

An Obstacle to Reconciliation in the Chinese Church

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To normalize Sino-Vatican relations is very important for the future of the Chinese Church.

It would open communications between Rome and Beijing, and would help to eradicate many existing prejudices resulting from history. But it is certainly not the first priority for the Church. It would even be better not to normalize Sino-Vatican relations than to do so on the wrong terms. It would not be disastrous for the Church if



Sino-Vatican relations were not restored. The Church can live without it. But all of us are aware of the internal division between the “official Church community,” and the “unofficial (underground) community”. It would definitely be disastrous for the Church if this internal division were not healed. From the pastoral viewpoint this is an absolute priority. Unity among His disciples was the Lord Jesus’ main concern at the end of his life (cf. Jn. 17).

The promotion of reconciliation between the official and the non-official communities remains, therefore, the first obligation of the Chinese Church and its friends. But are we all doing what is needed to achieve that goal? In fact, I don’t believe we are. We have been talking about it for years. Rome openly encourages reconciliation. Inside China the official as well as the unofficial (underground) Church communities also speak about it. But besides talk, is anything more happening? The answer is yes, but not enough! In some Chinese dioceses impressive concrete steps have been taken. In one diocese the underground and official priests meet on and off with each other and have even celebrated the Eucharist together. And there are other examples, but they remain exceptions.

Inside China, the Church remains divided. Friends outside the Church in China, remain equally divided.

Some Church Documents: Obstacles to Reconciliation

Everybody agrees that to “*seek the common ground*” (an expression used by Zhou Enlai), dialogue between Chinese Church leaders and civil authorities is important. But to use that kind of “dialogue” inside the Church community will not suffice to transform it into one, united Christian community. Unity inside a Church community means unity in faith. That is: “*communion*” of all Christians around the Lord Jesus. It is in the Eucharist that this communion is realized, expressed and celebrated. It is through the Eucharist that the Spirit of the Lord can re-create the unity for which Jesus prayed. But therein lies the contradiction, which exists within the Chinese Church.

Some years ago some wondered whether there was a schism in the Chinese Church. Today all agree that there is no schism. Of course, we still doubt the faithfulness of some individuals, but we do not doubt the faithfulness of the community of the Chinese Church as a whole. We repeat that unity is important and that it should be restored. We say that we ourselves cannot “program” reconciliation but that this is the work of the Holy Spirit and we should obtain this gift of unity through prayer and celebrating the Eucharist. But at the same time some Chinese bishops and priests keep referring to official documents in which Church authorities warn Chinese Catholics not to celebrate the Eucharist with their brothers and sisters of the official Church community, except on very specific conditions. Some even say that attending Mass in an “official church” is sinful, and many Chinese Catholics believe that even today. That is the contradiction in which the Church finds itself. As long as these instructions—threats of mortal sin and hell—are repeated, every effort to promote reconciliation ends in paralysis. When you encourage an unofficial (“underground”) Catholic to attend Mass in a local official Church community assuring him that (by far most of) the bishops and all priests are “valid and legitimate,” you immediately get the answer: “No, because that is mortal sin!” At the same time, this attitude of the underground community gives priests and bishops of the official Church community an ideal pretext to say that: “it is useless to try to approach

the underground because they refuse reconciliation.” As a result of this ‘vicious circle’ caused by Church instructions, the internal division continues to exist. This shows how urgent it is for Church authorities to give a signal—or to make a clear statement—to clear up this confusion. To show the urgency of such an intervention, we must look back and see how these “official Church instructions” came about, and how, in recent years, the doubts that existed earlier, and that were at the origin of these instructions, no longer exist.

Development of a More Organized Underground Church

First, there were the well-known “13 points” promulgated by the “unofficial” (underground) Church community in the eighties. Who promulgated these and why? And how were they replaced later by the “8 points”? And who promulgated these? Did the “8 points” contribute to create more unity? Are they still meaningful? If not, then why repeat them again today?

Internal disagreements in the Chinese Church started when, in 1957, the Chinese government created the “Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association,” whose purpose was to control the Church. The government appointed two bishops who had not been appointed by the Holy See. Some Chinese bishops started to cooperate openly and formally with the Patriotic Association. They made disparaging statements against the Holy See, and cooperated with the government in the self-appointment and self-consecration of bishops. Apparently, at the time, there was no “organized underground Church community” but division was growing. Then came the Cultural Revolution. During that period (1966-76) in most places of China, both the members and the non-members of the Patriotic Association without distinction were punished one way or the other. Most of them ended up in labor camps.

In the eighties, only after bishops and priests came out of labor camps and prisons, did a more organized “unofficial (underground) Church community” begin to develop. Priests and bishops were encouraged to go back to pastoral work, provided they cooperated with the Patriotic Association. Many of them accepted, just in order to save what could be saved of the Church, and paid lip service to the Patriotic Association. Very few bishops and priests joined the Patriotic Association or supported its goals. But others considered these “official patriotic bishops and priests” as schis-

matic. They organized an opposition against them. Today, if one reads the statements made by CCPA leaders of that time one must admit that the opposition had valid reasons for clearly expressing their disagreement and concern. Even Pope John XXIII once openly expressed his concern that a schism was growing in China. One did not really know the truth but there were reasons for suspicion. That suspicion could only be clarified by personal contact. This became possible only in the eighties.

In 1980, China opened its door to more and more visitors from abroad. Those who, at the time, visited China and contacted the Church soon discovered that ambiguous situation. I was one of those. I began to visit China on a regular basis in 1980, and talked to Christians, priests and bishops in various places. By far most priests and bishops I met had only recently come out of prison or labor camp. Many of them had decided to cooperate with the government in order to be able to reopen their church as soon as possible, and obtain the right to start parish work and reclaim Church properties. They had no interest whatsoever in the Patriotic Association. But the strict control of the authorities over the Church, and the criticisms leveled against the Holy See published every month in *Catholic Church in China* made me doubt. The fact that some married priests, in a few places, continued to preside at Eucharistic celebrations caused their own communities to reject them, and rightly so. Yet these remained exceptions. At the same time, in conversations, in prayer and by participating in Eucharistic celebrations, and listening to sermons, we learned little by little that we could not doubt the faithfulness of the Church as a whole to the Holy See. Their decision to collaborate with the Patriotic Association was made in order to save what could be saved.

Initially, we wondered whether these "official priests" did not pay too high a price to obtain the right to do pastoral work. We also had doubts about the faithfulness of individual persons, especially those who made fierce attacks against Rome in *Catholic Church in China*. But we also had clear indications that many of these aggressive articles were not written by the person under whose name they were being published. Moreover, the community of Christians obviously did not follow those "Patriotic Association leaders." Catholics only went to the open Church in order to be able to attend Mass and receive the sacraments. They did not and still do

not give any support to the CCPA. These Catholics impressed me with their “sense of Church.” They would observe very sharply who would preside at each Mass. If the celebrant was a priest with a critical attitude towards the Holy See or a married priest, they would refuse to receive communion from him. But these priests or bishops were a minority, and the vast majority of the Catholic community did not follow them.

That’s why, after I had obtained moral certitude for myself on this matter, I wrote in 1986 in an article (published in *China & Europe*, Leuven) that the Church in China is the “One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic Church.” Only those who at that time personally visited China could agree. Some friends who had not personally visited China did not share my viewpoint. Those who inside China went into open opposition against the “official Church community” strongly disagreed, and even circulated a written attack against me and against my view. I did not mind that they had different views, but I regretted that they themselves refused to enter into any conversation or contact with official priests and bishops. As a result they never knew the real attitude of these bishops and priests towards the faith. This was equally true as regards official priests and bishops. Few among them took any concrete steps to meet with the unofficial ones, therefore, neither could they know the real opinions of the others. One can understand this reluctance to communicate at that time. But by refusing to communicate they also deprived themselves of understanding the other side’s true attitude and opinion. Only by communicating can one overcome a conflict. That was true at that time. It remains true today. As long as the two sides avoid communicating frankly, charitably and openly, there can be no growth in mutual understanding.

The 13 points and Conviction of a Schism in the Church

Since the eighties, the underground Church community has recognized Bishop Fan Xueyan (Baoding, Hebei Province) as its leader. Bishop Fan was convinced that the official “patriotic bishops” were causing a schism in the Church. He therefore drafted a document with *13 points* (from which the document gets its name). He intended to give Catholics in China some guidelines to help them develop the right attitude towards the “official Church community.” The “*13 points*” strongly warned Catholics that receiving

the sacraments and participating in the Eucharist presided by an official priest was a sin. Underground priests started to spread this document and warning Catholics of the danger of “committing mortal sin and going to hell.” Even entering an official church building was considered a sin. The Christians, mostly simple people with little educational background took this very seriously and very spontaneously opted for the “safe side,” the underground Church community, in opposition to what was then often called “the Patriotic Church.” The very use of the term “Patriotic Church” indicated that there were two Churches, which implied there was one faithful and another unfaithful, “schismatic Church”. Some called it a “Church of the devil,” opposed to their own Church, which they called “The faithful (orthodox) Church.” I have never agreed with this vision and therefore always avoided using that terminology. Instead, I preferred to speak of the “underground Church community” and the “official Church community” indicating that there is one Church, which, unfortunately, is divided into two communities. We hope that the two communities will soon unite.

Most are of the opinion that it was not Bishop Fan himself but one of his close collaborators who wrote the *13 points*, and put Bishop Fan’s name on it. No matter how the document with Bishop Fan’s name was spread, it spelled the beginning of a more formal internal division within the Chinese Church. Since then, unfortunately, people have started to speak of a “faithful underground Church” and an “unfaithful Patriotic Church.”

Threat of “Mortal Sin:” a Pastoral Heresy

From the pastoral viewpoint I have always regretted the dissemination of the *13 points* document. A Church community should always and at all cost avoid causing internal division. The “mortal sin theory” spread fast in the Church communities. Some young underground priests, ordained during the eighties, were not very well trained theologically. I remember hearing homilies, which did nothing but strongly condemn the “Church of the devil” and provide a strict explanation of the *13 points*, limited to scolding official priests and bishops. Once I visited a remote farmers’ village in Shanxi Province. I was welcomed in the home of fervent, old Catholic farmers. We prayed together in their little home chapel where the underground priest used to say Mass. They told me it was

such a pity that the young official priest who accompanied me—and to whom they refused to talk—was “a priest of the devil” and they could not attend his Mass. I explained to them that this priest had been my student in the seminary. I said that he was “validly ordained” and that he, as well as his bishop, was recognized by and united with the Holy Father. I insisted that there was no problem at all in attending Mass in the official Church community. I will never forget how the old farmer listened so attentively to all that I said. It was obvious that he wished to believe me and do what I suggested, but after a short while he shook his head and said, “No Father, I dare not. I’m afraid to go to hell.” The good man was entirely misled by an underground priest who used to come to celebrate Mass in his house and who, every time, preached in strong words against the “Church of the devil,” severely warning the Catholics to follow the instructions of the *13 points*. Since the eighties I have understood that this “threatening with mortal sin” is a pastoral heresy whose victims are none other than good fervent Catholics. Yet, still today Catholics in remote villages carefully follow these instructions. I experienced this again during recent visits in China.

Have the 8 points Improved Anything?

Since 1986 more visitors have gone to China. More and more of them expressed doubts about the *13 points*. There grew a need for clearer and more positive guidelines not only for Chinese Catholics, but also for visitors from abroad. Many observers were then already convinced that there was no schism in China—and therefore no need for the *13 points*—while others held a different opinion. Finally in May 1988 a document—called the *8 points*—was promulgated. It carried no official signature, but was generally recognized as coming from the Holy See. The document seemed to be a milder version of the *13 points*. It did not directly speak of “mortal sin,” nor did it weaken the *mortal sin theory*. There was some public disagreement among China experts in Asia after the promulgation of the *8 points*. Even today some people doubt whether the *8 points* helped clarify anything. But we are now in the year 2003 and the “*8 points*” document remains officially in force. The situation inside the Church, however, has changed significantly over the past 15 years. Chinese Church leaders—also some of the underground community—have expressed the opinion several times

that a new signal from above is needed if we wish to promote the cause of internal unity in the Chinese Church. Pastors in the field in China are most concerned with this question. Can they expect such a signal soon?

Fifteen Years of Rapid Change

Although we continue to have doubts about certain individual Church leaders in China, even about their attitude towards Rome, none among them has openly expressed the will to separate from Rome. There are at present no signs that a schism exists or is likely to happen.

More than two thirds of the official (patriotic) bishops, who had been consecrated without appointment by the Holy See, have secretly contacted the Holy See. They explained their situation. They applied for and obtained an official appointment from the Pope. Civil authorities have not reacted against this. According to their present legal situation one can distinguish four categories of bishops in China. First the underground bishops who are almost all (but not all) appointed by the Holy See and therefore legitimate. Two thirds of the government-appointed bishops applied for and obtained an assignment from the Pope. It is generally believed—though we have no proof—that among the remaining one third of official bishops some also applied for, but have not yet obtained an appointment from the Pope. The few official bishops who, so it seems, have never applied to the Holy See to be legitimated constitute a fourth group.

All this means that a large majority—more than 80%—of all Chinese bishops (underground and official together) are recognized and appointed by the Holy See. According to Catholic theology and Canon Law they are united with the Universal Church community and the Pope. And those who are not (yet) united should rather be considered as “being on the way towards recognition” instead of being “schismatic” bishops. When we discuss the issue of promoting unity inside the Chinese Church it should be clear that in the present situation the *13 points* as well as the *8 points* documents, and the threat of mortal sin have become obsolete. In fact they have become an obstacle to reconciliation.

Why then should so many Chinese Catholics continue to live under this threat of “mortal sin”? When will a Church authority

speaking the liberating word to Chinese Catholics especially to many in the remote country villages making it clear that there is no question of "mortal sin" if one participates in the Eucharist in an official Church? When will a Church authority make clear that all Catholics can do so? One unofficial (underground) bishop told me recently: "After preaching the 'mortal sin theory' for so many years, our Catholics will not believe us if we encourage them now to attend Mass in an official church. And yet we should do so. But only a clear signal from higher Church authorities can motivate our Catholics to go to attend the Eucharist in the official Church communities."

Failing to Seek Contacts

To promote more unity in the Chinese Church initiatives are expected from both official and unofficial bishops. They are, as shepherds, the first responsible for promoting or re-establishing unity. If more than 80% of all Chinese bishops are appointed by the Pope and in union with the Universal Church, as we have stated above, then one wonders how come these bishops are not in more mutual contact? The question is evident, but the answer needs some explanation.

When government-appointed Chinese bishops applied for an appointment from Rome and were finally approved and appointed by the Holy See, they were all asked to promulgate their appointment by the Pope in their own diocese so that their Catholics would know. But most bishops did not do that, and Rome showed understanding for this. The bishops feared that, if the appointment by the Pope should become publicly known, civil authorities might react and it might have a negative effect on their work. Initially there have indeed been such threats from authorities, but in fact they never took action. Moreover, the bishops wanted to avoid a split among the "official bishops" between the Rome-recognized bishops and those not recognized. Any split inside the Church community is to be avoided. Fortunately such a split did not happen (although this does not mean that the official bishops are internally deeply united). But the result of all this is that there is no unity, not even any contact between the underground and the official Church's Rome-appointed bishops. This is not normal. One would rather expect that all bishops who know each other and their rela-

tionship to the Universal Church and the Pope would wish to express their unity with each other. In China this is not the case. It is a pity.

As Catholics, we can understand the hesitation of official bishops, but we wonder and ask: if internal unity is so crucial for the Church why should bishops passively wait for an initiative from higher Church authorities to attain it? Can we not expect a little more initiative from the Rome-appointed official bishops? Is it unreasonable for us to expect them to promote the internal unity of their Church by promoting contacts with the underground communities in their diocese, and to share this concern with their priests and Catholics?

Papal Appointment and Public Announcement

A Catholic bishop must be appointed by the Pope (in agreement, of course, with the local civil authorities). If not, he is not a "Catholic" bishop as he is not in union with the Universal Church. How come that during bishop consecrations in China the name of the Pope is not even mentioned? Recently an official bishop was consecrated. Government officials as well as the Catholics knew that the Pope (and also local authorities) had appointed the young candidate. Rome-appointed official bishops presided at the ceremony. During the ceremony, according to the prescribed liturgy, the presiding bishop asked the question: "Do you have an appointment letter?" (meaning from the Holy See). The answer was given: "Yes." But then they did not read the appointment letter of the Holy See. Instead a document was read which stated that the "Chinese Bishops Conference" (not recognized by the Pope) appointed the candidate. The Rome-appointed presiding bishop answered: "Thanks be to God." This surprised the Catholics who attended the ceremony. Neither the Pope nor the Holy See was mentioned even though the Pope had appointed the candidate. In our theology and in our faith, it is only the Pope's appointment that counts because only that appointment makes the bishop truly into the successor of the apostles and unites him with the universal College of Bishops presided over by the Pope. What happened during that liturgy could be understood as an approval of the policy of "self-electing, self-appointing and self-consecrating of bishops" which in the Catholic theology is not acceptable. According to our

theology an appointment of a bishop by the Pope is an activity that belongs to the realm of faith. It has nothing to do with foreign relations.

These and similar events happening in China indicate that, although the community of believers is faithful, there are many things in the general situation in need of clarification both on the side of the Church and on the side of civil authorities. Initiatives of official bishops to clarify these would enhance the present image that there is no schism in China in spite of the existing problems.

Perhaps one could phrase the present situation as follows: all bishops are shepherds of their flock. In that capacity their first duty is to promote and protect the unity of faith of their flock and this implies also unity with the Pope and the Universal Church. All Rome-appointed bishops will obviously be concerned with preserving unity with the government-appointed bishops in the hope that one day the Holy See can legitimize them all. But more urgent still is the need for all Rome-appointed bishops to express the unity among themselves, and promote the unity of all Chinese Catholics—underground and official—with the Universal Church by encouraging all to pray and celebrate the Eucharist together. No one's unity in faith with the Universal Church will diminish by doing that; rather love for their own country will increase. It will stimulate them to contribute positively to building up their nation.

Preparing the Way for the Holy Spirit

Reconciliation inside the Church cannot be “programmed” or “scheduled” by human beings. It can only grow as the fruit of prayer and celebration of God's Word through which the Spirit can work. To achieve that, we need encounters in faith and Eucharistic celebrations. It is hard to understand why such encounters between Catholics of the “underground” and the “official” communities are not openly encouraged. The idea that participating in a celebration with the official Church community is “mortal sin” is still prevalent. Encouraging reconciliation while discouraging participation in such Eucharistic celebrations is a cause of frustration and it could, in time, lead some of those communities to become religious sects.

The Church in China still faces historical challenges. A higher authority in the Church should urgently clarify the painful situation by making a clear statement liberating Chinese Catholics

from the “mortal sin pastoral heresy” and opening the way towards joint Eucharist celebrations in the Chinese Church.

Official legitimate bishops enjoy the privileged situation of being recognized by both the Pope and the Chinese government. We admit that their situation is not without problems. However, they will, hopefully, have the courage to dialogue openly with the government in view of obtaining the recognition of the Chinese hierarchy and the respect for Church law. The dialogue should also extend to the underground in view of achieving internal Church unity.

On November 10, 2001, China became the 143rd member of the World Trade Organization. That important event reflects the changes that have taken place in the past 20 years. These changes motivated WTO to accept the PRC as a member. More evolution and growth can be expected in the years to come not only in the field of trade but also in fields directly affecting religion. In March 2003, new leaders took up their responsibility to guide the PRC to a new future. We trust that changes described above can take place not in disagreement with the Chinese civil authorities but within the context of China’s implementing more deeply the spirit of WTO regulations. The joint Eucharistic celebrations of Catholics of both the underground and official Church communities, and in union with the Universal Church would be a historical breakthrough for the Chinese Catholic Church. This, together with the normalization of liturgical celebrations in the Chinese Catholic Church, and the creation of unity within the Chinese Church would greatly enhance the international image of the PRC.