

The Fifth Anniversary of Pope's Letter to the Church in China (2007)

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Introduction

The Holy Father's *Letter to the Church in China*, originally known as the *Letter of the Holy Father Pope Benedict XVI to the Bishops, Priests, Consecrated Persons and Lay Faithful of the Catholic Church in the People's Republic of China*, was published at the request of the newly-established Commission on the Church in China. The purpose of the Letter was to offer some guidelines for the numerous problems within the Church in China. The Holy Father's *Letter 2007* (the Letter) has been published for five years. How was it implemented in China? Did it help the Church in China find solutions to intricate and complex problems in Church-State relations? How did the Chinese authorities react to the Letter, which was full of instructions and guiding principles? Did the publication of the Letter reflect a power struggle between the Chinese Communist Party and the Vatican? This article aims to discuss the main points of the Letter, e.g. the appointment of bishops, ecclesiastical circumscriptions, priesthood and religious formation etc, with the hope of reflecting on Sino-Vatican relations, as well as on the relationship between the Church and society in China.

It is common for the Pope, as Head of Catholic Church and Vicar of Jesus Christ on earth, to issue an encyclical (open) letter to the entire Church, generally concerning particular issues or on some special occasions. However, it is rare that a letter is addressed to a particular church in a particular country; concerning the unique problems of that country. For the local Church, instructions for the unique problems in the country would be of the utmost importance.

The Holy Father's Letter in China

The Letter aimed at giving guidelines for the unique problems within the Church in the People's Republic of China. It was divided into two parts: the first was entitled "The Situation of the Church: Theological Aspects"; the second was entitled "Guidelines for pastoral life". The Letter responded to some questions including: the tensions and divisions within the Church and with Chinese civil society; the function of national organizations; the appointment of Bishops and the exercise of their pastoral ministries; the celebration of the Sacraments; the recognition and circumscription of ecclesiastical provinces and dioceses. The Holy Father also expressed his gratitude for the faithfulness of the Catholics who had undergone persecution, as well as his hope to engage in dialogue with the Chinese authorities.

The steps to implement the Letter were: first, to translate the Letter into Chinese; second, to have the episcopate discuss, explain and study the essentials of the Letter; finally, to implement it in the dioceses. However, for the political leaders in Beijing, only the Communist party has "teaching authority." Other ideologies cannot have a hand in it. In such a context, the tension between the Church and the State increased, because the latter was afraid of the influence of the Holy See. Just before the publication of the Letter, the nervous Chinese authorities went around making inquiries. After learning that the Letter was mainly about the discipline of the Church and theological issues, they eventually felt relaxed. While the Beijing authorities and religious institutions did not oppose one another in a high profile manner, middle-level religious institutions played some little tricks to express their dissatisfaction.

When being interviewed by the Hong Kong electronic media, Liu Bainian, vice president of the Catholic Patriotic Association, said that the Holy Father's Letter was very different from letters in the past, which were anti-communistic. Liu said, "Those letters were against communism and the socialist system, imposing 'excommunication' on Chinese patriots." He emphasized that the "present situation has changed," and the Pope wanted to "further understand the Church in China." In his Letter, he expressed his love and concern for the Catholics in China. When being asked

whether the Patriotic Association would consecrate bishops in the future, Liu replied that the matter had to be studied further. Due to the problem of social instability, political control was strengthened soon after the publication of the Letter. The Chinese authorities emphasized the need to maintain social stability, in order to tighten control over dissidents. In such a context, the Church in Beijing did not speak about the Holy Father's Letter, and many Catholics stated that they had not read the Letter. However, they hoped that the Letter could be read out in the churches. At the same time, they expected China would establish diplomatic relationship with Vatican, and that the Holy Father would visit China. In Shanghai, a day after the publication of the Letter, Auxiliary Bishop Xing Wenzhi spoke about some of the main points of the Letter. More government officials were present on that occasion.

In Hong Kong, Cardinal Joseph Zen, now the bishop emeritus of the Hong Kong Diocese, found that there were many misinterpretations in the Chinese version. Moreover, there were ambiguous interpretations, which diverged from the meaning of the original language, i.e. Italian. In China, the websites that uploaded the Holy Father's Letter were blocked, and a rumor spread in the official Church, which said: "It is not necessary to read this worthless Letter, because it was written by Cardinal Zen." The bishops were unable to meet together to study the document and to learn the essential points of the Letter, so as to implement it according to its original meaning. At meetings of the College of Catholic Bishops of China, the Letter had certainly not been put on the agenda. So how could one understand this important document? Regarding one of the main points in the Letter — communion between the official Church and the underground Church, each one implemented it according their own "correct" and convenient way, or under the intimidation and bribery of a hostile force. Therefore, confusion reigned, with "each competing with the other to demonstrate their talents".

After one year, the impact of the Holy Father's Letter was not up to expectations. Cardinal Zen, who always has the Church in China on his mind, urged the Holy See to publish a *Compendium of the Letter of the Holy Father Pope Benedict XVI to the Bishops, Priests, Consecrated Persons and Lay Faithful of the Catholic*

Church in the People's Republic of China, with the intention of helping the reader understand the main points of the Holy Father's Letter, and to respond to questions frequently raised by the Catholics about it. The Holy Spirit Study Centre published the Chinese version. Later, in September 2009, Cardinal Zen wrote and published a "reading guide" for the *Letter*. Cardinal Zen added remarks and explanations on some of the passages of the Letter, so that the faithful could better understand the essentials of the Letter.

The Letter Led to Disputes Overseas

The Italian magazine *30 Giorni*, having an international reader audience, reported that some Bishops suffered because they followed the guidelines of the Letter and sought to establish communion between the official community and the underground community. *30 Giorni* then criticized Cardinal Zen.

After the publication of the Letter, chaos appeared to reign both at home and abroad. However, under the social and political circumstances of China, that was to be expected. In the political context of China, the so-called "chaos" was due to four reasons:

1. Living in an agrarian society, conservative thought prevails. Thus the Catholics need the personal instructions of the Church leader (the vicar of Christ), so that they know what they should do. They listen to the authoritative instruction of the Church and act accordingly.
2. Some people selectively interpreted the message of the Letter to meet their own interests.
3. The people who persecute the Church stirred up trouble behind the scenes. They were glad to see that the Church is divided, which conforms to the principle of "divide and conquer".
4. Last but not least, the most important reason was that the Church in China lacks a strong leadership (it is without a Chinese episcopacy recognized by the Vatican) to offer an official and comprehensive interpretation of the Letter. Without the consent of the government, how could the "College of Chinese Catholic Bishops" (which is not

recognized by the Holy See) gather to study the Letter? They could not freely discuss the implementation of the Holy Father's teaching in their dioceses. Cardinal Zen not only published the "reading guide", but also sponsored the printing of the "compendium". It could be said that he took the place of the College of Bishops to "interpret" the Holy Father's Letter.

The Lay Faithful Did Not Discuss the Letter

In China, the lay faithful could not study the Letter in their parishes, nor could the bishops study the details of Letter together. Thus no structure was established to set policies and guidelines for implementing the suggestions of the Letter. In this context, it was appropriate and necessary that Cardinal Zen clarify the main points of the Letter. Who could take up this role except Cardinal Zen? Obviously, if Cardinal Zen did not intervene, the religious officials would directly or indirectly interpret the Letter. They would certainly adopt the stance of the Communist Party, rather than the Church. After Deng Xiaoping took the power, the religious policy of the Chinese Communist Party was to diminish or limit the influence of the Catholic Church, and of other religions. Therefore, the *30 Giorni* criticized Cardinal Zen because they thought that he was acting only in accordance with his own will. They misunderstood the situation of the State-Church relationship in China, as well as the intention of Cardinal Zen. If the Letter had been studied and "interpreted" by a Vatican-recognized Conference of Bishops, Cardinal Zen would not have gone beyond his duties, and meddled in their affairs.

Human Effort Divided the Church

"To divide and rule" is a common political strategy, whose purpose is to weaken the strength of a rival and to benefit the rulers. Nowadays, human effort has caused the "underground" and "official" communities of the Church in China to be polarized, contrary to the spirit of communion, which the Holy Father called for. If Cardinal Zen did not explain the main points of the Letter, the religious officials would have an excuse to force the

underground community to register and to become a state-sanctioned community under communist control. A high-profile critique of Cardinal Zen would have a negative impact on the Church in China. This would undermine the efforts towards reconciliation between the “official” and “underground” communities, and the division within the Church would continue to grow. The Communist Party would be glad to see that the opponent was in a disadvantageous position. *30 Giorni* magazine commented on the affairs of the Church in a high-profile manner, supporting one side in its attack on the other side. Such an action was not constructive, and also exposed its own shortcomings. It would have been better if the Vatican Commission for the Church in China had discussed and handled these affairs. Most likely the Chinese Communist Party was delighted at this overseas dispute for it was the only beneficial for them.

The Nomination of Bishops

The appointment of bishop is a religious issue, and is one of the most important issues in the Holy Father's Letter. From the perspective of a power conflict, the appointment of bishops is a very touchy problem. In the process of negotiations between China and Vatican (August 1999), the Beijing authorities introduced this touchy problem. The Beijing authorities suggested that both parties continue the practice of appointment, by which candidates would be nominated by the State and approved by the Holy See. This suggestion would undermine the authority of the Holy Father in the Catholic Church, which is spelled out in Canon Law (Art. 333, art. 337.1, art. 377.5). In other words, the suggestion of the Beijing authorities was not in accordance with the spirit of the appointment of bishops by both the Chinese government and the Holy See. Rather, the Chinese authorities wanted to take the initiative to nominate the bishops, while the Holy See had only to passively accept the candidate of China.

From the time of the self-election and self-ordination of Bishop Gan Junqiu of Guangzhou, the government nominated the candidate, then sought the approval of the Holy See; there was mutual understanding between the State and the Church. The

practice was for the candidate to be first nominated by the Chinese authorities; then after having obtained the approval of the Holy See, the candidate was consecrated as bishop. Therefore, from the beginning of 2010 to November 20th of the same year (the illicit consecration of Guo Jincai as Bishop of Chengde), the appointment and consecration of bishops was in line with the spirit of the Holy Father's Letter. Some bishops consecrated in that period were: Bishop Du Jiang of Bameng (Shaanba), Bishop Meng Qinglu of Hohhot, Bishop Shen Bin of Haimen, Bishop Cai Bingrui of Xiamen, Bishop Yang Xiaoting of Yan'an, Bishop Xu Ji-wei of Taizhou, Jiangsu. They were ordained with the Papal mandate, which Beijing obtained by informal communication.

However, the morning sun never lasts a whole day. On November 21, 2010, the Beijing authorities suddenly announced the consecration of Fr. Guo Jincai as Bishop of Chengde. This showed that China intended to divide the church. The illicit consecration took place against the wishes of the Pope. Not only was the consecration itself illegal, but also the consecrated and the consecrator were subject to "excommunication". From November 7–9, 2010, in spite of the objections of the Vatican and the Pope, the Eighth National Congress of the Catholic Church was held in Beijing. This congress by nature was against the doctrine of the Church and Paragraph 7 of the Letter. Many bishops were brought to the conference by the police or government officials. Later, illicit consecrations of bishops took place, including Lei Shiyin of Leshan, Wang Bingzhang of Shantou, Yue Fusheng of Harbin.

Since then, the ordination of bishops in the official Church could be described as a farce. Strictly speaking, none of these consecrations was perfectly legal. Even for legitimate ordinations, the authorities arranged for some illicit bishops to attend. On the other hand, the government arranged for legal bishops to be consecrators at illicit ordinations (e.g. Wang Bingzhang, Lei Shiyin, Yue Fusheng). This caused Sino-Vatican relations to hit rock bottom. During each episcopal ordination (legitimate or illicit), the Chinese authorities put illicit and legal consecrators together, so as to create confusion among the Catholics, thus reducing the severity of "excommunication". This "boiled frog" approach of handling the

problem of episcopal appointments showed that the Chinese authorities intended to mix up the Church, and to undermine its vitality. The consequences were severe.

The Catholics hoped that the Shandong-born Auxiliary Bishop Xing Wenzhi of Shanghai could save the critical situation, but he was missing. For those who were in fidelity to the Pope, they did not know how to express their sadness. While people put their hope on Bishop Pei Junmin, he attended the illicit ordination of the bishop of Harbin. This disappointed many Catholics.

On July 7, 2012, Fr Ma Daqin, with the approval of the Holy See, was ordained as Auxiliary Bishop of Shanghai. Bishop Jin Luxian presided over this ordination, and the concelebrants were legitimate bishops. However, an illicit bishop attended the ordination. Bishop Ma courageously and tactfully avoided the imposition of hands by the illicit Bishop Zhan Silu. After the consecration, Bishop Ma announced that he would give up his post in the Catholic Patriotic Association in order to focus his attention on his episcopal ministry. His resignation was meant to implement the guidelines of the Holy Father's Letter, which stated that the Catholic Patriotic Association was incompatible with Catholic doctrine. About 1,000 people in the Cathedral responded to Bishop Ma's speech with long applause. The applause signified silent but heart-felt support from the congregation. However, on the next day, the authorities placed Bishop Ma under house arrest in Sheshan Regional Seminary, and forbade him from exercising his episcopal ministry.

In comparison with the illicit ordination of Bishop Yue Fushang of Harbin, as well as the compromises of Guo Jincal, Wang Bingzhang and Lei Shiyin, Bishop Ma's unyielding attitude brightened up the congregation. They were delighted to see such a beautiful scene: this Church leader, who was like a phoenix rising from the ashes, showed great courage, even though he was under great pressure. Fearful and weak people could understand that they still had the right and the ability to say "no" to power. People inside and outside the Church highly appreciated the courage and fidelity of Bishop Ma, who became a hero in the people's hearts. The elderly Catholics of Shanghai were especially gratified, because they saw a trace of the presence of Cardinal Kung Pin Mei (Bishop

of Shanghai in the 1950s, and led the Catholic to resistance for a decade) in Bishop Ma.

One of the concerns in the Holy Father's Letter was the circumscription of ecclesiastical provinces (Letter, para. 11). All the dioceses in China were established before 1949, according to regional divisions of the Nationalist Government of Republic of China. However, the present public administration and the division of provinces are different from that of the Nationalist Government. Therefore, it is necessary to review the ecclesiastical circumscriptions in the present situation. This should be carried out in cooperation with the present Central Government, in a spirit of friendship and mutual understanding. However, after the incident of Bishop Ma, it is reported that the Chinese authorities punished the minor and major seminaries in Shanghai, deferring the opening of the academic year 2012-2013. Lacking a peaceful and calm atmosphere, it is not suitable to discuss the issue of the division of ecclesiastical territories at the present time.

The Letter also spoke about "Vocation and Religious formation," which has a special urgency, even in the universal Church. However, specific problem in China was the difficulty for the Church in China to deal with secularism, which followed from the rapid development of the economy. In the climate of rapid economic development, the Church faced the challenges of materialism and secularism, as well as the culture of "putting money above everything else." As a consequence, the whole society (including the Church) in Mainland China is in danger of being infected with the idea of putting morality behind money and other worldly interests. If the Church wants to be the "salt of the earth and light of the world" in the Chinese society, it should immediately implement the serious formation of priests, consecrated persons and lay faithful. The Bridge Church should help the Church in China to do this.

Conclusion

The Holy Father's Letter is not only the policy the Holy See follows regarding China, but it also offers guidelines and orientation to help solve the existing problems of the Church. As

atheism played a dominant role in the political situation in China, the work of interpreting the Letter fell on Cardinal Joseph Zen, Bishop emeritus of Hong Kong. However, five years after the publication of the Letter, Sino-Vatican relations have not improved. There will most likely be more illicit ordinations of bishops in the future. After five years, the situation of the Church in China remains the same, or it is even more adverse due to the political and social climate. Regarding the issue of "illicit" episcopal ordinations, the government will create chaos by different strategies, making Church personnel even more confused. However, underneath the situation of bad church-state relations, there are still many faithful and steadfast priests, religious and Catholics. Under the influence of good deeds, e.g. those of Bishop Ma Daqin, they hold on to the Holy Father's Letter, waiting for the dawn of religious freedom in the midst of a dark night.