

# THE NEW DIRECTION OF CHINA'S POLICY TOWARD THE CATHOLIC CHURCH

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translated by Peter Barry

Recently a friend from abroad sent me a mimeographed paper entitled "Conscientiously Implement Document #3, 1989, Issued by the Central Offices and Strengthen Catholic Church Work in the New Situation." He also asked me to offer my personal opinion about it.

Two months ago, when I accompanied Bishop Domingos Lam of Macao on a visit to Guangzhou City we met some Chinese bishops who had just returned from a meeting in Beijing. They told us that the meeting, which took place April 24-29, was attended by all the Catholic bishops of the country and the provincial chairpersons of the Catholic Patriotic Association. In all, there were about 70 persons in attendance. The purpose of the meeting was to study and discuss Document #3 which had been issued by the Party and government in the early part of this year. I believe that the document mentioned by the bishops and the mimeographed paper which my friend sent me are similar. Judging from the positions which the persons attending the meeting hold, one can see that this document carries a certain amount of weight and indicates a new direction in the Chinese Communist Party and government's policy regarding the Catholic Church within its borders.

As the contents inform us, this 2,400 word document was jointly issued by Party Central's United Front Department and the State Council's Religious Affairs Bureau. In addition to a forward the document contains four main points, the headings of which are as follows: 1. Firmly implement the policy of the independent administration of the church and increase thought education for the clergy and the broad mass of Catholics; 2. Continue to pay attention to the implementation of the religious policy and help the Catholic Church solve its problems of self-support; 3. Properly solve the problem of Catholic underground forces; 4. Strengthen leadership regarding the Catholic Church. (cf. Appendix)

From a quick reading of the document one can see that its content

and tone are similar to those of the past. However, reading between lines one finds new and hidden meanings which are worthy of our attention and discussion.

First of all, the document's title and preface both mention "a new situation." What is the meaning of this "new situation?" I think that it refers to the general circumstances and atmosphere of China in recent times. It especially refers to "China-Vatican relations." In other words, following the present worldwide trend for "dialogue," China-Vatican relations have also begun to move from a position of confrontation to one of dialogue. Since the Chinese government desires to dialogue, it must first set forth its new position. Here we describe the content and basic stance of the four points mentioned in the document.

The document's first point begins by stating: "At the beginning of the People's Republic, Party Central determined that under the premise that the Chinese Catholic Church free itself from the control of the Vatican, the church could maintain a purely religious link with the Vatican, and the self-elected Chinese bishops could still report to the Pope for his approval. However, not only did the Vatican not approve of our self-elected bishops, it also imposed 'excommunication.' Therefore, after 1958, our country's Catholic Church was forced to cut itself off from all contact with the Vatican. It was absolutely correct to do this." After reading this explanation one cannot help but ask: does this describe what actually took place in history? Or, does it still represent the bottom line established by the Chinese Communist Party for dialogue with the Vatican? It seems that the Chinese authorities want to consider the Pope's primacy to be merely "honorary" in nature, and not to be a primacy of "jurisdiction". Clearly the Party is accustomed to raising "religious affairs" to the "political level." On its side the Vatican is deeply aware that unless it can obtain "real pastoral benefits," to establish diplomatic relations in and of itself has no meaning. On the long and arduous road of dialogue between China and the Vatican, I am sure that this is the most important question.

The policy of returning church properties has been in existence for a long time. However the implementation of the policy has not been uniform in every place. What is new in the document's second point is not the return of church "buildings," but the return of church "land." Thus we read: "A conscientious inventory of occupied churches and church buildings (including the land on which the churches, seminaries, convents and related buildings stand) should be carried out in every place."

In the document's third point one reads the line: "After undergoing an examination by the local Catholic patriotic organization, report to the Chinese Bishops Conference for approval..." This sentence hints at a possible adjustment in the position of the patriotic association, that is that the bishops conference will be placed above it. This would bring the Chinese Bishops Conference in line with other bishops conferences around the world.

The following sentence is contained under the document's fourth point: "Pay attention to differentiating between the underground forces and those clergy who because of their belief in the Pope are separated from us." From this sentence it almost seems as if the government will permit Chinese Catholics to believe in the Pope. However, the government still plans to use both hard and soft measures to force the underground church to cooperate with government policy. That is, it will either positively try to win them over by persuasion, or it will brutally suppress them. This is apparent from the continuation of the text: "Differentiate between the leaders of the underground forces and the believing masses who are influenced or controlled by them. After painstaking and detailed education work, unite the great majority of them with us. Each place must closely watch the trends in the underground forces. Once a problem is discovered, under the unified leadership of Party committee and government, coordinate each department's powers to handle the problem promptly and securely."

On the whole the religious policy spelled out in this document represents some advancement from the past, and some new meanings are contained in it. However, there is still a vast difference between the measures for dealing with religious faith and organizations contained in the document and those regarding Catholic churches in the rest of the world. Moreover, this document was issued before the "June 4th Incident" in Beijing. Many people will naturally ask: After the "June 4th Incident" how will the government treat the Catholic Church? I think that after the "June 4th Incident" the Communist Party will be more sensitive regarding those activities which have not been approved, and may even use brutal methods in dealing with them. Thus the activities of the "underground church" will no doubt be dealt with severely too. This is because all activities which have not received government approval will most likely be painted with the same brush: from a political point of view they will be considered as "counter-revolutionary activities."

However, up to the present time no substantial changes have taken place in the Chinese government's treatment of religion. In other

words, the Communist Party, as in the past, considers religion in the context of the four modernizations. In order to promote the four modernizations it has broadened the degree of toleration of religion and granted more space for religious activities. However, for the time being, our contact with Chinese religious believers should be governed by a careful and prudent attitude.

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## Appendix

Conscientiously Implement Document # 3, 1989, from the Central Offices entitled "Strengthening Catholic Church Work in the New Situation"

Recently, with the agreement of Party Central and the State Council, the business offices of both Party Central and the State Council have transmitted a document from the Party's United Front Department and the State Council's Religious Affairs Bureau entitled "A Report Concerning a Strengthening of Catholic Church Work in the New Situation." This report is in accord with the norms for dealing with the relations between our country and the Vatican which were approved by Party Central and the State Council. The report gives an overall view of the actual situation of our country's Catholic Church at the present time, undertakes a conscientious analysis of Catholic Church work and further spells out guiding principles and concrete policies regarding Catholic Church work. Here we transmit the main spirit and specific contents of the document as follows.

The mission of the Catholic Church in our country has a 400 year history. After the Opium War the Western European imperialist powers invaded our country, and the Catholic Church developed to a greater degree. In the years just after Liberation there were 2,700,000 Catholics in our country. Today there are 3,300,000. Before Liberation the Chinese church was completely controlled by the imperialist powers and the Vatican. After the establishment of New China, under the energetic encouragement and support of the Party and government, the patriotic clergy and the great mass of believers freed themselves from the control of the Vatican, set up the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association, took the road of the independent and autonomous administration of their church and caused the Chinese Catholic Church to become a religious enterprise run by the Chinese Catholics themselves. This was a change of far-reaching significance in the Catholic Church. After the 3rd plenum of the CPC's 11th Central Committee (December 1978), the Party and government further strengthened Catholic Church

work, encouraging the Catholic Church to continue in its policy of running the church independently. The Chinese Catholic Church must firmly adhere to this path.

However, the Vatican's desire to once again control the Chinese Catholic Church has never died. In recent years, on the one hand it has slandered and attacked our country's Catholic patriotic clergy, and on the other hand, it has made use of the universal nature of the Catholic Church and the religious belief of the Catholics and clergy regarding the Pope to continually send people to China, or it has used other concealed means, to secretly appoint bishops and to instigate and support underground forces in a vain attempt to split the Chinese Catholic Church. This is a factor which seriously affects the security of society. Therefore it is necessary to courageously take effective means to strengthen and correct our work concerning the Catholic Church.

\* I. Firmly implement the policy of the independent administration of the church and increase thought education for the clergy and the great mass of Catholics.

At the beginning of the People's Republic, Party Central determined that under the premise that the Chinese Catholic Church free itself from Vatican control, the church could maintain a purely religious link with the Vatican and the self-elected Chinese bishops could still report to the Pope for his approval. However, not only did the Vatican not approve of our self-elected bishops, it also imposed "excommunication." Therefore after 1958 our country's Catholic Church was forced to cut itself off from all contact with the Vatican. It was absolutely correct to do this.

In recent years, the infiltrating activities of the Vatican have caused some of our clergy and Catholics to have unclear ideas about the policy of independently running the church. Therefore each place should choose various methods to explain the present circumstances to the clergy and Catholics and to fully affirm that maintaining the policy of the independent administration of the church is completely correct. They should also fully affirm the historical contribution of the patriotic clergy and Catholic masses in supporting national sovereignty and the independent running of the Chinese Catholic Church. It is still necessary to depend on them to run the church well. We reiterate here our government's two basic principles in handling China-Vatican relations:

1. The Vatican must cut off its so-called "diplomatic relations" with Taiwan and recognize the People's Republic of China as the only

legitimate government of China.

2. The Vatican is not allowed to interfere in the internal affairs of our country; this includes not interfering in our country's religious affairs.

Those two principles will not change no matter how China-Vatican relation develop in the futures. The Chinese Catholic Church must unflinchingly carry out the policy of the independent administration of the Church and continue to elect its own bishops. All the affairs of the Chinese Catholic Church (including finances, education, and supervision of the clergy) must be determined by the Chinese Catholic Church itself.

II. Continue to pay attention to the implementation of the religious policy and help the Catholic Church solve its problems of self support.

Before 1958 the Catholic Church depended on the income from properties to maintain its support. But during the "Cultural Revolution" almost all the Catholic Church property was occupied. Income was greatly reduced and self support was very difficult. Therefore each place should carry out a conscientious inventory of occupied churches and church buildings (including the land on which churches, seminaries, convents and related buildings stand). Those which have already been dealt with in accordance with the related policy of Party Central and the State Council do not deal with them again. Those properties which have not yet been settled, should be settled as quickly as possible. Those properties which the Church really needs to receive back should be absolutely returned to it. If for the time being the property cannot be returned a contract regarding the return of the property should be drawn up. If the original buildings have been torn down, reconstructed or sold and there is no way to return them, then the occupying unit should make a reasonable compensation in accordance with concerned government regulations.

Every place should positively help the Catholic Church to broaden the road of self-support, and in accordance with government regulations, permit the Catholic patriotic organizations, based on their own conditions and strengths, to run enterprises for the purpose of self-support, as well as social welfare projects. In the present circumstances of not being able to solve the problem of self-support, the finance department of each place can give appropriate funds to help alleviate necessary costs.

From now on, as the Catholic Church increases its ability to

support itself, the government can decrease its help, so that finally complete self-support for the Catholic Church will be realized.

### III. Properly Solve the Problem of Catholic Underground Forces.

The Catholic underground forces are made up of bishops secretly appointed by the Vatican, as well as of priests ordained by these bishops and leaders manipulated by them. Concerning the underground bishops and priests one must use a policy of differentiation in dealing with them. As for those among them who are willing to accept the Party and government's leadership, who demonstrate that they are patriotic and law-abiding, who accept the policy of the independent administration of the church and who have a certain religious cultivation, after undergoing an examination by the local patriotic organization and receiving the permission of the Chinese Bishops Conference, then their religious identities can be acknowledged. As for those individual clergymen, who after undergoing painstaking education work, still stubbornly persist in their inimical stance, engage in confrontational activities and instigate Catholics to perform acts destructive of the social order, one must identify their crimes, thoroughly make them known to the Catholic community, and severely deal with them in accordance with the law.

### IV. Strengthen Leadership Regarding the Catholic Church

Every level of the Party and government must definitely strengthen its leadership work regarding the Catholic Church and carry this work out well in all aspects. Each leading unit must fully realize the urgency and importance of strengthening Catholic Church work in the new circumstances. Every concerned department under the unified leadership of the Party committee must mutually cooperate, divide responsibilities, develop educational work for the Catholic masses, carry out general control, and fully bring into play the patriotic organizations and clergy. Pay attention to differentiating between the underground forces and those clergy who because of their belief in the Pope are separated from us. Also differentiate between the leaders of the underground forces and the believing masses who are influenced or controlled by them. After painstaking and detailed education work, unite the great majority of them with us. Each place must closely watch the trends in the underground forces. Once a problem is discovered, under the unified leadership of Party committee and government, coordinate each department's powers to handle the problem promptly and securely.

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