

Three Documents: A Commentary

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I have carefully read the three documents under review, and I find them most disconcerting. Many of my colleagues and other commentators have already explained these three documents at great length, and they have pointed out some serious shortcomings. They have shown how, in some key areas, these documents contradict, certain rules and traditions of the Catholic Church. I will not repeat what they have already said; my own comments will be brief and of a general nature.



The most serious departure from Catholic tradition and practice is the recurrent call for the Catholic clergy, faithful and organizations to uphold the leadership of the Communist Party, to adapt to Socialist society, and to “democratically” run Church affairs. Never in its long tradition has the Catholic Church formally declared that a specific political system should be supported, that the believers must adapt themselves to a political ideology, and that the Church is “democratic” in nature. In all three documents there is only one general reference to the Apostle Peter, and there is no mention, whatsoever, of the crucial role of the Holy Father, the successor of Peter and the leader of the Catholic Church. Is this a Catholic Church?

The so called “democratic” running of the Church has, of course, nothing to do with democracy, and not even with the legitimate and necessary participation of the faithful in Church affairs. The participation of the faithful in the life of the Church is a theological and pastoral mandate of the Second Vatican Council. It is part of the conscience of the Church. In these documents, “democratic running” means simply the total control of the Church by the Party and political authorities. The information we receive from China, sadly, confirms this.

It seems to me that the main purpose of the documents is to extend the scope of the Patriotic Association. The aggressive character of the Patriotic Association can never be sufficiently stressed. Let’s not forget

that the primary purpose of the Patriotic Association is to “support the leadership of the Communist Party.” The Patriotic Association responds only to the policies of the United Front, and it has nothing to do with the spirit of the Church. However, in the last twenty years or so, the Patriotic Association has not been equally active everywhere in China. In many dioceses and parishes its role was merely symbolic, almost non-existent. In other places, local Bishops and priests were able to keep the Patriotic Association under their effective control, in a way that prevented it from damaging the Church. The tolerance of such a state of affairs for such a long time suggested that, after all, local and provincial authorities were quite pragmatic and relaxed in dealing with the Catholic Church. These documents want to remove even that illusion. Everything must be subservient to the Patriotic Association, and its policies must be effectively carried out everywhere, without exceptions. In this respect, these documents are a significant step backward.

On July 25, 2003, the Hong Kong edition of the *China Daily* carried a signed commentary in which, for the purpose of criticizing the Hong Kong Catholic leader, the writer praised at length the principle of the separation of Church and State. The commentary, quoting no one other than Jesus himself, emphatically stated that one should “Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God what is God’s.” Then the writer added that clergymen should not confuse their role with that of politicians.

It is encouraging that China commentators appreciate the principle of the separation of Church and state, which, incidentally, does not mean that a clergyman, cannot, as any other citizen, express his views on social and political affairs. These documents are disturbing, however, since they constitute such a clear example of the interference of the state and of a political party into the legitimate autonomy of so worthy an institution as the Catholic Church, that everywhere in the world is respected and praised for its service to the well being of society.

It is strangely ironic that a few days after its attack on Hong Kong’s Catholic Church leader, the same *China Daily* reported similar remarks by the official bishop of Beijing, who is himself President of the Patriotic Association (which has, as we just mentioned, a political agenda), and Vice President of the National People’s Congress.

The Catholic Church in China, as in any other place in the world, does not ask for privileges or exemptions. She asks only for freedom. It is that simple. It is, in fact, so simple that it is hard to understand why China’s leadership does not grant that freedom to Chinese Catholics.