

How should we prepare to receive the Holy Father's letter?

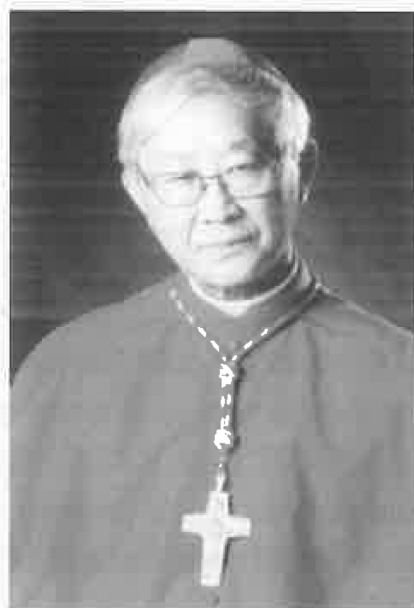
Cardinal Joseph Zen

Everybody is waiting for the promised letter of the Holy Father to the Catholics in China. It is believed that this letter will be probably published during the Easter season. All Catholic faithful, Chinese or otherwise, and all people concerned with the Church in China, are awaiting this letter with great expectation.

Those who helped prepare the initial drafts of the Pope's letter are waiting with curiosity. They know that this is going to be 'his' letter. His Holiness would not just sign drafts prepared by others, but would take responsibility for every sentence in the letter.

The people from the Chinese Patriotic Association and from the Religious Affairs Bureau, who promoted the illegitimate episcopal ordinations in China last year, must be waiting with anxiety. They probably anticipate a letter unfavorable to them and may even be plotting some action in retaliation.

The Chinese Government may be perplexed as to what to expect from the letter. On the one hand, they may remember the Holy See's stern statements in May and December last year; on the other hand, they cannot fail to have noticed the highly conciliatory posture of the press release at the end of the meeting in the Vatican towards the end of January.



The underground clergy and faithful in mainland China must be in a hopeful mood while waiting for the letter. They appreciated the encouragement signified by the words of the Holy Father on December 26 and repeated in the press release of January 20.

The clergy and faithful of the "open" Church in mainland China are also full of expectation for the Pope's letter, but that expectation may be of different kinds. The majority are expecting clear directions from the letter. In the recent past, several have been complaining about the supposed lack of clarity on the part of the Holy See. They anticipate that the awaited clear instructions may not please everybody. They are prepared, however, to accept unreservedly the guidance of the Successor of Peter and Vicar of Christ on earth, even if they will have to pay dearly for this.

However, there are also members of the "open" Church who hope that the Holy Father will incline more in the direction of compromise ("not to provoke the Chinese Government," they say), so that the Sino-Vatican relations may soon be normalized.

An article, representing this position, written anonymously by a priest in mainland China, has been published by *UCAN News* on March 20. This article has been abundantly reported in the *Sunday Examiner* of April 1.

After a careful reading of this article, my honest opinion is that: while claiming to be impartial, this article is very close to the official line of the Government. The reporting of the facts is selective, and the analysis and evaluation is ambiguous. The likely intention of the article (surely futile) is to advise the Holy Father towards compromise, that is, to confirm the present abnormal situation. We are sure that the Holy Father will not be influenced, but the article is nonetheless dangerous. In fact, inside and outside China, it may mislead the readers into having wrong expectations regarding the Pope's letter and into making a wrong response to it when it comes out. This would lessen the letter's effectiveness.

In what follows I give my detailed assessment of the content of the article:

- The article emphasizes the faithfulness of the members of the “open” Church to the universal Church and their respect for the Pope as their “spiritual leader.” It forgets, however, that the “open” church, even today, still proclaims itself to be, officially, an independent Church.
- The article criticizes the underground church for its stubbornness in opposing the Government. The underground church, however, is “guilty” only of not accepting to be a member of an independent Church.
- The article blames the overseas media for being hostile to China by claiming that persecution is still going on in China. However, the overseas media are simply reporting facts. Though I disagree with the position of the Kung Foundation, I don’t think their reports on imprisoned bishops, priests, and faithful are just hearsay.
- The author blames people for using Western standards in making their judgments. When fundamental human rights are in question, there should be no distinction between Western or Eastern standards.

The article still mentions events like the Opium War to defend the backward religious policy of the Government. The author is of the opinion that we should appreciate the progress made by China in recent years and accept the still existing limitations. This we surely do. But if you see them making two steps forward and one step backward, or one step forward and two steps backward, you should not appreciate their steps backward. And if the still existing limitations make the situation fundamentally not acceptable, we are bound to protest. No matter how big the cage, a bird locked therein is still a “bird in a cage.”

In evaluating the present tension between China and the Holy See, the author of the article presents himself as impartial. In reality, by doing so, he dispenses himself from holding the Catholic position. He puts all the blame on a different understanding of politics and religion in Chinese and Western

cultures. He says: "The Government does not accept that the Church should appoint bishops without Government approval, because they do not understand the Catholic faith. The Church does not accept that the Government should appoint bishops without the Holy See's approval, because they do not understand the political expectations of China." So, what should the conclusion be? That the Church renounces her faith so as to fulfill the political expectations of the Chinese Government!

We now examine in more detail how the article assesses the illegitimate episcopal ordinations of last year.

With much surprise, I find that the author of the article criticizes them severely, qualifying them as "unreasonable" and "going too far." In the English translation, words like "shock," "bitterness," and "regret" abound. (The author seemingly has inside information to know that the highest authorities were not actively behind those initiatives, which goes to confirm our suspicions.)

After condemning the ordinations, however, the article says that it is more important to ask the question "Why?" And in answering the question, he justifies those ordinations by pointing to the inner motivation behind the facts. What was actually meant by those ordinations was to show China's strong discontent with the Vatican for repeated appointments of clandestine bishops and for disapproving bishop-candidates elected with Chinese Government support. In addition, it signifies China's protest against the anti-communist, anti-Chinese comments made by some overseas media.

So, the final solemn impartial judgment made in the article is: "At such moments, claims of sincerity by both China and the Vatican fail to pass the test."

However, looking at the development of the situation in China, our understanding of the facts is that the illegitimate ordinations were really extremely unreasonable, because they suddenly reversed the direction of developments up to that time.

For twenty years or so, both the Chinese Government and the Holy See tried to compromise with each other with generosity. The Holy See recognized a great number of illegitimate bishops and approved a good number of bishop-candidates elected with Chinese Government support, without demanding that they renounce publicly their belonging to the "open" Church. The Government, on its side, was well aware of the recognitions, approvals, and even direct appointments by Rome and did not take any punitive action.

At this stage, the situation was ripe for both sides to sit down and work out a reasonable accord. The demise of one Pope and the coming onto the scene of another seemed to present a good opportunity. Unfortunately, suddenly we were inflicted with those ugly facts, which shocked the whole world, saddened the whole Church, and challenged the harmony that the Government professes to promote. Rightly, every one was asking: "Why?"

We in Hong Kong are unanimous in thinking that the plausible explanation of the illegal ordinations is that there are people who are afraid that, after the normalization of relations, they may lose their power and acquired advantages. That is why they tried to disrupt the negotiations. The author of the article must have known about this viewpoint of ours. Why did he not bring it into the discussion?

The author mentions many recent big religious events supported by the Government. I think we Catholics would be very happy if we were simply allowed to organize our own activities. Every time the Chinese Patriotic Association and the Religious Affairs Bureau intervene, you can suspect a political aim. For example, they brought Fr. Ma Yinglin to the Religious Peace Summit in Moscow to shake hands with cardinals, and they brought him to a Peace Summit in Tokyo to concelebrate with archbishops and bishops. Photos were taken and publicized to "prove" that Fr. Ma is recognized as a legitimate bishop.

If we ask what the likely intention of the author was, and what he hoped to achieve, we are in the area of conjecture.

However, it is not difficult to see that the article aims at a continuation of the status quo. The reasoning is quite simple: if the problem is all about misunderstandings, then the solution is in mutual compromise. The author gives priority to solving the problem between the States (i.e. China and the Vatican) through diplomatic relations. To make that a reality, the Holy See must posit whatever signs of good will are conducive to that purpose.

Under the beautiful words "mutual understanding," "trust," "good will," and "friendship," the substance of what the article wants to say is: "do not irritate the Government, do not insist on the normalization of the religious situation or of religious freedom." The author of the article speaks precisely according to the Government's plans: Even after the establishment of diplomatic relations, there should be no big change; the status quo should be maintained (so that the acquired position and advantages of certain people be safeguarded).

The article hopes that the Pope will opt for compromise. This hope is not likely to be fulfilled.

But the article is nonetheless dangerous. The author is knowledgeable and an expert in sophisms. By presenting himself as an impartial analyst, he can easily succeed in misleading the people into nurturing false expectations with regard to the Pope's letter.

If readers, inside and outside China, accept the suggestions of the article, they will expect the Holy Father to emphasize friendship rather than truth, and diplomatic relations rather than real normalization and real religious freedom.

The people with such expectations, I believe, will be disappointed when the letter comes out. They may even side with those who eventually may take irrational retaliatory action. Then, the Catholic Church in China would be on a road of no return to becoming a national Church independent from Rome. The best elements in the Church would become frustrated and disappear. Then, the normalization of the life of faith would become a far away dream.

We must believe that the only purpose of the Holy Father in writing such a letter is to urge a real normalization of the religious situation, so that millions of Chinese Catholics can live their lives of faith happily and bear abundant fruit. Let us be united in prayer and action behind this unique purpose, for which we have to stand up. Let us join the majority, or the near totality of the faithful, in mainland China who are ready to accept, without reservation, the directives contained in the Holy Father's letter

We beseech the leaders of our nation to cease allowing an enslaved Church to bring shame on our country. Rather let a free and respected Church bring honor to our strong and respected country. Please, give these people who are your citizens the happiness of the freedom to practice their faith. They are willing to offer their lives for the good of their country.