

Message of the Holy Father to the Church in China

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

The liturgical memorial of St. Francis Xavier, Patron of the Missions, gives me the opportunity of celebrating the Eucharist with you who represent in Rome the Church which is in China.

Just as Saint Francis Xavier, reaching the gates of China, burned with the desire to bring the light of the Gospel to the Chinese people, so we today look at that great country with the same sentiments while recalling two significant celebrations: the seventieth anniversary of the ordination of the first group of Chinese Bishops in Rome by Pope Pius XI, and the fiftieth anniversary of the establishment of the Ecclesiastical Hierarchy in China by his successor, Pope Pius XII.

These two anniversaries evoke in my heart as Supreme Pastor of the Universal Church thoughts, longings and fervent desires concerning the meaning and the present-day tasks of the episcopal ministry within the Church in China, in full communion with the College of Bishops which is presided over by the Successor of Peter. Allow me to open my heart to you, brothers and sisters present here, as if in an actual conversation with the Bishops, priests, men and women religious and the many lay faithful who live in mainland China. It is a meditation spoken aloud, almost a shared prayer, under the gaze of Christ, the High Priest, the merciful Shepherd and Lord of history.

1. The words of Jesus, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations ... and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age” (Mt 28:19-20), are for the Church a source of joy and confidence: joy because of the presence of the Risen Lord during her earthly pilgrimage; confidence because of his closeness and guidance, also in the midst of difficulties. These words confirm the others, spoken by Jesus in reply to the Apostle Peter’s confession of faith: “You are Peter, and on this rock I will build my Church, and the powers of

death shall not prevail against it” (Mt 16:18). With this promise the Lord assures the permanence of his Church founded on the person of Peter and his Successors.

2. The Church in China received the Good News and the gift of the Holy Spirit as early as the seventh century and then, once again, at the time of Giovanni da Montecorvino, first Archbishop of Khambaliq, the present-day Beijing; and from that time onwards it has always been noted for its catholicity and its exemplary fidelity to the Roman Pontiff. Chinese Catholics, in communion with the whole Church throughout the world, have been distinguished for their faithfulness to Christ, to the Pope and the reality of a Church which is universal, united like a family of peoples. This tradition has made the Church in China a precious jewel of the Catholic Church, thanks to the witness of generations of Pastors and faithful who have given their lives for Christ and have been, in the image used in the Gospel, salt, light and leaven of society.

Even in the most difficult times the fidelity of the Catholic Church in China has never waned. Pastors and faithful, as disciples of Christ and loyal citizens of their homeland, have always placed the guarantee of truth and life in effective communion with the Successor of Peter, the Bishop of Rome and Pastor of the whole Church.

Today too all Chinese Catholics are called to remain loyal to the faith received and passed on, and not to yield to models of a Church which do not correspond to the will of the Lord Jesus, to the Catholic faith, or to the feelings and convictions of the great majority of Chinese Catholics. From these models would come a division capable only of causing confusion, to the detriment both of the faith itself and of the contribution which the faithful can make to their homeland as instruments of peace and social progress.

3. I know that the Church which is in the People’s Republic of China wishes to be truly Catholic, even in its sufferings and in the uniqueness of its path through history. It must therefore keep itself united to Christ, to the Successor of Peter and to the whole universal Church, also and especially through the ministry of Bishops in communion with the Apostolic See. This is a truth of faith, amply lived in the Chinese tradition ever since the *plantatio Ecclesiae* in

those lands: Giovanni da Montecorvino, in fact, was consecrated the first Bishop of the Catholic Church in China through the imposition of hands of other Bishops who had been sent by the Pope and who brought the apostolic mandate for his episcopal consecration.

Through ordination the Bishop receives the grace and the responsibility of his own pastoral ministry. Hence he is to be a pastor, he must possess the human, moral and spiritual qualities which make him an example and model to the flock which Christ entrusts to him. The Church's age-old tradition and constant discipline have always demanded these qualities. The Bishop must be the first witness of the faith which he professes and preaches, to the point of "shedding his blood", as the Apostles did and as so many other Pastors have done down the centuries, in many nations and also in China.

The Bishop is called to carry out his pastoral ministry in hierarchical communion: that communion, namely, which he must show and live in all its clarity by virtue of his ordination and his being a member of the College of Bishops in communion with the Successor of Peter. This is also necessary in order that the priests and lay faithful may see in their pastors Bishops of the one Church of Christ.

4. You, dear Brothers in the Episcopacy who lead with courage and apostolic dedication the Catholic communities in China, are called today, in a particular way, to express and promote full reconciliation between all the faithful. You are men of communion: perfect communion with God, which is shown in prayer and in daily life; and clear, unambiguous communion with the universal Church, with the whole Episcopal College and its Head. You will carry in your hearts a passion for the unity of the Church, so as to contribute with humility and charity to the reconciliation of all, Pastors and faithful. This will be possible to the extent that you can undertake a dialogue in truth and charity also with those who, as a consequence of serious and persistent difficulties, have strayed - in certain aspects - from the fullness of Catholic Truth. Jesus' prayer will be your prayer: "Father...that they also may be one in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me" (Jn 17:21).

It is for you Bishops who, as vicars and ambassadors of Christ, govern in full freedom and independence from any local authority whatsoever the particular Churches entrusted to you, to take

suitable initiatives in order to prepare your flocks spiritually for the celebration of the Holy Year 2000. Could not this intense and constant striving towards full communion and visible unity be our and your special gift to Christ the Lord in the light and special grace of the Jubilee?

In order then to make progress on the path towards the fullness of unity and to assure the future of the Catholic Church in China, one of the fundamental tasks of the Bishop's ministry will be to ensure a suitable and serious formation of candidates for the priesthood. In fact, it is upon their authentic theological, moral, spiritual and pastoral formation, according to the Church's tradition and discipline, that there depends in a decisive way the future of Christian communities.

But today more than ever, and following the example of what has been done in other times, similar integral formation must be offered to men and women religious, as well as to catechists and lay people working to spread the Gospel: in this way they will also be able to give an account of their faith and of their hope before a society in need of a courageous and convinced witness to the wisdom and truth of Christ's Gospel.

5. In the celebration of the Eucharist the Church becomes in a very real way the Lord's Body, as Saint Paul says: "Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread" (1 Cor 10:17). The Eucharistic celebration, with the Lord's presence on every altar, truly makes us one body. It cancels all distances and makes us sense our full communion of faith and life with others. It also expresses the true nature of the Church, united by the same Word, the same prayers and the one Eucharist.

This intimate communion and sacramental unity also call for communion in the same faith and in the love which binds together all the members of the Catholic Church. How can we fail to recall the demands of ecclesial communion, expressed by the very prayer with which the Eucharist is celebrated? There is no perfect communion in the Eucharist without each Bishop making a full confession with the Pope of the one faith, and without priests doing the same in unity with the Pope and their legitimate Pastors, in communion with the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church.

6. It is for me a source of confidence, which is also confirmed by many reports coming from your communities, that the Holy Spirit, always present in the Church, is continuing to bestow his gifts on the Catholics of China and encouraging them to take heart and to act according to the supreme law of the Gospel, which is charity, with prayerful trust in God's Providence concerning the time when the truth of things will be fully manifested. With the Apostle Paul, I therefore invite you to build up together one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church, and to put into practice, as a programme of life, these words of his, "I beg you to lead a life worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all lowliness and meekness, with patience, forbearing one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of us all, who is above all and through all and in all" (Eph 4:1-6).

Moreover, with the same conviction, and with the responsibility and the confidence which come to me from the Apostolic mandate which I have received from Christ, I exhort all the Pastors and the faithful of China to express with courage and without fear the true profession of the Catholic faith, thus "speaking the truth in love" (Eph 4:15).

7. The civil authorities of the People's Republic of China should rest assured: a disciple of Christ can live his faith in any political system, provided that there is respect for his right to act according to the dictates of his own conscience and his own faith. For this reason I repeat to the governing authorities, as I have said so often to others, that they should have no fear of God or of his Church. Indeed, I respectfully ask them, in deference to the authentic freedom which is the innate right of every man and woman, to ensure that those also who believe in Christ may increasingly contribute their energies and talents to the development of their country. The Chinese Nation has an important role to play in the international community. Catholics can make a notable contribution to this, and they will do so with enthusiasm and commitment.

8. Dear Brothers and Sisters it has been my wish to express to you my affection and solicitude, full of hope in the working of the Holy Spirit in human hearts and confidence in the fidelity which Chinese Catholics profess, and must ever more profess, to Christ the Lord and to his Gospel.

The Church of Rome, which presides in charity over all the particular Catholic Churches throughout the world under the guidance of their Pastors, is united in prayer with you, the Bishops and faithful of China. She follows your history with affectionate understanding and looks forward to the full and complete visible union of Pastors and faithful alike, around the Pope. Just as the world admires the Chinese people for their culture and enterprising spirit, so the whole Church longs to see fully expressed the witness of Chinese Catholics to their faith and their contribution to the preaching and witness of the Gospel on the eve of the Third Millennium.

“Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and for ever” (Heb 13:8). As we prepare to celebrate, in the year 2000 of the Christian era, the Great Jubilee of the birth of Jesus, the Pope looks with trust and affection to China and to the Church in China, and he greatly desires to meet personally the Catholics of China in order to express, in the same faith and the same love, thanksgiving to the Father, whenever it may please him to grant this.

I entrust these intentions to the Blessed Virgin Mary, so greatly venerated and invoked by the Catholics of China under the titles of Mother and Queen.

“May the God of peace ... equip you with everything good that you may do his will, working in you that which is pleasing in his sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen” (Heb 13:20-21).

With my devoted Blessing.

From the Vatican, 3 December 1996

Joannes Paulus II