

EDITORIAL

S ometime in the middle of last year, a reporter asked a Chinese official about the progress of the talks between China and the Holy See. The official responded in this manner: if the Holy See made a concrete gesture to show its sincerity, then better progress could be made.

Well, the Holy Father Pope Francis seems to have made that gesture. In mid-December 2017, the Holy See-appointed Bishop Zhuang Jianjian, 88, of the Shantou Diocese was escorted to Beijing to meet a three-man delegation from the Holy See. He was rumoured to have been asked to retire in favor of the government-appointed Huang Bingzhang, 51, who has also been excommunicated. Underground bishop Guo Xijin, 59, of Mindong in Fujian was also rumoured to have been asked to make way for Holy See-unapproved bishop Zhan Silu, 57, to succeed Guo as Bishop of Mindong, where a large underground community exists.

Underground Catholic communities throughout China were thrown into turmoil. They wondered whether the sufferings they had undergone for 70 years for their loyalty to the Pope was all for nought. The Holy Father's purpose was to bring the two parts of the Church together, so that they could present a united witness to Our Lord to their fellow citizens. He would also like to prevent any further illicit episcopal ordinations from taking place.

The question in many people's minds is: if the underground bishops and priests surface, will they be forced to join the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association (CCPA)? It is also said that registration involves the signing of a statement supporting the independent administration of the Chinese Church. Most underground clergy cannot in conscience do this because they consider it to mean "independence from the Pope."

Here is where a gesture from the Chinese side of the negotiations should now come into play. It would be a great force for peace and unity on all sides if the Chinese government did not force the underground clergy to join the CCPA, nor sign a

statement supporting the independence of the Church, if they do not wish to do so. This would alleviate tensions, and create a relaxed atmosphere where Catholics on the two sides of the Church could work out their differences and build up healthy relationships among themselves over a period of time. In other words, the underground clergy should have the time and the freedom to choose the path they wish to follow. It would show the government's trust in them. Time, trust, a lack of pressure, and prayer can heal all wounds. Politics should take a back seat. Let the power of the Holy Spirit and the charity of Christ prevail in the Christian community. There should be no question of winners or losers. The aim should be to bring peace and harmony to the Chinese Catholic community.

Besides, the Chinese clergy are already independent. Many have studied abroad, and have returned with degrees in theology and Scripture from reputable universities. They are now in positions of authority as bishops, or as seminary rectors and professors. They can run the Chinese Church themselves. They are independent from the foreign missionaries, but not from the Pope. Otherwise, they would not be Catholic.

It is a repeat of what happened in the aftermath of the Rites controversy. In 1724, the Yongzheng Emperor forbade the preaching of Christianity in the Empire. With the expulsion of all foreign missionaries, the task of building up the Church fell to the Chinese priests, and they did an admirable job of keeping the faith alive in China. Priests like Luo Wenzao in Nanjing (ordained the first Chinese bishop in 1685) and Andrew Ly in Sichuan traveled far and wide to nourish the scattered Christian communities in their areas. The Chinese clergy did this for about 120 years, until the return of foreign missionaries after the Opium Wars of the 1840s and 50s. Today there is no need for the Chinese clergy to sign any more documents of independence. They have already proved that they can run the Chinese Church themselves.

Articles on recent restrictions in Chinese society are ably dealt with by our authors: Willy Lam, Lo Man Wai, Dick Madsen, and Sergio Ticozzi. This issue also contains the English translation of the new religious regulations, which came into effect on February 1, 2018, and Father Sergio Ticozzi's News Update of religious happenings during the previous year. (PJB)