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Message of Pope Francis to the Catholics of China and to the Universal Church

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"Eternal is his merciful love;
He is faithful from age to age"
(*Psalm* 100:5)

Dear brother bishops, priests, consecrated men and women and all the faithful of the Catholic Church in China, let us thank the Lord, for "eternal is his merciful love! He made us, we belong to him; we are his people, the sheep of his flock" (*Ps* 100:3).

At this moment, my heart echoes the words of exhortation addressed to you by my venerable predecessor in his Letter of 27 May 2007: "Catholic Church in China, you are a small flock present and active within the vastness of an immense people journeying through history. How stirring and encouraging these words of Jesus are for you: 'Fear not, little flock, for it is your Father's pleasure to give you the kingdom' (*Lk* 12:32)! … Therefore, 'let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven' (*Mt* 5:16)" (BENEDICT XVI, *Letter to Chinese Catholics*, 27 May 2007, 5).

1. Of late, many conflicting reports have circulated about the present and, in particular, the future of the Catholic communities in China. I am aware that this flurry of thoughts and opinions may have caused a certain confusion and prompted different reactions in the hearts of many. Some feel doubt and perplexity, while others sense themselves somehow abandoned by the Holy See and anxiously question the value of their sufferings endured out of fidelity to the Successor of Peter. In many others, there prevail positive expectations and reflections inspired by the hope of a more serene future for a fruitful witness to the faith in China.

This situation has become more acute, particularly with regard to the Provisional Agreement between the Holy See and the People's Republic of China, which, as you know, was signed in recent days in Beijing. At so significant a moment for the life of the Church, I want to assure you through this brief Message that you are daily present in my prayers, and to share with you my heartfelt feelings.

They are sentiments of thanksgiving to the Lord and of sincere admiration – which is the admiration of the entire Catholic Church – for the gift of your fidelity, your constancy amid trials, and your firm trust in God's providence, even when certain situations proved particularly adverse and difficult.

These painful experiences are part of the spiritual treasury of the Church in China and of all God's pilgrim people on earth. I assure you that the Lord, through the crucible of our trials, never fails to pour out his consolations upon us and to prepare us for an even greater joy. In the words of the Psalmist, we are more than certain that "those who are sowing in tears, will sing when they reap" (*Ps* 126[125]:5).

Let us continue to look, then, to the example of all those faithful laity and pastors who readily offered their "good witness" (cf. *1 Tim* 6:13) to the Gospel, even to the sacrifice of their own lives. They showed themselves true friends of God!

2. For my part, I have always looked upon China as a land of great opportunities and the Chinese people as the creators and guardians of an inestimable patrimony of culture and wisdom, refined by resisting adversity and embracing diversity, and which, not by chance, entered into contact from early times with the Christian message. As Father Matteo Ricci, S.J., perceptively noted in challenging us to the virtue of trust, "before entering into friendship, one must observe; after becoming friends, one must trust" (*De Amicitia*, 7).

I too am convinced that encounter can be authentic and fruitful only if it occurs through the practice of dialogue, which involves coming to know one another, to respect one another and to "walk together" for the sake of building a common future of sublime harmony.

This is the context in which to view the Provisional Agreement, which is the result of a lengthy and complex institutional dialogue between the Holy See and the Chinese authorities initiated by Saint John Paul II and continued by Pope Benedict XVI. Through this process, the Holy See has desired – and continues to desire – only to attain the Church's specific spiritual and pastoral aims, namely, to support and advance the preaching of the Gospel, and to reestablish and preserve the full and visible unity of the Catholic community in China.

With regard to the importance of this Agreement and its aims, I would like to share with you a few reflections and provide you with some input of a spiritual pastoral nature for the journey we are called to undertake in this new phase.

It is a journey that, as in its earlier stages, "requires time and presupposes the good will of both parties" (BENEDICT XVI, *Letter to Chinese Catholics*, 27 May 2007, 4). But for the Church, within and outside of China, this involves more than simply respecting human values. It is also a spiritual calling: to go out from herself to embrace "the joys and the hopes, the grief and anguish of the people of our time, especially those who are poor or afflicted" (SECOND VATICAN ECUMENICAL COUNCIL, Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*, 1) and the challenges of the present that God entrusts to us. It is thus an ecclesial summons to become pilgrims along the paths of history, trusting before all else in God and in his promises, as did Abraham and our fathers in the faith.

Called by God, Abraham obeyed by setting out for an unknown land that he was to receive as an inheritance, without knowing the path that lay ahead. Had Abraham demanded ideal social and political conditions before leaving his land, perhaps he would never have set out. Instead, he trusted in God and in response to God's word he left his home and its safety. It was not historical changes that made him put his trust in God; rather, it was his pure faith that brought about a change in history. For faith is "the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. Indeed, by faith our ancestors received [God's] approval" (*Heb* 11:1-2).

3. As the Successor of Peter, I want to confirm you in this faith (cf. *Lk* 22:32) – in the faith of Abraham, in the faith of the Virgin Mary, in the faith you have received –and to ask you to place your trust ever more firmly in the Lord of history and in the Church's discernment of his will. May all of us implore the gift of the Spirit to illumine our minds, warm our hearts and help us to understand where he would lead us, in order to overcome inevitable moments of bewilderment, and to find the strength to set out resolutely on the road ahead.

Precisely for the sake of supporting and promoting the preaching of the Gospel in China and reestablishing full and visible unity in the Church, it was essential, before all else, to deal with the issue of the appointment of bishops. Regrettably, as we know, the recent history of the Catholic Church in China has been marked by deep and painful tensions, hurts and divisions, centred especially on the figure of the bishop as the guardian of the authenticity of the faith and as guarantor of ecclesial communion.

When, in the past, it was presumed to determine the internal life of the Catholic communities, imposing direct control above and beyond the legitimate competence of the state, the phenomenon of clandestinity arose in the Church in China. This experience – it must be emphasized – is not a normal part of the life of the Church and "history shows that pastors and faithful have recourse to it only amid suffering, in the desire to maintain the integrity of their faith" (BENEDICT XVI, *Letter to Chinese Catholics*, 27 May 2007, 8).

I would have you know that, from the time I was entrusted with the Petrine ministry, I have experienced great consolation in knowing the heartfelt desire of Chinese Catholics to live their faith in full communion with the universal Church and with the Successor of Peter, who is "the perpetual and visible source and foundation of the unity both of the bishops and of the whole company of the faithful" (SECOND VATICAN ECUMENICAL COUNCIL, Dogmatic Constitution *Lumen Gentium*, 23). In these years, I have received numerous concrete signs and testimonies of that desire, including from bishops who have damaged communion in the Church as a result of weakness and errors, but also, and not infrequently, due to powerful and undue pressure from without.

Consequently, after carefully examining every individual personal situation, and listening to different points of view, I have devoted much time to reflection and prayer, seeking the true good of the Church in China. In the end, before the Lord and with serenity of judgment, in continuity with the direction set by my immediate predecessors, I have determined to grant reconciliation to the remaining seven "official" bishops ordained without papal mandate and, having lifted every relevant canonical sanction, to readmit them to full ecclesial communion. At the same time, I ask them to express with concrete and visible gestures their restored unity with the Apostolic See and with the Churches spread throughout the world, and to remain faithful despite any difficulties.

4. In the sixth year of my Pontificate, which I have placed from the beginning under the banner of God's merciful love, I now invite all Chinese Catholics to work towards reconciliation. May all be mindful, with renewed apostolic zeal, of the words of Saint Paul: "God… has reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation" (*2 Cor* 5:18).

Indeed, as I wrote at the conclusion of the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy, "no law or precept can prevent God from once more embracing the son who returns to him admitting that he has done wrong but intending to start his life anew. Remaining only at the level of the law is equivalent to thwarting faith and divine mercy… Even in the most complex cases, where there is a temptation to apply a justice derived from rules alone, we must believe in the power flowing from divine grace" (Apostolic Letter *Misericordia et Misera*, 20 November 2016, 11).

In this spirit, and in line with the decisions that have been made, we can initiate an unprecedented process that we hope will help to heal the wounds of the past, restore full communion among all Chinese Catholics, and lead to a phase of greater fraternal cooperation, in order to renew our commitment to the mission of proclaiming the Gospel. For the Church exists for the sake of bearing witness to Jesus Christ and to the forgiving and saving love of the Father.

5. The Provisional Agreement signed with the Chinese authorities, while limited to certain aspects of the Church's life and necessarily capable of improvement, can contribute – for its part – to writing this new chapter of the Catholic Church in China. For the first time, the Agreement sets out stable elements of cooperation between the state authorities and the Apostolic See, in the hope of providing the Catholic community with good shepherds.

In this context, the Holy See intends fully to play its own part. Yet an important part also falls to you, the bishops, priests, consecrated men and women, and lay faithful: to join in seeking good candidates capable of taking up in

the Church the demanding and important ministry of bishop. It is not a question of appointing functionaries to deal with religious issues, but of finding authentic shepherds according to the heart of Jesus, men committed to working generously in the service of God's people, especially the poor and the most vulnerable. Men who take seriously the Lord's words: "Whoever would become great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be the slave of all" (*Mk* 10:43-44).

In this regard, it seems clear that an Agreement is merely an instrument, and not of itself capable of resolving all existing problems. Indeed, it will prove ineffective and unproductive, unless it is accompanied by a deep commitment to renewing personal attitudes and ecclesial forms of conduct.

6. On the pastoral level, the Catholic community in China is called to be united, so as to overcome the divisions of the past that have caused, and continue to cause great suffering in the hearts of many pastors and faithful. All Christians, none excluded, must now offer gestures of reconciliation and communion. In this regard, let us keep in mind the admonition of Saint John of the Cross: "In the evening of life, we will be judged on love" (*Dichos*, 64).

On the civil and political level, Chinese Catholics must be good citizens, loving their homeland and serving their country with diligence and honesty, to the best of their ability. On the ethical level, they should be aware that many of their fellow citizens expect from them a greater commitment to the service of the common good and the harmonious growth of society as a whole. In particular, Catholics ought to make a prophetic and constructive contribution born of their faith in the kingdom of God. At times, this may also require of them the effort to offer a word of criticism, not out of sterile opposition, but for the sake of building a society that is more just, humane and respectful of the dignity of each person.

7. I now turn to you, my brother bishops, priests and consecrated persons who "serve the Lord with gladness" (*Ps* 100:2). Let us recognize one another as followers of Christ in the service of God's people. Let us make pastoral charity the compass for our ministry. Let us leave behind past conflicts and attempts to pursue our own interests, and care for the faithful, making our own their joys and their sufferings. Let us work humbly for reconciliation and unity. With energy and enthusiasm, let us take up the path of evangelization indicated by the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council.

To everyone, I say once more with great affection: "Let us be inspired to act by the example of all those priests, religious, and laity who devote themselves to proclamation and to serving others with great fidelity, often at the risk of their lives and certainly at the cost of their comfort. Their testimony reminds us that, more than bureaucrats and functionaries, the Church needs passionate missionaries, enthusiastic about sharing true life. The saints surprise us; they confound us, because by their lives they urge us to abandon a dull and dreary mediocrity" (Apostolic Exhortation *Gaudete et Exsultate*, 19 March 2018, 138).

I ask you wholeheartedly to beg for the grace not to hesitate when the Spirit calls us to take a step forward: "Let us ask for the apostolic courage to share the Gospel with others and to stop trying to make our Christian life a museum of memories. In every situation, may the Holy Spirit cause us to contemplate history in the light of the risen Jesus. In this way, the Church will not stand still, but constantly welcome the Lord's surprises" (*ibid.*, 139).

8. In this year, when the entire Church celebrates the Synod on Young People, I would like to say a special word to you, young Chinese Catholics, who enter the gates of the house of the Lord "giving thanks [and] with songs of praise" (*Ps* 100:4). I ask you to cooperate in building the future of your country with the talents and gifts that you have received, and with the youthfulness of your faith. I encourage you to bring, by your enthusiasm, the joy of the Gospel to everyone you meet.

Be ready to accept the sure guidance of the Holy Spirit, who shows today's world the path to reconciliation and peace. Let yourselves be surprised by the renewing power of grace, even when it may seem that the Lord is asking more of you than you think you can give. Do not be afraid to listen to his voice as he calls you to fraternity, encounter, capacity for dialogue and forgiveness, and a spirit of service, regardless of the painful experiences of the recent past and wounds not yet healed.

Open your hearts and minds to discern the merciful plan of God, who asks us to rise above personal prejudices and conflicts between groups and communities, in order to undertake a courageous fraternal journey in the light of an authentic culture of encounter.

Nowadays there is no lack of temptations: the pride born of worldly success, narrow-mindedness and absorption in material things, as if God did not exist. Go against the flow and stand firm in the Lord: “for he is good; eternal is his merciful love; he is faithful from age to age” (*Ps* 100:5).

9. Dear brothers and sisters of the universal Church, all of us are called to recognize as one of the signs of our times everything that is happening today in the life of the Church in China. We have an important duty: to accompany our brothers and sisters in China with fervent prayer and fraternal friendship. Indeed, they need to feel that in the journey that now lies ahead, they are not alone. They need to be accepted and supported as a vital part of the Church. “How good and pleasant it is, when brothers dwell together in unity!” (*Ps* 133:1).

Each local Catholic community in every part of the world should make an effort to appreciate and integrate the spiritual and cultural treasures proper to Chinese Catholics. The time has come to taste together the genuine fruits of the Gospel sown in the ancient “Middle Kingdom” and to raise to the Lord Jesus Christ a hymn of faith and thanksgiving, enriched by authentically Chinese notes.

10. I now turn with respect to the leaders of the People’s Republic of China and renew my invitation to continue, with trust, courage and farsightedness, the dialogue begun some time ago. I wish to assure them that the Holy See will continue to work sincerely for the growth of genuine friendship with the Chinese people.

The present contacts between the Holy See and the Chinese government are proving useful for overcoming past differences, even those of the more recent past, and for opening a new chapter of more serene and practical cooperation, in the shared conviction that “incomprehension [serves] the interests of neither the Chinese people nor the Catholic Church in China” (BENEDICT XVI, *Letter to Chinese Catholics*, 27 May 2007, 4).

In this way, China and the Apostolic See, called by history to an arduous yet exciting task, will be able to act more positively for the orderly and harmonious growth of the Catholic community in China. They will make efforts to promote the integral development of society by ensuring greater respect for the human person, also in the religious sphere, and will work concretely to protect the environment in which we live and to build a future of peace and fraternity between peoples.

In China, it is essential that, also on the local level, relations between the leaders of ecclesial communities and the civil authorities become more productive through frank dialogue and impartial listening, so as to overcome antagonism on both sides. A new style of straightforward daily cooperation needs to develop between local authorities and ecclesiastical authorities – bishops, priests and community elders – in order to ensure that pastoral activities take place in an orderly manner, in harmony with the legitimate expectations of the faithful and the decisions of competent authorities.

This will help make it clear that the Church in China is not oblivious to Chinese history, nor does she seek any privilege. Her aim in the dialogue with civil authorities is that of “building a relationship based on mutual respect and deeper understanding” (*ibid.*).

11. In the name of the whole Church, I beg the Lord for the gift of peace, and I invite all to join me in invoking the maternal protection of the Virgin Mary:

Mother of Heaven, hear the plea of your children as we humbly call upon your name!

Virgin of Hope, we entrust to you the journey of the faithful in the noble land of China. We ask you to present to the Lord of history the trials and tribulations, the petitions and the hopes of all those who pray to you, O Queen of Heaven!

Mother of the Church, we consecrate to you the present and the future of our families and our communities. Protect and sustain them in fraternal reconciliation and in service to the poor who bless your name, O Queen of Heaven!

Consolation of the Afflicted, we turn to you, for you are the refuge of all who weep amid their trials. Watch over your sons and daughters who praise your name; make them one in bringing the proclamation of the Gospel. Accompany their efforts to build a more fraternal world. Grant that they may bring the joy of forgiveness to all whom they meet, O Queen of Heaven!

Mary, Help of Christians, for China we implore days of blessing and of peace. Amen!

From the Vatican, 26 September 2018

FRANCIS