

## **PAPAL LETTER TO CATHOLIC FAITHFUL IN CHINA**

**VATICAN CITY, JUN 30, 2007 (VIS)** - Made public today was the Letter of Benedict XVI to the bishops, priests, consecrated persons and lay faithful of the Catholic Church in the People's Republic of China. The Letter, dated May 27 Feast of Pentecost, is divided into two parts - "the situation of the Church, theological aspects" and "guidelines for pastoral life" - and a conclusion. It has been published in Chinese, French, English and Italian.

"Without claiming to deal with every detail of the complex matters well known to you," writes the Pope at the beginning of his Letter, "I wish through this letter to offer some guidelines concerning the life of the Church and the task of evangelization in China, in order to help you discover what the Lord and Master, Jesus Christ, 'the key, the center and the purpose of the whole of human history' wants from you."

Addressing Catholic faithful in China, according to statistics 8-12 million strong, the Pope expresses his "sincere gratitude to the Lord for the deeply-felt witness of faithfulness offered by the Chinese Catholic community in truly difficult circumstances. At the same time, I sense the urgent need, as my deep and compelling duty and as an expression of my paternal love, to confirm the faith of Chinese Catholics and favor their unity with the means proper to the Church."

The Holy See, he continues, "hopes for the opening of some form of dialogue with the authorities of the People's Republic of China. Once the misunderstandings of the past have been overcome, such a dialogue would make it possible for us to work together for the good of the Chinese people and for peace in the world.

"I realize," the Pope adds, "that the normalization of relations with the People's Republic of China requires time and presupposes the good will of both parties. For its part, the Holy See always remains open to negotiations, so necessary if the difficulties of the present time are to be overcome."

"The civil authorities are well aware that the Church in her teaching invites the faithful to be good citizens, respectful and active contributors to the common good in their country, but it is likewise clear that she asks the State to guarantee to those same Catholic citizens the full exercise of their faith, with respect for authentic religious freedom."

On the subject of communion between particular Churches and the universal Church, the Holy Father highlights how "in the Catholic Church which is in China, the universal Church is present. ... The whole of the Church which is in China is called to live and to manifest this unity in a richer spirituality of communion, so that, taking account of the complex concrete situations in which the Catholic community finds itself, she may also grow in a harmonious hierarchical communion."

Chinese Catholics, writes Pope Benedict, are "aware of the problems [the Church] is seeking to overcome - within herself and in her relations with Chinese civil society - tensions, divisions and recriminations. ... The history of the Church teaches us, then, that authentic communion is not expressed without arduous efforts at reconciliation. Indeed, the purification of memory, the pardoning of wrong-doers, the forgetting of injustices suffered and the loving restoration to

serenity of troubled hearts, ... these are urgent steps that must be taken if the bonds of communion between the faithful and the pastors of the Church in China are to grow and be made visible."

On the subject of relations between ecclesial communities and the agencies of the State, Benedict XVI writes that "the claim of some entities, desired by the State and extraneous to the structure of the Church, to place themselves above the bishops and to guide the life of the ecclesial community, does not correspond to Catholic doctrine, according to which the Church is 'apostolic ... in her origin because she has been built on the foundation of the Apostles'."

The Holy Father highlights the fact that "the requisite and courageous safeguarding of the deposit of faith and of sacramental and hierarchical communion is not of itself opposed to dialogue with the authorities concerning those aspects of the life of the ecclesial community that fall within the civil sphere."

Turning to consider the Chinese episcopate - 60 percent of the more than 100 prelates are over the age of 80 - the Pope says "it must not be forgotten that many bishops have undergone persecution and have been impeded in the exercise of their ministry, and some of them have made the Church fruitful with the shedding of their blood."

"We must thank the Lord for this constant presence, not without suffering, of bishops who have received episcopal ordination in conformity with Catholic tradition, that is to say, in communion with the Bishop of Rome, Successor of Peter, and at the hands of validly and legitimately ordained bishops in observance of the rite of the Catholic Church.

"Some of them, not wishing to be subjected to undue control exercised over the life of the Church, and eager to maintain total fidelity to the Successor of Peter and to Catholic doctrine, have felt themselves constrained to opt for clandestine consecration. The clandestine condition is not a normal feature of the Church's life. ... For this reason the Holy See hopes that these legitimate Pastors may be recognized as such by governmental authorities for civil effects too - insofar as these are necessary - and that all the faithful may be able to express their faith freely in the social context in which they live.

"Other pastors, however, under the pressure of particular circumstances, have consented to receive episcopal ordination without the pontifical mandate, but have subsequently asked to be received into communion with the Successor of Peter and with their other brothers in the episcopate. The Pope ... has granted them the full and legitimate exercise of episcopal jurisdiction."

"Finally, there are certain bishops - a very small number of them - who have been ordained without the pontifical mandate and who have not asked for or have not yet obtained, the necessary legitimation. According to the doctrine of the Catholic Church, they are to be considered illegitimate, but validly ordained, as long as it is certain that they have received ordination from validly ordained bishops and that the Catholic rite of episcopal ordination has been respected. Therefore, although not in communion with the Pope, they exercise their ministry validly in the administration of the sacraments, even if they do so illegitimately. What great spiritual enrichment would ensue for the Church in China if, the necessary conditions

having been established, these pastors too were to enter into communion with the Successor of Peter and with the entire Catholic episcopate!"

The Holy Father insists that "the appointment of bishops by the Pope is the guarantee of the unity of the Church and of hierarchical communion." In this context, he expresses the hope that "an accord can be reached with the government so as to resolve certain questions regarding the choice of candidates for the episcopate, the publication of the appointment of bishops, and the recognition - concerning civil effects where necessary - of the new bishops on the part of the civil authorities."

In the second part of his Letter, on the subject of "guidelines for pastoral life," the Pope presents a series of indications for Eucharistic concelebration and calls for the creation of the diocesan organizations provided for by canonical legislation. He also refers to "the need for an adequate ongoing formation of the clergy" and a "more careful vocational discernment." Then, addressing himself to the laity, he says: "You are called, today too, to incarnate the Gospel in your lives and to bear witness to it by means of generous and effective service for the good of the people and for the development of the country. ... Since the future of humanity passes by way of the family, I consider it indispensable and urgent that lay people should promote family values and safeguard the needs of the family."

The Pope uses the Letter to revoke "all the faculties previously granted" by the Holy See to the Church in China in past years because "the increased opportunities and greater ease in communication" now enable Chinese Catholics to follow general canonical norms. The papal Letter concludes with the announcement of a "day of prayer for the Church in China" to be celebrated every May 24, the liturgical memorial of Our Lady, Help of Christians. "I would like that date to be kept by you as a day of prayer for the Church in China. I encourage you to celebrate it by renewing your communion of faith in Jesus our Lord and of faithfulness to the Pope, and by praying that the unity among you may become ever deeper and more visible."

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