



Winter 2012 Vol. 32 - No. 167 Fifth Anniversary of the Papal Letter to the Church in China

[Index](#)

Five Years after the Publication of Benedict XVI's Letter to the Church in China

Cardinal Fernando Filoni

The year 2007 was a pivotal time for the Holy See in its relations with China. Ten years had passed since Hong Kong had reverted back to the authority of Beijing and thirty years since Deng Xiaoping had opened China (1977). For several years (1992-2001) I lived in Hong Kong, following the life of the Church in that country, which was emerging from a long and dramatic period of persecution. My official responsibilities required me to travel a few times to Beijing and I was struck by the economic development of the country. There was also a sense of hope for the future of the Church in China, whose history of suffering and faithfulness, with its confessors and martyrs, radiated with extraordinary attraction. It also seemed that it could not suffer more than it had already suffered during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). Nevertheless, the problems that the Church faced both internally and in its relations with the State were enormous. Great difficulties were also experienced between China and the Holy See: historical, cultural, political, in the area of mutual understanding and in the assessment of related questions.

In 2005 John Paul II died with his great desire to visit China unfulfilled. He left a rich legacy of ardent love for the Church in that country, a paternal concern for those who had distanced themselves from full communion with the Successor of Peter, and a deep appreciation, with sentiments of friendship, towards the Chinese people. I had personally witnessed this on many occasions.

In 2007, Benedict XVI carefully examined the status quo, and although he considered that the times were not objectively ripe for the establishment of relations between China and the Holy See, he believed it important to work towards clearing the road of obstacles. The first task would be to publically manifest the Holy See's attitude in the face of the complex situation of the Church in China. Next there was the task of spelling out the desired stance that should be manifested within the Chinese Church in its relations with the State. Finally, it was important to describe the attitude the Holy See nurtures towards the Chinese State.

This was the context of the “birth” of the Holy Father's “*Letter to the Bishops, Priests, Consecrated Persons and Faithful of the Catholic Church in the People's Republic of China,*” which was published on May 27, 2007.

The Holy See and the Complex Situation of the Church in China

After years of study, the Holy See clearly perceived that as a whole, the Church in China was never schismatic. When I was in Hong Kong, I used an analogy to describe what had happened. From its very beginning evangelization in China occurred in fidelity to the Gospel: Christ was its unique source and the Church, which was born from it, flowed like a river of clear water, along the twists and turns that led along the contours of the landscape that became its history. A political earthquake at the beginning of the 1950's disrupted its life. And so, part of the water began to leak underground, another part continued to flow on the surface. Thus, one part of the Church in China did not accept compromises and political control, while the other part accepted these for existential reasons. One might ask: would these two currents of water ever come together, freely and openly? Yes, indeed, in the infinite ocean of the Heart of Christ, where a common fulfillment could be achieved. But, in the course of history, could it be possible for the Church in China to once again appear visibly united?

The aim of Pope Benedict XVI's *Letter*, mentioned in the second paragraph, was to provide an orientation regarding the life of the Church and the work of evangelization in China. Its primary purpose, therefore, was not political. According to the Holy Father, the Church in China would have to rediscover within itself the desire and the energy to move towards reconciliation. What was needed was to eliminate prejudices, interference, divisions and connivances, hatred and ambiguity. For this, it was necessary to start a process of truth, trust, purification and forgiveness.

The subjects concerned were: the so-called “clandestine” Church, that is, the one not officially recognized by the civil authorities and the so-called “patriotic” Church, that is, the one officially recognized by the civil authorities. Moreover, there were two other protagonists: the Apostolic See and the Beijing governing authorities.

In fact, these subjects interacted, creating a multiplicity of relations, open and concealed, prudent and imprudent, violent and cautious. Thus, could reconciliation have ever been thought possible, without a simultaneous dialogue between the Holy See and Beijing?

The Dialogue between the Two “Currents”

At first glance, one has to recognize that what was hoped for in the Pope's *Letter* experienced difficulties. This was due to external pressures on the Church itself, but also because of misunderstanding between the two “currents”. Decades of separation had dug furrows and built walls, so that deep internal wounds inflicted on the Church are present even today.

It is understood that dialogue is presumed to be based on a search for truth and has forgiveness and reconciliation as its end. If the Pope writes that the solution to the current problems cannot be pursued within a state of perpetual conflict, this must be taken into consideration by the two “currents” of the Church in China. Thus, the stalemate can be overcome by both “currents” in fidelity and in obedience to the successor of Peter, *the permanent and visible source and foundation of unity of faith and communion* (cf. Vatican Council II, *Lumen Gentium* 18).

The Dialogue between the Holy See and the Chinese Authorities

Pope Benedict XVI's *Letter* to the Church in China opens with the clear and public declaration that the Holy See is **open to a respectful and constructive dialogue** with the Beijing authorities, underlining that the solution to existent problems cannot be sought through ongoing conflict (n. 4). This evident manifestation of good will and openness on the part of the Holy See has never waned. Certainly the ways of proceeding of the Holy See and

that of a large and evolving country like China can differ, but should one have to wait forever for the objective to be achieved?

For its part, what conditions does the Holy See bring to the dialogue (not only with China, but with every other country in the world)? Presuming some preliminary aspects such as mutual trust, equal dignity, a clear will to enter into dialogue and to see it through even amidst difficulties, the Holy See places its benchmarks in characteristics that its Founder desired for his Church, namely: unity, including that of the Bishops between themselves and with the Pope; holiness, including the dignity and suitableness of its Pastors; catholicity, that is, universality; the totality and integrity of the faith; and apostolicity in relation to its origin and structure. The Holy See is also well aware that these characteristics become incarnate and are lived in the concrete context of every people, intimately transforming authentic cultural values through their integration into Christianity. Thus, the Church in China, like in every other country, will have particular expressions, which permit her faithful to be and to feel themselves fully catholic and fully Chinese.

It is in reference to these characteristics that the ups and downs of the past five years since the publication of Pope Benedict XVI's Letter to the Chinese Catholics have been manifested. I will briefly list three recent stumbling blocks that emerged on the road to better relations between the Holy See and the Chinese authorities:

1. The Eighth National Assembly of Catholic Representatives, organised by the Beijing authorities in 2010 has strengthened the control of the State over the Church and in particular the policy of the three autonomies. Related to this, there is the ongoing pressure put on the so-called "clandestine" clergy to become members of the Patriotic Association, an institution designed to control the Church in China so that it might be independent of its catholicity and of the Pope. At the same time, the same Association increased its own control also over the so-called "official" community, that is, over: Bishops, Priests, places of worship, finances, and seminaries (for example, a government official was appointed Vice-Rector of the Major Seminary in Shijiazhuang, causing the seminarians to go on strike in protest).
2. Rigorous control over the appointment of Bishops has led to the choice of controversial candidates, who were both morally and pastorally unacceptable, yet acceptable to the political authorities. These appointments were then neatly packaged with elections, that the participants often hurried to contest, for serious reasons, by letters or other forms of communication.
3. Episcopal consecrations whether legitimate or not, were constrained by the interference of illegitimate Bishops, creating a dramatic crisis of conscience for both the Bishops being consecrated and those who were consecrating.

Perhaps some of the reactions of the Holy See were not well received, because of a lack of understanding or accounting for the fact that they were dictated by a concern for remaining faithful to values that are part of the actual doctrine and tradition of the Church, which guarantee its very identity. And yet, a profound respect for the Chinese people was always at the root of all of these interventions.

The Church in China and the State

In the context of the mission it has received from Christ, the Church in China calls for the freedom to complete its particular mission, without interference from civil authorities and with respect for the laws of the State and for the laws of truth, justice and collaboration. One time an elderly Chinese priest told me: "We Catholics in China are only given the freedom of a bird in a cage!" In truth, the Church in China is not asking for privileges, nor does it intend to put itself in the place of the State, and it certainly does not intend to identify, in any way, with the political community, since both the Church and the political community are reciprocally autonomous. On the other hand, the Church happily offers its own contribution for the common good.

Concretely, the situation remains serious. Some bishops and priests have been segregated and deprived of their liberties, as the case of Bishop Thaddeus Ma Daqin of Shanghai has clearly demonstrated. He announced his desire to dedicate himself to full-time pastoral ministry, setting aside tasks that, among other things, were not in the competence of a Pastor. Control over persons and institutions have been honed, and sessions of indoctrination and pressure are being turned to with ever greater ease.

When religious liberty is lacking or seriously limited, does it not fall on the whole Church, and therefore primarily on the Holy See, to defend the legitimate rights of the Chinese faithful by giving a voice to those who have been deprived of one?

After five years since the publication of this Papal Document, is it still possible to nurture Hope?

The attempts at dialogue that have taken place between the Holy See and Beijing, have manifested enormous limitations. What is desired is a sincere and respectful dialogue, open and loyal, inaugurated by the Pope in the *Letter* and this demands direct and stable contact between the two parties. In fact, after over twenty years of contact, the hoped for results continue to be wanting. What is not lacking, however, are: a lot of inaccurate and incomplete items of information, misunderstandings, accusations and a hardening of positions.

One may ask: has not the time arrived for thinking about a new way for dialogue, a dialogue that is even more open and carried out on a more equitable basis, where it would no longer be possible for particular interests to undermine good will, trust and mutual esteem? The Holy See has an open and frank dialogue with many countries. For example, The Holy See and Vietnam have found a *modus operandi et progrediendi*. Even Beijing and Taipei have stable commissions at the highest level to deal with questions of mutual interest. Is it not possible to hope for a suitable and sincere dialogue with China?

China is a huge country and the Chinese people are everywhere. Ever since 1978 when it began to open itself to the global reality, how many priests, clerics, consecrated men and women, and lay people have been formed in seminaries and in Catholic institutes all over the world! Were they ever solicited or forced to renounce their own national identity? Were they ever forced to embrace a faith against their conscience? If Chinese immigrants ask to be baptized (and there are many!) do they not enjoy the same rights as all of the other baptized? In a world that is ever more open and interconnected, can one really contemplate the isolation of Chinese Catholics only because they live in their own country? How often have my Chinese friends shared with me their pride in belonging to their own country. Yet, they feel humiliated as Catholics in their own home, while being greatly esteemed and appreciated elsewhere! Can the Chinese authorities be deaf to the cry of so many of its own citizens? Even the signs, which in these past five years have generated positive expectations, have been dulled. I'm thinking, for example, of the majestic concert offered to the Pope by the Chinese Philharmonic Orchestra and by the Shanghai Opera Choir in 2008, which, in any event, remains a historical landmark and a very positive initiative.

A better understanding of the Letter to Chinese Catholics

The Pope's *Letter* to the Chinese clergy and faithful remains valid. The events of the past 5 years both in the Church and in China have confirmed its value, its propitiousness and its relevance. After the uncertainties, doubts, fears and restrictions that slowed down its reading and comprehension, a time has now opened in which this Pontifical document can be better understood. Indeed, it can be a point of departure for a dialogue within the Church in China. It can also stimulate dialogue between the Holy See and the government in Beijing. Pope Benedict XVI expects that the desire of his venerated predecessor, John Paul II, might soon be realized, who 10 years ago had declared: "It is no mystery to anyone that the Holy See, in the name of the whole Catholic Church and — I believe — for the benefit of

humanity itself, hopes for an opening of a space for dialogue with the authorities of the People's Republic of China, in which, overcoming the misunderstandings of the past, one might work together for the good of the Chinese People, and for peace in the world” (*Letter*, n. 4). In other words, the hope is for a dialogue that manifests a necessary appreciation for Chinese Catholics, faithful children of their People, and which will bear the fruits of harmony and peace, that reach beyond the good of the Holy See and of China. The Letter, in any event, remains a document of a predominantly religious nature and serves to clear the way for reconciliation, in truth and without ambiguity, within the Church in China.

The Pontifical document, therefore, appears to me to be an admirable point of reference, highlighting the Pope's passion for truth, political justice and love for his people. But it is also a text in which Catholic doctrine, political vision and the common good are wedded.

It is waiting for a response.

October 22, 2012

[Back to The Index](#)

Copyright© Holy Spirit Study Centre. All Rights Reserved.