

Sino-Vatican Relations at a Crossroads: A Reflection on the Papal Letter to China

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The long-awaited letter of the Pope to the members of the Church in China was finally published on June 30. A variety of media workers asked Church researchers whether the letter was “hard” or “soft” regarding its attitude towards China. If readers go through the letter carefully, they would find it difficult to simply classify it as “hard” or “soft.”

“Hard” or “Soft” are concepts for diplomacy. In his letter, however, the Holy Father does not take the diplomatic road. Rather, he makes a thorough review of the history of the Catholic Church in China over the past fifty years.

In his letter, Pope Benedict XVI expressed without hesitation his heartfelt remembrance of his predecessor Pope John Paul II. Pope Benedict not only repeatedly mentioned Pope John Paul II many times in the letter, but he even called Pope John Paul II “the Pope.” It seems that for Benedict XVI, John Paul II is still alive. Pope Benedict is just writing the letter on his behalf. Such words express not only a deep gratefulness to Pope John Paul II, but they are also an indirect disapproval of the rumor that the two Popes represent two different lines of thinking.

The Holy Father addressed four main points in the letter, though this does not mean that other points in the letter any less important.

First of all, the Holy Father reaffirms that the Church cannot exist without bishops. But “the Holy See follows the appointment of Bishops with special care since this touches the very heart of the life of the Church, inasmuch as the appointment of Bishops by the

Pope is the guarantee of the unity of the Church and of hierarchical communion.” (Section 9) So, an Episcopal ordination without an apostolic mandate from the Pope is totally unacceptable to the Church.

He also clearly stated that a legitimate authority deserves cooperation from the Catholic Church in regard to striving for a better society and for human justice. (Section 4) In the past, some analysts attributed the disagreement between the Church and the state as a problem between theism and atheism. In the letter, however, the Holy Father pointed out that the nature of the state is not a problem.

Thirdly, the Holy Father clearly rejected the role of a certain government agency, stating that such an entity is incompatible with Catholic doctrine. The Pope points out that “the intervention of such bodies obliges the people involved to adopt attitudes, make gestures and undertake commitments that are contrary to the dictates of their conscience as Catholics.” (Section 7) From footnote number 36, we know that the agency mentioned in the Pope’s letter refers mainly to the Catholic Patriotic Association.

Finally, the Holy Father is convinced that the situation of the Church in China keeps on improving and normalizing. Therefore he revoked all the faculties previously granted in order to address particular pastoral necessities that emerged in difficult times. (Section 18)

Regarding the revocation of faculties and of pastoral directives, there are two points worth noting.

First, the revocation is based on a consideration in the first place of “some positive developments in the situation of the Church in China,” and in the second place “the increased opportunities and greater ease in communication”. It does not mean that such faculties and privileges had been wrongly applied to the Church in China. Therefore, all the practices implemented before the date of release of the letter should be treated as still valid. This letter revokes the practices for the future, but does not deny their application in the past. Let us cite an example. If a bishop, based on the faculty of

1978, ordained a young man as a priest in 1980, this priest should still practice as a priest in the future. What the new letter revokes is the right to ordain priests in the light of the faculty of 1978.

Then, equally important is that all these faculties, privileges and pastoral directives were applicable to underground church members, as well as to open church members. So, the revocation of faculties and pastoral directives should not be treated as a measure to abandon the underground. The Holy Father clearly states in the letter that “all the faculties previously granted in order to address particular pastoral necessities that emerged in truly difficult times” is no longer needed by the whole Church in China. No matter underground or open, from now on “The doctrinal principles that inspired them now find a new application in the directives contained herein (the present letter).” In general situations, of course, Canon Law is always applicable.

Some media workers also want to know to what extent this letter will be helpful for achieving the normalization of Sino-Vatican diplomatic relations. Such a question reveals that they still fail to grasp the real concern of the Holy Father. The Holy Father is not aiming for any diplomatic achievements, but he just said what he should say. Just like in the year 2001, when Pope John Paul II apologized to the Chinese for all the mistakes committed by the missionaries during the past centuries, he was not aiming to achieve any particular goal. He just said what he should say.

If, however, someone asked if there will be any effect from this letter regarding the future of Sino-Vatican relations, it is fair to say that the letter clearly states the standpoint of the Church. So this would eliminate any unrealistic expectations from the Chinese side. In this way the letter may be beneficial to the process of the normalization of relations in the future.

For the last few years, the Chinese government always repeats the two conditions for normalization of Sino-Vatican relations. First, the Vatican should cut diplomatic relations with Taiwan, and the Vatican should not interfere in China’s internal

affairs.

If we rephrase these two conditions, we may elaborate the two in this way: First, China is a complete and indivisible nation. Any attempt at separating actions, claiming that one side has independent authority outside the central government, is totally unacceptable. Secondly, as a complete and unique government, outside interference is not tolerated.

Interestingly enough, the essence of these two conditions is also present in the Holy Father's letter. The Holy Father stresses that: first, the Catholic Church is a complete and indivisible Church. Any attempt at creating actions of separation, claiming that one part has independent authority outside the whole Church, is completely unacceptable. Secondly, as a complete and unique Church, outside interference is not tolerated.

Therefore, we can say that the Holy Father treasures the principle of these two conditions of the Chinese Government. So, as a consequence, he asks the Chinese Government, based on the same principles, to respect the Church.

Now we can say that Sino-Vatican relations are at a crossroads. If the Chinese government accepts the sincerity of the Holy Father, then everything will go smoothly from then on. If, however, they find the standpoint of the Holy Father "unrealistic," then it will not be possible for the normalization of Sino-Vatican relations to be arrived at in the near future.