

Documentation

The Chinese Bishops Conference: A Proposal

*by the Unofficial Bishops' Conference
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"The rising wind forebodes a coming storm"

Rumor has it that the Vatican will establish diplomatic relations with the Chinese government. This news has been widely disseminated within Catholic Church circles in China, and Catholics, both clerical and lay, are having heated discussions on the matter. We bishops of the Catholic Church on the mainland are paying close attention to see how the situation develops, since it concerns the future and the fate of the Chinese Catholic Church. In view of this, we bishops of the Chinese Catholic Church have prepared this document for the Holy See containing the following points for its consideration.

1. We Chinese bishops clearly recall the lessons learned about church-state relations from the Napoleonic period in France: "Those who were in the right became wrong, while those who were in the wrong became right."

2. Many people could not imagine the sudden changes which took place in both state and Church in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe. "When an influential person falls from power, his hangers-on disperse." The Communist Party lost its political power, and so the Church which was dependent on that power also collapsed. But the situation in China is different. In reality it is not China that will establish diplomatic relations with the Vatican, but the Chinese Communist Party. The Chinese Communist Party is still in power, whereas the communist parties of Russia and Eastern Europe have fallen from power. "The victor is crowned king and the loser runs off like a thief." The communist parties of those countries no longer have any right to speak. However, the same cannot be said for China.

3. If the Chinese government and the Vatican establish diplomatic relations, both sides will have to make compromises. We do not know how far these compromises will go. But one should firmly bear in mind that the policies of the Chinese Communist Party are always changing. They are "as changeable as clouds and rain." There are too many instances when they have gone back on their word. Words have never counted for much with them, and so it is difficult to believe them. In short, the Party will never allow itself to be put at a disadvantage.

4. Church and State must be separate. The Communist Party must not be allowed to interfere in Church affairs, including the selection of bishops.

5. The Patriotic Association should be disbanded, as well as the Bishops' Conference supported by it. The Bishops' Conference of the loyal church must not be disbanded.

6. If any bishops belonging to the Patriotic Association wish to repent and to join the loyal Bishops' Conference, they should make a public profession of repentance, and acknowledge their errors. Then they should be divided into categories: those who have married, have positively promoted the "independence" of the Church or who want to play both sides should all be screened out.

7. Diocesan boundaries should be re-drawn, and loyal bishops should occupy the most important sees.

8. Younger candidates should be chosen as bishops, and when the statutory age is reached, older bishops must retire.

9. The government should immediately and unconditionally return church properties. There should be no further procrastination. The Communist Party has often issued documents about the return of church properties, but without much effect. The orders are not worth the paper they are written on. The higher authorities know that lower officials do not carry out their orders, but they do not do anything about it.

10. The Catholic Church should enjoy complete freedom of religious belief. This includes freedom to propagate the faith, to meet for prayer and Bible study, to educate clergy and catechists, to allow bishops to make *ad limina* visits to Rome and to maintain relations with the Church outside of China, to establish institutions for education, research, charity, medical care and the publication of materials.

11. The government should cease forcing Catholics to have abortions because murder is forbidden by the fifth commandment of God.

12. In the spirit of the compassion of Christ, we welcome the return of our brothers and sisters who have lost their way, and we shall cooperate with them in furthering Christ's mission on earth.

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