

The Chinese Episcopate from the Perspective of the Second Vatican Council

Zhao Jianmin

Translated by Catherine Cheung

Reference to the Chinese Catholic episcopate naturally brings to people's minds the provisional agreement on the appointment of bishops, which China and the Vatican announced on September 22, 2018. Although we do not know much about the specific content of the agreement, and many people still have doubts, the agreement as a historical milestone obviously far exceeds its "provisional" meaning. After the signing of the agreement, all the bishops of the churches in mainland China have been accepted into open and complete communion with the successor of Peter, the Pope. Needless to say, this is only a small step in the historical evolution of the Chinese Catholic Church. But it is an important step forward. According to the doctrine of the Church, the bishops of the churches in mainland China are now legitimate. Of course, this does not mean that there will be fewer challenges, disputes and difficulties after the agreement!

Speaking of the Second Vatican Council, we naturally cannot forget its initiator—Pope Saint John XXIII. In his first Encyclical, regarding the issue of religious controversy, John XXIII said: “The Catholic Church, of course, leaves many questions open to the discussion of theologians. She does this to the extent that matters are not absolutely certain. Far from jeopardising the Church's unity, controversies, as a noted English author, John Henry Cardinal Newman, has remarked, can actually pave the way for its attainment. For discussion can lead to fuller and deeper understanding of religious truths; when one idea strikes against another, there may be a spark. (25)¹

¹ Cf. J.H. Newman, *Difficulties of Anglicans*, v. 1, 261 ff.

“But the common saying, expressed in various ways and attributed to various authors, must be recalled with approval: in essentials, unity; in doubtful matters, liberty; in all things, charity.”²

It is necessary then to reflect on the episcopate of the Greater China Catholic churches once again.³ After experiencing various difficulties, setbacks, and even pains for more than half a century, the Chinese episcopate have finally achieved open and complete communion with the successor of Peter. This is the result of the guidance of the Holy Spirit, the unremitting efforts of several popes, and the progress of time as well. Of course, as elsewhere in the world, controversy, difficulties and challenges still exist. However, we also have to say that the communion of the Chinese Bishops and the successor of Peter provides a good opportunity for Chinese bishops to evangelise actively and serve society. Facing the challenges of the world today, this open and complete communion has built a solid platform for the Church in China.

Jesus’ high priestly prayer is also the prayer of the churches of Greater China. “Holy Father, protect them by the power of your name, of those you gave me, so that they may be one as we are one.” (John 17:11) This is exactly the spirit the mainland episcopate needs: united as one, with one heart and one mind. The Second Vatican Council’s Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, clearly tells us: “the individual bishops represent each his own church, but all of them together and with the Pope represent the entire Church in the bond of peace, love and unity.” (23) The bishop is an individual. He tends a particular church. The episcopate is collegial. In other words, the bishops need each other, support each other, and share the same collegial union. No one can leave the whole body; if one suffers, the whole body suffers; if one is glorified, the whole body is glorified. In fact, the difficulties faced by individuals can be overcome by this common responsibility. Therefore, the bishops of the mainland churches need to be united, not forgetting their initial enthusiasm, and jointly

² John XXIII, Encyclical *Ad Petri Cathedram (On Truth, Unity and Peace)*, June 29, 1959, #71, 72.

³ Editor: The term “Greater China” (*dazhonghua* in Chinese) is sometimes used to refer to mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Macau

shoulder the responsibility for the Church to evangelise actively and serve society.

In order to accomplish this sacred mission, the Second Vatican Council told us that the episcopate is a sacrament. “These pastors, chosen to shepherd the Lord's flock of the elect, are servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God, to whom has been assigned the bearing of witness to the Gospel of the grace of God, and the ministration of the Spirit and of justice in glory.”⁴ It can be seen that they are the servants of Christ and the shepherds of the flock. They are not the CEO of a company, not the boss of a factory, not the “big boss” of a community, not someone who is obsessed with power. On the contrary, the Council sees it as “the duty of all bishops to promote and to safeguard the unity of faith and discipline common to the whole Church, to instruct the faithful to love for the whole mystical body of Christ, especially for its poor and sorrowing members and for those who are suffering persecution for justice's sake.”⁵ In other words, we should uphold the unity and integrity of the doctrines and disciplines of our faith, and especially take care of the poor and the weak. Of course, this is not in contradiction with the inculturation of Church theology. The gospel of Christ will only gain a strong vitality in the local culture, because “at all times and in every race God has given welcome to whosoever fears Him and does what is right.”⁶

At this stage, it may take time for the mainland bishops to share the responsibility of active evangelising and serving society in one reasonable and legitimate bishops' conference. However, this should not be a serious obstacle to the common apostolic mission. Even if there are still unspoken difficulties, the bishops in the same region are still responsible for jointly exercising “certain pastoral functions for the Christian faithful of their territory in order to promote the greater good which the Church offers to humanity,

⁴ Dogmatic Constitution On The Church, *Lumen Gentium* (LG), No. 21, November 21, 1964

⁵ LG, op. cit. 23.

⁶ LG, op. cit, 9.

especially through forms and programs of the apostolate fittingly adapted to the circumstances of time and place, according to the norm of law.”⁷ Therefore, bishops of the mainland churches who share the same episcopate must try various ways to jointly shoulder certain pastoral responsibilities in the region, especially to jointly explore ways and plans for evangelisation in the present environment and work together to implement them.

“I speak this in the world so that they may share my joy completely.” (Jn 17:13) Since all the mainland bishops have been accepted into open and complete communion with the successor of Peter, the Pope, their unity and responsibility for sharing the above mission is even more important. With joy, “bishops, therefore, with their helpers, the priests and deacons, have taken up the service of the community, presiding in place of God over the flock, whose shepherds they are, as teachers of doctrine, priests for sacred worship, and ministers for governing.” (*Lumen Gentium*, 20) Without joy, it is impossible to serve the community, and it is impossible to guard the flock. Of course, this joy does not stem entirely from this small step forward, because there are still many challenges and difficulties ahead. Rather, their joy is like that of Paul and Barnabas who boldly taught the Word of God, yet when they were forced to shake the dust off their feet and went to Iconium, “the disciples were filled with joy and with the Holy Spirit.” (cf. Acts 13:44-52). This joy is the joy of Jesus Christ, the joy of Paul and Barnabas, the joy of the apostles, and the joy Pope Francis mentioned in his first Apostolic Exhortation, *The Joy of the Gospel*. It should also be the joy of the bishops in mainland China today, and the joy of the believers as well. It is with this joy that the apostle Paul exhorted us saying, “brothers, rejoice. Mend your ways, encourage one another, agree with one another, live in peace, and the God of love and peace will be with you.” (2 Co 13:11)

In this joy of the gospel, the bishops, priests, deacons, brothers and believers of the mainland churches strive for full restoration, encourage one another, to be of one mind, live in peace and shoulder the mission that Jesus Christ entrusted to the apostles and disciples to preach the gospel. Especially for the bishops of the

⁷ Code of Canon Law, 447.

mainland churches, once they have open and complete communion with Peter's successor, the teachings and instructions to the bishops of Vatican II are naturally applicable to them. "Bishops, sharing in the solicitude for all the churches, exercise this episcopal office of theirs, which they have received through episcopal consecration, in communion with and under the authority of the supreme pontiff. As far as their teaching authority and pastoral government are concerned, all are united in a college or body with respect to the universal Church of God."⁸ Therefore, bishops of the mainland churches, including in particular the bishops of the churches of Greater China, in addition to the diocese they have been entrusted with, share in the responsibility to care for the entire Church, especially the churches of Greater China. Although this responsibility cannot be fully implemented at the canon law level at the moment, but in terms of the three aspects of church teaching, sanctification and pastoral management, mutual cooperation in evangelisation, the upholding of Church doctrines and moral precepts, enhancing growth in the virtues of faith, hope and love among believers, planning and implementing evangelisation strategies, etc., these pastoral duties can still be, and need to be shared.

Objectively speaking, regardless of whether the disputes concerning the nature of the bishops' conference can be resolved quickly, the responsibility of the bishops of the mainland churches to jointly serve in the mission of evangelisation cannot be avoided. After the mainland bishops were all accepted to be openly and completely in communion with Peter's successor, the mentality and habit of the past when "everyone cared only for oneself" needs to be completely changed. This change is in accordance with the teachings of the Second Vatican Council. When the chief duty of the bishops is fulfilled, that is, the preaching of the gospel, the bishops of the mainland churches must "present Christian doctrine in a manner adapted to the needs of the times, that is to say, in a manner that will respond to the difficulties and questions by which people are especially burdened and troubled. They should also

⁸ Decree Concerning the Pastoral Office of Bishops in the Church, *Christus Dominus* (CD), No. 3, October 28, 1965.

guard the same doctrine, teaching the faithful to defend and propagate it....They should also strive to make use of the various media at hand nowadays for proclaiming Christian doctrine, namely, first of all, preaching and catechetical instruction which always hold the first place.”⁹

Regarding the confusing "problems and difficulties" faced by the world and Greater China today, priests and believers call for and await “responses,” especially the “responses” shared collegially by the bishops. In order to exercise their office of sanctifying, the Second Vatican Council also reminded the bishops: “In exercising their office of sanctifying, bishops should be mindful that they have been taken from among men and appointed their representatives before God in order to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins.... Therefore bishops are the principal dispensers of the mysteries of God, as well as being the governors, promoters, and guardians of the entire liturgical life in the church committed to them.”¹⁰ Under the current circumstances, the liturgical life of the mainland churches obviously needs to be regulated and strengthened. There is no doubt that maintaining the sacredness and standardisation of the liturgical life of the mainland churches requires the joint management and responsibility of the “governors, promoters, and guardians of the entire liturgical life”! In view of the differences in language, region, and the spiritual pursuit of the believers, how to maintain the core position of liturgical life in the Church, and fully coordinate the sacredness, unity and diversity of liturgical life, the common responsibility of the bishops should be the only way to solve this complex problem. When exercising the office of pastoral management, Vatican II told the bishops that “in exercising their office of father and pastor, bishops should stand in the midst of their people as those who serve.”¹¹ It is relatively easy for younger clergy and the faithful to recognise the paternal role that bishops of older generations play in the mainland churches, with their age, wisdom, and special grace. Of course, the “father” mentioned in the Second

⁹ CD, op. cit., 13.

¹⁰ CD, op. cit., 15.

¹¹ CD, op. cit., 16.

Vatican Council does not mean age, but rather the expectation that bishops would be like “true fathers who excel in the spirit of love and solicitude for all.”¹² Kind words, good advice and good deeds are the proper expressions of this care and love. In other words, they are the fathers of care and love, the fathers of pastoral love in the whole Church.

They are to serve humbly and support each other. “All of you, clothe yourselves with humility in your dealings with one another, for: God opposes the proud but bestows favor on the humble.” (1 Peter 5:5) *Lumen Gentium* clearly stated: “And that duty, which the Lord committed to the shepherds of His people, is a true service, which in sacred literature is significantly called *diakonia* or ministry.” (24) In fact, the legal status of the local bishops’ conference itself is important, but according to No. 455 of the Code of Canon Law, it is stipulated that “A conference of bishops can only issue general decrees in cases where universal law has prescribed it or a special mandate of the Apostolic See has established it either *motu proprio* or at the request of the conference itself. The decrees mentioned in §1, in order to be enacted validly in a plenary meeting, must be passed by at least a two thirds vote of the prelates who belong to the conference and possess a deliberative vote. They do not obtain binding force unless they have been legitimately promulgated after having been reviewed by the Apostolic See.” Therefore, in general, there are not many opportunities for the local bishops’ conference to enact such common laws and regulations. It can be seen that the Second Vatican Council hopes that through diocesan meetings, provincial meetings and national conferences, the bishops of the local churches can “pool their abilities and their wills for the common good and for the welfare of the individual churches,” and can “establish for various churches the way to be followed in teaching the truths of faith and ordering ecclesiastical discipline.”¹³ The purpose of these meetings is not so much to make a decree, but rather to provide a platform for local church bishops to support each

¹² Ibid.

¹³ CD, op. cit., 36.

other and serve together. In order to provide greater benefits to the people, and make the missionary style more fitting according to the needs of the times, jointly exercising their pastoral office is needed. Obviously, “joint exercise of their pastoral office” is the biggest goal of the bishops.¹⁴

Under such a vision and understanding, the platforms whereupon local church bishops can serve and support each other, are not only restricted to local bishops’ conferences, but extend also to provincial synods. In this regard, there are many ways in which local church bishops can support each other. Once the vision is opened in accordance with the teachings of the Second Vatican Council, the mainland churches, the Greater China churches, and even the churches of Asia and the churches of other countries in the world will remember that “as legitimate successors of the Apostles and members of the episcopal college, bishops should realise that they are bound together and should manifest a concern for all the churches.”¹⁵ Therefore, in accordance with the guidance of Vatican II, the bishops of the mainland churches and the Greater China churches who use the same language, situated in the same culture, and shoulder the same mission, should serve each other and support each other.

In the past, for more than half a century, the so-called “bridge” church has made outstanding contributions to the formation of the clerics of the mainland churches, to pastoral evangelisation, liturgical norms, spiritual progress, and social services. The Church in China will naturally remember all these and be grateful. Nowadays, the bishops of the local churches and Peter’s successor, the Pope are in complete and open communion. This is both a historical turning point and a turning point in vision: the “bridge” is no longer there. The Great China churches are on the same boat with Peter as the head. No matter what kind of controversy still exists, everyone naturally needs to “row the same boat” and overcome the difficulties. It is on this boat that we face the storms of the world, and the disciples of the Greater China churches come

¹⁴ CD, op. cit., 38.

¹⁵ CD, op. cit., 6.

and plead with Jesus, who is sleeping on the boat, “Lord, save us! We are perishing!” (Mt 8:23 -27)

“You of little faith!” Yes, our faith is not enough, we are hesitant! Perhaps the humble service, mutual support and mutual aid between the Greater China churches is one of the ways to make up for our lack of faith. Needless to say, in this barque of Peter, the local church in mainland China is a “little brother” and a “new member.” We need the support and help of the brothers in the Chinese churches and the rest of the world. In any case, with the efforts of all parties, we have climbed onto this boat, although our body is still dripping with cold water! For this reason, the bishops of the mainland churches need the care and support of the bishops of the Greater China churches and the rest of the world. This care and support is not only the prayer and concern for each other, but also the support in fraternal humble service, according to the teachings of the Second Vatican Council, in presenting “Christian doctrine ... in a manner that will respond to the difficulties and questions by which people are especially burdened and troubled,” in guarding “that doctrine, teaching the faithful to defend and propagate it,” in attending “upon the poor and the lower classes” “with a special affection,” in seeking “out people, and both request and promote dialogue with them,” in fulfilling the role of “governors, promoters, and guardians of the entire liturgical life,” in the pastoral virtue of being “true fathers who excel in the spirit of love and solicitude for all.”¹⁶

In fact, the episcopate of mainland churches has opened a new historical chapter. On this barque of Peter, the bishops, priests, brothers and believers of the Greater China churches all face the sea of the world, “row the same boat” together and fulfill the mission that Jesus Christ has entrusted to us. Chinese culture has a long history, to spread the gospel of Christ to a new height is our fundamental pursuit. Perhaps the best summary of this article is still the maxim quoted in the beginning of the article, stated by Pope Saint John XXIII: “in necessary things unity; in uncertain things liberty; in all things charity.”

¹⁶ CD, op. cit., 13, 15, 16.