

The Holy Father's 2007 Letter Brought Turmoil, but also Inspired Hope

Fr. Huabei

This commentary on the Pope's Letter to the Church in China in 2007 is reproduced from <http://www.ucanews.com/2012/06/05/the-politics-of-faith-in-the-china-church/>. Fr. Huabei is the pseudonym of a priest in northern China.

I do not want to say that Pope Benedict XVI's Pastoral Letter to Chinese Catholics in 2007 started a war. It was actually more dramatic than that. Rumors had been spreading across China for months before the papal letter was released on June 30 of that year. During those months, fear and worry had filled the minds of those who held power in their hands, but did not have God in their hearts.

The letter was blocked just hours after it was made available on the internet. In the following months, it was spoken of only in whispers. Since the majority of Chinese Catholics were not online then, they could not read the letter immediately. The blockage further limited its circulation.

The tension that the letter brought to the Chinese Church was no less than what was produced by the canonization of 120 Chinese martyr-saints on October 1, 2000, China's National Day. After that China-Vatican relations turned sour. Government officials often came to priests with a pile of papers and asked: "Have you read the Pope's letter?" When they were sure we had not read it, they scanned the paper and recited a paragraph to us to "proclaim" how successful their control was.

Some courageous priests publicized the letter in their parishes. They copied and posted it on the church walls.

Whenever the copies were peeled off the walls, they put up another copy. Amid this climate of fear and intimidation, those clergymen who promoted the letter did not receive any warning or punishment. But the tense atmosphere scared most of the other bishops and priests, who adopted a passive attitude to the letter to avoid incurring unnecessary trouble. Such a mentality greatly reduced the impact of the document.

I did not see many Catholics studying the letter in an organized, careful and systematic manner, except for a few individuals who posted their study notes online.

I was also not aware of any bishop who genuinely carried out the letter's spirit among his clergy. A few prelates wrote pastoral letters, but few of these documents taught the gist of the Pope's letter. Other bishops were either struggling to manage Church affairs amid difficulties, or were continuing to feel helpless.

Only two types of people really concerned themselves with the contents of the letter: the "underground" Catholics, as the Holy Father revoked all faculties that were granted to address pastoral needs in difficult times in the past; and personnel from the Catholic Patriotic Association (CPA), as the Pope declared its purpose of promoting an independent Church to be incompatible with Catholic doctrine. The letter thus threatened the legitimacy of their existence.

As Catholic blogger "Shanyulai" noted: "The official community is overshadowed by the fact that the CPA 'is incompatible with Catholic doctrine,' while the underground community suffers the nightmare of possibly being sacrificed for the sake of diplomatic ties between China and the Vatican." Therefore, approaching the letter with a distorted mentality induced ill effects. A number of underground Catholics thought it spelled their doom.

On the contrary, the CPA is very smart, and knows it must press gang more bishops and priests to work in it in order to maintain its survival. It celebrated "great events" cautiously in recent years. It celebrated the 50th anniversaries of its founding and of "self-election and self-ordination" of its own bishops in 2007 and 2008 respectively. It organized 10 legitimate episcopal ordinations in 2010, but ended that year with an illicit one. It also

convened the 8th National Congress of Catholic Representatives in December, 2010. In 2011, two other illicit ordinations took place. After utilizing the bishops, it promoted the slogan of “evangelization” in order to preserve its status, further increasing the “difficulties” that Pope Benedict mentioned in his letter.

While politics continues to harass our faith, I would like to reiterate that the Holy Father has no thought of waging war, playing games or hatching plots. He merely wants to show his benevolence and God’s love. The Catholic faith only cares about justice, peace, repentance and the renewal of humanity. The government should abandon its colonial thinking that everyone is bullying China. We should not deny that foreign missionaries spread their charity in China, and sacrificed their lives for the people of China.

Today we must re-read the pope’s letter, and understand that its purpose is not to “deal with every detail of complex matters” but “to offer some guidelines concerning the life of the Church and the task of evangelization in China.” We must reject any voice that attempts to confuse or to blur this purpose.