

USCCB Commentary: In a sequel to his call for "*A Dialogue in Truth*" between China and the Holy See, Jeroom Heyndrickx here addresses the very poignant and demanding responses which will be required of all the Catholic Communities in China to move to full reconciliation and unity both within the China Church and with the Church Universal. Together with our sisters and brothers in the Faith in China, we await in prayer and anticipation the promised Pastoral Letter of Pope Benedict XVI to be addressed to Chinese Catholics in the PRC and all around the world.

The Chinese Church Awaits Papal Letter And For The Spirit Who Unites And Heals

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A new phase begins in the history of the Chinese Catholic Church

At the end of the China Church summit at the Vatican on Jan. 20, Pope Benedict XVI revealed he would write a pastoral letter to the Church of China. Not often does a pope address such a letter to the People of God in a particular Church. His decision to issue such a letter signals that he views the present situation of the Church in China as historically significant.

In 2006, three episcopal ordinations took place in China illicitly, without the Holy See's permission. In all, about 40 dioceses in China are now without a bishop. To appoint so many bishops in the absence of Sino-Vatican diplomatic relations and without any other formal communication channel can create problems. More so because China does not agree that the pope appoints bishops.

To clarify this matter is work for diplomats later on. Here we wonder: For the Church in China, what is the importance of the pope's pastoral letter as regards the faith life of Chinese Catholics in their own Church today?

Several pastoral questions have urgently awaited answers for years. Many Chinese Catholics hope those questions have inspired the pope to write a pastoral letter that will clearly define the Church view on those matters.

If Pope Benedict writes such a pastoral letter, he will initiate a new phase in the Chinese Church for the first time in 50 years.

Can all Chinese Catholics celebrate the Eucharist together?

The most urgent question concerns the joint participation of official (open Church) and underground Catholics in Eucharistic celebrations. There has been a dispute since the 1980s on whether Chinese Catholics may take part in a Eucharistic celebration presided by a priest of the official Church community.

The underground Catholics have regarded those priests as schismatic, and even the universal Church was unsure for many years if there was a schismatic Church group in China. Today, the

faithfulness of the Chinese Church is undoubted, even if there are doubts about a few individuals.

Priests in several underground Catholic communities still preach that Catholics who attend the Eucharist in an official Church community commit mortal sin and will go to hell. They justify this by referring to the "Eight Points" document issued by Rome in 1988. No Church authority has ever contradicted this document, so relatively few underground Catholics responded positively to the repeated calls of Pope John Paul II for reconciliation.

In March, I met an unofficial (underground) Chinese bishop released last year after spending 11 years in detention. He asked me if he was wrong to pursue dialogue with the government as Pope John Paul II had urged. The bishop had allowed his Catholics to attend the Eucharist in the official Church community, but most of his priests, citing the "Eight Points," opposed his decision. A huge internal dispute erupted and the priests split into two camps. After being detained 11 years for being faithful to Rome, this good man is now accused by his own priests of being unfaithful to Rome. After decades of dispute inside the Chinese Church about joint Eucharistic celebrations, only the pope has enough authority to provide a liberating answer. There are many reasons to hope the pope's pastoral letter will clarify this matter.

In the press release issued after the China summit in January, we got a clear signal about the content of the pastoral letter, which apparently will come out around Easter. The summit did not respond positively to requests that the Holy See be confrontational and even consider excommunications. On the contrary, the statement confirmed that Rome, despite the unhappiness and distress of the Holy See about what happened in 2006, still seeks dialogue, as Pope John Paul II had urged. This justifies our expectation that the pastoral letter may be mainly a call of the pope for unity and reconciliation inside the Chinese Church. Is the Church ready to respond positively to such a call?

Every group in the China Church seems to expect the letter to confirm what it is doing. Bishops and priests of the official Church community look for confirmation that their decision to cooperate with the government was correct. They hope the Chinese government will soon provide complete religious freedom for Catholics in China. This would make their cooperation with the government more acceptable in their own eyes, as well as in the eyes of other Catholics in China and in the universal Church. They also expect the pope to call for reconciliation and unity inside the Chinese Church.

Catholics of the unofficial Church community rightly expect a confirmation of their faithfulness through long, hard years of persecution. Many of them are ready for the pope's call to reconciliation, but an important group among them seems unprepared for this. Humanly speaking, such a feeling is quite understandable, but it raises pastoral concerns about how they will react to the pastoral letter.

A new pastoral situation

A papal call to unite and reconcile would oblige shepherds of the Church to show great faith, a sense of Church, much wisdom and, most of all, great love and understanding, to reconcile among themselves before motivating their Christians to do likewise. It would be a challenge for the unofficial and official bishops, about 90 percent of whom are now recognized by Rome, to

put aside all past disputes and thereafter jointly plan the pastoral care of the flock of each diocese and later develop a single bishops' conference.

Some bishops and priests, as well as many Catholics, are clearly not ready to face this new pastoral situation. To create unity, under the guidance of the Spirit, inside the Chinese Church will undoubtedly be the greatest pastoral challenge of the Chinese Church for future generations

Hear the cry of the just who suffered

A friend of the underground Church recently sent me a long document that honestly and genuinely expresses the bitter feelings of the underground Church community. Those Catholics sense a call for reconciliation is coming, and they do not reject it because it is in the logic of the Gospel of the Lord Jesus.

Even so, they still carry past wounds that have not been healed. Whole families in China were humiliated and deeply wounded and still suffer from that pain. It is good that all these realities of the past are again put under our noses. Some Church websites in China these days are filled with such documents and testimonies. So much bitterness, so many sharp words!

My friend's document left me speechless. The underground Catholics truly suffered. They say: We feel like the workers of the first hour (Matthew 20) who suffered the heat of persecutions during the early years. Does the Church now prefer the workers of the last hour over us? Will it with one document, a mere phrase of appreciation, throw our painful past into the bin of history?

That cannot be! They would revolt! This loud protest of the underground is the cry of the just who have suffered. They are right! It would be a further injustice and historic mistake to pass lightly over their dramatic past and to take their suffering for granted. Yet here we touch on the highest request of the Gospel of reconciliation that the Lord Jesus Himself preached.

When the Holy Father preaches reconciliation, he can only speak in the name of that same Gospel without diminishing its high demands.

Gathered as the apostles with Mary, awaiting the coming of the Spirit

In the last two decades, so much has been said and written about reconciliation. We must be careful. We unconsciously could become numb for it, reduce it to a slogan and empty the meaning of this most sublime moment in lived Christian faith. Catholics of the official Church community unconsciously may be too easily inclined to see reconciliation not as a call for them to join the underground but for the underground to join them, as if the underground were like "prodigal sons" returning to the home of the father. They do not realize that the underground could just as well consider the official Church community as "prodigal sons."

In fact, the "prodigal son" image cannot apply in this situation at all. We can best compare today's Chinese Church with the community of apostles after they had seen the Risen Lord. Each apostle reacted in his own way when the Lord Jesus was arrested, condemned and crucified. Some probably continued to believe in Him in their hearts. Others doubted and were

certainly not proud that they ran away. Most probably said little about this while sitting together in the cenacle, and I guess Peter said nothing at all.

Aware that the Lord had risen, they prayed together with Mary in the cenacle as they awaited the coming of the Spirit. Only the Spirit could unite them and empower them to pass beyond their own past weaknesses. Thus they emerged on Pentecost as a united Church, preaching, full of energy and faith. Peter, who admitted being weakest in faith during the time of trial, became their leader.

Chinese Christians of both Church communities are now similarly expectant. Pope Benedict's pastoral letter will remind them of the Risen Lord present in their Church. The Lord invites them to search for His living presence, to gather around Him and prepare a place for all around the table, as at Emmaus.

The Risen Lord's presence overshadows all the pain they endured in the past. In a joint Eucharist celebration, the Chinese Church will look for the coming of the Spirit. The Spirit in a new Pentecost for the Chinese Church will unite the divided and heal the wounded. With this faith, the Chinese Church can look forward to the pope's pastoral letter and prepare for what follows.

At this historic moment, Chinese civil authorities undoubtedly bear a heavy responsibility. They can create a climate that enables such encounters and healing. We may ask if those authorities, with just as many or more reasons as for the Church, are ready to foster reconciliation inside the Chinese Church. The Church may rightly expect this from civil authorities who profess that their highest priority is to promote a harmonious society.

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