

## *Division and Unity in the Catholic Church in China*

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It is common knowledge that there is a division in the Catholic Church in Mainland China. There is the open church, recognized by the government; and the other, the clandestine church, which the government does not recognize. Some people call these two coexisting groups "two churches." Yet, if we examine the real situation and life of the Mainland church, and analyze it from the viewpoint of faith, we can say that there is only one Catholic Church in China.

### *One Church, Three Entities*

*The Underground Church:* We can distinguish three entities within this one church. Let us look first at the underground church. Even though the government is unwilling to recognize it or allow it to exist, it does exist throughout the length and breadth of China, with large numbers of faithful. In many places its members comprise the vast majority of Catholics.

The bishops in every one of its dioceses, and its Bishops Conference maintain communion with Rome. It has a substantial number of priests who assist its bishops, as well as Sisters and seminarians. It consciously aims to maintain the faith of our Holy Church in its entirety, and preserve communion with the Universal Church. Although it is oppressed and persecuted to varying degrees in different places both by the government and the Patriotic Association, this body will never be destroyed.

Many bishops, priests and laity do not fear sitting in jail or being humiliated. The life and witness to the faith of the underground church t give it its special role as prophet, priest and king.

*The Open Church* Next, let us look at the part recognized by the government or the open church. A quick glance reveals that it also has its own Bishops Conference, bishops for every diocese; its priests, as well as Sisters and seminarians.

Moreover, many Catholics come to churches that are in the hands of the official church to receive the sacraments. From the documents and regulations issued by three bodies: the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association, the Chinese Catholic Bishops Conference, and the Chinese Catholic Church Affairs Committee, the objectives are clear: to set up an independent, self-supporting and self-governing church, not under the Roman Pontiff, one which leads its faithful along the road of love of country and love of religion. As we can see from this objective, it obviously lacks communion with the Universal Church.

*“Unity is not the result of human policies  
or hidden and mysterious intentions...  
it springs from conversion of heart...”*

*(Pope John Paul II, Manila)*

Some of the bishops in the open church are members of the three official organizations. However, we know that many secretly maintain ties with Rome, expressing their communion with the Universal Church and their willingness to serve the Pope and follow his directives.

Moreover, some bishops have already been legitimized by Rome. This fact indicates that many bishops are physically in one camp while their heart is in another. They are not following the Patriotic Association with hearts of stone along the path towards a schismatic, independent and self-governing church.

We also know that the vast majority of priests in the open church do not agree with the three major organizations, whose aim is to oppose Holy Mother Church. They are only administering the sacraments for the laity and serving their faith life within the limited

freedom that the government allows. Neither by their words nor deeds do they oppose the principles of the faith of our Holy Church. Many priests even proclaim their unity with the Universal Church, either openly or privately. These priests are not at all like those opportunists who oppose our Holy Church. We also know that almost all the Catholics within the open church preserve the faith in its entirety, proclaiming that they personally belong to the body of Catholics under the Pope. Most of the faithful do not really pay much attention to the three church organizations. They go to church to receive the sacraments and satisfy their need for religion. The Patriotic Association has had an especially hard time spreading its influence in villages scattered across the countryside, where Catholics simply “want to worship God and save their souls”.

*The Official Church* Finally, let us look at those I call the independent, self-governing, schismatic church. How many 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. However, 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 little attention to their statements on public matters. This means that everything they do in the name of the official church holds no authority for the faithful.”

### *The China Church and its Three Entities*

We can distinguish three entities within the Church in China. One is the underground church, holding the faith in its entirety and

loyal to our Holy Church. Another is made up of those who are under the overall control of the Patriotic Association, but have not left the faith of our Holy Church. They definitely do not follow the Patriotic Association down the path of an independent, self-governing, schismatic church. They are willing to remain in communion with the Pope and accept his leadership -- this includes the vast majority of members of the open church. The third rejects the leadership of the Pope. This is a small crowd of extremists who are opposed to our Holy Church.

### *Clergy and laity in different circumstances*

There is no deep divergence in terms of faith among the broad masses of Catholics. Some people may say "But we know that there are in fact some conflicts and contradictions between the Catholics of the open and underground Church. Some even see these two groups as enemies, not on speaking terms." Although this may have some element of truth, still, their differences are the result of ignorance and feelings. They are not divergences in faith.

Perhaps some people will say "But the three main church organizations have issued statements and documents on numerous occasions in the name of the entire open church. Many open bishops and priests have attended meetings and served as representatives. Don't all those who attend the conferences, or who are named as members, bear some responsibility for these proclamations and documents?" When it comes to matters of faith, bishops and priests do bear the responsibility, and have the duty to set matters straight.

Speaking in Manila in January 1995, Pope John Paul II said:

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.

The Pope's statement of faith and his demand, grounded in dogma, should be a touchstone and norm for the true Catholic faith.

### *Addressing the current situation*

Although the open church is under the control and domination of the official church, they are not the same. Actually, the open church is our main hope for reconciliation and unity.

The suffering underground church, loyal to of our Holy Church, willing to sacrifice for faith and truth, is also an important avenue of hope for reconciliation and unity.

Perhaps someone will ask: "According to your divisions and analysis, the official church is not included so you see no hope in it as a source of reconciliation and unity?" But we answer. "Of course it is." We hope that the official church will also be reconciled to God and united to our church with all possible speed.

### *The foundation of reconciliation*

Jesus Christ is the foundation for reconciliation in the Church in Mainland China. Our church is a body of faith, yet the centre and foundation of our faith is Jesus Christ, both man and God. Without this centre of faith, there is no way for us to discuss church issues, let alone discuss the problem of reconciliation. Our faith is one, and our church is one. This church is one body harmoniously joined to our head, Jesus Christ, and to his representative on earth, the Pope. Anyone who denies and departs from this principle of faith, no matter in what manner he may express it, does not belong to this body of faith, the Catholic Church. Only when all of us move towards Jesus Christ will we have that secure foundation on which to achieve reconciliation.

### *Obstacles to unity*

We also know that after resolving problems of faith, there are still roadblocks to unity. These obstacles are in people. We cannot deny the deep faith of Catholics in China; the flame of faith leaps high

in their hearts. But fervor alone does not make our faith secure. Over and above zeal, we need knowledge of our faith. Indeed, there are many contradictions and mental barriers between Catholics in the open and in the underground church. The only practical way to eliminate the obstacles is to raise the level of the faith of both sides. As faith embraces more and more areas of life, the weaknesses of human nature will slowly but steadily diminish. The goal of unity can be obtained only through constant effort.

### *Conclusion*

Finally, let us summarize this article with a quotation from Pope John Paul II's talk in Manila to the Catholics of China

Genuine love however cannot be separated from truth....The profound unity that marks every Catholic community throughout the world must be based on the truth which shines forth in the Gospel and on the charity which is born in the heart of Christ.

Obviously, love does not reject truth, nor does truth do away with love. The entire task of reconciliation and unity in the church in Mainland China will be found in truth and in love. □

