

Anniversary of the Pastoral letter to the Catholic Church in China, issued by Benedict XVI at Pentecost 2007

Vatican City: A year after the Holy Father's Letter to Chinese Catholics was made public (30 June 2007), it would seem impossible to list the effects of that gesture. A far longer period of time must pass before the impact on Chinese Catholics of such a document, described by many as historic, can be estimated. Moreover, the fruits of the Letter will be more than anything spiritual, not reportable in news bulletins.

After a period of enthusiasm and gratitude to the Holy Father, (and apprehension at the political level), and of praise, (eloquent, clear, balanced, affectionate, paternal...) now it would seem people want to listen to the papal message. What does Benedict XVI say to the Catholics of China, what does he expect of them and of the universal Church?

The first message would seem clear to everyone: things have changed and will never be the same. Of this radically changed situation there is awareness within the Catholic community, within the government, within China's civil society and on the international scene.

Since the Holy Father stated that the Church in China is one and that internal differences are the result of outside pressure, China's Catholics have begun to realize that they are all brothers and sisters. The Church in China is one because the great majority of the bishops are in communion with the Pope, the Bishop of Rome. One Church then although with a structure which is still abnormal. Unity is still not perfect but the direction indicated by Benedict XVI is clear. But reunification is not achieved in a day.

It would take too long to list the steps made at various levels, and of which we have been informed, which prove that there is movement towards reconciliation and unity. The Papal Letter has affected relationships between faithful of government recognized communities and communities non recognized, even in areas where divergences were marked. Reported events include exchange of Christmas wishes and gifts between recognized and non recognized communities; increased numbers, sometimes marked, of members of one community at Eucharistic celebrations of the other group; spiritual retreats made together; members of government recognized Church entrusted with catechism courses for non recognized community neophytes; joint study sessions and spiritual exercises on the Papal Letter organized in many parts of China, in a spirit of prayer, to gain a deeper understanding of the message.

Even funerals have been opportunities for reconciliation. Non recognized faithful go to government recognized clergy for the sacrament of confession and the celebration of Mass. There was a case of at least 500 Catholics attending a study meeting on Christian Formation for Evangelization which concluded with a procession and the celebration of the Eucharist. Bishops and priests of the two communities established regular contact to plan Easter liturgies: before the Letter this sort of contact and collaboration would have been unthinkable. Clergy and nuns of one group led retreats for members of the other group. Accusations that the Sacraments in one group were not valid or of no use, are no longer heard, indeed faithful of both communities are known to gather together for morning and evening prayer.

In some dioceses the theme of reconciliation has become the basis of all pastoral activity. In five villages in Mongolia non government recognized nuns were asked to lead prayer services for government recognized communities.

However as well as all these positive effects the Pope's Letter met with some resistance and many queries have reached Rome. However without a doubt the Pope's Letter made a historical mark on the life of the Catholic community.

Two major events brought Christians together in many ways, in prayer and pastoral initiatives, despite difficulties with the authorities: the terrible earthquake and the Day of Prayer for the Catholic Church in China held on 24 May. In Rome, for the first time ever, more than 500 Catholics of both groups from mainland China, Taiwan and Hong Kong took part in a solemn celebration of the Eucharist presided by the Prefect of the Vatican's Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, Cardinal Ivan Dias.

Considering these facts and reading once again the Pope's Letter we are reminded of St Augustine's commentary on Psalm 126 (If the Lord does not build the house, in vain the builders labour): "We speak exteriorly, God builds interiorly. I know you can hear me: what you think, He alone knows, He sees our thoughts. He builds, He admonishes, He instils fear, He opens minds, He opens you to the faith".

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