

Letter of the Holy Father Pope Benedict XVI to the Bishops, Priests, Consecrated Persons and Lay Faithful of the Catholic Church in the People's Republic of China

Pope Benedict XVI

Greeting

1. Dear Brother Bishops, dear priests, consecrated persons and all the faithful of the Catholic Church in China: “We always thank God, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, when we pray for you, because we have heard of your faith in Christ Jesus and of the love which you have for all the saints, because of the hope laid up for you in heaven ... We have not ceased to pray for you, asking that you may be filled with the knowledge of his will in all spiritual wisdom and understanding, to lead a life worthy of the Lord, fully pleasing to him, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God. May you be strengthened with all power, according to his glorious might, for all endurance and patience with joy.” (Col 1:3-5, 9-11).

These words of the Apostle Paul are highly appropriate for expressing the sentiments that I, as the Successor of Peter and universal Pastor of the Church, feel towards you. You know well how much you are present in my heart and in my daily prayer and how deep is the relationship of communion that unites us spiritually.

Purpose of the Letter

2. I wish, therefore, to convey to all of you the expression of my fraternal closeness. With intense joy I acknowledge your faithfulness to Christ the Lord and to the Church, a faithfulness that

you have manifested “sometimes at the price of grave sufferings,”¹ since “it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake” (Phil 1:29). Nevertheless, some important aspects of the ecclesial life of your country give cause for concern.

Without claiming to deal with every detail of the complex matters well known to you, I wish through this letter to offer some guidelines concerning the life of the Church and the task of evangelization in China, in order to help you discover what the Lord and Master, Jesus Christ, “the key, the centre and the purpose of the whole of human history”² wants from you.

FIRST PART

THE SITUATION OF THE CHURCH - THEOLOGICAL ASPECTS

Globalization, modernity and atheism

3. 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.

As my venerable predecessor Pope John Paul II once said, “The Catholic Church for her part regards with respect this

¹ Benedict XVI, *Angelus* of 26 December 2006: “With special spiritual closeness, I also think of those Catholics who maintain their fidelity to the See of Peter without ceding to compromises, sometimes at the price of grave sufferings. The whole Church admires their example and prays that they will have the strength to persevere, knowing that their tribulations are the fount of victory, even if at that moment they can seem a failure”. *L'Osservatore Romano*, English edition, 3 January 2007, p. 12.

² Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes*, 10.

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."³

The pressure to attain the desired and necessary economic and social development and the search for modernity are accompanied by two different and contrasting phenomena, both of which should nonetheless be evaluated with equal prudence and a positive apostolic spirit. On the one hand, especially among the young, one can detect a growing interest in the spiritual and transcendent dimension of the human person, with a consequent interest in religion, particularly in Christianity. On the other hand, there are signs, in China too, of the tendency towards materialism and hedonism, which are spreading from the big cities to the entire country.⁴

In this context, in which you are called to live and work, I want to remind you of what Pope John Paul II emphasized so strongly and vigorously: the new evangelization demands the proclamation of the Gospel⁵ to modern man, with a keen awareness that, just as during the first Christian millennium the Cross was planted in Europe and during the second in the American continent and in Africa, so during the third millennium a great harvest of faith will be reaped in the vast and vibrant Asian continent.⁶

³ Message to the participants of the International Convention "Matteo Ricci: for a dialogue between China and the West" (24 October 2001), 4: *L'Osservatore Romano*, English edition, 31 October 2001, p. 3.

⁴ Cf. John Paul II, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Ecclesia in Asia* (6 November 1999), 7: *AAS* 92 (2000), 456.

⁵ Cf. *ibid.*, 19, 20: *AAS* 92 (2000), 477-482.

⁶ Cf. *Address to members of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences* (Manila, 15 January 1995), 11: *L'Osservatore Romano*, English edition, 25 January 1995, p. 6.

“*Duc in altum*’ (Lk 5:4). These words ring out for us today, and they invite us to remember the past with gratitude, to live the present with enthusiasm and to look forward to the future with confidence: ‘Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and for ever’ (Heb 13:8).”⁷ In China too the Church is called to be a witness of Christ, to look forward with hope, and – in proclaiming the Gospel – to measure up to the new challenges that the Chinese People must face.

The word of God helps us, once again, to discover the mysterious and profound meaning of the Church’s path in the world. In fact “the subject of one of the most important visions of the Book of Revelation is [the] Lamb in the act of opening a scroll, previously closed with seven seals that no one had been able to break open. John is even shown in tears, for he finds no one worthy of opening the scroll or reading it (cf. Rev 5:4). History remains indecipherable, incomprehensible. No one can read it. Perhaps John’s weeping before the mystery of a history so obscure expresses the Asian Churches’ dismay at God’s silence in the face of the persecutions to which they were exposed at that time. It is a dismay that can clearly mirror our consternation in the face of the serious difficulties, misunderstandings and hostility that the Church also suffers today in various parts of the world. These are trials that the Church does not of course deserve, just as Jesus himself did not deserve his torture. However, they reveal both the wickedness of man, when he abandons himself to the promptings of evil, and also the superior ordering of events on God’s part.”⁸

Today, as in the past, to proclaim the Gospel means to preach and bear witness to Jesus Christ, crucified and risen, the new Man, conqueror of sin and death. He enables human beings to enter into a new dimension, where mercy and love shown even to enemies can

⁷ John Paul II, Apostolic Letter, *Novo Millennio Ineunte* (6 January 2001), 1: AAS 93 (2001), 266.

⁸ Benedict XVI, General Audience (Wednesday 23 August 2006), *L’Osservatore Romano*, English edition, 30 August 2006, p. 3.

bear witness to the victory of the Cross over all weakness and human wretchedness. In your country too, the proclamation of Christ crucified and risen will be possible to the extent that, with fidelity to the Gospel, in communion with the Successor of the Apostle Peter and with the universal Church, you are able to put into practice the signs of love and unity (“even as I have loved you, that you also love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another ... even as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be one in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me” – Jn 13:34-35; 17:21).

Willingness to engage in respectful and constructive dialogue

4. As universal Pastor of the Church, I wish to manifest sincere gratitude to the Lord for the deeply-felt witness of faithfulness offered by the Chinese Catholic community in truly difficult circumstances. At the same time, I sense the urgent need, as my deep and compelling duty and as an expression of my paternal love, to confirm the faith of Chinese Catholics and favour their unity with the means proper to the Church.

I am also following with particular interest the events of the entire Chinese People, whom I regard with sincere admiration and sentiments of friendship, to the point where I express the hope “that concrete forms of communication and cooperation between the Holy See and the People’s Republic of China may soon be established. Friendship is nourished by contacts, by a sharing in the joy and sadness of different situations, by solidarity and mutual assistance.”⁹ And pursuing this line of argument, my venerable predecessor added: “It is no secret that the Holy See, in the name of the whole Catholic Church and, I believe, for the benefit of the

⁹ John Paul II, Message to the participants of the International Convention “Matteo Ricci: for a dialogue between China and the West” (24 October 2001), 6: *L’Osservatore Romano*, English edition, 31 October 2001, pp. 3-4.

whole human family, hopes for the opening of some form of dialogue with the authorities of the People's Republic of China. Once the misunderstandings of the past have been overcome, such a dialogue would make it possible for us to work together for the good of the Chinese People and for peace in the world."¹⁰

I realize that the normalization of relations with the People's Republic of China requires time and presupposes the good will of both parties. For its part, the Holy See always remains open to negotiations, so necessary if the difficulties of the present time are to be overcome.

This situation of misunderstandings and incomprehension weighs heavily, serving the interests of neither the Chinese authorities nor the Catholic Church in China. As Pope John Paul II stated, recalling what Father Matteo Ricci wrote from Beijing,¹¹ "so too today the Catholic Church seeks no privilege from China and its leaders, but solely the resumption of dialogue, in order to build a relationship based upon mutual respect and deeper understanding."¹² Let China rest assured that the Catholic Church sincerely proposes to offer, once again, humble and disinterested service in the areas of her competence, for the good of Chinese Catholics and for the good of all the inhabitants of the country.

As far as relations between the political community and the Church in China are concerned, it is worth calling to mind the enlightening teaching of the Second Vatican Council, which states: "The Church, by reason of her role and competence, is not identified with any political community nor is she tied to any political system. She is at once the sign and the safeguard of the transcendental dimension of the human person." And the Council

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Cf. *Fonti Ricciane*, ed. Pasquale M. D'Elia, S.J., vol. 2, Rome 1949, no. 617, p. 152.

¹² Message to the participants of the International Convention "Matteo Ricci: for a dialogue between China and the West" (24 October 2001), 4: *L'Osservatore Romano*, English edition, 31 October 2001, p. 3.

continues: “The political community and the Church are autonomous and independent of each other in their own fields. They are both at the service of the personal and social vocation of the same individuals, though under different titles. Their service will be more efficient and beneficial to all if both institutions develop better cooperation according to the circumstances of place and time.”¹³

Likewise, therefore, the Catholic Church which is in China does not have a mission to change the structure or administration of the State; rather, her mission is to proclaim Christ to men and women, as the Saviour of the world, basing herself – in carrying out her proper apostolate – on the power of God. As I recalled in my Encyclical *Deus Caritas Est*, “The Church cannot and must not take upon herself the political battle to bring about the most just society possible. She cannot and must not replace the State. Yet at the same time she cannot and must not remain on the sidelines in the fight for justice. She has to play her part through rational argument and she has to reawaken the spiritual energy without which justice, which always demands sacrifice, cannot prevail and prosper. A just society must be the achievement of politics, not of the Church. Yet the promotion of justice through efforts to bring about openness of mind and will to the demands of the common good is something which concerns the Church deeply.”¹⁴

In the light of these unrenounceable principles, the solution to existing problems cannot be pursued via an ongoing conflict with the legitimate civil authorities; at the same time, though, compliance with those authorities is not acceptable when they interfere unduly in matters regarding the faith and discipline of the Church. The civil authorities are well aware that the Church in her teaching invites the faithful to be good citizens, respectful and

¹³ Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes*, 76.

¹⁴ Encyclical Letter, *Deus Caritas Est* (25 December 2005), 28: *AAS* 98 (2006), 240. Cf. Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes*, 76.

active contributors to the common good in their country, but it is likewise clear that she asks the State to guarantee to those same Catholic citizens the full exercise of their faith, with respect for authentic religious freedom.

Communion between particular Churches in the universal Church

5. Beloved Catholic Church in China, you are a small flock present and active within the vastness of an immense People journeying through history. How stirring and encouraging these words of Jesus are for you: “Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom” (Lk 12:32)! “You are the salt of the earth ... you are the light of the world”: therefore “let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven” (Mt 5:13, 14, 16).

In the Catholic Church which is in China, the universal Church is present, the Church of Christ, which in the Creed we acknowledge to be one, holy, catholic and apostolic, that is to say, the universal community of the Lord’s disciples.

As you know, the profound unity which binds together the particular Churches found in China, and which likewise places them in intimate communion with all the other particular Churches throughout the world, has its roots not only in the same faith and in a common Baptism, but above all in the Eucharist and in the episcopate.¹⁵ Likewise, the unity of the episcopate, of which “the Roman Pontiff, as the Successor of Peter, is the perpetual and visible source and foundation”,¹⁶ continues down the centuries through the apostolic succession and is the foundation of the identity of the Church in every age with the Church built by Christ on Peter and on the other Apostles.¹⁷

¹⁵ Cf. Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, 26.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 23.

¹⁷ Cf. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on some aspects of the Church understood as

Catholic doctrine teaches that the Bishop is the visible source and foundation of unity in the particular Church entrusted to his pastoral ministry.¹⁸ 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”.¹⁹ Moreover, the communion of all the particular Churches in the one Catholic Church, and hence the ordered hierarchical communion of all the Bishops, successors of the Apostles, with the Successor of Peter, are a guarantee of the unity of the faith and life of all Catholics. It is therefore indispensable, for the unity of the Church in individual nations, that every Bishop should be in communion with the other Bishops, and that all should be in visible and concrete communion with the Pope.

No one in the Church is a foreigner, but all are citizens of the same People, members of the same Mystical Body of Christ. The bond of sacramental communion is the Eucharist, guaranteed by the ministry of Bishops and priests.²⁰

Communion, *Communio Notio* (28 May 1992), 11-14: *AAS* 85 (1993), 844-847.

¹⁸ Cf. Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, 23.

¹⁹ Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on some aspects of the Church understood as Communion, *Communio Notio* (28 May 1992), 13: *AAS* 85 (1993), 846.

²⁰ See also Benedict XVI, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Sacramentum Caritatis* (22 February 2007), 6: “The Church’s faith is essentially a eucharistic faith, and it is especially nourished at the table of the Eucharist. Faith and the sacraments are two complementary aspects of ecclesial life. Awakened by the preaching of God’s word, faith is nourished and grows in the grace-filled encounter with the Risen Lord which takes place in the sacraments: ‘faith is expressed in the rite, while the rite reinforces and strengthens faith.’ For this reason, the Sacrament of the Altar is always at the heart of the Church’s life: ‘thanks to the Eucharist, the Church is reborn ever anew!’ The more lively the eucharistic faith of

The whole of the Church which is in China is called to live and to manifest this unity in a richer spirituality of communion, so that, taking account of the complex concrete situations in which the Catholic community finds itself, she may also grow in a harmonious hierarchical communion. Therefore, Pastors and faithful are called to defend and to safeguard what belongs to the doctrine and the tradition of the Church.

Tensions and divisions within the Church: pardon and reconciliation

6. Addressing the whole Church in his Apostolic Letter *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, my venerable predecessor Pope John Paul II, stated that an “important area in which there has to be commitment and planning on the part of the universal Church and the particular Churches [is] *the domain of communion (koinonia)*, which embodies and reveals the very essence of the mystery of the Church. Communion is the fruit and demonstration of that love which springs from the heart of the Eternal Father and is poured out upon us through the Spirit whom Jesus gives us (cf. Rom 5:5), to make us all ‘one heart and one soul’ (Acts 4:32). It is in building this communion of love that the Church appears as ‘sacrament’ as the ‘sign and instrument of intimate union with God and of the unity of the human race’. The Lord’s words on this point are too precise for us to diminish their import. Many things are necessary for the Church’s journey through history, not least in this new century; but without charity (*agape*) all will be in vain. It is again the Apostle Paul who in his hymn to love reminds us: even if we speak the tongues of men and of angels, and if we have faith ‘to move mountains’, but are without love, all will come to ‘nothing’ (cf. 1

the People of God, the deeper is its sharing in ecclesial life in steadfast commitment to the mission entrusted by Christ to his disciples. The Church’s very history bears witness to this. Every great reform has in some way been linked to the rediscovery of belief in the Lord’s eucharistic presence among his people”.

Cor 13:2). Love is truly the ‘heart’ of the Church.”²¹

These matters, which concern the very nature of the universal Church, have a particular significance for the Church which is in China. Indeed you are aware of the problems that she is seeking to overcome – within herself and in her relations with Chinese civil society – tensions, divisions and recriminations.

In this regard, last year, while speaking of the nascent Church, I had occasion to recall that “from the start the community of the disciples has known not only the joy of the Holy Spirit, the grace of truth and love, but also trials that are constituted above all by disagreements about the truths of faith, with the consequent wounds to communion. Just as the fellowship of love has existed since the outset and will continue to the end (cf. 1 Jn 1:1ff.), so also, from the start, division unfortunately arose. We should not be surprised that it still exists today ... Thus, in the events of the world but also in the weaknesses of the Church, there is always a risk of losing faith, hence, also love and brotherhood. Consequently it is a specific duty of those who believe in the Church of love and want to live in her to recognize this danger too.”²²

The history of the Church teaches us, then, that authentic communion is not expressed without arduous efforts at reconciliation.²³ Indeed, the purification of memory, the pardoning

²¹ Apostolic Letter, *Novo Millennio Ineunte* (6 January 2001), 42: *AAS* 93 (2001), 296. See also Benedict XVI, Encyclical Letter, *Deus Caritas Est* (25 December 2005), 12: “Divine activity now takes on dramatic form when, in Jesus Christ, it is God himself who goes in search of the ‘stray sheep’, a suffering and lost humanity. When Jesus speaks in his parables of the shepherd who goes after the lost sheep, of the woman who looks for the lost coin, of the father who goes to meet and embrace his prodigal son, these are no mere words: they constitute an explanation of his very being and activity. His death on the Cross is the culmination of that turning of God against himself in which he gives himself in order to raise man up and save him. This is love in its most radical form”: *AAS* 98 (2006), 228.

²² Benedict XVI, General Audience (Wednesday 5 April 2006): *L’Osservatore Romano*, English edition, 12 April 2006, p.11.

²³ The lived experience of the ancient Church in time of persecution

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, born of 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.

For this reason, my venerable predecessor on several occasions addressed to you an urgent invitation to pardon and reconciliation. In this regard, I am pleased to recall a passage from the message that he sent you at the approach of the Holy Year 2000: "In your preparation for the Great Jubilee, remember that in the biblical tradition this moment always entailed the obligation to forgive one another's debts, to make satisfaction for injustices committed, and to be reconciled with one's neighbour. You too have heard the proclamation of the 'great joy prepared for all peoples': the love and mercy of the Father, the Redemption accomplished in Christ. To the extent that you yourselves are ready to accept this joyful proclamation, you will be able to pass it on, by your lives, to the men and women around you. My ardent desire is that you will respond to the interior promptings of the Holy Spirit by forgiving one another whatever needs to be forgiven, by drawing closer to one another, by accepting one another and by breaking down all barriers in order to overcome every possible cause of division. Do not forget the words of Jesus at the Last Supper: 'By this all will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another' (Jn 13:35). I rejoiced when I learned that you intend your most precious gift on the occasion of the Great Jubilee to be unity among yourselves and unity with the Successor of Peter. This intention can

should be a source of enlightenment for all, as should the teaching given on this matter by the Church of Rome herself. Rome rejected the rigorist positions of the Novatians and the Donatists, and appealed for a generous attitude of pardon and reconciliation towards those who had apostatized during the persecutions (the "lapsed"), and wished to be readmitted to the communion of the Church.

only be a fruit of the Spirit who guides the Church along the arduous paths of reconciliation and unity.”²⁴

We all realize that this journey cannot be accomplished overnight, but be assured that the whole Church will raise up an insistent prayer for you to this end.

Keep in mind, moreover, that your path of reconciliation is supported by the example and the prayer of so many “witnesses of the faith” who have suffered and have forgiven, offering their lives for the future of the Catholic Church in China. Their very existence represents a permanent blessing for you in the presence of our Heavenly Father, and their memory will not fail to produce abundant fruit.

Ecclesial communities and State agencies: relationships to be lived in truth and charity.

7. A careful analysis of the aforementioned painful situation of serious differences (cf. section 6 above), involving the lay faithful and their Pastors, highlights among the various causes the significant part played by agencies that have been imposed as the principal determinants of the life of the Catholic community. Still today, in fact, recognition from these agencies is the criterion for declaring a community, a person or a religious place legal and therefore “official”. All this has caused division both among the clergy and among the lay faithful. It is a situation primarily dependent on factors external to the Church, but it has seriously conditioned her progress, giving rise also to suspicions, mutual accusations and recriminations, and it continues to be a weakness in the Church that causes concern.

Regarding the delicate issue of the relations to be maintained with the agencies of the State, particular enlightenment can be found in the invitation of the Second Vatican Council to follow the

²⁴ John Paul II, Message to the Catholic community in China, *Alla Vigilia* (8 December 1999), 6: *L'Osservatore Romano*, English edition, 15 December 1999, p. 5.

words and *modus operandi* of Jesus Christ. He, indeed, “did not wish to be a political Messiah who would dominate by force²⁵ but preferred to call himself the Son of Man who came to serve, and ‘to give his life as a ransom for many’ (Mk 10:45). He showed himself as the perfect Servant of God²⁶ who ‘will not break a bruised reed or quench a smouldering wick’ (Mt 12:20). He recognized civil authority and its rights when he ordered tribute to be paid to Caesar, but he gave clear warning that the greater rights of God must be respected: ‘Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God, the things that are God’s’ (Mt 22:21). Finally, he brought his revelation to perfection when he accomplished on the Cross the work of redemption by which he achieved salvation and true freedom for the human race. For he bore witness to the truth²⁷ but refused to use force to impose it on those who spoke out against it. His Kingdom does not establish its claims by force,²⁸ but is established by bearing witness to and listening to the truth and it grows by the love with which Christ, lifted up on the Cross, draws people to himself (cf. Jn 12:32)”²⁹.

Truth and charity are the two supporting pillars of the life of the Christian community. For this reason, I have observed that “the Church of love is also the Church of truth, understood primarily as fidelity to the Gospel entrusted by the Lord Jesus to his followers ... However, if the family of God’s children is to live in unity and peace, it needs someone to keep it in the truth and guide it with wise and authoritative discernment: this is what the ministry of the Apostles is required to do. And here we come to an important point. The Church is wholly of the Spirit but has a structure, the apostolic succession, which is responsible for guaranteeing that the Church endures in the truth given by Christ, from whom the capacity to

²⁵ Cf. *Mt* 4:8-10; *Jn* 6:15.

²⁶ Cf. *Is* 42:1-4.

²⁷ Cf. *Jn* 18:37.

²⁸ Cf. *Mt* 26:51-53; *Jn* 18:36.

²⁹ Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Declaration on Religious Liberty, *Dignitatis Humanae*, 11.

love also comes ... The Apostles and their successors are therefore the custodians and authoritative witnesses of the deposit of truth consigned to the Church, and are likewise the ministers of charity. These are two aspects that go together ... Truth and love are the two faces of the same gift that comes from God and, thanks to the apostolic ministry, is safeguarded in the Church and handed down to us, to our present time!”³⁰

Therefore the Second Vatican Council underlines that “those also have a claim on our respect and charity who think and act differently from us in social, political, and religious matters. In fact, the more deeply, through courtesy and love, we come to understand their ways of thinking, the more easily will we be able to enter into dialogue with them”. But, as the same Council admonishes us, “love and courtesy of this kind should not, of course, make us indifferent to truth and goodness.”³¹

Considering “Jesus’ original plan”,³² it is clear that the claim of some agencies, desired by the State and extraneous to the structure of the Church, to place themselves above the Bishops and to guide the life of the ecclesial community, does not correspond to Catholic doctrine, according to which the Church is “apostolic”, as the Second Vatican Council underlined. The Church is apostolic “in her origin because she has been built on ‘the foundation of the Apostles’ (Eph 2:20). She is apostolic in her teaching which is the same as that of the Apostles. She is apostolic by reason of her structure insofar as she is taught, sanctified, and guided until Christ returns by the Apostles through their successors who are the Bishops in communion with the Successor of Peter.”³³ Therefore,

³⁰ Benedict XVI, General Audience (Wednesday 5 April 2006): *L'Osservatore Romano*, English edition, 12 April 2006, p.11.

³¹ Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes*, 28.

³² Benedict XVI, General Audience (Wednesday 5 April 2006): *L'Osservatore Romano*, English edition, 12 April 2006, p.11.

³³ *Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 174. Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 857 and 869.

in every individual particular Church, “it is in the name of the Lord that the diocesan Bishop [and only he] leads the flock entrusted to him, and he does so as the proper, ordinary and immediate Pastor”;³⁴ at a national level, moreover, only a legitimate Episcopal Conference can formulate pastoral guidelines, valid for the entire Catholic community of the country concerned.³⁵

Likewise, the declared purpose of the aforementioned agencies to implement “the principles of independence and autonomy, self-management and democratic administration of the Church”³⁶ is incompatible with Catholic doctrine, which from the time of the ancient Creeds professes the Church to be “one, holy, catholic and apostolic”.

In the light of the principles here outlined, Pastors and lay faithful will recall that the preaching of the Gospel, catechesis and charitable activity, liturgical and cultic action, as well as all pastoral choices, are uniquely the competence of the Bishops together with their priests in the unbroken continuity of the faith handed down by the Apostles in the Sacred Scriptures and in Tradition, and therefore they cannot be subject to any external interference.

Given this difficult situation, not a few members of the Catholic community are asking whether recognition from the civil authorities – necessary in order to function publicly – somehow compromises communion with the universal Church. I am fully aware that this problem causes painful disquiet in the hearts of Pastors and faithful. In this regard I maintain, in the first place, that the requisite and courageous safeguarding of the deposit of faith and of sacramental and hierarchical communion is not of itself opposed to dialogue with the authorities concerning those aspects of the life of the ecclesial community that fall within the civil sphere. There would not be any particular difficulties with acceptance of

³⁴ John Paul II, Apostolic Letter, *Apostolos Suos* (21 May 1998), 10: *AAS* 90 (1998), 648.

³⁵ Cf. *Code of Canon Law*, c. 447.

³⁶ *Statutes of the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association (CCPA)*, 2004, art. 3.

the recognition granted by civil authorities on condition that this does not entail the denial of unrenounceable principles of faith and of ecclesiastical communion. In not a few particular instances, however, indeed almost always, in the process of recognition the intervention of certain bodies obliges the people involved to adopt attitudes, make gestures and undertake commitments that are contrary to the dictates of their conscience as Catholics. I understand, therefore, how in such varied conditions and circumstances it is difficult to determine the correct choice to be made. For this reason the Holy See, after restating the principles, leaves the decision to the individual Bishop who, having consulted his presbyterate, is better able to know the local situation, to weigh the concrete possibilities of choice and to evaluate the possible consequences within the diocesan community. It could be that the final decision does not obtain the consensus of all the priests and faithful. I express the hope, however, that it will be accepted, albeit with suffering, and that the unity of the diocesan community with its own Pastor will be maintained.

It would be good, finally, if Bishops and priests, with truly pastoral hearts, were to take every possible step to avoid giving rise to situations of scandal, seizing opportunities to form the consciences of the faithful, with particular attention to the weakest: all this should be lived out in communion and in fraternal understanding, avoiding judgements and mutual condemnations. In this case too, it must be kept in mind, especially where there is little room for freedom, that in order to evaluate the morality of an act it is necessary to devote particular care to establishing the real intentions of the person concerned, in addition to the objective shortcoming. Every case, then, will have to be pondered individually, taking account of the circumstances.

The Chinese Episcopate

8. In the Church – the People of God – only the sacred ministers, duly ordained after sufficient instruction and formation, may exercise the office of “teaching, sanctifying and governing”. The

lay faithful may, with a canonical mission from the Bishop, perform an ancillary ecclesial ministry of handing on the faith.

In recent years, for various reasons, you, my Brother Bishops, have encountered difficulties, since persons who are not “ordained”, and sometimes not even baptized, control and take decisions concerning important ecclesial questions, including the appointment of Bishops, in the name of various State agencies. Consequently, we have witnessed a demeaning of the Petrine and episcopal ministries by virtue of a vision of the Church according to which the Supreme Pontiff, the Bishops and the priests risk becoming *de facto* persons without office and without power. Yet in fact, as stated earlier, the Petrine and episcopal ministries are essential and integral elements of Catholic doctrine on the sacramental structure of the Church. The nature of the Church is a gift of the Lord Jesus, because “his gifts were that some should be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ” (Eph 4:11-13).

Communion and unity – let me repeat (cf. section 5 above) – are essential and integral elements of the Catholic Church: therefore the proposal for a Church that is “independent” of the Holy See, in the religious sphere, is incompatible with Catholic doctrine.

I am aware of the grave difficulties which you have to address in the aforementioned situation in order to remain faithful to Christ, to his Church and to the Successor of Peter. Reminding you that – as Saint Paul said (cf. Rom 8:35-39) – no difficulty can separate us from the love of Christ, I am confident that you will do everything possible, trusting in the Lord’s grace, to safeguard unity and ecclesial communion even at the cost of great sacrifices.

Many members of the Chinese episcopate who have guided the Church in recent decades have offered and continue to offer a shining testimony to their own communities and to the universal Church. Once again, let a heartfelt hymn of praise and thanksgiving

be sung to the “chief Shepherd” of the flock (1 Pet 5:4): in fact, it must not be forgotten that many Bishops have undergone persecution and have been impeded in the exercise of their ministry, and some of them have made the Church fruitful with the shedding of their blood. Modern times and the consequent challenge of the new evangelization highlight the role of the episcopal ministry. As John Paul II said to the Pastors from every part of the world who gathered in Rome for the celebration of the Jubilee, “the Pastor is the first to take responsibility for and to encourage the ecclesial community, both in the requirement of communion and in the missionary outreach. Regarding the relativism and subjectivism which mar so much of contemporary culture, Bishops are called to defend and promote the doctrinal unity of their faithful. Concerned for every situation in which the faith has been lost or is unknown, they work with all their strength for evangelization, preparing priests, religious and lay people for this task and making the necessary resources available”.³⁷

On the same occasion, my venerable predecessor recalled that “the Bishop, a successor of the Apostles, is someone for whom Christ is everything: ‘For to me to live is Christ ...’ (Phil 1:21). He must bear witness to this in all his actions. The Second Vatican Council teaches: ‘Bishops should devote themselves to their apostolic office as witnesses of Christ to all’ (Decree *Christus Dominus*, 11)”.³⁸

Concerning episcopal service, then, I take the opportunity to recall something I said recently: “The Bishops are primarily responsible for building up the Church as a family of God and a place of mutual help and availability. To be able to carry out this mission, you received with episcopal consecration three special offices: the *munus docendi*, the *munus sanctificandi* and the *munus*

³⁷ Homily for the Jubilee of Bishops (8 October 2000), 5: AAS 93 (2001), 28. Cf. Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Decree on the Pastoral Office of Bishops in the Church, *Christus Dominus*, 6.

³⁸ Ibid., 27.

regendi, which all together constitute the *munus pascendi*. In particular, the aim of the *munus regendi* is growth in ecclesial communion, that is, in building a community in agreement and listening to the Apostles' teaching, the breaking of bread, prayer and fellowship. Closely linked to the offices of teaching and of sanctifying, that of governing – the *munus regendi* precisely – constitutes for the Bishop an authentic act of love for God and for one's neighbour, which is expressed in pastoral charity.”³⁹

As in the rest of the world, in China too the Church is governed by Bishops who, through episcopal ordination conferred upon them by other validly ordained Bishops, have received, together with the sanctifying office, the offices of teaching and governing the people entrusted to them in their respective particular Churches, with a power that is conferred by God through the grace of the sacrament of Holy Orders. The offices of teaching and governing “however, by their very nature can be exercised only in hierarchical communion with the head and members of the college” of Bishops.⁴⁰ In fact, as the Council went on to say, “a person is made a member of the episcopal body in virtue of the sacramental consecration and by hierarchical communion with the head and members of the college.”⁴¹

Currently, all the Bishops of the Catholic Church in China are sons of the Chinese People. Notwithstanding many grave difficulties, the Catholic Church in China, by a particular grace of the Holy Spirit, has never been deprived of the ministry of legitimate Pastors who have preserved the apostolic succession intact. We must thank the Lord for this constant presence, not without suffering, of Bishops who have received episcopal ordination in conformity with Catholic tradition, that is to say, in

³⁹ Benedict XVI, Address to new Bishops (21 September 2006): *AAS* 98 (2006), 696.

⁴⁰ Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, 21. Cf. also *Code of Canon Law*, c.375 § 2.

⁴¹ Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, 22. Cf. also “Preliminary Explanatory Note”, no.2.

communion with the Bishop of Rome, Successor of Peter, and at the hands of validly and legitimately ordained Bishops in observance of the rite of the Catholic Church.

Some of them, not wishing to be subjected to undue control exercised over the life of the Church, and eager to maintain total fidelity to the Successor of Peter and to Catholic doctrine, have felt themselves constrained to opt for clandestine consecration. The clandestine condition is not a normal feature of the Church's life, and history shows that Pastors and faithful have recourse to it only amid suffering, in the desire to maintain the integrity of their faith and to resist interference from State agencies in matters pertaining intimately to the Church's life. For this reason the Holy See hopes that these legitimate Pastors may be recognized as such by governmental authorities for civil effects too – insofar as these are necessary – and that all the faithful may be able to express their faith freely in the social context in which they live.

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, and taking into account the opinion of neighbouring Bishops, by virtue of his proper responsibility as universal Pastor of the Church, has granted them the full and legitimate exercise of episcopal jurisdiction. This initiative of the Pope resulted from knowledge of the particular circumstances of their ordination and from his profound pastoral concern to favour the reestablishment of full communion. Unfortunately, in most cases, priests and the faithful have not been adequately informed that their Bishop has been legitimized, and this has given rise to a number of grave problems of conscience. What is more, some legitimized Bishops have failed to provide any clear signs to prove that they have been legitimized. For this reason it is indispensable, for the spiritual good of the diocesan communities concerned, that legitimation, once it has occurred, is brought into

the public domain at the earliest opportunity, and that the legitimized Bishops provide unequivocal and increasing signs of full communion with the Successor of Peter.

Finally, there are certain Bishops – a very small number of them – who have been ordained without the Pontifical mandate and who have not asked for or have not yet obtained, the necessary legitimation. According to the doctrine of the Catholic Church, they are to be considered illegitimate, but validly ordained, as long as it is certain that they have received ordination from validly ordained Bishops and that the Catholic rite of episcopal ordination has been respected. Therefore, although not in communion with the Pope, they exercise their ministry validly in the administration of the sacraments, even if they do so illegitimately. What great spiritual enrichment would ensue for the Church in China if, the necessary conditions having been established, these Pastors too were to enter into communion with the Successor of Peter and with the entire Catholic episcopate! Not only would their episcopal ministry be legitimized, there would also be an enrichment of their communion with the priests and the faithful who consider the Church in China part of the Catholic Church, united with the Bishop of Rome and with all the other particular Churches spread throughout the world.

In individual nations, all the legitimate Bishops constitute an Episcopal Conference, governed according to its own statutes, which by the norms of canon law must be approved by the Apostolic See. Such an Episcopal Conference expresses the fraternal communion of all the Bishops of a nation and treats the doctrinal and pastoral questions that are significant for the entire Catholic community of the country without, however, interfering in the exercise of the ordinary and immediate power of each Bishop in his own diocese. Moreover, every Episcopal Conference maintains opportune and useful contacts with the civil authorities of the place, partly in order to favour cooperation between the Church and the State, but it is obvious that an Episcopal Conference cannot be subjected to any civil authority in questions of faith and of living according to the faith (*fides et mores*, sacramental life), which are

exclusively the competence of the Church.

In the light of the principles expounded above, the present College of Catholic Bishops of China⁴² cannot be recognized as an Episcopal Conference by the Apostolic See: the “clandestine” Bishops, those not recognized by the Government but in communion with the Pope, are not part of it; it includes Bishops who are still illegitimate, and it is governed by statutes that contain elements incompatible with Catholic doctrine.

Appointment of Bishops

9. As all of you know, one of the most delicate problems in relations between the Holy See and the authorities of your country is the question of episcopal appointments. On the one hand, it is understandable that governmental authorities are attentive to the choice of those who will carry out the important role of leading and shepherding the local Catholic communities, given the social implications which – in China as in the rest of the world – this function has in the civil sphere as well as the spiritual. On the other hand, 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. For this reason the Code of Canon Law (cf. c. 1382) lays down grave sanctions both for the Bishop who freely confers episcopal ordination without an apostolic mandate and for the one who receives it: such an ordination in fact inflicts a painful wound upon ecclesial communion and constitutes a grave violation of canonical discipline.

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 asserting itself in the internal affairs of a State and

⁴² *China Catholic Bishops' College (CCBC).*

offending against 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 to religious freedom.⁴³ The Holy See would love to be completely free to appoint Bishops;⁴⁴ therefore, considering the recent particular developments of the Church in China, I trust that an accord can be reached with the Government so as to resolve certain questions

⁴³ At the universal level, see, for example, the provisions of art. 18, paragraph 1, of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights of 16 December 1966 (“Everyone shall have the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion. This right shall include freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of his choice, and freedom, either individually or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in worship, observance, practice and teaching”) and the interpretation, binding for Member States, given to it by the Human Rights Committee of the United Nations in “General Comment 22” (paragraph 4) of 30 July 1993 (“the practice and teaching of religion or belief includes acts integral to the conduct by religious groups of their basic affairs, such as freedom to choose their religious leaders, priests and teachers, the freedom to establish seminaries or religious schools and the freedom to prepare and distribute religious texts or publications”).

At the regional level, then, see, for example, the following commitments, assumed at the Vienna Meeting of the Representatives of States participating in the Conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE): “In order to ensure the freedom of the individual to profess and practise religion or belief, the participating States will, inter alia ... respect the right of these religious communities to ... organize themselves according to their own hierarchical and institutional structure ... select, appoint and replace their personnel in accordance with their respective requirements and standards as well as with any freely accepted arrangement between them and their State...”(Concluding Document of 1989, Principle No.16 of the Section ‘Questions relating to Security in Europe’).

Cf. also Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Declaration on Religious Liberty, *Dignitatis Humanae*, 4.

⁴⁴ Cf. Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Decree on the Pastoral Office of Bishops in the Church, *Christus Dominus*, 20.

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.

Finally, as to the choice of candidates for the episcopate, while knowing your difficulties in this regard, I would like to remind you that they should be worthy priests, respected and loved by the faithful, models of life in the faith, and that they should possess a certain experience in the pastoral ministry, so that they are equipped to address the burdensome responsibility of a Pastor of the Church.⁴⁵ Whenever it proves impossible within a diocese to find suitable candidates to occupy the episcopal see, the cooperation of Bishops in neighbouring dioceses can help to identify suitable candidates.

SECOND PART GUIDELINES FOR PASTORAL LIFE

Sacraments, governance of dioceses, parishes

10. In recent times difficulties have emerged, linked to individual initiatives taken by Pastors, priests and lay faithful, who, moved by generous pastoral zeal, have not always respected the tasks or responsibilities of others.

In this regard, the Second Vatican Council reminds us that, if on the one hand individual Bishops “as members of the episcopal college and legitimate successors of the Apostles, by Christ’s arrangement and decree [are] bound to be solicitous for the entire Church”, on the other hand they “exercise their pastoral office over the portion of the People of God assigned to them, not over other Churches nor over the Church universal.”⁴⁶

Moreover, faced with certain problems that have emerged in

⁴⁵ See, in this regard, the relevant norms of the Code of Canon Law (cf. c. 378).

⁴⁶ Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, 23.

various diocesan communities during recent years, I feel it incumbent upon me to recall the canonical norm according to which every cleric must be incardinated in a particular Church or in an Institute of consecrated life and must exercise his own ministry in communion with the diocesan Bishop. Only for good reasons may a cleric exercise his ministry in another diocese, but always with the prior agreement of the two diocesan Bishops, that is, the Ordinary of the particular Church in which he is incardinated and the Ordinary of the particular Church for whose service he is destined.⁴⁷

In not a few situations, then, you have had to consider the problem of concelebration of the Eucharist. In this regard, I remind you that this presupposes, as conditions, profession of the same faith and hierarchical communion with the Pope and with the universal Church. Therefore it is licit to concelebrate with Bishops and with priests who are in communion with the Pope, even if they are recognized by the civil authorities and maintain a relationship with agencies desired by the State and extraneous to the structure of the Church, provided – as was said earlier (cf. section 7 above, paragraph 8) – that this recognition and this relationship do not entail the denial of unrenounceable principles of the faith and of ecclesiastical communion.

The lay faithful too, who are animated by a sincere love for Christ and for the Church, must not hesitate to participate in the Eucharist celebrated by Bishops and by priests who are in full communion with the Successor of Peter and are recognized by the civil authorities. The same applies for all the other sacraments.

Concerning Bishops whose consecrations took place without the pontifical mandate, while respecting the Catholic rite of episcopal ordination, the resulting problems must always be resolved in the light of the principles of Catholic doctrine. Their ordination – as I have already said (cf. section 8 above, paragraph 12) – is illegitimate but valid, just as priestly ordinations conferred

⁴⁷ Cf. *Code of Canon Law*, cc. 265-272.

by them are valid, and sacraments administered by such Bishops and priests are likewise valid. Therefore the faithful, taking this into account, where the eucharistic celebration and the other sacraments are concerned, must, within the limits of the possible, seek Bishops and priests who are in communion with the Pope: nevertheless, where this cannot be achieved without grave inconvenience, they may, for the sake of their spiritual good, turn also to those who are not in communion with the Pope.

I consider it opportune, finally, to point out to you what canonical legislation provides in order to help diocesan Bishops to carry out their respective pastoral duty. Every diocesan Bishop is invited to make use of indispensable instruments of communion and cooperation within the diocesan Catholic community: the diocesan curia, the presbyteral council, the college of consultors, the diocesan pastoral council and the diocesan finance council. These agencies express communion, they favour the sharing of common responsibilities and are of great assistance to the Pastors, who can thus avail themselves of the fraternal cooperation of priests, consecrated persons and lay faithful.

The same is true of the various councils that canon law provides for parishes: the parish pastoral council and the parish finance council.

Both for dioceses and for parishes, particular attention must be devoted to the Church's temporal goods, moveable and immovable, which must be legally registered in the civil sphere in the name of the diocese or parish and never in the name of individual persons (that is, the Bishop, parish priest or a group of the faithful). Meanwhile, the traditional pastoral and missionary guideline that can be neatly summarized in the principle: "*nihil sine Episcopo*" retains all its validity.

From the analysis of the problems outlined above, it emerges clearly that any real solution will be rooted in the promotion of communion, which draws its vigour and impetus, as from a source, from Christ, the icon of the Father's love. Charity, which is always above everything (cf. 1 Cor 13:1-12), will be the force and the

criterion in pastoral work for the construction of an ecclesial community capable of making the Risen Christ present to modern man.

Ecclesiastical provinces

11. Numerous administrative changes have taken place in the civil sphere during the last fifty years. This has also involved various ecclesiastical circumscriptions, which have been eliminated or regrouped or have been modified in their territorial configuration on the basis of the civil administrative circumscriptions. In this regard, I wish to confirm that the Holy See is prepared to address the entire question of the circumscriptions and ecclesiastical provinces in an open and constructive dialogue with the Chinese Episcopate and – where opportune and helpful – with governmental authorities.

Catholic communities

12. I am well aware that the diocesan and parochial communities, spread over the vast Chinese territory, demonstrate a particular liveliness of Christian life, witness of faith and pastoral initiative. It is consoling for me to note that, despite past and present difficulties, the Bishops, priests, consecrated persons and lay faithful have maintained a profound awareness of being living members of the universal Church, in communion of faith and life with all the Catholic communities throughout the world. They know in their hearts what it means to be Catholic. And it is precisely from this Catholic heart that the commitment must likewise issue forth to make manifest and effective, both within individual communities and in relations between different communities, that spirit of communion, understanding and forgiveness which – as was said earlier (cf. section 5 above, paragraph 4, and section 6) – is the visible seal of an authentic Christian life. I am sure that the Spirit of Christ, just as he helped the communities to keep the faith alive in time of persecution, will today help all Catholics to grow in unity.

As I have already observed (cf. section 2 above, paragraph 1, and section 4, paragraph 1), members of Catholic communities in

your country – especially Bishops, priests and consecrated persons – are unfortunately not yet allowed to live and to express fully and visibly certain aspects of their belonging to the Church and their hierarchical communion with the Pope, since free contact with the Holy See and with other Catholic communities in various countries is ordinarily impeded. It is true that in recent years the Church has enjoyed greater religious freedom than in the past. Nevertheless it cannot be denied that grave limitations remain that touch the heart of the faith and that, to a certain degree, suffocate pastoral activity. In this regard I renew my earnest wish (cf. section 4 above, paragraphs 2, 3, 4) that in the course of a respectful and open dialogue between the Holy See and the Chinese Bishops on the one hand, and the governmental authorities on the other, the difficulties mentioned may be overcome and thus a fruitful understanding may be reached that will prove beneficial to the Catholic community and to social cohesion.

The Priests

13. I would now like to address a special reflection and an invitation to priests – especially those ordained in recent years – who have undertaken the path of the pastoral ministry with such generosity. It seems to me that the current ecclesial and socio-political situation renders ever more urgent the need to draw light and strength from the well-springs of priestly spirituality, which are God's love, the unconditional following of Christ, passion for proclamation of the Gospel, faithfulness to the Church and generous service of neighbour.⁴⁸ How can I fail to recall, in this regard, as an encouragement for all, the shining examples of Bishops and priests who, in the difficult years of the recent past, have testified to an unflinching love for the Church, even by the gift

⁴⁸ For a reflection on the doctrine and spirituality of the priest and on the charism of celibacy, I refer to my address to the Roman Curia (22 December 2006): *L'Osservatore Romano*, English edition, 3 January 2007, p.6.

of their own lives for her and for Christ?

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. I know that among you there are confrères who have had to deal with difficult times and situations, adopting positions that cannot always be condoned from an ecclesial point of view and who, despite everything, want to return to full communion with the Church. In the spirit of that profound reconciliation to which my venerable predecessor repeatedly invited the Church in China,⁴⁹ I turn now to the Bishops who are in communion with the Successor of Peter, so that with a paternal spirit they may evaluate these questions case by case and give a just response to that desire, having recourse – if necessary – to the Apostolic See. And, as a sign of this desired reconciliation, I think that there is no gesture more significant than that of renewing as a community – on the occasion of the priestly day of Holy Thursday, as happens in the universal Church, or on another occasion that might be considered more opportune – the profession of faith, as a witness to the full communion attained, for the edification of the Holy People of God entrusted to your pastoral care, and to the praise of the Most Holy Trinity.

Furthermore, I realize that in China too, as in the rest of the Church, the need for an adequate ongoing formation of the clergy is emerging. Hence the invitation, addressed to you Bishops as leaders of ecclesial communities, to think especially of the young clergy who are increasingly subject to new pastoral challenges, linked to the demands of the task of evangelizing a society as complex as

⁴⁹ Cf. John Paul II, Message to the Church which is in China on the Seventieth Anniversary of the Ordination in Rome of the First Group of Chinese Bishops and on the Fiftieth Anniversary of the Institution of the Ecclesiastical Hierarchy in China, *La Memoria Liturgica* (3 December 1996), 4: AAS 89 (1997), 256.

present-day Chinese society. Pope John Paul II reminded us of this: ongoing formation of priests “is an intrinsic requirement of the gift and sacramental ministry received; and it proves necessary in every age. It is particularly urgent today, not only because of rapid changes in the social and cultural conditions of individuals and peoples among whom priestly ministry is exercised, but also because of that ‘new evangelization’ which constitutes the essential and pressing task of the Church at the end of the second millennium”.⁵⁰

Vocations and religious formation

14. During the last fifty years, the Church in China has never lacked an abundant flowering of vocations to the priesthood and to consecrated life. For this we must thank the Lord, because it is a sign of vitality and a reason for hope. Moreover, in the course of the years, many indigenous religious congregations have emerged: Bishops and priests know from experience what an indispensable contribution women religious make to catechesis and to parish life in all its forms; moreover, care for the most needy, offered in cooperation with the local civil authorities, is an expression of that charity and service of neighbour that are the most credible witness of the power and vitality of the Gospel of Jesus.

I am aware, however, that this flowering is accompanied, today, by not a few difficulties. 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

⁵⁰ Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Pastores Dabo Vobis* (25 March 1992), 70: AAS 84 (1992), 782.

seminaries and religious institutes.

In this regard, the formation for celibacy of candidates for the priesthood deserves particular mention. It is important that they learn to live and to esteem celibacy as a precious gift from God and as an eminently eschatological sign which bears witness to an undivided love for God and for his people, and configures the priest to Jesus Christ, Head and Bridegroom of the Church. This gift, in fact, in an outstanding way “expresses the priest’s service to the Church in and with the Lord”⁵¹ and has a prophetic value for today’s world.

As for the religious vocation, in the present context of the Church in China it is necessary that its two dimensions be seen ever more clearly: namely, on the one hand, the witness of the charism of total consecration to Christ through the vows of chastity, poverty and obedience, and on the other hand, the response to the demand to proclaim the Gospel in the socio-historical circumstances of the country today.

The Lay Faithful and the Family

15. In the most difficult periods of the recent history of the Catholic Church in China, the lay faithful, both as individuals and families and as members of spiritual and apostolic movements, have shown total fidelity to the Gospel, even paying a personal price for their faithfulness to Christ. My dear lay people, you are called, today too, to incarnate the Gospel in your lives and to bear witness to it by means of generous and effective service for the good of the people and for the development of the country: and you will accomplish this mission by living as honest citizens and by operating as active and responsible co-workers in spreading the word of God to those around you, in the country or in the city. You who in recent times have been courageous witnesses of the faith, must remain the hope of the Church for the future! This demands from you an ever more engaged participation in all areas of Church life, in communion

⁵¹ Ibid., 29: AAS 84 (1992), 704.

with your respective Pastors.

Since the future of humanity passes by way of the family, I consider it indispensable and urgent that lay people should promote family values and safeguard the needs of the family. Lay people, whose faith enables them to know God's marvellous design for the family, have an added reason to assume this concrete and demanding task: the family in fact "is the normal place where the young grow to personal and social maturity. It is also the bearer of the heritage of humanity itself, because through the family, life is passed on from generation to generation. The family occupies a very important place in Asian cultures; and, as the Synod Fathers noted, family values like filial respect, love and care for the aged and the sick, love of children and harmony are held in high esteem in all Asian cultures and religious traditions".⁵²

The above-mentioned values form part of the relevant Chinese cultural context, but also in your land there is no lack of forces that influence the family negatively in various ways. Therefore the Church which is in China, aware that the good of society and her own good are profoundly linked to the good of the

⁵² John Paul II, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Ecclesia in Asia* (6 November 1999), 46: AAS 92 (2000), 521. Cf. Benedict XVI, Address at Fifth World Meeting of Families in Spain (Valencia, 8 July 2006): "The family is a necessary good for peoples, an indispensable foundation for society and a great and lifelong treasure for couples. It is a unique good for children, who are meant to be the fruit of the love, of the total and generous self-giving of their parents. To proclaim the whole truth about the family based on marriage as *a domestic Church and a sanctuary of life*, is a great responsibility incumbent upon all ... Christ has shown us what is always the supreme source of our life and thus of the lives of families: 'This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you. No one has greater love than this, to lay down one's life for one's friends' (Jn 15:12-13). The love of God himself has been poured out upon us in Baptism. Consequently, families are called to experience this same kind of love, for the Lord makes it possible for us, through our human love, to be sensitive, loving and merciful like Christ": AAS 98 (2006), 591-592.

family,⁵³ must have a keener and more urgent sense of her mission to proclaim to all people God's design for marriage and the family, ensuring the full vitality of each.⁵⁴

Christian initiation of adults

16. The recent history of the Catholic Church in China has seen a large number of adults coming to the faith, thanks partly to the witness of the local Christian community. You, Pastors, are called to devote particular care to their Christian initiation via an appropriate and serious period of catechumenate aimed at helping them and preparing them to lead the life of Jesus' disciples.

In this regard, I would mention that evangelization is never purely intellectual communication, but rather includes experience of life, purification and transformation of the whole of existence, and a journey in communion. Only in this way is a proper relationship established between thought and life.

Looking then to the past, it is unfortunately the case that many adults have not always been sufficiently initiated into the complete truth of Christian life and have not even known the richness of the renewal brought by the Second Vatican Council. It therefore seems necessary and urgent to offer them a solid and thorough Christian formation, in the shape of a post-baptismal catechumenate.⁵⁵

⁵³ Cf. Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes*, 47.

⁵⁴ Cf. John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation, *Familiaris Consortio* (22 November 1981), 3: *AAS* 74 (1982), 84.

⁵⁵ As the Synod Fathers of the Seventh Ordinary Assembly of the Synod of Bishops observed (1-30 October 1987), in the formation of Christians "a post-baptismal catechesis in the form of a catechumenate can also be helpful by presenting again some elements from the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults with the purpose of allowing a person to grasp and live the immense, extraordinary richness and responsibility received at Baptism": John Paul II, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Christifideles Laici* (30 December 1988), 61: *AAS* 81 (1989), 514. Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1230-1231.

The Missionary Vocation

17. The Church, always and everywhere missionary, is called to proclaim and to bear witness to the Gospel. The Church in China must also sense in her heart the missionary ardour of her Founder and Teacher.

Addressing young pilgrims on the Mount of the Beatitudes in the Holy Year 2000, John Paul II said: "At the moment of his Ascension, Jesus gave his disciples a mission and this reassurance: 'All power in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations ... and behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age' (Mt 28:18-20). For two thousand years Christ's followers have carried out this mission. Now, at the dawn of the third millennium, it is your turn. It is your turn to go out into the world to preach the message of the Ten Commandments and the Beatitudes. When God speaks, he speaks of things which have the greatest importance for each person, for the people of the 21st century no less than those of the first century. The Ten Commandments and the Beatitudes speak of truth and goodness, of grace and freedom: of all that is necessary to enter into Christ's Kingdom."⁵⁶

Now it is your turn, Chinese disciples of the Lord, to be courageous apostles of that Kingdom. I am sure that your response will be most generous.

CONCLUSION

Revocation of faculties and of pastoral directives

18. Considering in the first place some positive developments of the situation of the Church in China, and in the second place the increased opportunities and greater ease in communication, and finally the requests sent to Rome by various Bishops and priests, I hereby revoke all the faculties previously granted in order to

⁵⁶ Homily on the Mount of the Beatitudes (Israel, 24 March 2000), 5: *L'Osservatore Romano*, English edition, 29 March 2000, p.9.

address particular pastoral necessities that emerged in truly difficult times.

Let the same be applied to all directives of a pastoral nature, past and recent. The doctrinal principles that inspired them now find a new application in the directives contained herein.

A day of prayer for the Church in China

19. Dear Pastors and all the faithful, 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. This day is dedicated to the liturgical memorial of Our Lady, Help of Christians, who is venerated with great devotion at the Marian Shrine of Sheshan in Shanghai.

I would like that date to be kept by you as a day of prayer for the Church in China. I encourage you to celebrate it by renewing your communion of faith in Jesus our Lord and of faithfulness to the Pope, and by praying that the unity among you may become ever deeper and more visible. I remind you, moreover, of the commandment that Jesus gave us, to love our enemies and to pray for those who persecute us, as well as the invitation of the Apostle Saint Paul: "First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all men, for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a quiet and peaceable life, godly and respectful in every way. This is good, and it is acceptable in the sight of God our Saviour, who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth" (1 Tim 2:1-4).

On that same day, the Catholics of the whole world – in particular those who are of Chinese origin – will demonstrate their fraternal solidarity and solicitude for you, asking the Lord of history for the gift of perseverance in witness, in the certainty that your sufferings past and present for the Holy Name of Jesus and your intrepid loyalty to his Vicar on earth will be rewarded, even if at times everything can seem a failure.

Final Greeting

At the conclusion of this Letter I pray that you, dear Pastors of the Catholic Church which is in China, priests, consecrated persons and lay faithful, may “rejoice, though now for a little while you may have to suffer various trials, so that the genuineness of your faith, more precious than gold which though perishable is tested by fire, may redound to praise and glory and honour at the revelation of Jesus Christ” (1 Pet 1:6-7).

May Mary Most Holy, Mother of the Church and Queen of China, who at the hour of the Cross patiently awaited the morning of the Resurrection in the silence of hope, accompany you with maternal solicitude and intercede for all of you, together with Saint Joseph and the countless Holy Martyrs of China.

I assure you of my constant prayers and, with affectionate remembrance of the elderly, the sick, the children and young people of your noble Nation, I bless you from my heart.

Given in Rome, at Saint Peter’s, on 27 May, the Solemnity of Pentecost, in the year 2007, the third of my Pontificate.