

Pope John Paul II and the Unity of the Catholic Church in China

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The Church in China is divided. If it were otherwise, the Pope would not have appealed for unity on several occasions in recent years. Furthermore, his appeals have become increasingly strong, even to the point of demanding concerned persons to make spiritual preparations to bring it to realization. This essay contains no new ideas. It merely gathers into one article various ideas from two of the Holy Father's talks. For the sake of clarity this essay is divided into three parts: (1) the Pope's appeal for unity made in 1995; (2) the response to this appeal; (3) the appeal repeated in 1996.



1. The Call for unity made in 1995

In January 1995 the Pope arrived in Manila adding solemnity to the celebration of World Youth Day. At an occasion celebrating the silver jubilee of Radio Veritas in Manila, the Pope addressed the Catholics of China.¹ It was obvious that he had an excellent grasp of the situation of the China church. He spoke with brotherly affection to the Catholics in China, asking them to

express love which consists of understanding, respect, forbearance, forgiveness and reconciliation within the Christian Community, a love which involves service, self-sacrifice, fidelity, hard work, honesty, and justice in society as a whole—a genuine love that cannot be separated from truth.”²

The Pope also pointed out that Christian love has an intimate link with love of one's compatriots. Using reconciliation as his theme, the Pope explained unity in the church:

Unity is not the result of human policies or hidden and mysterious intentions. Instead, unity springs from conversion of the heart, and from sincere acceptance of the unchanging principles in the effective communion of all 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."³

The Pope also revealed that he is well aware of the main reason for the church's division.

How many testimonies of faith, how many messages of fidelity I have received from communities throughout China! There are Bishops, priests, Religious and lay people who wished to reaffirm their unshakable and full communion with Peter and the rest of the Church.⁴

The Manila address elicited a response which I will cite below. Reconciliation and unity are, for many Catholics, especially Catholics in China, matter for prayer and reflection. The Pope himself seems ever mindful of them. In August of the same year (1995) in speaking to the bishops of the Taiwan Bishops Conference, he again reiterated the need for reconciliation and unity. First, he affirmed that the Church in China was united in faith with the universal church. He said:

I know that Catholic communities throughout China are united in faith with other Catholic communities throughout the world and that they pray for the Pope. In this way they express their recognition of the special characteristic of the Petrine office—that it is Christ's distinct will for His church.⁵

These words demonstrate that the Pope knows that faith is central for the Chinese Church, and that this Church exists in special circumstances with obvious constraints.

The Pope showed that he was also well aware of the division within the Church in China.

To show their complete fidelity to this truth the majority of Catholics in China have already chosen the painful and silent way of the cross. With deep and fervent love our heart turns towards these brothers and sisters of ours who have suffered greatly to express our thanks for their generous and courageous example.⁶

The Pope further expressed his concern for another smaller group of people. He said:

We hope and pray that other Catholics will use a reawakened faith and strength to work for a complete communion and unity with the universal church and the successor of Peter.⁷

Special attention should be paid to the Pope's words "a complete communion and unity". In April 1995 I wrote an article in *Tripod*, no. 86 entitled "Can Mainland China's Official Church Still be Called Catholic?" It contained some theological reflections about the structural-institutional aspect of the 'official' Catholic Church in mainland China.⁸ Those who read the article with understanding, and who paid special attention to the "Preliminary Remarks" would know that the question mark at the end of the title did not necessarily indicate either a positive or negative response. The Catholic Church contains many and varied elements some of which may not always be completely preserved in some communities that call themselves Catholic.

2. Response to the Pope's appeal

The Pope's 1995 appeal for reconciliation and unity within the Chinese Church attracted considerable attention and many responses. This first outpouring of interest has somewhat lessened, and the present article does not propose to exhaust the subject. In discussing the Holy Father's call for unity and reconciliation, I will limit myself to summarizing three articles taken from *Tripod*.⁹

A seminarian now studying abroad, Wang Yandao, wrote an article entitled *Division and Unity Within the Catholic Church in China*.¹⁰ Looking over the situation he saw the church divided into three segments: the underground, the official and the open churches. In his opinion, it mattered little to average Catholics what segment they belonged to. They wanted simply “to worship God and save their souls.”¹¹ For him the clergy played a crucial role. He considered that, although many bishops belonged to the government recognized official church, their hearts were not with this church. Some of these bishops have even obtained official approval from the Vatican. Most of the priests, did nothing to offend against the principles of their faith in word or deed. However, Wang faults the bishops and priests of the open church for not openly upholding and expressing the complete contents of the Church’s faith.¹²

In Wang’s article the so-called official church refers to those who adhere to an independent autonomous church not under the leadership of the Roman Pontiff and that directs Catholics to follow the government slogan of “love country; love church”. How many of these Catholics are there?

Among the active bishops a rough figure would account for less than a third. For priests and laity the number would be even smaller. Some bishops and priests, who adhere strictly to the government line, are married. They are used to controlling the church, being paid high salaries to work for the government. Some so-called lay Catholics among them are in reality government cadres using the identity of the Patriotic Association and are paid a government salary. There is more than enough evidence to prove that there is no lack of Catholics who are so in name only, lukewarm in their faith, who belong to the Patriotic Association. They rarely come to church or receive the sacraments. Moreover, they are the ones who issue orders and manipulate the official church. They hold on to the leadership in the three official Catholic organizations and issue statements and documents in the name of the official church. However, the rest, the vast majority of clerics, pay no attention to their statements on public matters. This means that everything they do in the name of the official church holds no authority whatsoever for the faithful.¹³

Wang Yandao is very positive on the integrity of faith in the underground church. He says,

It is the only firm foundation of our holy Church in this great land of China and an important aspect of reconciliation and unity.¹⁴

What is Wang's view of reconciliation and unity or ways of promoting them? Unless mistaken, Wang seems to be saying :

First, we must seriously criticize and carefully expose the opinions and activities of those opposed to the faith and who divide the church (namely, the official church). We must let both the underground and open church come to recognize their inflexible nature and disagreeable features.¹⁵ Second, The open Church is the object of what we term reconciliation and unity.¹⁶ Third, The underground church is an important element for reconciliation and unity.¹⁷ To whom does this "we" Wang speaks of refer? It seems that none of the three entities into which he divides the Chinese Church is adequate. If this is so, is there any possibility of achieving reconciliation and unity?

In any case, of the three articles taken from *Tripod*, Wang's is the one that gives the most detailed exposition of reconciliation and unity, and this despite the obscurity of his "we". He also writes of "the basis for reconciliation" and "obstacles to unity" but these add nothing of substance to the discussion.¹⁸ We'll return to Wang later in this article.

The second article in the same issue of *Tripod* (Chinese section, no. 92; English, no. 99), there is an article written by the "Old Fisherman" entitled *See More Clearly, Love More Deeply*¹⁹ This comprehensive article analyzes the present situation of the Chinese Church, its internal relationships and external environment. Although the "Old Fisherman" knows of the Pope's appeal,²⁰ and endeavors to respond to it, he cannot help but add:

...This appeal of the Pope expresses both his love and deep concern for the loyal church, and his hopes in the official church. Obviously, the Pope does not want us only to pray. He wants us to take effective action; everybody must rebuild a love based on truth.

From the obstacles to unity mentioned in the first part of this essay, we know that the final solution must wait upon God's appointed time. However, nothing hinders both parties from eliminating negative elements and exerting all possible efforts to sow positive seeds. This will help effect whatever reconciliation may be possible at any given moment.²¹

The Old Fisherman's acknowledgment that "eliminating negative elements" and "sowing positive seeds" can help promote "some form" of unity is well worth considering.²² However, for him reconciliation and unity "can only wait upon God's appointed time." Not long after he wrote this article he went to his eternal reward. Upon reading the entire piece we can certainly understand the reasons for the division in the Church pointed out by the Old Fisherman. He wrote in his conclusion:

History has gone through myriad changes, but there is one constant: 'Rest assured, it is I, do not fear!' (Matthew 24:27). Who can resist the mighty hand that unites the entire universe? Winds blow and clouds drift here and there, but the final result is the same: Christ must conquer!"²³

The third article was written by Ye Sheng, a young Chinese priest. His article *Reconciliation in the Chinese Church—Reflections on Culture and Theology* is more difficult to read than the previous two articles. I already responded²⁴ to his article *We must Understand—Reflections After Reading Can Mainland China's Church Still Be Called Catholic?*²⁵ Ye Sheng is an energetic young man, blessed with many ideas but he is often obscure. It is not easy to know exactly what he means by reconciliation and unity, but I will still make a comment or two.

First, Ye Sheng separates reconciliation from unity. To say "reconciliation first, then unity" or that "reconciliation is the basis of unity" is not quite correct. Both are aspects of one reality. Integral reconciliation is equivalent to integral unity. (Ephesians 2:11–22) Though they differ conceptually, both point to the same reality. Ye cites Matthew 5:25 as well as other texts that speak of reconciliation, but these do not exclude both aspects being contained within the one reality of unity. Jesus prays that His followers be united (John 17:20–

22). This does not exclude the necessity for reconciliation.²⁶ What does Ye mean when he speaks extensively of “reconciliation”²⁷ without being exact when speaking of “unity”? What does he mean when he speaks of “complete and substantial unity”?²⁸ He even speaks of another reconciliation once the church herself has achieved reconciliation and unity²⁹ Owing to the intricacy of his thought and the dissimilarity between his and the two articles analyzed above, we will set Ye’s article aside for the moment.

Pope John Paul II’s thought on this matter is easier to understand. Furthermore, if we accept that “reconciliation is first, and then unity follows”, then the Pope’s appeal for unity is simply meaningless. In any case, such a purposeful young priest as Ye deserves applause.

There is still another voice that we should listen to—it is that of Bishop Han Qian.

Bishop Han Qian’s view of unity for the Chinese Church is “one flock and one shepherd”. He has stated this in two written statements. The first was *The Proposals of a Professor*³⁰ and the second, *A Letter to All the Bishops of the Country from a Diocesan Administrator*³¹. Although these two statements cannot be seen as a direct reply to Pope John Paul’s appeal, they are related to the question of unity. Although the two statements contain some minor discrepancies, their basic approach is the same. He says:

Today I once again take the liberty to express my humble opinion to my brother bishops throughout the country, and to the administrators of each diocese (whether recognized by the government or not)...let us announce publicly: we have returned to being one flock under one shepherd. Let us swear to be both loyal Christians and loyal Chinese citizens....Let us hold a meeting of all the bishops in the country to discuss the implementation of the decrees of the Second Vatican Council, and let us draw up concrete plans.³²

“Let China’s religious affairs be dealt with in China and not in the Vatican, but under the leadership of a personal representative of the Pope.”³³ We shall make use of Bishop Han’s second statement as

expressing his present thinking on this matter where he omits mention of the Pope's representative.

In concluding the second part of our essay, leaving aside Ye's article, we shall summarize in three points the thinking of the other three authors on reconciliation and unity.

1. Bishop Han's statement is the most straightforward, proposing to convene a meeting of the bishops and to proclaim that all are now one flock and one shepherd. After this is done, then all should work to implement the decrees of Vatican II.

2. According to the "Old Fisherman", it would be impossible for bishops "whether recognized by the government or not" to implement such an ideal under present government supervision, even granting that both sides were sincere in their desires. The only thing to do is to wait for "God's appointed time."

3. In Wang Yandao's triple analysis, the problem lies with what he terms the "official church". They are the minority; only one third of the bishops belong to this church. The number of priests and laity is even fewer. The other two elements are the underground church and the open church. The first is the important element and the basis on which to build reconciliation and unity. Bishops and priests belonging to the open church fail in their duty of not openly supporting the Pope and the orthodox teaching of the faith. They are the ones to be reconciled and united to the Church.

If we could in some way integrate these three proposals, it would seem that only the 'open church' and the 'official church' have the possibility and occasion of assembly. According to Wang Yandao the 'official church' controls the leadership of the three organizations exercising authority. These organizations are the Catholic Patriotic Association, the Bishop's Conference and the Catholic Church Administrative Affairs Commission. They are the minority. This seems to be the only place that Bishop Han's proposal has more of a possibility of implementation. The problem lies with those in the majority, those whom Wang calls the 'open church' whose bishops need to openly support the Pope and express the Church's orthodox faith. People can well ask whether the present situation would permit such a thing happening and what would be the results. However this is not Bishop Han's concern. With this summary in mind we can at least

“hope against hope” (Rom. 4:18) that the Pope’s appeal will be answered.

3. The Pope’s 1996 appeal

The Pope’s 1996 appeal took place on December 3, 1996, Francis Xavier’s feast day, the Apostle to East Asia, when John Paul II celebrated Mass in his private chapel. It also commemorated the 70th anniversary of the consecration of the first Chinese bishops and the 50th anniversary of the establishment of the Chinese hierarchy. The Pope’s speech was rich in meaning.³⁴ I shall excerpt some passages that bear close relationship to the theme of the present article. In summary we shall point out some of the Pope’s reflections on the Papacy and unity in the Chinese church. Because of its commemorative nature, the Pope on this occasion directly addresses the Bishops.

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. (Introduction)

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 yield to models of Church which do not correspond to the will of the Lord Jesus... (No. 2)

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. (No. 3)

Through ordination the Bishop receives the grace and the responsibility of his own pastoral ministry...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. (No. 3)

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? (No. 4)

Our aim in selecting these few passages from the Pope's eloquent address is to show the link with what we have stated in the latter part of section two in this article concerning reconciliation and unity. Basically these passages constitute an appeal to more than two thirds of the Bishops to safeguard "one flock and one shepherd" according to the public statement of Bishop Han. Regarding dialogue with the government, the Pope goes on to say:

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 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." (No. 7)

Facing the jubilee year 2000 this papal address can be said to be "his first witness to the faith he professes and proclaims." As

Supreme Leader of the Universal Church and Head of the Apostolic College of Bishops, he declares in all sincerity and frankness his thoughts, longings and fervent desires. Bishop Han's declaration seems to have anticipated the Pope's reflections on reconciliation and hopes for unity in the Church in China.

Conclusion

This article does not put forward new ideas but only assembles and arranges various materials. Articles cited in the second section are all taken from persons having direct experience in the Church in China and so have great value. Pope John Paul II's addresses on reconciliation and unity during the past two years have all focused on the Church in China. Gathering them into one article expresses the "hoping against hope" that St. Paul speaks about in his letter to the Romans. (Rom. 4:18) □

Endnotes

¹ To the Catholics of China: Message of Pope John Paul II, Manila, *Tripod*, no. 85, (Jan-Feb. 1995), pp.; 39-40.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ *Shandao Weekly*, Aug. 27, 1995, p. 1, paragraph 9.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ *Tripod*, no. 86 pp. 34-46.

⁹ *Tripod*, Chinese, no.92; English 93.

¹⁰ Op. cit., Wang Yandao, no. 92, pp. 36-41. (NB: cf. original Chinese version)

¹¹ Loc. cit., p. 38.

¹² Loc. cit., p. 39.

¹³ Loc. cit., p. 38.

¹⁴ Loc. cit., p. 40.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

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- ¹⁹ *Tripod*, no. 92, pp. 21-35 (NB: cf. original Chinese version)
- ²⁰ *Loc. Cit.*, p.29.
- ²¹ *Ibid.*
- ²² *Loc. Cit.*, pp. 30-35.
- ²³ *Loc. cit.* p. 35
- ²⁴ *Tripod*, no. 90, pp. 40-44.
- ²⁵ *Tripod*, no. 89, pp. 27-39.
- ²⁶ *Tripod* no. 92, pp. 5-7 (NB: cf. original Chinese version)
- ²⁷ *Loc. cit.*, p. 18.
- ²⁸ *Loc. cit.*, p. 7.
- ²⁹ *Loc. cit.*, p. 18.
- ³⁰ *Tripod*, no. 85 pp.41-45.
- ³¹ *Tripod*, no. 94 pp. 44-46.
- ³² *Loc. cit.*, pp. 45-46.
- ³³ *Tripod*, no. 85, p.42.
- ³⁴ For the entire English text cf. *Tripod*, no. 97, pp. 31-36.

