

An Appeal from the Underground

By John

Translated by Norman Walling, S.J.

Everybody knows that the Catholic Church in Mainland China is divided into the official and underground church.¹ The difference between these lies in their different directions and aims. The official church follows the government's leadership and opts for an independent and autonomous administration of its own affairs. It is under the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association that chooses and consecrates its bishops on its own authority without recourse to the Holy See. Its structure comprises the Catholic Patriotic Association and the Bishops Conference. Its supreme authority is the Chinese Catholic Church's Representatives Assembly that meets every five years.

The situation of the underground church

The underground church, on the other hand, consists of those who refuse to join the Patriotic Association, insist on communion with the Universal Church, its entire teaching, and union with the Pope. These adherents do not wish to compromise on any article of the faith, and are willing to suffer persecution for their loyalty to the Universal Church. In the government's eyes, the underground church is an illegal organization. Therefore it is constantly under attack and under threat of destruction. From time to time and in different places, the degree and form of government persecution differs, but its overall plan does not change. The government tries to coerce members of the underground church to join the Patriotic Association; it arrests and jails bishops and priests, closes their seminaries, and disperses communities of seminarians and Sisters. Some local governments even expropriate the church buildings and places belonging to the underground church, as has been the case with all underground church buildings in the Baoding District since 1996. They order Catholics to join the Patriotic Association or deny their faith. In November of 1998, the authorities arrested Fr. Li, a priest in the underground church who was ministering in Guan County, in the Langfang District of Hebei Province. They closed the four churches

under his charge, and made it known that they would not be reopened unless a priest from the official church came to minister.

Although the underground church is being persecuted and attacked, its ministry continues to prosper. It forms clergy and organizes the work of evangelization. If churches are closed, priests offer Mass, and minister the sacraments in private homes. If priests are arrested lay persons in key leadership positions carry on the work of encouraging the faithful. Various catechism classes for children, Bible study groups for young people and adults, and many large retreats flourish under the leadership of our priests. Every year large numbers of non-believers are converted and enter the church. We firmly believe in Jesus' promise: "The gates of hell will in no way overcome the church founded on the rock." With the Lord's help we do not fear the powers of evil and persecution, for we know that persecution is a special gift from the Lord. Look at history. In which historical age did the church not undergo difficulties? We are honored to share in the Lord's Passion.

Friends or adversaries?

However, at the present time the underground church is under another kind of pressure, one even greater than government persecution. This trail confuses and puzzles us, and even threatens to stifle us. It arises from a new current and tendency within the Universal Church where some members look down upon us and crush us. I do not say that these people wish to do this, but the decisions of some high church officials, and actions of other church people produce that result.

A few years ago I saw Bishop Qian Zhichun² give a priest from the underground church a letter that contained some decisions made by the Holy See. One decision ordered bishops of the underground church on the mainland not to consecrate new bishops. We realize that the purpose of this injunction proceeds from high church officials who are preparing the work of unification of the Church in China. But what does this mean? The underground church of course obeys this injunction, but the Patriotic Association will certainly not. To choose and consecrate their own bishops is their motto. How does the Holy See react? When the Patriotic Association consecrates one bishop, the Holy See legitimizes him. If things continue in this way the number of underground bishops cannot but

decrease while the number of official bishops will increase. Clearly, then, the underground church will have no way of developing and its activities will gradually decrease.

The Holy See and the recognition of bishops

We believe that the explanation for the Holy See's recognizing official bishops is that our Holy Father hopes that the members of the Patriotic Association will become members of the Universal Church. He wants them to be in communion with this Church and attain a common unity. In no way does the Pope want the underground church to abandon its principles and join the Patriotic Association. We members of the underground church warmly welcome bishops from the Patriotic Association to become bishops of the Universal Church. If they leave the Patriotic Association, we will cooperate with and obey them. However, during the past few years, we have the following strange situation in the mainland church. Some bishops who have been recognized by the Holy See still remain members of the Patriotic Association. They still hold office and take part in its activities. They even publish statements in line with the thinking of this association. Some of these bishops work for the good of the church. They try to recover its property, and carry out its mission. However, there are others who make use of their certificate of legitimization to blow their own horn and feather their own nests. They not only despise the underground church, but also make use of political power to increase their own influence and curb the activities of the underground church.

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This double identity of bishops, who are legitimized by Rome yet retain their position in the Patriotic Association, seems to have become the normal procedure. One is loyal to the Pope and also to the government. Can it be that rival claims are so easily satisfied! However, looking at the matter from another angle, this procedure is certainly ambiguous, specious, and lacking in all sense of direction,

because it deceives Catholics of good conscience as well as one's own conscience. Won't Jesus' warning words: "Let your yes be yes, and your no be no"³ make us feel all the more confused once we realize their full significance? Have Christ's words lost their meaning for this century?

Someone will say: "But we can't do otherwise for we live under special circumstances, and this is the only way the church can develop." However, do these special circumstances mean the abandonment of principles? Or does progress for the church mean that we stoop to base compromise? We have the wonderful example for church leaders in the story of Eleazar in the second book of Maccabees. His enemies tried to force him to eat pork, but he freely walked up to the instrument of torture choosing suffering and death. We read his words: "At our age it would be unbecoming to make such a pretense lest many young men be led astray by me. Even if, for the time being, I avoid the punishment of men, I shall never, whether alive or dead, escape the hands of the Almighty." His glorious example is remembered to this very day.

I wish to offer a word to shepherds who keep two identities. We understand your situation and the difficulties that you face. But for the good of the church, please leave the Patriotic Association and throw off the soiled linen that besmirches your reputation? Why don't you publicly proclaim that you are in communion with the Universal Church? Once you do this we will support you with our own blood and our own lives.

I also hope that, when the Holy See appoints bishops for the church in China, it will seriously consider whether those who choose to stay within the Patriotic Association (an association, mind you, that publicly proclaims it cuts off all communion with the Universal Church and thereby unable to be faithful to the principles of our faith), can be true pastors within the church? If such persons are given authority in the church, will they exercise it in a proper way? Those who are in authority should give serious thought to this matter.

Help from abroad

Many persons from overseas wish to help the church in Mainland China. Many priests and Sisters continually come to teach. Their purpose is to help form the clergy. We thank them for their good will and their efforts. However, the majority of them only go to the officially recognized seminaries with very few coming to the

underground ones because we cannot guarantee their security owing to our present difficulties. This unwittingly gives the impression that overseas church personnel, who come to the mainland, support the Patriotic Association. Members of the Patriotic Association become bolder and say: "Our way is right since we have many overseas friends who support us." One member even flaunted his pride in my presence saying: "Such and such an important person teaches theology for us; such and such an important person is my friend." We only hope that such famous teachers will help increase his faith, hope, and charity, and not encourage him to further disdain the underground church. When I was a seminarian, a priest from the Patriotic Association came to our community. Seeing that I held an English book in my hand, he showed his concern for me and said: "You should also study the catechism!" In his eyes, it seemed that the members of the underground church didn't know anything and that during our seven or eight years of study we could not even reach the level of understanding the catechism.

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Although we did not have any famous professor to teach us, we still received a systematic education that prepared us to be priests. Many people are of the opinion that the quality of clerical education in the underground church is very low. If we look at the entire picture, however, the situation is not this way at all. Although we do not have overseas teachers coming, our textbooks and courses of study are basically the same as in the official seminaries. Besides, it is not right to think that knowledge is all-important, that if the level of knowledge is low, quality is also low. Priests, of course, should not be deficient in knowledge, but an active spiritual life is more important. When Christ gave the primacy to Peter to rule the church, he didn't ask how much he knew, but asked whether he truly loved him. The underground church is diligent in forming priests with an interior life. While it also emphasizes knowledge, it gives primacy to

becoming a spiritual person. I believe that this is the right way to proceed. The example of many fervent priests is evidence of this.

The message that overseas priests, who come to the China mainland and concelebrate with priests from the Patriotic Association, gives is that they make no difference between the Universal Church and the Patriotic Association, but consider both equal. This matter puzzles both priests and Catholics of the underground church. In 1988 I read a document from the Vatican containing eight directives.⁴ One of these states that there should be no communion in sacramental matters with priests from the Patriotic Association. We have always observed this regulation. We can cooperate with the official church on other matters, but we do not dare to cooperate with the official church in sacramental matters or act against principle simply to foment good relations or to achieve union.

In view of these facts a few of my brother priests in one of our study gatherings stated ironically: "Why is the church on the mainland divided? Who are the elements that are causing this trouble? Wouldn't it be better if there were no underground churches and the Chinese Church would manage its own affairs and evangelize on its own! The only thing to do is to apply for membership in the Patriotic Association, otherwise we are walking down a dead end road!" Notwithstanding, we firmly believe that our church is not a business enterprise. If we were only a business enterprise, we could take any means to obtain our aim. But we are the Universal Church, a community of faith, loyal to principle and conscience. This is our fundamental duty.

Conditions for Church unity

The millennium is facing us. Our beloved Pope and Holy Father has appealed for unity in the Chinese Church, saying that that is the best offering we can present to our Lord Jesus Christ. The unity of the church is the desire of every Catholic in China. We earnestly pray for it and wish that it may come about as soon as possible. But the stumbling block to this unity is precisely the Patriotic Association that has as its aim an autonomous and independent church that manages its own affairs. The one thing necessary is for concerned persons to throw off this meaningless masquerade, and publicly proclaim their loyalty to the Holy See. Then we can attain complete unity. Those bishops who have obtained legitimization from the Holy

See should stand up and publicly proclaim their faith and break away from the Patriotic Association. Overseas church persons should encourage the official church to courageously take this step. Fifty years ago the Patriotic Association did not exist in China. We were united in those days. To recapture our former union we only need to discard the Patriotic Association. We earnestly desire that this day will soon come.

Recently we have heard reports that the normalization of Sino-Vatican relations has taken a step forward. We want diplomatic relations between China and the Vatican, but we have serious doubts how far these relations can go. If diplomatic relations between China and the Vatican can bring about real freedom, and due respect to the Church in China, then we earnestly hope for it. However, if the Church's authority were still controlled by the government, then I would wonder whether the freedom of a caged bird is any better for me than squatting in a prison cell!

Endnotes

¹ This term "official church" is a free translation of what would be a somewhat awkward translation of the original term in Chinese: "above-ground church." Both terms refer to the relationship of each "church" to the government: those officially recognized and those that are not.

² Bishop Qian is at present the bishop of Hualian Diocese in Taiwan.

³ Mt. 5:37

⁴ Anthony S.K Lam, *The Catholic Church in Present Day China through Darkness and Light*, Hong Kong: The Holy Spirit Study Centre, pp. 172-176.