

Pope Benedict XVI and the Church in China

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Pope Benedict XVI (Joseph Ratzinger, 1927) was the Supreme Pontiff of the Catholic Church from 19 April 2005 to 28 February 2013.

His election and installation as Pope

All Chinese Catholics applauded the election of Pope Benedict XVI on 19 April 2005. Many waited up late into the night to follow the outcome of the conclave on the internet and satellite television. In homes, parishes and seminaries, Catholics received the news “with joy and emotion” All were struck by Pope Benedict’s simplicity.

Apart from official congratulatory messages from government and official Church leaders in Beijing, Catholics from the unofficial Church in various parts of China also sent greetings to the new Pope. However, members of the unofficial Church also urged Pope Benedict XVI not to disregard them. In a message from one community in northwestern China, the faithful asked him “not to forget the suffering Church of China” because it struggles “with no freedom at all... Catholics in the Wenzhou diocese, in Zhejiang province, eastern China, pledged allegiance to Pope Benedict XVI and expressed the hope that he would visit China soon, bring them ‘light and freedom,’ and lead them in love and truth toward full communion with the Universal Church.”¹

¹ *Sunday Examiner*, 8 May 2005, reporting Hong Kong (UCAN).

Many Catholics also tried to watch the television broadcast of Pope Benedict's installation on April 24. On the following day, some underground communities in Hebei Province marked the official start of Pope Benedict XVI's reign with a solemn public Eucharist. The new Pope's photo, with a biographical sketch, was printed in several places to commemorate the event. "Pope John Paul II had hoped to visit China, but never realized his dream," an unofficial Bishop pointed out; and he invited everybody to pray for that intention.

The Commission for the Church in China and the Letter to all Catholics of China

Pope Benedict XVI showed his concern for the Church in China on different occasions, as we will see, but the greatest proof of his care were his efforts on behalf of the normalization of its status, and to apply to it the same standard as all the other local churches in the world.

On January 19-20, 2007, the Pope convoked a special meeting of several experts on the Catholic Church of China in order to deepen his knowledge of the situation of that Church. At the meeting Pope Benedict announced that he was preparing an official letter to all the Chinese Catholics, aiming to achieve the above mentioned purpose. The initiative created great expectations, and attracted suggestions from various sources. Even the Chinese Government responded, on January 23, 2007, expressing its appreciation for the Vatican's attitude of 'constructive and truthful dialogue.'

On June 30, 2007, the Holy Father published the **"LETTER to the bishops, priests, consecrated persons and lay faithful of the Catholic Church in the People's Republic of China"**² It focused on religious issues, and on the present life and difficulties of the Catholic community in China, providing a solid theological basis and practical directives for reconciliation and communion. It was a short and clear treatise on the nature and structure of the

² In Hong Kong, due to an improper translation of some points, Cardinal Joseph Zen published a revised Chinese version of the Pope's Letter.

Church, touching on its relation with the civil government, but without being political in nature.

Benedict XVI's main concern was for the life of the Church in China. Speaking "the truth with a language of love," he made clear that within the Catholic community there was a need for a true conversion. "The purification of memory, the pardoning of wrongdoers, and the forgetting of injustices suffered...are urgent steps that must be taken," he wrote. 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. The Pope sincerely asked for "a respectful and open dialogue" with the civil authorities. He expressed the hope that some understanding might be reached, which would allow the Catholic minority to contribute peacefully to the common good of the nation.

He stated clearly that the Catholic Patriotic Association and other agencies are institutions incompatible with the doctrine of the Catholic Church. He also revoked the previous special faculties that created divisions between the official and the underground communities of Catholics. The Pope also expressed his conviction that the solution of outstanding questions would favor the growth of the desired "harmonious society" in China.

In China, almost every diocese downloaded the Pope's Letter from the internet. Some even began to print it for distribution. But soon the Government authorities intervened. They prohibited the printing and distribution of the letter, even closing down some Catholic printing presses.

At the same time, on July 12, Bishop Joseph Wei Jingyi, unofficial bishop of Qiqihar, Heilongjiang, issued a pastoral letter encouraging Catholics to read and study the Pope's Letter. The Italian press reported interviews with Bishops Aloysius Jin Luxian of Shanghai, Peter Feng Xinmao of Hengshui, Hebei, and Lukas Li Jingfeng of Fengxiang, Shaanxi, publishing the positive reaction of these bishops to the Holy Father's Letter. Bishop Lukas Li, in the same month of July, also issued his own Pastoral Letter, encouraging his faithful to read and implement the instructions of the Letter. On August 15, the Xuanhua Diocese of Hebei Province held a solemn celebration of the Feast of the Assumption, attended

by a thousand faithful. It marked the ending of a weeklong formation course, and the Holy Father's Letter provided a fitting conclusion to the course.

In summary, the positive impact of the Letter on the Catholic communities was confirmed by the many positive responses to the Pope's guidelines both in the pastoral field and in evangelization programs. All Catholics gave positive praise to the Letter, while the civil authorities displayed a negative, but low profile, reaction. At the same time, some underground priests were not happy with the cancelation of the special privileges for the unofficial Church.

After the publication of the Letter, Pope Benedict wanted the Commission to carry on its consultative role on various issues of Catholic life in China. He closely followed its work and its suggestions. Two years later, on May 24, 2009, the Holy See, in order to remind everyone of the themes raised by the 2007 Letter to the Chinese Catholics, published a Compendium of the document, in a question and answer format, to help people arrive at a better understanding of the Letter. The Compendium was published in both simplified and traditional Chinese characters, and in English.

The work of the Commission followed the guidelines suggested by the Pope's Letter. Commission members emphasized the need for clarity and firmness regarding the principles of the Catholic Faith, while at the same time expressing loving concern for the difficulties faced by the Catholic faithful, and openness to dialogue. Firmness regarding Catholic principles required warning people to avoid taking steps contrary to the rules of the Church. From 2007 to 2010, official negotiations went on rather smoothly. But when people acted against the principles and rules of the Church, Pope Benedict, following the suggestion of the Commission, although quite saddened by events, could not but approve the declarations of excommunication imposed on persons involved in illegitimate episcopal ordinations. In the last three years, three bishops, even after proper and frequent admonitions, were illegitimately ordained and, therefore, excommunicated. This created an uneasy impasse, which lasts to the present day.

Cardinal Joseph Zen has commented:

“Pope Benedict has done things for China that he has not done for any other country: to no other particular Church has he written a specific letter, no country has a special Commission dedicated to it of about 30 members, from the two most important dicasteries in the Holy See. We should be profoundly grateful to him for this.”³

During the current Year of Faith, special attention has been given to the implementation of the Letter especially in the field of formation of the lay faithful, as well as the ongoing formation of priests, seminarians, religious women and men.

The Pope's emphasis on Prayer for the Church in China

The Pope's Letter declared that May 24th, the Feast of Mary Help of Christians, who is venerated with great devotion at the Shrine of Sheshan in Shanghai, would be a Day of Prayer for the Church in China. The prayer was meant to provide spiritual strength for the Catholics. From 2007 on, every May the Pope has reminded all Catholics throughout the world about the need of prayer for this intention. In fact, in May 2008, to show the seriousness of his concern for the Church in China, Pope Benedict himself composed a prayer to Our Lady of Sheshan. The ending reads: “Our Lady of Sheshan, sustain all those in China, who, amid their daily trials, continue to believe, to hope to love. May they never be afraid to speak of Jesus to the world, and of the world to Jesus. In the statue overlooking the Shrine you lift your Son on high, offering him to the world with open arms in a gesture of love. Help Catholics always to be credible witness to this love, ever clinging to the rock of Peter on which the Church is built. Mother of China and all Asia, pray for us, now and forever. Amen!”

Later, on May 18, 2011 at the end of the morning's general audience in St. Peter's Square, Benedict XVI, spoke briefly about the Church in China and took the opportunity to invite the faithful everywhere to join in prayer with and for the Church in China. However, there was some negative reaction from Beijing, which requested the Holy Father to accept the autonomy of that church.

³ In a report to *Asianews* on February 22, 2013.

On May 20, 2012, Pope Benedict XVI again invited everyone to pray for the Church in China, asking that courage and faithfulness be granted to China's Catholics.

The Pope's choice of close Chinese collaborators

On February 22, 2006, the Feast of the Chair of St. Peter, Pope Benedict XVI announced the elevation of the Bishop of Hong Kong, Joseph Zen Ze-Kiun, SDB, to the cardinalate. Cardinal Zen would become the sixth Chinese cardinal in history and the second one in Hong Kong, after Cardinal John Baptist Wu Cheng-Chung (1925-2002).

Again, on February 18, 2012, during his fourth Consistory held in Rome, Pope Benedict XVI created 22 new cardinals, among whom was the present bishop of Hong Kong, John Tong, who became the third Cardinal of this Diocese.

On December 23, 2010, Pope Benedict officially announced the appointment of the Chinese theology professor, Fr. Savio Hon Tai-Fai, SDB, from Hong Kong, as the General Secretary of the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples. On February 5, 2011, in Rome, Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, SDB, the Vatican Secretary of State, ordained Father Savio an archbishop.

The Pope also made Cardinal Fernando Filoni, who had been head of the Holy See's Study Mission in Hong Kong for about eight years, the Prefect of the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, which is responsible for Catholic Church's missions throughout the world, including in China.

All the above mentioned persons are also members of the Commission for the Church in China, and are consulted by the Holy Father on issues concerning that Church.

Throughout his pontificate Pope Benedict also desired the presence of China mainland Bishops at the Synods of Bishops held during his pontificate. On September 9, 2005, he invited four Chinese mainland Bishops to take part in the Synod on the Eucharist, but they could not get the government's permission to attend it. On October 5, 2008, the Pope opened the Synod on "The Word of God in the Life and the Mission of the Church", with 253 bishops from around the world, including 41 bishops from Asia, but

none from mainland China. No agreement could be reached beforehand between the Holy See and Beijing. On October 26, in the closing speech, Pope Benedict regretted the absence of the mainland bishops. In 2012, for the Synod on New Evangelization, there was a similar attempt, but again without a positive result.

Pope Benedict's encouragement for neighboring churches to perform a Bridge Role with the Chinese Church

In March 2006, Pope Benedict urged the Philippine Church to help address the need of the clergy in mainland China for theological updating, and asked Cardinal Gaudencio Rosales of Manila to provide educational possibilities for Chinese seminarians.

On June 27, 2008, during the *ad limina* visit of the Hong Kong and Macau Bishops, Cardinal Joseph Zen Ze-Kiun, Bishop John Tong Hon and Bishop José Lai Hung-Seng, the Holy Father encouraged them to 'continue their contribution to the life of the Church in China,' He also expressed the hope that mainland Bishops would be able visit Rome soon.

On July 6, 2008, the Hong Kong Catholic weekly, the Sunday Examiner reported:

The pope encouraged both dioceses to "continue your contribution to the life of the Church in China." He said that Christ is also a teacher, pastor and loving redeemer for China and that the Church "must never allow this good news to remain unspoken."

Pope Benedict also expressed his hopes and prayers that "the day will come soon when your brother bishops from mainland China will come to Rome on pilgrimage to the tombs of the apostles, Peter and Paul, as a sign of communion with the successor of St. Peter and with the universal Church."

Cardinal John Tong, in his thanksgiving letter to Pope Benedict XVI after he had just announced his resignation from the Petrine ministry, remembers:

"In June 2008, when I accompanied Joseph Cardinal Zen to Rome for the ad limina visit, you encouraged the Diocese

of Hong Kong to continue to be a Bridge Church and to contribute to the Church in China.”⁴

Likewise, on December 12, 2008, during the *ad limina* visit of the bishops of Taiwan, he exhorted them:

“My dear Brother Bishops, by the providence of Almighty God, you have been appointed to keep watch over the family of faith on Taiwan. Your apostolic bond with the Successor of Peter entails a pastoral responsibility for the universal Church across the globe. This particularly means, in your case, a loving concern for Catholics on the mainland, whom I constantly hold in prayer. You and the Christian faithful in Taiwan are a living sign that, in a justly ordered society, one need not fear to be a faithful Catholic and a good citizen. I pray that as part of the great Chinese Catholic family, you will continue to be spiritually united with your brethren on the mainland.”⁵

Pope’s attention to past and present events of China

On May 7, 2008, Pope Benedict enjoyed the performance of the Shanghai Philharmonic Orchestra at the Vatican.

Three months later, on August 3, 2008 at his Sunday midday speech, he expressed best wishes for the success of the coming World Olympics, which were to be hosted that month by China.

Some days later, on August 20, 2008, Bishop Li Shan of Beijing said in an interview to Italy’s State RAI Television that he hoped Pope Benedict XVI could visit China and that relations between China and the Vatican could improve. On the following day, Liu Bainian, then vice chairman of the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association, stated: “We hope that [the Pope] can visit China as soon as possible. It would be good for the Chinese Catholic Church. However, the first step is to establish diplomatic relations.”

⁴ Published by Sunday Examiner, 2 March 2013.

⁵ http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/speeches/2008/december/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20081212_bishops-taiwan_en.htm

On May 18, 2009, Benedict XVI sent a message to Bp Claudio Giuliadori, Bishop of Macerata (Italy), the birthplace of Fr Matteo Ricci, to mark the beginning of the celebration of the fourth centenary of the death of this great Jesuit missionary (1552-1610). And on May 29, 2010, he gave an audience in the Paul VI Hall at the Vatican, packed with thousands of pilgrims from Macerata and the nearby Marche region, for the closure of the celebration of the fourth centenary of the death of Fr. Matteo Ricci.

On December 25, 2010, Pope Benedict, during his Christmas world message, again pointed out the situation of Christians in China, and asked God to 'inspire political and religious leaders to be committed to full respect for the religious freedom of all.' Again, on December 25, 2012, in his *Urbi et Orbi* Message, the Holy Father explicitly called upon the leaders in China to respect the contributions made by religions within their borders:

"May the King of Peace turn His gaze to the new leaders of the People's Republic of China for the high task which awaits them. I express my hope that, in fulfilling this task, they will esteem the contribution of religion, and respect each one in such a way that they can all help to build a fraternal society for the benefit of that noble People and of the whole world."

On February 10, 2013, on the day before he announced his decision to step down from the Petrine Ministry, Pope Benedict extended special greetings and blessings to all people throughout the world celebrating the Lunar New Year, especially to Chinese people everywhere.

How Chinese people judge the pontificate of Benedict XVI

On February 22, 2013, Lucia Cheung, a correspondent for UCANews, wrote:

Since the news of Pope Benedict's resignation broke, the international media has been analyzing what can be considered as the successes and the failures of his papacy. While some secular media believe this pope has failed in terms of China-Vatican relations, I think that Chinese

Catholics would give the German Pontiff substantial credit for what he has done for the Church in China.

The writer lists the main initiatives taken by Benedict XVI in favor of China and then concludes:

The Vatican under his leadership is bravely saying "no" to the world's largest Communist regime. When China decided to ordain unsuitable candidates as bishops once again, after its previous attempts in 2006, the Holy See first tried to persuade the candidates to rethink their positions. After these efforts failed, it declared publicly for the first time in 2011 that a clergyman receiving episcopal ordination without papal mandate would incur automatic excommunication. So far, three illicit bishops have been excommunicated and the Holy See seems quite ready to resort to this Church canon again if it needs to.

Pope Benedict's efforts to lead the China Church back into the fold of the Universal Church are obvious. From this viewpoint, I think his thoughts are crystal clear.

Left with the choice of maintaining the integrity of the Catholic faith and the China Church and trying to achieve a breakthrough through compromise, Benedict had to choose the former instead of diplomatic ties. Though some critics may look upon his adherence to Church principles as "conservative," we need to recognize that the nature of the Vatican's diplomacy is different from other states. It must comply with principles of faith because its ultimate goal is pastoral. So if ties are built at the expense of the faith, such a relationship is an empty shell that is not beneficial to both sides.

Pope Benedict XVI may have lost marks for his failed attempts at diplomatic relations with the communist regime. Yet, his contribution to maintaining the integrity of the faith of the China Church is substantial enough to give him a place in Church history.⁶

⁶ <http://www.ucanews.com/news/building-a-new-church-on-old-foundations/67485>

During his pontificate, Benedict XVI underlined his respect for the distinctive character and history of the Church in China, but emphasized the necessary conditions for remaining in full communion with the Universal Church.

Chinese Catholics, religious, priests and bishops have been shocked, surprised and saddened at the news of Pope Benedict XVI's resignation. However, after their initial shock, most people believe that the Holy Father's decision was wise and courageous. They deeply admire and respect his decision, which displayed great courage and humility, wisdom and responsibility. Chinese Catholics are certain that Pope Benedict XVI will continue to pray for the Church in China. About the Holy Father's decision to step down, one priest has written an article on his blog with the title "*A great and responsible decision.*" Another priest declared: "I think that the Holy Father made a courageous and faith-filled decision. By stepping down from leading the universal church, he has chosen prayer as his way of continuing to serve the Church. Knowing his gifts as well as his limitations, the Holy Father is a good example for all of us to imitate." Moreover, one bishop commented: "I feel that Pope Benedict XVI is very great. His is an example of self-sacrifice for the good of the whole Church. I respect his decision. But I believe the Pope will continue to contribute to the Church through his prayers and his theological writings. We should learn from the Holy Father's good example."

A group of Chinese Catholic clergy and faithful have sent a heartfelt letter to Pope Benedict XVI to thank him for his attempts to improve ties between the Catholic Church and China. The text of the letter, dated February 22, 2013, was released by the Vatican on February 28, the last day of Pope Benedict's pontificate.

"Your Holiness, you have paid special attention to China and reserved a special place for the Catholic Church in China in your heart. You tried to promote dialogue and alleviate the cross we bear by showing concern and by blessing China and the Chinese people... We will never forget that, in the past eight years, only best wishes, friendly greetings and high hopes were expressed in the messages you sent to China. No matter what conflicts and harm occurred, no matter how sad and disappointed we

made you feel, you always embraced China and the Catholic Church in China with fatherly love."

The letter concludes: *"This not only moved the whole world, but also makes it difficult for us Chinese clergy and Catholics to say farewell to you."*