

# *A Letter from Cardinal Paul Shan to All Brother Bishops*

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*Paul Shan Kuo-hsi, SJ*

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My Dearly Beloved Brother Bishops:

May the peace and joy of Christ be with you, since He has conquered evil and death by rising from the dead.

Although we have never met or communicated by letter, I pray for you, your dioceses and the whole Church in China at least seven times a day. May the Lord grant you peace and health in both body and soul. May the Lord also grant you that your evangelization and pastoral work progress smoothly and successfully. May all the Catholics of your diocese be united in heart and soul, and cooperate with one another in mutual love. May each particular Church be in communion with the Universal Church in order to fulfill Our Lord's will that there be one flock and one shepherd.

A brother bishop once suggested that I should share my pastoral experience as a priest for over 50 years and as a bishop for some 30 years with my brother bishops. Since this year is the Year for Priests, I think I should share with my brother bishops something on "the relationship between a bishop and his priests". Our Catholic faith tells us that bishops are the successors of the Apostles and the legitimate ordinaries of their dioceses, and that priests are the closest associates of bishops in the evangelization and pastoral work. The relationship between a bishop and his priests is very intimate and multifaceted. I now briefly share with you, my brother bishops, the following three kinds of important relationships.

## **The father-son relationship**

The father-son relationship, which a bishop has with his priests, is not paternalistic, like that of an ancient patriarchal society. Rather within the limitations of human nature, it imitates the relationship, which the heavenly Father has with His only begotten and incarnate Son, Jesus. The Father and His only Son Jesus, with one heart and mind, live, communicate and work together. Jesus is the visible image of the Father: "Whoever has seen me has seen the Father. How can you say, 'Show us the Father? Do you not believe that I am in the Father and the Father is in me? The words that I speak to you I do not speak on my own. The Father who dwells in me is doing his works.'" (John 14:9-10) This conversation between Jesus and Philip in the upper room during the Last Supper clearly shows how close was the father-son relationship between Jesus and the Father. The intensity of the intimacy made them inseparably and wholly one.

Jesus hoped that His disciples and His believers in the following generations would love one another, and be united together as one. Therefore, at the Last Supper He prayed for them in this way: "That they may all be one, as you, Father, are in me and I in you, that they also may be in us, that the world may believe that you sent me... may they be one, as we are one." (John 17:21-22) The father-son relationship between the Father and His only Son is such that they are one in Being, with one heart and one mind, mutually loving one another and inseparable. This is the most perfect model for a bishop's father-son relationship with his priests. Although due to the weakness and limitations of human nature this model cannot be achieved completely, a bishop and his priests should at least strive hard to reach this standard of a father-son relationship.

If the diocese can be compared to a family, the bishop is the head of the family and the priests are his sons. The main task of the head of the family is to satisfy his children's physical, intellectual and spiritual needs, so that they can have the sense of security at home. At the same time he must put all his effort into raising the children until they become adults. He also has the responsibility for nurturing the family and developing the family enterprise.

The head of the diocesan family should primarily take care of the priests' livelihood and material needs. This is especially true for elderly and sick priests. They should be provided with proper medical care and arrangements for retirement. Although a diocese's finances may be tight, caring for priests should still be a priority. Parishes could be big or small, with more or less income. But since the bishop is usually too busy to please everyone, the best thing to do is to select priests, Sisters and laypeople who are fervent, fair and knowledgeable in financial affairs to form a committee, under the supervision of the bishop. They should charitably and justly manage and distribute the diocese's resources. This would permit each priest to be unconcerned about their material needs, and to be totally dedicated to evangelization and pastoral work. In my diocese, I have experimented with having bigger parishes take care of smaller parishes. The result was good and beneficial to both parties. But one caution should be given: Do not let the small parishes rely too much on the big parishes, because they must become self-reliant themselves. After some time, once they are self-sufficient, they can help other smaller parishes or newly developed missions.

The head of the diocese must also be concerned about the priests' psychological and intellectual growth. Here, "psychological and intellectual" means the formation and development of the priests' feelings and intellect. A person who is both psychologically and intellectually healthy, can deal with pastoral and evangelical work in a sound manner. I respectfully invite each bishop to lead the priests of his diocese to form a presbyterate, which should have a warm, friendly and lovable atmosphere, with a spirit of mutual cooperation and care for one another, and with the priests united with one heart and mind. In order to form such a community, the priests need to be in constant contact, communication, and communion with one another. Therefore, each priest must cherish the monthly priests' retreats and gatherings with the bishop. Besides spiritual exercises, the priests can exchange pastoral and evangelical experiences, regardless of successes and failures. They can also share life's joys and sorrows. As times keep changing and developing, priests also need to keep updated in Scripture, theology, spirituality, pastoral studies, canon law, liturgy, philosophy, management and personal relations, in order to be in touch with the

modern age. The bishop can join with other bishops of nearby dioceses to invite scholars and experts to run workshops to update the priests in the above subjects. Apart from large-scale workshops, and priests' monthly retreats, each deanery can run gatherings once a month "without a fixed format," holding them in various parishes by turn. One can thus understand the reality of pastoral work and evangelization in each parish. Priests can encourage one another, and explore matters of common concern within their deanery.

Not only does the head of the family bear responsibilities for the family, the children can have their duties too. The first is to understand their father's mind and to wholeheartedly carry out the father's will. The relationship between Jesus and His Father is a perfect model for priests and their bishop to follow. Jesus regards doing the Father's will as food (John 4:31-34) and He was "obedient to death, even death on a cross." (Philippians 2:8) Before a bishop makes an important decision on major diocesan matters, he must work with the diocese's Priests Council and related persons, so as to have substantial communication, research, an exchange of views, and a consensus, before finally arriving at a decision. After the bishop announces the decision, the priests should wholeheartedly accept it, taking it as the will of God expressed through the bishop. This will certainly bring blessings from God to enable the priest to complete the pastoral and evangelization work the bishop has entrusted to him. It will also help the priest to feel happy and peaceful.

### **The master-pupil relationship**

The relationship of the bishop and the priests of his diocese can be likened to the master-pupil relationship, which Jesus has with his disciples. Jesus used all kinds of opportunities and ways to form his disciples, and to strengthen them in the three virtues of faith, hope and charity. He especially set an example for them, thus gradually influencing them. The bishop should be the first to set an example. In his daily life, when dealing with persons and things, he must actively live out the three virtues of faith, hope and charity.

The bishop is the protector and the instructor in the fundamentals of the faith. In the present situation, the biggest

challenge is found in the area of ecclesiology. The bishop has the responsibility to protect and teach the Church's four attributes, namely of being one, holy, catholic and apostolic. He must also protect the Church's hierarchy, and teach the importance of communion and unity with the Successor of St. Peter. He must not only make sure that his priests clearly understand these important doctrines, but he must advise them to instruct the laypeople to observe them.

As for the ongoing formation of priests in Scripture, theology, spirituality, canon law, moral theology, pastoral ministry, evangelization, and catechetics, the bishop can join with the bishops of neighboring dioceses to jointly organize workshops. They can invite scholars and experts to help them with their updating program. Moreover, the bishops should encourage their priests to read good books. It would be good if every deanery set up a committee for the ongoing formation of priests. They could meet once a month. Each priest could share what he has learned from his reading and reflection. In this way one person's reading could benefit others. The diocese can even form study groups, according to the priests' interests and specialization, on the Bible, theology, spirituality, pastoral ministry, evangelization, moral theology, canon law, catechetics and parish management. Then, when questions arise, the special study groups can be invited to research and explain them.

### **Co-workers of pastoral work and evangelization**

When Jesus proclaimed the Gospel on this earth, He has selected the apostles as his co-workers and aides. When the apostles took up the preaching task, they also selected co-workers and aides. They laid hands on them and consecrated them as a Presbyter or Priest. Today the laypeople normally call them "Father", because they assist the bishop to care for the Catholics' spiritual life and needs. To be able to properly care for the Catholics' spiritual life and needs, as well as to expand the work of preaching the Gospel, so that more non-believers will accept it and be baptized as children of God, the bishop and priests must work closely together.

In pastoral work and evangelization, priests are the bishop's most intimate partners and friends. Therefore, in the process of planning and making policy for pastoral and evangelization work, the bishop should allow the priests to participate in research and discussion. Then only after a consensus is reached, should the plans be implemented. Such a process may seem like a waste of time, but in reality, it saves time. If the executors take part in the planning and decision-making, then tasks will be implemented more thoroughly and efficiently.

If the bishop lives like Jesus, he will not treat the priests as his employees or servants. Rather he will call them his co-workers and friends. He will communicate with them about his plans for pastoral and evangelization work. "I no longer call you slaves, because a slave does not know what his master is doing. I have called you friends, because I have told you everything I have heard from my Father."(John 15:15) If the priests, with one mind and one heart, support the bishop in his pastoral ministry and evangelization work, the diocese will reap an abundant harvest.

Most beloved brother Bishop, I know the difficult situations you are in. Not only do I pray every day for you and your dioceses, I want to share this small contribution of my more than 30 years experiences as a bishop with you. I think that the relationship between a bishop and his priests is very important. If the bishop can maintain a good relationship with his priests, like a father with his sons, or a master with his co-workers, then he will be happy and peaceful, and God will bless his pastoral and evangelical work with abundant fruit.

May God bestow His peace upon you.

Your brother in Christ,

Shan Kuo-hsi