

## *Upon Reading “The Pope Speaks to China”*

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*by Mark Fang  
translated by Norman Walling, S.J.*

*(Author’s note Since this papal address is a spoken meditation and a prayer sharing, we must adopt a prayerful spirit as we read it to grasp its true meaning.)*

Before we analyze the Pope’s address published by *Catholic Life Weekly* on last December 8, we must first clarify the meaning of a crucial term, China. Of what China is the Pope speaking? Obviously he is speaking of the Church on the China mainland although he does not necessarily exclude Chinese churches in other areas. This is obvious since on December 3 there were about 13 clerics, religious, Sisters and lay people presently residing in Rome who attended the Pope’s Mass. They represented Chinese Catholics living in various places around the world.(Cf. Dec. 15 *Catholic Life Weekly*, p.7)

There are seven sections to the Pope’s Address besides an introduction and a conclusion (#8). In the introduction the Pope says he is very happy to celebrate Mass on the feast of St. Francis Xavier with representatives from the Chinese Church living in Rome and to recall the 70th Anniversary of the consecration of the first Chinese Bishops and the 50th anniversary of the establishment of the Chinese hierarchy. He wanted to express some of his thoughts, hopes and desires to his sisters and brothers present at the Mass on the occasion and in the presence of Jesus, to meditate prayerfully out loud, sharing his thoughts with bishops, priests, seminarians, Sisters and the entire body of the faithful in mainland China.

The contents of the seven sections in the Pope’s address have a basic structure: the first three (#1–3) present the Pope’s thoughts; the middle section (#4) expresses the Pope’s hopes while the last three

sections (#5-7) contain some of the Pope's desires. In his conclusion (#8) he turns to speak again to his Chinese sisters and brothers present at the Mass as well as to the bishops and Catholics on the mainland. If we follow this structure in listening to his shared prayer, we will more easily grasp the main points of his message and realize that, in addition, the Holy Father uses many expressions of Catholic prayer and faith. All can savor them at leisure in their own prayer.

His first thought (#1) draws upon the words of Jesus (Matthew 28:19-20; 16:18) assuring the permanence of His Church. His second thought (#2) turns to the history of the Chinese Church beginning with the Nestorians up to the present day. He remarks that the Chinese Church is noted for its catholicity and its fidelity to the Roman Pontiff. This has made the Catholic Church in China a precious jewel in the entire Catholic Church. "Today 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." His third thought (#3) concerns the suffering and unique history of the Catholic Church in China that still wishes to be truly Catholic and to maintain its unity with the Pope and the Universal Church.

Number four (#4) states the central point of the Pope's entire address. Here, he speaks directly to his brother bishops in China telling them that their chief mission today is to express and promote full reconciliation among all the faithful. He exhorts them to be men of perfect communion with God in prayer and daily life, and to show clear, unambiguous communion with the universal Church, with the whole Episcopal College and its Head.

To promote reconciliation and communion is the Pope's first hope. His second hope is that those who are vicars and ambassadors of Christ may govern the particular churches entrusted to their care in full freedom and independence from any local authority and to undertake suitable initiatives in order to prepare their flocks spiritually for the celebration of the Holy Year 2000.

His third hope is that a suitable and serious formation of candidates for the priesthood be ensured. This formation should also be offered to men and women religious, as well as catechists and lay people working to spread the Gospel. "In this way they will 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."

Numbers five to seven can be said to express the Pope's desires—desires in full harmony with God's desires. Number five speaks of the Mass as being the most authentic and highest expression of the Church's unity and communion. This intimate communion and sacramental unity requires a communion in one faith as well as an affective union of all members of the Catholic Church with each other. In number six the Pope says that he is convinced that the Holy Spirit, always present in the Church, continues to encourage the Catholics of China in hope and love and prayerful trust in God's Providence that in time the truth of things will be fully manifested. He then uses the words contained in numbers one to three to conclude his message of encouragement to the Chinese bishops. He quotes from chapter four of St. Paul's letter to the Ephesians and exhort all pastors and ordinary faithful to express with courage and without fear the true profession of the Catholic Faith, thus according to St. Paul "speaking the truth in love."

In number seven the Holy Father addresses (indirectly) the mainland government. They should rest assured that Christians can live their lives of faith under any political system provided there is respect for their right to act according to the dictates of their conscience and their own faith. He goes on to repeat to the Chinese leaders what he has often said to other governments: not to fear God, and not to fear his Church. The Pope respectfully asks them to respect the innate rights of every person which is true freedom and enable Christians increasingly to contribute their energies and talents to the development of their country.

In his conclusion (#8) the Pope again turns his attention to his Chinese brothers and sisters present at the Mass expressing to them his affection and solicitude for the Church in China. Once again he speaks to the Chinese bishops and Catholics on the mainland. He tells them that the Roman Church, which presides in charity over all particular churches, is united in prayer with them. She follows its history and hopes that one day all pastors and their flocks can be united around the Pope in mutual union. Just as the world admires the Chinese people for their culture and enterprising spirit, 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. The Pope also says that he looks to China and the Church in China and ardently hopes that he can himself go to China and personally meet Chinese Catholics in order to express, in the same faith and same love, thanksgiving to the Father, whenever it may please him to grant this.

Since this papal address is a “verbalized meditation” and a “prayer sharing” one must read it in the same spirit of prayer in order to grasp its inner meaning. However many people only pay attention to the concluding words “I ardently hope to visit China.” No doubt these words carry significant weight. In our analysis of the Pope’s address—given on such a solemn and momentous occasion celebrating the feast of St. Francis Xavier and recalling two important church events in Chinese history and after the Holy Father had expressed his own thoughts, hopes and desires,—he concludes with the above quoted words that do indicate his desire to visit China and that do carry more than ordinary meaning.

Coming now to the more mundane political level, the mainland authorities might respond: the Pope can come but he must first break relations with Taiwan and not interfere in the nation’s internal affairs. Those in Taiwan on the other hand will say that President Li Denghui has often invited the Pope to visit Taiwan, but he has been unwilling to come. What need is there for him to keep expressing such ardent desires to visit the mainland? Does he have to go there? Why not come to Taiwan instead? Come to Taiwan and then see what the Communists will do! This may be better after all! However Vatican policy is at the service of faith and the Gospel. This is true especially now for the present Pope. He played a very important role in thawing the cold war barriers separating East from West. It is not hard to imagine that even now he wishes to offer his help in thawing the hostile situation existing between both sides of the Taiwan straits. He certainly will not want to topple any one political power but will work so that each side may come to respect the other and each other’s innate rights and freedom□.