

Pope Benedict XVI Opens a Bright Horizon to Catholics in China

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We should be very grateful to Pope Benedict XVI for his wonderful letter to the Catholics in China. It is enlightening to Catholics, stating that they are one Church whatever their choice of staying in the underground or being officially recognized by the authorities. All are called to reconcile on the basis of their common faith in Jesus Christ, our Saviour.

It is also enlightening with regards to relations to the Chinese people and to civil authorities. State and Church serve the people on two different levels: the State as a political power, the Church as a religious body contributing a spiritual force to the believers and encouraging them to act as good citizens. There is no conflict between the two powers. On the contrary, there is an appeal for cooperation in the service of the same human beings.

Church – State Cooperation

The first part of the letter opens a bright horizon for the growth of China and of the Church in the third millennium. It is written in the spirit of the 4th constitution of the 2nd Vatican Council *Gaudium et Spes*, “Joy and Hope” (The Church in the Modern World). Fully appreciating the resources of Chinese civilization, the Pope also takes into account the socio-economic progress, which has been achieved by China during the past decades.

As I turn my attention towards your People, which has distinguished itself among the other peoples of Asia for the splendour of its ancient civilization, with all its experience of wisdom, philosophy, art and science, I am pleased to note how, especially in recent times, it has also moved decisively towards achieving significant goals of socio-economic progress, attracting the interest of the entire world.

He opens a new horizon by suggesting the important part, which China can play in the process of a meaningful globalization. He explains in which way the Church can contribute to the efforts of the country towards building a peaceful world:

As my venerable predecessor Pope John Paul II once said, 'The Catholic Church for her part regards with respect this impressive thrust and far-sighted planning, and with discretion offers her own contribution in the promotion and defence of the human person, and of the person's values, spirituality and transcendent vocation. The Church has very much at heart the values and objectives which are of primary importance also to modern China: solidarity, peace, social justice, the wise management of the phenomenon of globalization.'

A number of intellectuals in China precisely think that Christian faith encourages the growth of a personal consciousness with a sense of responsibility and an aptitude to care for others and to work for the common good. These psychological elements, they say, are conducive to the growth of a sound democracy. Christianity urges active participation in public life while safeguarding against a wild use of freedom, and counteracting the deadly poisons introduced into social life from modernity. To be sure, the great moral tradition of China can also be revived in support of moral development. The broad success of Professor Yu Dan's presentations of Confucius and other classics proves that many

young Chinese are happy to draw inspiration from the ancient cultural heritage of China. Catholics too may obtain from these books many elements in tune with their own spiritual requirements.

Comparing their faith with other spiritual traditions, Catholics should express what is more specific in Christianity. It is a Faith in the person of Jesus Christ the Saviour. This means acknowledgement of our human limits in relation to a God creator, the source of life. It means also recognition of human weakness due to pride and selfishness, which destroys our harmony with God. People can be liberated and gain a new life through faith in the mercy of God manifested in history through the sacrifice of Jesus, the Son of God. But faith has to be proved in acts of love. To be true witnesses of their faith Catholics have to love one another and forgive those who have offended them.

Reconciliation among Catholics

The Pope therefore urges Catholics to reconcile among themselves and overcome the long split between those who have chosen to worship openly, due to some compromise with the government's requirement of independence (*dishang*) and those who, out of loyalty to the Church (*dixia*), refuse the official stand imposed by the Patriotic Association. This division due to political pressure, thanks be to God, has not provoked a real change in the faith of Chinese Catholics. All have found ways to keep in touch with the Universal Church, to put into practice the orientations given by the 2nd Vatican Council, and to express their loyalty to the Pope, head of the Church. Conscious of the sufferings endured by all, Pope Benedict urges Catholics to reconcile. Official bishops have to announce more clearly the secret recognition they have obtained from the Pope. Underground bishops should attempt to obtain recognition by the government. All Catholics should reconstruct their communities around the same Eucharist, knowing that they can receive Communion and the sacraments in the open churches. Former permissions, such as the 1988 directives, are now

revoked. Faculties for the nomination of bishops granted in a time of more severe persecution are now no longer to be used.

This call to unity by the Pope is not without risk. The government may take advantage of this to increase its control over all Catholics. From the part of those who have suffered more, it will require enormous effort to come out into the open, and fraternize with people who have offended them. Prudence will be needed. The Pope leaves each bishop to decide according to the local circumstances. The whole Church knows how the sacrifice of the underground Catholics permitted the survival of a Chinese Church fully loyal and united to the universal Church.

Autonomy of the Church in its own religious field

United in their common witness to the values of the Gospel, Catholics still need some freedom to express their views and promote justice, truth, love and freedom. Their prophetic mission may be cruelly countered by corrupt authorities. Many journalists, lawyers, and internet users have fallen victim in their fight for justice and truth. But if the government really wishes to check corruption and create a harmonious society, the Church should not be considered as a rival power.

The Pope therefore asks for the independence of the Church in religious matters. He stresses the religious nature of the Church and its hierarchical structure: the Church is “apostolic”, governed from the beginning by the apostles and their successors, the bishops united with the Holy See. As successor of Peter, the Pope has the mission to guarantee the unity of the Church and the integrity of the Faith. He is the one who should appoint bishops. But since a bishop has some authority in moral and social matters, the government may be consulted in the choice of candidates to the episcopacy. On the other hand, the government should not interfere in religious matters as the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association has done for the past 50 years.

The present Chinese bishops Conference has no legal status in the Church as it excludes unofficial bishops and integrates bishops who have not been approved by the Holy See.

Pastoral orientations for a better Church life

The second part of the letter gives pastoral advice to bishops, priests, religious and lay people. Bishops should manage their dioceses with the help of commissions recommended by Canon law. "Rules for the management of dioceses" have in fact been officially approved by the Chinese bishops in 2003. But this document was published in association with two other texts, which granted too much power to the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association. This overshadowed what was good in the rules for the sound management of dioceses. In fact many bishops still lack an efficient secretariat. They need reliable financial commissions. Money can easily be wasted by priests themselves for the benefit of their families or in unnecessary construction. The CCPA may also use Church money for its own benefit, while Sisters are often left with a minimum amount for food and lodging.

Priests have been exposed to many difficulties. Those who have gone astray should seize opportunities such as the Holy Thursday celebration to reconcile with the community.

My dear priests! You who bear "the burden of the day and the scorching heat" (*Mt* 20:12), who have put your hand to the plough and do not look back (cf. *Lk* 9:62): think of those places where the faithful are waiting anxiously for a priest and where for many years, feeling the lack of a priest, they have not ceased to pray for one to arrive.

Priestly and religious vocations have flourished over the past two or three decades. But many of these young people did not receive proper guidance. Some lacked a basic understanding of the spiritual meaning of their commitment:

The need therefore emerges both for more careful vocational discernment on the part of Church leaders, and for more in-depth education and instruction of aspirants to the priesthood and religious life. Notwithstanding the precariousness of the means available, for the future of the Church in China it will be necessary to take steps to ensure, on the one hand, particular attention in the care of vocations and, on the other hand, a more solid formation with regard to the human, spiritual, philosophical-theological and pastoral aspects, to be carried out in seminaries and religious institutes.

To lay people, the Pope recommends finding ways to overcome the difficulties affecting family life in modern society. Knowing that family education is deeply rooted in the Asian tradition, he wants Chinese families to be a school of love. He also wants the faith to be transmitted to catechumens as a way of life, and not as an intellectual exercise of learning the catechism, or as a simple ritual of reciting prayers. Finally he invites all Chinese Catholics to fulfil their mission of spreading the Gospel among the population. Every issue raised in the second part of the letter is related to concrete problems. Pope Benedict speaks as the Pastor of the universal Church.

Catholics throughout the world should pray for China on May 24th every year

Pope Benedict knows that for his daring letter to produce any fruit, the Holy Spirit has to blow a powerful wind of change. With this grace from above, his letter can become the spark which will set fire to the plain. The universal Church is invited to pray for China on May 24th, pilgrimage day to Mary Help of Christians on the hill of Sheshan in Shanghai. Why Shanghai? The Pope could have chosen Donglü in the province of Hebei, a well known pilgrimage site to the Holy Mother of China. But the Chinese

authorities might have seen this choice as a provocation. Access to the pilgrimage site at Donglü has been restricted for the past few years, as it was a huge gathering place for underground Catholics hostile to the Patriotic Association. A call for prayer to the universal Church should lead to concrete international participation. From this point of view, the Sheshan pilgrimage site may be more suitable than Donglü. The basilica can be reached within an hour from central Shanghai. Mary, Help of Christians, is the mother who can unite all the children of the family of God in China.

Signed on the Feast of Pentecost, the Pope's letter is a real gift of the Spirit. The choice of June 30th to publicize it may suggest another meaning. This date is the feast day of the first martyrs of Rome, a day after the feast of the apostles and martyrs, Peter and Paul. The blood of these first martyrs was the seed of many Christians. After three centuries of recurring persecutions, the whole Roman Empire accepted the Gospel of Christ. Christians in China have known persecution for over three centuries. The time may have come for a wonderful harvest.