

Documentation**Pastoral Letter of some Members of the China Mainland Catholic Bishops Conference in Commemoration of the 70th Anniversary of the Consecration of the First Local Chinese Bishops, and the 50th Anniversary of the Establishment of the Chinese Hierarchy**

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Dear Fathers, Brothers, Sisters and Catholics,

May the love of God, the grace of Christ and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all.

Seventy years ago today Pope Pius XI consecrated the first six local Chinese bishops, and fifty years ago Pope Pius XII appointed Tian Gengxin to be a cardinal and established the Chinese hierarchy. They were occasions for great rejoicing in the Chinese Church at that time. As we celebrate today these two great events of historical significance, let us cite excerpts from the sermon given by Pope Pius XI on that occasion as reported by the Holy See. We can share the joy of the Holy Father as he made the announcement to the whole church.

We cannot suppress the joy which wells up in our heart. My heart is full of joy because today for the first time the Holy Father consecrates Chinese priests, who are prefects apostolic, as local bishops. They will spread among their fellow citizens the kingdom of Christ and they will preach the church's universal message of love. We decided to invite you to the Holy City which is the centre of the church, and to consecrate you in the most august and holiest church in Christendom, the basilica of St. Peter's. When you put on the apparel of bishops, you will become fresh flowers and new seeds of the Chinese Church as Chinese bishops. You have come to the source of apostolic work to pay

your respects to 'Peter,' and to receive from his hand the staff for carrying out pastoral work. (*Acta Apostolicae Sedis*, 1926, p. 432)

The passage cited above was part of the sermon delivered by His Holiness Pope Pius XI on October 28, 1926 in St. Peter's Basilica during the Mass at which the first six Chinese bishops were consecrated. In his sermon the Holy Father pointed out that he chose October 28 as the consecration day because that year it was the feast of Christ the King, and it was also the 7th anniversary of the Pope's own consecration as a bishop. This made the consecration ceremony even more joyful and meaningful.

This year as we commemorate the 70th anniversary of the consecration of the first six Chinese bishops by the Pope himself and the 50th anniversary of the establishment of the Chinese hierarchy, is just a time when the Catholic Church on the mainland is experiencing many difficulties. As we commemorate these great historical events, we feel even more the deep significance of them. Since John of Montecorvino began to preach the Gospel in China over 700 years ago, many Chinese and foreign missionaries have worked together for the glory of the church. In the past the Popes have chosen many illustrious foreign missionaries to be bishops. But the Popes were concerned that local clergy be nurtured as bishops too. At the end of the Ming and beginning of the Qing dynasties, the Holy Father named Luo Wenzao as the first Chinese bishop when he appointed him as bishop of Nanjing. Bishop Luo Wenzao exhibited a catholic spirit when he chose a foreign priest to be his successor. Pope Pius XI opened a new chapter in the history of the Chinese Catholic Church when he consecrated the six Chinese bishops in 1926. The local clergy were now responsible for governing the church. The vine and branches of Christ were becoming verdant and stretching to the heavens.

Twenty years later, on April 11, 1946 Pope Pius XII issued a constitution establishing the Chinese hierarchy. This did away with the abnormal situation of missionary apostolic prefectures. Following the normal order of events in the Catholic Church, native Chinese clergy were now in charge of local church communities.

When Pope Pius XII established the Chinese hierarchy, he said:

Fulfilling the hopes of missionary development, following the opinion of the Cardinals of Propaganda, and accepting with pleasure the request of Cardinal Tian Gengxin, we have determined that the time is ripe to formalize and systematize the missionary work in the vast country of China, and to handle it in accordance with the custom of all the Catholic countries of the world. We thus establish the Catholic hierarchy of China.” (Acta Apostolica Sedis, 1946, p. 302.)

With the establishment of the Chinese hierarchy a new page was opened in the history of evangelization in China. As we commemorate the 50th anniversary of this event today, we cannot help but recall that in the 700 years since the Franciscan John of Montecorvino began to preach in China, the Catholic Church of China has suffered many persecutions. In spite of this, for the church to have developed to the extent that it has fills us with great emotion.

When Pope Pius XII established the Chinese hierarchy, this made the Chinese Church just like the Catholic Churches of Europe and America. Dioceses were formally created and real bishops were appointed to govern them. The system of prefectures apostolic came to an end. Pope Pius XII created 20 metropolitan sees in China, meaning 20 archdioceses, and 80 ordinary dioceses. The prefects apostolic of those sees automatically became archbishops or bishops.

We know that the local church or the diocese is the foundation of the structure of Christ’s church. The Code of Canon Law gives the following definition of a diocese:

A diocese is a portion of the people of God, which is entrusted to a Bishop to be nurtured by him, with the cooperation of the presbyterium, in such a way that, remaining close to its pastor and gathered by him through the Gospel and the Eucharist in the Holy Spirit, it constitutes a particular Church. In this Church, the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church of Christ truly exists and functions.” (Code of Canon Law, Can. 369).

A diocese is formed by the Catholic people of a particular district, having its own shepherd - the bishop. It is the normal structure of the church. The universal church can be experienced within the local church.

When Jesus was on earth, he chose 12 apostles to be with him, and from among them he chose Peter to be the leader of the apostolic band. After Jesus ascended into heaven, the apostles went out to the ends of the earth to preach the Good News of Christ. After many people in a certain district were converted at their preaching and had formed a community of believers, through the ceremony of laying of hands, the apostles passed on their spiritual power and office to their successors, commanding them to care for and pastor those believers. These successors of the apostles in turn passed on the spiritual power and authority which they had received to their own successors by laying hands on them. Power and authority were thus passed on from generation to generation up to the present day.

Therefore bishops are the successors of the apostles. Under the leadership of the Roman Pontiff, who is the successor of Peter the chief of the apostles, they represent the Pope in governing their dioceses. At his consecration the bishop receives the offices of sanctifying, teaching and governing. Only in line with and in communion with the Holy Father can these powers be exercised.

However, in the present abnormal and difficult circumstances on our mainland, the head of the loyal Catholic bishops community, the already deceased Bishop Fan Xueyan acted in an expedient hierarchical manner to support the hierarchical principle of the Catholic Church and to protect the life of the church. Thus in the difficult circumstances of the early 1980's Bishop Fan Xueyan wisely and resolutely used the hierarchical principle to decide to consecrate Bishops Jia Zhiguo, Zhou Shanfu and Wang Milu. In this way he saved the mainland Catholic Church. Bishop Fan's wise decision immediately received the high praise of the Holy Father, and he gave Bishop Fan a special power. The origin of this special power was the hierarchical principle of the universal church. Pope John Paul II wrote in this manner: "Your decision is in complete accordance with my thinking. I now give you the authority to decide beforehand, and afterwards I will make a decision." (excerpted from *The Lord of Destiny*, published by Holy Spirit Study Centre). Later during the early 1980's, Bishop Fan and the three bishops ordained by him secretly consecrated many more bishops, providing new pastors to some local Catholic communities which were lacking in them, thus giving new life to the church on mainland China.

At the end of 1989, after the majority of local churches on the mainland had restored the hierarchical system, many bishops thought that the time was ripe to restore and maintain the hierarchy throughout the whole Catholic Church on the mainland. So they decided to hold a meeting of the China mainland Catholic Bishops in Sanyuan and to set up a China Mainland Catholic Bishops Conference. The Sanyuan bishops conference opened a new page in the history of the Catholic in China, and it established a second glorious milestone in the history of evangelization in China.

Dear Fathers, Brothers, Sisters, and Christians, you are aware of this doctrine from Vatican Council II's decree on the Church:

Just as, in accordance with the Lord's decree, St. Peter and the rest of the apostles constitute a unique apostolic college, so in like fashion the Roman Pontiff, Peter's successor, and the bishops, the successors of the apostles, are related with and united to one another....The bishops installed throughout the whole world live in communion with one another and with the Roman Pontiff in a bond of unity, charity and peace....The college of bishops has no authority unless united with the Roman Pontiff, Peter's successor...Together with their head, the Supreme Pontiff, and never apart from him, they have supreme and full authority over the universal Church; but this power cannot be exercised without the agreement of the Roman Pontiff. (Para. 22)

As we share with you in celebration of the 50th anniversary of the establishment of the Chinese hierarchy, you are clearly aware that for the sake of preserving the Chinese hierarchy and for the love of Christ, there are some in your midst who are being arrested and released, making sacrifices even to the shedding of blood, and undergoing all kinds of trials of body and spirit. "Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when men revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for so men persecuted the prophets who were before you." (Mt. 5:10-12)

During this celebration we are very grateful to you because, based on the hierarchical principle, and whether we were in jail or not, you always cooperated with us in every way, in our carrying out of

our episcopal duties. In times of extreme difficulty in the past and in the present, you have worked remarkably well to complete the pastoral task. After the three bishops were consecrated by Bishop Fan Xueyan, our Holy Father Pope John Paul II showed his ardent concern for the loyal church on the China mainland, and in accordance with the laws of mother church, he gave Bishop Fan Xueyan special powers. According to these special powers, all the bishops consecrated by Bishop Fan himself or by bishops delegated by him, because of the special circumstances existing in China, will be recognized by the Holy See. Because of these special circumstances, the consecrated bishops are subject to arrest by the communist government. Therefore the Holy See has provided that the power and authority of bishops from the loyal church who are arrested or somehow separated from their dioceses will not come to an end.

This is an important decision taken by the Holy See in order to restore the Chinese Catholic hierarchy, and no unorthodox Catholic church can replace it. You absolutely cannot use non-Catholic explanations to harm the loyal community. Do not cause unnecessary damage to the church hierarchy which is just in the process of being restored.

We should clearly note that during the 20 years from the consecration of the first 6 bishops up to the establishment of the Chinese hierarchy, and then during the 50 years since then, up to the present, the number of local Chinese bishops has gradually increased. Up to the time of the China mainland bishops meeting in 1989, Chinese bishops were completely in charge of the Chinese Catholic Church (including of the Catholic communities in Taiwan, Hong Kong and Macao). What we should be even more grateful for today is the great effort for preaching the Gospel expended by the foreign missionaries over a period of many years. We should admire the good example they gave of fervor for evangelization, and be sorry for all the injustices and humiliations they suffered in their missionary work. We shall never forget them and their work.

Today we should express special admiration for Father Vincent Lebbe. We shall never forget the good example given by Father Lebbe during his missionary work in China, especially his promotion of "Chinese bishops" and "Chinese dioceses." His work is a glorious example for young priests as we enter the 21st century. We

remember the tears of happiness shed by Father Lebbe when the first 6 Chinese bishops were consecrated. He said: "The tears of pain that I shed throughout my whole life were wiped away in this one moment." We shall never forget Father Lebbe's contributions to the development of the Chinese Catholic Church. When the Chinese church was suffering difficulties, he was "obedient to death" and shed his blood on Chinese soil.

A fundamental belief of the Catholic Church is: "I believe in the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church." During the second century the martyr-bishop St. Ignatius once described Christians as grains of wheat. They pass through grinding and leavening to become one loaf of bread. Each local church is also like a grain of wheat which joins with other grains to become one loaf: the universal church. Then the bread becomes the body of Christ, otherwise it has no meaning. In the body of Christ, Jesus is the head and all the rest are members. During the Last Supper Jesus prayed to the heavenly Father that the apostles and Christians of later generations would be united together just as Jesus was with the Father and the Spirit.

Local churches should be united with one another just as the Three Persons of the Blessed Trinity are united with one another. The local church should also be united to Christ, and through Christ become united with the Trinity. Christ of course is the head of the church. The church is an invisible, mysterious community, and at the same time it is a visible organization in the midst of human beings. The church has Christ as its head and the Holy Spirit as its soul. Through the sacraments, she dispenses grace, adds to the number of Christians, spreads the kingdom of Christ and firms up Christ's church. Christ established the hierarchy in the church so that there would be order in the administration of the sacraments, and so that the people of God would have shepherds to take care of them. Bishops have the responsibility of caring for dioceses and the Pope has the responsibility for caring for the whole church. After Jesus rose from the dead, he three times commanded Peter to feed his sheep. Under the pastoral care of Peter and in union with him, the hierarchical system of the church has become unified throughout the whole world.

Dear Fathers, Brothers, Sisters and Christians, during this time of celebration we must still squarely face our present reality. Just when we are working hard to restore our Catholic hierarchy on

the mainland, some unfortunate brothers and sisters have left the church's hierarchical system and have left Holy Mother Church herself. They have formed their own non-Catholic body. The nature of the organization formed by these pitiable brothers and sisters is opposed to the hierarchical principle of the Catholic Church. Therefore we should pray for these most unfortunate brothers and sisters, and beseech our merciful Father to give them the grace and the opportunity to repent. We see that in some places among those brothers and sisters who have left the church some have expressed a desire to return once more to the bosom of Christ's church. We should accept them with charity and encourage them with faith, that full of grace they might bravely bear witness to Jesus Christ, and courageously testify that they are returning to the universal church having the successor of St. Peter as the visible head. They should do this "by written statement before a bishop, by oath before a priest, and by declaration before the Christians." (Vatican spokesperson at the 1995 World Youth Festival in Manila). Therefore do not miss the opportunity: when you see a sign of willingness on the part of those unfortunate brothers and sisters who have left the church, warmly welcome them and advance the cause of unity within the church.

As we restore the hierarchy among the local churches, we should pay attention to certain trends in individual local churches. Some bishops who have been secretly consecrated in the 1980's and some loyal bishops who have been consecrated in recent years have already been legitimately appointed by the Holy See. However, they are subject to suspicion and attack by individual clergymen from within our church. This should never happen. If the newly restored hierarchy suffers harm from persons within it, this creates an opportunity for those opposed to the Catholic hierarchical system to easily destroy branches of our church.

Here we must point out the most important responsibility of the China mainland Catholic Church. That is, under the hierarchical principle, to bring about communion and unity in the Chinese Church. If we separate ourselves from the universal church with the successor of St. Peter, the Roman Pontiff, as the visible foundation, then unity and communion basically cannot be established. The basis for unity and communion in the mainland Catholic Church is the church's hierarchical principle. No one should doubt this.

As we celebrate the 70th anniversary of the consecration of the first Chinese bishops and the 50th anniversary of the establishment of the Chinese hierarchy, and as we face the present situation on the China mainland, you realize both the seriousness of the bishops' responsibilities and the difficulties they meet. Therefore we encourage you to unite with one heart to form one body with the bishops, and to support them and cooperate with them. St. Peter exhorted the shepherds in this manner: "Tend the flock of God that is in your charge...not as domineering over those in your charge but be examples to the flock." (1 Peter 5:2-3). In the midst of the difficulties faced by today's mainland church, the bishop's office has been restored, the hierarchy has been established, and the duty of teaching has been taken up. During the anniversary Masses, let us ask the Lord to help us and the Blessed Mother of China to protect us. Let us also implore St. Joseph, the Patron of China, and the blessed Chinese martyrs to support us. Through the assistance of the Holy Spirit and our hard work, let us create a more wonderful future for the Chinese Catholic Church.

In 1979 our national leaders promoted democracy and the rule of law. They rehabilitated many falsely accused persons and opened a few churches. The Party press pointed out that Masses and religious ceremonies held in homes were legal. Some newspapers had friendly reports about the Pope. However, arrests of bishops, priests and Catholics have recently been on the increase, all because Masses are being celebrated in the homes of Catholics. Chapels and Blessed Mother grottoes at Donglu have been destroyed. There are even cases of Catholics apostatizing. We wish that the Party would be faithful to the teachings of Lenin, who held that religion is a personal matter for the people, and that politics and religion should be separated.

Party documents have also pointed out that you cannot use administrative means to destroy religion and you cannot force people not to believe in religion. You can only solve problems of thought and internal contradictions among the people by democratic means...(cf. the document concerning correctly dealing with internal contradictions among the people). At the present time we wish that the government leaders would be faithful to their own principles, and uphold religious freedom. Catholic doctrine has always taught Christians to love their country and to obey its laws and to respect the leaders at all levels,

that a good Christian is a good citizen, one who loves God and neighbor. We request the government to release the jailed bishops, priests and Christians, to guarantee that religious ceremonies in the homes of Christians will not be disturbed, to conscientiously implement democracy and the rule of law, and to protect the peoples' right of freedom of religious belief.

On the anniversaries of the establishment of the hierarchy and of the consecration of the first Chinese bishops, we renew our thanks to God and to the Blessed Mother for the love they have shown to the Chinese people, and we thank the present Holy Father for his special concern for us. We should renew our efforts at achieving holiness and stir up anew the fire for spreading the Gospel. We should learn from the good example of Cardinal Tian, who when he was a bishop walked each day throughout the countryside, visiting the homes of the peasants. Like St. Paul he was on fire with love and preached the Gospel to all he met. He also led his priests to be busy in the vineyard of the Lord, with the result that there was an unprecedented harvest of souls.

We should also learn from the spirit of Father Lebbe whose motto was "complete sacrifice, true love, always happy, quick to carry out orders, and in control of oneself." We should work hard at personal sanctification and the spread of Christ's kingdom, preach the Gospel of Christ to others, and lead others to be immersed in the grace of Christ. We should always follow the example of the saints, the evangelistic spirit of Cardinal Tian, the sacrificial spirit of Father Lebbe, the example of the recently canonized missionary, Jean Gabriel Perboyre, and fervently love Christ and fervently love the people. We should ask ourselves each day: "What have we done today to love God and to love others?" We should study the document of Pope John Paul II, *The Coming of the Third Millennium*. The Holy Father wrote:

I invite the Catholics to raise their fervent prayers to God so that we might obtain the necessary light and help to prepare for and to celebrate the future jubilee year. We urge our brothers in the episcopal office and the church communities entrusted to them to open their hearts to the action of the Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit will not fail to stir up the fire within them to lead their people to a renewed faith and generosity to participate in the celebration of the jubilee year. We entrust the whole church to the prayers of

Mary, the compassionate mother of our Saviour. She, our pure and loving mother, is the star leading the Christians towards the jubilee year of the 3rd millennium. She will safely guide the Christians along the path to our Lord. May the humble maid of Nazareth who brought forth the Word to the world two thousand years ago lead the men and women of the new millennium towards the One who is "the true light that enlightens everyone." (Jn. 1:9).

May the blood of Jesus Christ cleanse us. May the sorrowful tears of Mary sanctify us.

We will conclude our letter with the words the Three Kingdoms ruler, Sun Wu, inscribed on the iron cross of Quan Zhou:

As everyone rejoices at the Spring rain, a bright cross is left inscribed on the iron;

Happiness exudes from every breast, and the people worship for all eternity.

We bless you in the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, and may the peace of the Lord be with you always!

The China Mainland Catholic Bishops Conference
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