

Unity in the Chinese Church Revisited

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The special circumstances of the church in Mainland China has awakened the attention and concern of the universal church as well as our overseas Chinese brothers and sisters. There is no one from the Pope on down concerned for this church that does not ardently desire an end to its present distress. There is no one genuinely concerned that does not look anxiously to the day when it will be blessed with complete freedom, when all its members will enjoy an open and formal communion with each other and with the universal church. For these reason the unity of the church in Mainland China has become a burning issue for many mediating bodies as well as the subject of many articles in church publications. As the author of the following article and a priest in this China church, I wish to shed some light on the question of unity.

“That the church be one” was Jesus’ prayer to his Father before he left this world. It is also the common desire of all of the church’s children. The twenty-first century is said to be the century moving towards a universal unity. The Holy Spirit is raising up this desire for unity among each church and community. It has become the daily prayer and desire of the entire church. The church is deeply conscious of letting “the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 2:5). Divisions within the church harm the witness that Christians should give to the world, and is one of the reasons that the world is still far from God. This is why Vatican II urgently appealed for unity among all Christians, and why it made it one of its important goals.

The first thing necessary for unity is an objective understanding of the source of divisions as well as the obstacles to it. Loudly proclaiming “unity” today may be pure wishful thinking, and more of a hindrance than a help. It could even possibly aggravate existing divisions. No one wants to see this happen, of course, but since China’s opening up, several such incidents have taken place to impede the church’s difficult journey.

To think that the divisions between the official and underground church within Mainland China are the same as those between Catholic and Protestant Churches is simply inaccurate. Today's division is not the result of some fundamental issue. This is to say, it is not caused by bishops or priests refusing the leadership of the Pope, or by any heresy or theological division. It is created solely by the political situation. Both the "Three-Self Reform Movement" of the fifties and today's "One Association, One Conference"¹ are political creations. Some persons have, willingly or not, become tools of government entities that divide the church, and have been tricked to act as its dupes. If we view the period from the fifties and its "Three-Self Reform Movement" to Document 26 of August 17, 1999², we find that, despite some cosmetic changes, no substantial change has occurred in government policy towards the Catholic Church. The government's pattern of using people as its pawns appears most clearly in this document.

"The basic function of the Patriotic Association is to assist the government to implement its policy of freedom of religion, and to carry out an autonomous, independent policy of self-administration for churches...

"The basic function of the Bishops' Conference is to administer church affairs according to the policy of an autonomous, independent, self-administered, and completely democratic church...

"The Central United Front Department and the National Religious Affairs Bureau should administer the approved system of regulations for the "One Association, One Conference"... They must regulate and strengthen its leadership, choose and channel clerics and intellectuals into the Patriotic Association and the Bishops' Conference to strengthen them."

From this we see that the top leader of the "One Association, One Conference" is not the Pope, the head of all the bishops in the Universal Church, but the "Central United Front Department" and the "National Religious Affairs Bureau." Today people in the Patriotic Association continue to act as the government's "mouthpiece," saying only what the government permits them to say and doing only what the government permits them to do. Even though what some of them are told to say and do is not what they want to say or do, they have no other choice. This point is clear from what the Vice-Chairman of the Patriotic Association announced to the international press at the beginning of the millennium on the

same day—the Epiphany--the Pope consecrated bishops. On that day, when the Patriotic Association and the Bishops' Conference also solemnly consecrated five bishops they had chosen, a government spokesman said: "This is an internal church affair, we do not interfere."

Mainland government entities not only do not allow religious bodies to register a "dissident" voice, but neither do they permit any political party or group of people do so. The government does not tolerate any of its citizens under its control to "serve" an authority other than itself. Even if religious authority of its very nature ("My kingdom is not of this world" John 18:36) did escape government control, the State would still see this as a threat to its own authority. As far as the government is concerned, not only should "what belongs to Caesar be rendered to Caesar," but also what belongs to God must be rendered to Caesar (Matthew 22:21). For since "there is no God, and only Caesar remains" to serve God, makes one "a counter-revolutionary and a special agent using religion as a guise for illegal acts..."

A totalitarian government has been China's ruin. When church people shout their tragic slogan: "We have no king but Caesar" (John 19:15), they only add further anguish to the Church's agony. The Chinese are noted for their loyalty and piety. Logically, for Christians living within Chinese culture, to be loyal to the Church and to the Pope should be no problem. However, the main reason is that "fear" paralyzes many people, and they are really determined to save "face". One martyr priest on the mainland told another priest compelled to join the Patriotic Association: "It seems that you never received Confirmation!" Since some do not dare uphold the truth and their faith in the face of persecution, they allow themselves to be used, adopting such catchwords as "deal with the devil to save the situation," and "only the fittest survive" to salve their consciences. Caring only for their "face," they do not dare to acknowledge their weakness and error, but boldly proclaim: "There was nothing else I could do." And to justify themselves they try to find some "supernatural" reasons to ease their conscience. For example, they say they "act under the Holy Spirit's inspiration," "care for the needs of the Church," "inculturation," "the good of Catholics," and other specious pretexts by which they deceive others and stifle the voice of their own conscience.

It is not very realistic to talk of “unity” for the church in China as long as insuperable obstacles continue to exist. Some people regularly think that the main reason for the divided church in China is the existence of the “official” and “underground churches.”³ This is a very superficial view of the matter. Although the Patriotic Association and the suffering Church confront each other in some areas in China (there being many reasons for the confrontation), this phenomenon is not the fuse that enkindles this division. At root there is the creation of the “national church” to which loyal believers cannot give their assent. Therefore, we should not over-emphasize confrontation. For the day when true freedom of belief arrives, the circumstances that cause confrontation will disappear. So this is not the main problem that hinders unity in the Chinese Church. Even though confrontation exists between the two bodies, we still experience that all of us are “brothers and sisters in the Lord,” where blood is thicker than water.

The viewpoint that some overseas church observers take towards unity is, I believe, in some aspects open to question. Especially since it directly influences the actions of some church people in China. I offer some examples of what I mean.

One priest who helps Chinese students studying in Europe said: “Isn’t it achieving unity by having them (referring to the students from the Patriotic Association and the Loyal Church) study together?” Some think that entering the same church building together is a sign of unity. Others think that one should not distinguish between the priests of the Patriotic Association and those who do not belong to it. One also should not talk of division since all receive the same sacraments that are a sign of unity. Some even say that the loyal suffering church should not confront the government, but should follow the “reasonable” example of persons in the Patriotic Association. It should “no longer fail to read the signs of the times which point towards unity.”

First, we must understand what is meant by “unity” in the church. If thinking is muddled, it will be useless to speak of unity. Our Holy Father in his encyclical *That They May Be One* says: “In effect, this unity bestowed by the Holy Spirit does not merely consist in the gathering of people as a collection of individuals. It is a unity constituted by the bonds of the profession of faith, the sacraments, and hierarchical communion. The faithful are *one* because, in the Spirit, they are in communion with the Father: “Our *fellowship* is

with the Father and with His Son Jesus Christ (1 John 1: 3). For the Catholic Church, then, the *communion* of Christians is none other than the manifestation in them of the grace by which God makes them sharers in his own communion, which is his eternal life. ... To believe in Christ means to desire unity; to desire unity means to desire the Church; to desire the Church means to desire the communion of grace which corresponds to the Father's plan from all eternity. Such is the meaning of Christ's prayer: "That they may be one"⁴ (John 17:21). Consequently, unity is the natural result of the Holy Spirit bringing the love of the Father and Son to dwell in Jesus' disciples. "As the Father has loved me, so have I loved you; abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as I have kept my Father's commandments and abide in his love" (John 15: 9, 10). This love is to respond to God by "keeping his commandments." This unity exists for the body of the faithful when all desire to implement John's words: "To do the Father's will." In Mainland China isn't the Father's will what the Pope has said: "Today all Chinese Catholics must persevere in the faith they have received. They should not compromise with any ecclesial theory that does not agree with the will of Jesus, the faith of the Catholic Church, or the feelings of the majority of Chinese Catholics."⁵ The Church is an organic living body, it is the Mystical Body of Christ, and is a "living stone," not a pile of loose rocks.

A Christian should judge everything from the aspect of faith seeing ultimate meaning in everything. This is what the Christian offers to the world. In the eyes of the Chinese government, church buildings are on a par with the church itself. Therefore to control church buildings is to control the church as well. It is for this reason that the government throws so-called illegal priests out of church buildings, and does not permit them to exercise their ministry within these buildings. Even many church people hold this ingenuous meaning of church. They think that if Catholics from the underground church would just enter the official churches, there would be unity. They exhort and encourage all Catholics to go to the churches of the Patriotic Association thinking, that by so doing, the two will advance one more step toward unity,

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* explains the meaning of church in the following way: "The word 'Church' means a convocation or an assembly. It designates the assemblies of the people...within the church...God calling together his people from all

the ends of the earth. The term church means ‘what belongs to the Lord.’”⁶ The catechism clearly states that the church is “those people who belong to the Lord.” The church refers to *people* called by the Lord and not to a *place*. In the church’s beginning there were no church buildings, yet that was a most ideal time for the church, a model for later times. “The Church” is “the people of the new covenant called together by the shedding of Christ’s blood. They form the mystical body of Christ through the Spirit and not through human means.”⁷ “The Church is also the spotless bride of the spotless lamb.”⁸ With undivided interests they are loyal to their bride (Cf. 1 Corinthians 7: 32, 33). Church buildings are meeting places for gatherings of the faithful in those areas where the exercise of religion is not proscribed. These places are only external symbols of the church.⁹ Therefore tearing down a “church building” is not the same thing as destroying the “church.” In the same way those priests and congregations that do not have church buildings can not be said to have “left the church.” However to abandon the principles of faith, and to leave the hierarchical unity of the church is to be a member that is not in complete communion with the mystical body of Christ.¹⁰ This divided church is not the suffering loyal church that is deprived of its church buildings, but the Patriotic Association that has left the church hierarchy relying on political power to occupy the church’s buildings. (In saying this we do not wish to pass judgment on the conscience of any person.) Since this is the case, will unity be achieved by going to those church buildings of the Patriotic Association that is not in complete communion with the universal church?

Related to this matter is the issue of not “celebrating the sacraments together with priests of the Patriotic Association.” Some people think that one reason for division in the church is the refusal to receive the sacraments from priests of the Patriotic Association. First, we must note that to refuse sharing sacramental communion with these priests not completely united with the universal church is a regulation of Canon Law¹¹ and a requirement of the “Eight Points.”¹² During the Eucharistic Sacrifice, the church really becomes the body of Christ (Cf. 1 Corinthians 10:17). Jesus who is actually present on the altar shows the true nature of the church that is united through the same Word, the same prayers, and the same Eucharistic Sacrifice. The Eucharist Sacrifice of those not completely proclaiming a unity in faith that each bishop has with the Pope and

priests have with the Pope, and their legal pastors who belong to the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church is a sacrifice that lacks complete communion.¹³ Especially on the mainland the level of Catholics' "faith consciousness" (to have communion or not) is determined by "communion in the sacraments." Not to clearly differentiate between what is right or wrong in directing Catholics in this matter of receiving the sacraments will certainly create what Canon 844 calls "indifferentism in matters of faith." Receiving sacraments (from ministers of the Patriotic Association) will have "deviant" effects on the consciousness of the recipients and, if the practice continues for any length of time, will result in Catholics accepting the principle that the "Patriotic Association is the same as the church itself." Experienced pastors who hold responsibility and live under the particular circumstances existing on the mainland all agree that "not to have sacramental communion with the Patriotic Association" is necessary for maintaining the purity of the faith of Catholics. (But I do not deny the special circumstances that Canon 844 speaks of. I have no intention to affirm that those Catholics who receive the sacraments from those of the Patriotic Association are not in communion with the church.) Avoiding communion in the sacraments with the Patriotic Association does not create division for this division already exists. It is this already existing division that creates the pastoral practice of "avoiding sacramental communion."

It is more difficult to imagine and is inconceivable how some people accuse the suffering church of not recognizing the "signs of the times," of opposing the government, and of being an obstacle to unity when it only struggles not to submit to a totalitarian power. We do not wish to comment at length on this matter, but we must quote a priest whose church was torn down, and who has been repeatedly deprived of his right to practice his religion. He says in a sermon: "Today they have torn down our church and people freely trample on us. The church building has become a pile of rubble, but we can endure it. Tomorrow they won't let us go on pilgrimage saying that it is illegal. Since this isn't a question of faith, we can endure it. The day after tomorrow when Sunday arrives they won't let you leave the village to attend Mass saying that it breaks some temporary ordinance. All we can do is to worship the Lord in our homes 'in spirit and in truth.' A few days later, group prayer in the home will be declared an illegal activity and participants will be fined. When our children go to school they are forced to write a "document

denying their faith.” The government says that freedom of religious faith is a right of citizens, but only for those who have reached 18 years of age. Therefore those under 18 must choose between leaving their church or their school. They also say that we are not permitted to listen to the Pope in Rome for this would mean being controlled by foreign powers which is against Article 36 of the Constitution.

A priest, in his sermon at the funeral of the much-abused Bishop Fan of Baoding Diocese told a parable entitled “The Lamb and the Wolf.” It was addressed to the Catholics present and also to the crowd of hostile government officials who had come from all over the country. His sermon ended with: “The wolf wants to eat the lamb, and will always find an excuse to do so. For its part, no matter how much the lamb entreats the wolf trying to show him his good will he will always lose out in the end. The result is always the same: he is devoured. But we have God. He has told us: “Do not be afraid, little flock, because it has pleased the Father to give you the kingdom” (Luke 10: 32).

The loyal church has no ideological bone to pick with the government and doesn’t threaten anyone’s “political party.” It only wishes to bring truth, mercy, and the peace of Christ to his “little flock” in the world (Luke 12:32).

Recently I read an article, written by a priest that left me very puzzled. This priest has never met the leaders of the suffering church, and has never visited any of the persecuted Catholics. Yet he made a very subjective judgment: “The underground church does not read the signs of the times,” he wrote. He seems to think that having made several visits to the Mainland and seen several people whom the government arranged for him to see, as well as listen to, that he now has a great deal of correct information on the Church in China. He has used this information for his theological reflections on the church in China.

According to him the suffering church should follow the Patriotic Association in compromising with those who are persecuting it. Is this the desired unity for the Church in China? Or is it the end of the Church in China? Isn’t this the same aim and method that the government advocates in its Document 26 of August 17? Why is it that so many overseas church people are always at odds with their brothers and sisters of the suffering church in China? They not only do not endeavor to obtain their basic human rights, but also lack the least compassion and sense of justice for them. On the

contrary, why do they endanger the lives of their suffering brothers who are struggling to keep their faith in very straitened circumstances? Non-Christians, who do not have the faith (as those who participate in democratic movements), can courageously and with conviction speak the truth. Why is it, then, that those in the church who have the light of the gospel—(Blessed are those persecuted for righteousness)—easily bend with the wind and servilely fawn on others and willingly strike their own brothers when they are down. They have lost all sense of the most basic justice. This is a real tragedy for the church! Why do some people look upon persevering in one's faith and not yielding to violence as only making matters worse? It is no wonder that martyrs are always a mockery and ridicule to a worldly spirit because the light exposes darkness (John 3:20).

I once saw a letter from a high Vatican official written to a priest here in China. It explained the reason behind legitimizing bishops of the Patriotic Association. It read: "Concerning this contradictory attitude, we also feel that it is difficult to accept, but we must put up with it for the time being...The loyal church shoulders an important prophetic role. You and everybody like you must assist these brethren who are weak in will, animate them to stir up their courage, rediscover the importance of truth and loyalty. You must act as a goad to others. They will find this disagreeable, but you must constantly urge them take a courageous stance. This is to say they must become modern martyrs. This is indeed a hidden and even mystical vocation. The "Blood of Martyrs" is a gift of God Who will only give it to those who ask for it." Bishops of the Patriotic Association who have been legitimized should not take this tolerance on the part of the Holy See as ordinary or as the natural course of events and thus stifle the voice of conscience. Some overseas church people should not let their compassion and love for those who admit their faults weaken the difficult struggle needed to lead a life of faith. This is what the present Pope is talking about. He says: "Appropriate allowance is made both for God's mercy towards the sinner who experiences conversion and for the *understanding of human weakness*. Such understanding, however, never means compromising and falsifying the standard of good and evil in order to adopt it to particular circumstances. It is quite human for sinners to acknowledge their weakness and to ask mercy for their failings. What is unacceptable is the attitude of those who make their own

weakness the criterion of truth about the good, so that they can feel justified, without even sensing the need to have recourse to God's mercy. An attitude of this sort corrupts the morality of society as a whole, since it encourages doubt about the objectivity of the moral law in general and a rejection of the absoluteness of moral prohibitions regarding specific human acts, and it ends up by confusing all judgment about values."¹⁴

The Second Vatican Council introduced the age of "dialogue" for the church. However in no way should one think that to dialogue means "not to speak the truth." The Pope in his exhortation to the Asian Bishops' Conference meeting in India said: "I encourage the Asian Church to open itself to dialogue with other Christian bodies, with believers of other religions, and with all men and women of good will. Naturally our dialogue will speak of the 'cross of Jesus Christ.'" For such a dialogue to take place and attain its aim there is need of the good will of the parties engaged in the dialogue as well as each one's equality and freedom. However in dealing with people of the Patriotic Association one does not dare speak the truth as one understands it, but must resort to deceit and manipulation. This renders "dialogue" impossible for true dialogue means that one is his or her own master and no one's fool. At present we must pray and encourage each other to discover what God's gracious plan is for China.

The suffering loyal church should not be troubled by all sorts of strange rumors and opinions, nor should it lose heart if some of "its brothers and sisters" misunderstand it. For only when "friends who had our trust, who shared our table, have scorned us" (Psalm 41:10) will we fully resemble our Lord Jesus on the cross, and be brothers and sisters of the martyr church. We must persevere in giving our witness as martyrs while cherishing love towards our weak brothers and sisters. We should keep an open mind towards the tolerant way the Holy See deals with our brothers of the Patriotic Association. This will not mean that by so doing we deny our loyalty to the universal church. "Martyrdom is a gift. God grants it only to those who willingly ask for it." Let us encourage each other with this thought.

Endnotes

- ¹ “One Association, One Conference” is a government slogan referring to the Patriotic Association and the Bishops’ Conference. Trsl.
- ² Document 26 concerning the Catholic Church, reportedly issued on August 17, 1999, by the Secretariat of Party Central. Cf. Tripod #117, March-April 2000.
- ³ The terms used in Chinese are: “above-ground” and “under-ground” churches. These two terms clearly show the contrast between the two entities. In English, however, the term “above-ground” is somewhat awkward. For this reason the term usually used is “official” or government-approved or open church. In this article we use the term “official” church to designate the church that is recognized by the government and that usually operates under the aegis of the Patriotic Association. The “underground” church is not recognized by the government and wants to have no part with the Patriotic Association. Trsl.
- ⁴ John Paul II Encyclical Letter *Ut Unum Sint: On Commitment to Ecumenism*, May 25, 1995.
- ⁵ Apostolic Letter of the Pope to Catholics in China. The precise reference is not given in the original text. Trsl.
- ⁶ The Catechism of the Catholic Church, The U. S. Catholic Conference, 1994.
- ⁷ Walter M. Abbott, S.J. General Editor *The Documents of Vatican II*, The America Press, 1966. The Church #9, 7.
- ⁸ Op. Cit., #796.G6.
- ⁹ Loc cit., #1179-1180.
- ¹⁰ Loc. cit. Vat II *The Church* #14
- ¹¹ Canon 844 *The Code of Canon Law*, English Translation, London: Collins, December 1983
- ¹² Cf. Anthony S.K. Lam, *The Catholic Church in Present-Day China: Through Darkness and Light*, Hong Kong: Holy Spirit Study Center,, pp. 172-176
- ¹³ That They May Be One,” loc. cit. #45 and the Apostolic Letter of the Pope to the Catholics in China, loc. cit. Note #5
- ¹⁴ Encyclical of Pope John Paul II, *The Splendor of Truth*, #104.