

# *Reactions to the Letter of Pope Benedict XVI to the Chinese Church*

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**T**he Pope has shown a great deal of courage by entering a fascinating, yet complex and obstacle-filled territory. Observers and advisers, all knowledgeable and in good faith, offered the Pope conflicting opinions and interpretations, as discord occasionally marks the viewpoints of the Chinese Catholics.

The Pope proclaimed his Word, producing a text of great perspicuity, balance and gracefulness. He spoke words of truth and love, without condemning anyone, but he was not about to permit the freedom of the Church to be trampled upon.

## **The reactions of the Catholic communities<sup>1</sup>**

I write this article after the letter has been released only for a couple of weeks. It is too early to know in a satisfactory manner the reactions of the Catholics from China. Moreover they need time to receive, read, reflect upon and digest the long text.

The initial reactions, so far, are of great joy and appreciation. For us, familiar with the Catholic communities in China, this does not come as a surprise. All the Catholics in China, belonging to both open and underground communities, have a great devotion to the Pope, as was proved in the last few months, when they patiently and eagerly awaited the letter, considering it to be something very

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<sup>1</sup> The reactions registered in this article come from personal contacts, experiences reported to me by visitors to China, and by the following agencies and media: Ucan, Asianews, South China Morning Post, Sunday Examiner, Mondo e missione.

important for their lives. The words of the Pope really carry weight among Chinese Catholics, more, I believe, than in most other countries.

This task has unfortunately been made more complicated by the political authorities preventing Catholics from receiving the letter. The internet websites which carried the letter, such as the Vatican and *Asianews*, have been obscured or partly censored. Popular websites, belonging to dioceses or other groups, were warned to remove or not upload the letter. Officials closed at least three websites. On June 29<sup>th</sup>, some websites informed their readers that the long-awaited papal letter would be released the next evening, and they urged their readers to watch for it and for related reports. But since then, these websites have not carried the papal letter.

A priest in charge of such a website registered with the government said he felt helpless because he strongly believes that China Church websites should publish the Pope's letter. He also said that some government officials came to his office on the morning of July 1<sup>st</sup>, and told him he was not allowed to upload the text.

We have learned that in a diocese of Shaanxi the local priests have printed the letter, as a small booklet. But the police went as far as closing the small printing shop. In some open churches the text is put out on public boards, so that faithful can read it, but in most places this is not allowed. The Patriotic Association has clearly stated that they will not distribute the letter, a statement implying that they will prevent others from doing so (as we will see again).

As far as we can know, priests did not comment, or even mention, the letter during their homilies in the open churches, again, because of the pressure and/or orders that came from the officials of the government.

So far official bishops have not made any comments about the letter, and it is very unlikely they will be able to publicly support it.

### Voices from the underground communities

The members of the underground communities have so far accepted all the pope's instructions, including the revocations of concessions and privileges given to them in past decades. This was one of the most sensitive issues regarding the underground communities, and their reactions seem encouraging.

The privileges, conceded from the late seventies of the last century, were exceptions to canon law to meet the needs presented by difficult situations. The clergy were allowed to go beyond diocesan boundaries and administer sacraments to Catholics anywhere. Underground bishops were also allowed to ordain other bishops and to ordain priests without formal theological education. From 1980 to 1993, it is believed that about 80 bishops were ordained secretly. In 1988, the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples issued the "Eight-Point Directive on Dealings with China," which required that all *communicatio in sacris* (sacramental communion) be avoided with bishops and priests belonging to the Patriotic Association.

Underground Bishop Joseph Wei Jingyi of Qiqihar said he completely agrees with the Pope, especially on the revocation of past faculties. The letter provides practical guidelines for Church life and evangelization in China, so that she can move forward, he said.

Bishop Luke Li Jingfeng of Fengxiang (Shaanxi), a long-time underground bishop, now recognized by the government without being a member of the Patriotic Association, praises the Pope's appeal to all Chinese priests. "Those who follow the Catholic tradition are reassured, whilst those who do not feel the great call from the successor of Peter to God's flock will ignore it."

An underground priest from the Baoding Diocese (Hebei) agreed the situation has changed and the Pope rightly has revoked the privileges. "The letter urges the Chinese Church to gradually return to the universal Church. Even when difficult, every Catholic should, in obedience, accept the document unconditionally."

Another priest from a northern China underground community has expressed his joy for the letter: "We can feel we are an important part of the Universal Church. We can feel his pastoral care and deeply feel that communion in the Church is not an empty concept."

"The most urgent mission of the Church in China now is reconciliation. Our quarrels and confrontations are definitely not what Christ wants. We need to sit down in love and truth -- even better, in the truth of love and in the love of truth -- so that we can pursue sincere dialogue. The only way to have the other listen to me is for me first to listen to the other. The only way to avoid quarrels is for me not to quarrel." This brings us to the question of 'concelebration'. "Perhaps some members of the 'underground Church' will find this hard to accept for the present. We should put aside personal prejudices and personal views, and bear in mind the Church of Christ."

The priest, however, regrets that the papal letter does not mention those bishops and priests who are still in prison. "We would not ask the Pope to offend the Chinese government by mentioning it. We only want assurance that the Universal Church has not totally abandoned these people who are suffering, in silence. This is just a humble request." It should be pointed out, however, that the pope did acknowledge the persecution and suffering of Christians in China.

### **The statements of Cardinal Zen and other China watchers**

Hong Kong Bishop, Cardinal Joseph Zen, admired "the precious balance achieved by the Holy Father. Only an outstanding theologian and a tender father could satisfy at the same time the demands of the truth and kindness towards the people. The Pope insists that Bishops are the leaders of the Church and they are not to be separated from the Roman Pontiff." Cardinal Zen, however, noted that mistakes have been made in the Chinese translation of the letter. In the second section of paragraph 7, in a sensitive

passage, where the Pope refers to the underground bishops obtaining government recognition, after the words: “In not a few particular instances,” in the Chinese translation, the following words are missing: “indeed almost always.” Card. Zen also took issue with the translation of the anonymous *Explanatory Note* accompanying the letter. Moreover, according to him, the *Note* does not correctly reflect the content of the letter, and should not be considered part of the Pope’s letter.

Some observers, in and outside China, claim that the Pope urged the underground community to seek recognition from government authorities. Actually, the pope did not say that; rather he asked the civil authorities to recognize the underground bishops. But he also admitted that ‘almost always’ (a sentence strangely left out in the Chinese translation released by the Vatican), in the process of recognition by the government, the bishops are obliged “to adopt attitudes, make gestures and undertake commitments that are contrary to the dictates of their conscience.” This is why the Pope remains very prudent, leaving to individual bishops to determine the best course of action to take in their own specific situations.

Clearly, asking the government to recognize the bishops (which is what the Pope says) is a completely different matter from affirming that the Pope asks the underground bishops to surface (which the Pope does not say). Commentators who write that the Pope said there is now no longer a need for an underground Church may be misreading the Pope’s letter.

### **Government’s reaction**

Although, as a token of courtesy, the Holy See provided the Chinese government with a copy of the letter ten days before its publication, China’s official reaction to the letter was still critical, although somewhat restrained. The Foreign Affairs Ministry in Beijing, ignoring the call of the Pope for dialogue, reiterated

China's two pre-conditions, and even warned the Holy See not to create new obstacles.

When dealing with sensitive issues, Chinese leaders prefer not to speak in the first person, or to react too quickly. They let their middle-level officials speak and take action. Therefore the United Front Work Department of the Communist Party, even before the letter was published, summoned some official bishops to Huairou, near Beijing, to instruct them about the letter. Ye Xiaowen, director of the Council's State Administration for Religious Affairs, was also there, reasserting the State's policies.

Another key government official, Mr. Liu Bainian, Secretary of the Patriotic Association, said that his organization would not distribute the letter. That means no one will take responsibility for this, since religious publications need government authorization. Certainly the heavy suppression of the letter all over China, while not unexpected, does not presage a good reaction from the government.

On July 5, the *Wen Wei Po*, a pro-China daily in Hong Kong, quoted a Beijing "authoritative person" (anonymous) as saying that the authorities do not accept the papal letter, and described it as 'unrealistic'. The Chinese official is quoted as saying that the attitude shown by the Pope is rigid and inflexible. The letter just repeats "hackneyed phrases," he said. Therefore it will not have a positive effect, and will just create more complications and barriers. Finally this official stressed that the Church in China will continue to ordain its own bishops according to its needs (Was he a CPA spokesman, who has said similar things in the past?).

## Conclusions

In anticipation of the important event of the Olympic games coming up in the summer of 2008, one would expect that China would be eager to accredit herself as a advanced country respectful of all faiths and of religious liberty. Unfortunately the regime

remains unable to deal with an institution having idealism and freedom such as the Catholic Church.

We make ours the words of Bishop Luke Li Jingfeng of Fengxiang. "I pray the Lord that the Chinese government may understand the Pope's message, and I hope that it does so for the good of China. I always tell our rulers: Look at China; it is really developing and joining the rest of the world, but it has remained backward as far as the Church is concerned. If China wants to open up to the world, it must open itself to the Church. If this problem is solved, everything else will be solved. Otherwise we shall always be a step behind other countries. I pray for this, and that the Pope's letter might reawaken the Chinese Catholic Church."

I am sure the great majority of Catholics in China, if not all of them, will do everything they can to achieve the unity the Pope calls for. It is a difficult, but not an impossible objective. The situation differs from place to place. In some areas the state officials apply their faulty religious policy with hardness. In other areas unity seems at hand, once they overcome personal animosities. Today in many dioceses, where the Catholic community is united and firm in the defense of ecclesial principles, the civil authorities have little space for maneuver. The officials have space where the church remains divided. In fact they work in order to create or to increase those divisions. The Pope therefore is most prudent: he does not judge or offer easy solutions. The bishops must run the Church, he states. Therefore he entrusts to individual bishops the responsibility of leading the dialogue among all the members of the Catholic community, and with the political authorities.

I wholeheartedly desire that the letter will bear the fruit that the Holy Father strives for. The Pope and the Chinese Church deserve as much. I have confidence that this will happen. Not immediately, perhaps, because this historical letter can be judged only for its long-term impact. For a while we may witness the government's effort to diminish its significance. But in perspective, this letter contains the seed for the accomplishment of the long hoped for unity and freedom of the Church in China.