

## *The Holy Father's Pastoral Letter Has a Subtle Influence*

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**O**n May 27, 2007, the Holy Father, Pope Benedict XVI signed a historical letter directed to the Church in mainland China. The "Pastoral Letter" clearly set forth the Catholic Church's mission and its immovable stance. Two years after the publication of the Letter, the bishops had made no move to implement it. This caused people to be really disappointed. I wrote an article entitled "The Influence of the Holy Father's Pastoral Letter on the Mainland," in which I lamented, "The Holy Father's Letter has become like a fallen star in the heavens." Based on my observations of the Chinese Church during the last few years, I have concluded that the "Pastoral Letter" has gradually taken on the role of having a subtle influence.

Pope Benedict himself is a theologian. He looks at the present situation of the Church from the point of view of a theologian, especially regarding the situation of the Catholic Church existing in the People's Republic of China. He faces the reality of an internal division within the church. As the chief shepherd of the universal church, he expresses his warm concern, love and respect for that church. He clearly testifies: "The Catholic Church in the vast expanse of China's territory, and existing together in history with over one billion people, is only a small flock. However, Jesus' words to it, are both a comfort and a challenge: 'Do not be afraid, little flock, for it has pleased your father to give you the kingdom of heaven.'"

The Holy Father on the one hand emphasizes that the Church has not abandoned its principles, and on the other hand, he expresses the hope that after overcoming all misunderstandings, it "can cooperate with the People's Republic of China." Although

the external divisions in the Church in China sadden one, he added, "There are no strangers in the Church. Everyone belongs to the same community. They are branches of the same body. Because the bishops and the priests guarantee the existence of the Eucharist, therefore, the links of communion are present among the people."

At this time, we can now understand why the Holy Father has recognized so many formerly illegitimate bishops. The loyal church present on the mainland previously had difficulty understanding the Vatican's policy and plan. They thought that the Roman Curia had been deceived. They did not realize that the Holy Father is full of compassion, and he wants to receive the prodigal son, who had strayed away, back into the fold of his father's house.

From the "Pastoral Letter" one can clearly see that the Holy Father understands the situation of the Church in China. "Although the Chinese Catholic Church exists in complicated circumstances, the whole church dreams of living an abundant communal spiritual life. They also want to manifest their unity, so that they can grow into a hierarchical and harmonious communion. Therefore, the shepherds and the Christians all hope to protect and to defend all the evangelical doctrines of the Church."

All the words of the Letter make the Catholics, who live in mainland China, especially the clergy, deeply feel that they are in communion with the universal Church. No human power is able to kick the Chinese Catholic Church out of communion with the universal Church.

The compassionate Holy Father's loving and encouraging teaching makes the Chinese Catholic Church to realize that the "Pastoral Letter" has taken on the positive function of being a subtle catalyst. From the outside, there does not seem to be any great change. It is like everything is "as it was before." However, those who really follow the path of "establishing a church independent of the Vatican" are getting fewer and fewer.

Here we can cite a few examples. Bishop Liu Jinghe of Tangshan refused to be the main celebrant at the ordination ceremony of the illegitimate bishop of Chengde. Bishop Li Liangui of Xianxian did participate in the Chengde ordination

ceremony. But after returning to his diocese, he expressed sorrow, promised to uphold the principles of the Catholic faith, honored the spirit of the Holy Father's Letter, and refused to participate in the "Eighth Assembly of Chinese Catholic Representatives." Bishop Yang Xiangtai of the Handan Diocese absolutely refused to have an illegitimate bishop come to Handan to participate in an ordination ceremony. Rather, he consecrated Sun Jigen as auxiliary bishop secretly. The priests of the Diocese of Shenyang gathered in the cathedral to pray and to protect Bishop Pei Junmin, to prevent him from being taken away to participate in an illegitimate ordination ceremony. The priests of the Liaocheng (Yanggu) Diocese refused to concelebrate Mass with their bishop, Zhao Fengchang, because he participated in several illicit ordination ceremonies. The priests of the Heze Diocese rejected Bishop Zhao Fengchang as the administrator of Heze, and also refused to concelebrate with him, unless he first seeks forgiveness from the Holy See. When he does that, then the Liaocheng priests will concelebrate with him.

These actions on the part of the priests are the best reactions to the "Pastoral Letter." It would be even better if they make the Chinese bishops to defend the hierarchy of the Catholic Church.

The "Pastoral Letter" emphasized, "The Catholic Church in China is like every other church around the world, in that they are governed by the successors of the Apostles — the bishops in communion with the successor of St. Peter, the Holy Father in Rome. The bishops can validly ordain other bishops. They have the offices of teaching, administering and sanctifying. They have the duty to govern the people in their charge in their dioceses. In order to carry out their duties of teaching and supervising, according to their nature, they need to be in hierarchical communion with the head of the college of bishops, the Holy Father in Rome, and with their fellow bishops from around the world; only then they can function."

When Lei Shiyin of Sichuan's Leshan Diocese and Huang Bingzhang of Guangdong's Shantou Diocese accepted unlawful ordination as bishops, showing disdain for the church's laws, the Holy Father announced publicly that they put themselves in the situation of excommunication. At the same time, he showed that

he was carrying out his responsibility as the successor of St. Peter, and upholding Peter's primacy. This action struck fear in the hearts of those episcopal candidates, who were contemplating illegal ordinations in violation of the Catholic Church's Canon Law.

Wuhan, Heze, Harbin, and other dioceses, which originally planned to hold ordinations of bishops without papal approval, had to cancel or postpone them. The clergy and the Catholics expressed their desire that the candidates first obtain the appointment of the Holy Father before they were ordained as bishops. All these reactions show that the Holy Father's letter is having a subtle effect.

*(Note: The quotations are paraphrases by the author of what he thinks the Pope wrote.)*