



Press Release - November 2, 1998

Vatican Urges Charitable But Clear Contact With Chinese



China: Guidelines to World Bishops

Issued by Cardinal Tomko

September 3, 1988



(These Guidelines have been revoked by Pope Benedict the XVI's Letter to the Chinese Church signed on May 27, 2007 and released on June 30, 2007)



Press Release

Vatican-China Nov. 2, 1988 (520 words)

By John Thavis

VATICAN CITY (NC) – The Vatican, in a confidential advisory to the world's bishops, said contacts with the official Chinese church should be marked by doctrinal clarity and fraternal charity, a Vatican official said.

The statement makes clear that while the Vatican still rejects the government-sponsored Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association, regards members who spurn ties to the pope as non-Catholics, and considers the bishops appointed under its auspices illicit, it recognizes that some Chinese Catholics might have to cooperate with the organization, the official said Nov. 2.

The document, about three pages long and considered "reserved," was recently sent to bishops' conferences, said the official, who asked not to be identified. Some of the statement's contents became public when an Italian monthly, *Jesus*, circulated advance copies of an article on the subject.

The statement was drawn up by members of the Vatican's Secretariat of State and the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples. At high-level meetings in recent years, Vatican officials have discussed the formulating such guidelines.

The official said that statement reaffirmed the church's position that there is a strong group of Chinese Catholics still loyal to Rome, often called the "clandestine church." On the other hand, those who reject unity with the papacy – a category that would appear to include the Patriotic Association – cannot consider themselves Catholics, it said.

But the official said the document also recognized that an "intermediate level" of priests and faithful exists in China: those who remain tied to the pope but who have had to accept the current political reality of the country – including the Patriotic Association.

The main problem for the church, the official said, is defining "to what point cooperation is allowed with the Patriotic Association." There was no indication that the Vatican statement had answered that question.

According to the article to be published in *Jesus*, the Vatican statement:

- Affirmed that the clandestine church represented a majority among Chinese Catholics. (Other observers have put the number of both groups at about 3 million.) It said the Patriotic Association currently has about 50 bishops, numerous functioning churches and several seminaries.
- Reminded the world's bishops that Episcopal ordinations by the Patriotic Association were "gravely illicit," but said supporting this point does not mean refusing "the fraternal charity which is expressed in a cordial welcome" by Chinese church officials.
- Said the Patriotic Association had distorted the idea of ecclesial self-government by cutting off ties with the pope. It suggested that bishops worldwide explain to the association's representatives the church's understanding of collegiality, self-government and self-financing, in the light of the Second Vatican Council.

The statement said the Vatican was making the guidelines known because of more frequent contacts between Chinese Catholics and the rest of the church. It noted that the internal situation of the Chinese church presents a picture that is "complex and not always clear."

The Vatican official said the Vatican had asked that the document remain confidential "not because the church is afraid to say these things publicly, but to avoid reactions either by the Chinese government or the Patriotic Association."