

Documentation

One Point of Clarification: Papal Primacy and the C.C.P. A. in 1957

by an old pastor

Esteemed Editor:

What I want to discuss in this essay is definitely not one of life's trivial issues. It is something which can provide a better understanding of the actual situation of the church on the Mainland, and in understanding the complexity of the situation of the Mainland church, help both that church and the church outside move towards mutual understanding. First of all, I wish to clarify something regarding the establishment of the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association (CCPA) in 1957. To this day there are a number of biased opinions and reports on that event. These criticisms and reports are misleading those unaware of the actual situation and filling them with groundless misgivings and misunderstandings about the church in China. This is very worrisome to Mainland Catholics. With an attitude of seeking the truth from facts, I have already written an account about this matter to the Congregation for the Doctrine and the Faith, but I do not know if they received it.

Since this is a weighty matter, I hope to clarify it through your magazine, in order to prevent any further distorted misunderstanding of historical events which continue to disturb people's hearts. I write as an old man about to die, unable to shirk the responsibility to state publicly my grasp of this historical truth. I cannot allow the facts of history to be submerged forever, nor those people who are entrusted with the life and survival of the church to be forever misinformed.

The situation about which I write comes as the result of the underground church's circulating a paper in recent years, which

reportedly was a secret document from the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples. The opening lines make clear the main theme of the document: Reports are circulating that when the C.C.P.A. was founded in 1957 it announced that it was breaking all fundamental ties with the Roman curia. According to the report, the Holy Office decided to take a number of steps to guard against this seemingly unorthodox move. Of course this report led to divisions within the Mainland church. No more need be said of its influence; the results are proof enough.

This phrase “to break all fundamental ties” does not accord with the actual situation. The phrase has affected people deeply and filled them with feelings of guilt. I was an onlooker at that meeting and paid close attention to the proceedings. I have put my whole mind and heart into researching the matter and feel that I can speak clearly about it and hopefully, eliminate the misunderstandings that have been handed down, serious misunderstandings of the truth of the actual event. I bear this heavy responsibility with a clear conscience. The crux of the matter is that the conference passed a final resolution which received support from the entire assembly and from all the delegates. The bottom line of that resolution was “*to cut all political and economic ties with the Vatican, while maintaining links on the purely spiritual level*”. Now I will objectively describe the course of that assembly.

During April and May of that year, all dioceses were notified to select a pre-determined number of delegates who were to assemble in Beijing at the beginning of June. Of course this selection process was closely monitored. Notification of this meeting immediately heightened tension among the clergy and laity throughout the nation. Their hearts were already heavy with the prospect of future misfortune and perhaps only a few lucky breaks.

In early May, I was sent to Shanghai to handle the paperwork for the rental of church property to the government. I returned to Beijing in early June just as delegates from all over were arriving. From my contacts with them, I surmised that the atmosphere was extremely tense, almost as though some powerful adversary were approaching. Everyone had a premonition that there would be an unavoidable and profound ideological confrontation over the doctrine of papal primacy. Yet everyone was firmly resolved to defend the

faith. The delegates present at the conference represented the heroic spirit of the church of that era; they were not older workers just waiting to retire.

At that time, the section chief responsible for bringing the delegates from my province to the meeting, a cadre named Cui, wanted me, and another priest who had gone with me to Shanghai, to remain in Beijing and attend the conference. Because we foresaw the upcoming bitter challenge, a dismal ideological struggle, we politely declined.

It had been decided originally that the conference would not last even two weeks. But because everyone firmly upheld this crucial basic principle of papal primacy, the time had to be extended repeatedly. Finally, the authorities had to change their original plan. All agreed to drop "*economic and political ties*" but to retain "*spiritual ties*". This was clearly stated in the principal report given by Xi Zhongxun, the chief secretary of the State Council. Since what I have related above is what actually occurred at the meeting, the result was not the breaking of all fundamental ties. The passage of the final resolution brought peace to the uneasy and anxious hearts of all the delegates and finally restored tranquillity. They saw this as sacrificing a rook to save the king in a game of chess.

The documents were then collected and sent everywhere throughout the country for serious discussion. The conclusion was that although this principle was not everything that people would have wanted, yet it was acceptable. After dispelling unfounded rumors and fears, the Catholics calmed down.

Two years ago when I was in a parish in my diocese, I chanced upon a bookcase containing a compilation of the minutes of the 1957 meeting. I felt as if I had found a treasure. I read the record of what everyone had said, whether speaking as an individual or on behalf of a group. Without exception, every word that was spoken accurately expressed a firm defense and protection of papal primacy. Of course I paid special attention to what several leading figures said as representatives of the church, e.g., Bps. Zhang Jiashu of Shanghai, Pi Shushi of Shenyang, and Zhao Zhensheng of Xianxian. I took special note of what the newly appointed secretary, my classmate Fr. Pang Shihong, said. With one voice these leading figures all stressed the fundamental nature of the doctrine of papal primacy, something

they could not risk violating. The delegates went one step further in verifying this. The final article of the collection states this principle: "*We may preserve ties on issues which are purely matters of faith.*" This is solidly grounded. At the same time there is evident proof that what the document from the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples says: "*sever all fundamental ties,*" is a misunderstanding, a false report without any basis in fact. The ensuing outcome is highly regrettable.

The so-called underground church keeps reiterating their version at length in a way that seems credible, "The government approved church is schismatic. It has been rejected by the Pope. The sacraments of the government approved church are null and void. You cannot save your soul by following the government approved church. It is a mortal sin to enter a government approved church,..." All kinds of strange and odd articles are widely circulated, and some weird phenomena have emerged. This, without doubt, has something to do with the essay reportedly from Evangelization of Peoples.

Secondly, are the open churches free of problems? Their problems are quite serious. Truly the greatest crisis appeared in the early 1980's, during the first period after the government renewed its policy of openness and freedom of religious belief. A re-established C.C.P.A. resumed its activity. Unfortunately, real power was usurped and monopolized by several married bishops and priests. These opportunists acted individually. They not only talked but also printed pamphlets directed against papal primacy, even to inking out or papering over all references to the Pope in the big Roman Missal. Especially serious was deleting all the numerous references to the primacy of Peter from the Mass of June 29. Good people could only pray for the pope as head of the church in their hearts. This altering of the spoken prayers was unreasonable. Some of those in authority clearly saw the blunder on the part of the married bishops and priests but kept silent. We cannot deny that they were guilty of turning a blind eye to a bad situation. At that time, yes it was at that time, that the church in the Mainland was really in a critical situation.

But the deplorable conduct of a few individuals could not touch the human heart of the Catholics nationwide. Such revolting behavior could only be planned in secret and basically could not withstand the light of day. The true church is not restricted to a small

circle of individuals, but rather exists among *sensus fidelium* nationwide who are loyal to the holy doctrines of the church. A cry of opposition came from Beijing and from every part of the country, gradually silencing these married bishops and priests who then laid low.

Thirdly we have the emergence of underground church activities. As the struggle among extreme individualists (probably among those who had already married) at 14 Liuyin Street in Beijing [the former address of the C.C.P.A. and National Seminary] intensified and was disclosed, opposition from the whole nation grew stronger and stronger. At the same time a small handful of people in the C.C.P.A. stirred up a movement to divide the church. The Diocese of Baoding, headed by beloved Bp. Fan Xueyan, took defensive measures to counter this split. Loyal Catholics should have welcomed what Bishop Fan was doing. Yet as we can see Bishop Fan in his final words retracted what he had said earlier. Several underground activists left the path which the old Bishop had originally intended for them to follow. Other people in the underground, using Bp. Fan's name, took what he had originally emphasized and inserted statements which were contrary to church doctrine. Three different versions of Bp. Fan's Thirteen Points were printed. In his last writings and final words, Bp Fan clearly declared that any version of his Thirteen Points which defied church doctrine was null and void. But the underground extremists took versions of the Thirteen Points, which obviously did not accord with church doctrine, and accepted them as infallible pronouncements. In his final words, Bp. Fan wanted to get in touch with the government and evangelize within the open church. Yet the underground extremists wanted to stir up opposition to the government and carry on clandestine activities. For them the open church is their opponent and main target of attack, and their goal is to eliminate it.

Esteemed. Editor, you may regard this letter as a continuation of my earlier letter, written to clarify the truth or falsity of a few things. I do not ordinarily discuss whether people are right or wrong. A better way to say it is that I do not have such frivolous moods. Since the areas which I have touched upon involve serious questions of right and wrong, I cannot continue to remain silent (that would be unprincipled of me), or stand on the sideline. My only purpose in

writing is to help restore the truth about historical events, through historical research, and to diminish the inexactness that comes from relying on hearsay rather than on eyewitnesses. I write this for the sake of reconciliation and bridge building in the Mainland Church, to make a distinctive contribution, to clear away misunderstandings, and finally to achieve what Jesus prayee for: “Father, may they all be one, as you and I are one.” [Jn. 17:21]

