

"Vatican Vista" by Gerard O'Connell

VATICAN CITY (UCAN) -- The recent summit about the Catholic Church in China reached agreement on important proposals for a more comprehensive and incisive Holy See strategy to help the Church address some major China-related issues.

The meeting, summoned by Pope Benedict XVI and convened Jan. 19-20 at the Vatican, brought together 20 people, including Cardinal Joseph Zen Ze-kiun of Hong Kong, and Cardinal Paul Shan Kuo-hsi, retired bishop of Kaohsiung, Taiwan, as well as other Chinese prelates from Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan.

Several Vatican officials also were involved: Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, the secretary of state; Cardinal Ivan Dias, prefect of the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples; Cardinal William Levada, prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith; and Cardinal Julian Herranz Casado, president of the Pontifical Council for Legislative Texts.

Archbishop Claudio Maria Celli, secretary of the Administration of the Patrimony of the Apostolic See, also took part. Archbishop Celli, who went as the pope's envoy to Beijing in 2006, is regarded as the most experienced Vatican official on the China question.

Following the summit, UCA News spoke with several participants in Rome, on condition of anonymity. They said the meeting, chaired by Cardinal Bertone, had been well prepared, the discussion was conducted in a friendly atmosphere, and every one had a chance to speak freely and frankly.

The summit was a success, they concluded, because it not only achieved the pope's goal -- "to deepen the understanding of the situation of the Catholic Church in mainland China" -- but also mapped out a wide-ranging strategy for the Holy See to assist the Church in China in the future.

Each participant received three volumes of specially prepared documentation, totally 384 pages. Volume I, a position paper more than 100 pages long, listed 17 items on the meeting's agenda. For each topic, the present status was explained and relevant questions were noted. Volume II, about 50 pages, contained a draft of a proposed papal letter, in longer and shorter versions, with a chapter explaining its origins and historical evolution. Volume III consisted of more than 200 pages of background documentation.

The participants had to return all documents at the meeting's end. This procedure evidences the highly sensitive nature of the subject. However, a statement that the Vatican issued to the press on Jan. 20 helps one identify some topics discussed during the summit and highlights two of its conclusions.

UCA News has since learned that Pope Benedict approved the press statement, which had been drafted during the meeting and submitted for his approval. When he sent it back, he suggested that a phrase, "for the peaceful and fruitful life of faith in the Church," be inserted.

The press release also mentions that the Holy See wants to develop diplomatic relations with Beijing so that both sides can "work together for the good of the Chinese people" and "for peace in the world."

The pope personally attended the last 30 minutes of the morning session on Jan. 20. Thereafter, the Vatican issued the press statement, and the two-day summit drew to a close at 6:00 p.m. that same day.

One can deduce from the press statement that the nomination and ordination of bishops without papal approval were major topics at the summit. Most bishops in mainland China are quite elderly -- 70 are older than 80, and 10 older than 90 -- and 46 dioceses have no bishop.

The nomination of new bishops is a major concern of the Holy See because this will largely determine Catholic Church leadership in China for the next quarter century. The Holy See is especially concerned that mainland China's bishops are in communion with the pope. Now, fewer than 10 bishops are not.

Three episcopal ordinations that took place in China in 2006 without papal mandate aggravated division and caused problems for the Church, and disrupted or scuttled what had been emerging as a promising, pragmatic way to appoint bishops acceptable to both the Holy See and Beijing.

Cardinal Levada's presence at the summit signaled that illicit ordinations seriously challenge the fundamental principles of the divine constitution of the Church, including the pope's role in appointing bishops, and the communion of the bishops with the pontiff.

Concern for proper interpretation and implementation of the Code of Canon Law was reflected in the presence of Cardinal Herranz. He attended earlier Vatican meetings convened to respond to the involvement of more than a dozen Chinese bishops at the illicit ordinations last April 30, May 2 and Nov. 30.

The problem of those ordinations, which has raised serious questions as regards doctrine and ecclesiology as well as canon law, is still under consideration at the Vatican and the case has not yet been closed.

The Holy See is also concerned about the limits China imposes on religious freedom and how to address this multi-faceted problem. Some Chinese bishops say they were pressured to join the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association and compelled to take part in illicit ordinations.

They also complain that the formation of Church personnel is restricted, and that they are not allowed to meet and consult each other freely, or travel to Rome to meet the pope or attend synods.

Though the Vatican press release did not mention it, some participants have confirmed that the meeting agreed on a proposal for the establishment of a special commission for the Church in China. It would collaborate with the Holy See, particularly with the secretariat of state and the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, in examining the most important doctrinal and pastoral questions related to the Church in China.

The commission is expected to hold twice-yearly plenary sessions, chaired by the secretary of state. Between sessions, it would develop more collaboration and cooperation among Vatican offices whose work concerns China.

Sub-commissions could also be created to generate input for the commission concerning subjects of special relevance to the Church in China. They would be free to engage the help of experts, even from outside the Vatican, thereby providing more human resources than before devoted to the Church in China.

The summit did not vote on any proposal. Instead, a sense of the meeting was developed when a proposal gained the assent of the gathering. The proposal for the commission and other proposals were given to the pope for his approval.

The press release noted that when the participants discussed diplomatic relations with China, they agreed "to continue along the path of respectful and constructive dialogue with the governing authorities (in China), in order to overcome the misunderstandings of the past." Diplomatic links can be forged only after China and the Holy See reach accord. Even so, the Vatican chose to express publicly "the hope" that "normalization of relations at all levels could be achieved," and its own goal of continuing the dialogue to that end.

The press release also announced that Pope Benedict will address a letter to China's Catholics. A 25-page draft, the fruit of extensive consultation during the past several years, served as a reference text for the deliberations of the participants. It is now being revised in the light of the meeting's input.

The letter is expected to reaffirm fundamental principles concerning the divine constitution of the Church as well as religious liberty, and state clearly what constitutes the hierarchical structure of the Church founded by Christ, including the fundamental role of the pope in appointing bishops.

It also is expected to help Chinese Catholics deepen their understanding of the Church's position on issues of fundamental doctrinal and pastoral importance, and encourage them to remain steadfast in their Catholic faith. 1/31/07

Gerard O'Connell covers the Vatican as a correspondent for UCA News.

USCCB Comment:

A multiplicity of Reports have been published on the recent so called "Vatican Summit" (January 19-20, 2007) on the Catholic Church in China.

Regrettably, most of them depart from the factual text of the official Statement issued by the Vatican Press Information on January 20; interpolating, speculating and otherwise introducing subjective bias and spin not validated by the official statement.

USCCB finds the reporting by Gerald O'Connor a refreshing departure from these typical reports - given to highlighting controversy, confrontation, and conflict; rather than the efforts by the Holy See to achieve reconciliation and unity for the Church in China.