

CHINA: 'Underground' Bishop Calls on Fellow Chinese Bishops to Reconcile

LEUVEN, Belgium (UCAN) -- A young Chinese bishop from the "underground" Catholic Church has written a letter expressing his desire for communion between the two divided Catholic communities in mainland China.

In his "Letter to My Friends," written in July, Bishop Joseph Han Zhihai of Lanzhou, Gansu province, northwestern China, asked fellow bishops "to free Chinese Catholics from the ambiguous situation of division" in the Catholic Church of China. The 39-year-old bishop said he feels it is time to heed Pope John Paul II's 20-year-long plea to realize unity in the Chinese Church.

Letter to my friends ***"Time has come to heed the call of Pope John Paul II to remake unity in the Chinese Church"***

I am bishop of Lanzhou Diocese, successor of Bishop Philip Yang. I belong to the younger generation of priests who have always looked up with great admiration to our dear Bishop Yang and the priests of his time who upheld our Church during the most difficult and critical times before, during and after the Cultural Revolution. Together with Bishop Yang and all the priests of his time we have for a long time feared that a group of Chinese bishops, priests and Catholics, misguided by the Patriotic Association, would cause a schism in our Church by creating an independent Chinese Catholic Church, away from the Universal Church and from the Pope. We refused to join them in their Eucharistic celebrations and we encouraged our Catholics to do the same because it is our duty to protect the unity of the Church with the Universal Church and with the Holy Father. We deeply regretted that this caused division inside our Chinese Church, but we preferred that situation rather than having the whole Chinese Church be separated from Rome.

Over the past twenty years we have carefully observed the many efforts made by Pope John Paul II to better understand the situation of the Chinese Catholic Church. We felt very much strengthened and comforted by his encouraging words. Later we were told that some of the official bishops, appointed by the Chinese government, were also being legitimated and appointed by the Holy Father after they had applied for it and after the application had been investigated and approved. This started many years ago and for a long time we were suspicious because we did not have many contacts with official priests or bishops and we could not verify the truth. Meanwhile, however, we have had much more contact with several of these official bishops and we have learned that already the majority of the official bishops are now in unity with the Pope and with the Universal Church. Together with the unofficial bishops the legitimate bishops form by far the big majority of the Chinese bishops.

Over the past years we have, in our diocese, developed occasional contacts with priests and Catholics of the official Church community. Official and unofficial priests in our neighboring Tianshui Diocese have even concelebrated the Eucharist together. They did so because they have repeatedly heard that the Holy Father encourages us, Chinese Catholics, to promote reconciliation and to remake unity in the Chinese Catholic Church according to the wish of Our Lord Jesus Christ who prayed "That all may be one!" (John XVII,11). Ever since I became (unofficial) bishop of Lanzhou Diocese this question has been on my mind and in my heart: our

Church must be united, according to the prayer of Our Lord Jesus and the expressed wish of the Holy Father. But when is the right time and what is the right way to do it?

I must admit that some doubts still linger on in my heart. After all there are still several official bishops who are not united with the Pope. The attitude of the Patriotic Association is ambiguous when it comes to unity with the Holy See, which is essential to us. This ambiguity is the reason why several of my brother bishops of the unofficial Church community are reluctant to take steps in line with reconciliation and I fully understand their hesitation. Our own Catholics even feel guilty if they would participate in the Eucharist of an official Church community. Some official Church documents - the "13 points" and "the 8 points" - have confirmed unofficial Catholics in that attitude.

But much has changed in recent years. I feel very encouraged by the fact that we learned that the vast majority of our bishops, priests and Catholics are united in the same faith and united with the Pope. But on the other hand I experience as very harmful to our Church the fact that we are still divided into an "official Church community" and an "unofficial Church community" celebrating the Eucharist separately while the Eucharist is precisely the time when our unity is created and celebrated. That is a contradiction.

I have become convinced now that we may no longer ignore the prayer of our Lord Jesus "that all may be One". As bishop, pastor of the flock in Lanzhou Diocese I feel the obligation to call on my brother bishops: let us free Chinese Catholics from this ambiguous situation of division. The often repeated wish of the Pope -- as f.e. during the commemoration of the 400th anniversary of Matteo Ricci -- encouraging us to reconcile makes us understand that earlier Church documents discouraging joint Eucharistic celebrations of unofficial and official Catholics do not apply any more to our faithful when they attend the Eucharist of a bishop or priest who has declared clearly his unity with the Holy Father and the Universal Church because it is Eucharist that fosters unity. We must admit the fact that a new situation is emerging for the Church in China, which calls on us to take new initiatives. I therefore suggest to my brother bishops and priests -- of the unofficial as well as the official Church communities -- to take more concrete steps towards unity in the Chinese Catholic Church.

Let us all -- bishops and priests -- make clear to our congregation of faithful that we are in unity of faith with the Holy Father and with the Universal Church so that we all know clearly of each other where we stand. Then we can peacefully but courageously proceed to meet with each other and celebrate in the Eucharist our unity in Christ and in one and the same Father. This is what the Lord Jesus prayed for and what our Holy Father expects from us all.

I trust that, if we have the courage and generosity to do that, renewal will happen in the Chinese Church. Our unity in faith will not in any way diminish our love for our own country. On the opposite it will strengthen our ability to cooperate all together for building up and modernizing our country.

Bishop Joseph Han Zhi-hai
Bishop of Lanzhou (Gansu)

July, 2003

[Translation from Chinese by Ferdinand Verbiest Foundation, Leuven, Belgium]