

Beijing & the Holy See -- Seeking the Common Ground Two Wounded Partners in Dialogue

Part 1 –

Why do we call them *wounded*? & How did the Rome-Beijing relation develop from confrontation to dialogue?

The Unequal Treaties (1842-1860) were for China the most humiliating events in its history. They caused wounds in the hearts of all Chinese which till now are not healed. The history of the Catholic Church in China was also full of drama. The drama of the Rite Controversy (18th Century) was partly caused by internal strife inside the church, but most painful and leaving unhealed wounds among Catholic leaders and faithful were the dramas of the Boxer Uprising (1900) and the events of the 1950's which culminated in the Cultural Revolution (1965-75). This dramatic history has over the years caused sharp confrontations and an unfriendly relationship between Rome and Beijing. Given this dramatic background we consider it a breakthrough that these two wounded partners – Beijing and the Holy See -- are now in dialogue *seeking the common ground*¹ instead of continuing the confrontation of the past.

Fundamental changes have taken place in both China and in the Catholic Church during the past 150 years. The Vatican II Council has changed the church. The Open Policy has changed China. As a result the Rome-Beijing dialogue has become possible. Both Rome and Beijing now declare themselves to be open to dialogue with all ideologies. This was not the case in the past. Changing the Catholic Church from a medieval church into a church open to dialogue with all ideologies was the fruit of a 150 year long, gradual and painful struggle and growth to a level of maturity needed for any entity to transform and open itself to the world. The same is true for the changes that happened in China. Some observers insist that the Chinese government never changed nor will ever change. That's why we explain at length how changes did happen in China almost parallel with the changes that happened in the Church².

¹ cfr Philip Wickery "Seeking the Common Ground", Orbis Books, Maryknoll pg 293 Notes, Introduction nr 5: The slogan *qiu tong cun yi* was first articulated by Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai at the Bandung Conference of non-aligned nations in 1955. "The Chinese delegation" Zhou told the delegates, 'has come to seek the common ground, not establish differences. Is there a basis among us for seeking the common ground? There is. It is that the majority of nations and peoples of Africa and Asia have in the modern age suffered from and even now are suffering from the bitterness and sufferings brought on by colonialism. From the common ground of eradicating the bitterness and suffering of colonialism, we can come to mutual understanding and respect, mutual sympathy and support, not mutual suspicion and fear or mutual exclusion and opposition.'" He went on to relate this same principle to the religious question, in part because he was addressing a number of leaders from Muslim countries: "The principle of freedom of religious believe is commonly acknowledged by modern nations. We Communists are atheists, but we respect people of religious believe. We hope that religious believers would also respect those who do not believe. China is a country in which there is freedom of religious belief. We not only have seven million Communist Party of China members, but tens of millions of Muslims and Buddhists, and millions of Protestants and Catholics. This Chinese delegation includes a faithful Muslim Imam. Since this situation does no harm to domestic unity in China, why should not religious believers and non-believers join together in the great family of nations from Africa and Asia? The era of religious disputes should be in the past, because we would not be among those who would benefit from such infighting." See, "Premier Zhou Enlai's Supplementary Remarks." Xiejin (May, 1955), p.14.

² The following historical data are taken from "Mij is alle macht gegeven" by Mark Heirman, Houtekiet Gooi en Sticht, Antwerpen – Baarn (2000), pgs 166-204.

The French Revolution shocked the church. Popes fought the new ideologies of that time. Since Vatican II the church dialogues with these ideologies.

The French Revolution ended medieval times for society and for the church. The Catholic Church was deeply wounded by it. Since then an avalanche of new ideologies spread in Europe. The popes were at a loss on how to deal with these ideologies. They were defensive and wanted to defend the traditional teaching of the church. Pope Pius IX published “Syllabus Errorum” [List of Errors – 1864] in which he condemned 82 errors of that time including rationalism, naturalism, socialism, communism, indifferentism, Free Masonry, separation of church and state, freedom of the press, religious freedom and other aspects of liberalism. Since more than a thousand years popes had been convinced that in order to protect the church and to freely spread the gospel the pope needed to have his own country. But on October 11, 1870 a large majority of the citizens of Rome voted in favor of annexing the Papal States to Italy. That was felt as a historic disaster. The pope convened Vatican Council I [Dec 8. 1869] in order to confront the crisis. The Council voted the dogma of the infallibility of the pope [Pastor Aeternus, July 18, 1870] to confirm the authority of the pope against the errors of the Reformation, the growing pretense of science and the Enlightenment. Later, Pope Pius X turned against social modernism, philosophical and theological modernism. In the decree *Lamentabili* and the encyclical *Pascendi* (both in 1907) he condemned 65 positions related to the nature of the church, to revelation, bible exegesis, sacraments, divinity of Christ.

But gradually the popes, under the guidance of the Spirit, also caught up with the signs of the times. Step by step the church changed and opened up to the world. Leo XIII [1878-1903] wrote the encyclical *Rerum Novarum* (on capital and labor) drawing the attention of the church to the problems of injustices in society. Until that time the Catholic Church was in fact generally considered as being limited to Europe. Benedict XV made it into a world church. In his mission-encyclical *Maximum illud* (1919) he pleaded for the creation of a local clergy and bishops in other continents. That was the emergence of local churches. As a result of this encyclical Pius XI ordained the first local bishops for China (1926), for Japan (1927), Vietnam and Ceylon (1933), Korea (1937), Uganda and Madagascar (1939). On Christmas 1944 Pope Pius XII speaking over the radio recognized for the first time democracy as an acceptable form of government and took a positive attitude towards the newly established United Nations (while before it had been critical of the existing “League of Nations”). In 1946 he established the local hierarchy in local churches of Asia and other continents. In a few years’ time he appointed more than 50 cardinals so that for the first time in history there were fewer Italian cardinals than foreigners. 25 years later – in 1978 -- a non-Italian pope (John Paul II) was elected pope. In this extraordinary evolution we see the church catching up with the time.

In 1963 Pope John XXIII wrote the encyclical *Pacem in Terris* which no longer condemned modern human rights and freedoms but formally recognized them and even hailed them as the foundation for world peace. Time was ripe to convene the Vatican II Council which became the historical turning point for the church. Its document *Gaudium et Spes* [Joy and Hope] confirmed that the church opened itself for dialogue with the world. The word “dialogue” appeared for the first time in an official church document when Pope Paul VI wrote “*Ecclesiam Suam*” precisely to promote dialogue. To prove his point the pope went to speak before the United Nations General Assembly (1965). He took initiatives towards ecumenical dialogue (1966 and 1967) and convened

the first Synod of Bishops (1967). The Catholic Church had changed fundamentally in its attitude to the world and to all different ideologies. It also set up structures – the Synod of bishops -- to promote dialogue inside the church.

The Unequal Treaties are to China what the French Revolution was to the Church

The Opium War and the Unequal Treaties (1842-1860) humiliated, shocked and wounded China deeply. It made China painfully aware of how corrupt and powerless the country was, exploited by Western colonialists. In the same way the French Revolution had shocked the church in Europe at its foundations. During the following century the popes were at a total loss searching for ways for the church to survive. The same happened to China. During the 100 years following upon the Unequal Treaties Chinese philosophers and politicians searched for ways to save China's existence as a people and to strengthen the state. Should they rely on their own culture or should they learn from the West [西学]? They faced the painful choice on how to combine their hatred for the imperialists from the West with their felt need to learn from these same imperialists; a painful choice that bothered China for generations. Feng Guifen [冯桂芬] and Li Hongzhang [李鸿章] searched for ways towards 'self-strengthening' of China relying still on Chinese traditional values yet stressing the need for Western ['barbarian'] Studies [西学]. Liang Qichao [梁启超] went much further. He wondered whether Confucius' Wang Dao [王道] was still worth at all to be kept in the New China. He called for creating a "new Chinese citizen", a fundamental change in China's identity, a change to the core of what it meant to be Chinese, so as to save China's existence as a people and state³. He even suggested that this would require a complete destruction of China's traditional value system. He invented the term "destructivism" [破坏主义]. Chen Duxiu [陈独秀], Lu Xun [鲁迅] and others followed in the same line. These ideas found finally their dramatic echo during the 1960's when Mao Zedong [毛泽东] – who was an enthused reader of Liang Qichao's writings -- launched the Cultural Revolution speaking of "destruction before construction" [先破后立]. Mao did only the first and failed in the second.

The Wuchang Uprising and the establishing of the Republic in 1911 did not bring liberation either as it was followed by the confusing period of the War Lords, the Long March (1934-35) and the bloody war against the Japanese (1931-1945). The establishing of the People's Republic (1949) was a moment of glory. The Chinese people found in Mao Zedong a leader who symbolized the pride of the whole nation after their victories over the enemies of the past. But that's where the contribution of Mao Zedong ended. Just as Pope Pius IX and his successors did not know how to deal with the new situation after the French Revolution, so also Mao was at a loss trying to build up his nation from destruction. During the following 25 years he launched one destructive movement after another leading the country into famine and disaster. Chinese people trusted that Mao would finally solve the problems of the nation and improve their livelihood. But that did not happen. China went through a destructive Cultural Revolution (1966-73). These were the most confusing 150 years of China's history.

The "Open Policy" was for China what Vatican II was for the Catholic Church.

Dialogue with Rome became possible as of then.

³ Data in this chapter are taken from: *Wealth and Power, China's Long March to the 21st century*, by Orville Schell and John Delury, 2013, Random House New York

When Deng Xiaoping [邓小平] took over the leadership of China after Mao's death, he was a well-known figure even though he had not been a great writer or philosopher. He was for China what Pope John XXIII was for the church who became pope after the long dramatic recovery in the church. He had the clear insight in what the church needed at that time. From that insight he made his historical decision to convene the Vatican II Council taking the whole church by surprise. In the same way quite unexpectedly and to the surprise of everybody in China and to the whole world, Deng Xiaoping cancelled two decades of Mao policy at the 3rd plenum of the 11th Chinese Communist Party Congress in 1978 when he declared: "*From this day forward we renounce class struggle as the central focus, and instead take up economic development as our central focus.*" Chinese farmers understood him right away when he made his famous "*white cat, black cat*" [白猫黑猫] statement.

True liberation happened after Deng Xiaoping promulgated this Open Policy [开放政策]. China joined the World Trade Organization and again surprised the world by paying a high price. It abandoned its basic Marxist policies in economy and politics which had been its priorities for decades. A remarkable change indeed! The Open Policy changed China economically and changed its relations of confrontation with many countries into a relation of cooperation and exchange. Since then China started to adjust to the international scene and the world has watched in amazement its fast growth economically, socially, politically. This success was enhanced when it organized the Olympic Games in 2008 and when that same year Chinese astronauts completed another successful space flight. China now rightfully claims high recognition even in the fields of science and technology. After a long, dramatic struggle and growth the "new China" was born: a different China from that of the Boxer Rebellion and of 1949, a truly liberated China. This "new China" declares itself to be ready to dialogue with all ideologies in the world. China has made drastic changes and big progress in the fields of economics and politics but it failed till now to apply the same in the field of religion. In other words the liberation introduced by Deng Xiaoping is historic but not yet complete.

China and the Catholic Church (identified by Chinese officials as "the Vatican") are the same in that both have fundamentally changed and adjusted themselves a lot to our time. They took important steps on the way of dialogue, but they both still have to prove much when it comes to realizing the dialogue which they promised. The signs of our time however show that historical dialogue between the two is now possible. In fact it is happening.

**Rome and Beijing already took remarkable initiatives towards dialogue
But both experienced that in their own camp not everybody agrees to dialogue.**

When we analyze the events that happened since the 1980's we discover that the popes have been pioneers in promoting dialogue, especially with China; and in a limited but clear way, China responded with positive signals to the gestures of Rome. But other events revealed that an important group of conservatives in the Chinese Communist Party blocked any attempt of China to further apply its Open Policy also in the field of religion and human rights. And Rome on the other hand discovered that not everybody in the church was ready to walk the way of dialogue.

In 1970, two years even before President Richard Nixon visited China, Pope Paul VI pleaded in a speech at FAO [UN Food and Agricultural Organization] to admit China as a member of FAO. It

is remarkable to note that this happened at a time when in China church persecution was going on during the Cultural Revolution. Pope John Paul II, although born in Poland and known as anti-communist, also demonstrated a remarkable will to dialogue with China. We quote only one example: at the occasion of the commemoration of the Fourth Centenary of Matteo Ricci's Mission in China [Oct. 1982] when speaking about China today he made it clear that he wanted to do everything possible to make dialogue succeed. He said: "*We hope to overcome all the obstacles and find an appropriate way and adequate structures to resume dialogue and keep it constantly open.*"⁴

China echoed these gestures by giving signs of appreciation for religion in China. As of 1985 Chinese bishops were allowed to respond positively to invitations from abroad to visit churches in Asia, Europe and USA. Communication between the Chinese Church and other local churches was allowed.

In 1985 Zhao Fushan, [赵复三] then vice-director of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, gave his historic speech at the Chinese People's Political Consultation Congress explaining that *it is wrong to say that religion is opium of the people*. The message implied that religion therefore did not have to be destroyed any more, as was the policy until then. This was yet another 180 degree U-turn from China's position during the Cultural Revolution. In 1988 Cardinal Jaime Sin was officially received by Zhao Ziyang [赵紫阳] in Beijing and in their conversation the possibility to normalize the Beijing-Vatican relations was explicitly mentioned.

On December 16, 2001 Pan Yue [潘岳] published an article in the Shen Zhen Special Zone Daily on "*Marxist view on religion must move along with the times*" [与时俱进]. It was commonly understood as being backed by higher authorities. Pan criticized the traditional philosophy on religion of the Chinese Communist Party as well as the persecution of religion during the Cultural Revolution. He admitted the positive role of religion in society in the field of morality and recommended reforms so as to found a new Religion-State relationship.

But these positive signals were met by negative, often violent aggressive moves of the conservative group in the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) revealing the Party's internal division. On June 4, 1989 the student manifestation for democracy which had started earlier under Hu Yaobang [胡耀邦] and was quietly supported by Zhao Ziyang, was violently crushed. That event shocked the world and silenced also for many years the hope to discuss any further rapprochement between China and Rome. Internal division inside China appeared also from the "*White Paper on Freedom of Religious Belief in China*" which was released by the Information Office of the State Council of the PRC on Oct 16, 1997. The paper spoke an aggressive language against religion, mainly against the missionaries. It repeated the slogan language of the Cultural Revolution and was seen as another sign that the conservatives were very influential in the CCP. The document was published shortly before Jiang Zemin [江泽民] left for his USA visit and was seen as an attempt by the conservatives to sabotage his visit. It was a setback for the president and confirmed the internal struggle.

⁴ E. Wurth MM, *Papal Documents Related to China 1937-2005*, pg 161

In 2000, in the presence of 4000 Chinese Catholics, Pope John-Paul II canonized 120 Chinese martyrs – 87 Chinese and 33 foreign missionaries -- on St Peter square in Rome on October 1, the National Day of the PRC. China reacted in an unusually fierce way. In the style of the Cultural Revolution Catholic martyrs were scolded with names as: *criminals, traitors, thieves, opium traffickers, rapists; ...all deserved to die because of their unforgivable crimes...*

The popes remained undisturbed by all this and even intensified the line of dialogue

The guidance of the Holy Spirit in the church becomes obvious by the fact that the popes – Paul VI, the so anti-communist Pope John Paul II and also Pope Benedict XVI – were able to face all these crises and yet, by their low-key response, avoid all confrontation that would close the doors to dialogue with China. To enter into confrontation was not an option for Rome.

In 2007 Pope Benedict XVI made two open calls for dialogue with China which dramatically intensified the line of dialogue. On Jan 19-20, 2007 Pope Benedict XVI called a meeting of the highest church officials of the Curia together with Chinese bishops of Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan to discuss relations with the church in China. This happened shortly after three illegal episcopal ordinations in China [in Kunming, Anhui, Xuzhou] had stunned the Universal Church in April, May and November 2006. Before the Rome meeting took place the media, especially in Hong Kong, predicted that the Vatican would probably react against the illegal ordinations and perhaps decide on punishments. But the opposite happened. The press release after the meeting stated:

“what emerged was the will to continue along the path of respectful and constructive dialogue with the governing authorities, in order to overcome the misunderstandings of the past. The hope was also expressed that a normalization of relations on all levels could be achieved so as to facilitate a peaceful and fruitful life of faith in the Church and to work together for the good of the Chinese people and for peace in the world”.

That same year, in his historical Pastoral Letter to the Catholic Church in China [June 30, 2007], Pope Benedict XVI used charitable words when addressing the Chinese faithful as well as civil authorities. He made it clear that there is only one church in China but pointed with regret to the drama of the internal division while showing understanding for both communities. The pope confirmed that he fully trusts the bishops and the decisions they take in conscience in order to face the often so controversial requests from civil authorities. In Nr 7 of the letter the Pope says:

“...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.

A historical dialogue took place in 2008-2009

The pope's letter yielded its fruit. In 2008-09 delegations went from Rome to Beijing and from Beijing to Rome to discuss the very thorny issue: the appointment of bishops. Both sides reached

agreements in principle on the appointment of ten candidates to be ordained in different dioceses with approval of both Rome and Beijing. Never, since 1949, had Rome and Beijing engaged in such a constructive dialogue. This was an important step towards the emergence of a truly Chinese Catholic Church in China. The media even reported that a written agreement on bishops appointments in the future had been drafted that would be signed by both sides. But it was never signed. The reason why it was not signed was never made known. China reacted with disappointment.

In December 2010 the government called together the 8th National Assembly [八大会] of the Committee of delegates of the Catholic Church. Several bishops refused to participate but were then forced to by the government. It upset Catholics in China and also the Vatican. At the same time the appointment of a candidate bishop for Chengde Diocese was pending. Many in the church in China were convinced that there was no obstacle for the proposed candidate to be appointed by the pope. But they were disappointed when Rome refused to appoint the candidate. This refusal was seen by many as a sign that also in Rome not everybody was on the same line of thought. Chinese authorities went ahead with the appointment and forced bishops to do the illegal ordination. It was the dramatic end of a historic dialogue and the beginning of other illegitimate ordinations by Beijing and even excommunications by Rome. That produced the situation which we knew before Pope Francis signed the agreement in September 2018.

This analysis of events signals to us that dialogue is going to be difficult. For a long time, for generations perhaps, dialogue will remain a difficult, challenging aspect of preaching the Good News in China. The church will have to live with this reality. Nevertheless, persevering in this dialogue is the condition for the emergence of a truly Catholic Chinese Particular Church. Even the events of Chengde and the “Badahui” [八大会] did not prevent Pope Francis later to follow the line drawn by Pope Benedict XVI: seek unity, through reconciliation and dialogue, also with the state.

The letter of Pope Benedict XVI continues to inspire us to dialogue

Evangelization always happens within a particular context: a country with its own culture, history, philosophy, economic and political system. The communist People’s Republic of China is the milieu in which the church of China wishes to rebuild itself and to preach the gospel. This implies that the church in China has to dialogue with the Chinese State and with the situation as we described it. Pope Benedict XVI clearly indicates the obstacles but he refers to the Lord Jesus who encouraged dialogue with the State saying “*Render therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s and to God the things that are God’s (Mat 22:21)*”. The pope also states that our faith does not prevent us from dialoguing with the State⁵. Chinese Catholics must learn to practice their faith within the existing system of China but requesting and insisting that the Catholic identity of our faith be fully respected; if not, there would be no freedom of religious belief for Catholics in China.

Pope Francis, the ideal guide of the church to persevere in dialogue

Finally, it was Pope Francis who, by signing the first ever agreement between the PRC and the Holy See got the dialogue formally started. Truly a breakthrough in the dialogue.

⁵Cfr Letter of the pope to the church in China, Nr 7.

Part 2

The Beijing-Rome Agreement of September 22, 2018

The pope is recognized as pope! That's a historical step forward

But this is not reflected in the bad news that comes from China

A new interpretation of 'independence'? OK. But it's a two-edged sword

After 60 years of free discussions Pope Francis invites us to follow him in dialogue with China

Ever since the PRC in 1958 appointed and ordained 2 bishops without appointment by Pope Pius XII the Catholic Church in China has been divided on whether to dialogue with the Chinese government or to enter into confrontation. During sixty years experts expressed their very different viewpoints on the issue that divided the church more and more internally. It was in fact the cause of the split between the "official" and "non-official" (underground) communities. But on September 22, 2018 after 4 years of painful negotiations with civil authorities the Holy See signed an agreement with the Chinese government on the appointment of bishops and on making the remaining 7 illegal bishops also legal, i.e. recognized by Rome. Internal division has harmed the church in China so much that Pope Francis decided that dialogue should from now on be the way of the church to deal with the government. The head of the Catholic Church spoke and decided on some issues on which he alone has the final say. Catholic faithful, after years of internal disagreements and in the spirit of unity with their shepherd are since then challenged to follow the pope's line of dialogue.

Very different reactions against the agreement appeared in the media, even among Catholics in Hong Kong and Taiwan: some fiercely criticizing, others expressing doubts, a large majority (also in China) supporting it fully. It is said – and we believe -- that also inside the Chinese Communist Party some members support but others disapprove the agreement signed by their government. But that does not appear in the media. Both Beijing and Rome, for reasons of their own, opted not to publish details of the agreement.

Based upon the limited information we dispose of we here make an attempt to formulate our understanding of the agreement. For Catholic faithful living in Taiwan and Hong Kong for example it is particularly challenging and difficult to follow the pope in his decision. Pope Francis in his letter which accompanied the agreement shows that he fully understands that. Their arguments call for attention and respect. Still, the pope signed the agreement. He did so after 60 years of open discussion and after 4 years of intense negotiations. What matters for Catholic faithful now is to unite and define how we will manage to follow the pope on the long, long pilgrimage of dialogue with the PRChina that still lies ahead. There is no shorter way. We did not obtain what we hoped for. How shall we support the pope as he continues to reach the final goal? Let us first try to understand better the agreement.

The agreement is historical and good for the Church

There are three reasons for this. First because for the first time in its history the People's Republic of China by signing an agreement with the Holy See (not with the Vatican) recognizes the pope as head of the Catholic Church. In the past Beijing recognized only the head of Vatican State. Second:

for the first time in 60 years all Catholic bishops in China are in unity with the Pope. All have now been appointed by the Pope. That is crucial for the unity of the church. It clarifies a sixty year old worry of the church. Thirdly: the agreement now offers the pope the opportunity to appoint a bishop in about 25 dioceses where there has been no bishop for many years. For the church these three points represent a reason for celebration.

**The agreement is not the big breakthrough which everybody expected.
It is very limited and this caused mistaken interpretations**

The agreement is very limited in time and in content. In time: both Beijing and Rome took no chance and wisely decided to re-evaluate the agreement after 2 or 3 years. If needed some aspect can then be adjusted. But it is mainly limited in content. It only discusses the appointment of bishops and the legalization of the 7 remaining illegal bishops. It does not even touch upon diplomatic relations. The fact that the Holy See was able to motivate China to sign this agreement with the Holy See without even touching upon diplomatic relations must be seen as an achievement by the Roman negotiating team and disappointing for China. But then Rome must have been disappointed also as it was unable to clarify the most crucial obstacle for improving the situation inside the Church, namely: the problem of the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association (CCPA). Both Rome and the PRC had hoped for more. Both have given in. That's how negotiations go: both win a bit, both lose a bit. But the Pope did not give in any essential aspect of faith.

The cause of the misunderstanding in church circles inside and outside China is the fact that for sixty years Catholics have lived with the annoying anomaly that in China the Patriotic Association (CCPA) wants to develop an "independent" (独立自主) Catholic Church which goes against the essence of the Catholic Church itself and is therefore totally unacceptable. No other country requests this but China wants it that way. When some Catholics heard of an agreement to be signed between Beijing and the Holy See, they spontaneously and quite understandably expected this agreement to be "finally *the* agreement" that would clear up this anomaly. But that did not happen and as a result many Catholics in Hong Kong were disappointed. The official "Chinese Bishops Conference" also could not yet be made legal and they too were disappointed.

The agreement teaches the Catholic faithful a lesson

In fact this teaches all Catholics in China and abroad a lesson: sixty years of arguing and discussing among us and in the media could not clarify the problem of the CCPA. Pope Francis and his team could not clear that either in 4 years of negotiations. For this to happen both partners of the dialogue must agree. We do not have that decision in our hands. We must continue to dialogue and explain to our partners in dialogue that an "independent Catholic Chinese Church" (独立自主) remains unacceptable to us. We must learn to consider this kind of dialogue as an integrated part of evangelization in China for the years to come...Dialogue itself is positive. It gives up nothing. It is creative and in the given circumstance, the strongest most efficient way towards achieving our final goal namely: obtaining the right of legal citizenship for authentic Catholic Faith in China. A most lofty cause, worth working for in patience and perseverance!

The merit of the pope reaching this agreement goes to all the Chinese Catholics

Too long we have focused our attention only on the internal division of the Catholic Church in China: the “underground” community is in confrontation with the government while the “official community” tries to accommodate so as to allow the Church to survive. But that internal division is only caused by disagreement on political matters not on faith. As far as faith is concerned both the “underground” and the “official” communities are united. They pray the same “Credo”. In every Mass they openly confess their unity with the Universal Church and with the Pope. Everybody in China, also the government, knows that all the Catholic faithful, priests and bishops are united in faith with Rome. Each of the two communities in its own way and within its own limitations makes clear its unity with Rome. Sixty years of history, even the Cultural Revolution has not been able to break that unity. Rome knows it, the government knows it. Without that testimony of sixty years the Chinese government would never have agreed to sign this agreement with the pope. The fact that the pope could sign an agreement at this time is due to the fact that all Chinese Catholics made their unity with Rome clear.

The church universal has largely ignored that aspect. Instead of focusing on the internal division – which of course remains an issue of grave concern – we should have celebrated the fact that the church in China in spite of the hardships which it has faced has remained united in faith with Rome. Pope Francis in his letter to the Catholic faithful of China shows that he is much aware of that. He admired their “*fidelity, constancy in adverse situations*”. He told them that he is very much “*aware of their doubts and sense of abandonment*” in difficult times. By saying this the pope shows that he does not distinguish between the ‘underground’ and the ‘official’ communities because both have their own problems.

The shepherd who goes in front of the whole Universal Church has spoken. We now follow him in dialogue and celebrate the unity in faith of the Church in China. We prepare for a “Long March” .

Bad news from China makes us worry

In Henan Province – and in more and more other regions – children below the age of 18 are not allowed to go to church. In some towns school authorities even went to the church on Sunday to note the names of the children who attend Mass. Does that not infringe on the rights of the parents to educate their children? Since two-three years there are more stories of crosses that are removed from church buildings that are suddenly declared illegal and then are destroyed. We wonder what is really meant by “sinicizing” all religions in China? Will this policy indeed – as is promised – respect each religion’s own liturgy and theology? And if so, why then should ‘unofficial’ bishops who wish to join the Bishops Conference, be obliged to agree on establishing an “independent church” which is against the theology and faith of the Catholic Church? This must still be clarified. We worry.

A new interpretation of “independent church” causes confusion

And now it seems that “independent church” does not really mean “independent” any more. For sixty years the CCPA has insisted on establishing an “independent Catholic Church” in China (独立自主办). For decades it caused controversy and division in the church.

In private contacts in Rome and in Beijing (I have of course no official function to negotiate) I suggested that changing just one character “du” “独“ (independent) into “zi” ”自“ (autonomous) might perhaps be a solution that could satisfy both sides. Establishing “an independent Chinese Catholic Church” (独立自主自办) would then become “establishing an autonomous” Chinese Catholic Church (自立自办) which would be in line with Catholic theology. Indeed Vatican II stressed the importance of each local church within the universal church. Each local church has its own cultural, social, religious and historical background. This way the French, Italian, USA and of course also Chinese local churches contribute from their own background to the richness of the universal church which is a community of many local churches with each its own face each its own autonomy, not independent from and still united with, the Universal Church. It is normal that this autonomy of local churches may occasionally cause a kind of tension with the center, which is Rome. That is in fact a healthy situation. Only if the relation tilts too much either to the center or to the periphery (to one or several local churches) only then would there be a problem. The pope is the bishop of the local church of Rome and the brother-bishop of all other bishops in each local church. But he is also the successor of Peter who received directly from Christ the special mission to be the head of the Universal Church. As such he is not like a “king” or a “president ” far above the other bishops. He is “the head” and in that capacity he has the authority to guide and preside over the council of all the bishops of the church. The partners in my conversation in Rome and also in Beijing even forwarded the idea to higher authorities and I know from the feedback received that it has been given attention on both sides. But apparently that too seemed to offer no solution. So we follow the decision which Pope Francis agreed with authorities in Beijing.

But suddenly we now learn about a new interpretation of the term “independence” which is now said to refer only to the political realm, not necessarily meaning “independent from the Holy See”. In other words the term “independent” does not really mean what it says. If we had known that earlier it could have avoided a lot of misunderstandings in the past sixty years....

A new phase in the dialogue: words are given a double meaning. A question of semantics.

This opens a new chapter in the dialogue between Rome and Beijing. For sixty years the underground bishops refused to join the CCPA because of their demand for an independent Catholic Church in China. After Pope’s Francis’ Agreement the priority issue is now that the underground bishops also join the “Bishops Conference” so that it can become legal (= recognized by Rome). The underground bishops obviously refuse if they have to give in to the CCPA’s demand for setting up an ‘independent Chinese Catholic Church’ because that is against our faith. But now Chinese civil authorities say that the word “independent” refers only to the political realm. Joining CCPA is no more a must. Bishops are free to join or not but new laws in China request bishops and priests to sign a paper by which they promise to obey to the government and also the CCPA which seeks to establish an “independent Chinese Church”. This is really not different from becoming a CCPA member but it is against Church teaching and also against their conscience. Yet if they refuse to sign a harsh punishment follows. How does Rome and the bishops in China handle this new situation? Has the big historical disagreement caused by the option for “independence” now become a question of semantics? Underground bishops and priests are confronted with a very

delicate decision in conscience. What is the answer of the Holy See to Beijing on this matter and what will be its advice to the bishops?

“Pastoral guidelines of the Holy See concerning the civil registration of clergy in China”^[1]

Rome sticks to its way of dialogue but stands with the bishops who cannot sign.

The Holy See is aware that, even after the new ‘official interpretation of independence’ problems remain for some of the underground bishops if they have to sign and promise obedience to the CCPA which, just as before, even after the signing of the Agreement continues to repeat its slogan of “**独立自主教会**“ (establish an independent church).

Rome reminds the Chinese bishops that “freedom of religious belief” is assured by the Constitution of the PRC. That motivates Rome to stick to its option for dialogue with the government and hopes that in time it will be possible to agree with civil authorities on a way to respect Catholic teaching as well as the conscience of the bishops involved. At the same time the Holy See demands from the government to show respect for the conscience of the bishops and priests and avoid to intimidate them. Stating this Rome signifies that it knows very well that intimidation of bishops is happening already in many places in China. While sending this message to the government the Holy See makes it clear to the bishops and priests that, in case some of them feel that even with the new interpretation of ‘independence’, they cannot in conscience agree to sign the document, the Holy See shows understanding and remains close to them. It quietly hints that bishops may consider to be flexible to sign even though this implies an ambiguous attitude, saying: “*Sign, but make it clear (to a witness and to your bishop) that in conscience you disagree*”. But bishops are assured that if any bishop considers it to be against his conscience to sign, Rome understands and backs him.

We are witnessing what Audrey Donnithorne wrote in 1967: words are given a double meaning

This situation reminds me of what Audrey G. Donnithorne [董育德]^[2] wrote as early as 1967 about the significance of words in China. She wrote in her book “China’s Economic System” and quoted it again in her recently published memoirs “China. In Life’s Foreground” referring especially to the distinction and confusion between official and underground Chinese Catholics:

“The Chinese have a sophisticated attitude to outward expression of opinion...words are regarded as symbolic counters, to be moved across the chessboard of life in order to produce the desired effect. This leads to reservations and subtleties of expression and actions which need to be interpreted within the framework of the Chinese environment and which a stranger might not understand. There commonly lacks a sense of obligation for words and beliefs, or words and actions, to correspond. While this phenomenon is present in other cultures, it is not normally so strong as in China. It has the result that outward compliance is easily obtained but that an individual’s or group’s ‘*public face*’ must not be taken as an indication of its ‘*private face*’. Thus, conformity

^[1] Vatican, June 28, 2019

^[2] Audrey G. Donnithorne was borne in Sichuan province China of British missionary parents and is an economist and writer who has held academic posts of University College London and the Australian National University, working mainly on the economy of China. In her long life she has been a sharp-eyed observer of a changing Asia and Western world; of China in the era of the war lords, the Guomindang and the war against Japan. She has also been an active Catholic laywoman helping the Catholics in China.

though easily won is apt to remain superficial...sabotage need be none the less effective for being done in silence. Indeed, the more contrary to central government orders that local cadres are acting, the more loudly they may give verbal support to those orders.^[3]”

We see the “guidelines” as the right answer to the situation but they are “a two-edged sword”

The guidelines show that the Holy See remains faithful to its agreement and the line of dialogue. Rome looks further to the future. Avoiding confrontation but sticking to dialogue is the only way to make progress on that road in the awareness that this road is long. For spreading the gospel in the PRChina, taking into account the past centuries of controversy and confrontation, walking that long road is worthwhile. Rome advises the bishops to avoid confrontation even while they are confronted with pressure. While insisting on following the road of dialogue Rome does not abandon the bishops who feel they cannot agree, in conscience, to walk the ambiguous road of saying one thing yet meaning something else.

We believe that Rome understands well that the option to adjust to this double meaning and sign the document is in fact a two edged sword (两刃之刀). On one side it allows the bishops (and Rome) to go around the endless discussion of the CCPA policy of establishing an “independent church” That in itself is an achievement and that’s the reason for Rome to live with it. But on the other hand, if the option would be accepted as a general line of policy to be followed in the future, it would introduce a double-standard way of living: saying one thing and meaning another. That would jeopardize even the gospel values and the main principles of Canon Law. Accepting this is to be excluded.

Is accepting this option then to be seen as a step in line with sinicisation? At least we observe that Rome and Beijing have already applied the same option in the 1980’s. Bp Dong Guangqing (Wuhan 董光清) – the first official bishop ordained without nomination of the pope (1958) -- applied to Rome to be legitimized in the mid-eighties and was then followed by other bishops who, secretly, followed him. The director of the National Religious Affairs Bureau, Mr Ren Wuzhi (任务之), warned all the bishops during a meeting that *this was not allowed. Those who had done so were requested to admit their mistake (认错)*. But more illegal bishops just continued, during the 1980’s and 1990’s to follow the example of Bp Dong Guangqing. None of them was ever punished by the government. Rome from its side studied each case individually and legitimized them one by one even though it was known that these bishops, while not being member of CCPA, they publicly avowed to cooperate with them. They had to. Several of them even occasionally repeated the slogan “establishing an independent church” (独立自主教会). Was that adaptation to the reality inside China (sinicisation)?

In any case the adaptation to the two-edged sword situation needs to be qualified, relativized, to make sure that living with a double standard does not become a common practice in the church

^[3]Cfr Audrey G. Donnithorne, China. In Life’s Foreground” pg 413, Australian Scholarly & cfr. Audrey G. Donnithorne, China’s Economic System, pg 508-509, Allen & Unwin 1976.

and undercuts its very gospel message. The phrasing of the document on the ‘guidelines’ makes clear that Rome is well aware of this.

Conclusion

From the point of view of Europe:
Faith invites us to join Pope Francis on his pilgrimage
Dialogue must be continued and increased
So as to complete the unfinished Agreement

Dialogue itself is entirely in line with the gospel message. Confrontation is non-productive and harmful to both sides. We need to “*seek the common ground*” in mutual respect also for religious belief as Chou En-lai suggested. Instead of losing ourselves in scolding our own church brothers and sisters or criticizing our partners in dialogue we should engage in creative planning for the future in order to clarify the existing doubts seeking agreement on what can at this point be agreed upon.

As Catholic faithful we understand that to walk the road of dialogue must be a pilgrimage in faith practiced within the Christian communities. Chinese faithful make their “exodus in faith” leaving their own closed community – be that “official” or “unofficial” – and, in biblical terms, visit the “promised land” (i.e. the other community) even if it were only to bring some flowers to the other church. Catholic faithful outside of China stop their practice of exclusively one-sided visits by either one-sidedly visiting the ‘official community’ or one-sidedly visiting the underground. All bishops are now recognized by the Pope, who are we that we would not recognize them? That kind of internal movement in faith would in fact be of the highest quality activities of church community building, a first step towards setting up truly Chinese – and indeed autonomous – but united Catholic local church. This pilgrimage in faith represents the most crucial aspect of dialogue. It happens inside the communities, inside the hearts of the faithful. It is crucial because without this *pilgrimage towards unity* all other aspects of dialogue will fail.

Outside the circle of the Catholic faith, joint academic research is a wide open field for dialogue. In the Catholic University of Louvain (Belgium) Verbiest Institute KULeuven initiated such academic exchange inviting scholars from China and other countries to exchange views on “Religion and the Rule of Law”. But there is much more; f.e. the field of ethics – Family Ethics, Environment Ethics, Business Ethics etc – which offers ample opportunities to exchange research on issues of common concern of all societies and countries worldwide and which can create a lot of mutual respect, trust and friendship.

As more dialogue is developed on the higher diplomatic level and parallel with it on the lower academic and pastoral levels, progress will be made in finding the common ground which we all seek. Hope will grow that what is now an ambiguous option and a two-edged sword which helps to cross a 60-year old controversy may also mature in a more clear mutual agreement in line with the commonly accepted principle of religious freedom and in true respect for the conscience of the partners both sides. And, who knows, perhaps one day there will be an agreement on an autonomous local Chinese Church. If so, then there would be no need for any ambiguous interpretation or double meaning of terms. We are dealing with an *unfinished agreement*.

Completing the *unfinished Agreement* will be the challenge of the two partners in dialogue – Beijing and Rome -- for the coming years. The day when they find the common ground the Rome-Beijing Agreement will culminate in an encounter which will assure clear citizenship for Catholic faith in China. Today that encounter may seem to be far away in a vague future. As Christians carrying our gospel we cannot afford to exclude this from our vision and hope. That motivates us to follow Pope Francis and his negotiating team.

Jeroom J. Heyndrickx csm

Verbiest Institute, Catholic University Leuven (Belgium)

August 19, 2019