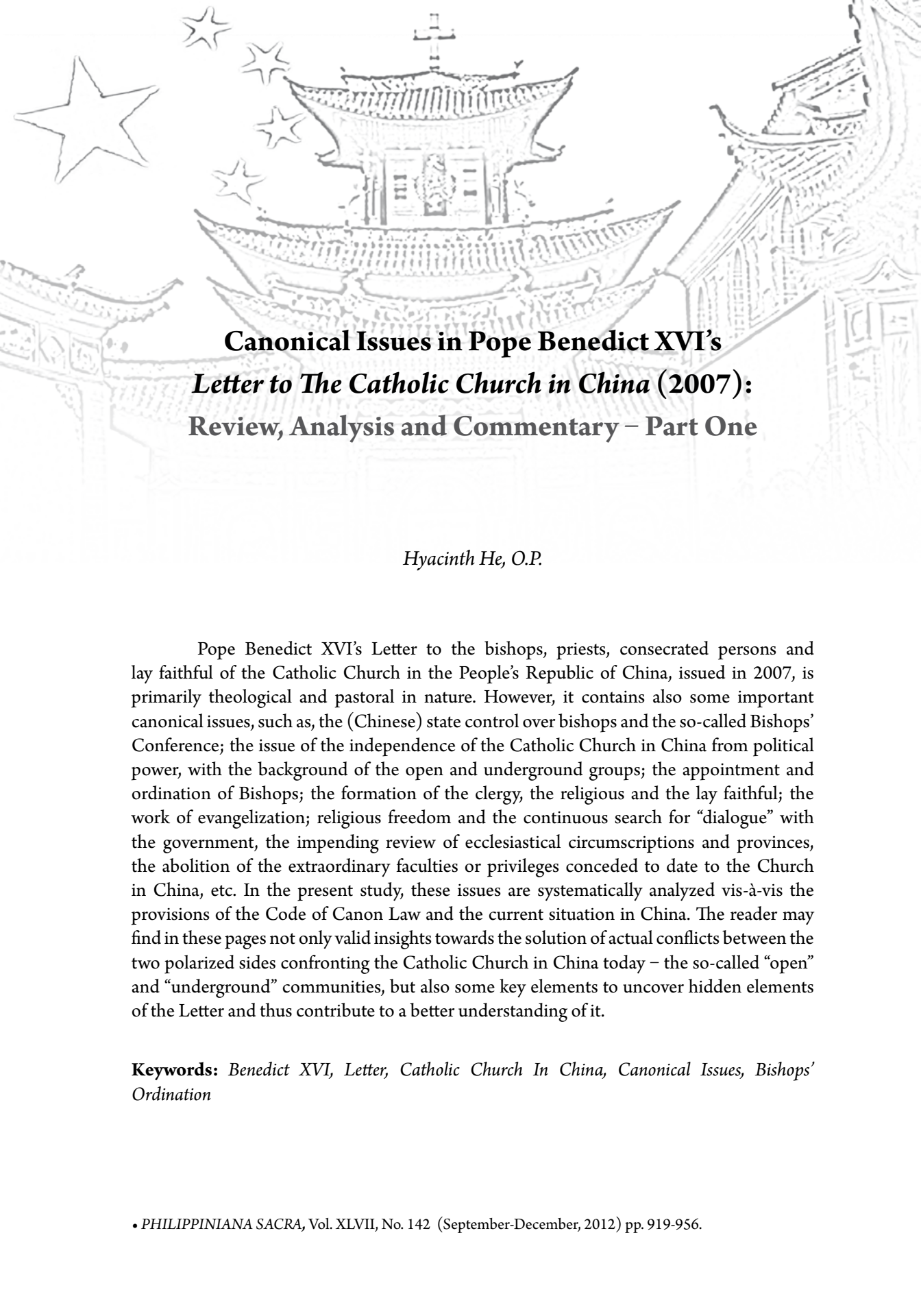




Canonical Issues in Pope Benedict XVI's *Letter to The Catholic Church in China* (2007): Review, Analysis and Commentary – Part One

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Pope Benedict XVI's Letter to the bishops, priests, consecrated persons and lay faithful of the Catholic Church in the People's Republic of China, issued in 2007, is primarily theological and pastoral in nature. However, it contains also some important canonical issues, such as, the (Chinese) state control over bishops and the so-called Bishops' Conference; the issue of the independence of the Catholic Church in China from political power, with the background of the open and underground groups; the appointment and ordination of Bishops; the formation of the clergy, the religious and the lay faithful; the work of evangelization; religious freedom and the continuous search for "dialogue" with the government, the impending review of ecclesiastical circumscriptions and provinces, the abolition of the extraordinary faculties or privileges conceded to date to the Church in China, etc. In the present study, these issues are systematically analyzed vis-à-vis the provisions of the Code of Canon Law and the current situation in China. The reader may find in these pages not only valid insights towards the solution of actual conflicts between the two polarized sides confronting the Catholic Church in China today – the so-called "open" and "underground" communities, but also some key elements to uncover hidden elements of the Letter and thus contribute to a better understanding of it.

Keywords: *Benedict XVI, Letter, Catholic Church In China, Canonical Issues, Bishops' Ordination*

“**T**here is just one Church in China; may it be united and free.” These words concerning the unity of the Catholic Church in China and her independence from political power seem to contain the main concern of the *Letter of the Holy Father Pope Benedict XVI to the bishops, priests, consecrated persons and lay faithful of the Catholic Church in the People’s Republic of China*, issued by him on 27 May 2007.¹

From this main concern other questions stem, such as the bishops’ appointment and ordination, the search for “dialogue” with the government, the idea of a necessary “normality” of the Chinese Church, with the invitation to bishops and faithful to overcome divisions and to display their faith publicly, and the abolition of the extraordinary privileges conceded to date to the Church in China.

These concerns are only some of the many urgent problems needing to be addressed in the Church in China. For instance, the evangelization (above all, of the young); the challenge of secularization; the choice of new bishops; the formation (of bishops, priests, religious and lay faithful); unity; freedom from the control of the Patriotic Association.

The Chinese Catholics received the Pope’s *Letter* with devotion and gratitude. “They received it with total adhesion of heart and mind, whichever community they belong to.”² The reason is because the text of the Papal letter reflects clearly two basic elements or attitudes: on the one hand, a deep spiritual affection for all Catholics in China as well as cordial esteem for the Chinese people; and, on the other, an earnest appeal to the perennial principles of the Catholic tradition and to the ecclesiological principles of the Second Vatican Council.

The Holy Father recalls the “original plan” which Christ had for his Church and which he entrusted to the Apostles and their successors, the Bishops. In this light, he takes into consideration various problems of the Church in China which emerged during the past fifty years. From this “plan” he also draws inspiration and formulates guidelines to tackle and resolve, in a spirit of communion and truth, the said problems.³

¹ Benedict XVI, Pope Benedict XVI, *Epistula ai Vescovi, ai presbiteri, alle persone consacrate e ai fedeli laici della Chiesa cattolica nella Repubblica Popolare Cinese*. AAS, Vol. XCIX, n.7 (6 Iulii 2007), 553-581. The text of the *Letter* was originally published in Italian. We use here the English version downloaded from the Vatican Website: *Letter to the Bishops, Priests, Consecrated persons and Lay Faithful of the Catholic Church in the People’s Republic of China*. Cf. http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/letters/2007/documents/hf_benxvi_let_20070527_china_en.html. [Hereafter referred simply as the *Letter* or *Letter to Chinese Catholics*].

² Cf. Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, *Chinese Faithful Welcome Papal Letter*. ZENIT (Zenit.org), Rome, July 16, 2007, in <http://zenit.org/article-20145?l=english>.

³ Cf. *Vatican Declaration on Letter to Chinese Catholics*. “A Pressing Invitation to Charity, Unity and

By the political and economic reform and social transformation that have taken place in China during the last twenty years, there has been some progress in the area of religious freedom; especially the situation of the Catholic Church has experienced an amazing improvement. From the part of the Church leadership, for instance, we have seen a good number of young clergy and religious rising from the ranks of the local Church and, in accordance to the needs, some had been sent abroad for further studies hoping that it would bring new and up to date tools of evangelization and service to the local Churches. Yet, evidence shows that full religious freedom, which is a fundamental right of the human person, is not presently enjoyed by the Church, in spite of that the current state authorities claim that they have granted freedom to all religious groups, including the Catholic Church, to practice their faith and propagate it in China as long as they do not work against the benefit of the State.

In this context, the on-going dialogue between China and the Vatican is a great reason for hope. In the background of this dialogue, there are some significant developments of a recent past that speak eloquently of the late Pope John Paul II's concern for the evangelization of China to Christ and his efforts to open new diplomatic avenues with the Chinese government. Just to mention a few: The Pope's Letter addressed to all the Bishops on the Church in China, in 1982; the invitation made to some Chinese Bishops to attend the Bishop's Synod in Rome, in 1998; the "Eight-Point Directive on Dealings with China," issued by the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples in the same year; the controversy related to the canonization of the Martyrs of China in 2000; and the reaction to the decision of the Chinese government to proceed with the ordination "without mandate" of some Bishops; the apology to the Chinese people for the errors and mistakes of the Church throughout history, issued in 2001. Indeed, John Paul II was open to dialogue with the different separated Christian Churches regardless of their confession of faith, beliefs or political ideologies and had his influence in the changes that during his time took place within the Catholic Church in China and in relation to the diplomatic approaches of the Chinese government and the Vatican.

Pope Benedict XVI, from the very beginning of his pontificate, reassumed the efforts of his predecessor on his concern for the Catholic Church in China. Indeed, his *Letter to the bishops, priests, consecrated persons and lay faithful of the Catholic Church in the People's Republic of China*, dated 27 May 2007, expresses his love for and his closeness to the Catholics who live in China⁴ and unmistakably shows his willingness

Truth." Zenit (Zenit.org), Vatican City, June 30, 2007, in <http://zenit.org/article-20008?l=english>.

⁴ *Explanatory Note. Letter of His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI to Chinese Catholics*, Vatican City, 27 May 2007, in http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/letters/2007/documents/hf_ben_xvi_let_20070527_china-note_en.html.

to engage in respectful and constructive dialogue.⁵ The *Letter* stirred from the very beginning an extraordinary movement of study and reflection within the Chinese religious communities, whether official patriotic or underground ones; an interest that continues still to awake today. Definitely, it has been a historical “first” that the Pope wrote a letter to the Catholic community in a particular region.

On May 23, 2009, on the second anniversary of the publication of the *Letter*, Benedict XVI approved a *Compendium* that besides summarizing the content of the original *Letter* in a question and answer format, offers also some enlightening explanations “to facilitate a deeper understanding of the Pope’s thought on some particularly delicate points.”⁶ The press release reported that the *Letter* “has given rise not only to study sessions exploring its content, but also to many pastoral initiatives.” It added that the *Letter* “is becoming a reliable point of reference for the resolution of the various problems that the Catholic community has to address on both the doctrinal level and the practical, disciplinary level.”⁷

The great relevance of the *Letter* and its challenges due precisely to “the various problems that the Catholic community has to address on both the doctrinal level and the practical, disciplinary level” has motivated this writer to take its study as the object of this dissertation. The stress is placed on the canonical issues, or better, on the same ecclesiological issues brought up in the *Letter* analyzed from the canonical perspective. The conclusions as well as the consequences of their concrete application in China are important.

The topic will be developed in three parts: the first one is devoted to describe Pope Benedict XVI’s *Letter* to the members of the Catholic Church in China; the second one, to review the main issues contained in the *Letter* in the light of the Church’s canonical provisions; and the third part, to analyse the impact of Pope Benedict’s *Letter* in the present-day Catholic Church in China and in the Sino-Vatican relations.



⁵ Benedict XVI, *Letter to Chinese Catholics*, n. 4.

⁶ *Pope Offers Compendium of Chinese Catholics Letter*. ZENIT (Zenit.org), Vatican City, May 24, 2009, in <http://zenit.org/article-25982?l=english>.

⁷ *Ibidem*.

Pope Benedict XVI's Letter To The Members Of The Catholic Church In China

Since the object of these pages is to review, analyze and comment on the canonical issues brought up in Pope Benedict's *Letter to the Bishops, priests, consecrated persons and to the lay faithful of the Catholic Church in the Peoples Republic of China*, the first thing to be done is to have a look at the text and context of the *Letter*, that is, at its occasion, purpose, background, sources and content, giving particular emphasis to the particular issues tackled in it.

This is precisely what we intend to do in this first part, structured in two main subtitles containing, respectively: (A) *Some general considerations on the Letter*; and (B) *A review of the particular issues tackled in the Letter*.

A. Some General Considerations On The Letter

1. The Occasion of the Letter

It was a piece of news foretold around the world in 2006 that the Holy Father Pope Benedict XVI would hold a special meeting on church affairs in China. The meeting was felt as urgently needed. The Holy See made it clear her eagerness to dialogue with Beijing, in spite of the three illicit Episcopal ordinations that had taken place in that same year.

The announced high-level Vatican-China meeting took eventually place in the Vatican on January 19-20, 2007. It was called at the explicit request of Pope Benedict XVI, always eager in promoting dialogue, like his predecessor Pope John Paul II. The highest Church officials present at the meeting were: Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone (Secretary of State, who presided), Cardinal Ivan Dias (Prefect of the S.C. *Propaganda Fidei*), Cardinal Paul Shan (formerly Bishop of Kaohsiung, Taiwan), Cardinal Joseph Zen (Hong Kong), Archbishop Mamberti (Committee for Relations with Foreign Countries), Archbishop Claudio Celli, other bishops from Hong Kong and Macao and experts on China Church matters.⁸ Some of the participants, according to the press, had in the past been open to dialogue with the People Republic of China (PRC), while others had been more confrontational.⁹ The

⁸ Five Chinese bishops participated in the meeting. They were Cardinal Paul Shan, Bishop Emeritus of Kaohsiung; Bishop Liu Hsien-Tang, Bishop Emeritus of Hsinchu; Cardinal Joseph Zen, Bishop of Hong Kong; Bishop Jose Lai, Bishop of Macau; and Bishop John Tong, Auxiliary Bishop of Hong Kong.

⁹ Cf. Paul P. Pang, OFM, *The Holy See and the People's Republic of China*. "A Word from the Pastor," in <http://www.chinese-catholic.org/zh/grapevine-/112-12/2006/234-a-word-from-the-pastor.htm>.

most hope-giving message of the meeting was expressed in the last two paragraphs of the official press release, issued on 20 January 2007, stating that the Holy Father would write a letter to the Chinese catholic faithful.¹⁰

Finally, the long-awaited “Letter to Bishops, Priests, Consecrated Persons and Lay Faithful of the Catholic Church in the People’s Republic of China,” was released on 30 June 2007. The original Italian version and other translations were officially promulgated on the same day, about five weeks after the finishing date, which was on 27 May, the Solemnity of Pentecost, 2007. By his Letter, Pope Benedict XVI wished to express his love for and his closeness to the Catholics who live in China. He did so as Successor of Peter and as Universal Pastor of the Church.

Two basic thoughts are immediately perceived in the text of the Letter: one, the Pope’s deep affection for the entire Catholic community in China; the other, his passionate fidelity to the great values of the Catholic tradition in the ecclesiological field. Evidently, passion for charity and passion for truth: The Pope recalls the great ecclesiological principles of the magisterium of the Church and at the same time takes into consideration particular aspects of the life of the Church in China, setting them in an ample theological perspective.¹¹

2. *The Purpose of the Letter*

According to its author, Pope Benedict XVI, the *Letter* has a double purpose, namely: (a) to convey to all the faithful in China “the expression of my fraternal closeness;” and (b) 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 centre and the purpose of the whole of human history wants from you.”¹²

The *Explanatory Note* on the Letter to Chinese Catholics, dated 27 May 2007, delves with this in detail:

With spiritual concern and using an eminently pastoral language, Benedict XVI addresses the entire Church in China. His intention is not to create situations of harsh confrontation with particular persons or groups: even though he expresses judgments on certain critical situations, he does so with great understanding for the contingent aspects and the persons involved, while upholding the theological principles with great clarity. The Pope wishes to invite the Church to a deeper fidelity to Jesus Christ and he reminds all Chinese

¹⁰ Cf. “Summit on China closes with promise of continued dialogue and a papal Letter,” *Sunday Examiner*, 28 January 2007, p. 1.

¹¹ Pope Benedict XVI, *Explanatory Note on the Letter to Chinese Catholics*, 27 May 2007, in <http://zenit.org/article-20010?l=english>.

¹² Pope Benedict XVI, *Letter to the Bishops...*, n.2.

Catholics of their mission to be evangelizers in the present specific context of their country. The Holy Father views with respect and deep sympathy the ancient and recent history of the great Chinese people and once again declares himself ready to engage in dialogue with the Chinese authorities in the awareness that normalization of the life of the Church in China presupposes frank, open and constructive dialogue with these authorities.¹³

And the *Compendium of Pope Benedict to Chinese Church*, published on May 23, 2009, lists a number of purposes of the *Letter*, as it states that the Holy Father wishes through this *Letter* to offer some guidelines concerning the life of the Church in China; responds to numerous concrete questions raised in recent years; manifests the sincere gratitude to the Chinese Catholic Community for its faithfulness; confirms the faith of the Chinese Catholics; and expresses hope to engage in respectful and constructive dialogue with the Chinese authorities:

“...The Holy Father, writing as the Successor of Peter and universal Pastor of the Church, wishes through this Letter to offer some guidelines concerning the life of the Church (n. 2 §2). The Letter responds to numerous concrete questions raised by people in recent years, such as the tensions and divisions within the Church and with the Chinese civil society (n. 6), the function of national organizations (n. 7), the appointment of Bishops and the exercise of their pastoral ministry (n. 8 to 10), the celebration of the Sacraments (n. 10) and also the recognition and circumscription of ecclesial provinces and dioceses (n. 11). It joyfully manifests the sincere gratitude for the faithfulness offered, in the past and in the present, by the Chinese Catholic Community (n. 4 §1). It confirms the faith of the Chinese Catholics and favors their unity (n.4 §1). It expresses the Holy Father’s hope to engage in respectful and constructive dialogue with the Chinese authorities (n.4 §3).¹⁴

In a commentary for *UCA News*, J. Heyndrickx, the Director of Verbist Institute of Leuven University in Belgium, said the Holy See “calls for dialogue, not words of confrontation,” and addresses “urgent ecclesial problems which call for adequate solutions based on the fundamental principles of the Church’s divine constitution and religious freedom.”¹⁵

A most laudable intention of the *Letter* is the Pope’s expression of sincere admiration and sentiments of friendship to the entire Chinese people. In doing so, he spoke words of truth and love, without condemning anyone, but firmly defending the freedom of the Church and offering “some guidelines concerning the life of the

¹³ Pope Benedict XVI, *Explanatory Note on the Letter to Chinese Catholics*, 27 May 2007. In <http://zenit.org/article-20010?l=english>.

¹⁴ *Compendium of Pope Benedict XVI to Chinese Church*, n. 2, May, 23, 2009.

¹⁵ *UCAN Commentary*, January 29, 2007. In <http://www.ucanews.com/2007/01/29>.

Church and the task of evangelization in China.” In his *Letter*, considered a historical “first” written to the Catholic community in a particular region, the Pope also shows great sympathy, understanding and concern for the Chinese community that had experienced so much tribulation in the past decades. This papal solidarity is a motive stressed by Cardinal Joseph Zen Ze-Kiun when he writes that “...the Holy Father wants to show special concern for those his children and give them some guidelines in this seemingly crucial moment, so that they might free themselves from their unfortunate predicament.”¹⁶ Finally, the *Letter* is directed to all the members of the Catholic Church in China and deals with eminently religious questions, responding to precise queries which had been addressed for some time to the Holy See by Chinese Bishops and priests. The *Letter*, therefore, is not a political document nor, much less, an indictment of the government authorities,¹⁷ but it is a truly pastoral Letter.

3. *The Background of the Letter*

To understand the background of Pope Benedict’s Letter, it is necessary to consider the History of the Church in China for the past few decades. The Catholic community in China has lived the past fifty years in an intense way, undertaking a difficult and painful journey, which not only has deeply marked it but has also caused it to take on particular characteristics which continue to mark it today. The *Explanatory Note* delves summarily on this.

In the 1950s, the Catholic community suffered an initial persecution which witnessed the expulsion of foreign Bishops and missionaries, the imprisonment of almost all Chinese clerics and the leaders of the various lay movements, the closing of churches and the isolation of the faithful. Then, at the end of the 1950s, various state bodies were established, such as the Office for Religious Affairs and the Patriotic Association of Chinese Catholics, with the aim of directing all religious activity. In 1958 the first two Episcopal ordinations without papal mandate took place, initiating a long series of actions which deeply damaged ecclesial communion.

In the decade 1966-1976, the Cultural Revolution, which took place throughout the country, violently affected the Catholic community, striking even those Bishops, priests and lay faithful who had shown themselves more amenable to the new orientations imposed by government authorities.

¹⁶ “Cardinal Zen on Papal Letter to Chinese Catholics,” *Tripod*, Vol. 27, No. 146 (Autumn 2007), p. 42. In http://www.hsstudyc.org.hk/en/tripod_en/en_tripod_146_03.html.

¹⁷ Cf. “Vatican Declaration on Letter to Chinese Catholics,” Vatican City, June 30, 2007. In <http://zenit.org/article-20008?l=english>.

In the 1980s, with the gestures of openness promoted by Deng Xiaoping, there began a period of religious tolerance with some possibility of movement and dialogue, which led to the reopening of churches, seminaries and religious houses, and to a certain revival of community life. The information coming from communities of the Catholic Church in China confirmed that the blood of the martyrs had once again been the seed of new Christians: the faith had remained alive in the communities; the majority of Catholics had given fervent witness of fidelity to Christ and the Church; families had become the key to the transmission of the faith to their members. The new climate, however, provoked different reactions within the Catholic community.

In the 1990s, from many quarters and with increasing frequency, Bishops and priests turned to the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples and the Secretariat of State in order to obtain from the Holy See precise instructions as to how they should conduct themselves with regard to some problems of ecclesial life in China. Many asked what attitude should be adopted toward the government and toward state agencies in charge of Church life. Other queries concerned strictly sacramental problems, such as the possibility of concelebrating with Bishops who had been ordained without papal mandate or of receiving the sacraments from priests ordained by these Bishops. Besides, the legitimizing of numerous Bishops who had been illicitly consecrated confused some sectors of the Catholic community. In addition, the law on registering places of worship and the state requirement of a certificate of membership in the Patriotic Association gave rise to fresh tensions and further questions.

During the years of his pontificate, Pope John Paul II on several occasions addressed messages and appeals to the Church in China, calling all Catholics to unity and reconciliation. The interventions of the Holy Father were well received, creating a desire for unity, but sadly the tensions with the authorities and within the Catholic community did not diminish.

In reference also to the past, Pope Benedict notes in his *Letter to China* that some pastors, “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 to ensure a pastoral service to their own communities.”¹⁸ Others who were especially concerned with the good of the faithful and with an eye to the future

¹⁸ *Letter to Chinese Catholics*, n. 8. This (clandestine) form of acting, according to the Pope, is quite atypical in the history of Church. In fact, he writes, “the clandestine condition is not a normal feature of the Church’s life, and history shows that Pastors and faithful have recourse to it only amid suffering, in the desire to maintain the integrity of their faith and to resist interference from State agencies in matters pertaining intimately to the Church’s life” (Ibid).

“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.”¹⁹ A number of them, in consideration of the complexity of the situation and aiming at promoting the re-establishment of full communion, were granted “full and legitimate exercise of Episcopal jurisdiction.”

Attentively analyzing the situation of the Church in China, Pope Benedict XVI was aware of the fact that the community was suffering internally from a situation of conflict in which both faithful and Pastors were involved. He emphasizes, however, that this painful situation was not brought about by different doctrinal positions but is the result of “the significant part played by entities that have been imposed as the principal determinants of the life of the Catholic community.”²⁰ The Pope adds that these are entities whose declared purposes – in particular, the aim of implementing the principles of independence, self-government and self-management of the Church – are not reconcilable with Catholic doctrine. This interference has given rise to seriously troubling situations. What is more, Bishops and priests have been subjected to considerable surveillance and coercion in the exercise of their pastoral office.

Behind this language, there was actually an incident that created some tensions between the Vatican and the Chinese Government to the point of somehow polarizing their diplomatic relations: the illicit ordination of three bishops, which took place in 2006.²¹ This incident and other contemporary events triggered the need on the part of the Vatican to study the situation of the Church in China and the relations between the Holy See and the Chinese government.

The task of analyzing the current situation of the Church in China and of proposing practical recommendations was entrusted, upon the initiative of Pope Benedict XVI, to an *ad hoc* Commission made up of some members of the Roman Curia and some experts on China matters.²² The Commission met on 19-20 January, 2007. Pope Benedict XVI graciously took part in the final session of the meeting.

The end result of the aforesaid Commission was a document aimed at ensuring broad discussion on the various issues, gathering practical recommendations made by the participants and proposing some possible theological and pastoral guidelines

¹⁹ *Ibidem*.

²⁰ *Ibidem*, n.7.

²¹ The illicit ordinations in Kunming (April 30), Anhui (May 3) and Xuzhou (November 30) instead took place with the heavy-handed involvement of the Patriotic Association (PA) and the Ministry of Religious Affairs.

²² The meeting was presided by Cardinal Secretary of State, Tarcisio Bertone, SDB, and attended by top figures from the Secretariat of State and the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, as well as representatives of the Chinese episcopate (Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan) and by various experts on Chinese matters. Cf. <http://www.asianews.it/index.php?l=en&art=8261>.

for the Catholic community in China. Primary consideration was given to those serious ecclesial problems which called for adequate urgent solutions, based on the fundamental principles of the Church's divine constitution and religious freedom. From the multiplicity of the participants' contributions, what emerged was the will to continue along the path of respectful and constructive dialogue with the Chinese 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.

The conclusions of the aforementioned commission were decisive in motivating Pope XVI to write his *Letter to the Catholic Bishops, priests, consecrated persons and lay faithful in China*.²³

4. The Sources of the Letter

The author of the Letter, Pope Benedict XVI, in addition to being a solicitous pastor, is an outstanding theologian. He already attended the Second Vatican Council as a theological consultor and was appointed by his predecessor Pope John Paul II as the Prefect of the Congregation of the Faith. These elements together, namely, his stature as Theologian, his familiarity with the doctrines of the Second Vatican Council and his closeness to Pope John Paul II are clearly seen in the sources of his Letter to the Catholic faithful in China.

Firstly, Pope Benedict writes as a trained dogmatic theologian. The 50 some footnotes scattered throughout the *Letter* refer to texts from Scripture, the documents of the Second Vatican Council, encyclicals of previous Popes, the Code of Canon Law, and even civil documents, like the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights. The reader sees immediately that the Holy Father knows his sources, and uses them well.²⁴

All throughout the pages of the Letter, Pope Benedict turns the eye of a dogmatic theologian on the situation of the Church in China. As the reader may know, the curriculum of a Catholic seminary is generally divided into Dogmatic Theology, Moral Theology, Scripture and Church History. Other subjects come under these four main categories. For instance, Liturgy and the Sacraments are

²³ Holy See Press Office, "Pope to write a Letter to Chinese Catholics," Vatican Information Service, January 20, 2007. EWTN News. In <http://www.ewtn.com/vnews/getstory.asp?number=75036#>.

²⁴ Peter Barry, M.M., *A Commentary on the Letter of Pope Benedict XVI to the Catholics of China*. In http://www.hsstudyc.org.hk/en/remarks/en_err_20070704.html.

part of Dogmatic Theology, whereas Canon (or Church) Law comes under Moral Theology. All priestly candidates study such a curriculum.

In his *Letter*, the Holy Father repeatedly quotes also from the documents of the Second Vatican Council, especially its Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (*Gaudium et Spes*), and its Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (*Lumen Gentium*).²⁵ The Decree *Christus Dominus* is also cited. The spirit of the Council is perceived as hovering over the *Letter*, even without any expressed citation.

Secondly, the name and the writings of Pope John Paul II are not only repeatedly mentioned in the letter, but Benedict XVI's predecessor is seen still alive in the text, to the point that he is even called "the Pope." It may be correct to say that Pope Benedict has the same line of thinking that John Paul II, and that he shares his predecessor's full grasp of the straggling situation of the Church in China.²⁶ In fact, his ideas and writings are profusely brought up in Pope Benedict's *Letter*.²⁷

Thirdly, other statements come from various pronouncements by Roman Dicasteries²⁸ as well as, obviously, from Pope Benedict's own writings, speeches and experience during the first three years of his Pontificate. The Bible is likewise cited several times.²⁹

In closing we may say that the sources cited in the 56 footnotes of the *Letter* testify to an important fact: the Catholic Church in China is a member of the Universal Church both essentially and historically. Thus all that is said about the universal Catholic Church can perfectly be applied to the Catholic Church in China.

5. The structure and content of the *Letter*

Speaking about the organizational structure or outline of the *Letter*, it can be said that its two parts are arranged in such a way that it becomes easy for the readers

²⁵ Reference to these two documents of the Second Vatican Council, namely, the Decree *Gaudium et Spes* [AAS 58 (1966), 1025-1115] and the Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen Gentium* [AAS 57 (1964), 5-75], appear around a dozen times in the endnotes of the *Letter*. Also the Vatican II's Decree *Christus Dominus* [AAS 58 (1966), 673-696] is cited.

²⁶ Anthony Lam, "Sino-Vatican Relations at a Crossroads: A Reflection on the Papal Letter to China," *Tripod*, Vol. 27 - No. 146 (Autumn 2007), p. 61.

²⁷ Not only from his messages or addresses, but also from some official documents issued by him, like *Ecclesia in Asia*, *Novo Millenio Ineunte*, *Apostolos Suos*, *Pastores dabo vobis*, *Familiaris Consortio*, and *Christifideles Laici*. Apart from these, the two more official ones, namely, the *Code of Canon Law* and the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*.

²⁸ E.g., the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, "Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on some aspects of the Church understood as Communion *Communione Notio*," 28 (May 1992): AAS 85 (1993).

²⁹ Cf. *Is* 42:1-4; *Mt* 4:8-10; *Mt* 26:51-53; *Jn* 18:36-37 (Letter's Endnotes nn. 25, 26, 27 and 28).

to grasp its main points and message. In fact, the First Part entitled *The Situation of the Church – Theological Aspects* establishes the theological foundations of the Letter that will link to the ecclesiastical norms or responsibilities transmitted in the Second Part, entitled *Guidelines for Pastoral Life*. In this sense, the *Letter* shares the traditional style of the Catholic Church documentation: From the Epistles of St Paul, through every Ecumenical Council, documents seem to have a common pattern, that is, first come God's revelation and theological explanations, and then a link to ethical norms. In the present case, theological aspects and pastoral guidelines concerning the life of the Church and the task of evangelization in China, are offered in order to help the members of the Catholic Church in China "discover what the Lord and Master, Jesus Christ, the key, the centre and the purpose of the whole of human history wants from you."³⁰

Referring now to the content of the papal Letter, there is no need to repeat that the Letter comprises two main parts, but it has to be further said that the Letter is divided into twenty segments or numbers. Numbers 1-3 belong to the *Introduction*; numbers 3-9 to the first part [*The Situation of the Church - Theological Aspects*]; numbers 10-17 to the second part [*Guidelines for Pastoral Life*]; and numbers 18-20 to the *Conclusion*.³¹

Let us now make a short description of the content of the Letter by its numbers:

(1) The first number contains the introductory greeting. The Pope borrows some words from St Paul to the Letter to the Colossians³² to express his sentiments, as Successor of Peter and universal Pastor of the Church, towards his brother Bishops, priests, consecrated persons and all the faithful of the Catholic Church in China.

(2) The second number deals with the Purpose of the *Letter*, which in addition to showing solidarity and closeness with the Church members in China, the Pope humbly wishes "to offer some guidelines concerning the life of the Church and the task of evangelization in China."³³

³⁰ *Letter*, n. 2. Cf. Introduction of *Compendium of Pope Benedict XVI to Chinese Catholic Church*, May, 23, 2009.

³¹ At the end of the Introduction of the *Compendium* there is a brief summary of the Letter: "... nn. 1-2 contain a greeting and the purpose of the Letter; nn. 3-9 explain in detail seven theological aspects of the situation of the Church; nn. 10-17 give eight guidelines for pastoral life; and finally nn. 18-20 conclude with the revocation of special pastoral faculties, the establishment of a day of prayer for the Church in China, and a final greeting."

³² Cf. Col 1:3-5, 9-11.

³³ Cf. *Letter*, n.2.

(3) Number 3 contains some important thoughts on *Globalization, modernity and atheism*, describing the current social situation in which the Church in China finds herself and the new challenges that the Chinese People must face in proclaiming the Gospel.

(4) Number 4 gathers the Holy Father's "readiness for a respectful and constructive dialogue" between the Holy See and the Chinese government. The Pope, who regards the entire Chinese People with sincere admiration and sentiments of friendship, realizes that the normalization of relations with the People's Republic of China requires time and presupposes the good will of both parties. The Catholic Church sincerely proposes to offer, once again, humble and disinterested service in the areas of her competence, for the good of Chinese Catholics and for the good of all the inhabitants of the country, but it is likewise clear that the Church asks the State to guarantee to those same Catholic citizens the full exercise of their faith, with respect for authentic religious freedom.

(5) Number 5 refers to the "communion between the particular Churches and the universal Church" applied to the life of the Catholic Church in China. "In the Catholic Church which is in China, the universal Church is present, the Church of Christ, which in the Creed we acknowledge to be *one, holy, catholic and apostolic*." Concluding that "for the unity of the Church in individual nations, every Bishop should be in communion with the other Bishops, and all should be in visible and concrete communion with the Pope," a corollary is in place: The whole of the Church which is in China is called to live and to manifest this unity in a richer spirituality of communion.³⁴

(6) "Tensions and divisions within the Church: pardon and reconciliation" is the topic developed in number 6 of the *Letter*. Although these matters concern the very nature of the universal Church, they have a particular significance for the Church in China. Hence it refers to the problems that the Church is seeking to overcome, affecting relations within the Church – "the painful situation of serious differences involving lay faithful and their pastors" – and also relations with the Chinese civil society – tensions, divisions and recriminations. The urgent steps to 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" are simply "the purification of memory, the pardoning of wrong-doers, the forgetting of injustices suffered and the loving restoration to serenity of troubled hearts, all to be accomplished in the name of Jesus crucified and risen."³⁵

³⁴ Cf. *Letter*, n.5.

³⁵ *Letter*, n. 6.

(7) Number 7 develops a delicate issue, namely, the relationships between “Ecclesial communities and State agencies,” relationships that are to be lived “in truth and charity.” Benedict XVI writes that on this point, “particular enlightenment can be found in the invitation of the Second Vatican Council to follow the words and *modus operandi* of Jesus Christ.” He, indeed, “did not wish to be a political Messiah who would dominate by force, but preferred to call himself the Son of Man who came to serve, and ‘to give his life as a ransom for many’ (Mk 10:45).”³⁶ Truth and charity are the two supporting pillars of the life of the Christian community, which should be characterized by communion and fraternal understanding.

(8) In number 8, quite solid in content, the Holy Father expresses his view on the *Chinese Episcopate* as a whole. He exposes the real situation of the Episcopate in China: “In recent years, for various reasons, you, my Brother Bishops, have encountered difficulties, since persons who are not “ordained,” and sometimes not even baptized, control and take decisions concerning important ecclesial questions, including the appointment of Bishops, in the name of various State agencies.” The consequence is no other than a demeaning of the Petrine and Episcopal ministries, as well as an unacceptable loss of communion within the Church: “As in the rest of the world, in China, too, the Church is governed by Bishops. The offices of teaching and governing of Bishops, however, by their very nature can be exercised only in hierarchical communion with the head and members of the college.”³⁷

(9) Number 9 is about the *Nomination of Bishops*. The Holy See follows the appointment of Bishops with special care since this touches the very heart of the life of the Church, inasmuch as the appointment of Bishops by the Pope is the guarantee of the unity of the Church and of hierarchical communion. The Holy See would desire to be completely free to appoint Bishops. On this issue, the Letter clearly maintains the right and duty of the Pope’s role as the one who “appoints.” This is a not negotiable, pure religious matter.

(10) Number 10 marks the beginning of the second part of the Letter, which contains some guidelines for pastoral life. Predominant matters in this regard are those related to *Sacraments, governance of dioceses, and parishes*. To mention some, the concelebration of the Eucharist, the incardination of priests either to a diocese or to a religious institute, consecration of bishops, the use of indispensable means of communion the diocesan curia, the presbyteral council, the college of consultors, the diocesan pastoral council and the diocesan finance council. From the analysis of the problems outlined above, it emerges clearly that any real solution will be rooted in

³⁶ Letter, n. 7.

³⁷ Letter, n. 8.

the promotion of communion, which draws its vigour and impetus from Christ, the icon of the Father's love.

(11) *Ecclesiastical provinces* is the title of number 11. The Holy See is prepared to address the entire question of the circumscriptions and ecclesiastical provinces in an open and constructive dialogue with the Chinese Episcopate and – where opportune and helpful – with governmental authorities.

(12) Number 12 deals with *Catholic communities*. The very existence of diocesan and parochial communities, spread over the vast Chinese territory, speaks of liveliness of Christian life, witness of faith and pastoral initiative. Now the Pope wishes all their members to grow in communion with each other and to be allowed to live freely their belonging to the Church and their hierarchical communion with the Pope, since free contact with the Holy See and with other Catholic communities in various countries is still ordinarily impeded, in spite of some recent improvements.

(13) Number 13 contains a special address to the *Priests* in China. In addition to heartfelt praises for bearing “the burden of the day and the scorching heat” (Mt 20:12), Pope Benedict XVI invites them to be shining witnesses to an unfailing love for the Church, even by the gift of their own lives for her and for Christ. “The current ecclesial and socio-political situation,” the Pope writes, “renders ever more urgent the need to draw light and strength from the well-springs of priestly spirituality, which are God's love, the unconditional following of Christ, passion for proclamation of the Gospel, faithfulness to the Church and generous service of neighbor.”³⁸

(14) *Vocations and religious formation* is the title of number 14. The abundant flowering of vocations to the priesthood and to consecrated life, being a sign of vitality and a reason for hope, must also be a reason for gratitude to the Lord. The emerging of indigenous religious congregations has shown to Bishops and priests the indispensable contribution religious make to catechesis and to parish life in all its forms. The need emerges both for more careful vocational discernment on the part of Church leaders, and for more in-depth education and instruction of aspirants to the priesthood and religious life, the witness of the charism of total consecration to Christ through the vows of chastity, poverty and obedience, and the response to the demand to proclaim the Gospel in the socio-historical circumstances of the country today.³⁹

(15) Number 15 is about the *Lay Faithful and the Family*. The Holy Father first praises the lay faithful, both as individuals and families and as members of spiritual

³⁸ *Letter*, n. 13.

³⁹ Cf. *Letter*, n. 14.

and apostolic movements, for having been courageous witnesses of the faith and shown total fidelity to the Gospel, even paying a personal price for their faithfulness to Christ. Then, the Pope reminds them of their vocation: "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."⁴⁰ They are challenged to remain "the hope of the Church for the future!" This demands communion with the Pastor and engaged participation in Church life.

(16) In number 16, which deals with the *Christian initiation of adults*, the Holy Father reminds the Pastors of their vocation to devote particular care to the adult Christian initiation via an appropriate and serious period of catechumenate aimed at helping them and preparing them to lead the life of Jesus' disciples. The Pope clarifies that "evangelization is never purely intellectual communication, but rather includes experience of life, purification and transformation of the whole of existence, and a journey in communion."⁴¹

(17) Number 17 marks the end of the second part of the *Letter* and it is about the *Missionary vocation*, which evokes the perennial vocation of the Church (always and everywhere missionary) to proclaim and to bear witness to the Gospel. "For two-thousand years Christ's followers have carried out this mission. Now, at the dawn of the third millennium," Pope Benedict XVI addresses to the Catholics in China in this vein, "... it is your turn. It is your turn to go out into the world to preach the message of the Ten Commandments and the Beatitudes."⁴²

(18) Number 18 is the first of the three concluding numbers of the *Letter*. Its title [*Revocation of faculties and of pastoral directives*] indicates the decision taking by the Pope of revoking "all the faculties previously granted in order to address particular pastoral necessities that emerged in truly difficult times." The same is applied to "all directives of a pastoral nature, past and recent." The reasons are basically three, namely, some positive developments of the situation of the Church in China; the increased opportunities and greater ease in communication; and the requests sent to Rome by various Bishops and priests.⁴³

(19) *A day of prayer for the Church in China*, which is the title of number 19, encapsulates its content. In words of the Pope, "the date 24 May could in the future become an occasion for the Catholics of the whole world to be united in prayer with the Church which is in China. This day is dedicated to the liturgical memorial of Our

⁴⁰ *Letter*, n. 15.

⁴¹ *Letter*, n. 16.

⁴² *Letter*, n. 17.

⁴³ Cf. *Letter*, n. 18.

Lady, Help of Christians, who is venerated with great devotion at the Marian Shrine of Sheshan in Shanghai.”⁴⁴

(20) As it could not be otherwise, the last number of the *Letter* contains a *Farewell*, which is the expression of a personal prayer by the Pope for the “dear Pastors of the Catholic Church which is in China, priests, consecrated persons and lay faithful.”⁴⁵ Following the custom of his predecessors, Pope Benedict concludes his *Letter* with a special reference to Mary: in this case, to “Mary Most Holy, Mother of the Church and Queen of China.” Finally, there is an invocation to St Joseph and, on this particular occasion, also to the countless Holy Martyrs of China.

B. Particular Issues Tackled In The Letter

After having made some general considerations on Pope Benedict’s *Letter to the Bishops, Priests, Consecrated persons and Lay Faithful of the Catholic Church in the People’s Republic of China* regarding its occasion, purpose, background, sources and content, it is now time to round up the picture on the Letter by trying to identify and review the most important issues tackled in it.

The order in which the issues are listed below is not based in their importance, but rather in the order in which they are mentioned in the *Letter*, which, as have been already said, is divided into two parts: the first devoted to the theological aspects of the situation of the Church in China; and the second, to offer some “guidelines for pastoral life.”

1. The Situation and Role of the Church in China

From the very title of the Letter Pope Benedict XVI speaks of the Church in China (“the Catholic Church which is in China”) in which “the universal Church is present.”⁴⁶ He does not use the expressions “official Church” and “underground Church,” but speaks only of the “Church in China,” which he praises, from the letter’s outset, for her “faithfulness” and recalls her “grave sufferings.”⁴⁷ And even if “it is true

⁴⁴ *Letter*, n. 19.

⁴⁵ *Letter*, n. 20.

⁴⁶ *Letter*, no. 5.

⁴⁷ *Letter*, no. 2: “With intense joy I acknowledge your faithfulness to Christ the Lord and to the Church, a faithfulness that you have manifested “sometimes at the price of grave sufferings”, since “it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake” (*Phil* 1:29).” This text was in turn inspired on Benedict XVI, *Angelus* of 26 December 2006: “With special spiritual closeness, I also think of those Catholics who maintain their fidelity to the See of Peter without ceding to compromises, sometimes at the price of grave sufferings. The whole Church admires their example and prays that they will have the strength to persevere, knowing that

that in recent years the Church has enjoyed greater religious freedom than in the past"⁴⁸ "grave limitations remain" (the word "persecution" is also used).⁴⁹

Being part of "the vast and vibrant Asian continent," the Church in China is seen by Pope Benedict as the "target" of the new evangelization in the third millennium: "... just as during the first Christian millennium the Cross was planted in Europe and during the second in the American continent and in Africa, so during the third millennium a great harvest of faith will be reaped in the vast and vibrant Asian continent."⁵⁰

But it cannot be denied that the Church as a whole is affected by the modern phenomena of globalization as well as the tendency towards materialism and hedonism, which are spreading from the big cities to the entire country, and that make feel their presence in the Chinese present generation, particularly among the young. These contrasting phenomena, which, according to the Pope, should be evaluated with equal prudence and a positive apostolic spirit, "are accompanied by a growing interest in the spiritual and transcendent dimension of the human person, with a consequent interest in religion, particularly in Christianity."⁵¹

The Church in China is called to be a witness of Christ, to look forward with hope, and – in proclaiming the Gospel – to measure up to the new challenges that the Chinese People must face. The Pope quotes the Book of Revelation to express the Asian Churches' dismay at God's silence in the face of the persecutions to which they were exposed at the time. "It is a dismay that can clearly mirror our consternation in the face of the serious difficulties, misunderstandings and hostility that the Church also suffers today in various parts of the world."⁵² Today, as in the past, to proclaim the Gospel means to preach and bear witness to Jesus Christ, crucified and risen, the new Man, conqueror of sin and death. Such proclamation of the Gospel and witnessing to Christ demand fidelity, communion and the practice of the new commandment of love: "In your country [China] too, the proclamation of Christ crucified and risen will be possible to the extent that, with fidelity to the Gospel, in communion with the Successor of the Apostle Peter and with the universal Church, you are able to put

their tribulations are the fount of victory, even if at that moment they can seem a failure." *L'Osservatore Romano*, English edition, 3 January 2007, p. 12.

⁴⁸ *Letter*, no. 12.

⁴⁹ Cf. *Letter*, n. 8: "... in fact, 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."

⁵⁰ *Letter*, no. 3, par. 4.

⁵¹ *Letter*, n. 3. Cf. John Paul II, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Asia* (6 November 1999), 7: AAS 92 (2000), 456.

⁵² Cf. *Letter*, no. 3, par. 6.

into practice the signs of love and unity (“even as I have loved you, you also must love one another. By this all will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another ... so that the world may believe... (Jh 13:34-35; 17:21).”⁵³

What will be the role of the Church in China in reference to the State, civil authorities, politics? The bases to answer to this question are in the teachings of the Magisterium, particularly the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council teachings, which outline the ideal relationship between the Church and the Political community.⁵⁴ They could be summarized thus: The Church is not identified with any political community nor tied to any political system, and therefore she cannot and must not replace the State; neither does she have the mission to change the State’s structure or administration, nor even “to take upon herself the political battle to bring about the most just society possible.” “... Yet at the same time she cannot and must not remain on the sidelines in the fight for justice. She has to play her part through rational argument and she has to reawaken the spiritual energy without which justice, which always demands sacrifice, cannot prevail and prosper. A just society must be the achievement of politics, not of the Church. Yet the promotion of justice through efforts to bring about openness of mind and will to the demands of the common good is something which concerns the Church deeply.”⁵⁵ “The political community and the Church are autonomous and independent of each other in their own fields. They are both at the service of the personal and social vocation of the same individuals, though under different titles. Their service will be more efficient and beneficial to all if both institutions develop better cooperation according to the circumstances of place and time.”⁵⁶

Applying these principles to situation of the Church in China and concretely to the relations between the Church and the political community of said People’s Republic, Pope Benedict XVI writes: “The Catholic Church which is in China does not have a mission to change the structure or administration of the State; rather, her mission is to proclaim Christ to men and women, as the Saviour of the world, basing herself – in carrying out her proper apostolate – on the power of God.”⁵⁷ The Pope himself shows his willingness to engage in respectful and constructive dialogue as he expresses the hope ‘that concrete forms of communication and cooperation between

⁵³ Cf *Letter*, no. 3, par. 7.

⁵⁴ Cf. Second Vatican Council, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et Spes*, 76.

⁵⁵ Benedict XVI, Encyclical Letter *Deus Caritas Est* (25 December 2005), 28: AAS 98 (2006), 240. Cf. Second Vatican Council, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et Spes*, 76.

⁵⁶ Second Vatican Council, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World *Gaudium et Spes*, 76.

⁵⁷ *Letter*, no. 4, par. 5.

the Holy See and the People's Republic of China may soon be established. Friendship is nourished by contacts, by a sharing in the joy and sadness of different situations, by solidarity and mutual assistance.”⁵⁸ And he adds: “Today the Catholic Church seeks *no privilege* from China and its leaders, but solely the resumption of dialogue, in order to build a relationship based upon mutual respect and deeper understanding.”⁵⁹ “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.”⁶⁰

2. *Communion within the Church*

Taking as departure point Pope Benedict XVI's statement that “in the Catholic Church which is in China, the universal Church is present, the Church of Christ, which in the Creed we acknowledge to be *one, holy, catholic and apostolic*, that is to say, the universal community of the Lord's disciples,”⁶¹ we have also to acknowledge that such universality and catholicity cannot exist without communion both within the particular Churches found in China and with all the other particular Churches throughout the world in communion with the supreme authority of the Church.⁶² Indeed the domain of communion (*koinonia*) embodies and reveals the very essence of the mystery of the Church.

This basic ecclesiological teaching is brought up by Pope Benedict as he writes that “the communion of all the particular Churches in the one Catholic Church, and hence the ordered hierarchical communion of all the Bishops, successors of the Apostles, with the Successor of Peter, are a guarantee of the unity of the faith and life of all Catholics. It is therefore indispensable, for the unity of the Church in individual nations, that every Bishop should be in communion with the other Bishops, and that all should be in visible and concrete communion with the Pope.”⁶³

The profound unity which binds together the particular Churches found in China, and which likewise places them in intimate communion with all the other

⁵⁸ *Letter*, no.4, par.2.

⁵⁹ *Letter*, no.4, par.4.

⁶⁰ *Letter*, no.4, par.6.

⁶¹ *Letter*, no.5, par. 2.

⁶² “... In every particular Church, in order that she may be fully Church, there must be present the supreme authority of the Church, that is to say, the episcopal College together with its Head, the Roman Pontiff, and never apart from him. Therefore the ministry of the Successor of Peter belongs to the essence of every particular Church “from within”” (*Letter*, no. 5).

⁶³ *Letter*, no. 5, par. 4.

particular Churches throughout the world, has its roots not only in the same faith and in a common Baptism, but above all in the Eucharist and in the Episcopate.⁶⁴ Likewise, the unity of the episcopate, of which “the Roman Pontiff, as the Successor of Peter, is the perpetual and visible source and foundation”⁶⁵ continues down the centuries through the apostolic succession and is the foundation of the identity of the Church in every age with the Church built by Christ on Peter and on the other Apostles.⁶⁶ 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.⁶⁷

But how can communion ever exist in the human sphere without pardon and reconciliation? This is a key fact brought up by Benedict XVI in his Letter, referring to the recent history of the Catholic Church in China. It is indeed a well known fact that the Church in China has endured a lot of suffering, trial and persecution: many bishops, priests, religious and lay faithful have suffered and continue suffering on account of their catholic faith. The Pope is fully aware that, in this situation, pardon and reconciliation are preconditions for communion. That is why he encourages the faithful to take some urgent steps aimed at developing bonds of communion between the faithful and the Pastors of the Church in China. They are, among others, the purification of memory, the pardoning of wrongdoers, the forgetting of injustices suffered and the loving restoration to serenity of troubled hearts, all to be accomplished in the name of Jesus crucified and risen, can require moving beyond personal positions or viewpoints, born of painful or difficult experiences.⁶⁸ “My ardent desire,” he concludes, “is that you will respond to the interior promptings of the Holy Spirit by forgiving one another whatever needs to be forgiven, by drawing closer to one another, by accepting one another and by breaking down all barriers in order to overcome every possible cause of division.”⁶⁹

3. Ecclesial Communities and State Agencies

In dealing with the various causes of division in the Church community under the title “Ecclesial communities and State agencies” the Holy Father bluntly points

⁶⁴ *Lumen Gentium*, n. 26.

⁶⁵ *Lumen Gentium*, n. 27.

⁶⁶ Cf. Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on some aspects of the Church understood as Communion Communionis Notio* (28 May 1992), 11-14: AAS 85 (1993), 844-847.

⁶⁷ Cf. *Letter*, n.5.

⁶⁸ Cf. *Letter*, n.6.

⁶⁹ *Ibidem*.

out the role played by agencies, external to the Church, which have been imposed on the Catholic community. Recognition from these agencies is the criterion for declaring a community, a person, or a religious place legal and “official.” This gives rise to divisions, suspicions and denunciations within the Christian community itself.

History tells us that the Church in China has had a bitter experience since 1949, when the Chinese Communist Party won the civil war and established the “People’s Republic of China.” Then, with the establishment of the “Three-self Movement”⁷⁰ in 1950, Sino-Vatican relations were cut off; the foreign missionaries were expelled⁷¹; and many bishops, priests and lay were arrested in 1955. Once the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association (CCPA) was established in 1957, with its statutes openly opposed to some doctrinal tenets of the Church, no other choices were left for the Catholic clergy aside from these two difficult ones: either to follow the government’s line, namely, to join the Catholic Patriotic Association, or to go to prison or labor camp. Many were the Catholics who opted to remain obedient to the Holy See,⁷² thus refusing to join the Catholic Patriotic Association. As a consequence, divisions originated among the Catholics, serious wounds were inflicted to the Church, and unavoidable tensions between the Catholic Church in China and the State were born.⁷³

Those tensions within the Church in China and between the latter and the State are present in Pope Benedict’s Letter. “Indeed you are aware of the problems that she is seeking to overcome,” Pope Benedict writes referring to the Church, “within herself and in her relations with Chinese civil society, tensions, divisions and recriminations.”⁷⁴ Nothing surprising after all for “from the start the community of the disciples has known not only the joy of the Holy Spirit, the grace of truth and

⁷⁰ The so-called “Three-self Movement,” a self-supporting, self-governing, self-propagating church, in its manifesto essentially condemned the way in which the imperialists had used the church as an instrument of colonial aggression and it called on Chinese Catholics to cut off connections with imperialism so as to build up the “three autonomies.”

⁷¹ Many foreign missionaries were accused of being spies and counter-revolutionaries. No matter what “evidence” the government authorities brought up against them, their fate was already sealed. They were first imprisoned and then expelled.

⁷² These Catholics refused to go to open churches or to accept the sacraments administered by priest and bishops who joined patriotic association or cooperate with government or publicly deny the primacy of the Pope; they practiced their faith privately in homes and were served by itinerant priests; that is why they were so-called “underground.”

⁷³ “Still today, in fact, recognition from these entities is the criterion for declaring a community, a person or a religious place legal and therefore ‘official’. All this has caused division both among the clergy and among the lay faithful. It is a situation primarily dependent on factors external to the Church, but it has seriously conditioned her progress, giving rise also to suspicions, mutual accusations and recriminations, and it continues to be a weakness in the Church that causes concern” (*Letter*, n.7).

⁷⁴ *Letter*, n. 6, par. 2.

love, but also trials that are constituted above all by disagreements about the truths of faith, with the consequent wounds to communion... We should not be surprised that it still exists today..."⁷⁵ The history of the Church teaches us, then, that authentic communion is not expressed without arduous efforts at reconciliation, and that this journey cannot be accomplished overnight.⁷⁶

Referring specifically to the state agencies, Pope Benedict writes, "The claim of some agencies, 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..." Likewise, the declared purpose of the aforementioned entities to implement "the principles of independence and autonomy, self-management and democratic administration of the Church"⁷⁷ is incompatible with Catholic doctrine, which from the time of the ancient Creeds professes the Church to be "one, holy, catholic and apostolic."⁷⁸ Thus the Pope demands freedom from any external interferences for the Church on matters that are of her exclusive competence: "The preaching of the Gospel, and liturgical and charitable activities, as well as pastoral choices to be made, belong uniquely to the competence of the Bishops, and cannot be subject to any external interference." In every individual particular Church, it is the diocesan Bishop [and only he] the proper, ordinary and immediate Pastor;⁷⁹ at a national level, however, only a legitimate Episcopal Conference can formulate pastoral guidelines, valid for the entire Catholic community of the country concerned.⁸⁰

Here a concrete problem needs to be addressed: *Does recognition by the civil authorities –necessary in order to function publicly– compromise communion with the universal Church?* Pope Benedict answers in a straightforward manner by saying two things: first, that the safeguarding of the deposit of faith and of sacramental and hierarchical communion is not in itself opposed to dialogue with the authorities on those matters in the ecclesial community that fall within the civil sphere; second, that there would not seem to be any particular difficulties with acceptance of the recognition granted by civil authorities on condition that this does not entail the denial of unrenounceable principles of faith and of ecclesiastical communion. The problem, however, is that "in not a few particular instances, indeed almost always, in the procedure of recognition the intervention of agencies obliges the people involved

⁷⁵ Benedict XVI, General Audience (Wednesday 5 April 2006): *L'Osservatore Romano*, English edition, 12 April 2006, p. 11.

⁷⁶ Cf. *Letter*, n. 6, par. 6.

⁷⁷ Cf. *Statutes of the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association (CCPA)*, 2004, art. 3.

⁷⁸ Cf. *Letter*, n. 6, par. 6.

⁷⁹ Cf. John Paul II, Apostolic Letter *Apostolos Suos* (21 May 1998), 10: AAS 90 (1998), 648.

⁸⁰ Cf. *Code of Canon Law*, c. 447.

to adopt attitudes, make gestures and undertake commitments that are contrary to the dictates of their consciences as Catholics.”⁸¹

Consequently, a wise stand regarding the delicate issue of the relations to be maintained with the agencies of the State would be taking the invitation of the Second Vatican Council to follow the words and *modus operandi* of Jesus Christ. He, indeed, “did not wish to be a political Messiah who would dominate by force but preferred to call himself the Son of Man who came to serve, and ‘to give his life as a ransom for many’ (Mk 10:45). [...] He recognized civil authority and its rights when he ordered tribute to be paid to Caesar, but he gave clear warning that the greater rights of God must be respected: “Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God, the things that are God’s” (Mt 22:21).”⁸² Thus “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,’ as the Second Vatican Council underlined.”⁸³ It would be good, finally, if Bishops and priests were to take every possible step to avoid giving rise to situations of scandal, seizing opportunities to form the consciences of the faithful, with particular attention to the weakest: all this should be lived out in communion and in fraternal understanding, avoiding judgments and mutual condemnations. Since clandestine condition is not a normal feature of the Church’s life, having recourse to it by pastors and faithful only to resist interference from State agencies, “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.”⁸⁴

4. *The Situation of Episcopate*

Speaking of the situation of the Episcopate in China, after pointing out the curious fact that all the Bishops of the Catholic Church in China are sons of the Chinese People, Pope Benedict makes a very important statement, namely, that the Catholic Church of China “has never been deprived of legitimate Pastors, who have preserved the apostolic succession intact.”⁸⁵

⁸¹ *Letter*, n. 7. Even in such circumstances of external pressure, the Christian community is urged to refrain from judgment and condemnation of another person’s actions. Rather every case must be pondered individually, taking into account the circumstances. Cf. Peter Barry, M.M. “A Commentary on the Letter of Pope Benedict XVI to the Catholics of China,” *Tripod*, Vol. 27, No. 146 (Autumn 2007).

⁸² *Letter*, n. 7, par. 2.

⁸³ *Letter*, n.7, par. 5.

⁸⁴ *Ibidem*. Cf. *Compendium of Pope Benedict XVI to Chinese Church*, n. 11 (May 23, 2009).

⁸⁵ *Letter*, n.8.

Having said that, the Pope distinguish three groups of Bishops, namely, (1) those who have received ordination in conformity with Catholic tradition, that is, in communion with the Bishop of Rome and at the hands of validly and legitimately ordained bishops; (2) those who having consented to receive episcopal ordination without the papal mandate, have later asked to be received into communion with the Successor of Peter and obtained it; and finally, (3) those who have been ordained without the Pontifical mandate and who have not asked for or have not yet obtained, the necessary legitimation.

In fact, most bishops have received ordination in conformity with Catholic tradition, that is, in communion with the Bishop of Rome, through episcopal ordination conferred upon them by other validly ordained Bishops; they have received, together with the sanctifying office, the offices of teaching and governing the people entrusted to them in their respective particular Churches, with a power that is conferred by God through the grace of the sacrament of Holy Orders. Some among them, however, “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.”⁸⁶ The Holy Father has words of praise and gratitude for this group of the Chinese episcopate, considering that many of them “have offered and continue to offer a shining testimony to their own communities and to the universal Church” and that furthermore “some of them have made the Church fruitful with the shedding of their blood.”⁸⁷

Parallel to this group, there is another (small) group of Pastors who, having consented to receive episcopal ordination without the papal mandate, have later asked to be received into communion with the Successor of Peter. The Pope, “taking into account their sincerity and the complexity of the situation, as well as obtaining the opinion of neighboring bishops, has granted them full and legitimate exercise of episcopal jurisdiction.” The problem is that many priests and faithful have not been fully informed that their Bishop has been legitimized, at times because the Bishops themselves who have been legitimized have failed to clearly make known that they are in full communion with the Successor of Peter. For the spiritual good of the

⁸⁶ *Letter*, n.8. The Holy See hopes that these legitimate Pastors may be recognized as such by government authorities.

⁸⁷ “Many members of the Chinese episcopate who have guided the Church in recent decades have offered and continue to offer a shining testimony to their own communities and to the universal Church. Once again, let a heartfelt hymn of praise and thanksgiving be sung to the “chief Shepherd” of the flock (1 Pet 5:4): in fact, 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” (*Letter*, n.8).

diocesan communities concerned, these Bishops are urged to provide “unequivocal and increasing signs of full communion with the Successor of Peter,” and to bring into the public domain at the earliest opportunity their legitimation, once it has occurred.

Finally, the Pope mentions a third group of Bishops – a very small number of them – “who have been ordained without the Papal mandate and who have not asked for or have not yet obtained the necessary legitimization.” Their canonical status is accurately described in the *Letter*: “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.”⁸⁸ The Pope’s longing in this regard is that one day the necessary conditions be established in China for these Pastors to enter into communion with the Successor of Peter and with the entire Catholic episcopate: their Episcopal ministry would be legitimized and they would enjoy their communion with the priests and the faithful who consider the Church in China part of the Catholic Church.⁸⁹

The existence of this third group of Bishops not in communion with the Church is the main reason for the Apostolic See not to recognize the present College of Catholic Bishops of China⁹⁰ as an Episcopal Conference: “The “clandestine” Bishops, those not recognized by the Government but in communion with the Pope, are not part of it; it includes Bishops who are still illegitimate, and it is governed by statutes that contain elements incompatible with Catholic doctrine.”⁹¹

5. The Appointment of Bishops

The appointment of Bishops is one of the most delicate current issues in the relations between the Holy See and the Chinese authorities.

For the civil authorities the appointment of Bishops matters because of the social implications the choice of the leaders in the local Catholic communities has; no wonder then that governmental authorities are attentive to the choice of those who will carry out the important role of leading and shepherding the local Catholic

⁸⁸ *Letter*, n. 8, par. 12.

⁸⁹ Cf. *Ibidem*.

⁹⁰ *China Catholic Bishops' College (CCBC)*.

⁹¹ *Letter*, n. 8, par. 14. Cf. Compendium of Pope Benedict XVI to Chinese Church, May, 23, 2009, n. 12. See also Peter Barry, M.M. “A Commentary on the Letter of Pope Benedict XVI to the Catholics of China,” *Tripod* Vol. 27, No. 146 (Autumn 2007). In http://www.hsstudyc.org.hk/en/remarks/en_err_20070704.html.

communities. For the Church, on the other hand, the appointment of Bishops is important because it touches the very heart of her life, inasmuch as the appointment of Bishops by the Pope is the guarantee of the unity of the Church and of hierarchical communion,⁹² apart from being a constitutive element of the full exercise of the right to religious freedom.⁹³

The appointment of bishops by the Pope is an exercise of his supreme spiritual authority and, henceforth, an action kept into the strictly religious sphere; it should not be seen as a political intervention of the Pope or as a meddling of him into the State's internal affairs, still less as an offense to the State's sovereignty. And being a constitutive element of the full exercise of the right to religious freedom, as it has just been said, the Holy See desires to be completely free to appoint Bishops. This is why, in the light of recent developments in China, she longs for the day 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 [...] of the new Bishops on the part of the civil authorities."⁹⁴

6. Sacraments and Governance of dioceses and parishes

Referring to some pastoral aspects of Church's life, in an attempt to offer some guidelines on the celebration of the Sacraments –especially the Eucharist– and on the administration of dioceses and parishes, the Pope makes some clear statements:

a) Regarding the celebration/reception of the Eucharist:

"It is licit to concelebrate with Bishops and with priests in communion with the Pope, even if they are (also) recognized by the civil authorities and maintain a relationship with entities desired by the State and extraneous to the structure of the Church, provided [...] that this recognition and relationship do not entail the denial of unrenounceable principles of the faith and of ecclesiastical communion." "The lay faithful too, who are animated by a sincere love for Christ and for the Church, must not hesitate to participate in the Eucharist celebrated by Bishops and by priests who are in full communion with the Successor of Peter and are recognized by the civil authorities. The same applies for all the other sacraments."⁹⁵

⁹² *Letter*, n.9, par. 1. A freely conferred Episcopal ordination without an apostolic mandate is severely sanctioned by the Code of Canon Law (c. 1382) for it "inflicts a painful wound upon ecclesial communion and constitutes a grave violation of canonical discipline."

⁹³ Cf. Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Declaration on Religious Liberty *Dignitatis Humanae*, 4.

⁹⁴ *Letter*, n.9, par. 3.

⁹⁵ *Letter*, n. 10, par. 4. Cf. Peter Barry, M.M. "A Commentary on the Letter of Pope Benedict XVI to the Catholics of China," *Tripod* Vol. 27, No. 146 (July 4, 2007). http://www.hsstudyc.org.hk/en/remarks/en_err_20070704.html.

What about concerning Bishops whose consecrations took place without the pontifical mandate yet respecting the Catholic rite of episcopal ordination? Pope Benedict XVI clarifies in his Letter that “the resulting problems must always be resolved in the light of the principles of Catholic doctrine. Their ordination is illegitimate but valid, just as priestly ordinations conferred by them are valid, and sacraments administered by such Bishops and priests are likewise valid. Therefore the faithful, taking this into account, where the Eucharistic celebration and the other sacraments are concerned, must, within the limits of the possible, seek Bishops and priests who are in communion with the Pope: nevertheless, where this cannot be achieved without grave inconvenience, they may, for the sake of their spiritual good, turn also to those who are not in communion with the Pope.”⁹⁶

Thus with regard to participation in the Mass and in the other sacraments in an officially registered church, the Holy Father distinguishes two cases. If the Bishop or the priest celebrant is in communion with the Pope, the faithful “should not hesitate” to receive the sacraments from him. If, on the contrary, the Bishop or priest celebrant is not in communion with the Pope, the faithful “may” receive communion and the other sacraments from him on two conditions: when they do not succeed in finding legitimate Pastors “without grave inconvenience to themselves,” and yet they feel the need of the sacraments for their own spiritual good. In the second case, the final decision will be taken by the individual Catholic, taking into serious consideration the possibility indicated by the Holy Father.⁹⁷

These quoted statements come as practical solutions or consequences of a two-fold reminder that previously the Pope had made of the canonical norm according to which every cleric must be incardinated in a particular Church or in an Institute of consecrated life and must exercise his own ministry in communion with the diocesan Bishop.⁹⁸ Also that concelebration “presupposes, as conditions, profession of the same faith and hierarchical communion with the Pope and with the universal Church.”⁹⁹

On the celebration Holy Mass, the Letter offers some answers to three specific questions, namely, (1) concerning the *place* where Mass is to be celebrated; (2) concerning the *number* of Masses which may be celebrated daily; and (3) concerning the *offering for the application of the Mass* for a determined intention. To the first

⁹⁶ Letter, n. 10, par. 6. *Compendium of Pope Benedict XVI to Chinese Church*, n. 14.

⁹⁷ *Compendium of Pope Benedict XVI to Chinese Church*, footnote 6.

⁹⁸ Letter, n. 10, par. 3. Cf. *The Code of Canon Law*, cc. 265-272.

⁹⁹ *Compendium of Pope Benedict XVI to Chinese Church*, n. 14.

question, canon 932 is to be followed¹⁰⁰; therefore, if necessary, priests may celebrate the Eucharist in the houses of the faithful. To the second, canon 905, § 2 has the answer.¹⁰¹ Finally, to the third, as to the offering for the application of the Mass for a determined intention, the Congregation for the Clergy laid down some rules in the decree “*Mos iugiter*” of 22 February 1991.¹⁰²

b) Regarding the Administration of Dioceses and Parishes:

Some guidelines are also given in the Letter regarding the administration of dioceses and parishes, a matter closely connected with the celebration and participation in the Sacraments. These guidelines are, as it could not be otherwise, in accordance with the provisions of the Code of Canon Law, and refer mainly to three particular points ordered to build up ecclesial communion: the exercise of pastoral ministry in the diocese of the incardination; the right use of the diocesan/parochial structures provided by canon law, and a good administration of the ecclesiastical temporal goods.

The basic principle is that every cleric must be incardinated in a particular Church or in an Institute of consecrated life and must exercise his own ministry in

¹⁰⁰ Canon 932, § 1 stipulates that “the Eucharistic celebration is to be carried out in a sacred place, unless in a particular case necessity requires otherwise; in which case the celebration must be in a fitting place.”

¹⁰¹ Canon 905, § 2: “If there is a scarcity of priests, the local Ordinary may allow priests, for a good reason, to celebrate twice on one day or even, if pastoral need requires it, three times on Sundays or holydays of obligation.”

¹⁰² Cf. AAS 83 [1991], 443-446. Among these rules, the following may be recalled:

Preamble: “(...) It is true that the faithful have always, especially in economically depressed regions, had the practice of giving the priest modest offerings, without requesting expressly that, for each of these offerings, one single Mass be celebrated according to a particular intention. In such cases it is licit to combine the various offerings in order to celebrate as many Masses as would correspond to the fixed diocesan stipend. The faithful are, of course, always free to combine their intentions and offerings for the celebration of a single Mass for these intentions.”

Art. 2 – § 1. In cases in which the people making the offering, have been previously and explicitly informed and have freely consented to combining their offerings with others in a single offering, their intentions can be satisfied with a single Mass celebrated according to a “collective” intention.

§ 2. In this case it is necessary that the day, place and time for the celebration of this Mass, which is not to be more than twice a week, be made public.”

Art. 3 – § 1. In cases described in art. 2, § 1, it is licit for the celebrant to keep only the amount of the offering established by the diocese (cf. Code of Canon Law, canon 950). § 2. Any amount exceeding this offering shall be transmitted to the Ordinary as specified in canon 951, § 1, who will provide for its destination according to the ends established by law (cf. Code of Canon Law, canon 946).” For a proper reflection on this entire delicate topic it is good to recall also the directives given by the Second Vatican Council in the decree *Presbyterorum Ordinis*: “Priests, just like bishops, are to use moneys acquired by them on the occasion of their exercise of some ecclesiastical office primarily for their own support and the fulfillment of the duties of their state. They should be willing to devote whatever is left over to the good of the Church or to works of charity” (n. 17). Mass stipends fall into this category. *Compendium of Pope Benedict XVI to Chinese Church*, Appendix II.

communion with the diocesan Bishop. Only for good reasons may a cleric exercise his ministry in another diocese, but always with the prior agreement of the two diocesan Bishops, that is, the Ordinary of the particular Church in which he is incardinated and the Ordinary of the particular Church for whose service he is destined.¹⁰³

Another important point is a call to all diocesan Bishops to communion as well as to make good use of all the instruments of communion and cooperation within the diocesan Catholic community: the diocesan curia, the presbyteral council, the college of consultors, the diocesan pastoral council and the diocesan finance council. "These agencies express communion, they favor the sharing of common responsibilities and are of great assistance to the Pastors, who can thus avail themselves of the fraternal cooperation of priests, consecrated persons and lay faithful"¹⁰⁴ "The same is true of the various councils that canon law provides for parishes: the parish pastoral council and the parish finance council."¹⁰⁵

Finally, a right administration of the ecclesiastical temporal goods is also fundamental in the good governance of dioceses and parishes: "Both for dioceses and for parishes, particular attention must be devoted to the Church's temporal goods, moveable and immovable, which must be legally registered in the civil sphere in the name of the diocese or parish and never in the name of individual persons (that is, the Bishop, parish priest or a group of the faithful). The traditional pastoral and missionary guideline that can be neatly summarized in the principle: *nihil sine Episcopo*, retains all its validity."¹⁰⁶

c) Regarding Circumscriptions and Ecclesiastical Provinces

The Holy See is prepared to address the entire question of the circumscriptions and ecclesiastical provinces in an open and constructive dialogue with the Chinese Episcopate and – where opportune and helpful – with governmental authorities.

The reason for this is explained in the Letter: "Numerous administrative changes have taken place in the civil sphere during the last fifty years. This has also involved various ecclesiastical circumscriptions, which have been eliminated or regrouped or have been modified in their territorial configuration on the basis of the civil administrative circumscriptions."¹⁰⁷

¹⁰³ Letter, n. 10, par. 3. Cf. *The Code of Canon Law*, cc. 265-272.

¹⁰⁴ Letter, n. 10, par. 7.

¹⁰⁵ Letter, n. 10, par. 8.

¹⁰⁶ Letter, n. 10, par. 9.

¹⁰⁷ Letter, n. 11.

d) Revocation of faculties and of pastoral directives

One of the star points of the Letter – that came as a surprise to many – is the revocation of faculties and of pastoral directives. The two provisions come briefly formulated in the *Conclusion*, as if they were mere natural consequences or practical applications of what has been said previously in the Letter. The truth is that, despite their brevity and unassuming formulation, the provisions are very important from a canonical point of view.

The reasons for the revocation are mainly three, namely: (1) the positive developments of the situation of the Church in China; (2) the increased opportunities and greater ease in communication; and (3) the request sent to Rome by various Bishops and priests.¹⁰⁸

“Let the same be applied,” the Letter continues, “to all directives of a pastoral nature, past and recent. The doctrinal principles that inspired them now find a new application in the directives contained herein.”¹⁰⁹

Can new faculties be requested? To whom? Both questions are answered in the first of the two *Appendices* of the *Compendium*. Yes, “whenever particular situations so require, the Diocesan Bishop or whoever is temporarily governing the diocese may ask for new and updated faculties from the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples. The Congregation shall examine the requests and, if necessary, submit them for the Holy Father’s consideration.”¹¹⁰

7. Priests, Religious, and Lay Faithful

Towards the end of the *Letter*, Benedict XVI writes some thoughts on Catholic communities, priests, consecrated persons and lay faithful in China, as well as on family and missionary vocation, in the light of past and present experiences.

a) Catholic communities

The Pope has first of all words of commendation for the Catholic communities living in China: “It is consoling,” he says, “to note how Catholic communities, bishops, priests, consecrated persons and lay faithful have kept their faith alive

¹⁰⁸ “Considering in the first place some positive developments of the situation of the Church in China, and in the second place the increased opportunities and greater ease in communication, and finally the requests sent to Rome by various Bishops and priests, I hereby revoke all the faculties previously granted in order to address particular pastoral necessities that emerged in truly difficult times” (*Letter*, n. 18).

¹⁰⁹ *Letter*, n. 18.

¹¹⁰ *Compendium*, Appendix I.

despite difficulties and persecutions, and maintained a profound awareness of being living members of the universal Church, in communion of faith with other Catholic communities throughout the world.”¹¹¹ Lamenting that they –especially the bishops and priests– “are not yet allowed to live and to express fully and visibly certain aspects of their belonging to the Church and their hierarchical communion with the Pope, since free contact with the Holy See and with other Catholic communities in various countries is ordinarily impeded;” and that “grave limitations remain that touch the heart of the faith” and suffocate pastoral activity, the Pope expresses words of hope for the future, taking as departure point the fact that “in recent years the Church has enjoyed greater religious freedom than in the past.”¹¹² He likewise renews his earnest wish that “in the course of a respectful and open dialogue between the Holy See and the Chinese Bishops on the one hand, and the governmental authorities on the other, the difficulties mentioned may be overcome and thus a fruitful understanding may be reached that will prove beneficial to the Catholic community and to social cohesion.”¹¹³

b) Priests

Fatherly and deep are the words devoted to priests in Pope Benedict's *Letter*.

In the first place, the Pope shows his predilection for them by articulating into words a special *reflection* and an *invitation*. The special reflection refers to the need priests have “to draw light and strength from the well-springs of priestly spirituality, which are God's love, the unconditional following of Christ, passion for proclamation of the Gospel, faithfulness to the Church and generous service of neighbor”¹¹⁴; this is particularly true in their situation in China where, the Pope recalls, priests in recent difficult situations have testified to an unfailing love for the Church even by the gift of their own lives for her and for Christ.¹¹⁵ The invitation is to “think of those places where the faithful are waiting anxiously for a priest and where for many years, feeling the lack of a priest, they have not ceased to pray for one to arrive.”

A second thought on priests addresses an important and painful issue: the *reconciliation* for those priests who forced by circumstances adopted positions “that cannot always be condoned from an ecclesial point of view and who, despite everything, want to return to full communion with the Church.” The solution, based

¹¹¹ *Letter*, n. 12, par. 1.

¹¹² *Letter*, n. 12, par. 2.

¹¹³ *Letter*, n. 12, par. 2.

¹¹⁴ *Letter*, n. 13, par. 1.

¹¹⁵ *Ibidem*. “How can I fail to recall, in this regard, as an encouragement for all, the shining examples of Bishops and priests who, in the difficult years of the recent past, have testified to an unfailing love for the Church, even by the gift of their own lives for her and for Christ?”

in the spirit of profound reconciliation to which John Paul II invited the Church in China,¹¹⁶ is an appeal to the Bishops who are in communion with the Successor of Peter, so that with a paternal spirit they may evaluate these questions case by case and give a just response to that desire, having recourse –if necessary– to the Apostolic See.¹¹⁷

A third and last point deals with the need for an adequate *ongoing formation of the clergy*, particularly of the young clergy who are increasingly subject to new pastoral challenges in the present-day Chinese society. The words of John Paul II on the nature, urgency and need of on-going formation for priests and religious¹¹⁸ have, have not lost their modern relevance: The ongoing formation of priests “is an *intrinsic requirement* of the gift and sacramental ministry received; and it proves necessary in every age. It is particularly urgent today, not only because of rapid changes in the social and cultural conditions of individuals and peoples among whom priestly ministry is exercised, but also because of that ‘new evangelization’ which constitutes the essential and pressing task of the Church at the end of the second millennium.”¹¹⁹

c) *Religious vocations:*

The fact that in recent times – the Pope uses the expression “during the past fifty years” – the Church in China has never lacked an abundant flowering of vocations to the priesthood and consecrated life is something for which we must thank the Lord. It is indeed a sign of vitality and a reason for hope. Moreover, in the course of the years, many indigenous religious congregations have emerged, which has resulted in a blessing for the local Church as they have shown “what an indispensable contribution women religious make to catechesis and to parish life in all its forms.”¹²⁰

Now, with those vocations and congregations the need has emerged also for a careful vocational discernment on the part of the Church leaders and for an in-depth education and instruction of aspirants to the priesthood and religious life. Formation for celibacy of candidates for the priesthood deserves particular mention: Celibacy is to be esteemed “as a precious gift from God and as an eminently eschatological sign

¹¹⁶ Cf. John Paul II, “Message to the Church which is in China on the Seventieth Anniversary of the Ordination in Rome of the First Group of Chinese Bishops and on the Fiftieth Anniversary of the Institution of the Ecclesiastical Hierarchy in China” *La Memoria Liturgica* (3 December 1996), 4: AAS 89 (1997), 256.

¹¹⁷ *Letter*, n. 13, par. 2.

¹¹⁸ Cf. Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Pastores Dabo Vobis* (25 March 1992), 70: AAS 84 (1992), 782.

¹¹⁹ *Letter*, n. 13, par. 3.

¹²⁰ *Letter*, n. 14, par. 1.

which bears witness to an undivided love for God and for his people, and configures the priest to Jesus Christ, Head and Bridegroom of the Church.”¹²¹

What is expected of the religious vocation in the present context of the Church in China? Pope Benedict XVI summarizes the answer in two words: *witnessing* and *evangelization*: “As for the religious vocation, in the present context of the Church in China it is necessary that its two dimensions be seen ever more clearly: namely, on the one hand, the witness of the charism of total consecration to Christ through the vows of chastity, poverty and obedience, and on the other hand, the response to the demand to proclaim the Gospel in the socio-historical circumstances of the country today.”¹²²

d) Lay Faithful and the Family:

Since the Pope's Letter is addressed also to the “Lay Faithful of the Catholic Church in the People's Republic of China” it is natural that it should likewise contain some words expressly addressed to this great sector of the Church. Indeed, to his “dear lay people” the Pope reminds of their calling to incarnate the Gospel in their 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.”¹²³ After all, they must remain the hope of the Church for the future! This demands from them an active participation in all areas of Church life, in communion with the Pastors.

And since the future of humanity passes by way of the family, the Pope considers it indispensable and urgent that lay people should promote family values and safeguard the needs of the family,¹²⁴ an institution that occupies a very important place in Asian cultures.¹²⁵ In the Chinese cultural context, these values are present “although there is no lack of forces that influence the family negatively in various ways.” This is why there is a concluding advice for the Church which is in China: to have “a keener and more urgent sense of her mission to proclaim to all people God's plan for marriage and the family, ensuring the full vitality of each.”¹²⁶

¹²¹ “This gift, in fact, in an outstanding way “expresses the priest's service to the Church in and with the Lord” [John Paul II, *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, 70: AAS 84 (1992), 782] and has a prophetic value for today's world” (Benedict XVI, *Letter*, n.14, par.3).

¹²² *Letter*, n.14, par. 4.

¹²³ *Letter*, n. 15, par.1.

¹²⁴ *Letter*, n. 15, par.2.

¹²⁵ Particular reference is made to John Paul II's Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Asia* (6 November 1999), 46: AAS 92 (2000), 521: “The family occupies a very important place in Asian cultures; and, as the Synod Fathers noted, family values like filial respect, love and care for the aged and the sick, love of children and harmony are held in high esteem in all Asian cultures and religious traditions.”

¹²⁶ Cf. *Letter*, n. 15, par. 3. Cf also John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris Consortio* (22 November 1981), 3: AAS 74 (1982), 84.

e) *Christian Initiation of Adults and Missionary Vocation*

Two more pastoral concerns are briefly mentioned in the Letter in relation to the Christian initiation of adults and the Missionary vocation of the Church in China.

As regards adults coming to the faith, Pastors are reminded of their obligation to devote particular care to Christian initiation of adults via a serious period of catechumenate, having into mind that evangelization is not just an intellectual communication but includes experience of life, purification and transformation of the whole of existence and a journey of communion.¹²⁷

As regards the missionary vocation that the Church has always been and everywhere, the Church in China is called also to proclaim and to bear witness to the Gospel as well as to “sense in her heart the missionary ardour of her Founder and Teacher”¹²⁸ Furthermore, paraphrasing the words of John Paul II, *it is now its turn!*¹²⁹ “Now it is your turn, Chinese disciples of the Lord, to be courageous apostles of that Kingdom.”¹³⁰

Conclusion

From the text of the Papal document two basic attitudes are clear: on the one hand, deep spiritual affection for all Catholics in China and cordial esteem for the Chinese people, and, on the other, an earnest appeal to the perennial principles of the Catholic tradition and the Second Vatican Council in the ecclesiological sphere. It is, therefore, a pressing invitation to charity, unity and truth.

The Holy Father recalls the “original plan” which Christ had for his Church and which he entrusted to the Apostles and their successors, the Bishops. In this light, he takes into consideration various problems of the Church in China which emerged during the past fifty years. From this “plan” he also draws inspiration and formulates guidelines to tackle and resolve, in a spirit of communion and truth, the said problems.¹³¹

¹²⁷ *Letter*, no. 16, par. 2. “You, Pastors, are called to devote particular care to their Christian initiation via an appropriate and serious period of catechumenate aimed at helping them and preparing them to lead the life of Jesus’ disciples” (n. 16, 1). [...] “Many adults have not always been sufficiently initiated into the complete truth of the Christian life (...). It therefore seems necessary and urgent to offer them a solid and thorough Christian formation, in the shape of a post-baptismal catechumenate” (n. 16, par. 3).

¹²⁸ *Letter*, n. 17, par. 1.

¹²⁹ Cf John Paul II, *Homily on the Mount of the Beatitudes* (Israel, 24 March 2000), 5: *L’Osservatore Romano*, English edition, 29 March 2000, p. 9.

¹³⁰ *Letter*, n.17, par. 3.

¹³¹ “Without claiming to deal with every detail of the complex matters well known to you”,

In his *Letter*, Benedict XVI declares himself fully available and open to a serene and constructive dialogue with the civic authorities in order to find a solution to the various problems concerning the Catholic community, and to reach the desired normalization of relations between the Holy See and the Government of the People's Republic of China, in the certainty that Catholics, by freely professing their faith and by giving generous witness of life, contribute also, as good citizens, to the good of the Chinese people.¹³²

While expressing great joy for the fidelity demonstrated by the faithful in China over the past fifty years, Benedict XVI reaffirms the inestimable value of their sufferings and of the persecution endured for the Gospel, and he directs to all an earnest appeal for unity and reconciliation. Since he is aware of the fact that full reconciliation "cannot be accomplished overnight", he recalls that this path "of reconciliation is supported by the example and the prayer of so many 'witnesses of faith' who have suffered and have forgiven, offering their lives for the future of the Catholic Church in China."¹³³

In dealing with some of the more urgent problems which emerge from the queries which have reached the Holy See from Bishops and priests, Benedict XVI offers guidance, as we have seen in this chapter, regarding the recognition of ecclesiastics of the clandestine community by the government authorities and he gives much prominence to the subject of the Chinese Episcopate, with particular reference to matters surrounding the appointment of Bishops. Of special significance are the pastoral directives which the Holy Father gives to the community, which emphasize in the first place the figure and mission of the Bishop in the diocesan community: "nothing without the Bishop." In addition, he provides guidance for Eucharistic concelebration and he encourages the creation of diocesan bodies laid down by canonical norms. He does not fail to give directions for the training of priests and family life.

As for the relationship of the Catholic community to the State, Benedict XVI in a serene and respectful way recalls Catholic doctrine, formulated anew by the Second Vatican Council. He then expresses the sincere hope that the dialogue

writes Benedict XVI to the Catholics of China, "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 wants from you" (n. 2). The Pope reiterates some fundamental principles of Catholic ecclesiology in order to clarify the more important problems, aware that the light shed by these principles will provide assistance in dealing with the various questions and the more concrete aspects of the life of the Catholic community.

¹³² Declaration on *Letter to Chinese Catholics*, June 30, 2007. In <http://zenit.org/article-200081=english>.

¹³³ *Letter*, n. 6.

between the Holy See and the Chinese government will make progress so as to be able to reach agreement on the appointment of Bishops, obtain the full exercise of the faith by Catholics as a result of respect for genuine religious freedom and arrive at the normalization of relations between the Holy See and the Beijing Government.

Finally, the Pope revokes all the earlier and more recent faculties and directives of a pastoral nature which had been granted by the Holy See to the Church in China. The changed circumstances of the overall situation of the Church in China and the greater possibilities of communication now enable Catholics to follow the general canonical norms and, where necessary, to have recourse to the Apostolic See.¹³⁴ ■



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¹³⁴ Pope Benedict XVI, *Explanatory Note on the Letter to Chinese Catholics*, 27 May 2007 <http://zenit.org/article-20010?l=english>.