

## **No Confrontation, but Dialogue in Truth! A Call from Pope Benedict XVI to the PRC and to all Chinese Faithful**

*LEUVEN, Belgium (UCAN) -- A veteran Church-in-China observer regards the Vatican meeting on China held Jan. 19-20 as "the most significant China initiative" of Pope Benedict XVI, since it produced a message expressing the Holy See's wish to continue respectful and constructive dialogue with Beijing.*

*In a commentary for UCA News, Father Jeroom Heyndrickx, 76, director of Verbiest Institute of Leuven University in Belgium, says the Holy See "called for dialogue, not words of confrontation," and it is now for Beijing to prove it also is ready for this.*

His commentary follows:

In a press release after the Vatican China Meeting of Jan. 19-20, 2007, the Holy See made it clear that, in spite of three illicit episcopal ordinations in 2006, the Holy See still wishes to dialogue with Beijing. Pope Benedict XVI follows in the footsteps of Pope John Paul II, who promoted dialogue during 25 years. This is, so far, the most significant China initiative of Pope Benedict. The ball is now clearly in the camp of the People's Republic of China (PRC). Beijing has to prove that it also is ready for dialogue.

The high-level China meeting was called at the explicit request of Pope Benedict. The highest Church officials were present: Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone (Secretary of State, who presided), Cardinal Ivan Dias (Prefect of the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples), Cardinal Paul Shan Kuo-hsi (Taiwan), Cardinal Joseph Zen Ze-kion (Hong Kong), Archbishop Dominique Mamberti (Secretary for Relations with States), Archbishop Claudio Maria Celli (Secretary of the Administration of the Patrimony of the Holy See), other bishops from Hong Kong and Macau, and experts on China Church matters. Some participants have in the past been open to dialogue with the PRC; others were more confrontational. The press release stated: "The wide-ranging and intricate debate was characterized by a frank and fraternal cordiality." In other words there were blunt, yet cordial exchanges, a good meeting with genuine dialogue.

"The troubled history of the Church in China and of the principal events of recent years" were discussed. The meeting pointed to the gravity of the situation: "urgent ecclesial problems which call for adequate solutions based on the fundamental principles of the Church's divine constitution and religious freedom." **The Holy See called for dialogue, no words of confrontation.** Rome sees, amid all the hardships, very positive aspects in the situation of the Chinese Church: "The inspiring witness of the bishops, priests and lay faithful was recognized with profound appreciation; without giving way to compromise they have maintained their loyalty to the See of Peter, sometimes at the cost of grave suffering. It was noted with particular joy that today almost all of the bishops and priests are in communion with the Supreme Pontiff." This is a message of the Holy See to Chinese authorities and also to the faithful of the Chinese Church. Rome tells Beijing that Chinese Catholics are all firmly behind the pope and united with the Universal Church. Attempts by the government to establish an independent Church have failed. **No mention is made either of two communities inside the Church** -- official and underground -- as if to indicate that **this phase should belong to the past.** Moreover, the statement refers with joy to "a surprising numerical growth of the

ecclesial community which, in China as elsewhere, is called to bear witness to Christ." This is the kind of confirmation by Rome that both the very missionary-minded official and underground Chinese Church communities expected and deserve. It recommends to the Universal Church the admirable missionary spirit of the Chinese Church.

The most hope-giving message of the Rome meeting is expressed in the last two paragraphs stating that the Holy Father will write a letter to the Chinese faithful, who will most welcome such a letter. We receive **an indication of what we may expect in that letter**: "what emerged was the will to continue along the path of respectful and constructive dialogue with the governing authorities, in order to overcome the misunderstandings of the past. The hope was also expressed that a normalization of relations at all levels could be achieved so as to facilitate a peaceful and fruitful life of faith in the Church, and to work together for the good of the Chinese people and for peace in the world." In other words, a constructive dialogue, based upon "the fundamental principles of the Church's divine constitution and religious freedom": a solid basis for a constructive dialogue in truth.

To appreciate fully the meaning and importance of such a positive statement from the Holy See one must remember that it comes after the recent, confusing events in the Church in China. Two illicit episcopal ordinations in China stunned the Universal Church in April-May 2006. Why? After all, other bishops had been ordained in 2004-05 after having been appointed by the Pope. Was this a reaction against the much-publicized conflict between the bishop of Hong Kong and one leader of the Patriotic Association? But then in late November 2006, there was another illicit ordination in Xuzhou diocese. Both the underground and official Church communities reacted critically. Underground Church circles said that the participation of legitimate bishops in the ordination confirmed their claim that the official Church community in China is not faithful to Rome and that only the underground Church community is faithful.

By opting for dialogue in the given circumstances, **the pope passes beyond this whole discussion**. He shows courage and strength, but also wisdom, insight and a sense of discernment -- just the opposite of weakness. He in fact throws the ball in the camp of the PRC leadership and challenges them. In 2006, Chinese authorities used tricks to lure and force Vatican-legitimated bishops to participate in the ordination of bishops not appointed by the Holy See. In their un-freedom these bishops chose to avoid conflict with civil authorities who would punish them and their flock if they refused. They knew that by giving in to this pressure they were subject to punishment by Canon Law. They chose one of two evils. Their own faithful criticized them. The Holy See however, in previous statements released after each illicit ordination did not apply any sanctions. This call of Pope Benedict XVI to avoid any further confrontation and to promote dialogue seems to imply a non-verbal message for Chinese authorities: "Both China and the Church will gain if we dialogue to normalize that situation of un-freedom."

We all should learn that **this kind of dialogue is stronger than confrontation**. It does not divide but calls for an effort to pass beyond all obstacles. Already once, in June 2006, soon after the first illicit ordinations had happened, the pope sent two diplomats to Beijing to dialogue; but apparently their meeting failed. No dialogue took place. Worse even, one more illicit episcopal ordination happened in November (Xuzhou). The PRC has in the past not responded positively to attempts by Rome to dialogue. In spite of this the Holy See, after having sought dialogue dozens of times under Pope John Paul II, now once again opts for

dialogue. Each time the PRC repeats its request to give up the nunciature in Taiwan. The intention of Rome about its embassy in Taiwan has been known by Chinese authorities ever since the Holy See removed its nuncio from Taiwan in 1972 and left only a charge d'affaires. That is still the situation today. Now Pope Benedict XVI invites the PRC leadership to discuss the application of religious freedom for Catholics in China the way more than 165 other countries in the world apply it and find it normal to do so. Is the PRC ready this time? Another refusal -- for example, repeating once again the old pre-conditions to "first remove the embassy from Taiwan" and to "stop interfering in China's internal affairs" -- is not credible any more.

But Pope Benedict does not only challenge the communists. Also **the faithful and bishops, in and outside of China, are challenged to dialogue in truth.** Are they ready for it? Many are, others apparently not. Yet the moment of truth has come. We must realize that it is easy but useless and without merit to limit oneself to point accusing fingers at individuals of "the other Church community" or to individuals of the government in an attitude of confrontation. This will only block dialogue and contradicts the call of Pope Benedict. We must find truth, as source of our attitude of dialogue, in "the fundamental principles of the Church's divine constitution and religious freedom," and first of all in the Gospel. Only Gospel truth can create unity inside the Church, because it is based upon Christ's love. It can set the faithful free and make them strong enough to respond to the pope's call for a frank dialogue inside the Church on how to be united; and for an open dialogue with the Chinese government on how to "seek the common ground" and to "give to God what belongs to God, and to Caesar what belongs to Caesar."