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## **Orientations for the Chinese Clergy, respecting their freedom of conscience**

The following is the article by the Editorial Director of the Dicastery for Communication, Andrea Tornielli, also published on Vatican News and in L'Osservatore Romano regarding the document "Orientations for the Chinese Clergy":

### **Orientations for the Chinese Clergy, respecting their freedom of conscience**

*The Pastoral Orientations of the Holy See for Bishops and priests facing the government's requests for civil registration: safeguarding Catholic doctrine and conscience.*

**ANDREA TORNIELLI**

The full respect of the freedom of conscience of each, closeness and understanding for the current situation of Catholic communities, suggestions for concrete operational decisions allowing the Chinese Clergy to register without breaking with the Catholic Church's beliefs regarding communion with the Successor of Peter: these are included in the Note of the Holy See on the Pastoral Orientations for Bishops and Priests in the People's Republic of China.

The document was born out of many questions put to the Vatican by the Chinese clergy. What is the appropriate behaviour when facing governmental pressure to register, according to what is established by law and political authorities? What to do with the dilemma of conscience presented by some problematic texts that they are often asked to subscribe to?

The Holy See's immediate response to these questions is the reiteration of a fundamental general principle: freedom of conscience must be respected, and therefore no one may be forced to take a step they do not wish to take.

The signing of the Provisional Agreement between the Holy See and the People's Republic of China regarding the appointment of Bishops in September 2018 represented a new beginning in Chinese-Vatican relations and led to the initial important result of the full communion of all Chinese bishops with the Pope.

However, not all issues were resolved: the Agreement represents only the first step of the process. Today, one of the difficulties concerns the request for all priests and bishops to register officially with the authorities, as required by Chinese law. Despite the commitment to finding a shared and acceptable solution, in many regions of the People's Republic of China, priests are asked to subscribe to texts which are incompatible with the doctrine of the Catholic Church, creating struggles of conscience, when they are asked to accept the principle of independence, autonomy and self-management of the Church in China.

Today's situation is a far cry from the 1950s, when an attempt took place to create a national Chinese Church, separate from Rome. Today, thanks to the Provisional Agreement, the authorities in Beijing recognize the special role of the Bishop of Rome in appointing candidates for the episcopate, and thus his authority as the Shepherd of the Universal Church. The Holy See continues to work so that every declaration required during the registration is in line not only with Chinese law, but also with the doctrine of the Catholic Church, and is, therefore, acceptable to bishops and priests.

Considering the peculiar situation of the Christian communities of the country, who await a permanent resolution of the issue, the Holy See suggests therefore a possible concrete way to allow a person in doubt, but wishing to register, to overcome his reservations.

It consists in a suggestion arising from the Letter to Chinese Catholics published in May 2007 by Pope Benedict XVI. In that text, the Pope recognized that "In not a few particular instances, however, indeed almost always, in the process of recognition the intervention of certain bodies obliges the people involved to adopt attitudes, make gestures and undertake commitments that are contrary to the dictates of their conscience as Catholics." He also added: "I understand, therefore, how in such varied conditions and circumstances it is difficult to determine the correct choice to be made. For this reason the Holy See, after restating the principles, leaves the decision to the individual Bishop who, having consulted his presbyterate, is better able to know the local situation, to weigh the concrete possibilities of choice and to evaluate the possible consequences within the diocesan community."

Twelve years ago, the Pope had already shown understanding and de facto authorized the single Bishops to make a decision, with the good of their respective communities as their primary concern.

Today the Holy See takes a further pastoral step in the process, in an objectively different context from the past. The recently published Pastoral Orientations suggest that the bishops ask for the inclusion of a sentence, upon registration, affirming that the independence, autonomy and self-management of the Church must be understood without undermining Catholic doctrine. That is, political independence, administrative autonomy, and pastoral self-management, which all local Churches in the world currently enjoy.

Should the written addition not be allowed, the Bishop or priest intending to register is given the opportunity to make this clarification at least orally, in the presence of a witness. They are also asked to immediately inform their Bishop of the registration and the circumstances in which it took place. Those who do not wish to sign up to these conditions should not face undue pressure to do so.

The document is clearly based on a realistic outlook on the current situation and the persisting difficulties, the intent to help those who are in doubt, always respecting each person's conscience, in the knowledge of the suffering they have endured, the will to contribute to the unity of Chinese Catholics and favour the public exercise of the Episcopal and priestly ministries for the good of the faithful. The clandestine condition, as Benedict XVI wrote in his Letter, "is not a normal feature of the Church's life".

Reading between the lines of this latest Note of the Holy See, we can see the supreme law of the *salus animarum*, the salvation of souls, and the commitment to cooperating for the unity of Chinese Catholic communities, through the eyes of the Gospel, showing closeness and understanding for what the Chinese

faithful have endured and continue to endure. On 26 September 2018, in his Message to Chinese Catholics, Pope Francis expressed “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.”

Finally, it must be clearly stated that there is no naivety in the Pastoral Orientations. The Holy See, as written in the Note, is aware of the limitations and the “intimidatory pressures” faced by many Chinese Catholics, but it wants to show that we can look beyond and walk forwards without compromising the fundamental principles of ecclesiastical communion. The Pope’s heartfelt concern allows these Pastoral Orientations to be founded on Christian hope, following the Spirit, pushing the Church towards this new chapter.

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