

See More Clearly, Love More Deeply

The Old Fisherman

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Editor's note: Since Father A.B.Chang's article, pp.28-39 makes reference to an article previously published only in Chinese in Tripod, we thought it wise to include the English version in this issue. Due to limitations of space the English has been slightly condensed.

History travels in complex and changing cycles. It is very difficult to determine the exact meaning of any particular historical event, or to discover the rights and wrongs of any one historical figure. One act of carelessness can relegate a person to the company of the blind men who attempted to describe an elephant by feeling only one of its parts. None could give an accurate picture of the entire animal.

Understanding the official and unofficial church

The difficulty in understanding the unofficial and official church in China is due to their complex and changing situation.

Recently, there have been appeals from both sides of the Catholic Church in mainland China to put aside prejudices and work for unity. Why is there division? Why not unite? Where precisely is the problem? Everybody knows that before Liberation there was no official church. The official church is a political creature set up after the Liberation. It was not something the clergy or laity wanted, but something established in fear of an oppressive and powerful political regime. The Church on the mainland then began to divide into the open and underground church; the former opting for submission while the latter chose prison and exile.

After the Cultural Revolution the government's religious policy underwent some adjustment. Churchmen who completed their prison term or who were rehabilitated obtained some political breathing space. Most religious activities were no longer carried out in se-

cret. Fundamentally the Church on the mainland was now an open church (at least to some degree).

Today we ask, is it possible for the official and the non-official church to unite? To answer this question we must ask, what does unity mean?. (1) Should the non-official church be reunited to the official church? (2) Or should the official church be united to the non-official church? (3) Or should they co-exist with both parties cooperating in evangelization, avoiding mutual recriminations, and forming a relationship similar to what exists between Catholics and Protestants? We will now explore these various options..

Should the non-official church seek unity with the official church?

We must be clear on the historical antecedents of both segments of the church to know for sure whether they can unite.

In Socialism the Party is the overall leader. Its basic structure nationwide consists of all units and organizations, from the smallest to the largest. No unit or organization in the country can enjoy autonomy apart from the Party. Now, the highest leadership in the Catholic Church is precisely an authority that exists outside the country. This particular factor is something the Party cannot tolerate. The official church in the mainland can exist because it has broken relations with the Pope and become a reformed church¹ completely under the control of the government. The concrete expression of this leadership resides in the Catholic Patriotic Association.

All past campaigns against the Pope were instigated by the authorities. They obliged the Patriotic Association to organize small and large criticism sessions among Catholics to condemn so-called foreign hostile powers for interfering in China's internal affairs. On the surface these statements seem to come from the Catholic community. In reality the government was behind them. With the passage of time and changes in policy the government's treatment of the Church has occasionally been milder and more open, but the Party's overall leadership is still never in question. Without the dictatorship of a single Party, Socialism would not exist.

Once we grasp this idea, we can understand why it would be impossible for the official church to recognize the unofficial church. It is simply because it continues to maintain unity in religious matters

and recognizes, with the rest of the universal church that the Pope, is the highest leader in the church. To unite with the official church the unofficial church would have to declare itself a part of the reformed church, break off relations with the Pope, choose and consecrate its own bishops, and agree that episcopal consecrations done according to canon law are, in fact, interference in China's internal affairs.

The people who appeal to the unofficial church to put aside its prejudices and join the official church so as to give common witness to the gospel, know little about the present historical situation.

Should the official church seek unity with the non-official church?

Is it possible for the official church to unite with the non-official church? Some clergy in the official church who have lost their faith may be tools of the government, but most of the clergy in the official church fervently desire to be in full communion with the Pope. They really want episcopal consecrations to be performed according to canon law and not imposed by the government. Many bishops and priests, including recently ordained young priests, through various channels, have petitioned the Holy See for full communion. There are however, many psychological and political problems to be overcome.

Within the existing political situation, the elements dividing the two parties lie not with the church but with the government. Therefore those who tied the bell on the tiger should remove it.

Coexistence of the official and unofficial church

The third way of union is peaceful coexistence and cooperation in the work of evangelization with relations similar to those that exist between Catholic and Protestant churches. However, the past forty years have brought mutual relations to an impasse. Criticisms made in foreign Catholic publications by well meaning persons, but ignorant of the real situation, have only aggravated the situation.

First we must realize that the unofficial church operates in the open but it is not recognized by the government. Bishops and priests who carry out services in private homes are often harassed. Although conditions differ in various localities with controls being tight or loose as the case may be, the unofficial church is still considered illegal. Some municipal authorities know the real situation and see no need to

cause Catholics further trouble. There are other authorities who harass Catholics, making it impossible for them to practice their religion. The result is frequent open confrontation.

Another question to ponder is whether the clergy in the official church are completely free. When these clergy meet with foreign guests they often must do so in the presence of cadres from the Patriotic Association. Later they must give an account of their conversation. If they have frequent contacts with clergy from the unofficial church, they fall under suspicion and are liable to questioning. Some official church clergy complain that the underground church has more freedom than the open church and that no one controls them whereas the open church is always under the scrutiny of the Patriotic Association. Can one speak of cooperation under these circumstances?

In the nineties, in a few places the unofficial church hardly experienced any harassment. In other areas the official and unofficial churches were at open odds. In some cities and towns the churches under the control of the Patriotic Association were almost empty whereas Catholics, daily increasing in large numbers, continually received the sacraments from the clergy of the unofficial church in their homes. In some reformed churches Catholics did not attend the Bishop's Mass because he was married, but they did take part in the Masses celebrated by a young priest trained in the official seminaries because he openly avowed that Catholics could not separate from the Pope. In other cities churches under the control of the Patriotic Association were filled with Catholics but almost all of them admitted they were not joining the reform. They came solely because they could not find a priest from the unofficial church.

Acting in accord with Rome's *Eight Directives* they went to this church since the priest there did not urge them to join the reform and he himself proclaimed his loyalty to the Pope. Some Bishops released from prison said that the government did not force them to renounce the Pope or join the Patriotic Association. They said they could openly evangelize as long as they did so in the churches of the Patriotic Association. Since the circumstances are so varied, one cannot evaluate them only using one single norm. These instances allow us to examine the following questions.

(1) What is the difference between the reformed Church in China and the Protestant Churches? The Protestant leadership, i.e.,

the clergy, is united with the laity in faith and belong to one body, professing one set of beliefs. The reformed church's leadership, the Patriotic Association, on the other hand, does not necessarily profess the same faith as do the faithful who attend the services. Catholics unavoidably go to their churches to pray and receive the Sacraments, but they have not deserted the Pope. The division exists on the leadership level and not among the faithful. The official and unofficial churches are the same when it comes to doctrine, morals, liturgy and pastoral practice. Politics causes this division, not theology. Therefore the obstacles to unity between the two churches are not as complex or difficult as between the Catholic and Protestant churches. Once the government relaxes its control, the problem can be readily resolved.

(2) Allow me to comment on two recent incidents. A bishop from a diocese in the South after being released from prison said that the government did not force him to sever relations with the Pope or to join the Patriotic Association. They also allowed him to carry on his ministry as long as he worked through the church under the control of the Patriotic Association.

The magazine, *Voice of the Clergy*, reported another incident. On December 5, 1996, Bishop Pan Deshi, of the open church, boldly made the following statement before several thousand Catholics, four bishops and ten officials of the local Religious Affairs Bureau:

Our faith absolutely binds us to serve the Pope and preserve communion with the universal church. We shall always believe that the Pope is the head of the Church, that when he teaches according the Bible and tradition he cannot err when proclaiming matters of faith and morals. Therefore we shall always follow the Pope in matters of faith even though this means that we sacrifice our lives.

These two incidents seem contrary to the way the government has been dealing with the Catholic Church. Now, everybody can return to the bosom of Holy Mother Church! The religious policy stated in Documents Nineteen, Six and Three² at least in tone, are generally milder, more reasonable than the original Party pronouncements on religion. Nevertheless, their essential aim remains the same: The documents constantly repeat:

...The underground strength of the Catholic Church comes mainly from the Bishops secretly appointed by Rome, the priests ordained by these same bishops and the core members whom they control. They take most of their cues from their belief in the Pope and disagree that the Chinese Church should be autonomous and self-governing...therefore we must actively initiate appropriate steps to advance the work of winning over and uniting the majority and be determined to wipe out reactionaries... regarding bishops and priests in the underground we must strive to use strategies to convince them or divide them, going after them one by one.” (Document Three) “...we must unite and rely on the strength of religious patriots to divide and isolate hostile forces, win over and unite those under their control, segregating the few leaders of the minority.” (Document Six)

Since we know that government policies are always coherent, we know what criteria the government will use on this question of communion with the Pope. The two incidents previously mentioned seem to say that the government is abandoning its criteria and discarding its consistent policy. However it is reasonable for people to ask for verification. Since the underground church is not recognized, it has no way of holding a dialogue with official bishops. Furthermore some forty years of experience with the United Front strategies, and the Religious Affairs Bureau and Patriotic Association have made the underground Bishops cautious in their dealings. They will hardly believe such a change has taken place unless this is verified by the Holy See.

If the government has indeed changed its policies, one of the basic obstacles to unity would certainly be removed, something that the entire underground church has been hoping for all along! The prestige of the government would be greatly enhanced, if this were true, and it would win the hearts of people. Finally this would remove the long standing aversion the underground church has felt towards the government and make for greater unity.

Some maintain that a certain number of bishops in the official church have privately asked the Holy See for restoration of communion. They have regained peace of mind and have made the underground church very happy. However this restoration is not public and thus creates some difficulties in the pastoral field. They remain in

their original posts and still depend on the authorities. How they can square their promise to the Pope with their present situation, and clarify their position with the underground church—are matters that must be resolved in their conscience before the Lord. Their position also causes confusion because many underground Catholics do not know the actual situation and consider these bishops as belonging to the official church. Other underground Catholics, who know the situation, go to their churches and receive the sacraments. This, in turn, causes division.

In another incident, a priest from the unofficial church was invited by the official church to take charge of a parish and was told that he would not have to join the Patriotic Association, sever relations with the Pope and could carry out his ministry as he wished. After careful consideration he made up his mind to try it out. It never worked since the Patriotic Church officials dogged his footsteps. After a short period of time he left the parish in anger and returned home.

In general we can say that the situation of the Catholic Church in mainland China is very complex. Only when China and the Vatican restore diplomatic relations will these problems find a reasonable solution.

The April 27, 1995, issue of Taiwan's *Catholic Life* published the talk of the Pope to the Taiwan Bishops on their *ad limina* visit. He said:

For my part, I know that the Catholic community throughout China, in union of faith with the rest of Catholic Church, prays for the Pope. It recognizes in this way the specific nature of the Petrine ministry as an essential aspect of Christ's will for his Church. But the great majority of Chinese Catholics, precisely in order to live this fidelity in fullness, have chosen the path of suffering and silence. With deep affection, our hearts turn to these brothers and sisters of ours who suffer great hardship, thankful for their generous and heroic example. We hope and pray that also the others will work with renewed faith and strength for full communion and unity with the Universal Church and the Successor of Peter...I know that many are wondering how this reconciliation can come about. All need to move; all have to turn to Jesus Christ, who calls us to unity and communion. Everyone must

discover the steps that lead to reconciliation. Everyone must bring along his whole self, his past, his moments of courageous witness and his hopes for a better future. What we are speaking of is a long and difficult journey. The goal is clear enough, but the path leading to it still seems obscure. We need to invoke the light of the Spirit and to let ourselves be guided by his inspiration...At the same time, I renew the assurance of my love, encouragement and good wishes to all the Catholic members of the greater Chinese family. If these brothers and sisters of ours already pray for the Pope and in some way recognize in him the special ministry of Peter, how much longer will it be before he can embrace them and confirm them in faith and unity³?

This appeal of the Pope expresses both his love and 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 all the obstacles to unity mentioned in the first part of this essay, we must know that the final solution must wait upon God's appointed time. However, nothing hinders both parties from first 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.

Building a reconciliation based on love; clarification of several concepts

The Communists' wish to destroy religion must be set against the background of recent history in order to understand its various ramifications. At the beginning of the Liberation, especially during the Cultural Revolution, there were vigorous attempts to destroy religion. After the Cultural Revolution the government adopted the policy of letting religion die a natural death. "We must let the question of religious belief become one of individual choice, the private affair of each citizen." (Document 19) Since the post-Cultural Revolution reform began, we must admit that the government has essentially lived up to this policy. Across the country one will not find articles in newspapers and other media attacking religion. There has been a sharp rise in conversions to Christianity. In some years the celebration of Christ-

mas has even been more lively than the celebration of the lunar new year although it is more commercial than religious. Even the number of Communists converting to Christianity has increased. The number of Catholics has sharply increased from the three to four millions of the pre-liberation period to over ten million today.

God created all men and women out of love. There is no doubt that the command to love others as oneself also includes Communists. To love in this way is to be loyal servants of God.

If we must love the Communists, how much more must we love our brothers and sisters in the official church who have been sealed by the sacraments of Baptism and Holy Orders. We must find some way to resolve this question by adjusting our thinking.

Let us begin from an accurate knowledge of the actual relationships between the two churches. Lin Ruiqi in an essay in his book, *Lord of the Church: Through Darkness And Light*, entitled "The Attitude of the Underground Church Towards the Official Church" writes: "Underground priests do not recognize that the official church is another church; they only say that some public organizations of this church are not recognized by the Pope, hence their criticism of it."

A few members of the unofficial church may say this, but in reality the great majority of Catholics call the official church a "schismatic" church. Of course this does not meet the definition of schism as stated in canon law. These Catholics simply consider that when the open church proclaims that it withdraws from the universal church, severs communion with the Pope and takes an adversarial position regarding him, judging the Holy See to be a hostile power—after all these three points define the official church—it is in fact a "schismatic church". This is how the unofficial church looks at the official church.

And what about the official church? How does it look upon the unofficial church? The leaders in the official church are obliged to act according to the government's internal documents, taking the government's position. At certain meetings some bishops of the official church have petitioned the government to arrest all the clergy of the underground church and wipe out all their activities. In some areas officials of the Patriotic Association have even gone into the alleys and byways and forced Catholics to go to the open churches for Mass.

In brief, both sides are sharply divided, mutually antagonistic even to the point of verbal abuse.

Christ's attitude in facing problems

How can the unofficial church respond to the Pope's plea for reconciliation?

(1) *Christ's attitude towards sinners should be ours.* The Bible tells us how Jesus' disciples were entering a Samaritan village when the inhabitants refused them hospitality. The disciples asked the Lord to call down fire from heaven to destroy them. This is a human reaction, but Jesus rebuked them. This is Christ's attitude. The prodigal son was leading a life of luxury and dissipation. After he had exhausted all his father's fortune living abroad he had to look after pigs to survive. The father on his part had always hoped that his son would return, and when he did, he embraced him and prepared a banquet for him. This is Christ's way of acting. When the elder son saw this he refused to join in the festivities, thinking this black sheep had no conscience and should be cast out of the house. This is the human way of acting. When the good shepherd discovered that one of his sheep had strayed, he immediately set out to find it. He carried it back on his own shoulders and called his friends together for a joyful feast. This is the way of Christ. When Judas betrayed Jesus with a kiss in the garden at night Jesus gently but sadly gave him a last appeal: "Do you with a kiss betray the son of man?" This is the way of Jesus.

Clearly then a loyal Catholic must act like Christ when dealing with the brothers and sisters who have gone astray either because they weakened under government pressure or made an errors of judgment.

(2) *Be very wary of being caught up in clan factions.* Among isolated and backward villages in China's interior there is much clan fighting.. These antagonisms are passed down from one generation to the next and serve to show loyalty towards the clan. Such hatreds often end in murder.

The common factor in those who lack the spirit of Christian love is hate whereas the central point for a true Christian is to endeavor to be filled with Jesus' spirit of love.

(3) *Don't let the devil get the advantage!* Wherever there is division there is the devil. The family is by nature the place where

family members gather in harmony to enjoy God's peace. When the devil sows seeds of distrust and misunderstanding the family then becomes a small battlefield. Our large family, the unofficial church, has suffered an intense drawn out persecution. The members have developed a spirit of self-defense and of reacting to events. The unofficial Church is always suspicious of Patriotic Catholics secretly penetrating its community, digging out news and creating confusion. Because of this some Catholics, seeing good Catholics talking with people from the Patriotic Association or going to reformed churches for Mass, begin to suspect that they are becoming friends of the Patriotic Association or have even joined it. One thing leads to another, and before you know it, the brother or sister is unwittingly excluded and treated with coldness and discrimination. They are unwelcome to take part in their own Masses.

During these extraordinary times one must follow what canon law says and the *Eight Directives* of the Holy See. It is permissible under certain conditions to go the reformed churches to receive the sacraments. To say that under no condition can one go to their churches to receive the sacraments is to go against canon law and the church's directives. No one questions the orthodoxy of one's faith if in ordinary life one has normal relations with others. To speak with a thief is not to become a thief. By dealing with an atheist one does not become an atheist. To visit a sick person who belongs to the Patriotic Association does not mean becoming a Patriotic Christian. This is very simple common sense.

Hold to the truth in love

Up to now we have been clarifying our viewpoint on China's official and unofficial churches. Why are they divided? Why don't they unite? How can we realize Jesus' teaching on love in our relationships with the two parties? Overseas churches have written many articles on unity and the church on the mainland. They hope for the unity of the two segments. Their sincerity is deeply moving. However they often reveal a lack of understanding of the political situation behind which each group operates.

In mainland China the government completely controls the activities of the official church and its working policies. Therefore if people think the open and underground churches can meet together

and “have everybody sit down in peace and harmony to hold a dialogue” they are sorely mistaken even if both parties were willing to do so. As far as the unofficial church is concerned, the government does not recognize it so how can it allow the official church to sit down and talk with an illegal organization?

Our task at the present time is to set forth clearly the objective nature of the official and unofficial churches and scrutinize the position of each regarding orthodoxy. This will help all avoid confusion and provide a clear and reliable norm for accepting truth. Fr. A.B. Chang’s article “Can the Official Church on the China Mainland Still Be Called the Catholic Church?” and a response to it entitled “An Answer to ‘Can the Official Church on the China Mainland Still Be Called the Catholic Church?’” uses tightly knit logic, and copious quotes from several sources, to penetrate each level of contradiction. These articles also summarize the important problems that have occurred during these past years. Both articles are well worth studying.

Finally, the best way to solve these problems is for everybody to reflect on St. Paul’s saying: “Hold to the truth in love.” (Ephesians 4:15) The least iota of the truth must be preserved for love to grow stronger. True love is a silent strength that can overcome anything.⁴

The historical process undergoes myriad changes but there is only one constant. “Do not be afraid, it is I, do not fear!” (Mt. 14:27). Who can withstand the all-powerful ruler of the universe? Storms may come and go but the result is always the same: Christ will conquer!

Endnotes

¹ The term used in Chinese translates as the “Reform Church” or “Reformed Church”. In English this term can be readily mistaken for the Protestant Church. But from the context the author is clearly referring to the official Catholic Church under the control of the patriotic Association. This latter meaning should be kept in mind throughout the entire article wherever the term “reformed church” or its variants are used. Trsl.

² For the English translations of these documents cf. Appendices of *Lord of the Church: through darkness and light*

³ For the full English text of *Tripod*, No. 89, Sept.-Oct. 1995, pp. 3-9.