

A Letter Sent by the Faithful Church on Mainland China to the Holy Father

(To Commemorate the 70th Anniversary of the Ordination of the First Chinese Bishops and the 50th Anniversary of the Establishment of the Chinese Hierarchy)

translated by the Staff of the Holy Spirit Study Centre

(Our last issue, Tripod, No. 96, carried a pastoral letter of the underground bishops conference in China to all the clergy and Catholics of the country. The letter commemorated the 70th anniversary of the ordination of the first six Chinese bishops and the 50th anniversary of the establishment of the Chinese hierarchy. We now publish a letter of the same bishops conference written to the Holy Father himself commemorating the two same events.)

Dear Holy Father,

With fervent devotion we sons and daughters of China give thanks to Almighty God. He did not forget the broad masses of Chinese people who lived in darkness for so long. Rather, the Popes throughout history have sent missionaries to China to preach the Gospel. Beginning with Blessed John of Montecorvino at the end of the 13th century, and later with St. Francis Xavier and Matteo Ricci, missionaries have repeatedly come to China to preach the Gospel. Through the blood of martyrs and the sweat of the missionaries, by the early years of this century some flourishing sprouts had been nurtured. At that time the Vatican sent one after the other the two Apostolic Delegates Costantini and Zanin to direct church affairs in China. Special mention should be made of the encyclical *Maximum Illud*, issued by Pope Benedict XV, which pointed out localization as the direction missionary work should take.

Whereupon 70 years ago (on October 28, 1926), Our Holy Father Pope Pius XI appointed the first group of Chinese bishops. In order to draw the attention of the whole world to the significance of this action, the Holy Father held the ordination ceremony in St. Peter's Basilica in the presence of all the Cardinals in Rome, 50 bishops and the Vatican diplomatic corps.

For the past several centuries of Chinese Church history the Chinese Church was in its youthful missionary existence. Besides Bishop Luo Wenzao (1616-1691), all bishops were naturally foreign missionaries. Seventy years ago when the Holy Father ordained the first group of Chinese bishops, he was announcing to the whole world that the Chinese Church had now reached maturity. The ordination ceremony of that first group was the ceremony of adulthood of our Chinese Catholic Church. At the end of the ordination ceremony, the Holy Father ordered the new bishops to make a tour of the whole basilica to receive the wholehearted congratulations of all those present. In his sermon the Pope informed the whole world that the Chinese Church had reached maturity and had arrived at a stage when it could manage its own affairs. If there are still some people who have an opposite opinion, then let it be known that they are opposed to the Holy Father himself. At this time we want to express our sincere thanks to the Popes throughout history, to the missionaries and to the whole church. It is your blood, sweat and tears that have watered this young plant and brought it to maturity.

Fifty years ago (in 1946) another great event took place in Chinese Church history, namely the establishment of the Chinese hierarchy. Before this, our bishops were called "vicars apostolic." Their title was bishop of a diocese which no longer existed. They borrowed the title of bishop of that diocese to oversee church affairs in a Chinese diocese, thus the name "vicar apostolic." After the setting up of the hierarchy, our bishop in Beijing was called the Bishop of Beijing. The same was true for Nanjing, Shanghai and all the other dioceses. From that time on our Chinese Catholic Church no longer existed in missionary vicariates, but in dioceses. In the same year, along with this great change, came the establishment of diplomatic relations between the Vatican and China. Pope Pius XII assigned Archbishop Antonio Riberi as the first nuncio to China. Moreover the Holy Father created 22 archbishops and 79 bishops. He

also appointed Bishop Tian Gengxin as China's first Cardinal, the first Chinese to receive this title and East Asia's first Cardinal.

Speaking from the aspect of the church, the apostles, in Jesus' name went throughout the whole world to preach the Gospel and to teach all nations. No one made distinctions about what was one's own and what was another's. Was not the early church all comprised of Jews? Were the apostles out for their own glory? From the point of view of the church's center in Rome, its glory comes from the preaching of the great apostles Peter and Paul. In the eyes of the Romans were not Peter and Paul both foreigners? The church is the Body of Christ. Those who pass on the message and those who receive it both exist in this Body. There is no need to distinguish between nationality and skin color.

When the church has sunk roots and grown to maturity in a place, that place will naturally produce its own clergy. Finally native bishops and a local hierarchy will make an appearance. This is in accordance with a natural process of growth. Before this process is completed you cannot pull up the seedlings to make them grow faster. After the completion of the process, you cannot remain unconcerned. For this, the reigning Pontiff has the help of the Holy Spirit to give directions and guidance.

The localization of the church is a demonstration of its catholicity. Catholicity does not mean loss of unity. The mustard seed of the Catholic Church has grown into a large tree which overshadows the whole world. The birds of the air come from north, south, east and west to rest in its branches. Indicating the apostles and those who would believe because of the apostles' preaching, Jesus prayed to His heavenly Father: "May they all be one."

Recalling the history of the past few decades, we have seen that the church's leader, the Holy Father, has put much effort into the localization and the sinicisation of the church. However, a sinicised church is still as you, Holy Father, have described it yourself: "A living part of the one Mystical Body of Christ."

But for various reasons, not the least of which is the desire to preserve their own authority, political powers throughout history, have sought to divide up the Body of Christ. In the territories they govern they try to have administrative jurisdiction over the church. Therefore phrases like: "the nation is greater than the church," "such and such a

country's national church," "the state-run church," or "autonomous church" are not isolated cases. Some terms are more naked, while others are more suave. But the object is always the same: to make use of the church for their own purposes. Their "self" is not "self" from the church's standpoint; rather it is the "self" of the state or of the political authority.

At the present time, the problem faced by our Chinese Catholic Church is not whether or not to become localized. Clearly it is the question of the local church being asked to separate itself from the authority of the Holy Father and of becoming obedient to the government in religious matters.

You, Holy Father, sent a message to us which said in part: "Unity springs from conversion of the heart and from sincere acceptance of the unchanging principles laid down by Christ for his Church. Particularly important among these principles is the effective communion of all the parts of the Church with her visible foundation: Peter, the Rock. Consequently, a Catholic who wishes to remain such and to be recognized as such cannot reject the principle of communion with the Successor of Peter."

We constantly have this teaching before our eyes. Although we have difficulties, are subject to pressure, and face dangers, our identity as Christians cannot change. We are extremely grateful to the Holy Father for the recognition and support that he has given us.

Towards our fellow citizens, especially towards those who in knowledge and activity are not the same as us, we will definitely harbor the "brotherly love" mentioned by the Holy Father, and have compassion, forgiveness and reconciliation towards them.

"Unity" is the appeal Jesus made before his passion and death. They were words spoken from the bottom of his heart. We will bear them forever in our hearts. Not forgetting our communion with the Holy See, we will strive to bring our brothers and sisters who have gone astray back to the one fold under the one shepherd, so that together we can praise Jesus for all eternity.

In accordance with the development of the world situation, as humankind enters the 21st century, the Vatican has appealed for the focus of evangelization to be placed on Asia, and of course, this means on China which makes up more than one-fifth of the world's population. Taking advantage now of the 70th anniversary of the

ordination of the first group of Chinese bishops and the 50th anniversary of the establishment of the Chinese hierarchy, and relying on the advocacy of our heavenly mother Mary, "Queen of China," we offer up our prayers and sacrifices. We beseech the Sacred Heart of Jesus to grant our petition, expressed in the midst of difficulties, to see with our own eyes "the coming of the kingdom of the Sacred Heart of Jesus in China!"

May 11, 1996

The Feast of Our Lady of China

