

EDITORIAL

The theme of this issue, “The Bishops’ Conference and Local Churches in China,” is quite apropos, with the signing of the Sino-Vatican Agreement on the appointment of bishops last September. Certain segments of the Catholic community in China were upset by this. To explain his action, the Holy Father Pope Francis, issued an accompanying letter “to the Catholics of China and to the Universal Church.” He points out that the Provisional Agreement was “the result of a lengthy and complex institutional dialogue between the Holy See and the Chinese authorities.” The purpose of the dialogue is “to attain the church’s specific spiritual and pastoral aims, namely, to support and advance the preaching of the Gospel and to reestablish and preserve the full and visible unity of the Catholic community in China.” (2)

The Holy Father recounts: “from the time I was entrusted with the Petrine ministry, I have experienced great consolation in knowing the heartfelt desire of Chinese Catholics to live their faith in full communion with the universal Church and with the Successor of Peter, who is ‘the perpetual and visible source and foundation of the unity both of the bishops and of the whole company of the faithful.’” (Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen Gentium* from Vatican II, 23) Therefore, Pope Francis determined “to grant reconciliation to the remaining seven ‘official’ bishops ordained without papal mandate...and to readmit them to full ecclesial communion. At the same time, I ask them to express with concrete and visible gestures their restored unity with the Apostolic See and with the Churches spread throughout the world, and to remain faithful despite any difficulties.” (3)

Pope Francis maintains: “It is not a question of appointing functionaries to deal with religious issues.” The Holy Father addresses the Chinese Catholic community directly: “An important part falls to you, bishops, priests, consecrated men and women to join in seeking good candidates capable of taking up in the Church...the important ministry of bishop...and of finding authentic shepherds according to the heart of Jesus.” (5)

From its beginning, the Holy Father has placed his Pontificate under the banner of God's mercy. He quotes from *Misericordia et Misera*, the Apostolic Letter issued on November 20, 2016, at the conclusion of the Extraordinary Jubilee Year of Mercy: "No law or precept can prevent God from once more embracing the son who returns to him admitting that he has done wrong but intending to start his life anew. Remaining only at the level of the law is equivalent to thwarting faith and divine mercy...Even in the most complex cases, where there is a temptation to apply a justice derived from rules alone, we must believe in the power flowing from divine grace."

The Holy Father calls all Chinese Catholics "to be united, so as to overcome the divisions of the past that have caused, and continue to cause great suffering in the hearts of many pastors and faithful. All Christians, none excluded, must now offer gestures of reconciliation and communion." (6) He particularly addresses his brother bishops, priests and consecrated persons: "Let us recognise one another as followers of Christ in the service of God's people....Let us leave behind... our own interests, and care for the faithful....Let us take up the path of evangelisation indicated by the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council." (7) At the same time we want to recall the distinct unity: "The college or body of bishops has ... no authority unless united with the Roman Pontiff, Peter's successor, as its head, whose primatial authority ... over all, whether pastors or faithful, remains in its integrity." (*Lumen Gentium*, 22)

The Holy Father addresses the universal Church, asking that they accompany the Church in China so that they do not feel alone on the journey ahead. (9)

In line with the Holy Father's wish, our authors deal with the relations between the local Bishops Conferences in China and in Taiwan with the universal Church. We also have Fr. Sergio Ticozzi's review of the news of the Church in China for the previous year (2018), and Fr. James Kroeger's article recounting 50 years of outreach efforts of Radio Veritas Asia, in conjunction with the vision of the FABC (Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences). Finally, let us pray that the Holy Father's efforts to build up the Chinese Catholic Church will bear much fruit. (PJB)