

# *The 10th Anniversary of Pope Benedict XVI's Letter to the Clergy and Catholics of China*

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**P**ope Benedict XVI chose an auspicious day to sign his letter to the Catholics of China, Pentecost Sunday, May 27, 2007. It was as if he was calling down the Holy Spirit on the Chinese Church, so that it could experience a New Pentecost.

This year, 2017, marks the 10th year of the issuance of the Letter. In the intervening ten years, what events have taken place in the Chinese Church? What has its history been like? What effect has Pope Benedict's letter had on the Church?

First of all, let us recall some of the salient points made in the Letter. The Holy Father, as a compassionate and loving father should, first of all reach out to his sons and daughters in the Chinese Church, from whom Popes had been cut off for several decades, and expresses his loving concern for them. He urges them to heal the divisions among themselves, and to become reconciled with one another. He also urged them to remain in union with the Holy Father, using the Greek word *koinonia* (communion) to describe the union of a local church with the universal Church. He told them: "The whole Church which is in China is called to live and to manifest this unity in a richer spirituality of communion, so that, taking account of the complex concrete situations in which the Catholic community finds itself, she may also grow in a harmonious hierarchical communion. Therefore, Pastors and faithful are called to defend and to safeguard what belongs to the doctrine and tradition of the Church." (Letter, para. 5)

Towards the political authorities of China, Pope Benedict offered a message of hope for concrete forms of communication and cooperation between the Holy See and the authorities (para. 4:2), a message of openness to dialogue and negotiations with a view to

normalization of relations, an assurance that the Church does not have a mission to change the structures or administration of the State, but only a moral and spiritual mission (para. 4:6), and a trustful hope to reach an agreement with the government to solve questions related to the choice of future bishops, in order to find the most suitable and worthy person, and the publication of the appointment. (para. 9:3-4) (The above paragraph was taken from the “Compendium” of the Pope’s Letter put together by a group of clergy in Hong Kong in July, 2007, 10 pgs., p. 3.)

### **Reactions to the Letter**

Reactions to the Letter varied according to whether the person was from the Church or from the government. Cardinal Joseph Zen of Hong Kong wrote: “I admire the precious balance by the Holy Father between his passion for the truth and his love for his children. Only an outstanding theologian and a tender father could satisfy at the same time the demands of the truth and the kindness for people. Blessed be God for having given us such a leader!” (*Tripod*, Vol. XXVII-No. 146, Autumn 2007, pp. 42-43)

Bishop Aloysius Jin of Shanghai wrote: “As universal pastor, with the concern of a spiritual and merciful father, with serenity and calm, basing himself on Scripture, on the documents of Vatican Council II, on the Code of Canon Law and on the teachings of the Pope John Paul II, the Pope sets out for us in clear and simple fashion the nature, the mission, the task, the organization of the Church of Christ. It gives me the feeling of attending a great lesson in ecclesiology. It makes me love our Church even more, and gives me the determination to take another step in my post of local bishop towards soon achieving the hope and the commitment of Jesus for ‘one pastor and one fold.’” (*Thirty Days* N. 6/7 – 2007, p. 22)

Of course the government and the patriotic association did not like the letter. Government officials ordered Church websites not to re-produce the Letter, and the patriotic association refused to distribute it. However, most clergy, religious and lay, both above and below ground, were happy to get it and read it. One priest from an underground community in north China expressed his joy for the Letter in this way: “We can feel that we are an important part of the

Universal Church. We can feel his (the Pope's) pastoral care and deeply feel that communion in the Church is not an empty concept." (Gianni Criveller, *Tripod*, Vol. XXVII-No. 46, pgs. 52-54).

### **Bishops' ordinations**

At this time of the 10th anniversary of Pope Benedict's Letter, it is appropriate to look back on the history of the Church in China during the intervening 10 years. We jump to the year 2010, which seemed to be a banner year for church-state relations in China. For in 2010, ten bishops were consecrated that year, who had the approval of both the Holy See and the Chinese government. They were Bishop Meng Qinglu (the first bishop to be ordained in China since Dec. 2007), ordained bishop of Hohhot, Inner Mongolia on April 18th, Bishop Shen Bin, ordained bishop of Haimen, Jiangsu on April 21st, Bishop Cai Bingrui, ordained bishop of Xiamen, Fujian on May 8th, Bishop Han Yingjin, ordained coadjutor bishop of Sanyuan, Shaanxi on June 24th, Bishop Xu Jiwei, ordained bishop of Taizhou, Zhejiang on July 10th, Bishop Yang Xiaoting, ordained coadjutor bishop of Yan'an, Shaanxi on July 15, Bishop Meng Ningyou, ordained coadjutor bishop of Taiyuan, Shanxi on September 16th, Wu Junwei, ordained bishop of Yuncheng, Shanxi on September 21st, Bishop Li Suguang, ordained coadjutor bishop of Nanchang, Jiangxi on October 31st, and Bishop Yang Yongqiang, ordained coadjutor bishop of Zhoucun, Shandong on November 15th. At almost all of the ordination ceremonies the ordaining prelates were approved by the Holy See. (Sergio Ticozzi, *Tripod*, Vol. XXXI, No. 160, Spring 2011, "China Church and News Update," pp. 50-51)

However, for the last episcopal ordination of 2010, a great change took place. For the ordination of Father Guo Jincai, unapproved by the Holy See, on November 20th, in a scene reminiscent of a 1940s spy movie, black cars pulled up in front of the residences of Bishops Pei Junmin of Liaoning, Li Liangui of Cangzhou, Feng Xingmao of Hengshui, Li Shan of Beijing, Meng Qinglu of Hohhot, Zhao Fengchang of Liaocheng and An Shuxin of Baoding. Government officials jumped out of the cars, and forced those bishops (all approved by the Holy See) to go to Chengde,

Hebei Province to carry out the episcopal ordination of Father Guo Jincai as bishop of Chengde. To this day no explanation for the sudden great change in government policy has been forthcoming.

### **Illicit bishops**

Up until President Xi Jinping took office in 2013, several episcopal ordinations have taken place where papally unapproved bishops would lay hands on (ordain) Holy See approved candidates, and vice-versa, Holy See bishops would be forced to ordain those unapproved by the Holy See. Most of the illegitimately ordained candidates have been excommunicated, and the legitimate bishops have had to write letters to the Holy See explaining the circumstances surrounding their actions, and asking for forgiveness.

After a year of approving 10 episcopal ordinations along with the Holy See, why would the government suddenly do a 180 degree turn, and force legitimate bishops to carry out the ordination of a Holy See unapproved candidate? Was it just to show that the government is in charge of everything, even episcopal ordination ceremonies of the Catholic Church? They not only showed disrespect for Catholic doctrines and liturgy, but they showed that they are not above using force to implement their “religious” policies. The danger is that the sudden change in tactics reinforces the long held attitude of many people around the world that Party members are nothing more than a group of devious people, who are not to be trusted. Is that the image that the Party wants to project about itself around the world? I think not.

After the consecration of Guo Jincai on November 20, 2010, the Holy See issued a warning that if another illicit ordination took place, the unapproved candidate would be excommunicated. Despite the warning, during the summers of 2011 and 2012, three Chinese priests decided to test the Holy See’s resolve, and agreed to undergo unapproved episcopal ordination. The three were Fathers Lei Shiyin of Leshan, Sichuan Province ordained on June 29, 2011, Huang Bingzhang of Shantou, Guangdong Province ordained on July 14, 2011 and Yue Fusheng of Harbin, Heilongjiang Province on July 6, 2012. All three Fathers were excommunicated for

attempting to be ordained bishops without papal approval. They exist in that state to the present day.

### **Two dissenting bishops**

The ordination which did receive a lot of media coverage was that of Father Ma Daqin as auxiliary bishop of Shanghai on July 7, 2012. Three Vatican approved bishops laid hands on Father Ma. These were Bishops Aloysius Jin Luxian of Shanghai, Xu Honggen of Suzhou and Shen Bin of Haimen. Although illegitimate bishop Zhan Silu of Fujian was present at the ordination, he did not lay hands on the candidate. At the end of Mass, when newly ordained Bishop Ma was thanking those who supported him, he announced, that since he would be quite busy with his missionary work as bishop, he would have to withdraw from his position in the Shanghai Catholic Patriotic Association. The authorities arrested Bishop Ma that very afternoon, confined him in the hostel of Sheshan Seminary, and he remains held incommunicado there until the present day. Subsequently, the national Bishops Conference and the national Patriotic Association removed Bishop from his episcopal office. He is now to be referred to only as Father Ma. (Sergio Ticozzi, *Tripod*, Vol. XXXIII, No. 168. Spring 2013, p. 61)

In resigning from the patriotic association, Bishop Ma may have been influenced by the treatment of another Shanghai auxiliary bishop, Xing Wenzhi, at the 8th national assembly of Catholic representatives held in Beijing (December 7-9, 2010). Bishop Xing refused to concelebrate Mass with illegitimate bishops, and apparently objected to many items which came up for discussion. For these disruptions, he was made to feel unwelcome at the assembly. Bishop Xing was so disgusted with the proceedings of the assembly that he eventually resigned from the episcopacy.

### **The year 2013**

2013 turned out to be a tumultuous year for both the Church and the State in China. On February 11, 2013, Pope Benedict XVI, citing reasons of illness and old age, announced his resignation from the Petrine ministry. On February 22, 2013, the Vatican released a statement from Mainland Chinese Catholics: "Your Holiness has

paid special attention to China and kept a special place for the Catholic Church of 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.” (Sergio Ticozzi, *Tripod*, Vol. XXXIV, No. 172, Spring, 2014, pp.56-7)

On March 13, 2013, the conclave of Cardinals in Rome elected Cardinal Bergoglio of Argentina as the new Pope. He took the name Francis, after St. Francis of Assisi. On that same day, the Chinese Foreign Ministry issued a congratulatory message, but added: “Let us hope that the Vatican, under the guidance of the new Pope, adopts a practical and more flexible attitude, which could create more favorable conditions for relations and the gradual removal of obstacles between China and the Vatican.” The message reiterated the previously stated two conditions: withdraw diplomatic recognition from Taiwan, and no interference in the internal affairs of China in the name of religion. On March 15, the spokesperson of the Holy See announced that Pope Francis had likewise sent his congratulations to the Chinese leaders, Xi Jinping and Li Keqiang, also elected on March 13, Chinese time. (Ticozzi, *ibid.*, p. 58)

No doubt tired out from all the turmoil surrounding the creation and loss of two auxiliary bishops in a short period of time, Bishop Aloysius Jin of Shanghai himself died on April 27, 2013. He was 97 years old. Born in Shanghai in 1916, Bishop Jin, a Jesuit, had studied abroad, in Spain, France and Rome. He was ordained a priest in 1945. He returned to Shanghai in 1951. In 1955, the then Father Jin was arrested along with Bishop Gong Pinmei and other priests and laity. In 1960, he was sentenced to 18 years in prison as a counter-revolutionary. After his release from jail he returned to Shanghai. In 1982, he was appointed to be rector of the newly re-opened Sheshan Seminary. In 1985, he accepted to be ordained an auxiliary bishop of Shanghai, along with Fr. Li Side. The main bishop of Shanghai at that time was Zhang Jiashu. All of them did not have the Holy See’s approval. In the first decade of the new millennium, the Holy See normalized Bp. Jin’s situation. Sheshan Seminary, a regional seminary for six provinces on China’s east coast, under Bp. Jin’s tutelege, became the most famous of China’s 12 (at that time) major seminaries. Around 300 of China’s priests have been trained there. Bp. Jin’s funeral was held on April 29 at St.

Ignatius Cathedral in Xujiahui, with only clergy and Catholics of Shanghai in attendance. (Ticozzi, *ibid.* pp. 60-61)

Finally, on March 16, 2014, Bp. Fan Zhongliang, bishop of the underground church in Shanghai, also died. Having been born in 1918, Bp. Fan was 96. Now the great diocese of Shanghai, the historic jewel of the Chinese Church, has no bishop, except the two “demoted” ones, Ma Daqin and Xing Wenzhi.

Since President Xi Jinping took office on March 13, 2013, five episcopal ordinations have taken place, one in 2015 and 4 in 2016. All the candidates had been approved by both the Holy See and the Chinese government. (Cf. Sergio Ticozzi, “China Church and News Update,” *Tripod*, No. 180, Spring 2016, p. 71 and No. 184, Spring 2017, p. 81) No illicit episcopal ordinations have taken place since Xi Jinping’s inauguration as president.

This is the one bright spot in an otherwise bleak picture for religion. At a meeting on religious work in April 2016, the president himself emphasized the sinicization of religions to protect against foreign infiltration of Chinese culture and society. Also, new regulations on religion, reported to be stricter than the previous ones of 2004, are set to come into effect on February 1, 2018. Wang Zuo’an, the Director of the religious Affairs Bureau, while praising the efforts of Pope Francis to better relations between China and the Vatican, also said that the Holy Father has first to fulfill the two long-standing conditions of withdrawing diplomatic relations from Taiwan and not interfering in the internal affairs of China, including religious affairs. Director Wang referred to this when he said, “Many obstacles, which will take a long time to resolve, still stand in the way.” Thus, it is rumored, no agreement was signed.

A further problem is the campaign to register the clergy. Underground priests may be willing to do this, if it means registering with the government. But they object to being forced to do this through the patriotic association (CCPA). They feel this would mean that they would have to agree with the CCPA’s stance of the “independent administration of the church.”

On the 2nd Sunday of Advent, Year B, the first reading begins with the words: “Comfort, give comfort to my people, says your God.” Amidst all the foreseeable possible future pressure being exerted on religious believers in China, we Catholics can at least be

comforted by the fact that no illicit episcopal ordinations have taken place in China since Xi Jinping (now in his second term) took office as President in 2013.

Finally, we return to one of the original questions: did the Holy Father's Letter have a good effect, or a bad effect on the Chinese Church. I think it had a good effect. As the Chinese priest quoted above said: "It made us feel part of the Universal Church." Pope Benedict's Letter showed that the Chinese Church was one with all the local churches throughout the world in the one big family of the universal Catholic Church.

Even the turmoil of the mixed episcopal ordination ceremonies kept the question of the appointment of bishops before the eyes and in the prayers of Catholics around the world. So, yes, Pope Benedict's Letter of 10 years ago did have a positive effect on those to whom it was addressed, the clergy, religious and laity of the Catholic Church in China.