

Commentary

An Appeal from the Underground Church

By René Gilbert

The preceding article *An Appeal from China's Underground Church* deserves the attention of the church communities outside mainland China. According to the author of the article, foreign press reports had stated that relations between the Vatican and the Chinese had been normalized and further talks would proceed. The article restates the position of the underground church urging extreme caution on the part of the Vatican in its dealings with the Chinese government.

The author's warning is easily understandable seeing that the underground church, now as in the past, has been undergoing severe pressure from the government including arrests, imprisonment, and other repressive measures. Nonetheless, one must be very careful in accepting press reports stating that the Vatican and the Chinese government have undertaken serious discussions, much less reached any agreement, on normalizing Sino-Vatican relations. As of the present time no such talks have been opened. An article appearing in this issue of *Tripod* entitled: *An "Independent, Autonomous, and Self-Administered" Church--an Evaluation of the Principle* presents recent information on this matter.

The author, named only as Paul, offers some proposals that, though reflecting what was stated in the July 1993 meeting of some bishops, priests, and laity from the underground church, still differ in some respects from the original proposals. Perhaps they reflect a more recent development in the understanding of the church situation in China. For fuller coverage and understanding of this meeting see *The Catholic Church in Present Day China* by Anthony S.K. Lam, Chapter 20, entitled *The Underground Church in 1993*, published by the Ferdinand Verbiest Foundation and Holy Spirit Study Centre.

Paul refers at times to the underground church as the loyal church. The use of this word well describes the fidelity and endurance of Chinese Catholics under attack since the early 1950s. If, however, the term is limited solely to that part of the church that

has not and does not want to register with the government, then further explanation will be needed, since such a limitation implies that part of the church that has registered is in whole or in part "disloyal" to the faith and to the Pope.

It seems difficult to imagine the Vatican opposing the Pope's right to appoint bishops as seems to be implied in Paul's first statement. However perhaps Church history can have some say in clarifying and elucidating the papal right to appoint bishops to their sees that might have some application to the present situation in China once serious talks are opened between China and the Vatican.

It is unclear what Paul means when he states that once matters have been settled between the Vatican and the Chinese state, the diocesan bishop should settle the validity and legality of the priests who belong to the Patriotic Association. The statement as it stands is ambiguous and, unless grounds are furnished for it, meaningless. It is interesting to note that priests from the open church have concelebrated with the Holy Father on the occasion of the canonization of Fr. Damien on Pentecost Sunday, June 4, 1995. The students were at the time studying at Leuven University in Belgium. The validity of priests, even those belonging to the Patriotic Church, has not been questioned in any known document coming from the Holy See.

Paul's final words are very moving, stating that they come from the heart of the underground church in China. As he says: "they are made with peace of heart and no desire for vengeance." This gives hope that the Church in China will again be united in both heart and mind.

