

# *An “Independent, Autonomous and Self-Administered” Church*

## *An Evaluation of the Principle*

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For some time the Church in China has followed the principle of “independence, autonomy and self-administration” in accordance with the nation’s conditions.<sup>1</sup> But the nation’s conditions can change and church principles can be mitigated. In time even certain principles may lose their significance. This article will not discuss Church structure and systems in China,<sup>2</sup> but will focus on this principle only. This article will be divided into three parts: (I) a brief review and analysis of the situation, (II) Pope John Paul’s care and concern for the church in China, and (III) future hopes and expectations.



### *I. A Brief Review and Analysis of the Situation*

#### **(1) Three-Self Patriotic Movement**

When the People’s Republic of China was first established, it was isolated from the rest of the world. It is not strange, therefore, that it took a very defensive stance. Furthermore, the humiliation brought about by the Opium War and the aggression of the Western powers was still fresh in mind. It was quite natural, for national policy to reject imperialism, and be alert to any foreign power that could harm the nation’s dignity.

Fr. Wang Liangzuo, a Chinese Catholic priest, made a declaration in Guangyuan County, Sichuan Province, on November 30, 1950. He proposed setting up a new church under the principle of

“self-administration, self-support, and self-propagation.” Although his declaration mentioned the need of “cutting all connections with imperialism” his main aim was to enable the Church in China to survive even without the help of foreign missionaries.<sup>3</sup>

The government immediately supported the “Guangyuan Declaration” and began to pressure the Catholic Church to carry out the “three-self patriotic movement.” On January 17, 1951, Premier Zhou Enlai spoke on this issue: “This is a movement in which patriotic religious people are taking part. We must break off all relations with those countries that are our enemies, and clearly define who these enemies are.”<sup>4</sup>

In March 1951, the Nanjing Diocese also came out with a declaration. To the three-self principle was added “opposition to the Vatican’s interference in China’s internal affairs, and the determination to cut off all political and economic relations with the Vatican.” We should note that this declaration included only political and economic relationships. In principle religious relations with the Vatican could be maintained. Thus a patriotic movement aimed at the Western powers ended up by also affecting the Pope, and subsequently his representative in China, Archbishop Antonio Riberi. Riberi was expelled from China, and China and the Vatican severed diplomatic relations.

As events developed, it was not clear whether the three-self patriotic movement was only political patriotism or whether it was already coming into conflict with the Catholic faith. In any case on June 2, 1951, Fr. Dong Shizhi made his “Profession of Faith” in Chongqing. At a meeting of the three-self movement, he said, The three-self movement has broken links with the hierarchy. Today they want us to attack the Pope’s representative Archbishop Riberi; tomorrow they may require us to attack Jesus’ representative, the Pope; I see no reason why they won’t ask us later to deny God.”<sup>5</sup>

## **(2) Independence, Autonomy and Self-Administration**

This article will not cover the situation of the Catholic Church in China after 1951. We will proceed directly to the development of the “three-self patriotic movement.” In 1957, the “Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association” was set up in Beijing. The Association passed the following important resolution at its first meeting.

“The Catholic Church in China must implement a policy of autonomy and independence, whereby Chinese Catholics, cleric and

lay, take charge of their own affairs. With our country’s independence and dignity foremost in mind, we shall maintain purely religious relations with the Vatican. We shall obey the Pope in matters pertaining solely to the Catholic faith and Church law. However, we shall sever all political and economic ties with the Vatican and resolutely oppose its use of religious pretext and other underhanded activities to intervene in our country’s internal affairs, violate our country’s sovereignty and disrupt our just cause of opposing imperialism and promoting patriotism.”<sup>6</sup>

The second meeting in 1962 adopted the principle of “independence, autonomy and self-administration.” But as the above quote testifies, the clergy and lay people who attended the first meeting affirmed the “separation of religious and political affairs”. Naturally they did not want to see a conflict between “the nation’s interests, dignity and independence” and “the Church’s dogma and teaching.” But what would happen if such a conflict did occur?

Thirty years have passed since the principle of “independence, autonomy and self-administration” was first laid down. During this period, China has experienced the catastrophe of the Cultural Revolution, and Deng Xiaoping’s liberal policy. Today, China stands confidently among the world’s great powers. Under the government’s new religious policy, the Catholic Church is experiencing a revival. However, the principle that was laid down thirty years ago still remains intact. The constitution of the Catholic Bishops’ Conference says, “The Catholic Bishops’ Conference is the leading national structure for church affairs of the Chinese Catholic Church. In accordance with the Bible and based on the traditional spirit of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church, its purpose is to ... implement the principle of independence, autonomy and self-administration according to the situation in China...”<sup>7</sup>

### **(3) Basic Theological Analysis**

After having briefly reviewed the thirty years of the Catholic Church in China, from the “three-self movement” to “independence, autonomy and self-administration,” I will now analyze the problem from the viewpoint of Vatican II ecclesiology.

*The “Three-self movement” and “autonomous self-administration”*: Since Pope Pius XII established the hierarchy in 1946, “localization” has become very common in clerical circles. “Self-administration, self-support and self-propagation” is the direc-

tion that “localization” should take in individual churches. This principle shows that the universal church embraces and unites all cultures, under the head of the apostles, with the Bishop of Rome as the center of leadership. Autonomy, self-administration and the three-self movement is not something different; it is, in fact, the principle underlying the “localization” of the church.

In each local church, the bishop of the diocese is the chief pastor. In his own diocese he is the highest authority charged with sanctifying, teaching and administration. Since he is a member of the College of Bishops, his concern for each local church and the Universal Church forms a relationship of interdependence. According to the wish of Christ, the Bishop of Rome, the Pope, leads the universal church, which is a communion of all the individual churches. The head of the church together with all bishops forms the College of Bishops of the Universal Church, which is the highest authority upholding unity in the Universal Church. It is right to say that the Pope, being head of the College of Bishops, is the head of the Universal Church.<sup>8</sup> He is always in communion with the College of Bishops. This is what Vatican II teaches about hierarchical communion. This structure enables the Catholic Church to maintain its characteristics of being one, holy, catholic, and apostolic. At the same time individual and local churches are united as one. This also promotes “localization” in that local churches remain autonomous and self-administering, whereas unity and communion are maintained through the leadership of the Pope and the College of Bishops. This is precisely what St. Paul means when he says, “There is no difference between Jews and Gentiles...” (Gal. 3:28). The Church integrates itself into different cultures through local churches. However, it is not bound to any one culture. Therefore we can say that the church is not a culture itself since it belongs to all cultures, otherwise it cannot be called catholic.

***Independence, autonomy and self-administration in the Universal Church:*** Within certain limits, autonomy and self-administration is the principle behind the church’s activity and life. Jesus Christ founded the church and, under his guidance and mission, it is by nature religious. Because it is religious, it is autonomous and self-administering, and “it does not belong to the world” (Jn. 17:14). However, it is not “removed from the world” (Jn.17:15). The church makes statements on economic and political matters, and because it is not removed from the world, it also speaks and acts on economic

and political matters. Nevertheless, all that it says and does on all these issues must be based on Biblical principles and the traditions of the faith. Since this is so, it does not come under any worldly power. In theory, then, this holds true if we are talking about the Church’s independence, autonomy, and self-administration. However, in reality, since it is not removed from the world, its “independence” should not be overemphasized, lest it give the impression that the church is aloof and distant from the world. Church structure is such that local churches are interdependent. Furthermore to avoid misunderstanding, we should avoid speaking of the local church as independent. Our explanation shows how the principle of independence, autonomy, and self-administration can have meaning viewed in light of the ecclesiology of Vatican II. But how has this principle developed in China and what does it mean?

***“Independent, autonomous and self-administration” of the Church in China:*** Let’s view the development of the principle from the “three-self patriotic movement” to “independence, autonomy and self-administration.” Autonomy and self-administration are derived from “localization,” but the notion of “independence” does not proceed from any religious consciousness; it arises instead from the nation’s condition. On the one hand, due to its isolation in the early days of the establishment of the People’s Republic of China, China was highly defensive and harbored a strong animosity towards outside forces. It put great emphasis on the independent sovereignty of the nation, and would brook no interference in its internal affairs. Furthermore, the government saw that religion would be a reactionary force and an obstacle to revolution, since communist ideology considers religion to be a product of capitalist ideology. The Chinese government had to control all religious activities in the country, and cut off all outside influences. Zhou Enlai’s speech in 1951 supported the three-self movement that integrated both of these aspects.

Looking back at history, the principle of self-administration, self-support and self-propagation, which is similar to autonomy and self-administration, in fact originated from the ecclesial principle of “localization.” As for “independence,” it originated from the political situation in the country at the time. It is not strange then that the Church in China that linked “independence, autonomy and self-administration” as a single principle caused tensions and even conflicts. This can be seen from the resolution taken at the first meeting of the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association in 1957. On the one

hand it says: "With our country's independence and dignity foremost in mind, we...shall obey the Pope in matters pertaining solely to faith and church law. However, the present constitution of the Catholic Bishop's Conference speaks of basing its stance "on the traditional spirit of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church" while "implementing the principle of independence, autonomy and self-administration." The clergy and lay people at the time thought that both of these principles could be supported without much of a problem,<sup>9</sup> but what, in fact, actually happened?

Between 1957 to 1962, when the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association held its first and second meetings, there was a consecration of bishops without papal authority. There is no need to mention all the details here. Nevertheless, China now has its own policy of "the Chinese Catholic Bishops' Conference consecrating bishops."<sup>10</sup> Isn't this a consequence of independence? This consecration of bishops without proper papal authority does not stem at all from the principle of "localization" by an autonomous and self-administrating church. Otherwise how can one explain the fact that so many bishops who had been consecrated without papal authority later secretly sought papal approval? This shows that the existing policy of consecrating bishops without papal approval stems rather from China's claim to its independence and dignity, refusing to give ground to any political move from the Vatican.

Furthermore, it is difficult to see how existing church policy and structure in China are in line with the licit principle of "localization" of individual churches.<sup>11</sup> What it does express is actually contrary to the traditional spirit of a church that is one, holy, catholic and apostolic. Under these circumstances, almost all links between the Church in China and its College of Bishops and the Holy See are cut off. Can we still call this policy and structure "Catholic"? Perhaps it should be considered instead a constitution more in line with nationalism and a country's independence.

In brief, the principle of "independence, autonomy and self-administration" intrinsically bears all the elements for conflict, which is actually the case of the Church in China. "Autonomy and self-administration" is in line with the characteristics of the church's "localization." However to add the word "independence" to the formula, owing to political expediency, is not compatible with "localization" and will affect the church's integrity. This is not the nature of an "autonomous and self-administering" church. Our analysis brings us

to the question of how this intrinsic conflict can be overcome. I fear this is something that the Church in China cannot deal with alone.

This article has so far been making a theological analysis of an "independent, autonomous and self-administering" church. But the principle of an "independent, autonomous and self-administering" church as defined by the Church in China manifests an interpretation that is completely dictated by the government policy on religious affairs. Its meaning whether in official documents or speeches of national leaders, is strange and incompatible with the ecclesiology of Vatican II. In China, the aim of this principle is merely to confirm that religion, in a country like China that has its independent sovereignty, is no different from any other internal affair. It is completely under government direction and control. We run across phrases such as "China is an independent, autonomous and self-administering country."<sup>12</sup> Therefore we must be aware that the formula stating "independence, autonomy and self-administration" for the Church in China is really the government's version.

## ***II. Pope John Paul II's Care and Concern***

When Pope John Paul II became Pope, the People's Republic of China was already a member of the United Nations. It had opened diplomatic relations with the United States, and had entered into the era of Deng Xiaoping. In Rome, there was a change from the somber condemnations of Pope Pius XII to the open policy of Pope John XXIII, and to the era of dialogue of Pope Paul VI elected to the papal throne during Vatican II. Today, we see Pope John Paul II's deep concern for the Church in China. Two opposing attitudes have developed in the Chinese Church's policy on religious matters: that of the official and unofficial churches. Despite these differences the Church in China is making progress.

### **(1) Hints of Dialogue**

Pope John Paul II, a native of Poland, has a thorough understanding of Marxism, but he continues Pope Paul VI's spirit of openness and dialogue towards China. In 1981, on his pilgrimage to Asia, the Pope expressed his views on the Church of China. His main aim was to give encouragement to Catholics, whether in the official or non-official church, and to express his deep respect and appreciation for their courage in witnessing to their faith.

The following papal statements are closely related to this section of the article, and they give us a good indication of the Pope's thinking over the past twenty years.

"Your country devotes all its energies to the future. It wishes to insure its scientific and technological development, and through the industrious collaboration of all its people, to enable its citizens to live truly happy lives."

"I am convinced that every Catholic within your frontiers will fully contribute to the building up of China, since a genuine and faithful Christian is also a genuine and good citizen."

"The Church has no economic nor political goal; she has no worldly mission. She wants to be, in China as in any other country, the herald of the Kingdom of God. She desires no privileges but only that all those who follow Christ may be able to express their faith freely and publicly, and to live according to their conscience."<sup>13</sup>

The Pope's care and concern were very well received in the West, but in China there was no formal response. When asked about this, the spokesman at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs only said that at present China did not have any diplomatic relations with the Vatican. The head of the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association only reiterated the government's position, adding that the Vatican had to sever diplomatic relations with Taiwan, and respect the independence and autonomy of the Church in China. Although general opinion in Hong Kong considered these messages of the Pope to be conciliatory, the diplomatic relations between the Vatican and Taiwan, and the independence and autonomy of the Church in China were still seen as obstacles.<sup>14</sup>

After the message of Pope John Paul II, Cardinal Casaroli, who accompanied the Pope to Manila, left Manila for Hong Kong by himself. He stated that the Holy See was ready for some constructive negotiations, but there was no direct channel for him to use. The Vatican adopted a wait and see policy.<sup>15</sup>

## **(2) The Archbishop Dominic Tang Incident**

On February 13, 1951, Bishop Dominic Tang had accepted the Pope's appointment to be the Apostolic Vicar of Guangzhou Diocese despite the foreseeable difficult days that lay ahead. After several public "criticisms," Bishop Tang was finally jailed in February 1958. He remained in prison until his release in 1980. On June 9, the Patriotic Association let Bishop Tang resume his position and duties



as Bishop of Guangzhou. In November, he was permitted to go to Hong Kong for medical treatment.

In April 1981, Bishop Tang went to Rome for an *ad limina* visit. On June 6, the Vatican announced the appointment of Dominic Tang as Archbishop of Guangzhou. Not long afterwards, there was a series of strong attacks, throughout the whole of China, mainly aimed at the Vatican. These attacks lasted for more than a month. We shall not list them all here, but will only mention the points that pertain to the subject matter at hand.<sup>16</sup>

"This action on the Vatican's part interfered with the sovereignty of the Chinese Church. "We are determined to break the Vatican's control, and walk the road of independence, autonomy and self-administration of the church and to defend the dignity and independence of our nation. This corresponds to the traditions Christ established for His Church."

"This action on the part of the Pope harmed Bishop Tang's dignity as a Chinese Catholic religious and also as a Chinese citizen. This action also violated the principle of the "independence, autonomy and self-administration" of the Church in China."

"China is no longer a semi-colony or a colony that can be treated in a high-handed manner. The Catholic Church in China is no longer a colonial church which can be manipulated and controlled by foreign powers. The devious activities of the Vatican will not succeed."

The issue reached a climax in mid-July 1981, when the Patriotic Association, the Religious Affairs Bureau, and the Chinese Bishops Conference held a committee meeting that lasted three days. By the end of the meeting the participants signed a document where the above points were reiterated citing the Pope's message in Manila. The document said that the Vatican clearly showed that the Pope was hypocritical in making a gesture of goodwill in his message to the Catholics in China.

At present we cannot help but ask how great the difference is between the Chinese Church's and the government's version of an "independent, autonomous and self-administering" church. Some may be surprised at the low profile the government has played in this matter. However the government already has many spokespersons for its religious policies, so it can easily keep a low profile.

The Vatican has not yet answered the objection of the Chinese Church. When Archbishop Tang returned to Hong Kong from

his trip to Rome on June 22, 1981, he immediately held a press conference.<sup>17</sup> Studying the question of an “independent, autonomous and self-administered church,” today we can still gain some insights from this press conference even though it did not touch directly upon this matter.

Archbishop Tang first mentioned the establishment of the Chinese hierarchy in 1946. Canton was raised to the level of an archdiocese. Archbishop Tang was made its Apostolic Vicar since the former archbishop was still alive in France. In his understanding of the hierarchy, Archbishop Tang said: “As a matter of fact raising a Vicar Apostolic to an Archbishop is normal procedure in the church and normalizes my position.” A Vicar Apostolic only represents the Pope in administering a diocese; an archbishop is a leader in his own right. This is certainly in line with the principle of localization consistent with autonomy and self-administration. The Archbishop said that his being raised to archbishop was meant to improve relations between China and the Church and a sign of respect for China and the Chinese people.

Archbishop Tang was quite astonished when the Patriotic Association and the priests in Guangdong decided to remove him from his position. He said: “I cannot fully agree that the Church in China must be totally independent. I believe that the Catholic Church must keep its intimate relations with the Pope. This is the situation in all other countries.” Who, then, has the right to remove him from his position?”

What did Archbishop Tang mean? Was he speaking for the Vatican in answering the Chinese accusations?

The Archbishop Tang affair aroused much criticism in China and abroad. More to the point is the fact that mutual understanding between both parties was still far apart. There was a need for both to know each other’s historical background and understand each other’s intentions. The Vatican has always maintained silence. Doubtless it has learned much from all that has happened. We would be able to find out more or less what the Vatican had in mind from the way things developed later.

### **(3) Doing Two Things simultaneously to Attain the Aim**

We now wish to summarize the two main directions Pope John Paul II is taking to show his caring concern for China and the Church in China while still mindful of China’s principle of an “inde-

pendent and autonomous self-administered church." The silence of the Catholic Church was broken in 1981, when the Pope addressed a letter on the Church in China to the whole world.<sup>18</sup> In this pastoral letter, actually dated January 6, 1982, the Feast of the Epiphany, the Holy Father noted that the Lunar New Year that year fell on January 25. In the conclusion of his letter the Pope wrote: "The celebration of the beginning of the Chinese New Year, now near at hand, offers me a welcome opportunity to manifest once more the affection and esteem I have, and have always had, for the Chinese people." This proves that the message the Pope gave during his pilgrimage to Asia the previous year was not hypocritical. The Pope's letter continued in this vein, perhaps because he noticed that this nation in the process of creating a socialist country with Chinese characteristics was much in need of having its autonomy affirmed and people respected.

The other line the Pope took was to have the Universal Church pray for the Chinese Church. Obviously his purpose was to call attention to the experience and sacrifices made by the Church in China during the past thirty years and more, as well as to its present situation and needs. At the same time he let the Church in China know that it is in communion with the Universal Church. His letter was meant to affirm the role of the office of the Roman Pontiff within the church. He was kind, yet firm, while recognizing human weakness. He was saying that the church is open to new ideas that are legitimate, yet it has the duty of overseeing all particulars. This duty to oversee particulars does not harm the Church's communion, rather it enhances it. The Pope's power is not that of a tyrant. This concern for the Chinese Church has been the Pope's constant stance: the localization of the Church is legitimate, but he cannot accept any church that is independent.

The letter to the Universal Church was very important. It established a basis for Pope John Paul to deal with China and the Church in China after the Archbishop Tang affair. In accord with the purpose of this article we can even say that, on the one hand, the Pope approves and encourages autonomy and self-administration as part of the localization of the church, but on the other hand independence harms the church's unity and universality. His double concern on the tension and contradiction inherent in an "independent and autonomous self-managed church" must find a solution that transcends the obstacles. Since I am not writing an historical record, I

will only run through those important occasions when the Pope, during the following ten years, expressed his concern

In 1982 the Pope on two occasions commemorating the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the arrival of Matteo Ricci's in China, expressed his concern for China. On October 25 his speech at the Gregorian University drew widespread attention.<sup>19</sup> Reflecting on the past and the present, he spoke about China today. He said: "The Church, sensitive to the spiritual gifts of every people, cannot but look upon the Chinese people—the most numerous in the world—as a great unitary reality, crucible of lofty tradition and vital ferments, and therefore at the same time a great and promising hope." Recalling the way Ricci related to people the Pope said: "We can have faith that the obstacles can be removed and that an appropriate way and adequate structures will be found to resume dialogue and keep it constantly open." When the Pope spoke of Matteo Ricci, he was also speaking of indigenization.

Later, on February 28, 1984, the Pope spoke to the bishops from Taiwan present in Rome and told them that they and other overseas Chinese Catholics in Taiwan and overseas should be the "bridge church" to their brothers and sisters on the Mainland. He also affirmed that the Church had and would always respect and love China.<sup>20</sup>

In October 1989 at the 44th International Eucharistic Congress held in Seoul, Korea, he spoke to the Catholics in China telling them of his deep affection and concern for them. He expressed the hope that he would be able to travel there some day to see them personally. He prayed for their reconciliation and unity. He urged them to labor for the good of society by serving their fellow citizens, and by working for the progress of their noble nation.<sup>21</sup>

On June 19, 1993 he visited Matteo Ricci's birthplace, Macerata, and expressed again his desire to visit China.<sup>22</sup> The Pope's dual concern is clear: (1) He affirms China's history, culture, autonomy, and dignity. (2) He encourages and voices his concern for the Church in China, urging reconciliation, and unity. We can say that his concern is very concrete. In view of the "independent, autonomous and self-administered" Church in China, it is only by dialogue with China that the meaning of "independence" will be clarified, and the autonomous administration of the church be preserved.

We can observe his concern on the occasion of various celebrations: first, in January 1995 in a short radio address he gave to the

Church in China on the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of *Radio Veritas*, and second, in a speech to the bishops in China on the feast of Francis Xavier, Apostle of East Asia, on December 3, 1996. The latter speech also commemorated the consecration of six Chinese Bishops in St. Peter's Basilica in Rome 70 years previously.<sup>23</sup> We can hear the Pope appealing on these two occasions to the Church in China to strive to work for a complete communion and a visible unity—a unity with Christ, with the successor of Peter, and with the Universal Church. This is the only acceptable way for an individual church to autonomously administer its affairs. It was on the second occasion that the Pope said: "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." He goes on to say: "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."<sup>24</sup> What is the Pope saying here? My conjecture is that the China that plays an important role on the international scene must be aware of the principle of "mutual subordination." Catholic oneness and universality only demands that each individual church, though autonomously managing its own affairs, is subordinate to the one principle of unity. Therefore, Catholics have a great contribution to make toward China's becoming an international state. This wide perspective obviates the necessity of emphasizing one's own independence. This of course is only my personal reading of the matter. In any case, the Pope is highly respectful of China's sovereignty.

Finally, we can inquire whether Pope John Paul II's dual concern has produced any satisfactory results? Has his intervention help overcome internal tensions and contradictions in the Chinese Church's "independence, autonomy and self-administration of its own affairs"? We can say for sure that the Chinese Catholic Church's attitude toward the Pope has changed for the better since the days of the Archbishop Tang affair. The Pope himself says: "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."<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, the Chinese Church does not mention the principle of "independent, autonomous and self-administration"

as often as it did in the past, perhaps seeing in it something of an expression rather than something of substance.

There are even signs of some loosening up towards the Vatican. For example, in 1993 the Vatican received an invitation to send Cardinal Etchegaray to attend a sports event in Beijing and meet some government officials. This was the highest Vatican official to visit China since 1949. While in Beijing the Cardinal stated that the Vatican sincerely wishes to open relations with China. However this was only a flash in the pan as nothing ever came of it.<sup>26</sup>

In summary we can say that during the past ten years the Pope has maintained an attitude of trust towards China and the Chinese Church, looking for suitable ways and means to open a dialogue with the proper authorities. Nevertheless the principle of an “independent, autonomous and self-administered Church” still remains in force.

### ***III. Future Hopes and Expectations***

In this article I have pointed out the internal tensions and contradictions contained within the principle of an independent, autonomous and self-administered church. At present the Chinese Church alone cannot resolve this problem.

I will now present other opinions on the subject worthy of our consideration.

#### **(1) Papal Documents**

The editor of *Papal Documents Related to the New China*, Elmer Wurth M.M., after studying the messages of the Popes related to China since Pius XII, has concluded that the conciliatory words of Pope John Paul II makes it difficult for China to attack the Popes today. Nevertheless, they still do not respond to his overtures with any show of good will. On the contrary, they stick to the same stereotyped phrase: “The affairs of the Chinese Church are an internal matter and brook no outside interference.”

Fr. Wurth asks: “What is it that blocks progress in normalizing Sino–Vatican relationships?” He considers that the demands of the Chinese government for normalization can be resolved, but there has yet not been any meeting of minds. Fr. Wurth writes: “It is becoming clear, therefore, that any improvement in Sino-Vatican relations rests solely on and must wait for the reunification of the Church

in China. Only when the church speaks with one unified voice to the government will there be any hope for reunification with the Pope and the Universal Church."<sup>27</sup>

For a time my own opinion ran along the same lines, but I now think that the Chinese Church alone will be unable to overcome "the independent and autonomous running of its own affairs," unless the Chinese government and the Vatican meet and dialogue with each other. The Chinese Church does indeed need unity, but unity still needs an essential condition that is not presently within its power to provide.

Fr. Jaing Jianqiu, in his article, "Sino-Vatican Relations" written before that of Fr. Wurth's says it is up to Beijing to decide."<sup>28</sup> Here we cite only Fr. Jiang's thoughts on "getting to the root of the matter," since the first part of his article on "prerequisites for resolving the problem" is not as apodictic as this latter statement implies.<sup>29</sup> In fact, Fr. Jiang's thesis is that "what the two countries must decide is whether there is any advantage in normalizing relations?" "Advantage" is the key word here. If there is no advantage then there is no possibility and no need to establish relations. In fact, there is no "advantage" at all for China to establish relations with the Vatican.<sup>30</sup>

My question is different. It is whether the time is ripe for establishing relations is open to discussion? I am not at all certain that there is no "advantage" in China's establishing relations with the Vatican. Obviously what the Pope desires is to help the Chinese Church overcome the tension arising from "the independent and autonomous running of its own affairs" and be in full communion with the Universal Church.

## (2) Thawing of Sino-Vatican Relations

There are some signs that China's attitude towards the Vatican is softening. On August 26, 1997, the Vice-Premier of China's State Council and Foreign Minister, Qian Qichen, spoke at the 40th anniversary celebration of the Catholic Patriotic Association. As was to be expected, he quoted the old bromides. However in discussing Sino-Vatican relations, he stated that two conditions must be fulfilled before mutual relations between the Vatican and China can improve. He said: "Sino-Vatican relations are first of all political relations. Only when these political relations are improved will it be possible to talk about religious matters." *Tripod's* Chinese editor, Anthony S.K. Lam, adds a footnote saying: "Room is left for talks between China and the

Vatican. This is in contrast to the situation ten years ago when the Chinese government refused any role for the Vatican in matters concerning the Chinese Church. This is evidence of a much more open attitude.<sup>31</sup>

I am not sure whether Qian Qichen's words evoked the following responses from the Vatican. At the beginning of the year at the meeting of the diplomatic corps in the Vatican, the Pope expressed his views on China, emphasizing its progress and hoping that China and the Vatican could establish friendly relations, and permit its Chinese citizens to share communion with the Universal Church.<sup>32</sup> During the meeting of the Asian Bishops Conference, the Pope repeated what he had been saying on relations between China and the Vatican.

The aim of this article has been to ascertain whether there is a way out of the difficulties facing the Chinese Church tied to the principle of an independent, autonomous and self administered church. Evidence supporting our viewpoint is taken from two replies given by Archbishop Jean-Louis Tauran, Secretary in the Vatican Secretariat of State, who in May 1998 gave an interview to the editor of an Italian newspaper. He said he found it difficult for the Chinese Church to break out of its impasse through its own efforts; that it will need outside help. The Archbishop said: "The Pope hopes to hold direct conversation with the Chinese government to clarify the status the Chinese Church should enjoy in public life. He hopes that these conversations may lead to the establishment of diplomatic relations...The Catholic Church has enjoyed a long history within China's history and is not a foreign element. I am sure that one day the Catholic Church in China, in communion with the Universal Church and the Roman Pontiff, will freely use its spiritual energy to aid society and make religion progress and in this way contribute to the welfare of the Chinese people."<sup>33</sup>

I am convinced that these quotes are connected and show that the principle of "independence, autonomy and self-administration of church affairs" can be resolved to each one's mutual satisfaction through diplomatic relations. The government on the one side, should not insist on "independence" which is unacceptable to the Vatican side, while the Vatican should allow the other side to maintain the principle of "autonomous administration." What both sides seek should be an integrated Chinese Church that could develop its latent abilities to work for country and society.



### (3) New Opportunities

The present position of the People's Republic of China on the international stage is very different from the situation that existed at the time of its founding in 1949. China is now a superpower among other countries, no longer isolated, nor uncertain of its autonomy and dignity. On the contrary it is a respected member of the international community. Therefore having an international vision where everyone's interests are considered is more important for China than merely emphasizing its "independence."

China will not find it difficult to discover in these circumstances the spiritual role the Vatican plays on the world stage. More than 160 countries at present have diplomatic relations with the Holy See. These countries are not worried that the Church will create problems for their country or the local churches in their country. Will China be unable to weigh its own "advantage" in opening up a dialogue with the Vatican? Why should China be unique in taking a stand that avoids all contact with such an international tradition rich in meaning? The Pope's attitude is very clear on this matter and he has stated that Catholics can help China make further progress on the international scene. The condition is that Catholics must become fully integrated church members as in all other countries. However this question often brings up history and the so-called "colonialist" spirit. I do not wish to enter further into this issue. In any case Pope Paul VI's openness and support of China, the present Pope's sincerity and concern goes a long way to show the Holy See's breadth of vision after Vatican II. In February 1998 the three American religious leaders who met with President Jiang Zemin actually discussed the possibility of normalizing Sino-Vatican relations.<sup>34</sup>

During an April 16, 1998 Vatican Press conference, Archbishop Tauran said: "I think that today China is aware that the Vatican—it never uses the term the *Holy See*—is an important member of international society. As far as religion is concerned I can say that normalizing relations with the Vatican is not China's priority. I think that the Holy See must be aware of this. We have often tried to keep the doors open. At present we are unable to discuss any concrete action or discern signs of openness. However we must consider any proposals that are put on the table. As far as the visit of the three religious leaders to China is concerned, no concrete results have been produced."<sup>35</sup>

The three religious leaders quoted Jiang as having said to them “Differences can be gradually narrowed and common ground broadened.” He added that and the Chinese government would carefully consider the proposals and concerns.<sup>36</sup>

In the same press conference Archbishop Tauran said: “The Chinese have a different concept of time. They do not make hasty decisions.”<sup>37</sup> Later in May, the archbishop was more optimistic.<sup>38</sup> What is missing are, of course, concrete proposals.

### *Conclusion*

Each individual church is by its very nature both “local” and “universal.” Because it is “local” it is autonomous; because it is universal it is in communion with the Holy See. Both of these elements produce a normal tension. Besides a systematic organization, wisdom and love are both needed on the part of leaders in the individual churches and on the part of the Pope and his curia to maintain a healthy relationship between individual churches and the Universal Church. Most of all the presence of the Holy Spirit is needed to preserve the unity and diversity of the church. Serious clashes throughout history have led to divisions and independence. Basically this has been due to the lack of harmony between “autonomy” and “communion.”

This article has examined the principle of the independent, autonomous and self-administered” church in China, which is but one example of the basic issue mentioned above. Obviously, there is the element of government interference or what is known as “suitable to the national condition.” This lets us know how complex this question is. It is also not the first time that this situation has occurred in the course of history, and on occasion it has found a satisfactory solution. Most observers see that now is the time to find a solution. We can imagine that this matter cannot rely only on rules and regulations, but calls for vision and wisdom on the part of all parties concerned. The role of the Holy Spirit is also indispensable.

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### **Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup> Constitutions of the Chinese Bishops Conference, Article 2.

<sup>2</sup> “Can Mainland China’s Official Church Still Be Called Catholic,” *Tripod*, no. 86, pp. 34-46.

<sup>3</sup> *Through Darkness and Light: The Catholic Church in present-day China*, Lam, Anthony S.K., pp. 23-25.

<sup>4</sup> Loc. cit. p. 24.

<sup>5</sup> Wu Yan, Luo You, "40 Year Annals of the Catholic Church on the Mainland 1945-1986," p. 18.

<sup>6</sup> Op. cit. *Through Darkness and Light*, p. 35.

<sup>7</sup> Op. cit. Constitutions of the Bishops Conference Article 2.

<sup>8</sup> This is Karl Rahner's theory. It does not change the role of the Pope in being the chief shepherd of the universal church.

<sup>9</sup> Op. cit. *Through Darkness and Light*, Constitutions of the Bishops Conference Article 2.

<sup>10</sup> Op. cit. "Can Mainland China's Official Church Still Be Called Catholic," pp. 43-44.

<sup>11</sup> Op. cit. "Can Mainland China's Official Church Still Be Called Catholic," pp. 34-46.

<sup>12</sup> Documents on an "Independent, Autonomous and Self-Administered Church," vol. 2, The Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association, The Chinese Catholics Church Affairs Committee Reference Library, July 1990, pp. 2-13. NB: This document lacks an English translation. Trsl.

<sup>13</sup> Lazzarotto, Angelo, *The Catholic Church in Post-Mao China*, p. 127-128.

<sup>14</sup> Loc. cit., p. 129.

<sup>15</sup> Loc. cit., p. 130.

<sup>16</sup> Loc. cit., p. 132-137.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> For the complete talk cf. The Pope's Letter to the Bishops of the World, Papal Documents Related to the New China 1937—1984, ed. Elmer Wurth M.M., Orbis Books, Maryknoll NY, pp. 146-149.

<sup>19</sup> op. cit., pp. 163-

<sup>20</sup> Op. cit., pp. 176-

<sup>21</sup> Tong Hon John, "The Pope speaks to the Chinese Church from Korea," *Tripod*, No. 54, p. 71-

<sup>22</sup> Aloysius B. Chang, "Pope John Paul II and the unity of the Catholic Church in China," *Tripod*, No. 99, pp. 28-39.

<sup>23</sup> Loc. cit.

<sup>24</sup> Op. cit., p. 35.

<sup>25</sup> Op. cit., p. 29.

<sup>26</sup> *Tripod*, China Church and News Update, p. 64.

<sup>27</sup> Wurth Elmer, "Sino-Vatican Relations 1980-1997," *Tripod*, No. 100, pp. 80-

<sup>28</sup> Jiang Jianqiu, "Sino-Vatican Relations are in the Hands of Beijing," *Tripod*, no. 93, and pp. 4-7

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<sup>29</sup> Loc. cit. p. 5 (Chinese).

<sup>30</sup> Loc. cit. p. 7 (Chinese).

<sup>31</sup> The editor's quote. A summary of Premier Qian's statement appears in *Tripod*, no. 101, pp. 2,3 (Chinese section) Mention of Qian's talk is given in News Update in the English section, loc. cit. p. 67, minus the summary and Lam's comment.

<sup>32</sup> News Update, *Tripod*, no. 103, p. 45 (Chinese).

<sup>33</sup> "The Pope Expresses His Deep Love for Chinese Believers," *Tripod*, no. 105, p.43 ff. (Chinese).

<sup>34</sup> Documentation: A Report of the U.S. Religious Leaders' Delegation to the People's Republic of China, Feb. 1998, *Tripod* no. 105, p. 7.

<sup>35</sup> News Update, *Tripod*, no. 106, p. 47 (Chinese) NB: English by translator.

<sup>36</sup> *Tripod*, no. 105, p. 57.

<sup>37</sup> *Tripod*, no. 105 p. 47.

<sup>38</sup> Loc. cit., p. 43.

