

## EDITORIAL

**O**n June 30, 2007, the Vatican released the long awaited letter of Pope Benedict XVI to the clergy and Catholics of China. Such a letter from the Holy Father had been expected since a meeting of Vatican officials and Church-in-China experts, held in Rome in mid-January 2007.

Very warmly, the Holy Father speaks directly to the Catholics of China, addressing them as “Brother Bishops, dear priests, consecrated persons and all the faithful of the Catholic Church of China.” He then quotes St. Paul’s letter to the Colossians: “We always thank God, the Father of Our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, because we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love which you have for all the saints...” (Col. 1:3-5, 9-11) Pope Benedict then writes that these words of St. Paul express the sentiments that he, as Successor of Peter and universal Pastor of the Church, feels for the Chinese Catholics.

The Holy Father then sets out the purpose of his letter. He writes that some important aspects of ecclesial life in China give cause for concern. He wishes to address some of these matters, and to offer some guidelines concerning the life of the Church and the task of evangelization in China.

After expressing heartfelt gratitude to the Lord for the faithful witness of the Chinese Catholic community, Pope Benedict moves on to express his sincere admiration and sentiments of friendship for the entire Chinese People. Citing his predecessor, Pope John Paul II, Pope Benedict also expresses the hope “for the opening of some form of dialogue with the authorities of the People’s Republic of China.” He writes that the Holy See “always remains open to negotiations.” In relations with the civil authorities, the Church teaches the faithful to be good citizens of their country. At the same time, she asks the authorities not to unduly interfere “in matters regarding the faith and discipline of the Church.” The

Church asks the State to guarantee authentic religious freedom, so that its Catholic citizens can exercise their faith to the full.

Pope Benedict's letter was signed on Pentecost Sunday (May 27 this year). The letter was published on June 30, after a period of translating it into several different languages. It is interesting to note that the Gospels for the liturgies on the day before and after the issuance of the letter are very apropos for its contents. On June 29, the Feast of Saints Peter and Paul, the Gospel read at Mass was from Matthew, Chapter 16, where Jesus gives the keys of the kingdom of heaven to Peter, and says the words: "Upon this rock I will build my Church." On the day following the issuance of the letter, Sunday, July 1, the Gospel read at Mass was from Luke, Chapter 9, where Jesus sets his face to go to Jerusalem. When the apostles James and John saw that Jesus was not welcomed in a certain Samaritan village, they asked Jesus: "Lord, do you want us to call down fire from heaven to consume them?" Jesus turns and rebukes them.

The passage from Matthew emphasizes the Church's faith and doctrine regarding the Petrine office, while the second reading from Luke emphasizes Jesus' compassion and rejection of the use of violence as a means to solve problems. Both elements are present in Pope Benedict's letter to the Catholics of China. He is warm and compassionate, and yet at the same time, he is not shy about spelling out the Church's doctrine, and how he sees this doctrine being tampered with in present day China.

Actually, in his letter the Holy Father does nothing more than reiterate traditional Catholic doctrine and practice.

(The above was taken from a fuller commentary, which can be viewed on our centre's website: [www.hsstudyc.org.hk](http://www.hsstudyc.org.hk))

In this issue of *Tripod*, we reproduce the Holy Father's letter, and follow it with commentaries by several Church in China observers. (PJB)