

Compendium 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

The intent of this “Compendium” is to assist the reader in understanding the main points of the Holy Father’s Letter and to respond, by quoting the words of His Holiness, to the questions that are frequently raised by Catholics.

Introduction

In his Letter, the Holy Father repeatedly quotes the documents of Vatican II, especially Gaudium et Spes (GS), (the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the modern world), and Lumen Gentium (LG), (the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church). He also quotes from many writings of his predecessor, Pope John Paul II, as well as his own talks during the first three years of his Pontificate, plus some pronouncements from Vatican Congregations. The sources cited in 56 footnotes testify to an important fact: the Catholic Church in China is a member of the Universal Church both essentially and historically (especially in post-Vatican II Church history). All that is said about the Church of Jesus Christ may be applied to the Catholic Church in China.

Speaking about the layout of the Letter, the first and second parts are arranged clearly and analytically, making it easy for people to grasp its main points and the path the readers should follow. The First Part, “The Situation of the Church – Theological Aspects” establishes the theological foundations of the Letter. This is the traditional style of the Catholic Church. From the Epistles of St. Paul, through every Ecumenical Council, documents have been like this: first come God’s revelation and theological explanations, and then afterwards a link to ethical norms. These are the important responsibilities transmitted in the Second Part, “Guidelines for Pastoral

Life". No matter whether there are seven theological aspects or eight pastoral guidelines, all are addressed to the Church in China from the whole Church throughout the entire world, in order to normalize the irregularities of the Church situation in China and to help the Chinese ecclesial community to make the Risen Christ present to modern world (2.2 and 10.10).

After the text, there is a "Table of Contents," which groups the 20 numbered sections under different headings: nn. 1-2 contain a greeting and the purpose of the Letter; nn. 3-9 explain in detail 7 theological aspects of the situation of the Church; nn. 10-17 give 8 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. Before reading the text, reading these 20 headings first will enable one to make an intelligent guess at what the Letter says. This will certainly deepen one's comprehension of it.

Reading the letter with the heart of its author certainly enables one to understand it more thoroughly and deeply. What was in the Holy Father's heart when he wrote this Letter? We can reply with three pairs of descriptive phrases taken from the Letter: concern both for knowledge and feelings, the presence of both truth and love, and promoting both the Eucharist and the hierarchy. To restate it a little more clearly, the Letter is not only intelligent and reasonable, it is also an emotionally moving document. These are the true feelings of a pastor and a father.

Questions and Answers

1. To whom is the Letter addressed?

“To the Bishops, Priests, Consecrated Persons and Lay Faithful of the Catholic Church in the People’s Republic of China” (*Title of the Letter*).¹

2. What is the Purpose of the Letter?

It is to express that “You are present in my heart and in my daily prayer and how deep is the relationship of communion that unites us spiritually” (1.2) and to express his fraternal closeness as well as his admiration for the great sufferings undergone for the sake of Jesus Christ (2.1).

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 (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 (6), the function of national organizations (7), the appointment of Bishops and the exercise of their pastoral ministry (8 to 10), the celebration of the Sacraments (10) and also the recognition and circumscription of ecclesial provinces and dioceses (11).

It joyfully manifests the sincere gratitude for the faithfulness offered, in the past and in the present, by the Chinese Catholic Community (4.1).

It confirms the faith of the Chinese Catholics and favors their unity (4.1).

It expresses the Holy Father’s hope to engage in respectful and constructive dialogue with the Chinese authorities (4.3).

3. Into how many parts is the Letter divided?

The Letter is divided into two parts: the first is entitled “The Situation of the Church: Theological Aspects”; the second is entitled “Guidelines for pastoral life”.

¹ The Letter contains messages for the Chinese Government authorities (4.3) as well.

4. What is the current social situation in which the Church in China finds herself?

The pressure to attain the desired and necessary economic and social development and the search for modernity are accompanied by two different and contrasting phenomena, both of which should nonetheless be evaluated with equal prudence and a positive apostolic spirit. On the one hand, especially among the young, one can detect a growing interest in the spiritual and transcendent dimension of the human person, with a consequent interest in religion, particularly in Christianity. On the other hand, there are signs, in China too, of the tendency towards materialism and hedonism, which are spreading from the big cities to the entire country (3.3).

In China also the Church 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 (3.5).

5. What is the Holy Father's vision for a dialogue between the Holy See and the Chinese government?

The Holy Father, 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. For its part, the Holy See always remains open to negotiations, so necessary if the difficulties of the present time are to be overcome (4.3).

The Catholic Church seeks no privilege from China and its leaders, but solely to dialogue, in order to build a relationship based upon mutual respect and deeper understanding (4.4).

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 (4.4).

The Catholic Church which is in China does not have a mission to change the structure or administration of the State. 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 (4.6).

In the light of these unrenounceable principles, the solution to existing problems cannot be pursued via an ongoing conflict with the legitimate civil authorities; at the same time, though, compliance with those authorities is not acceptable when they interfere unduly in matters regarding the faith and discipline of the Church. 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 (4.7).

6. What are the other messages to the Chinese authorities that the Holy Father's Letter conveys?

The Holy Father trusts 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 (9.3).

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 (11).

The Holy Father renews his earnest wish (cf. section 4, paragraphs 2, 3, 4) 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 (12.2).

7. What does the Holy Father say to the Catholics who suffered for the faith in China?

The Holy Father deeply appreciates their witness. His appreciation flows through the whole Letter as follows:

“I wish, therefore, to convey to all of you the expression of my fraternal closeness. 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*)" (2.1).

"The word of God helps us, once again, to discover the mysterious and profound meaning of the Church's path in the world. In fact the subject of one of the most important visions of the Book of Revelation is [the] Lamb in the act of opening a scroll, previously closed with seven seals that no one had been able to break open. John is even shown in tears, for he finds no one worthy of opening the scroll or reading it (cf. *Rev 5:4*). History remains indecipherable, incomprehensible. No one can read it. Perhaps John's weeping before the mystery of a history so obscure expresses 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. These are trials that the Church does not of course deserve, just as Jesus himself did not deserve his torture. However, they reveal both the wickedness of man, when he abandons himself to the promptings of evil, and also the superior ordering of events on God's part" (3.6).

"As universal Pastor of the Church, I wish to manifest sincere gratitude to the Lord for the deeply-felt witness of faithfulness offered by the Chinese Catholic community in truly difficult circumstances. At the same time, I sense the urgent need, as my deep and compelling duty and as an expression of my paternal love, to confirm the faith of Chinese Catholics and favour their unity with the means proper to the Church" (4.1).

"Keep in mind, moreover, that your path of reconciliation is supported by the example and the prayer of so many 'witnesses of the faith' who have suffered and have forgiven, offering their lives for the future of the Catholic Church in China. Their very existence represents a permanent blessing for you in the presence of our Heavenly Father, and their memory will not fail to produce abundant fruit" (6.7).

"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" (8.5).

“We must thank the Lord for this constant presence, not without suffering, of Bishops who have received episcopal ordination in conformity with Catholic tradition, that is to say, in communion with the Bishop of Rome, Successor of Peter, and at the hands of validly and legitimately ordained Bishops in observance of the rite of the Catholic Church” (8.9).

“In the most difficult periods of the recent history of the Catholic Church in China, the lay faithful, both as individuals and families and as members of spiritual and apostolic movements, have shown total fidelity to the Gospel, even paying a personal price for their faithfulness to Christ. My dear lay people, 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: and you will accomplish this mission by living as honest citizens and by operating as active and responsible co-workers in spreading the word of God to those around you, in the country or in the city. You who in recent times have been courageous witnesses of the faith, must remain the hope of the Church for the future! This demands from you an ever more engaged participation in all areas of Church life, in communion with your respective Pastors” (15.1).

“At the conclusion of this Letter I pray that you, dear Pastors of the Catholic Church which is in China, priests, consecrated persons and lay faithful, may ‘rejoice, though now for a little while you may have to suffer various trials, so that the genuineness of your faith, more precious than gold which though perishable is tested by fire, may redound to praise and glory and honour at the revelation of Jesus Christ’ (1 *Pet* 1:6-7)” (20.1).

8. What are the Holy Father’s guidelines for 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, that is to say, the universal community of the Lord's disciples” (5.2).

“As you know, the profound unity which binds together the particular Churches found in China, and which likewise places them in intimate communion with all the other 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. Likewise, the unity of the episcopate, of which «the Roman Pontiff, as the Successor of Peter, is the perpetual and visible source and foundation», 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” (5.3).

“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” (5.4).

“The Apostles and their successors are therefore the custodians and authoritative witnesses of the deposit of truth consigned to the Church” (7.3).

9. How does the Holy Father deal with the tensions and divisions or the “painful situation of serious differences involving lay faithful and their pastors” ?

“*The domain of communion (koinonía)* embodies and reveals the very essence of the mystery of the Church” (6.1).

“These matters, which concern the very nature of the universal Church, have a particular significance for the Church which is in China. Indeed you are aware of the problems that she is seeking to overcome – within herself and in her relations with Chinese civil society – tensions, divisions and recriminations” (6.2).

“The history of the Church teaches us, then, that authentic communion is not expressed without arduous efforts at reconciliation. Indeed, 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, can require moving beyond personal positions or viewpoints, born of painful or difficult experiences. These are urgent steps that must 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” (6.4).²

² We can see that the Holy Father is talking about a spiritual reconciliation, which can and must take place now, even before a structural merger of official and unofficial Catholic communities takes place. As a matter of fact, the Holy Father seems to make a distinction between “a spiritual reconciliation” and “a structural merger”. He recognizes that the reconciliation is like a journey that “cannot be accomplished overnight” (6.6): however, he emphasizes that the steps to be taken on the way are necessary and urgent, and cannot therefore be postponed because - or on the pretext that - they are difficult since they require the overcoming of personal positions or views. Times and ways may vary according to local situations, but the commitment to reconciliation cannot be abandoned. This path of reconciliation, furthermore, cannot be limited to the spiritual realm of prayer alone but must also be expressed through practical steps of effective ecclesial communion (exchange of experiences, sharing of pastoral projects, common initiatives, etc.). Finally, it should not be forgotten that all without exception are invited to engage in these steps: Bishops, priests, religious and lay faithful. It is by means of practical steps that spiritual reconciliation, including visible reconciliation, will gradually occur, which will culminate one day in the complete structural unity

For this reason, Pope John Paul II, in a message sent to the Chinese Catholics at the approach of the Holy Year 2000, said: “In your preparation for the Great Jubilee, remember that in the biblical tradition this moment always entailed the obligation to forgive one another's debts, to make satisfaction for injustices committed, and to be reconciled with one's neighbour” (6.5).³

10. How does the Holy Father describe the State Agencies and “the Entities Imposed as Principal Determinants of the Life of the Catholic Community”?

“A careful analysis of the aforementioned painful situation of serious differences (cf. section 6 above), involving the lay faithful and their Pastors, highlights among the various causes the significant part played by entities that have been imposed as the principal determinants of the life of the Catholic community. 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” (7.1).

“Regarding the delicate issue of the relations to be maintained with the agencies of the State, 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*). He showed himself as the perfect Servant of God who ‘will not break a bruised reed or quench a smouldering wick’ (*Mt 12:20*). 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*)” (7.2).

“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

of every diocesan community around its one Bishop and of every diocesan community with each other and with the universal Church. In this context, it is licit and fitting to encourage clergy and lay faithful to make gestures of forgiveness and reconciliation in this direction.

³ The Papal Letter does not use the terms “official and unofficial Church”, nor “open and underground Church”, and ignores the wrong term “Patriotic Church,” which one sometimes still sees in the media today.

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” (7.5).

“Likewise, the declared purpose of the aforementioned entities to implement «the principles of independence and autonomy, self-management and democratic administration of the Church»⁴ is incompatible with Catholic doctrine, which from the time of the ancient Creeds professes the Church to be «one, holy, catholic and apostolic»” (7.6).

11. Does the process of reconciliation mean that one must now join the officially registered Catholic community?

“Not a few members of the Catholic community are asking whether recognition from the civil authorities – necessary in order to function publicly – somehow compromises communion with the universal Church. I am fully aware that this problem causes painful disquiet in the hearts of Pastors and faithful. In this regard I maintain, in the first place, that the requisite and courageous safeguarding of the deposit of faith and of sacramental and hierarchical communion is not of itself opposed to dialogue with the authorities concerning those aspects of the life of the ecclesial community that fall within the civil sphere. There would not 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. 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. 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

⁴ According to the Footnote n. 36 of the Papal Letter, such claim comes from the “Statutes of the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association (CCPA), 2004, article 3”.

In the light of “Jesus’ original plan” for the Church (7.5), the Holy Father indicates (7.6) some aspects of these entities which cannot be reconciled with Catholic doctrine, in particular their claim to place themselves above the Bishops and to guide the life of the ecclesial community, as well as their declared purpose of implementing “the principles of independence and autonomy, self-management and democratic administration of the Church” (art. 3 of the “Statutes of the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association [CCPA], 2004”). Hence, as to the relations to be maintained with these State entities, the Pope recommends Bishops and priests to do all possible to avoid giving rise to situations of scandal. At the same time, he invites them to grasp the opportunities to form the conscience of the faithful. This should be done safeguarding communion and fraternal understanding and avoiding judgments and mutual condemnations. With regard to this matter too, it should be borne in mind that every case should be evaluated individually, taking into account the real intentions of the person concerned and the circumstances (7.9).

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. It could be that the final decision does not obtain the consensus of all the priests and faithful. I express the hope, however, that it will be accepted, albeit with suffering, and that the unity of the diocesan community with its own Pastor will be maintained” (7.8).⁵

“It would be good, finally, if Bishops and priests, with truly pastoral hearts, 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 judgements and mutual condemnations. In this case too, it must be kept in mind, especially where there is little room for freedom, that in order to evaluate the morality of an act it is necessary to devote particular care to establishing the real intentions of the person concerned, in addition to the objective shortcoming. Every case, then, will have to be pondered individually, taking account of the circumstances” (7.9).

“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. For this reason the Holy See hopes that these legitimate Pastors may be recognized as such by governmental authorities for civil effects too – insofar as these are

⁵ With regard to the recognition by the civil Authorities - necessary in order to function publicly -, the Holy Father reaffirms some fundamental principles: “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” (8.10); civil recognition may be accepted “on condition that this does not entail the denial of unrenounceable principles of faith and of ecclesiastical communion” (7.8): “almost always”, however, the people involved are obliged “to adopt attitudes, make gestures and undertake commitments that are contrary to the dictates of their conscience as Catholics” (7.8); the Holy See leaves the decision to the individual Bishop who, having consulted his presbyterate, is better able to know the local situation and weigh up the consequences. Therefore, the Pope neither excludes the possibility of accepting or seeking government recognition nor encourages doing so: the ideal would be to abandon the clandestine condition but everything depends on the constraints imposed. Caution should be used and the final judgment belongs to the local Bishop, who has to consult his presbyterate (7.8). Naturally, the Bishop may always consult the Holy See, in order to seek assistance in the difficult task of evaluating the local situation and discerning the best course of action, but, in the end, the decision is left to him.

It is also opportune to recall that situations differ greatly from one zone to another, from one diocese to another (for example, as regards the degree of freedom of activity of the Church), and that even when the “objective” conditions are met (for example, the legitimacy of the Bishop), the maturation and conscience of individual Catholics must always be respected.

necessary – and that all the faithful may be able to express their faith freely in the social context in which they live” (8.10).

12. How does the Holy Father view the Chinese Episcopate as a whole?

“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. Consequently, we have witnessed a demeaning of the Petrine and episcopal ministries by virtue of a vision of the Church according to which the Supreme Pontiff, the Bishops and the priests risk becoming *de facto* persons without office and without power. Yet in fact, as stated earlier, the Petrine and episcopal ministries are essential and integral elements of Catholic doctrine on the sacramental structure of the Church” (8.2).

“Communion and unity – let me repeat (cf. section 5 above) – are essential and integral elements of the Catholic Church: therefore the proposal for a Church that is «independent» of the Holy See, in the religious sphere, is incompatible with Catholic doctrine” (8.3).

“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” (8.5).

“As in the rest of the world, in China too the Church is governed by Bishops who, through episcopal ordination conferred upon them by other validly ordained Bishops, 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. The offices of teaching and governing «however, by their very nature can be exercised only in hierarchical communion with the head and members of the college» of Bishops. In fact, as the Council went on to say, «a person is

made a member of the episcopal body in virtue of the sacramental consecration and by hierarchical communion with the head and members of the college»” (8.8).

“Currently, all the Bishops of the Catholic Church in China are sons of the Chinese People. Notwithstanding many grave difficulties, the Catholic Church in China, by a particular grace of the Holy Spirit, has never been deprived of the ministry of legitimate Pastors who have preserved the apostolic succession intact” (8.9).

“Some of them, 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. 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. For this reason 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” (8.10).

“Other Pastors, however, under the pressure of particular circumstances, 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. The Pope, considering the sincerity of their sentiments and the complexity of the situation, and taking into account the opinion of neighbouring Bishops, by virtue of his proper responsibility as universal Pastor of the Church, has granted them the full and legitimate exercise of episcopal jurisdiction (...). It is indispensable, for the spiritual good of the diocesan communities concerned, that legitimation (of the bishops), once it has occurred, is brought into the public domain at the earliest opportunity, and that the legitimized Bishops provide unequivocal and increasing signs of full communion with the Successor of Peter” (8.11).

“Finally, there are certain Bishops – a very small number of them – who have been ordained without the Pontifical mandate and who have not asked for or have not yet obtained, the necessary legitimation. 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” (8.12).

“The present College of Catholic Bishops of China cannot be recognized as an Episcopal Conference by the Apostolic See: 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” (8.14).

13. What is the Holy Father’s view about the nomination of Bishops in China?

“On the one hand, it is understandable that governmental authorities are attentive to the choice of those who will carry out the important role of leading and shepherding the local Catholic communities (...). On the other hand, 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” (9.1).

“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” (9.3).

“Whenever it proves impossible within a diocese to find suitable candidates to occupy the episcopal see, the cooperation of Bishops in neighbouring dioceses can help to identify suitable candidates” (9.4).

14. What guidelines does the Holy Father give regarding the celebration of the Mass and the administration of the other Sacraments?

Regarding the problem of concelebration of the Eucharist “I remind you that this presupposes, as conditions, profession of the same faith and hierarchical communion with the Pope and with the universal Church. Therefore it is licit to concelebrate with Bishops and with

priests who are in communion with the Pope, even if they are recognized by the civil authorities and maintain a relationship with entities desired by the State and extraneous to the structure of the Church, provided – as was said earlier (cf. section 7 above, paragraph 8) – that this recognition and this relationship do not entail the denial of unrenounceable principles of the faith and of ecclesiastical communion” (10.4).

“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” (10.5).

“Concerning Bishops whose consecrations took place without the pontifical mandate yet respecting the Catholic rite of episcopal ordination, the resulting problems must always be resolved in the light of the principles of Catholic doctrine. Their ordination – as I have already said (cf. section 8 above, paragraph 12) – 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” (10.6).⁶

15. What guidelines does the Holy Father give regarding the administration of dioceses and parishes?

“Faced with certain problems that have emerged in various diocesan communities during recent years, I feel it incumbent upon me to recall the canonical norm according to which every cleric must be incardinated in a particular Church or in an Institute of consecrated life and must

⁶ 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.

exercise his own ministry in 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” (10.3).

“Every diocesan Bishop is invited to make use of indispensable 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 favour 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” (10.7).

“The same is true of the various councils that canon law provides for parishes: the parish pastoral council and the parish finance council” (10.8).

“Both for dioceses and for parishes, particular attention must be devoted to the Church's temporal goods, moveable and immoveable, 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). Meanwhile, the traditional pastoral and missionary guideline that can be neatly summarized in the principle: “*nihil sine Episcopo*”, retains all its validity” (10.9).

16. What is the attitude of the Holy See regarding the delimitation of the borders of dioceses according to the new civil circumscriptions?

Regarding this question, “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” (11).

17. What does the Holy Father recommend to all Catholic communities in their various dioceses and parishes?

“It is consoling for me to note that, despite past and present difficulties, the Bishops, priests, consecrated persons and lay faithful have maintained a profound awareness of being living members of the universal Church, in communion of faith and life with all the Catholic communities throughout the world” (12.1).

“Members of Catholic communities in your country – especially Bishops, priests and consecrated persons – are unfortunately 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. It is true that in recent years the Church has enjoyed greater religious freedom than in the past. Nevertheless it cannot be denied that grave limitations remain that touch the heart of the faith and that, to a certain degree, suffocate pastoral activity. In this regard I renew my earnest wish (cf. section 4 above, paragraphs 2, 3, 4) 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” (12.2).

18. What does the Holy Father recommend regarding priests, especially young priests, in China?

“The current ecclesial and socio-political situation 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 neighbour” (13.1).

Young priests should follow 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 (13.1).

The Holy Father says: “My dear priests! You who bear ‘the burden of the day and the scorching heat’ (Mt 20:12), who have put your hand to the plough and do not look back (cf. Lk 9:62): 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” (13.2).

“Among you there are confrères who have had to deal with difficult times and situations, adopting 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. In the spirit of that profound reconciliation to which my venerable predecessor repeatedly invited the Church in China, I turn now 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” (13.2).

“In China too, as in the rest of the Church, the need for an adequate ongoing formation of the clergy is emerging” (13.3).

19. What does the Holy Father recommend regarding Priestly and Religious Vocations?

“During the last fifty years, the Church in China has never lacked an abundant flowering of vocations to the priesthood and to the consecrated life. For this we must thank the Lord” (14.1).

“The need therefore 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” (14.2).

“The formation for celibacy of candidates for the priesthood deserves particular mention” (14.3).

“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” (14.4).

20. What does the Holy Father recommend regarding lay people and the family?

The Holy Father appreciates that “in the most difficult periods of the recent history of the Catholic Church in China, the lay faithful, both as individuals and families and as members of spiritual and apostolic movements, have shown total fidelity to the Gospel, even paying a personal price for their faithfulness to Christ” (15.1).

“My dear lay people, 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: and you will accomplish this mission by living as honest citizens” (15.1).

“Since the future of humanity passes by way of the family, I consider it indispensable and urgent that lay people should promote family values and safeguard the needs of the family” (15.2).

21. What does the Holy Father recommend regarding the Christian Initiation of Adults?

As regards adults coming to the faith, “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” (16.1).

“Evangelization is never purely an intellectual communication, but rather includes experience of life, purification and transformation of the whole of existence, and a journey in communion” (16.2).

“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” (16.3).

22. What does the Holy Father recommend regarding the missionary vocation of the Church in China?

“The Church, always and everywhere missionary, is called to proclaim and to bear witness to the Gospel. The Church in China must also sense in her heart the missionary ardour of her Founder and Teacher” (17.1).

“Addressing young pilgrims on the Mount of the Beatitudes in the Holy Year 2000, Pope John Paul II said: «(...) For two-thousand years Christ's followers have carried out this mission. Now, at the dawn of the third millennium, *it is your turn*»” (17.2).

“Now it is your turn, Chinese disciples of the Lord, to be courageous apostles of that Kingdom. I am sure that your response will be most generous” (17.3).

23. How does the Holy Father conclude his Letter?

The Letter concludes with the revocation of faculties and other pastoral directives (18), an invitation to the entire Church to hold an annual day of prayer for the Church in China on May 24 (19), and some beautiful words of farewell (20).

“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.

Let the same be applied 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” (18.1-2).⁷

“Dear Pastors and all the faithful, 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 Lady, Help of Christians, who is venerated with great devotion at the Marian Shrine of Sheshan in Shanghai (19.1).

I would like that date to be kept by you as a day of prayer for the Church in China. I encourage you to celebrate it by renewing your communion of faith in Jesus our Lord and of faithfulness to the Pope, and by praying that the unity among you may become ever deeper and more visible (19.2).

On that same day, the Catholics of the whole world – in particular those who are of Chinese origin – will demonstrate their fraternal solidarity and solicitude for you, asking the Lord of history for the gift of perseverance in witness, in the certainty that your sufferings past and present for the Holy Name of Jesus and your intrepid loyalty to his Vicar on earth will be rewarded, even if at times everything can seem a failure” (19.3).

“May Mary Most Holy, Mother of the Church and Queen of China, who at the hour of the Cross patiently awaited the morning of the Resurrection in the silence of hope, accompany you with maternal solicitude and intercede for all of you, together with Saint Joseph and the countless Holy Martyrs of China.

I assure you of my constant prayers and, with affectionate remembrance of the elderly, the sick, the children and young people of your noble Nation, I bless you from my heart” (20.2-3).

⁷ See Appendix I and Appendix II of the “Compendium”.

APPENDIX I

On requesting new faculties

With regard to all the revoked faculties, 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.

APPENDIX II

On the celebration of Holy Mass

Concerning the place where Mass is to be celebrated, canon 932, § 1, of the *Code of Canon Law* 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*”. Therefore, if necessary, priests may celebrate the Eucharist in the houses of the faithful.

With regard to the number of Masses which may be celebrated daily, canon 905, § 2, of the *Code of Canon Law* stipulates that “*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*”. For exceptional cases a request may be sent to the Holy See.

Finally, 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 (AAS 83 [1991], 443-446). Among these, 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 (cfr 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 (cfr 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 fulfilment 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.