

# *An Appeal from China's Underground Church*

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*By Paul*

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## *Foreword*

*Reports from foreign news agencies claim that there has been an important break-through in secret negotiations between the Chinese Communist government and the Vatican.*

*These reports reveal that negotiations between the Communist government and the Vatican have been normalized and can now proceed further. However no timetable has been set for establishing diplomatic relations since both sides are still divided on some issues.*

*As these negotiations proceed, public figures in the underground church in China are facing the reality of a possible change in relations between the Chinese government and the Vatican. They sincerely hope that Archbishop Celli of the Vatican Secretariat of State listens, receives, analyzes, and discerns the hopes and aspirations of the underground church in Mainland China.*

First, the underground church in China is extremely grateful to the Pope who has always shown deep and profound respect and love for the Chinese Church. We clearly realize that from the religious level the aim of normalizing relations with the Chinese government is:

- ◆ To promote true, complete, and inviolate religious freedom in China.

- ◆ To safeguard the Church's unity and its government and pastoral care over China's 12,000,000 Catholics.
- ◆ To assure that believers enjoy true religious freedom in their activities and live their religious lives without external interference.

We Chinese Catholics who have lived in China during the past 50 years have personally seen, experienced, and understood all that has happened there. What follows is a brief presentation of the events of these years.

- From the time the Communists came to power in 1949 until 1955 the Chinese Catholic Church had regularly been restricted and persecuted. The Communist government seized church schools, hospitals, and orphanages. They banned the publication of Catholic periodicals such as *The Catholic Magazine*, *The Sacred Heart Bulletin*, and *The Eucharist Monthly*. They expelled foreign bishops (all papal appointments). In 1951 they also expelled the Papal delegate to China, Archbishop Riberi. However native Chinese bishops (also papal appointments) were able to continue to officiate as head of their dioceses, ordain and appoint priests, and hold public ceremonies. The Church organized small groups to teach catechism to children and young people. These lessons took the place of religious instruction in the schools that had now been taken over by the government. Solemn preaching continued unabated in the churches as well as other religious activities, such as retreats, consecration of families, and Marian devotions, etc. There were some formal restrictions. Catholics for theoretical reasons and practical religious needs became more active and were fervent in listening to sermons, studying religious doctrine, and receiving the Sacraments. In the meantime the Pope had appointed 18 Chinese bishops. Seminaries remained opened and many priests ordained.
- Towards the middle of 1955 the Chinese Communists arrested Bishop Gong Pinmei and started an all-out attack on the Church. They also arrested a large number of church officials and lay persons. During the same period the communists organized accusation campaigns in which they drafted petitions opposed to the Pope and the Bishop. They

held public meetings. Those who did not attend or who opposed them were subject to re-education through labor or condemned to labor camps.

- In 1957 the system of independent and autonomous managing of church affairs was set up to replace the church's hierarchy.
- In 1958 Bishops were appointed and consecrated without the Pope's approval. During the consecration ceremony the person being consecrated had to publicly affirm that he would manage church affairs well, refuse all reactionary commands and "Encyclicals," and firmly shake off all Vatican control. (Such a consecration was held in Changsha on October 26, 1958.) This resulted in open resistance and division within the church and a breaking off of relations with the universal church.
- In 1966 the Cultural Revolution began. All religious activity was prohibited. No one could hang up holy pictures or read the Bible. Sacred articles and books were burned and churches closed. Like *the autumn wind blowing away the fallen leaves none is left to be seen*.
- From 1980 to the present time, (1999) China has been opening to the outside world. Believers who were loyal to the Pope, to their faith, and to the Church, did not join the Patriotic Association when it was set up in 1957, and do not enter churches that are under its control thus marking a clear distinction between themselves and the Association. They pray privately in their homes or attend Masses celebrated by priests returning from prison and receive the sacraments from them. These Catholics are very fervent, sound in faith, and careful in matters of conscience. They progress in their religious life under the pastoral care of Bishops in communion with the Holy See . This is the church known to overseas Catholics as the underground church, the loyal church.

This underground church has been persecuted for the past 50 years. The government considers it an "illegal" entity. Bishops, priests, and laity are arrested, imprisoned, and forbidden to carry out normal religious activities. This situation holds true up to the present day.

When the Patriotic Association was restored to its original form in 1980, it continued to insist on the independent and autonomous running of church affairs without any interference from the Vatican. In 1980 the National Catholic Representatives Assembly, held in Beijing, re-affirmed this principle. In October 1997 the Beijing “White Paper” on religion also re-affirmed China’s original religious policy without changing any of its principles or aims.

Nevertheless, it is clear that China had to make changes to its religious policy owing to international pressure and its own internal situation. Religious property was restored, churches opened, the religious press able to publish, (but with severe restrictions), seminaries established, and the terms “Successor of Peter” and the “Holy See” reappeared in religious books. There were prayers for the Pope and petitions offered for the reunion of the bishops in the open church with the Pope.

The underground church had gone through many trials and tribulations and many communities were without pastors. Believers, though, remained very fervent, sound in faith, and careful in matters of conscience. The true church does not consist of buildings made of stone. It consists, rather, of such “pastor-less” communities where the believers are the “living stones” guided and maturing under the guidance of the Holy Spirit. *“The Lord is my shepherd; there is nothing I lack. In green pastures you let me graze...you restore my strength.”* (Psalm 23)

The above describes the situation of the Church during the past 50 years. What seriously concerns church people in China if China normalizes relations with the Vatican is how much freedom they will enjoy in this new situation. Will it be possible to return to the situation that existed before the fifties and enjoy the freedoms that existed then? If not, can we maintain that Catholics today enjoy real freedom? All of us must give serious consideration to this question.

Next, Vatican representatives taking part in these negotiations must be clear-headed and not lose their way. What the Chinese Communists most wish to obtain from these negotiations is for the Vatican to break diplomatic relations with Taiwan and to cut off one more of Taiwan’s avenues to the outside world. In exchange for this they will grant some minor freedoms to Chinese Catholics. However, even this possibility—of granting a little more freedom—

is seriously open to question. At present there is no reason to believe this. Once relations are re-established and, given a period of time to see how things develop, we will discover that we have been cheated with no possibility of remedying the situation. Religious freedom is a God-given right; we should not have to beg for it.

Furthermore, we ask the Vatican representatives to pay close attention to another point: they must not forget that the Chinese Communist Party holds power and controls everything. They will in no way give up their control over religion. No one who knows the Party's history will doubt this.

What is even more important is that Party policy has not changed, but has remained the same from 1949 to the present. What may change at times is the strategy the Party uses to implement its policy. Again this is very clear to all who know the Party.

Even if Chinese-Vatican negotiation are successful, the trials and hardships the Church has undergone over the past 50 years as well as the stormy persecution that Catholics suffered in the fifties will not be easily forgotten. So even if they obtain religious freedom, it will take some time for people to be optimistic in this matter. Having religious freedom is something difficult to understand for someone who has lived in China during these long years.

The proposal of the Chinese Bishops' Conference entitled *Coming Events Cast Their Shadows Before Them* (July 30, 1993) asks and hopes that the Vatican listens, reviews, and recalls history and then responds to the following appeal of the Chinese Church:

- The Vatican must uphold the Pope's authority to appoint bishops in China's dioceses. China must recognize the Pope's authority to appoint bishops in China without adding conditions, for no worldly authority has the right to interfere with the Pope's authority in governing the church.
- Once the Vatican appoints bishops, it should settle the situation created by those bishops who took an oath to break relations with the Pope and were appointed and consecrated without the Pope's authority. The diocesan bishop should settle the validity and legality of priests who belong to the Patriotic Association.
- The Patriotic Association has no reason to exist. The Chinese Church's essential relationship with the Holy See must be



guaranteed and Cardinal Gong Pinmei return to his diocese of Shanghai.

- A papal representative should convene a meeting of all the Chinese bishops and establish the Bishops' Conference. Dioceses should set up Church Affairs Committees. Bishops should be allowed to make their customary *ad limina* visit to Rome.
- The Chinese Church should formally consecrate China to Our Lady of China.

In conclusion the Holy See should appeal to the Chinese Communist Party in all sincerity to grant the following to the Church as the new millennium approaches:

- That the Chinese Church enjoy true religious freedom that is not dependent upon a government's whim or law.
- China's 12,000,000 must experience religious freedom. This will be beneficial to both the State and the Party. True freedom is no danger. China will show itself to be the first Communist country to have true religious freedom.
- The Religious Affairs Bureau should take a long-term view and not support divisions within the Church nor create them. They should not support the Three-Selfs movement. They should realize there would be less trouble if the Patriotic Association did not exist. Do not let the problems of the past years continue to trouble the church in the future.
- The underground church has made much progress in the past 50 years and Catholics who belong to it are very fervent. The official church has been less able to win people's hearts. What is the reason for this? Unity with the Pope and the universal church must be maintained so there is one flock and one pastor.

China's 12,000,000 Catholics are doing their best to assist in rebuilding the country. This strength should not be underestimated.

What is written here comes from the heart of the underground church in China. These words proceed only from the love of God, loyalty to the Church, and to the Pope. These proposals are made with peace of heart and with no desire for vengeance. May Jesus who rose from the dead live forever!