

Five Years after Pope Benedict XVI's Letter to Chinese Catholics

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Five years have passed since Pope Benedict XVI addressed a special Letter “to the bishops, priests, consecrated persons and lay faithful of the Catholic Church in the People’s Republic of China.” Looking at today’s China Church, one may tend to emphasize the many problems she seems to be confronted with, forgetting the positive side of her development. Closer looks at the changes that have taken place since Pentecost 2007 can help us better appreciate the lasting impact of this papal document.

It appears that in China today, Catholic communities have come to the special attention of the official structures, which can be read as a sign that some ambiguities are finally being exposed, calling for basic reassessment. Benedict XVI’s main concern is the Church — speaking “the truth with the language of love.” He has made it clear that within the Catholic community there is the need for true conversion: “the purification of memory, the pardoning of wrongdoers, the forgetting of injustices suffered...are urgent steps that must be taken.” He then also underlined in a gentle and yet clear way that the current situation of “religious tolerance” is far from the “religious freedom” that is expected of a modern State.

It is hoped that some understanding may be reached, allowing the Catholics to contribute peacefully to the common good of the nation. Revoking the long time Vatican directives that made sharp distinctions and barriers between the so-called “underground” Catholics and those who adhere to the government sponsored Catholic Patriotic Association, the Pope showed the sincerity of requesting “a respectful and open dialogue” with the civil authorities. He thus stressed his conviction that the solution

to the outstanding questions would favor the growth of the desirable “harmonious society” in China.

Warm reception by Chinese Catholics

As is well known, Catholic communities in mainland China generally welcomed this authoritative encouragement as a ray of hope, although there was some reservation from unofficial groups. Initial statements from public authorities were somewhat cautious, and the Letter was not explicitly condemned. Nevertheless, initiatives to study and distribute it were soon restricted.

Reports from different parts of mainland China reveal remarkably different situations in the various provinces. In Qiqihar (Heilongjiang), the young unofficial bishop Joseph Wei Jingyi, 48, was able to comment on the Letter in a special pastoral letter soon after he received this “milestone in the development of the Church in China.” He asked some 30 priests in his communities to consider with their faithful how to apply the Pope’s directives. As he stated a couple of months later, even the Qiqihar authority in charge of religious affairs, to whom he had presented a copy of the papal Letter, expressed appreciation for it. But he admitted that some of his “clandestine” priests disapproved his collaboration with the authorities.

In Feng Xiang diocese (Shaanxi province), Bishop Lucas Li Jingfeng, 87, distributed copies of the Chinese translation of the papal Letter to his priests, and also gave it to the local government office. The Patriotic Association has not been harsh to his diocese, and he himself, having been ordained as a bishop in 1980 without government approval, was recognized by the authorities in 2004 without having to join the Association. Yet he thinks that if the government does not accept the positions expressed by the Pope, things could worsen — “we know how difficult it is to reach a compromise.” In Xi’an (also Shaanxi), where there is practically no underground community, Bishop Anthony Dang Mingyan is happy with the positive fruits of the papal Letter, which makes contacts and dialogue easier.

In the sensitive Hebei province, Petrus Feng Xinmao, 44, coadjutor bishop, approved by both the Holy See and the

government, said that in his Hengshui diocese the papal Letter could circulate freely. In Xuanhua diocese (also Hebei), at a solemn Mass attended by one thousand Catholics for the Feast of the Assumption (August 15), the papal Letter was presented at the Offertory, and an appeal for unity was stressed. In the same Hebei province, unofficial bishop Jiulius Jia Zhiguo, 75, (well known to the Public Security forces), emphasized the importance of unity inside the Church not long after the Letter was published. He pointed out that the pressure exercised by the State was the real problem. Only the government could limit the power of the Patriotic Association. "But I am afraid," he added, "that we cannot expect much with regard to State-Church relations, as practically nothing has changed in the Chinese political field since Mao's time."

According to a young priest from an "underground" community in Northern China who studied abroad, the Letter would have "a decisive impact on the future development of the Church in China." He agrees that "the most urgent mission of the Church in China now is reconciliation." He laments the fact that the Pope, as pastor of the Universal Church, does not mention the bishops and priests who are still suffering in prison. Priests in the official Church welcome the Letter with caution, though they appreciate it. It is generally believed that most Chinese priests, Sisters and lay Catholics have read the papal Letter and have a copy.

Muddled public reactions

The Beijing government was not caught unprepared, as the Holy See had sent them the papal Letter ten days before publication. When the document was about to appear, the United Front summoned the "official bishops" to a meeting, warning them to keep "a calm attitude." It was near the time of the 50th anniversary of the founding the Catholic Patriotic Association, celebrated with a symposium, and a bigger gathering of 500 participants, including 37 bishops on June 27-28, 2007. This was addressed by Ye Xiaowen, Liu Bainian, Jia Qinglin (president of the CPPCC), vice-

premier Hui Liangyu, and the head of the United Front Department, Liu Yandong.

At the local level, as mentioned earlier, initial reactions of the authorities were not uniform. But soon the papal Letter disappeared from Catholic websites, while some website operators were “persuaded” by government officials to withdraw it. In fact the Hebei Public Security Bureau promulgated in August 2007 an elaborate document in the form of study material, which blamed the Pope for “unilaterally issuing his pastoral letter disregarding China’s objections.” It went on repeating old accusations: “The Roman Curia places all the blame on the Chinese side; the Letter interferes in China’s internal affairs in the name of religious freedom.”

Then, in October the United Front Department together with the State Agency for Religious Affairs (SARA) issued stringent guidelines, describing the Pope’s Letter as a Vatican infiltration attempt and a challenge to China’s sovereignty. Distribution of the Letter was to be stopped, websites blocked, its publication forbidden, and private copies seized. The clergy should undergo sessions of brainwashing. The organization of control should be activated and intensified at all levels, with the participation of all interested parties: United Front, Offices of Religious Affairs, Public Security, State Security, and Department of Propaganda. The collection of information should be intensified to know more about local situations, both at home and abroad. Senior officials, however, should remain silent, not to embarrass the Central Authority.

In the same month of October news from Guangxi autonomous province confirmed that in Nanning a campaign was launched against the Vatican “penetration” of Church life. In the nearby district of Qingxiu, copies of a parish bulletin that carried parts of the Letter were seized and destroyed. The Religious Affairs office even set up an emergency group comprising over 12 government agencies to combat the spread of the Letter, labeled “(Vatican) instrument that damages the country and the people.” Many obligatory political sessions were organized all over China for Catholic priests, and about a dozen of them were known to have been arrested.

On the other hand, with the Olympic Games due to commence in summer 2008, the State apparatus obviously wanted to avoid any controversy on an international level, which probably has kept the central government's reaction low profile, though critical. Another incident was that the 17th Congress of the Chinese Communist Party was about to convene. When it was held in October 15-20, 2008 for the first time a resolution was approved to incorporate guidelines into the Party's charter, assuring implementation of the policy of religious freedom and promotion of an active role for religious circles in advancing social and economic development. But at the same time, an order to stop the papal Letter was issued by Beijing authorities. Ye Xiaowen, director of SARA, appeared particularly bitter. He made an unusually strong attack against the Catholic Church and Pope Benedict's Letter in an interview with the *Nanfang Weekend* newspaper (March 13, 2008).

Sudden clash after two years of apparent lull

There was a period of calmness from that time until the end of 2010. Several dioceses felt encouraged to renew or multiply their evangelization efforts and pastoral formation programs. On the critical issue of choosing new bishops, where the Catholic community proved determined and united, even with the "democratic election" system, it was possible to reach a practical agreement on candidates acceptable both to Rome and to Beijing. In the months following the publication of the papal Letter, five young bishops were ordained (including those in important cities like Beijing and Guangzhou), approved by both the Holy See and the government. Then, in the years 2008 and 2009 no new bishop were ordained — was the difficult issue being debated at high level? Then up to mid-November 2010, ten new episcopal ordinations were agreed by both China side and the Holy See.

The situation changed dramatically on November 20, 2010, when Father Joseph Guo Jincai, who did not have the approval of the Holy Father, was forcefully ordained bishop of Chengde (Hebei). The Holy See, very disturbed by the news, issued a Communiqué to express the "deep regret" of the Holy Father, reaffirming the willingness "to engage in a respectful and

constructive dialogue with the Authorities of the PRC...” Unfortunately, when the 8th Assembly of Catholic Representatives convened in Beijing on December 7-9, 2010,) with massive support of the police, it became all too clear that a grave confrontation policy was fixed.

The situation deteriorated further in 2011. Although there were four new bishops ordained with the approval of both the Holy See and the Chinese authorities, two other episcopal ordinations were imposed without papal approval, namely in Leshan (Sichuan) on June 29, and Shantou (Guangdong) on July 14. These were carried out with the usual support of the security forces, which pressured bishops in good standing to participate in these illicit ordinations. Both cases were met with official statements by the Holy See, declaring the serious canonical sanction (excommunication) of canon 1382 of the Code of Canon Law. Beijing reacted strongly immediately.

After a SARA evaluation meeting held in Haikou (Hainan), a resolution was made on January 24, 2011 to “guide the ‘one Association and one Conference’ of the Catholic Church to fully implement the spirit of the 8th National Assembly of Catholic Representatives, strengthen the efforts in education for administering the Church autonomously and independently as well as education in its democratic management, and also deepening the formation of more than 1,000 members of the clergy through organizing six training courses for them.”

A leading article published in the *People's Daily Online* (June 8, 2011) explained “Why the Chinese Communist Party can unite religious believers.” The author was Ye Xiaowen, who since 2009 had left the position as SARA's director to become Party Secretary of the Central Institute of Socialism. Obviously his influence on the official religious policy continues. At a press conference held in Washington on September 28, 2011, Wang Zuo'an (who succeeded Ye Xiaowen as director of SARA) stated that “China wants to conduct a sincere dialogue with the Vatican” based on the usual

“Two Principles.”¹ A few weeks earlier (on July 4, 2011), SARA had announced new “Norms for the appointment of Parish Priests of the Catholic Church in China” with immediate effect. This is obviously interference of the State in matters traditionally regulated by the Code of Canon Law and clearly pertaining to the internal life of the Church.

There were new reports of persecution of priests in the “underground,” especially in north Hebei, with authorities taking them away and trying to force them to join the Patriotic Association. On the other hand, privileges were made available to induce priests and bishops to accept the official religious policy as being more beneficial for the Church’s development, apart from substantial personal benefits to them and their families. This carrot and stick approach was supported by numerous seminars, study sessions, and articles published in the official magazine *Catholic Church in China*, which tried to justify theologically the policy of “self-election and self-consecration of bishops.”²

In such an atmosphere, some bishops might begin to think that it might be better to take the government’s stance, which keeps assuring that the Catholic Church in China would continue to expand even without Rome. As a matter of fact, often such bishops found themselves isolated by their priests, Sisters, and faithful, thus rendering them practically ineffectual in their pastoral endeavors.

2012: The horizon is still covered by heavy clouds

The year started with SARA reporting progress in the record filing of clerics and in achieving financial supervision over places of worship (January 9, 2012).³ In April 2012, two episcopal

¹ They were usually expressed this way: 1) the Vatican must sever its diplomatic relations with Taiwan; and 2) the Vatican must not interfere in China’s internal affairs under the pretext of religious affairs.

² On this delicate question, in *Tripod* n.165 some of these spurious studies were refuted.

³ According to the report, practically all religious office holders have been officially recognized and filed in ten provincial level administration units, including Beijing, while in other units, including Shanghai and Guangzhou, the process was under way. Most of the national religious organizations had also issued “ID cards for religious office holders” to the majority of those

ordinations, approved both by the Holy See and the Chinese government, were performed — Joseph Chen Gongao, 47, was made bishop of Nanchong (Sichuan), and Methodius Qu Ailin, 51, bishop of Changsha (Hunan). But at their consecrations, bishops in seriously irregular situations were present. On June 27-28, the Patriotic Association and the Bishops' Conference hosted a conference on the Second Vatican Council at the National Seminary in Beijing. Zhou Yongzhi (vice-secretary general of the Patriotic Association) claimed that Vatican Council II was the basis for the independent, self-governed Chinese Church. Another vice-secretary general of the Patriotic Association, Wang Huaimao, declared at the conference that China, under the leadership of the Holy Spirit, was a decade ahead of its times in introducing the reforms of the 1950s, i.e., the creation of the Patriotic Association in 1957 and the first episcopal consecrations without papal mandate in 1958. According to him, those Chinese initiatives served as a practical demonstration and as stepping stones for the progressive spirit of the Council (!!).

A new clash took place on July 6, when Father Joseph Yue Fusheng was ordained bishop in Harbin (Heilongjiang) without papal mandate. A Note from the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples had warned a couple of days earlier that such action “planned in a unilateral way would produce divisions, wounds and tensions in the Catholic community in China.” Quoting from Benedict XVI's Letter (n.9), the Note added: “It is understandable that governmental authorities are attentive to the choice of those who will carry out the important role of leading and shepherding the local Catholic communities, given the social implications which — in China as in the rest of the world — has a function in the civil sphere as well as the spiritual.” But it should be recalled that “the appointment of Bishops touches the very heart of

who filed. Then, on June 5, SARA released (for trial implementation) a new document touching directly on the life of the Church: “Measures for Reporting Bishops of the Chinese Catholic Church for the Record.” Its content and implication are not yet clear, but it gives to the Patriotic Association and to the official Bishops' Conference the leading role in the mandatory filing of applications for the record with the State authorities.

the life of the Church, inasmuch as the appointment of Bishops by the Pope is the guarantee of the unity of the Church and of hierarchical communion.”⁴ The Note insisted that the appointment of Bishops is a religious question, not a political one: “The appointment of Bishops for a particular religious community is understood, also in international documents, as a constitutive element of the full exercise of the right to religious freedom.”

On July 4, the Chinese authorities responded sharply with a SARA statement, that dismissed the Vatican warning as “extremely outrageous and shocking.” As the ordination of Yue Fusheng went ahead as planned, the Holy See had no alternative but declared that he had automatically incurred the sanctions laid down by canon 1382 of the Code of Canon Law, and was lacking the authority to govern the priests and the Catholic community in the province of Heilongjiang. Yet the official statement concluded: “The Apostolic See, trusting in the concrete willingness of the government authorities of China to dialogue with the Holy See, hopes that the said authorities will not encourage gestures contrary to such a dialogue.”

A few days later, on July 7, 2012 in the Shanghai Cathedral at Xujiahui, Thaddeus Ma Daqin, 45, was ordained auxiliary bishop for that diocese. Although his appointment was approved by both parties, the tensions that have developed with regard to this ceremony have weighty consequences. Bishop Ma Daqin was taken away by the authorities immediately after his ordination and is still confined at Sheshan Regional Seminary, prohibited from performing his duties and from meeting people.

⁴ The Note went on quoting from the Pope’s Letter giving the juridical consequences: “For this reason the Code of Canon Law (cf. c.1382) lays down grave sanctions both for the Bishop who freely confers episcopal ordination without an apostolic mandate and for the one who receives it: such an ordination in fact inflicts a painful wound upon ecclesial communion and constitutes a grave violation of canonical discipline”. In fact, “when the Pope issues the apostolic mandate for the ordination of a Bishop, he exercises his supreme spiritual authority: this authority and this intervention remain within the strictly religious sphere. It is not, therefore, a question of a political authority, unduly asserting itself in the internal affairs of a State and violating against its sovereignty.”

What to expect now?

Now, five years after Benedict XVI has addressed his papal Letter to the Church in China, we can see the positive impact on the life of the Catholic communities. This is confirmed by the many initiatives responding to the Pope's guidelines both in the pastoral field and in evangelization programs. In the "Year of Faith" commencing this year, priority will be given to the formation of lay faithful, as well as to the ongoing formation of priests, seminarians, and religious Sisters.

This article addresses the challenges posed by the "guidance of political powers" over the Chinese Church. If the Chinese government insists on imposing more illegitimate episcopal ordinations on the Catholic Church in China, it will become "a State Church" guided by the government, thus changing her very nature. An unexpected incident in the Shanghai diocese has triggered the government's wrath in Shanghai, when Bishop Ma Daqin publicly declared his decision to resign from the Patriotic Association (which he has never voluntarily joined), in order to concentrate on his pastoral duties. Over the years a situation has tacitly developed that to be accepted as a bishop or a qualified member of the officially approved Church, one has to be a member of the Patriotic Association. This is a serious problem. The Shanghai official bishop Aloysius Jin Luxian, 97, when publicly appraising the Pope's Letter five years ago, added that in his almost two decades of episcopal experience in Shanghai, "the Patriotic Association never stepped over me." Yet now Bishop Ma's confinement confirms how the Patriotic Association is "stepping over" the bishops even in Shanghai.

In recent decades such an ambiguous policy favored the growth of many "clandestine" communities, anxious to safeguard the integrity of their faith. The Holy Father, besides stating that "the clandestine condition is not a normal feature of the Church's life," adds that "there would not be any particular difficulties with acceptance of the recognition granted by civil authorities, on condition that this does not entail the denial of unrenounceable principles of faith and of ecclesiastical communion" (7.8). On the other hand, due to the variety of local situations, the Pope did not

offer specific instructions, leaving it to the discretionary judgment of the various bishops.

The extreme difficulty in finding workable solutions became clear in the case of Baoding diocese (Hebei) — when underground coadjutor bishop Francis An Shuxin “surfaced” after ten years in police custody. He was under strong pressure by SARA to join the Patriotic Association, and his subsequent acceptance to become the official diocesan bishop caused a further split in the local community. As Pope Benedict stated in his Letter: “Still today, recognition from these entities is the criterion for declaring a community, a person or a religious place legal and therefore ‘official’. All this has caused division...” (7.1). This is a serious matter, as the declared purpose of the Patriotic Association, to implement “the principles of independence and autonomy, self-management and democratic administration of the Church” is “incompatible with Catholic doctrine, which from the time of the ancient Creeds the Church professes” (7.6).

Cardinal Fernando Filoni, prefect of the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, in a recent interview (*30 Giorni*, May 2012) suggested that Party or government officials should be open to accept the criteria proper to the Church for the selection of bishops: “This is not only an order of the Pope,” he explained, because the bishops as successors of the apostles are naturally expected to be faithful to the Church’s doctrine. Naturally, as citizens, they need also to be loyal to their homeland, “giving to Caesar what is Caesar’s,” but not at the expense of giving to God what is due to God.

Such a principle of separation between Church and State may not be easily accepted in China, with a tradition of imperial absolute power and a Communist ideology not recognizing that “gods” have any special right. Besides, daily experience shows how easily national pride and defense of sovereignty can be manipulated for political reasons or personal interest. According to some observers, certain decisions in the last couple of years affecting the Church negatively and claiming to counteract hostile foreign intrusions were inspired by ultra-leftist factions. The media, both in China and abroad, recently have given ample evidence of a dangerous revival of Maoist revolutionary methods, inducing some

people to consider ideology an insurmountable fence in China. In the words of Roman Malek, a scholar with great experience, we can't change the Communist system, but the system will change.

In the run up to the 18th Party Congress due to convene in Beijing on November 8, 2012, the climate seems to be hopefully moving away from such "leftist" orientations. There is sincere expectation that the new generation of leaders called to govern this great nation for the coming decades will promote programs of harmonious growth based on social justice, respectful also of the identity of minority religious groups.

A ray of light for a difficult road

The latest stimulating reflection written by Cardinal Filoni for *Tripod* magazine⁵ deserves great attention. On reviewing the present situation five years after the papal Letter addressed to the Catholics of China, His Eminence underlines the clear orientation it provides to the life of the Church and to the evangelization ministry, showing the pressing need to achieve unity within the communities. The Cardinal dwells amply also on the present difficulties with the Chinese authorities, drawing from his rich experience as head of the Vatican Study Mission in Hong Kong. He does not hide his admiration for the economic development of China which he could witness directly during some visits to Beijing, but he treasures also the quality of the Catholics he has known: "How often have my Chinese friends shared with me their pride in belonging to their own country. Yet, they feel humiliated as Catholics in their own house, while being greatly esteemed and appreciated elsewhere!" He further explains: "One time an elderly Chinese priest told me: We Catholics in China are only given the freedom of a bird in a cage!"

Cardinal Filoni is convinced that the Chinese authorities can no longer be deaf to the cry of so many of their own citizens, and augurs a reconciliation between Rome and Beijing that could benefit both China and the Holy See: "Has not the time arrived for

⁵ The article written for *Tripod* was made public in Rome by *Fides* news service and *AsiaNews* on October 25, 2012.

thinking about a new way for dialogue, a dialogue that is even more open and carried out on a more equitable basis, where it would no longer be possible for particular interests to undermine good will, trust and mutual esteem?" The fact that the Holy Father himself publicly declared (in his Letter) the readiness of the Holy See "to participate in negotiations, so necessary if the difficulties of the present time are to be overcome...", is a most authoritative and clear statement that can be expected: "Let China rest assured that the Catholic Church sincerely proposes to offer, once again, humble and disinterested service in the areas of her competence, for the good of Chinese Catholics and for the good of all the inhabitants of the country" (n.4).

The formula suggested by Cardinal Filoni to resume the interrupted dialogue is the setting up of a bilateral "high level" Commission qualified to deal with "questions of mutual interest". The existence of ideological differences should not be an absolute obstacle to dialogue when the parties are seeking the real good of the people, as is shown by two cases mentioned by the Cardinal: "For example, the Holy See and Vietnam⁶ have found a *modus operandi et progrediendi*. Even Beijing and Taipei have stable commissions at the highest level to deal with questions of mutual interest. Is it not possible to hope for a suitable and sincere dialogue with China?"

Such hope is evident in Cardinal Filoni's conclusion: "The Pope's Letter to the Chinese clergy and faithful remains valid. ...It can be a point of departure for a dialogue within the Church in China. It can also stimulate dialogue between the Holy See and the Government in Beijing."

To us believers, this is also a matter for prayer. Let us address the Mother of Jesus, venerated at Sheshan near Shanghai, with the words suggested by Pope Benedict XVI on May 24, 2008: "Mother

⁶ It may be recalled that just five years ago (September 28, 2007) Vietnamese Cardinal Phan Minh Man, bishop of Ho Chi Minh City, who was leading a five-member delegation to China, stated in Beijing: "From my meetings with Chinese officials, I got the impression that they hope the Church in Vietnam can help China and the Vatican understand each other's point of view."

of hope, in the darkness of Holy Saturday you journeyed with unfailing trust towards the dawn of Easter. Grant that your children may discern at all times, even those that are darkest, the signs of God's loving presence."