

# *A Response to the Pastoral Letter of the China Catholic Bishops' Conference*

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In reading the “Jubilee 2000 Pastoral Letter of the China Catholic Bishops’ Conference,” one becomes keenly aware of the tremendous limitations constantly facing the Bishops’ Conference, and the difficult situation under which the bishops labor. On the one hand, the Conference cannot ignore the leading role the Holy See plays within the Universal Church. Therefore, in the first part of the pastoral letter, “The Meaning and Message of the Millennium,” there are constant references to the messages of Pope John Paul II. On the other hand, the Pastoral fails to address the prophetic role that these same papal messages have emphasized during these past years.

In the first part of the Bishops’ pastoral letter, we read, “We sincerely beg our country, our people, and our fellow citizens to forgive the historical wrongs committed by the Church and by each one of us.” This is basically a kind of personal reflection, which deserves the support of members of the Church. However, the Church’s responsibility to society and to the country should also extend to being a remonstrative friend, thus the Church should also fulfill its prophetic role. If the Church has really done any grave wrong to the country, the greatest of these must surely be that she has remained quiet in face of all the wrongs of the socialist society.

We also note from certain remarks in the bishops’ Pastoral that the government-approved China Catholic Bishops’ Conference has not yet shed its old self. The second part of the pastoral letter, “A Historical Review,” repeats the same old story. It makes a one-sided negative remark on the pre-1949 Catholic Church in China, while it acclaims the post-1949 Church as gifted with a new life. This extremely biased view has long been abandoned in other areas of the Chinese society, such as literature, education, social thoughts, and even in politics. The Bishops’ Conference still uses this outdated, outmoded form of expression to present a historical review of the

Church in China. This attitude brings to light how conservative it is, and how far behind society's general trend it still lags.

The third part of the pastoral letter is on "Mission of Evangelization in the New Century." In principle, the content of this section undoubtedly moves in the right direction. However, in the whole section of some 2,000 Chinese characters, there is not a word about the conflict between the open and the underground Church. The writers of the Pastoral seem simply to be turning a blind eye to this unfortunate reality. The pastoral letter mentions that "We must open ourselves to our separated brethren and followers of other faiths. We must change our narrow concept that we are the only source of the good and the true." Putting religious dialogue on its agenda is no doubt a great step forward for the Church in China. Nevertheless, to avoid talking about the problems within the Church is failing to put things in their proper perspective and rightful order.

"With a sincere and humble frame of mind, we need to seek reconciliation with our brothers and sisters." This statement appears in the first part of the pastoral letter. Yet, with these words still ringing in our ears, the China Catholic Bishops' Conference ordained five bishops on January 6, 2000 without papal approval. This causes sad division within the Church in China, and as a result of the ordination, many dioceses are caught in the conflict between the open and the underground Church. Hence, although what is said in the pastoral letter is appealing, the actual situation is quite different.

On the whole, this pastoral letter is commonplace and lacking in focus. It contains nothing new. This fact serves to demonstrate that the Bishops' Conference, caught between the political reality and the teachings of the Church, has little room to maneuver. Thus all it can do is to keep harping on the same old themes over and over again.