

Heilongjiang Diocesan Bishop Urges Reconciliation in Spirit of Pope Benedict XVI's Letter to China

An "underground" bishop in northeastern China has issued a pastoral letter that asks his flock to study and act on the letter Pope Benedict XVI recently wrote for Catholics in mainland China. Bishop Joseph Wei Jingyi of Qiqihar said the pope's lengthy letter, released on June 30, marks a new milestone in the development of the China Church, and his diocese has organized Catholics to study and discuss it. He told UCA News on July 13 that his own pastoral can help his priests and laypeople understand the significance and spirit of the papal document. The bishop's two-page pastoral letter was issued on July 12 and sent to parishes in Qiqihar, a city in Heilongjiang province that is 1,050 kilometers northeast of Beijing, as well as to neighboring regions that he administers. He has asked parish priests to read his pastoral letter to congregants at Sunday Masses and to consider how each parish should implement it.

Bishop Wei's pastoral admits that something declared by the pope, the Holy See's revocation of faculties and pastoral directives previously granted to the underground Church community is a challenge. Though this development is painful, the bishop says, it puts China's Church back on the right track. Acknowledging the pope's call for reconciliation between the "open" and "underground" Church communities, the bishop said he wishes to reconcile with five of his priests who rejected his leadership last September. He said he hopes to meet and talk with them "in the new spirit of the papal letter" and "to re-examine the harm we have done to each other." A Church source explained to UCA News that those priests were unhappy that the bishop dialogued with the government and registered worshipping venues because, according to those priests, such actions are no different from joining the Catholic Patriotic Association (CPA) and the "open" Church.

However, Bishop Wei's pastoral asserts that registering churches with the local government conforms to what the pope said: Catholics can dialogue with the authorities on aspects of Church life that fall within the civil sphere. The prelate explained to UCA News that some Church premises in his diocese have been registered since the early 1980s, when religious activities revived in the mainland, but some Catholics perceive such action as joining the CPA and recognizing its "independent, autonomous and self-governing" principle. Bishop Wei's letter insists such decisions were based on consensus among his priests and in accordance with Catholic doctrines. He asks his laypeople to understand his goodwill and his difficulties, and to trust the decisions made.

His pastoral also announces "we finally know clearly" that underground Catholics can be in *communio in sacris* (sacramental communion) with open Church clergy who are in communion with the pope. According to Bishop Wei, Catholics working in other provinces can now conveniently receive Communion, go to confession and receive anointing of the sick from open Church clergy who are in communion with the pope. He also said he hopes his priests will approach the issue of concelebrating Mass with those clergy with "a positive attitude and the principle of reconciliation." He urged all priests and laity to read the pope's letter thoroughly, sum up their feelings and experiences, and engage in discussions to better grasp the pope's intentions. He also asked them to pray for the unity of the diocese in the next three months, to adore the Blessed Sacrament and to fast three days per week.

Bishop Wei was consecrated coadjutor bishop of Qiqihar in 1995 and succeeded retired Bishop Paul Guo Wenzhi in 2000. Qiqihar now has about 30 underground priests serving 40,000 underground and 10,000 open Church Catholics. The 48-year-old prelate is concurrently administrator of Harbin diocese and Jiamusi apostolic prefecture, both in Heilongjiang, and Hulun Buir apostolic vicariate in neighboring Inner Mongolia autonomous region.