

Editorial

The Holy Father's Message

On December 15th last year, the Holy Father Pope John Paul II, in his capacity as the church's chief shepherd, delivered a message to the Taiwan bishops who were in Rome for their "ad limina" visit. The last two sections of the message relate directly to the Catholic Church in mainland China. The Holy Father, more compellingly than ever before, called upon the Catholic communities and organizations to become reconciled with one another. He requested the Taiwan bishops to be the spokespersons for this ardent desire of his.

The media interpreted this heartfelt message in various ways: "The Pope urged Chinese Catholics not to turn their backs on members of the officially recognized Patriotic Association." Or, "The Pope hinted that the establishment of China-Vatican relations is not imminent." Just how correct are these interpretations and to what degree? How should we Catholics understand the Pope's message? We feel we can answer this question with the following three points:

I. We, unlike the media generally, should not interpret the contents of the Holy Father's speech from a political point of view or from the angle of China-Vatican relations. Rather, we should dwell on the theological or pastoral essence which is the core of the message. The Pope has two identities, one as chief shepherd of the Universal Church and the other as head of the Vatican State. The former is essential to his identity while the latter is an instrument. Occupying 108 English hectares of land, the present Vatican State has only a 62 year history. Although the origins of the present Vatican State can be traced to the Papal States which go back to the 4th century A.D. and the Edict of Milan of the Emperor Constantine, the papal ministry itself was created when Jesus established the Church. Its purpose was to form the churches into one communion for bringing the Gospel to all people. The function of the Vatican State is to provide the Pope with the independence and freedom he needs to carry out his duties, protected from possible interference from other countries. Therefore, the speech of the Holy Father is not mainly concerned with, nor does it reveal the direction and circumstances of China-Vatican relations. It is primarily concerned with unity within the Church communities in China.

II. It is worth noting that in mentioning the Catholic Church communities on the mainland, the Holy Father never uses the words, "members of the Patriotic Association" or "underground Catholics." This shows that the Holy Father is addressing the mainland Catholics "as a whole." In this address he reveals once again, as he did in February 1981 in Manila, and in Seoul, Korea at the Eucharistic Congress in October 1989, the fullness of his magnanimous, pastoral heart. In his talk, the Pope speaks as the Supreme Pastor of the visible Church and from a pastoral point of view. His concern is to acknowledge and encourage whatever is being done for the spreading of the Gospel, and for making the Catholic community a credible witness to that Gospel. He does not want to characterize any group among the Catholics, but he praises all that is being done "with a loyal heart and in fidelity to Christ and his Church." From this perspective, he does not hesitate to express his joy at "the reopening of churches, seminaries and houses of formation..." although he is well aware of the limitations under which they operate. He also expresses sadness and deep concern at the arrest of some bishops, priests and Catholics, and for all the other difficulties the church experiences. In his appeals and request to all concerned and regarding their actions, the Holy Father uses positive language, which allows us not only to understand the words but also to read between the lines.

III. Since this speech is pastoral, and not legal, in nature, it only gives "principles" which indicate a direction. It does not give instructions, regarding laws to be observed or not to be observed.

The last part of the speech, especially, demonstrates the consistent principle observed in church tradition and stressed in the ancient maxim: "In what is doubtful, freedom; in what is necessary, unity; in all things, charity." Thus our Holy Father says: "Reconciliation must be built on the foundation of the truth of the unrenounceable principles of the Catholic faith, but it must also be sustained by understanding, goodwill, forgiveness and the dedication of all to the cause of spreading the kingdom of God."

Only by understanding and distinguishing the various levels of communications and the focus of the Holy Father's words can we grasp the spirit of his message and know how far we can go in interpreting it.
