

A Sincere and Urgent Invitation

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The address to the Catholic Church in China delivered by the Holy Father on Vatican Radio is not a piece of news to be passed over lightly. As with many other papal activities, it is an event destined to bear fruit over a period of time. Therefore it is worth reading the document several times and reflecting on its contents.

As the title indicates, the document is addressed to the Chinese Church. That is to say, the most important audience is the whole body of Catholics within China's borders. No distinction is made between pastors and laity, or between strong and weak Catholics.

The contents of the document is very clear to Chinese Catholics. Many of them have courageously borne witness to it. That content is that the successor of St. Peter is still the fundamental guarantor of unity in the universal church.

An invitation to dialogue and reconciliation: This document is a sincere and urgent invitation to the Church in China to begin to dialogue and to take steps to become reconciled internally. This reconciliation is a special grace which the Holy Father and the universal church asks God to bestow on the Church in China as the Jubilee Year 2000 gradually approaches. It is also a responsibility clearly laid upon the shoulders of the Chinese bishops and Catholics by the universal shepherd himself.

Therefore there is no hint of accusation or complaint in this papal document. The whole document is full of a spirit of compassion, forgiveness and hope. It invites each Catholic to look towards what will benefit the church and the country in the future. The church is asked to contribute wholeheartedly to the building up of the nation through service and witness.

Chinese authorities asked to put their hearts at ease: In the above mentioned spirit, the Holy Father finally addresses the Chinese political authorities, telling them to put their hearts at ease. They need not fear religion or the Catholic Church. The Catholic Church only desires reconciliation and to practice its faith in freedom and in communion with the universal church.

For people, whether Catholics or not, who have the heart to listen, the Holy Father's words are clear enough. Nevertheless the seed has been sown; time is required for it to sprout and grow. The people bearing witness to Christ in China really know the value of patience and perseverance. Actually it is they who teach us these values!

Key for normalization of Sino-Vatican relations: Appointment of Bishops

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For the Holy Father to have sent a letter to "the Church in China" is indeed a wonderful thing. Here are a few observations.

1. When, in connection with the Jubilee in the year 2000, the Holy Father appeals "that every effort be made to achieve full communion," is he expressing a desire for the complete normalization of China-Vatican relations before the year 2000? Would that this were so.

2. The Holy Father expresses the desire that the Church in China be reconciled within itself. This is also the hope of many Catholics in China, especially of the young.

3. The Holy Father recalls the ordination of the first Chinese bishops in 1926. Although this was facilitated by some foreign missionaries and church leaders, it was also a breakthrough in the face