



SALA STAMPA DELLA SANTA SEDE
BOLLETTINO

HOLY SEE PRESS OFFICE BUREAU DE PRESSE DU SAINT-SIÈGE PRESSEAMT DES HEILIGEN STUHLS
OFICINA DE PRENSA DE LA SANTA SEDE SALA DE IMPRENSA DA SANTA SÉ
دار الصحافة التابعة للكرسى الرسولي BIURO PRASOWE STOLICY APOSTOLSKIE

N. 0219

Giovedì 14.04.2011

MESSAGE TO CHINESE CATHOLICS OF THE COMMISSION FOR THE CATHOLIC CHURCH IN CHINA

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On 11 – 13 April, the Fourth Plenary Meeting of the Commission, instituted by Pope Benedict XVI in 2007 to study the questions of major importance concerning the life of Church in China, took place in the Vatican. At the conclusion of the aforementioned Meeting, the Participants addressed the following Message to the Catholics in China:

• **MESSAGE TO CHINESE CATHOLICS**

1. "May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may abound in hope" (Rom 15:13).

From 11 to 13 April we met in the Vatican to study some questions of major importance regarding the life of the Catholic Church in China.

The meetings took place in a climate of serene and cordial fraternity and were enriched with contributions, the value of which derives both from the reflection and experience of the participants and from the information and testimonies which have reached here from China.

Moved by love for the Church in China, by sorrow for the trials you are undergoing and by the desire to encourage you, we deepened our knowledge of the ecclesial situation by means of a panoramic vision of the organization and life of the ecclesiastical circumscriptions in your country. We noted the general climate of disorientation and anxiety about the future, the sufferings of some circumscriptions deprived of Pastors, the internal divisions of others, the preoccupation of still others who do not have sufficient personnel and means to tackle the phenomena of growing urbanization and depopulation of rural areas.

From an examination of the information, there also emerged a living faith and an experience of the Church, capable of dialoguing in a fruitful way with the social realities of each territory. The joint action of Bishops, priests, deacons, consecrated persons and lay faithful come together to compose, in the majority of cases, a mosaic, in which the image of Christ and his many disciples is reflected. Many religious sisters, in a spirit of

abnegation and living, not infrequently, in real economic straits, spend themselves daily in their closeness to families, young people, the elderly and the sick. Various associations attend to works of charity and welfare, taking care of the needs of the poorest and of those who in these years have been affected by floods and earthquakes.

2. We encourage the Bishops, together with their priests, to conform themselves ever more closely to Christ the Good Shepherd, to ensure that their faithful do not lack education in the faith, to stimulate a just industriousness and to strive to build, wherever they are lacking and are necessary, new places of worship and education in the faith and, especially, to form mature Christian communities. We also invite Pastors to take care of the life of the faithful with renewed commitment and enthusiasm, especially in its essential elements of catechesis and liturgy. We exhort the same Pastors to teach priests, by their own example, to love, forgive and remain faithful. We also invite ecclesial communities to continue to proclaim the Gospel with ever more intense fervour, while we unite ourselves to their gratitude to God for the baptism of adults, which will be celebrated during the upcoming days of Easter.

3. We dwelt in particular on some difficulties which have recently emerged in your communities.

As far as the sad episode of the episcopal ordination in Chengde is concerned, the Holy See, on the basis of the information and testimonies it has so far received, while having no reason to consider it invalid, does regard it as gravely illegitimate, since it was conferred without the Papal mandate, and this also renders illegitimate the exercise of the ministry. We are also saddened because this took place after a series of consensual episcopal ordinations and because the consecrating Bishops were subjected to various constrictions. As the Holy Father wrote in his Letter of 2007: "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. For this reason the *Code of Canon Law* (cf. c. 1382) lays down grave sanctions both for the Bishop who freely confers episcopal ordination without an apostolic mandate and for the one who receives it: such an ordination in fact inflicts a painful wound upon ecclesial communion and constitutes a grave violation of canonical discipline. The Pope, when he issues the apostolic mandate for the ordination of a Bishop, exercises his supreme spiritual authority: this authority and this intervention remain within the strictly religious sphere. It is not, therefore, a question of a political authority, unduly asserting itself in the internal affairs of a State and offending against its sovereignty" (No. 9).

The external pressures and constrictions could mean that excommunication is not automatically incurred. However, there remains a grave wound, perpetrated on the ecclesial body. Every Bishop involved is therefore obliged to refer to the Holy See and find the means of explaining his position to the priests and faithful, renewing his profession of fidelity to the Supreme Pontiff, to help them to overcome their interior suffering and repair the external scandal caused. We are close to you in these difficult times. We invite priests, consecrated persons and lay faithful to understand the difficulties of their Bishops, to encourage them, to support them by their solidarity and prayer. What the Pope wrote in his Letter will certainly be a comfort to all: "I am aware of the grave difficulties which you have to address ... in order to remain faithful to Christ, to his Church and to the Successor of Peter. Reminding you that – as Saint Paul said (cf. *Rom 8:35-39*) – no difficulty can separate us from the love of Christ, I am confident that you will do everything possible, trusting in the Lord's grace, to safeguard unity and ecclesial communion even at the cost of great sacrifices" (No. 8).

4. With regard to the 8th National Assembly of Catholic Representatives, the words of the Holy Father, once again, are inspiring: "Considering 'Jesus' original plan,' it is clear that 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. [...] Likewise, the declared purpose of the aforementioned entities to implement 'the principles of independence and autonomy, self-management and democratic administration of the Church' is incompatible with Catholic doctrine" (No. 7).

5. The choice of Pastors for the governance of the numerous vacant dioceses is an urgent necessity, and, at the same time, a source of deep concern. The Commission strongly hopes that there will not be new wounds to

ecclesial communion, and asks the Lord for strength and courage for all of the persons involved. Concerning this, one should also bear in mind what Pope Benedict XVI has written: "The Holy See would desire to be completely free to appoint Bishops; therefore, considering the recent particular developments of the Church in China, I trust that 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 – concerning civil effects where necessary – of the new Bishops on the part of the civil authorities" (No. 9). We make these desires ours and we look with trepidation and fear to the future: we know that it is not entirely in our hands and we launch an appeal so that the problems do not grow and that the divisions are not deepened, at the expense of harmony and peace.

6. In examining the situation of the ecclesiastical circumscriptions, various difficulties regarding their boundaries have emerged. Concerning this, the necessity of taking note of the changed circumstances was recognised as well as the need of respecting the ecclesiastical norms and always keeping in mind what is written in the Papal Letter to the Catholics in China: "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. In this regard, I wish to confirm that 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" (No. 11).

7. Finally, we dwelt on the theme of formation of seminarians and female religious, inside and outside of China. We considered the difficulties that seminarians encounter both for their studies abroad and in their seminary life, while appreciating also their examples of courage and of patience. The necessity of using the latest and most efficacious means for the permanent formation of the clergy was also discussed. We have noted with pleasure that the Catholic communities in China organise within themselves initiatives for the purpose of formation. For all it is opportune to offer educational proposals which may develop in an integral way the human and Christian personality of the various involved.

8. We hope that sincere and respectful dialogue with the civil Authorities may help to overcome the difficulties of the present moment, so that the relations with the Catholic Church may also contribute to harmony in society.

9. We have learnt with joy the news that the diocese of Shanghai can start the beatification cause of Paul Xu Guangqi, which will be added to that of Father Matteo Ricci, S.J.

10. To overcome the difficult situations of each community, prayer will be of great help. Various initiatives can be organised, which will help to renew your communion of faith in Our Lord Jesus and of fidelity to the Pope, so that the unity among you may be ever more deepened and visible. At the same time we wish to assure you of our daily prayers, in particular for those who are confronted by every sort of grave difficulty, and for all the sick and suffering of your Nation.

11. In the gathering that took place at the end of the Plenary Meeting, His Holiness recognised the desire for unity with the See of Peter and with the Universal Church which the Chinese faithful never cease to manifest, notwithstanding being in the midst of many difficulties and afflictions. The faith of the Church, set forth in the Catechism of the Catholic Church and to be defended even at the price of sacrifice, is the foundation on which the Catholic communities in China should grow in unity and in communion.

The Holy Father then recalled the importance of formation, in particular spiritual formation, in order that the internal life of the Christian, educated by personal and liturgical prayer, may be able to confront the challenges of the current moment. Finally, entrusting the entire flock of the Chinese faithful to the intercession of Mary, Most Holy, Queen of China, he renewed the urgent invitation to all the Church to dedicate 24 May, liturgical memorial of the Blessed Virgin Mary, Help of Christians, to prayer for the Church in China.

[00556-02.02] [Original text: English]

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