

Cardinal Zen: Seeking a Deeper Understanding of the 2007 Papal Letter

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Pope Benedict XVI issued a pastoral letter to the Catholics of China on June 30, 2007. Two weeks after the Letter was published, Cardinal Joseph Zen Ze-kium, then bishop of Hong Kong, conducted three seminars in the diocese, from July 16 to 18, 2007, to explain to local Catholics the contents of the Letter. In November 2009, he published a booklet called “Reading Guide” for the Papal Letter that he wrote in order to clarify certain points of the Letter. Five years have now gone by, and Cardinal Zen, now emeritus bishop, spoke again at a seminar in Hong Kong on May 13, 2012, on the significance of the Papal Letter for the Church in China. The Diocesan Justice and Peace Commission organized the seminar to mark the fifth anniversary of the Letter. The text below covers the main points of Cardinal Zen’s speech.

The Background of the Holy Father’s Letter

Cardinal Zen began by saying that he was happy to talk about the Papal Letter again, and to highlight the background of the Letter written by Pope Benedict XVI in 2007. As early as in 2002, Vatican’s Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples (formerly known as Propaganda Fide) had prepared a draft document to be issued to the Church in China. It was at the time of Pope John Paul II’s pontificate. The draft did not receive much support as people thought that the open and underground Church communities were too uncompromising and would take from the letter only what was agreeable to their position.

Pope Benedict XVI called a summit regarding the Church in China on January 19-20, 2007 at the Vatican. About 20 bishops, including Cardinal Zen and bishops from Taiwan, Hong Kong and

Macao, experts and dicastery officials attended the meeting. Pope Benedict decided to write a letter to the Chinese Church, based on the abovementioned draft document, and after listening to opinions of those present at the summit meeting. People concerned were hoping that the document could be issued by Easter, in early April that year. But Pope Benedict only signed the letter on May 27, 2007, the feast of Pentecost. Due to a need for translation, the document was not officially published until June 30. Ten days prior to that date, the Holy See, out of courtesy, had sent the Chinese government a copy of the text; and four days before its release, copies were sent to bishops in Taiwan, Hong Kong and Macao.

A month after the release of the Letter, Cardinal Zen led a group of Hong Kong permanent deacons and their family members on a pilgrimage to Italy. They visited “Larenzago di Cadore” in northern Italy where the Holy Father was spending his summer holiday. They met Pope Benedict, who inquired about the effect of his letter on the Church in China. The Pontiff confided to Cardinal Zen that the Chinese side could not accept the Letter. They suggested that the Holy See send a cardinal to China to whom they would explain matters. It was made clear to the Chinese side that the Letter was sent to them as a courtesy, not to seek their approval.

The Salesian prelate said he remembered on the day the Letter was published, mainland Church websites were busy uploading the text so that their Catholics could download it immediately. The next day, those websites were ordered to remove the text of the Letter. Gradually, negative reactions from local governments in China were heard. However, until today, the Chinese Central government has not officially opposed the Letter. However, strong opposition has been expressed internally.

Cardinal Zen said that in the Letter the Holy Father explained with clarity and a balanced view the situation of the Church in China, and what “oneness” in the Catholic Church means. The Letter is full of the Pope’s admiration and love for the Church in China. He tries to maintain a balance between truth and love. Truth must be told and not sacrificed. The words of the Letter, with a sense of gentleness and subtlety, enable the readers to read it from the perspective of faith. There is no political motivation behind it.

The Letter is a theological reflection written by a great theologian, who as true father, expresses his love for the Chinese Church.

Impact on Church in China

Cardinal Zen said that the papal Letter pointed out that both the open and underground communities are important. It expressed sincere respect for the Chinese government. However, the cardinal thought that some people manipulated the Letter to achieve certain goals, and it was somehow wasted. Some Chinese officials did not understand, or accept, the Letter. Some mainland Church people also did not cordially accept the Letter. Even in the Holy See, some were eager to compromise with the Chinese government, the cardinal said, and this wounded the Church in China again.

Regarding the past illicit ordinations, Cardinal Zen quoted a Vatican press statement after the most recent 5th meeting of Holy See's Commission for the Catholic Church in China on April 26, 2012, which stated: "This clarity has been obfuscated by those clerics who have illegitimately received episcopal ordination and by those illegitimate bishops who have carried out acts of jurisdiction or who have administered the Sacraments. In so doing, they usurp a power which the Church has not conferred upon them." The statement continued: "The behavior of these bishops, in addition to aggravating their canonical status, has disturbed the faithful and often has violated the consciences of the priests and lay faithful who were involved." The authorities are now using tougher measures to force Church people to comply with their directions.

The situation is different from that of the past. In the 1980s, bishops understood clearly that illegitimate ordinations were wrong. Nonetheless, they were forced to be ordained without papal mandate. In their heart they knew that illicit ordinations were incorrect. Today, some younger bishops do not seem to see it as being improper. Even after their participation in an illicit ordination, they do not show any remorse or write to the Holy Father to explain the reasons for their action, and to seek pardon. Faced such acts, the Pope and Catholic believers are disheartened, Cardinal Zen said.

Cardinal Zen also cited a press statement after the 4th meeting of China Commission on April 13, 2011, which refers to serious

incidents like the illicit ordination of Chengde (Hebei) and the convocation of the Eighth Assembly of the Chinese Catholic Representatives in Beijing, both in late 2010. Those events saddened and shocked both the open and the underground communities in China, as well as the Universal Church. "We are very distressed," the statement said. It was especially distressing because before the illicit ordination in Chengde (Nov. 20, 2010), China and Holy See had arrived at a consensus on the approval of several bishops.

The Papal Letter said that the Patriotic Association is incompatible with Catholic doctrine. "Likewise, the declared purpose of the afore-mentioned entities to implement the principles of independence and autonomy, self-management and the democratic administration of the Church is incompatible with Catholic doctrine, which from the time of the ancient Creeds professes the Church to be one, holy, catholic and apostolic. (No. 7)" the 2011 statement cited from the 2007 papal Letter.

Now, Chinese Catholics have become dismayed. This principle seems to contradict what is actually happening with appointments of bishops. Cardinal Zen quoted some of their doubts and questions: Why are mainland bishops who support the implementation of independently managing the church still recognized by the Holy See? Why does Holy See approve episcopal candidates who hold positions in the Patriotic Association? Does Holy See ask such bishops to quit the Patriotic Association? Why does the Holy See not ask them to quit the Patriotic Association before appointing them bishops? These issues are very worrying. If Church principles had been strictly enforced, those "opportunistic-bishops" would not have had a chance to commit such violations, Cardinal Zen said.

The Patriotic Association splits the Church

In this regard, Cardinal Zen said, laypeople must influence their priests, and urge their bishops to be in communion with the Holy Father, and strictly comply with Church principles. The Chinese bishops must stand firm. Currently, the Patriotic Association is highly corrupted, and will disappear some day. The

Pope knows the Chinese bishops are under much pressure, but they still should express their desire to be in communion with the Holy Father.

After the publication of the Letter, different opinions on the situation have emerged, even wrong ones. Some claimed that compromise is for the good of the Church. However, to help Chinese bishops get rid of the control of the government and the Patriotic Association is most crucial, Cardinal Zen said. Then, the Church must appoint suitable bishops and should not compromise in the selection of candidates. Otherwise, this continuous compromise will just “encourage the Chinese bishops to continue being slaves to those who strictly control our Church in China.”

Papal Letter has not asked Underground Church to “surface”

The Pope’s Letter has affected the underground Church communities greatly. Cardinal Zen, again, said that the Letter was manipulated. Some claimed the Letter called for unity and urged underground Catholics to “come out into the open,” and accept registration with the government. Cardinal Zen stressed: “The Papal Letter has not encouraged the underground groups to surface, nor has it prohibited anyone from getting government approval.” The cardinal said the Pope is, in fact, extremely cautious in handling this situation. For underground priests who choose to register, they should discuss the matter with their bishop and fellow priests, and act according to the needs of their situations. However, they must not act against their consciences. Cardinal Zen acknowledged that it is very difficult for underground bishops or priests to make such a decision, and it entails facing a lot of pressure.

The translation problem

Cardinal Zen found at least 10 mistakes in the original Vatican translation of the Pope’s Letter into Chinese. The head of the Holy See’s department for translation required Cardinal Zen to find witnesses to confirm those errors. The cardinal got four experts from Taiwan and Hong Kong to confirm the errors and omissions in the translated text. Finally, the Holy See decided to revise the text online, but not reprint the Chinese version. The Diocese of Hong

Kong took the trouble to print the revised text of the Letter with Vatican permission.

Cardinal Zen commented: "The Chinese translation of the Letter carried mistakes. I am wonder if someone might have intentionally allowed those errors to exist, thus twisting the meaning of the Papal Letter, so that it appeared to urge the underground communities to 'surface' as soon as possible. In fact, some of their conditions were not ripe and the time had not yet come." Regarding the case of Coadjutor Bishop An Shuxin of Baoding, it remains a thorny issue for the Holy See, Cardinal Zen said. Bishop An had been jailed for decades for his Catholic faith. But in 2009 he "surfaced," and took part in the activities of the Patriotic Association. Then in 2010, Bishop An participated in an illegitimate ordination in and attended the Eighth Assembly of Catholic Representatives. He must have been brainwashed, the cardinal commented.

In recent years, the Chinese government has pressured by force and violence underground priests to register and to join the Patriotic Association. Cardinal Zen has observed some changes in the Chinese government's attitude, as it seems more aggressive now. Previously, they might have gathered underground bishops and priests to undergo political education or put them under house arrest in public security guesthouses. Now, when priests are arrested, some are beaten up and tortured, and are made to undergo continuous interrogations for days without rest. "These means are very cruel," he said.

Conclusion

In conclusion Cardinal Zen said: "The Pope's Letter has been published for five years now. We need to rediscover its meaning and significance by re-reading it." The cardinal has written a booklet called "Reading Guide" for the Papal Letter that gives readers a better understanding of the current situation of the Church in China and of the Pope's thoughts.

"I have been criticized as acting as a judge, deciding who is loyal and who is disloyal to the Pope. Others said I am happy with and supportive of the excommunication of bishops in China. Both

are untrue. It is sad to see such illicit ordinations take place. In the 1980s-90s, I served as a teacher in open Church seminaries for seven years. I helped to explain to the Holy See that the open Church was growing and had good clerics. With more reflection on the Pope's Letter, it is hoped that the Church in China will return to the right path of union with the Universal Church and communion with the Holy Father," he concluded.