

## **EXPLANATORY NOTE**

### **Letter of His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI to Chinese Catholics**

**27 May 2007**

By his “Letter to Bishops, Priests, Consecrated Persons and Lay Faithful of the Catholic Church in the People’s Republic of China”, which bears the date of Pentecost Sunday, Pope Benedict XVI wishes to express his love for and his closeness to the Catholics who live in China. He does so, obviously, as Successor of Peter and Universal Pastor of the Church.

From the text two basic thoughts are clear: on the one hand, the Pope’s deep affection for the entire Catholic community in China and, on the other, his passionate fidelity to the great values of the Catholic tradition in the ecclesiological field; hence, a passion for charity and a passion for the truth. The Pope recalls the great ecclesiological principles of the Second Vatican Council and the Catholic tradition, but at the same time takes into consideration particular aspects of the life of the Church in China, setting them in an ample theological perspective.

#### **A. The Church in China in the last fifty years**

The Catholic community in China has lived the past fifty years in an intense way, undertaking a difficult and painful journey, which not only has deeply marked it but has also caused it to take on particular characteristics which continue to mark it today.

The Catholic community suffered an initial persecution in the 1950s, which witnessed the expulsion of foreign Bishops and missionaries, the imprisonment of almost all Chinese clerics and the leaders of the various lay movements, the closing of churches and the isolation of the faithful. Then, at the end of the 1950s, various state bodies were established, such as the Office for Religious Affairs and the Patriotic Association of Chinese Catholics, with the aim of directing and “controlling” all religious activity. In 1958 the first two episcopal ordinations without papal mandate took place, initiating a long series of actions which deeply damaged ecclesial communion.

In the decade 1966-1976, the Cultural Revolution, which took place throughout the country, violently affected the Catholic community, striking even those Bishops, priests and lay faithful who had shown themselves more amenable to the new orientations imposed by government authorities.

In the 1980s, with the gestures of openness promoted by Deng Xiaoping, there began a period of religious tolerance with some possibility of movement and dialogue, which led to the reopening of churches, seminaries and religious houses, and to a certain revival of community life. The information coming from communities of the Catholic Church in China confirmed that the blood of the martyrs had once again been the seed of new Christians: the faith had remained alive in the

communities; the majority of Catholics had given fervent witness of fidelity to Christ and the Church; families had become the key to the transmission of the faith to their members. The new climate, however, provoked different reactions within the Catholic community.

In this regard, the Pope notes that some Pastors, “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” to ensure a pastoral service to their own communities (No. 8). In fact, as the Holy Father makes clear, “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” (*ibid.*).

Others, who were especially concerned with the good of the faithful and with an eye to the future “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” (*ibid.*). The Pope, in consideration of the complexity of the situation and being deeply desirous of promoting the re-establishment of full communion, granted many of them “full and legitimate exercise of episcopal jurisdiction”.

Attentively analyzing the situation of the Church in China, Benedict XVI is aware of the fact that the community is suffering internally from a situation of conflict in which both faithful and Pastors are involved. He emphasizes, however, that this painful situation was not brought about by different doctrinal positions but is the result of the “the significant part played by entities that have been imposed as the principal determinants of the life of the Catholic community” (No. 7). These are entities, whose declared purposes – in particular, the aim of implementing the principles of independence, self-government and self-management of the Church – are not reconcilable with Catholic doctrine. This interference has given rise to seriously troubling situations. What is more, Bishops and priests have been subjected to considerable surveillance and coercion in the exercise of their pastoral office.

In the 1990s, from many quarters and with increasing frequency, Bishops and priests turned to the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples and the Secretariat of State in order to obtain from the Holy See precise instructions as to how they should conduct themselves with regard to some problems of ecclesial life in China. Many asked what attitude should be adopted towards the government and towards state agencies in charge of Church life. Other queries concerned strictly sacramental problems, such as the possibility of concelebrating with Bishops who had been ordained without papal mandate or of receiving the sacraments from priests ordained by these Bishops. Finally, the legitimizing of numerous Bishops who had been illicitly consecrated confused some sectors of the Catholic community.

In addition, the law on registering places of worship and the state requirement of a certificate of membership in the Patriotic Association gave rise to fresh tensions and further questions.

During these years, Pope John Paul II on several occasions addressed messages and appeals to the Church in China, calling all Catholics to unity and reconciliation. The interventions of the

Holy Father were well received, creating a desire for unity, but sadly the tensions with the authorities and within the Catholic community did not diminish.

For its part, the Holy See has provided directives regarding the various problems, but the passage of time and the rise of new situations of increasing complexity required a reconsideration of the overall question in order to provide the clearest answer possible to the queries and to issue sure guidance for pastoral activity in years to come.

## **B. The history of the Papal Letter**

The various problems which seem to have most seriously affected the life of the Church in China in recent years were amply and carefully analyzed by a special select Commission made up of some experts on China and members of the Roman Curia who follow the situation of that community. When Pope Benedict XVI decided to call a meeting from 19-20 January 2007 during which various ecclesiastics, including some from China, took part, the aforementioned Commission worked to produce a document aimed at ensuring broad discussion on the various points, gathering practical recommendations made by the participants and proposing some possible theological and pastoral guidelines for the Catholic community in China. His Holiness, who graciously took part in the final session of the meeting, decided, among other things, to address a Letter to the Bishops, priests, consecrated persons and lay faithful.

## **C. Content of the Letter**

“Without claiming to deal with every detail of the complex matters well known to you”, writes Benedict XVI to the Catholics of China, “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 wants from you” (No. 2). The Pope reiterates some fundamental principles of Catholic ecclesiology in order to clarify the more important problems, aware that the light shed by these principles will provide assistance in dealing with the various questions and the more concrete aspects of the life of the Catholic community.

While expressing great joy for the fidelity demonstrated by the faithful in China over the past fifty years, Benedict XVI reaffirms the inestimable value of their sufferings and of the persecution endured for the Gospel, and he directs to all an earnest appeal for unity and reconciliation. Since he is aware of the fact that full reconciliation “cannot be accomplished overnight”, he recalls that this path “of reconciliation is supported by the example and the prayer of so many ‘witnesses of faith’ who have suffered and have forgiven, offering their lives for the future of the Catholic Church in China” (No. 6).

In this context, the words of Jesus, “*Duc in altum*” (Lk 5:4), continue to ring true. This is an expression which invites “us to remember the past with gratitude, to live the present with enthusiasm and to look forward to the future with confidence”. In China, as indeed in the rest of the world, “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” (No. 3). “In your country too” the Pope states, “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” (*ibid.*).

In dealing with some of the more urgent problems which emerge from the queries which have reached the Holy See from Bishops and priests, Benedict XVI offers guidance regarding the recognition of ecclesiastics of the clandestine community by the government authorities (cf. No. 7) and he gives much prominence to the subject of the Chinese Episcopate (cf. No. 8), with particular reference to matters surrounding the appointment of Bishops (cf. No. 9). Of special significance are the pastoral directives which the Holy Father gives to the community, which emphasize in the first place the figure and mission of the Bishop in the diocesan community: “nothing without the Bishop”. In addition, he provides guidance for Eucharistic concelebration and he encourages the creation of diocesan bodies laid down by canonical norms. He does not fail to give directions for the training of priests and family life.

As for the relationship of the Catholic community to the State, Benedict XVI in a serene and respectful way recalls Catholic doctrine, formulated anew by the Second Vatican Council. He then expresses the sincere hope that the dialogue between the Holy See and the Chinese government will make progress so as to be able to reach agreement on the appointment of Bishops, obtain the full exercise of the faith by Catholics as a result of respect for genuine religious freedom and arrive at the normalization of relations between the Holy See and the Beijing Government.

Finally, the Pope revokes all the earlier and more recent faculties and directives of a pastoral nature which had been granted by the Holy See to the Church in China. The changed circumstances of the overall situation of the Church in China and the greater possibilities of communication now enable Catholics to follow the general canonical norms and, where necessary, to have recourse to the Apostolic See. In any event, the doctrinal principles which inspired the above-mentioned faculties and directives now find fresh application in the directives contained in the present Letter (cf. No. 18).

#### **D. Tone and outlook of the Letter**

With spiritual concern and using an eminently pastoral language, Benedict XVI addresses the entire Church in China. His intention is not to create situations of harsh confrontation with particular persons or groups: even though he expresses judgments on certain critical situations, he does so with great understanding for the contingent aspects and the persons involved, while upholding the theological principles with great clarity. The Pope wishes to invite the Church to a deeper fidelity to Jesus Christ and he reminds all Chinese Catholics of their mission to be evangelizers in the present specific context of their country. The Holy Father views with respect and deep sympathy the ancient and recent history of the great Chinese people and once again declares himself ready to engage in dialogue with the Chinese authorities in the awareness that normalization of the life of the Church in China presupposes frank, open and constructive dialogue with these authorities. Furthermore, Benedict XVI, like his Predecessor John Paul II before him, is firmly convinced that this normalization will make an incomparable contribution

to peace in the world, thus adding an irreplaceable piece to the great mosaic of peaceful coexistence among peoples.

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