

Consensus on "Reconciliation and Unity" in the Chinese Catholic Church Gradually Gaining Acceptance

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Introduction

I have always considered the Chinese Catholic Church, be it on the mainland, in Taiwan, Hong Kong, Macao, or found among the overseas Chinese diaspora, as one integral Chinese Catholic Church. In addition I do not divide it into Chinese and foreign, or "above ground" and "underground". We Chinese all share the same cultural heritage, and no matter where we find ourselves, we are all children of the Yellow Emperor. Moreover, I view the Catholic Patriotic Association on the mainland as nothing more than a political organization which is supposed to "completely cut political and economic relations" with the Vatican. This organization, however, also allows people to "obey the Pope in regard to doctrines to be believed and disciplines to be observed."¹ Churches on the mainland may seem outdated since many are still using the pre-Vatican II Tridentine Latin liturgy, but this is the result of having been isolated from the rest of the world by the Bamboo Curtain. Now, however, the churches are preparing to implement the decrees of Vatican II, and several places already celebrate Mass and administer the sacraments in the vernacular. As far as the faith is concerned I feel there are no major differences between theirs and ours. They also have the same outlook regarding the Church's discipline of priestly celibacy.

When I reflect on the bitter experiences of the church in China during the past 40 years, I feel very sad, and I have nothing but the greatest admiration for the countless number of Catholics who have suffered for their faith. I consider them to be outstanding Christians. Certainly, their stories should be written down and a record of their deeds preserved for history to serve as an example for future generations. We must, however, not only gather materials about the past, but must also look ahead towards the future. Looking to the future is more helpful than merely focusing on the past. To dwell only on the past is of little avail. "He who puts his

hand to the plow and keeps looking back is not fit for the Kingdom of God" (Lk 9:62). The problem today confronting our Chinese church is two-fold: how to sink roots deep into our culture and how to expand outwards. This requires both a forward looking stance and a prophetic vision.

I wish, therefore, to re-emphasize the need for reconciliation and unity in the Chinese Catholic Church. To achieve reconciliation and unity each side must first seek to understand the other and both together must accept their principal responsibility: the life and development of the church. This also requires all parties to lay aside personal biases and vested interests. We must never forget that the Church's most important mission is the healing and salvation of souls.² To fulfill our mission we must join hands and work together.

Trends in the Chinese Church

According to news reports, most of the bishops present at a meeting of the Chinese Catholic Church held in Beijing on April 27, 1989, agreed "to support the primacy and authority of Pope John Paul II." Some saw this as "an important step in preserving doctrinal unity and unity with the universal church."³

On November 21, 1989, the clergy of the underground church held a meeting in Sanyuan County, Shaanxi Province.⁴ They wanted to establish a "Chinese Bishops Conference," that would put the underground above ground. They hoped that they might be able to open a dialogue with the above ground clergy of the government approved church and proceed in the direction of reconciliation and reunification of "one flock under one shepherd." The Pope never gave any sign that he agreed with their action.

One written report states that Shanghai's Bishop Jin Luxian, though not yet recognized by the Pope as bishop of Shanghai, has invited several "unofficial" clergy to teach in Sheshan seminary and accepted students sent there by the underground bishops. When these seminarians graduate, if they cannot find an underground bishop to ordain them, they will be ordained by an above ground bishop.

On my last trip to China I heard that in one Chinese diocese the underground bishop has become reconciled with the above ground bishop. They are now living together in the bishop's residence and working together to spread the Gospel. Both have the support of the underground priests in the diocese. In a few other dioceses, the underground and the official clergy, although perhaps not working in complete cooperation with each other, do at least live in peace and harmony.

The Holy See's Most Recent Instruction

This instruction on the church in China emphasizes that the Holy See does not require above ground bishops, who recognize papal primacy, to abandon the Patriotic Association publicly. The Holy See has issued the following instruction regarding the future selection and consecration of bishops by underground bishops.

1. If a diocese already has an underground bishop, regardless of whether he is in prison or under house arrest, it is not permitted to choose and consecrate another bishop in his place.

2. If a diocese already has an above ground bishop, before selecting and consecrating an underground bishop, communication must first take place with the above ground bishop. If he agrees to be reconciled with the Holy See, then an underground bishop should not be selected.

Since some underground Catholics are still not aware of this new instruction and continue to maintain an antagonistic attitude towards the clergy of the Patriotic Association, a representative of the Holy See in Hong Kong has asked clergy and Catholics visiting the mainland to transmit the contents of this instruction to the Chinese church. With this new instruction, the Holy See clearly shows its desire to avoid having two or more bishops in one diocese. It also encourages more communication between underground and official bishops in order to promote a spirit of reconciliation.

The Reaction of the Taiwan Church

Since the Taipei government has allowed its citizens to visit China, many of Taiwan's clergy and Catholics have journeyed to the mainland. Direct contact with their fellow Catholics in the Chinese church has brought about a change in the outlook among Taiwan Catholics. The old attitude of "making a clear distinction between us and the enemy" has given way to a new feeling of "blood is thicker than water." In its pamphlet, "A Guide for Catholics Visiting China," the secretariat of the Taiwan Bishops' Conference urges visiting Catholics "to display clearly a spirit of reconciliation."

Then, on April 19 of this year at a meeting of the Regional Bishops Conference of Taiwan, the Bishops openly "appealed to the Church on the mainland, whether above ground or underground, to put aside the past and sit down together calmly to dialogue. The Chinese church should be reconciled and unified in the one true faith to produce greater results so that the Chinese people may be converted to Christ,"⁵

The Outlook of the Church Abroad

For many years foreigners have been more open-minded towards the Chinese church. Because of this, they have received a lot of harsh criticism from self-styled "loyalists". These critics claim that such people actively support the Patriotic Association and unfairly attack the underground clergy and Catholics. Thankfully, the situation is now being cleared up. All parties to the problem, the Holy See, the underground and official clergy on the mainland, and the Taiwan Bishops' Conference are moving steadily towards a consensus; namely, the fundamental need for reconciliation and unity in the Chinese Catholic Church. All agree that disunity among its members only harms the church and is certainly not in accord with the Christian principles of love and forgiveness required of every Christian community.

In May of this year I returned to New York from a visit to Jakarta and Manila. Upon my return I met with many clergymen and lay Catholics. Some of them were more open-minded than others but in the course of our conversations we discovered that, although we had many points of difference, we all agreed that reconciliation and unity are the prerequisite conditions for resolving present problems in the Chinese Catholic Church.

As regards the clergy, whether above or underground, everyone was of the opinion that through dialogue and frequent exchanges, reconciliation and unity in the Chinese Catholic Church could be achieved without too much difficulty. The most difficult obstacle at the present time is how to placate the "die-hards"--those underground lay persons who seem to be intransigent. Their unyielding attitude seems, for the time being, to blind them to the present reality. Some feel that when reconciliation is achieved and unity restored, they will be the ones most likely to leave the church. It is important for us to help them come to a clearer understanding of the present situation and to a deeper realization of the gravity of the problems. We must convince them that all of us must choose the path to unity.

The need to work for reconciliation and unity in the Chinese Catholic Church is gradually becoming a general consensus among all Catholics. This is wonderful and exciting news. But in our enthusiasm, we must not ignore the needs of the "die-hards". We must reach out to them in fraternal concern for their healing and salvation.

Notes

1. *Decisions of the Chinese Catholic Representatives Meeting*, August 3, 1957.
2. Code of Canon Law, #1752.
3. *Tripod*, No. 56, p. 19.
4. The terms *underground* and *above ground* are used in this article only for convenience, and not as categories of division.
5. *Monthly Bulletin of the Chinese Bishops Conference*, No. 134, March-April 1990.



(Above) Parishioners and friends gather for blessing of new church in Nanhai, Guangdong Province. (Below) Entrance to new church, Our Lady of Lourdes Church, Nanhai.

