

# *Do Not “Dismember” Pope Benedict’s Pastoral Letter Anymore*

---

*Paul Han  
Translated by Ingrid Chan*

**I**t has been ten years since the publication 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” (also known as the “Pastoral Letter”) on 30 June 2007. Nevertheless, many groups and individuals—whether at home or abroad—acted to address their own needs over a period of time. In my opinion, what they have done is to “dismember” the Pastoral Letter.

As a member of the Church in China, and like all those who were concerned with the Pastoral Letter, I too read immediately and carefully both the English and Chinese versions of the Letter, which clearly expressed its wishes and objectives: the Church in China should seek first reconciliation, unity and communion, institution building, vocations and formation, evangelization, as well as the beginning of constructive dialogue with the government, under the premise of mutual respect, so as to overcome the misunderstandings and difficulties stemming from state-church relations over many years. Regarding the ways to achieve the above goals, Pope Benedict XVI, who clearly understood the special situation of the Church in China, authorized the bishops to take the initiative. He also asked all the priests and the faithful to acquiesce, albeit with difficulties, for “the unity of the diocesan community with its own Pastor should be maintained.” “All this should be lived out in communion and with fraternal understanding, avoiding judgments and mutual condemnations.” (Letter, 7)

What was puzzling, however, was that disputes over the Pastoral Letter unceasingly arose. Soon after the Chinese translation was published, different versions created by overseas communities

were circulated within the Church in Mainland China. After the Holy See issued the “Compendium” in 2009, there followed a number of interpretations, with similar themes but different styles. Each group quoted some words from the Letter, not only trying to explain their own standpoints and ideas, but also refuting other opinions. One of the arguments was: “it is clear that the claim of some entities, desired by the State and extraneous to the structure of the Church, to place themselves above the Bishops and to guide the life of the ecclesial community, does not correspond to Catholic doctrine.” The so-called “some entities...extraneous to the structure of the Church” refers to the “Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association [CCPA]” (Letter, 7 and footnotes). The CCPA was established over 60 years ago, but even now different parties still argue over the following: as the CCPA does not correspond to Catholic doctrine, then the priests and lay faithful who have joined the CCPA, are they guilty of apostasy? Is the “ambivalence” of Pope Francis and the Holy See regarding the matter “naive,” even at the risk of “betraying Jesus Christ”?

Speaking of Pope Francis, we vividly remember what he said during the in-flight interview from Korea to Rome (18 August 2014). He clearly stated that “we must not forget that fundamental document for the Chinese problem which was the Letter to the Chinese written by Pope Benedict XVI. That Letter is still timely today. It is good to reread it.” What did Pope Francis want us to get out of rereading the Letter? To stop the work of reconciliation which is underway within the Church? To be caught in endless disputes? To “dismember” the Letter by interpreting parts of it out of context?

Looking back on Church history, perhaps we can learn from the following facts and get inspiration: if Peter and Paul had remained deadlocked over the issue of circumcision, would the Church have become a universal Church, which would include the Church in China? If in 1715 the Church had not promulgated Pope Clement XI’s bull *Ex illa die*, which prohibited the worship of ancestors and Confucius, but rather Pope Pius XII’s Instruction *Plane compertum est* (1939) which lifted that ban, would the history and present situation of the Church of China have been the same today? Moreover, if there had not been much difference

between the Holy See's "Eight-Point Directive on Dealings with China" (1988) and Pope Benedict's Pastoral Letter, would we still have to spend so much energy on the issue of "the open community and the underground community?"

Surely, the purpose of historical review is not to criticize a political system, institution or individual, but rather to urge the priests and lay faithful of the Church in China to draw lessons from history, so as to have a soaring vision and to avoid repeating the same mistakes. Thus, although the Pastoral Letter of Pope Benedict was published ten years ago, it is not outdated but "still timely today. It is good to reread it."

The Pastoral Letter indeed dealt with many issues and details, including the historical review, the assessment of the present situation, as well as exhortations and instructions for the life of the Church in China. However, as the supreme Pontiff, Pope Benedict hoped that the clergy and the lay faithful would understand the spirit of the Letter through the words, and make sensible decisions. After all, just as we reread the Bible, it is important to understand and fulfill the essence of the message—not the words or phrases—which Jesus Christ and the Apostles conveyed to us! At the same time, by asking the universal Church to pray for the Church in China, Pope Benedict is reminding us of this fact: regardless of how history evolved, and no matter the problems and burdens stemming from it, only those who live in the circumstances can resolve conflicts and solve problems by making sensible decisions in line with the practical situation. All those who are outside, no matter how much they care about the situation, they can only pray, encourage, bless and give help. In view of this, although Pope Benedict said in the Letter that "it is clear that the claim of some entities, desired by the State and extraneous to the structure of the Church, to place themselves above the Bishops and to guide the life of the ecclesial community, does not correspond to Catholic doctrine," the Church in China has to seek reconciliation and unity. When groups and individuals—whether at home or abroad—are concerned about the Church in China, they should not take a position regarding this history and the political burdens of it. However, if someone tries to quote out of context, and make use of this "evidence" to kick up a fuss, this will lead to a weakening and

misunderstanding of the overall idea and spirit of the Letter. It would be like the fundamentalist readings of the Bible. It would become an ideology that troubles us!