

Salt and Light: Reflections on Pope Benedict's Letter to the Church in China on the Occasion of its 10th Anniversary

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Glorious things are said of you, O city of God! (Psalms, 87:3)

In his letter ten years ago (abbreviated as L), Pope Benedict XVI warmly encouraged Chinese Catholics (referring to bishops, priests, Sisters, seminarians and laypeople in general) to become the salt of the earth and the light of the world, to follow Jesus and to be good disciples. This is a very precious piece of advice, and I don't have any other advice to add. This article, written at the invitation of *Tripod*, is just some of my reflections on Pope Benedict's letter.

The city of God and the city of the world

Pope Benedict has a special likeness for St Augustine (+430). In his commentary on contemporary China we can find the shadow of St Augustine present, especially his book *The City of God*. The book gets its name from Psalm 87, which describes God's glory manifested upon the people of this city. Although the city of the world in this life troubles them, the city of God has always been the destination of Catholics from the present life to the future life.

Viewed from this perspective, Pope Benedict first pointed out some of the present conditions in China: the pressure to attain the desired and necessary economic and social development and the search for modernity are accompanied by two different and contrasting phenomena. On the one hand, one can detect a longing for human dignity, a growing interest in the spiritual and transcendent dimension of the human person; and on the other hand, there is a tendency towards materialism and hedonism (L3.3).

As *The City of God* pointed out, some people in the world choose God, and live their lives according to the spirit, and some choose themselves, and live according to the flesh. The two choices result in two kinds of society: the city of God and the city of the world. The Church is not the perfect city of God but only its partial presence and symbol. In fact, some people in the Church appear to be obeying God, but they actually collude with enemies outside of it, and oppose the people of God. On the other hand, some people outside the Church appear to be opposed to God, but are in fact staying together with the Church, supporting the people of God. In this life, the historic development of the two cities are "mixed together from beginning to end." It will not be until the Final Judgment that the two cities would be separated, each facing its own destiny: eternal happiness or eternal damnation. The people of the two cities have been mixed together, with both good and bad members existing together. The same happens even to the leaders of the Church. Thus, Catholics would be at a loss as to what to do. But St Augustine comforted them, telling them not to be disappointed. As long as they keep faith in God, He will eventually bestow on them their eternal reward.

Pope Benedict, in his Letter, likewise repeatedly assures us that Christ will never abandon His Bride, the Church. In any case, the Church has the responsibility to take up the mission of Christ and to accompany the people on earth with apostolic zeal. The essence of such accompaniment is to be a witness in proclaiming Christ (L3.5), who is "the key, the centre and the purpose of the whole of human history" (L2.2). The Church is "the sign and the safeguard of the transcendental dimension of the human person" (L4.5). In its proclamation, the local Church should be faithful to Christ, in communion with the universal Church, under the leadership of the Pope (L3.7), focus on the mission to proclaim the Gospel and never interfere in politics (L4.6). The Catholic Church does not seek any special privilege, but only wants to unselfishly work for the good of the Chinese People (L4.4).

With this positive attitude, the Holy See naturally hopes to get understanding and acceptance from the Chinese authorities through dialogue. However, many misunderstandings and much

incomprehension remain between the two sides (L4.4). This puts the Church in a dilemma.

The Church's Dilemma

The Letter directly points out the dilemma: "In the light of these unrenounceable principles, the solution to existing problems cannot be pursued via an ongoing conflict with the legitimate civil authorities; at the same time, though, compliance with those authorities is not acceptable when they interfere unduly in matters regarding the faith and discipline of the Church." (L4.7)

In other words, the local Church community on the one hand has to obey government directives, and on the other hand has to maintain Church principles. Since the beginning of the 1950s, on the question of whether the Church community should uphold or abandon Church principles, some people took an uncompromising attitude, while others always followed the government. The dilemma led to the splitting of the Church community into two, each one looking for its space of survival. Thus there appeared the so-called above ground and underground Church communities. (Later they were also called official and non-official Church communities).

However, the opposition between the government and religion gradually subsided during the early 1980s. The Chinese government began to have a more tolerant attitude towards religions. This is evidenced by *Document No. 19*, which the Communist Party's Central Committee issued in 1982. At least, the government no longer claimed that religion is the opium of the people. They even actively transformed religious sites (including churches) into windows to the world, showing all nations that "there is religious freedom now." Religious people were naturally needed to manage these places, but they were not to be regarded as "juridical persons." The Chinese regime then set up different institutions to control the leaders or believers of each religion and their activity venues. In the Catholic Church they established "the Catholic Patriotic Association, the Church Affairs Committee, and the Bishops' Conference." The core of its power was called *yi hui yi tuan* (one association one conference).

These institutions lead the faithful to support state policy by “concentrating their will and strength on the goal of building a modern, powerful socialist country,” and to prevent citizens and groups from “being manipulated by foreign forces,” and to guard against people using religious affairs “to undermine social order.”

Today, according to the policy, the Church of China must be independent and autonomous. They must elect and ordain bishops on their own (commonly called 自選自聖 self-election and self-consecration). The Church community that cannot accept this policy is caught in a dilemma: Should they persist in confronting the regime? Or should they let the regime improperly interfere? Although the dilemma still exists, there is more space for the community to work in. Faced with a more tolerant regime, the Church survives through maintaining an attitude of being “neither servile nor in defiance” (不卑不亢).

Non-servile attitude: when facing government directives that violate Church principles, excuse is asked gently from doing it.

Non-defiant attitude: when facing government directives that do not violate Church principles, no resistance is shown.

Servile attitude: In order to comply with government directives, Church principles are put aside.

Defiant attitude: In order to comply with Church principles, government directives are put aside.

When the community has more space, an attitude that is “neither servile nor defiant” (不卑不亢) will be relatively easier. Thus, since the Reform and Open Door policy, most of the Church members maintain such an attitude while living in a situation of dilemma. The government's tolerance improved as the society is getting increasingly more open, unlike the hardline attitude of the Cultural Revolution. Though the policy remained unchanged, the ordinary officials in fact understood this “neither servile nor defiant” attitude. They allowed the Christians “to do things in quasi-legal ways,” (擦邊球) and even turned a blind eye to it. Because of this, the so-called underground Church community has

also become increasingly known to the public. Sometimes they are tacitly accepted by the authorities, almost on the same basis as the official Church community, but without the need to join the Catholic Patriotic Association.

The faithful of the Church usually do not fall neatly into 50 percent non-servile/ 50 percent non-defiant. Depending on different circumstances, when they face the officials, they are sometimes more servile and less defiant, or sometimes less servile and more defiant. Thus, sometimes the situation turns out to be “a safe passage,” sometimes “a narrow escape,” and sometimes “grave and dangerous.” The attitudes of the officials are like playing the accordion, sometimes loose and sometimes tight, depending on time and place. Thus, the faithful have survived like this for over three decades.

Since each circumstance is different, the question of whether to be “servile” or “defiant,” will vary with different people. This leads to misunderstandings and disputes within the Church. The Holy See has always been very concerned about this, and has encouraged the Church, whether in the official or non-official communities, to treat each other with love, and try their best to stay in communion with each other, since without love, all will be in vain (L6.1).

The appointment of bishops by the Pope

From the perspective of China (authorities), the reason not to allow the Pope to appoint bishops is out of the fear that the Holy See (foreign power) would cause harm to China in the name of religion. Although in the past 30 years, the Holy See and the local Church tried to make China understand that the Pope's appointment of bishops would not lead to any “invasion” or “harm”. Yet, the regime still has no confidence. Pope Benedict repeatedly reminded his readers that the relationship between the Church and the government is already a difficult issue to deal with. But an even more painful division exists within the Church concerning the Episcopal Ordination of a candidate who has not received the pontifical mandate. For the Church people it is commonly called an illegitimate Episcopal Ordination.

In the days of Pope John Paul II, Chinese society had already become quite liberal. Many people, even the atheists, believed that each religion should keep its true face. Thus, for the Catholic Church, the Pope should be free to appoint bishops. Such an appointment is about communion within the Church hierarchy. Each bishop must maintain communion with the Pope and with other bishops in the hierarchy so as to carry out the duty to sanctify (*munus sanctificandi*), to teach (*munus docendi*), and to govern (*munus regendi*) in his own diocese. In fact, each bishop, as long as he is in communion with the Pope, is in communion with all other bishops. For this reason, Canon Law stipulates that a bishop, while receiving the Episcopal Ordination, must have already the pontifical mandate which should be announced to all those in attendance. This is a crucial move for him so as to manifest his hierarchical communion with the Pope and with the other bishops. The Pope's freedom to appoint bishops is a matter of principle in faith, and not even the Pope himself has authority to give it up.

Viewed from the international arena, more than 180 countries have diplomatic relations with the Holy See. One of the reasons for this is to let pontifical representatives from the Holy See assist the local Church and coordinate the work of identifying episcopal candidates. They then submit a report to the Holy See for the Pope to appoint a candidate as bishop. Enlightened people in China have long realized that the international community does not regard the Pope's appointment of bishops as interference in their domestic affairs.

However, due to very complex reasons, some other Chinese Party members maintain that in a communist-led country religions must be subservient to the regime. They consider the Pope's appointment of bishops an act of interference in domestic affairs. To prevent such interference, the Chinese Catholic Church must be independent (of the Pope) and autonomous, and must elect and consecrate bishops on its own (the so-called self-election self-consecration).

As we all know, under these two different kinds of thinking, the regime has chosen "independence and autonomy" as the mainstream resolution. "All this has caused division both among the clergy and among the lay faithful. It is a situation primarily

dependent on factors external to the Church, but it has seriously conditioned her progress, giving rise also to suspicions, mutual accusations and recriminations, and it continues to be a weakness in the Church that causes concern." (L7.1)

Who can become a bishop's successor?

Ten years after the Letter was published, disagreements still persist between the Chinese "independence and autonomy" and the Holy See's "hierarchical communion." Although dialogue has taken place between the two sides, it will take more time before they can draw closer together.

Since members of the Church accepted the principle of faith, namely the "hierarchical communion passed down from the Apostles, and did not accept the "independence and autonomy" that comes from the Party, government officials thus started to impose acceptance upon the Church leaders. They have always been concerned about seminary formation and formation of the clergy in an attempt to raise up some "reliable" leaders. In this way, they would have more officially recognized leaders who are "only servile and not defiant." Only in this way would they have Church leaders who truly practice the ideal of "love the country and love their religion." Only in this way could they build up an "independent and autonomous" Church. This would in turn consolidate the "one association, one conference" to impose the practice of "self-election self-consecration (of bishops)." Although the government has euphemistically named it the "democratic administration of the religion (民主辦教)", it is in fact the Party who runs the Church. This is obvious to all.

Bishops are the most important leaders in the Church. With elderly bishops gradually passing away one after the other, looking for successors becomes an important task. Therefore, government officials have for many years tried hard to identify future episcopal candidates among young students. They set standards early on: being reliable politically, with religious accomplishments, a good moral reputation among the faithful, and able to be useful at a crucial time.

These four standards, if taken literally, do not necessarily contradict Church law. However, for the Church, pastors must be men of virtue and competence, with virtue coming first. The most important virtue is that the pastors should be steadfast and faithful men of God, rather than men of the world. By this standard the Church would entrust the people of God into their hands. In fact, the question of “belonging either to God or to the World” existed from the very beginning of the Church. St Augustine had perceived this problem, and pointed out that some people entered the sheepfold, not through the gate—Jesus—but they resorted to other means, e.g., by jumping into the sheepfold from the side, wearing a sheepskin, deceiving the flock, and even transforming themselves into shepherds to seek their own advantage.

The question of “who” is a man of God pertains purely to a religious plane. It should be answered by those who believe in God. Their answer is very direct. They believe that God calls and picks a shepherd for His people. A bishop is a man of God because he obeys God's call. Although this concerns the calling of God, it has to go through "discernment" and formal "approval" by the Church. Since the official approval comes from the Pope himself, the Pope has to appoint his representatives to carry out the discernment work. Discernment and approval are purely religious matters designed to identify "who" is a man of God. In fact, when the discernment is done, and a candidate identified, the Pope will issue a pontifical mandate for his Episcopal Ordination. In so doing it is the Pope who "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 offending against its sovereignty." (L9.2)

For an atheist government, the question "who is a man of God" does not have much sense. But in order for the religion to be strictly subordinate to the government, the bishop must be "useful at a crucial time!" In other words, when the government takes a tough stance, the bishop must only “be servile and not defiant” in certain circumstances. In fact, some bishops were forced to participate in an illegitimate Episcopal Ordination to the point of gravely violating Church discipline. In addition, there are other serious

circumstances. These include the usurpation of papal authority by institutions and figures that are established and led by the government. For example, the highest authority of the Catholic Church in China now is not the Pope, but the National Assembly of Catholic Representatives controlled by the regime. During the assembly, the Catholic Patriotic Association and the so-called bishops' conference elect their chairpersons and vice-chairpersons and so on. It is through these people, that the regime implements the "independent and autonomous" policy. One of its important initiatives is to ordain bishops without a pontifical mandate. The universal Church calls such a bishop an "illegitimate bishop." The regime makes use of an Episcopal Ordination to implement the Party's policies: to realize an "independent and autonomous" Church and to carry out the "self-election and self-consecration (of bishops)".

Of course, learned people inside and outside China know that an "illegitimate Episcopal Ordination" is a grave violation of the canonical discipline in the Church. In such an Ordination, all bishops, whether they be consecrators or consecrated, would automatically incur excommunication. However, for the government, these bishops, "at a critical time", courageously became models of "patriotic" bishops for having no fear of excommunication. Illegitimate bishops, thus, can be used as a standard to measure whether other legitimate bishops are "patriotic" or not. Thus, any legitimate bishop who concelebrates Mass with those illegitimate bishops is regarded as a "servile and not defiant" patriotic bishop, and politically reliable. In this way, the Chinese government can declare to the world that more and more Chinese bishops advocate that the Chinese Church must be independent and autonomous and must carry out self-election and self-consecration (of bishops).

Uphold the Truth and exercise Charity

Pope Benedict XVI certainly understood this situation, and stated in his letter "such an ordination (illegitimate Episcopal Ordination) in fact inflicts a painful wound upon ecclesial communion." (L9.1)

Above all, the Church members feel grieved. During the Mass, Jesus was really present there, in communion with the faithful. However, in the same Mass, some people held an illegitimate Episcopal Ordination, degrading the most sacred liturgy of the Church into a worldly political act, to the point of abandoning Church principles, tearing apart ecclesial Communion, and setting a very bad example. All this was only to achieve the goal of a political party or self-interest. In the eyes of the Catholics, these bishops, whether they be consecrators or consecrated, who should be the successors of the Apostles and should in the name of Jesus shepherd his flock, now broke unity in the very sacrament of unity. Ever since then, they themselves have incurred automatically excommunication, separated themselves from ecclesial communion and disqualified themselves from exercising any episcopal ministry. Not until the Apostolic See lifts those excommunications, each time they administer a sacrament, they will not only commit an illegal act but also a sacrilege. How can this not pain the hearts of the Catholics?

For this reason, Pope Benedict made it clear in his Letter: "Truth and love are the two faces of the same gift that comes from God and, thanks to the apostolic ministry, is safeguarded in the Church and handed down to us, to our present time!" (L7. 3) These heartfelt words were to encourage the Bishops as "successors of the Apostles" to root themselves in "true love" in order to "love truly."

Bishops receive the ministry to care for God's flock, not on account of their own merits or someone's recommendation, much less vanity, but on account of their deep rootedness in God's love. This love was already vividly manifested in the Last Supper. In the same manner, an episcopal candidate receives the grace of love and gifts of ministry from the Holy Spirit in his Episcopal Ordination. The aim is to unite people together in the Eucharist. How can someone use an illegitimate Episcopal Ordination to defile the holy Eucharist and trample on ecclesial communion?

Therefore, Benedict XVI understood well. The faithful who uphold their faith loyally, will pay a heavy price and suffer. But the entire Church admires them as examples, especially those Catholics who uncompromisingly maintain their faithfulness to the See of Peter. (L2.1) "You have to make a right choice, when you cannot

have both fish and bear's paw (魚與熊掌不可兼得) ... ", said Mencius, "when you cannot have both life and righteousness, the right choice is to sacrifice life for righteousness (捨生取義)". This is the spirit of being salt and light. Uncountable numbers of Catholics have given faithful witness with their blood, sweat and tears. Of course, if anyone sins, one should repent sincerely and seek pardon from the Holy See according to Pope Benedict's Letter.

Despite the difficulties in the life of faith for Chinese Catholics, Pope Benedict stays close to them with love and affection saying: "In the Catholic Church of China, you, a small flock present and active within the vastness of an immense People journeying through history, how encouraging and challenging these words of Jesus are for you: 'Do not be afraid any longer, little flock, for your Father is pleased to give you the kingdom' (Luke 12:32)! 'You are the salt of the earth (...) the light of the world: therefore 'let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven' (Mt 5:13, 14, 16)." (L5.1)

On the night of his election, Pope Francis said: "And now, we take up this journey: the Bishop and the People, the people and the Bishop. This is the journey of the Church of Rome which presides in charity over all the Churches." This reminds me of the words of two famous Church fathers. The first one was St Augustine speaking to his people, "For you, I am a bishop, and with you, I am a Christian." The second one is a quote of St Ignatius of Antioch about the Church "presiding in charity." "Presiding" means that the Church of Rome is led by the Pope, the successor of St. Peter, who has always enjoyed the primacy in Faith and Charity. Thus, the Pope, the Bishop of Rome, will journey together with the Chinese Catholics and "preside in charity" over the Church in China.

Being "neither servile nor defiant" (不卑不亢) seems to be passive. However, when faced with a difficult choice (not to have both fish and bear's paw), to be "neither servile nor defiant" is a better strategy than "being only servile but not defiant." (只卑不亢) In short, in order to uphold our faith, a silent "no" is filled more with God's blessing and glory than a flattering "yes."

During recent dialogues between China and the Vatican, the Chinese leader said: "When a people have faith, their race will have

hope and their country will have strength." Aren't these words moving many hearts?

In any case, as people of the city of God, Catholics must uphold their faith, be salt and light, and rely wholeheartedly on God, not on secular power and wealth. God will demonstrate His glory upon them and bless their race and country.

Glorious things are said of you, O city of God! (Psalms, 87:3)