

# *Response to the Letter of Pope Benedict XVI to the Church in China*

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*Savio Hon, SDB*

*Here is my immediate response to the letter of Pope Benedict XVI to the Church in China (Pentecost, May 27, 2007)*

1. It is a profound letter with powerful religious overtones. In his usual way, the Pope has recourse to love and truth, which are the two pillars of the unity of the Church. With an utmost sincerity and conciliatory tone he exposes the truth so as to reach the hearts of those who yearn for communion.
2. To the bishops the Pope sounds like a brother exhorting them with clarity and Church teaching to observe the ecclesial duties of the Episcopal ministry, namely, to maintain the unity of the Church both *ad extra* and *ad intra*.
3. The Pope admits the complex situation of the Church in China and the pain of the divisions, tensions, and recriminations. He asks for “reconciliation” and encourages Christians to be ready to forgive (even at great cost).
4. The letter clearly states that the disharmony is caused from the outside by certain “entities”. The word “entities” has been cleverly used. Without mentioning the names of these entities, such as the Patriotic Association or the institutes that stand behind them, the anonymous flavor of this word is meant as a conciliatory signal towards those entities. Some of them (i.e., some patriotic associations at the local or provincial level) are doing good for the Church, whereas others are doing harm to the Church, to corrode her in every sense.

5. To the Chinese authorities, the letter clearly states that both the Church and the government should observe the principle of non-interference. Dialogue is absolutely necessary, and is to be founded on trust and good will.
6. On the issue of the appointment of bishops, the letter clearly maintains the right and duty of the Pope's role as the one who "appoints". This is purely a religious matter, and not negotiable in the course of the normalization of Sino-Vatican relations.
7. There are also guidelines for the pastoral life. The bishops again are reminded of the principle of communion and cooperation (in particular with the priests). The guidelines aim at the unity of the Church, show concern for the Catholic faithful, and give them discretion and freedom in the matter of receiving sacraments from illegitimate pastors. The Pope also revokes all the faculties previously granted in order to address particular pastoral necessities that emerged in truly difficult times. The faculties include the possibility of allowing some bishops even to administer episcopal ordination secretly in extreme cases. The act of revoking the faculties is for the purpose of avoiding confusion, and would make Church life more transparent to the public.
8. I am particularly glad that the Pope dedicates May 24 as a day of prayer for the Church in China, since that day is the feast of Our Lady Mary Help of Christians. He encourages us to celebrate it by renewing our communion of faith in Jesus our Lord and of faithfulness to the Pope, and by praying that the unity among us may become ever deeper and more visible.
9. The limits or measures imposed by the government upon Church activities and communion are so restrictive that the integrity of the faith is being compromised, in particular, regarding the appointment of bishops. The bishops are all important for all the aspects of Church life, for "*nihil sine episcopo*." Hence, when the bishops themselves are not in full

- communion with the Church through the successor of St. Peter, it causes the pain of division and disharmony.
10. The whole Church suffers when the heart of faith is touched. However, the Church is not frustrated. The faithfulness of the Catholics in China “at the price of grave sufferings” is very much praised in the letter.
  11. I share very much the concern shown in the letter for the formation of priests and religious.
  12. To my delight, I see that the letter is constantly based on love and truth. It manifests a great openness to dialogue, care for the laity, fraternity to the pastors, but at the same time firmness in the non-negotiable elements of the faith.