

Reflections on the Papal Letter to China

Cardinal Paul Shan

Translated by Michael J. Sloboda, M.M.

*This is an English translation of Cardinal Paul Shan's first response to the pastoral letter of the Holy Father to the faithful in China. It was originally published in Taiwan in the July 8, 2007 issue of **Christian Life Weekly**. We are grateful to Cardinal Shan and to **Christian Life Weekly** for permission to reprint the original Chinese version in Issue 146 of *Tripod*, pp.35-39.*

On the evening after he had been elected as Successor to Peter, Pope Benedict XVI gave a special blessing to each of the Cardinals. He said to me, "My heart cherishes very closely the Church in China." Because he loves and cares for the Church in China, the Holy Father, after his installation, has been vigorously and attentively searching for a path to resolve the various problems of the Church in China. In January of this year [2007] he summoned a group composed of a number of senior clerics in the Curia, representative Chinese bishops, theologians and canonists, to a meeting concerned with the Church in China. The Holy Father personally addressed the closing session, and announced that he would write a *Letter to the Bishops, Priests, Consecrated Persons and Lay Faithful in the People's Republic of China* (hereafter called the Papal Letter). This letter was signed on the Eve of Pentecost, May 17, 2007, and officially promulgated on June 30. After reading it, I now willingly share my reflections with the reader.

1.) Clarifying and Upholding the Truth

My first impression of the letter is how the Holy Father clarifies and upholds the truth. The Holy Father expresses very clearly theological truths of the faith held and professed by the Universal Church, such as its essence, mission and structure. Over the past 2000 years, both clergy and laity in the Universal Church and in every local church have believed that Jesus established the Church as a body which is One, Holy, Catholic and Apostolic, as the Creed says. (Papal Letter, n. 5) In his letter, the Holy Father especially stresses the marks of One and Apostolic from Sacred Tradition.

As the Holy Father explains, the Church is One Church, and this unity “has its roots not only in the same faith and in a common Baptism, but above all in the Eucharist and in the episcopate.” (n. 5, cf. Vatican II, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, 26) Also, unity among bishops is perpetually based on the Roman Pontiff, the Successor to Peter, as a visible sign of the Lord’s grace. (*Lumen Gentium*, n. 22) Thus, for emphasis, the Holy Father quotes *Lumen Gentium*:

...[each] Bishop is the visible source and foundation of unity in the particular Church entrusted to his pastoral ministry. But in every particular Church, in order that she may be fully Church, there must be present the supreme authority of the Church, that is to say, the episcopal College together with its Head, the Roman Pontiff, and never apart from him. Therefore the ministry of the Successor of Peter belongs to the essence of every particular Church ‘from within’. (n.5)

Holding fast to principles, the Holy Father has elucidated the unity of the Universal and the local Church as one family, and the faith which comes to us from the Apostles. Otherwise, if this faith is lacking one essential element, for example, communion with the church, unity, the authority of bishops, or the primacy and universal ministry of the Pope, then the church cannot be called the true

Catholic Church. Thus we can see that external forces on the organization of the Church, those which override the Sacred Tradition of the Church, are all contrary to the fundamental faith of the Church.

2.) Forgiveness, Communion and Unity

The Holy Father has a good understanding of the history of the Church in China, particularly the past half-century of severe persecution and testing. In order to preserve their faith, many bishops, priests, religious and laity, endured cruel persecution, even to the point of bloody martyrdom. They have already received the admiration of the Universal Church. But the Church is composed of members who are frail people. Relying on God's help, there have been firm believers and heroic martyrs. On the other hand, because human nature is weak, "in the events of the world but also in the weaknesses of the Church, there is always the risk of losing faith, hence, also love and brotherhood." (n.6) In every age of calamity for the Church, there have always been those who fell away from the faith (*lapsi*). When the [next] calamity was postponed or after there was a respite for the church, the local church was faced with an internal problem: what to do about them? A tense situation naturally developed between the "loyal" and the "lapsed," with feelings of jealousy, contempt, hostility and division on both sides. (cf. n.6)

It is very hard to overcome these difficulties of human nature. When the Roman Church was persecuted in the early days, they set numerous good examples for all the local churches. They rejected the stern, rigid hard-line stance of the Novatians and the Donatists. Instead, they encouraged and urged the "loyal" vast majority to forgive the truly repentant with the merciful heart of Jesus Christ, and to fervently hope for the return of the *lapsi* to the merciful embrace of Mother Church. The Holy Father is deeply aware that forgiveness and acceptance are the pre-conditions for communion, since "authentic communion is not expressed without

arduous efforts at reconciliation.” (n.6) For this reason, the Holy Father encourages and urges the “loyal Catholics” on the Mainland to attain “the purification of memories, the pardoning of wrong-doers, the forgetting of injustices suffered and the loving restoration of serenity to troubled hearts, all to be accomplished in the name of Jesus Christ crucified and risen.” (n. 6)

In every time and place, those who plot to eliminate the Church employed the policy of the ancient Romans towards their conquered subjects: *divide et impera*, divide and rule. Within the Church, tension, friction, loss of harmony, schism and hostile antagonism are all exactly the scheme and the expectation of the enemies of the Church. Now is the time when everyone should cast aside previous grudges, to seize the present moment, to jointly strive for the little boat of the Church to “set out into the deep, and to cast the net for fishing.” (cf. Lk. 5:4)

“The fields are already white, ripe for the harvest!” (Jn. 4:35) Everyone should join hands and harvest. Numerous dioceses on the Mainland have no trouble working together for evangelization, and so in recent years they have had an abundant harvest. This good news delights the ears of the Holy Father and of the Universal Church.

3.) Mutual Esteem, Calm and Honest Negotiation

Both the Church and the government have the public as the object of their service; both exist for the sake of some demand for public happiness. Church service falls within the scope of public religion, ethics and morality. The government serves social order, administering the peace, securing food, shelter, medical care and the like. The Holy Father respects the rights of the national government. At the same time, he safeguards the rights of God and of His Church. He quotes Jesus, “Give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar, and to God what belongs to God.” (Mt. 20:21)

Democratic nations of the Free World and every major religion all accept the separation of Church and State. Although the

rights and duties of both sides are quite clear, yet there are also overlapping and ambiguous zones. These areas require both sides to negotiate calmly and in good faith, for example, the question of redrawing diocesan and metropolitan boundaries to match civil boundaries. Yet some problems encroach upon the essential nature of the Church, such as “the principles of independence and autonomy, self-management and democratic administration of the Church.” (*Statutes of the CCPA*, Art. 3) This obviously destroys the Oneness of the Church, and its essential characteristics of communion and unity. The Papal Letter calls this “incompatible with Catholic doctrine.” (n. 7)

On the question of appointing bishops in China, which has drawn attention from around the world, the Papal Letter has a detailed explanation:

The Pope, when he issues the apostolic mandate for the ordination of a Bishop, exercises his supreme spiritual authority: this authority and this intervention remain within the strictly religious sphere. It is not, therefore, a question of a political authority unduly inserting itself in the internal affairs of a State and violating its sovereignty.

The appointment of Bishops for a particular religious community is understood, also in international documents, as a constitutive element of the full exercise of the right of religious freedom...I trust that an accord can be reached with the Government so as to resolve certain questions regarding the choice of candidates for the episcopate, the publication of the appointment of Bishops, and the recognition – concerning civil effects where necessary – of the new Bishops on the part of the civil authorities. (n. 9)

On the principle of mutual respect, the Curia hopes to calmly negotiate with the Government regarding several technical questions, which will not harm the integrity of Catholic doctrine.

4.) Hope and Prayer

In his letter, the Holy Father expresses his boundless admiration and feelings towards those in the “loyal” Church who endured severe persecution and cruel testing. At the same time, he sees the glory of the Chinese Church shining forth from them. His attitude toward those who loyally suffered for a long time is full of understanding and sympathy. Furthermore,

...the purification of memory, the pardoning of wrong-doers, the forgetting of injustices suffered and the loving restoration to serenity of troubled hearts, all to be accomplished in the name of Jesus crucified and risen, can require moving beyond personal positions or viewpoints, arising from painful or difficult experiences. These are urgent steps that must be taken if the bonds of communion between the faithful and the Pastors of the Church in China are to grow and be made visible. (n. 6)

Please note that the Holy Father specifically uses “we, our, and us” in his letter. This clearly shows that there is an understanding and deep love between Holy Father and those loyal people who were persecuted.

The Holy Father, as a merciful father, loves the *lapsi* who fell away during the time of hardship for the church. He hopes they will soon return to the embrace of Holy Mother Church. He forgives and accepts them, as forming “one flock and one shepherd.” (cf. Jn. 10:16)

Other Pastors, however, under the pressure of particular circumstances, have consented to receive episcopal ordination without the pontifical mandate, but have subsequently asked to be received into communion with the Successor of Peter and with their other brothers in the episcopate. The Pope, considering the sincerity of their

sentiments and the complexity of the situation... by virtue of his proper responsibility as universal Pastor of the Church, has granted them the full and legitimate exercise of episcopal jurisdiction. (n. 8)

In his letter, the Holy Father also calmly points out that, unfortunately, several bishops who have received papal legitimization have not dared formally to notify their priests and laity of their legitimate status. Serious problems of conscience have developed in some dioceses, even to the point of mutual lack of trust and division taking place. In his letter, the Holy Father encourages them [those bishops] to speak clearly to their clergy and laity, and to reveal that the Holy See has already legitimized them. He hopes that everyone will accept and support them. (n. 8) The Holy Father's concern, love, encouragement, admiration and anxiety for the entire body of believers on the Mainland flows throughout his letter, as well as his heartfelt yearning and hope for the future. The Holy Father also bestows his fervent apostolic blessing upon the Church in China.

Conclusion

This letter of the Holy Father is a purely pastoral letter. Not only as a theologian, but also in his personal capacity and authority as the supreme shepherd of the Universal Church, he clarifies the position of the Holy Father in the Church for the past 2000 years.

I hope the reader will read the letter of the Universal Shepherd with a heart of good faith, sincerity and prayer, meditate on it carefully, and seek ways to implement it. In the closing paragraphs of his Letter, the Holy Father gives a beautiful present to the Church in China. Referring to the memorial of Our Lady, Help of Christians, he wrote, "...the date 24 May could in the future become an occasion for the Catholics of the whole world to be united in prayer with the Church, which is in China." [n.19]