

Can Mainland China's 'Official' Church Still Be Called 'Catholic'?

Some theological reflections about the structural-institutional aspect of the 'official' Catholic Church in Mainland China

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Preliminary Remarks

These preliminary remarks about the ecclesiological and theological context of the present article intend to avoid possible misunderstandings about it and to clarify its precise focus.

(1) Negatively expressed, the reflections of the article contain in no way any judgment about the subjective religious-Catholic attitude of the members of the 'official' Church of Mainland China. Neither do they deal with most central reality of the Church, being a community of faith, hope and love, gathered by the Triune God. And finally, they are not offered from the angle of a dogmatically fixed and rigidly uniform ecclesiology.



(2) Positively said, these reflections move on the level of objective discourse, *sine ira et studio*, facing an objective theological issue. Further, they deal with the structural and institutional aspect of the Catholic Church, which is an integral factor of a truly and genuinely Catholic ecclesial life. And finally these reflections are offered from the angle of a searching and open minded ecclesiology, which - since some years - is setting out in the direction of a socially and culturally polycentric, yet structurally united, Church united in the one Triune God, in the one and same faith, guided by the one successor of Peter, the Pope in Rome. It seems as if the "official" Church in China would need a challenge from within, in order to come out from its present structural impasse. The challenge from within could be formulated as follows: The structural and institutional situation, as is the case with the 'official' Church of Mainland China

should not go on forever--in spite of the massive pressure of the political establishment. Otherwise, there is the danger, that the present 'special' situation will become a normal and permanent one.

(3) Needless to say, the author of this article is very much aware of the complexity and variety of ecclesial life in the Catholic Church of Mainland China. What is valid in one place, does not necessarily hold for another place. Whereas in some places ecclesial life seems to be more or less the ordinary Catholic one, in other places, there exists a serious confrontation between the 'official' and the 'non-official' church. The reader of the following theological reflections is asked to keep in mind, that the problem dealt with here belongs strictly to the structural-institutional level of universal ecclesial life; it does apply to concrete particular situations. Since concrete particular situations do belong to a different level, they would be the subject of another discourse.

It might be said, that some 'official' bishops have reconciled themselves with the Pope in Rome and are therefore ordinary Catholic bishops. Yes, but the structural-institutional problem of the 'official' Church as such remains unresolved. Further, it is said again and again that many members of the 'official' Church recognize the Pope as the 'spiritual leader' of the whole Catholic Church. Yes, but the structural-institutional dilemma on the level of the universal Church is not removed by these assertions. And finally, somebody could say: In the convention of the Chinese Catholic Representatives Congress in September 1992, the Commission for Religious Affairs--formerly above the Bishops Conference of the Catholic Church in China--has been placed under the authority of this said Bishops' Conference. This marks a considerable progress on the level of the ordinary structural-institutional Catholic ecclesial life. Yes, this is a genuine sign of improvement; we can only hope that similar steps will follow soon.

(4) These reflections were stimulated among others by the following articles: Robert J. Schreiter, C.P.P.S., "Ecclesiological Challenges for the Sake of Service," *Tripod*, vol. 13, no. 75 (May-June 1993):31-45, Joseph Zen, S.D.B., "Ecclesiological Challenges: Response to Robert Schreiter," *Ibid.*:46-53. Aloysius B. Chang, S.J., "More on the Fundamental Attitude of the Bridge Church: A Commentary on the Essays of Fathers Robert

Schreiter and Joseph Zen,; *Tripod*, Vol. 13, No. 77 (September-October 1993), 42-46. And finally the very helpful article by Geoffrey King, S.J. "Regulations of the Chinese Catholic Bishops' Conference Regarding the Election and Consecration of Bishops: Some Canonical Comments," (*ibid.*, 55-59).

(5) The urgency of these reflections stems from the following documents of the 'official' Church: "Constitution of the Chinese Catholic Bishops' Conference," (*Tripod*, May-June 1993, 62-64), "Constitution of the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association" (*Tripod* May-June 1993, 62-64), "Regulations of the Chinese Bishops Conference Regarding the Election and Consecration of Bishops," (*Tripod*, September-October, 1993, 52-54).

Theological reflections in five steps

I. The level of the universal Church:

1. The ordinary Catholic teaching:

There is no need to repeat that the Church is one, holy, Catholic and apostolic. 'Catholic' means 'universal', in the sense of 'according to the totality' or in 'keeping with the whole' (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Dublin: Veritas, 1994, nr. 830). "The Church is Catholic in a double sense: First, the Church is Catholic because Christ is present in her. Secondly, because she has been sent out by Christ on a mission to the whole of the human race."

Fully incorporated into the society of the Church are those who, possessing the Spirit of Christ, accept all the means of salvation given to the Church together with her entire organization, and who - by bonds constituted by the profession of faith, the sacraments, ecclesiastical government, and communion - are joined in the visible structure of the Church of Christ, who rules her through the Supreme Pontiff and the bishops. (LG, 14).

The Pope, Bishop of Rome and Peter's successor, "is the perpetual and visible source and foundation of the unity both of the bishops and of the whole company of the faithful." (LG, 23). "The college or body of bishops has no authority unless

united with the Roman Pontiff, Peter's successor, as its head." As such, this college has "supreme and full authority over the universal Church, but this power cannot be exercised without the agreement of the Roman Pontiff" (LG, 22; CIC, can. 336).

2. Contrasting statements in the 'official' documents, mentioned in the preliminary remarks (4):

The highest authoritative body is the 'Chinese Catholic Representatives' Congress' (CCRC). "The Congress is convened once every five years. The convening of the CCRC, the quota of and manner of naming delegates are matters decided jointly by the standing committees of the Bishops' Conference and the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association" (CCPA). It is good to remember, that the CCPA is "a mass organization made up of Chinese Catholic clergy and laity of the Catholic Church in China who love the country and religion. Its purpose, under the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party and the People's government, is to: ...assist the Church in implementing the principles of independence, self-government and self-management."

The Bishops Conference of the Catholic Church in China (BCCCC) "is accountable to the CCRC. The termination of the BCCCC, if deemed necessary, must be discussed and decided upon by the CCRC."

3. Questions for theological reflection:

--To whom is the CCRC accountable? Is it, as the 'official' documents say, the highest ecclesiastical authority of the 'official' Catholic Church in China? If this is the case, can it rightly still call itself 'Catholic' in the ordinary sense, as it has been summarized in the first part of this first step? It is difficult to see in the arrangement of the CCRC the ordinary 'Catholicity' on the structural-institutional level.

--If the CCRC has, among others, the function and power to 'elect the president, vice-presidents, secretary-general and standing committee members of the Bishops' Conference,' is any relationship to the successor of Peter, effective symbol of the Catholic unity of the universal Church, preserved? Does a 'spiritual' relationship, as it is affirmed 'officially' by the leadership

of the CCRC suffice in the long run and for the ordinary life of the Church? It seems that the structural-institutional level demands visible expressions and legal means of its own kind, which cannot be fully and adequately substituted by attitudes and statements belonging to another dimension of the Church, e.g. the spiritual and liturgical dimensions.

II. The level of Catholic communion among particular Churches:

1. The ordinary Catholic teaching:

The college or body of bishops, "in so far as it is composed of many members, is the expression of the variety and universality of the People of God; and of the unity of the flock of Christ insofar as it is assembled under one head." (LG, 22).

The character of universality which adorns the People of God is a gift from the Lord himself whereby the Catholic Church ceaselessly and efficaciously seeks for the return of all humanity and all its goods, under Christ the Head in the unity of the Spirit. (LG, 13, #1-2).

Particular Churches are fully Catholic through their communion with one of them, the Church of Rome 'which presides in charity' (LG, 13). For with this Church, by reason of its pre-eminence, the whole Church, that is the faithful everywhere, must necessarily be in accord. (Vatican I, DS, 3057)

2. Contrasting statements in the documents of the 'official' Church of Mainland China:

The BCCCC

is the leading national structure for church affairs of the Chinese Catholic Church. In accordance with the Bible and based on the traditional spirit of the one, holy, Catholic and apostolic Church, its purpose is to ... implement the principles, of independence, self government and self administration which is in accordance with the situation in China.

It might be helpful to take notice too of article 2 of the Constitution of the CCPA:

This association...has as its purpose...to unite the clergy and Catholics of the whole country to manifest a patriotic spirit, to support the Socialist system, to observe China's Constitution, laws, regulations and policies...to assist the Church in implementing the principles of independence, self government and self management."

3. Questions for theological reflection:

--It is understood that we are aware of the 'special situation' on Mainland China. Nevertheless, the question is again raised: Do the 'official' statements, mentioned above, contain genuine elements of Catholic communion among particular Churches on the objective structural-institutional level? If so, where are those elements of Catholic communion among particular Churches?

-- It might be said, that there is a 'spiritual' and 'liturgical' communion in the sense of a communion of prayers and liturgical celebrations. We praise God for this kind of spiritual and liturgical communion, vividly affirmed by various members of the 'official' Church. And yet, the theological question returns: Do the statements of the 'official' Church of Mainland China and the affirmation of a spiritual and liturgical communion do justice to the theological fact that the living Church of Christ, universal and at the same time particular, is a Catholic communion in the same shared life of the Triune God and a profound communion in the same vocation and mission? Is the universal dimension expressed with adequate clarity? Or is there not a tendency to "conceive the universal Church as the simple sum, or ...the more or less anomalous federation of essentially different particular Churches?" (Paul VI, EN, 62). The 'official' Church of Mainland China would then consider itself as one such essentially different particular Church.

--We should sincerely ask ourselves whether the actual structural-institutional way of proceeding in the 'official' Church of Mainland China does correspond to the vision of unity in variety or plurality in communion, outlined by Paul VI and Vatican II in the following words:

In the mind of the Lord the church is universal by vocation and mission, but when she puts down her roots in a variety of cultural, social and human terrains, she takes on different external expressions and appearances in each part of the world (Paul

VI, EN, 62).

The rich variety of ecclesiastical disciplines, liturgical rites, and theological and spiritual heritages proper to the local Churches unified in a common effort, shows all the more resplendently the catholicity of the undivided Church." (LG, 23).

III. The level of the Particular Church:

1. The ordinary teaching of the Catholic Church:

"The phrase 'particular Church', which is the diocese (or eparchy), refers to a community of the Christian faithful in communion of faith and sacraments with their bishop ordained in apostolic succession. (Vatican II, CD, 11; CIC, cann. 368-369). These 'particular Churches' are constituted after the model of the universal Church; it is in these and formed out of them that the one and unique Catholic Church exists." (LG,23).

Bishops govern the particular Churches entrusted to them as the vicars and ambassadors of Christ. This they do...by their authority and sacred power...This power, which they personally exercise in Christ's name, is proper, ordinary, and immediate, although its exercise is ultimately regulated by the supreme authority of the Church, and can be circumscribed by certain limits, for the advantage of the Church or of the faithful...They should not be regarded as vicars of the Roman Pontiff, for they exercise an authority which is proper to them...This power, therefore, is not destroyed by the supreme and universal power. On the contrary it is affirmed, strengthened, and vindicated thereby, since the Holy Spirit unfailingly preserves the form of government established by Christ the Lord in his Church (LG, 27).

Sharing in solicitude for all the Churches, bishops exercise this episcopal office of theirs, received through episcopal consecration, in communion with and under the authority of the Supreme Pontiff. All are united in a college or body with respect to teaching the universal Church of God governing her as shepherds. They exercise this office individually over the portion of the Lord's flock assigned to them, each one taking care of the particular Church committed to him. On occasion some of them jointly provide for certain common needs of their various dioceses (CD, 3; cf. also 4-16; CIC 375).

Episcopal conferences, already established in many nations, have furnished outstanding proofs of a more fruitful apostolate...An episcopal conference is a kind of council in

which the bishops of a given nation or territory jointly exercise their pastoral office by way of promoting that greater good which the Church offers mankind, especially through forms and programs of the apostolate which are fittingly adapted to the circumstances of the age (CD, 37-38; CIC, cann. 447-459).

In conclusion: The ordinary Catholic teaching holds the following sequence of priority in the elements of ecclesiastical leadership:

On the highest level: The Pope in unity with the universal college of bishops.

On the second level: The individual bishops of particular Churches.

On the third level: The conference of bishops.

The first two levels are of divine law (*de iure divino*), whereas the third level of ecclesiastical law (*de iure ecclesiastico*).

2. Contrasting statements of the 'official' Church of Mainland China:

The conference of bishops (BCCCC) is the leading national structure for church affairs of the Chinese Catholic Church. Its purpose is...to examine and approve the election and ordination of diocesan bishops.

The conference is accountable to the CCRC.

The constitution (of the conference of bishops) has been approved by the CCRC and hereby takes effect.

In conclusion: The 'official' Church of Mainland China holds the following sequence of priority in the elements of ecclesiastical leadership:

On the highest level: The Chinese Catholic Representatives Congress (including clergy, religious and lay persons).

On the second level: The Chinese Catholic Bishops' Conference.

On the third level: The individual diocesan bishop of a particular Church.

The first two levels are of ecclesiastical law, established in the 'official' Church in China, whereas the third level is of divine law (*de iure divino*).

This is an obvious inversion of the traditional Catholic

teaching.

3. Questions for theological reflection:

--Is it possible to reconcile these two structural-institutional systems?

--If so, which steps should be taken now (!) in order to arrive at an authentic reconciliation?

--Two theological suggestions may be permitted:

First, on the side of the universal Church it seems that the role and importance of the conference of bishops need further evaluation in an open theological discourse. There is no need to repeat, that conferences of bishops are of ecclesiastical law; they should in no way diminish the two elements of divine law, namely the importance of the individual bishop in his particular Church (diocese), as well as the communion of the individual bishop with the successor of Peter, the Pope, head of the universal college of bishops. With these two elements of divine law in mind, it seems, that the potentiality of the conference of bishops, in limited territorial analogy to the universal college of bishops, could be brought to its proper value in the life of the Church in a given territory or national boundary, by listening to the signs of the times and the needs of the ecclesial communities. In theological perspective--looking towards the future--it appears as a possible way of ecclesial development, that the strengthened role of the conference of bishops could increase the quality of the exercise of leadership in the universal Church, by delegating more decision making power to regional groups of bishops, united firmly to the successor of Peter. This theological idea is based, first, on the theological fact that the one, holy, Catholic and apostolic Church actually and existentially lives its ecclesial life in the framework of a plurality of regions. The plurality of regions is suggested to the universal Church by humanity itself, which lives actually in the framework of a plurality of socio-cultural regions. This theological idea is based, secondly, on the mounting complexity and speed of modern life, which presents the Church with so many issues, questions and problems on the regional and local scale, that the proper and timely response to them cannot be given only --due to physical limitations of human beings and structures-- by the central administration of the universal Catholic Church.

Secondly, on the side of the 'official' Church of Mainland

China, it seems very important to strengthen that already existing movement to upgrade the importance and role of the individual bishop of a particular Church (i.e. diocese), so that again the elements of divine law come before the elements of ecclesiastical disposition.

IV. The question of the appointment of bishops:

1. The ordinary teaching of the Catholic Church:

The Supreme Pontiff freely appoints bishops or confirms those lawfully elected (CIC, can.377 #1).

Unless it has been lawfully prescribed otherwise, for the appointment of a diocesan bishop or a coadjutor bishop, a terna, as it is called, is to be proposed to the Apostolic See. In preparation of this list, it is the responsibility of the papal Legate to seek individually the suggestions of the Metropolitan and of the Suffragans of the province to which the diocese in question belongs or with which it is joined in some grouping, as well as the suggestions of the president of the episcopal conference. The papal Legate is, moreover, to hear the views of some members of the college of consultors and of the cathedral chapter. If he judges it expedient, he is also to seek individually, and in secret, the opinion of other clerics, both secular and religious, and of lay persons of outstanding wisdom. He is then to send these suggestions, together with his own opinion, to the Apostolic See (CIC, can 377, #3).

The definitive judgment on the suitability of the person to be promoted rests with the Apostolic See (CIC, can 378, #2).

For the future, no rights or privileges of election, appointment, presentation or designation of bishops are conceded to civil authorities (CIC, can 377, #5).

2. Contrasting regulations of the 'official' Church of Mainland China:

On May 17, 1993, the Standing Committee of the Chinese Catholic Bishops' Conference held its second meeting in Jinan, Shandong Province. It drafted the "Regulations of the Chinese Catholic Bishops' Conference Regarding the Election and Consecration of Bishops" (cf. *Tripod*, vol. 13, no. 77, September-October 1993, 52-54).

Here a short summary of the six points of the Regulations:

(1) When a see is vacant,...the diocese must first apply for permission from the provincial (municipal, autonomous region) church administrative committee, and obtain the agreement of the local government.

(2) The required qualities in the candidate: ...strong faith,...supportive of the principle of the independent administration of the Church...being at least 35 years of age and a priest for over 5 years, of dignified bearing and in good health.

(3) After fervent prayers...all the clergy, seminarians, Sisters and representatives of the Catholics are to nominate one or two candidates and then carry out a secret ballot.

(4) For the episcopal election it is necessary that the bishops responsible for the Church administrative committee on the provincial (municipal, autonomous region) level...supervise the election. Things should be kept on record properly.

(5) After the election (by over half of the votes), the Church administrative committee has to be informed. This committee examines the results and presents the name to the Chinese Catholic Bishops' Conference for approval. The result is reported to the respective bureaus of the local government.

(6) Before the new bishop assumes office, he should take an oath of faithfulness both to his own Christian faith, as well as loyalty to the motherland and observance of the Constitution.

3. Questions for theological reflection:

-- How can the two forms of procedures for electing a bishop presented above, be reconciled with one another? The Catholic Church has always held that the successor of Peter has something important to say, when it comes to the appointment of a new bishop for a particular Church. This is so, because the episcopacy is a divinely instituted element of ecclesiastical leadership (cf. CIC, can 375 #1), and it is therefore an essential element of Church life.

--Is it possible to reduce (to say the least!) the influence of the 'public hand' (i.e.. the interference of civil, public authorities) in the process of episcopal election? This could be an interesting challenge to the alertness and tactical prudence of Church members, following the advice of Jesus, who admonishes us "to be cunning as serpents and yet as harmless as doves" (Mt 10:16).

V. The question of the consecration of bishops:

We do not deal here with the liturgical regulations of the universal Church regarding the consecration of a new bishop, nor with the theological problem regarding the validity of episcopal consecration in the 'official' Church of Mainland China. It is generally - with solid reasons - accepted as a fact, i.e. we are convinced that the bishops of the 'official' Church of Mainland China are validly consecrated bishops. We are rather concerned about the structural-institutional aspect of the consecration of 'official' bishops.

1. The ordinary procedures of the universal Church are as follows:

Unless prevented by a lawful reason, one who is promoted to the episcopate must receive episcopal consecration within three months of receiving the apostolic letters, and in fact before he takes possession of his office (CIC, can 379).

Before taking canonical possession of his office, he who has been promoted (to the episcopacy) is to make the profession of faith and take the oath of fidelity to the Apostolic See, in accordance with the formula approved by the same Apostolic See (CIC, can. 380).

It is strongly recommended that the taking of canonical possession be performed with a liturgical act in the cathedral church, in the presence of the clergy and the people (CIC, can 382, #4).

2. Contrasting regulations of the 'official' Church of Mainland China:

After receiving the approval of the Bishops' Conference, the consecration of the new bishop should take place within three months.

Before the new bishop assumes office, he should swear to uphold the deposit of faith preached by Christ, to be faithful to the one, holy, Catholic and apostolic Church, to be loyal to the motherland, to observe the Constitution and to serve the people.

3. Questions for theological reflection:

--It is obvious that the present 'official' regulations of the

Church of Mainland China do not match with the ordinary procedures applied to the universal Catholic Church; of course, the fact that the communion with the Roman Pontiff is not mentioned explicitly, as the Pontificale Romanum has it, it is not *eo ipso* identical with a direct and intentional rejection of that communion with the successor of Peter in Rome.

--In the Rituale of the ordination of Bishops, as used now in the official Church of China, the name of the Holy Father is replaced by the "Bishops' Conference" or simply omitted. Here the questions arise: Have some Bishops the power to change the Rituale used in the whole Catholic Church? What is the meaning of these important changes?

--Will the 'official' Church of Mainland China become more aware of the real danger, that the questionable procedures, promulgated on May 17, 1993, will become the unquestioned and ordinary way of proceeding in the 'official' Church? Would such continued proceedings not logically lead into further separation from the structural-institutional communion and unity with the universal Church, symbolized in its unity by the Successor of Peter?

No doubt, further efforts of working towards mutual understanding are needed and the courage to try the nearly impossible. This article wants to be a challenge in that direction.

