

## *Commentary: The Chinese Bishops' Conference: A Proposal*

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In the Fall of 1993 a paper entitled *A Proposal of the Chinese Bishops' Conference* surfaced in Taiwan where it received widespread coverage. Later, it was also widely publicized in the United States. The bishops' conference mentioned in the title was not the one that the official church established in Beijing in 1980 ; it was rather one set up by some members of the underground church in Shaanxi in 1989. The latter, unlike the former that has government approval, prides itself on its unbroken communion with Rome and unswerving loyalty to the Pope.



The original Chinese text, which appeared soon after was clearly dated July 30, 1993, but there were no signatures attached. The Union of Catholic Asian News (UCAN), quoting a reliable source who wished to remain anonymous, reported that the document came out after a secret meeting held in the Northwest on July 9 and 10 and reflected the sentiments of the 10 or more members in attendance. While the *Proposal* states rather inclusively that: "We, the entire body of the mainland Chinese Bishops' Conference, have prepared this document for submission to the Vatican for its consideration," the actual number of those present at the meeting, according to the same source, was only 3 bishops and 9 priests, and Catholics representing five provinces and one municipality. While the authenticity of the appeal leaves no room for doubt, whether or not it represents the view of all the underground bishops remains a moot point. However, given the present situation of the Church in China, *A Proposal* is certainly worth examining in some detail.

The document is divided into 12 parts. The main purpose

seems to be to state the concern felt by the authors to preserve the interests of the underground church in any future diplomatic negotiations between the Vatican and the Chinese government. This includes a demand to respect the work done by the underground bishops in the past and the mutual acceptance and recognition of the authenticity of the present underground bishops' conference.

In summary, the first three points of *A Proposal* are concerned with history; the fourth covers the principle of the separation of Church and State and why the government should not interfere in the internal affairs of the Church; items five through seven demand that the underground bishops' conference be firmly established as the only authentic bishops' conference for the Church in China; point eight suggests a lowering of the age limit for ordaining bishops; nine, demands the return of church property, a demand which differs little from like requests by the official church; point ten calls for religious freedom, including freedom to evangelize, assemble, conduct religious formation, manage and oversee the church's works of charity and institutions, and the freedom of bishops to go to Rome on *ad limina* visits. The tenth and final point reveals an unwillingness on the part of the bishops to follow blindly unreasonable government policies, e.g., they demand that Catholics not be coerced into having abortions. This step moves boldly in the direction of civil disobedience and the introduction of certain moral precepts of the Church into the law.

*A Proposal* reflects a concern on the part of the bishops, that their interests might be expendable in future diplomatic negotiations between the Holy See and China. They seem to feel that, in order to restore normal relations between the two powers, they might be offered up on the altar of compromise. The source of this anxiety seems to lie in the Vatican's attitude towards such countries as Czechoslovakia and the former Yugoslavia as well as in the ill treatment meted out to certain former underground church leaders following the upheaval in Eastern Europe.

Early in 1990 one of the leaders of the Chinese underground church, Bishop Fan Xueyan of Baoding, Hebei, was quoted as saying: "Today Eastern Europe, tomorrow China." But early in 1991 when problems related to authority and to canon law surfaced between former underground church people in Czecho-

slovakia and the Vatican, Chinese underground church members began to realize that the collapse of Communism would not necessarily signal a total victory for their side. In fact, they might be called upon to make more sacrifices to heal the rift. Of course, the two cases are different. The Chinese underground has been quite careful to keep traditional church discipline, e.g., they did not allow married men to be ordained priests, which was not the case in Eastern Europe. However, their anxiety increased and soon the plea went out from the Chinese underground bishops to foreign visitors that they hoped they would be treated better than their European cousins.

It is well known that a number of underground church members do not have full confidence in the Holy See to negotiate on their behalf and this attitude is also reflected in the paper. While the proposal acknowledges that Rome must take steps to be reconciled with the official church, it appeals repeatedly to the Holy See to denounce publicly the government sponsored Patriotic Association as well as the government approved Bishops' Conference. This is the reason the opening section of the document treats of historical precedents and discusses past agreements reached with Napoleonic France in the 19th century. The underground Chinese Church does not want to see decades of painful and often heroic resistance shunted aside and ignored as if it had no value.

The bishops also worry that the Holy See will concede too much in negotiations with the Chinese government. Over half the document points out the seemingly irreconcilable differences and contradictory interests that exist between Church and State. They make it perfectly clear that they have no confidence in the present communist government. (This may also be true of bishops in the official church, but they are not allowed to speak openly about it.) These same sentiments were also voiced by a number of underground church people in Hebei at about the same time as this conference.

*Human Rights and Religious Freedom*, a paper written by dissident Catholics and addressed to international groups and foreign communities opposed to government persecution, called for international intervention on behalf of the persecuted. The tone of the paper indicated that they expect no short term change in their situation.

The anxieties, feelings and fears expressed are not ground-

less nor are they surprising, but the document does not necessarily represent the whole picture. After all, very few were involved in the meeting: only three out of an estimated 50 to 60 underground bishops. With only nine dioceses represented, the most we can say of this document is that it represents a partial view.

We must keep other facts in mind in our attempt to put things in proper perspective. It has been reported that a number of China appointed bishops have had their status with Rome normalized in recent years.

We must also remember that there is some acceptance of official church bishops even among bishops of the underground church. In November of 1993, several underground bishops, while meeting with foreign visitors in Central China, expressed the view that the Pope could recognize some government appointed bishops, but not all. They cited some as lacking in integrity; others being outspoken opponents of the universal church; still others as being married and having children. On the other hand, there was no demand that official bishops do public penance as part of the reconciliation. Left unspoken was the silent acceptance of some of them being allowed to continue in their present office to serve the needs of the Church and the people.

One point is definite: when the time for negotiations with the Chinese government comes, the Holy See will not disregard the valid interests and concerns of either side. Neither the official nor the underground church will be treated with wanton disregard by Rome. I believe the contents of *A Proposal* deserve and will receive serious consideration at the highest levels of the Church. I also believe that, because of their large number and the courageous stance taken by many in the face of overwhelming adversity, the members of the underground church will capture the greater amount of sympathy throughout the Catholic world. It will, however, be up to the Holy See to act with the interests of the whole church in mind. According to Church law, neither of China's bishops' conferences can be accepted by the Pope as having any legal ecclesiastical status. Thus, while sympathy may prefer one side over the other, it is up to the Holy See to help establish unity and strike the delicate balance that will assure the future of the Church in China.

Finally, when it comes to measuring the degree of suffering,

psychological harm and spiritual deprivation three decades of persecution have caused the Church in China, neither side can claim to have an edge. All have suffered and none should judge. It is entirely unrealistic and also unchristian for one side to deny the right of existence to the other. Only wholehearted mutual acceptance can restore the harmony necessary to heal all wounds. Discrimination and suppression will benefit neither camp. May the underground bishops, who justly pride themselves on their loyalty to Rome, continue to seek to understand every aspect of this complex and many-layered problem now facing the Holy See. Then, let them give their wholehearted support to the Holy See as it continues to ponder ways to resolve its relations with China for the benefit of the entire Church and of all the Chinese people.

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