

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

*by Anthony Chang
translated by Peter Barry, M.M.*

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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

of opposition from the majority of foreign missionaries. The establishment of the hierarchy in 1946 was a further step in the localization of the Chinese Church. However China at that time was still subject to division by foreign forces.

The three-self spirit is not contradictory to universal communion: During the 1970's countries under colonialism became independent one after the other, and local churches advanced further along the road of indigenization. For instance, in 1973 the East African Bishops Conference wrote: "This demonstrates that the church has become a self-governing, self-propagating and self-supporting church." They also emphasized communion with the universal church.

The normalization of relations between the Chinese Church and the Pope is not opposed to the spirit of self-government, self-support and self-propagation. Actually, the bishops on the mainland have already publicly acknowledged that they accept the spiritual leadership and the primacy of the Pope, and daily pray for him at Mass.

4. Regarding the normalization of relations between China and the Vatican, I think that the Vatican is already prepared to break diplomatic relations with Taiwan and establish them with the Beijing government. But there is another key problem: the method of selecting and appointing bishops for the China church.

From the point of view of the Chinese government, to have a diocese in China nominate three persons for the office of bishop and then to have the Vatican choose one of these to be the local bishop, smacks of relations between a vassal and a sovereign state.

A suggestion about the selection of bishops which takes both sides into account: The relationship of a diocesan bishop to the Pope is not one of subordination. The Holy Father has pointed out that the bishops are "representatives and ambassadors of Christ." Chapter 27 of the *Constitution on the Church* of the Second Vatican Council affirms the same thing: "The bishops, as vicars and legates of Christ, govern the particular churches assigned to them....nor are they to be regarded as vicars of the Roman Pontiff...Consequently their authority, far from being damaged by the supreme and universal power [the Pope], is much rather defended, upheld and strengthened by it."

Church history provides us with many different ways of choosing bishops. Besides the method used recently by Hong Kong's Anglican Church which is worth examining, we can add two other methods which can provide for papal participation. 1) Before the election, provide the Holy Father with the list of candidates for his examination and approval: 2) submit the name of the final candidate to the Holy Father who, in his position as chairman of the college of bishops of the universal church and as the successor of St. Peter, would grant approval. This method takes everything into consideration, and conforms to church tradition. It also implements the "principle of subsidiarity," since it allows the local community to take responsibility for what it can itself be responsible for, being autonomous, making its own decisions, and taking its own initiatives, without interference. Only when it lacks the required capability would the China church receive assistance from outside.

Reactions from the Church in China

(The following remarks on the secular press' reaction to the Papal Message are culled from UCA News Dispatch No. 902/A December 16-18, 1996.)

Bishop Joseph Zong Huaide of Jinan and Zhoucun, president of the government approved Bishops' Conference of the Catholic Church in China, emphasized that

- the government-approved church recognizes the Pope as the spiritual leader and openly prays for him daily.
- He suggested that the underground church visit some of the open churches in order to experience first hand the communion of the open church with the Holy Father.
- In commenting to the Holy Father's wish to visit China, the President of the Conference reiterated the conditions needed:
 - establishing diplomatic relations with China
 - severing relations with Taiwan

Unless these conditions are satisfied, he said, there is little hope that the Holy Father will be able to realize his desire.