college of bishops is the successor of the apostolic college, with Peter as its head. It is hoped that the Church in China, being a true local church, would make greater effort to defend the four marks of the Church — one, holy, catholic and apostolic, which the Church as the Body of Christ should manifest. Here we reflect on these characteristics from the perspective of Catholic faith and theology.

1. The Episcopal System and the Unity and Catholicity of the Church

1.1 The Vatican II’s teaching on the marks of the Church

Indeed, the theological explanation of the unity of the Church is profound. The unity of the Church is not only manifested in the profession of the same faith and the proclamation of the same Gospel, but is also realized in a system which accepts “the Roman Pontiff, the successor of Peter as its head.” Speaking about the primacy of the Pope and the unity of the Church, *Lumen Gentium* clearly stated:

“This collegial union is apparent also in the mutual relations of individual bishops of particular local churches and with the universal Church. The Roman Pontiff, as the successor of Peter, is the perpetual and visible principle and foundation of unity of both the bishops and of the faithful.”

It continued:

“The individual bishops, however, are the visible principle and foundation of unity in their particular churches, fashioned after the model of the universal Church, in and from which churches comes into being the one and only Catholic Church.

For this reason the individual bishops represent each his own church, but all of them together and with the Pope represent the entire Church in a bond of peace, love and unity.” (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, Ch. 3, n.23)

The Pope’s primacy and power exists for the sake of the union and unity of the entire Church of Jesus Christ, as well as for the realization of the “unity” and “catholicity” of the Church. The Council clearly stated: “Every particular church is fashioned after the model of the universal Church.” Therefore, it should have the characteristics of unity and catholicity, which have existed from ancient times. Although particular local churches are different from each other, they are all subordinate to the Roman Pontiff, the successor of St. Peter, who is the perpetual and visible center of unity and its foundation. Unity and catholicity in the Church are like two sides of a coin, with catholicity meaning “unity in diversity”. The diverse development of each particular church can neither damage nor deny its unity, which is not only manifested in the proclamation of the same Gospel, but is also manifested in its union and communion with the universal Church and with its head, the Holy Father.

1.2 The principle of independent and autonomous administration of the Church is harmful to the marks of unity and catholicity

From the perspective of the teachings of Vatican Council II, one cannot help but wonder if the principle of “the independent and autonomous running of the Church” and its explanation, upheld by some clergy and lay faithful in China, has deviated from the Council’s teaching, and has reversed the “ancient practice” of the Church (cf. *Lumen Gentium* 22). Moreover, if the Church in China insists on promoting the principle of “the independent and autonomous administration of the Church,” as a member of the universal Church, will this principle gradually obscure, weaken and damage its unity and catholicity? It will no longer be able to strongly and clearly manifest the nature and marks of the universal Catholic Church. The Church in China will also gradually alienate other sister churches around the world, losing true union, unity and

communion with the universal Church in the aspects of “faith and institution.”

2. The Episcopal System and the Apostolicity of the Church

2.1 *The Vatican II’s teaching on the apostolicity of the Church*

Speaking about the episcopal college and its head, *Lumen Gentium* clearly stated:

“Just as in the Gospel, the Lord so disposing, St. Peter and the other apostles constitute one apostolic college, so in a similar way the Roman Pontiff, the successor of Peter, and the bishops, the successors of the apostles, are joined together. Indeed, the very ancient practice whereby bishops duly established in all parts of the world were in communion with one another and with the Bishop of Rome in a bond of unity, charity and peace, and also the councils assembled together.....both of these factors are already an indication of the collegial character and aspect of the episcopal order; and the ecumenical councils held in the course of centuries are also manifest proof of that same character.” (cf *Lumen Gentium*, 22)

Jesus had called the Twelve to constitute one apostolic college, with Peter as its head. According to Catholic doctrine, the “apostolic succession” not only means that the Church has received the faith and Gospel of Jesus Christ witnessed and transmitted by the apostles, but at the same time, it also refers to the “apostolic college.” This “ancient practice” and tradition is an integral part of Catholic doctrine. The Church believes in a kind of “double succession”: the college of bishops succeeds to the “apostolic college” (the Twelve) constituted by our Lord Jesus Christ, and the Roman Pontiff, as the head of the college of bishops, is the successor of St Peter, the head of the apostolic college. Such a “double succession” indicates the “collegial character” of the episcopal order. Hence, according to today’s theology, theologians consider episcopal ordination to be the fullness of Holy Orders. The communion between the college of bishops and the Pope also

manifests the concrete unity and communion between particular churches and the universal Church.

On the basis of this faith, the practice of summoning several bishops to ordain a newly appointed bishop was introduced in ancient time, and in the course of time, has become a liturgical practice, with a strong theoretical foundation in theology. The Second Vatican Council described the practice in this way:

“And it is intimated also in the practice, introduced in ancient times, of summoning several bishops to take part in the elevation of the newly elected to the ministry of the high priesthood. Hence, one is constituted a member of the Episcopal body in virtue of sacramental consecration and hierarchical communion with the head and members of the body.” (cf *Lumen Gentium*, 22)

2.2 “Episcopal ordination without papal mandate” (the self-election and self-consecration of bishops) is harmful to a complete “apostolicity” of the Church

The ordination of a bishop implies the communion and unity of that individual bishop with other local churches, and with the Roman Pontiff. However, the Church in China advocates the “independent and autonomous administration of the church,” and implements the “self-election and self-consecration of bishops.” These practices not only cause harm to the collegial character of the episcopal system, but also implicitly deny that such a church is a member of the college of bishops. To a greater or lesser degree, they damage the complete “apostolicity” of that particular local church, because the collegial character of the episcopal ministry essentially comes from the whole concept of succession to the apostolic college: the individual bishop and the college of bishops and with their head, the Roman Pontiff, united as a communion, constitute the episcopal hierarchy, which succeeded the apostolic college.

Conclusion

The arguments in this article come from Catholic dogma and the teaching of the Second Vatican Council. We certainly

understand the political and social situations, which most of clergy and lay faithful of the Church in China face. As outsiders or observers, we cannot fully appreciate the challenges and pressures that they are subject to. Under normal circumstances, there is no conflict between love for one's country and love for the Church. However, when living in an abnormal situation, these two kinds of love will become imbalanced, in mutual conflict with each other, and unable to be integrated. Catholics, while nourishing sincere sentiments of concern for their country, should make every effort to defend the fundamental characteristics of their faith and of their Church, and in this way, practice true love for the Church. If some practices exist that diminish or damage the characteristics of the Church, it is difficult to say that one has achieved true love for the country and for the Church. There are some problems which can still be solved and for which solutions can be found. Let us take the problem of episcopal ordinations for example. When dealing with this problem, if both parties set aside political and power struggles, but rather focus on mutual respect, the promotion of in-depth dialogue and understanding — so as to know more about the situation of China as well as the nature of the Church — both sides should be able to find a way, which will be mutually beneficial, and allow for co-existence. The Church and the state will thus contribute to the true stability and harmony of the society. Both the Church and the nation could develop in accordance with each one's own nature. When that day arrives, the Church in China and its faithful will have the opportunity to achieve true love for the country and love for the Church. In fact, in the *“Letter to the Bishops, priests, consecrated persons and lay faithful of the Catholic Church in the People's Republic of China,”* Pope Benedict XVI, as the chief shepherd of the Church, had to teach correct doctrine, defend the ancient practices of the Church and rectify wrong doing. However, at the same time, he expressed his love for all the Chinese people and the faithful throughout the letter. He also expressed the wish to reach out his hands, making every effort to bridge the gap between Church and state, and to promote dialogue. The Holy Father also expressed the hope that the Church in China would implement the true spirit of loving the country and loving the Church, without doing harm to the essential nature of the Church.