

CHAPTER 4

Moving with the Times

You can be both a good Catholic and a dutiful citizen, declared Pope John Paul II, when he met representatives of the overseas Chinese communities in Manila in 1981. The Pope's message was that a good *Chinese* Catholic works loyally for the progress of the nation and observes the obligations of filial piety towards parents and family, as well as service to the country.

The church desired no special privileges from China, only freedom for its members to practise their faith. Admiring the greatness of China, John Paul II took the occasion to apologise on behalf of foreign missionaries who had not appreciated nor understood Chinese culture as the great Italian Jesuit missionary, Matteo Ricci, did centuries ago.

As a church leader in Poland who had lived under a harsh communist regime, John Paul II understood the long suffering of Catholics in similar situations.

In those long years you have undoubtedly lived through other experiences which are still unknown, and at times you will have wondered in your consciences what was the right thing for you to do. For those who have never had such experiences it is difficult to appreciate fully such situations.

He wanted them to know that ‘all through this period and up to the present day, I, and the universal Church with me, have been with you in thought, in prayer, in genuine brotherly love and in pastoral concern’.¹

But who were the good Catholics to whom the Pope’s well-meaning statements were addressed? On the ground, there is the officially approved ‘patriotic’ church that follows the constitution and cannot owe allegiance to any outsider ruling in the far-off Vatican. The patriots appoint their own bishops and carry out their own worship under a government that places the godless CCP above God. Opposing them is the underground church, comprising mostly of young and zealous members who risk life and limb to be loyal to the Pope. They are not afraid of questioning the legitimacy of the patriotic church.

Word had come from Rome for all Chinese Catholics – patriots and underground moles – to be more amicable to one another and to work toward a re-united church. The confrontational attitude of the underground members is disruptive and worrisome for Vatican officials.

The underground church flourished in the late 1970s when the Vatican granted a series of dispensations from canonical regulations concerning the celebration of the sacraments, training and the ordination of priests, and the nomination and ordination of bishops. As a result of the easing of restrictions, there was a rapid increase in the ordinations of priests and bishops who were poorly trained and lacked sufficient pastoral experience. Some of the newly ordained priests seemed to have more zeal in denunciation than in evangelisation. Here we see the emergence of a militant church that appeared to threaten the effort at dialogue and reconciliation. Its leaders, known as ‘little black priests’, were antagonistic towards the Patriotic Association to the extent of labelling it the work of the devil.² Denying the validity and effectiveness of the sacraments administered by the priests of the state-approved church, the ‘black priests’ ended up sowing discord and anger among the faithful. Scandalised and confused, many Catholics left the divided church.

The state-approved, or official, Catholic Church is independent of the Holy See because the Chinese Constitution stipulates that no foreign power can dominate any religion in China. Nonetheless, many Catholics and church leaders continued to pray for the Pope without any hindrance. Pictures of Pope John Paul II could be seen in many of the churches in China in the 1990s. After a meeting of the Bishops’ Conference in March

1. Pope John Paul II, *Address of His Holiness from John Paul II to the Chinese Catholic Communities in Asia*, Manila, no. 5.

2. Edmond Tang, ‘The Church into the 1990s’, in Tang and Wiest, *The Catholic Church in Modern China*, 33-4.

1989, these positions were adopted: The patriotic Church is to recognise the Pope as the head of the church and Catholics are allowed to pray for him. The Bishops' Conference is responsible for the running of the church, and not the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association. Married bishops are not allowed to be members of the Bishops' Conference nor of the Church Administrative Commission.³ The bishops thus upheld the traditional ecclesiology of the Roman Catholic Church. The Patriotic Association in different parts of China also adopted a more liberal and open attitude, as it too had to respond to the changing situation in the nation, which was experiencing a 'Christian fever'.⁴

In his effort to forge unity among the churches, Pope Benedict XVI issued a document in 2007 entitled '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'. This chapter highlights the important issues in this document concerning papal authority, the relation between local churches and the Holy See, and the appointment of bishops. While Benedict, an accomplished theologian, adopted a conciliatory tone towards the Chinese church, this document reflects his centrist ecclesiology, which has been normative for the church since he was the Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith from 1981 to 2005. Strong in his assertion of papal authority, Benedict's thoughtfulness and openness is revealed in this letter by his willingness to open dialogue with the Chinese authorities for the sake of unity in the church. Known widely as a conservative, this letter reveals that Benedict not only read the 'signs of the times', but 'moved with the times' when dealing with the complexity of China.

Letter of Pope Benedict XVI
(2007)

One of the main goals of Pope Benedict's papacy was reconciliation with the church in China. This is obvious in his letter of 27 May 2007, addressed to the bishops, priests, religious and laity in China. In this letter, Benedict took a conciliatory attitude towards the official church while emphasising the importance of communion with the Holy See. While he strongly upheld the importance of the Petrine Office, Benedict was also sympathetic to the plight and dilemma of Chinese Catholics. Aware of the widespread persecution of Christians in China and the misunderstanding and hostility of the authorities towards the church,

3. Ibid., 37.

4. Ibid., 40.

Benedict expressed his admiration for the Chinese faithful, who were shining examples of Christian witnessing. As supreme pontiff, his main desire was ‘to confirm the faith of Chinese Catholics and favour their unity with the means proper to the Church.’⁵

Gone were the days when the Holy See indiscriminately condemned communist nations; Benedict was now seeking friendship and cooperation with China. Nonetheless, the burden of history, past misunderstandings and conflicts weighed heavily on both the church and the Chinese government. Not seeking any privilege, Benedict told the Chinese authorities that he was keen to establish a relationship based on mutual respect and deeper understanding: ‘Let China rest assured that 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.’⁶

Benedict assured the Chinese authorities that the church by nature of its vocation is not identified with any political system. This means that the political sphere and the ecclesiastical sphere are independent of each other – both are called to serve the welfare of people in different ways and they should cooperate with each other. This assurance by Benedict is a far cry from the days when the church was identified closely with imperialist powers. He held that the church cannot replace the political order or the state. A just society can be established only through the efforts of the state, and the church can help in the promotion of justice and the common good. Catholics are taught to be good citizens and the state must respect their religious freedom. The state should not attempt to divide the church. Pope Benedict XVI wrote, ‘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.’⁷ The church in China is bound by a profound unity with the rest of the churches throughout the world as all Catholics share in one common Baptism, Eucharist and episcopate. The episcopate is united under the

5. Benedict XVI, *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*, https://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/letters/2007/documents/hf_ben-xvi_let_20070527_china.pdf, no. 4. Some material in this chapter appeared as an article in Ambrose Mong, ‘Pope Benedict XVI and the Church in China’, *International Journal for the Study of the Christian Church* (2019), ID: 1633229 DOI:10.1080/1474225X.2019.1633229.

6. Ibid.

7. Ibid., no. 5.

Roman Pontiff as successor of Peter, in apostolic succession. The Chinese church continues to be faithful to the teachings of the apostles handed down through the ages.

Ecclesiology of Joseph Ratzinger

Before Joseph Ratzinger became Pope Benedict XVI, an essential feature of his ecclesiology was the ontological and temporal priority of the universal church. As theologian and Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, Ratzinger's understanding of the church can be described as 'ecclesiology from above' as opposed to 'ecclesiology from below'.⁸ He asserted that the universal church has priority over the particular churches. In this section we examine Ratzinger's ecclesiology, which influenced directly how the Vatican dealt with the Chinese authorities regarding their attempt to divide the church by promoting an independent hierarchy.

Time and again, Ratzinger stressed that the origin of the church is not a human decision. The church is the fruit of the Holy Spirit that 'overcomes the Babylonian world spirit'. While the human 'will to power, symbolized in Babel' aims at domination, subjection and uniformity, and sows hatred and division, the Spirit of God is love because He brings about recognition, creates unity and accepts the 'otherness of the other'. Hence, the many languages become comprehensible.⁹ The image of Pentecost, found in the Acts of the Apostles, shows the harmonious relationship between plurality and unity. Ratzinger explains that in this sense, the Holy Spirit is opposed to the spirit of the world. The spirit of the world is one of domination, while that of the Holy Spirit is one of love.¹⁰ The church accepts many languages and cultures, and in faith, they understand and enrich one another; it exists in 'manifold and multiform particular Churches'. It is precisely in this way that the church is one. This means that initially there exists one universal church that speaks in all tongues – *ecclesia universalis*. This universal church later spreads to different localities, but these particular churches still remain the 'embodiments of the one and only Church': 'The temporal and ontological priority lies with the universal Church; a Church that was not catholic would not even have ecclesial reality.'¹¹

8. For a detailed study of these two terms, see Roger Haight, *Christian Community in History* (New York: Continuum, 2004), 1: 18-25, 56-66. The material in this section is taken from Ambrose Mong, *Are Non-Christian Saved? Joseph Ratzinger's Thoughts on Religious Pluralism* (London: Oneworld Publications, 2015), 48-9, 54-8.

9. Joseph Ratzinger, *Called to Communion* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1996), 43.

10. *Ibid.*

11. *Ibid.*, 44. Commenting on the 'universalist' model of the Church, Nichols writes,

In Acts, Luke presents the ‘path of the Gospel from the Jews to the Gentiles’. He depicts the fulfilment of the command of Jesus to be witnesses ‘to the ends of the earth’ (Acts 1:18). Ratzinger writes,

Paul’s arrival in Rome marks the goal of the path that began in Jerusalem; the universal – the catholic – Church has been realised, in continuance of the ancient chosen people and its history, and taking over the latter’s mission. Thus Rome, as a symbol for the world of all the nations, has a theological status in Acts; it cannot be separated from the Lucan idea of catholicity.¹²

Thus in Ratzinger’s ecclesiological vision, all roads lead to Rome.

Ecclesiology of Communion

Joseph Ratzinger teaches that the concept of communion lies ‘*at the heart of the Church’s self-understanding*’. This implies the union of each person with the Trinity and with the rest of humanity. Rooted in faith and begun as a reality in the church on earth, communion is ‘directed towards its eschatological fulfilment in the heavenly Church’.¹³ This concept of communion must be understood in the biblical sense; moreover, within in the biblical context, communion has theological, Christological, soteriological and ecclesiological characteristics.¹⁴

There is also this sacramental dimension as stated by St Paul: ‘The cup of blessing which we bless, is it not a communion in the blood of Christ? The bread which we break, is it not a communion in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body’ (1 Cor 10:16-17). Thus, the ecclesiology of communion forms the basis for Eucharistic ecclesiology. Ratzinger wrote,

‘Because the universal Church precedes the particular churches in the divine plan and gives them whatever they have, so Jesus Christ, in sending the apostles to the entire world, made them doctors of the whole Church before they had even begun to form particular churches.’ Aidan Nichols, O.P., *Rome and the Eastern Churches* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2010), 372.

12. Ibid., 45.

13. Joseph Ratzinger, ‘Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on Some Aspects of the Church Understood as Communion’, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_28051992_communionis-notio_en.html.

14. Joseph Ratzinger, ‘The Ecclesiology of Vatican II’, Conference of Cardinal Ratzinger at the opening of the Pastoral Congress of the Diocese of Aversa (Italy), <http://www.ewtn.com/library/curia/cdfecv2.htm>.

In the Eucharist, Christ, present in the bread and wine and giving Himself anew, builds the Church as His Body and through His Risen Body He unites us to the one and triune God and to each other. The Eucharist celebrated in different places is universal at the same time, because there is only one Christ and only a single body of Christ. The Eucharist comprehends the priestly service of 'repraesentatio Christi' as well as that network of service, the synthesis of unity and multiplicity which is expressed in the term 'communio'.¹⁵

Communion has two dimensions: the vertical, that is, communion with God, and the horizontal, that is, communion with one another. Christians must understand that communion is a gift from God given to us through the paschal mystery. Ecclesial communion is both invisible and visible. The invisible reality refers to our communion with the Father, through Christ, in the Holy Spirit. The visible reality is our communion with one another, as sharers in the divine nature, in the passion of Christ and in the same faith. In the church on earth, there is this close relationship between the invisible and visible aspects of communion. The link between these two dimensions of communion, invisible and visible, 'constitutes the Church as the *Sacrament* of salvation'. From this sacramentality, Ratzinger argues, the church is open to missionary and ecumenical work. It is sent out to the world to realise the mystery of communion that is essential to its nature: 'to gather together all people and all things into Christ; so as to be for all an "*inseparable sacrament of unity*".'¹⁶

Another important point that Ratzinger makes is the idea that the church is a communion of saints. This communion fosters unity among the members of the church as members of one body. The invisible element means that communion exists not only among those still living, but also among those who have died in Christ, in the hope of rising again. Ratzinger wrote:

there is a *mutual relationship* between the pilgrim Church on earth and the heavenly Church in the historical-redemptive mission. Hence the ecclesiological importance, not only of Christ's intercession on behalf of his members, but also of that of the saints and, in an eminent fashion, of the Blessed

15. Ibid.

16. Ratzinger, 'Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on Some Aspects of the Church Understood as Communion', nos. 3-4.

Virgin Mary's. *Devotion to the saints*, which is such a strong feature of the piety of the Christian people, can thus be seen to correspond in its very essence to the profound reality of the Church as a mystery of communion.¹⁷

Ratzinger's understanding of communion became the official ecclesiology when he was Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF). Meanwhile, different people interpreted the word 'communion' differently. Ratzinger said that, like the expression 'People of God', the word 'communion' had become a 'slogan', its meaning distorted and devalued when people emphasised only the horizontal aspect and abandoned the vertical dimension. In this case, the ecclesiology of communion was reduced to a concern with relations between the local churches and the universal church. The egalitarian emphasis on equality in communion was gaining popularity.

In 'Eucharist, Communion and Solidarity', Ratzinger expressed his concern clearly:

It was unavoidable that this great fundamental word of the New Testament, isolated and employed as a slogan, would also suffer diminishment, indeed, might even be trivialized. Those who speak today of an 'ecclesiology of communion' generally tend to mean two things: (1) they support a 'pluralist' ecclesiology, almost a 'federative' sense of union, opposing what they see as a centralist conception of the Church; (2) they want to stress, in the exchanges of giving and receiving among local Churches, their culturally pluralistic forms of worship in the liturgy, in discipline, and in doctrine.¹⁸

With this erroneous understanding, according to Ratzinger, communion is seen as 'emerging from a network of multiple communities'. He is opposed to the horizontal idea of communion, with its emphasis on the idea of 'self-determination within a vast community of churches' that dominates the thinking of the church.¹⁹ Ratzinger

17. Ibid., no. 6.

18. Lecture by H.E. Cardinal Ratzinger at the Bishops' Conference of the Region of Campania in Benevento (Italy) on the topic: 'Eucharist, Communion and Solidarity', 2 June 2002, http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20020602_ratzinger-eucharistic-congress_en.html.

19. Ibid.

admits the need to correct the imbalance and excessiveness of Roman centralisation, but also reminds us that questions of this sort should not distract from the main task of proclaiming Christ to the world. He rightly asserts that the church should not be proclaiming itself, but God.²⁰

At the same time, Ratzinger insists that communion is related to the universal church, with its ecclesial hierarchy and papal primacy. Thus, there are criteria to be met by Christian communities in order to be qualified as a 'valid church'. These criteria centre on the requirements of 'valid ministerial orders, including a valid episcopate, and the celebration of a valid Eucharist'. Above all, for Ratzinger, communion with Rome is an important prerequisite.²¹ It is no surprise that he insists on the ontological priority of the universal church.

Joseph Ratzinger was criticised for his assertion concerning the priority of the universal church: 'The universal Church in her essential mystery is a reality that ontologically and temporally is prior to every particular Church.' He responds to the criticism by saying that 'the ontological priority of the universal Church – the unique Church, the unique Body, the unique Bride – vis-à-vis the empirical, concrete manifestations of various, particular Churches is so obvious to me that I find it difficult to understand the objections raised against it'.²² Those objections are possible only if one looks at the church with its shortcomings and not as something willed by God. As such, they are 'theological ravings' by people who see the church only as a human institution. Thus,

in this case one has abandoned not only the ecclesiology of the Fathers, but the ecclesiology of the New Testament and the understanding of Israel in the Old Testament as well. It is not just the later deutero-Pauline letters and the Apocalypse that affirm the ontological priority of the universal Church to the particular Churches.²³

20. Ratzinger, 'The Ecclesiology of Vatican II'.

21. Lieven Boeve and Gerard Mannion, eds., *The Ratzinger Reader* (London: T. & T. Clark, 2010), 83.

22. Ratzinger, 'The Ecclesiology of Vatican II'. Pope Benedict's idea of the universal church as a reality that is ontologically and temporally prior to the individual church overlooks the church as a concrete historical reality, according to Cardinal Walter Kasper. Walter Kasper, 'On the Church', *America*, 23 April 2001, <https://www.americamagazine.org/magazine/2001/04/23/church>.

23. *Ibid.*

Priority of the Universal Church

When the ecclesiological concept of communion is applied analogously to the relationship between the universal church and particular churches, Ratzinger strongly asserts the priority of the universal church. He dismisses the idea that the particular church is a subject complete in itself. According to Ratzinger:

In order to grasp the true meaning of the analogical application of the term *communion* to the particular Churches taken as a whole, one must bear in mind above all that the particular Churches, insofar as they are '*part of the one Church of Christ*,' have a special relationship of '*mutual interiority*' with the whole, that is, with the universal Church, because in every particular Church '*the one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church of Christ is truly present and active*.'²⁴

Consequently, Ratzinger insists that the universal church is not merely the sum of all the particular churches or a federation of churches. Neither is it the result of the communion of all the churches: 'It is a reality *ontologically and temporally* prior to every *individual* particular Church.' The universal church is the mother and not the offspring of the particular churches.²⁵

In its original and first manifestation, the church is universal. The local churches that have arisen in different places are particular expressions of the one true Church of Jesus Christ. 'Arising *within* and *out of* the universal Church, they have their ecclesiality in it and from it.'²⁶ Ratzinger argues that the relationship between the universal church and the particular churches is a mystery that cannot be compared to any human organisation. We become members of the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church through faith and baptism. However we 'do not belong to the universal Church in a *mediate way through* belonging to a particular church'. Instead, we belong to the universal church in an '*immediate way*', although we enter it through a particular church. Ratzinger posits 'from the point of view of the Church understood as communion, this means therefore that the universal *communion of the faithful* and the *communion of the Churches* are not consequences of one another, but constitute the

24. Ratzinger, 'Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on Some Aspects of the Church Understood as Communion', no. 9.

25. Ibid.

26. Ibid.

same reality seen from different viewpoints'.²⁷ When one becomes a Catholic through a particular church, one automatically belongs to the one, holy, catholic and apostolic church.

Living in Spiritual Communion

The bishop is the visible source and foundation of unity in the church. All local individual churches must come under the authority of the Roman Pontiff to be fully legitimate. Every bishop must be in communion with other bishops and with the Pope as supreme head, all united by one Eucharist. Benedict called upon the church in China to live this unity in 'a richer spirituality of communion'.²⁸ Church leaders and the faithful are called upon to defend this unity, a tradition of the church.

There is then an urgent need to overcome the tensions, conflicts and rivalries inside and outside the church. According to Benedict, this is done with the help of the Risen Christ, through purification of memory, forgiveness and forgetting of past injustices. The purpose is to restore unity and communion in the Church of China, which has been wrecked by the conflicts and rivalries between the 'official' church and the underground movement. Benedict was very much against the state interfering in the affairs of the church, especially in the appointment of bishops. For him, only a legitimate Episcopal Conference can guide and teach the Catholic community. The idea of an independent, separately managed church is incompatible with the Catholic doctrine of *one, holy, catholic and apostolic church*.

Nonetheless, Benedict understood the difficulties faced by Catholics, both leaders and laity, in China. While he insisted on safeguarding the traditional doctrine of the church regarding unity and communion with the Holy See, he was open to dialogue with the Chinese authorities. While steadfast in restating the fundamental principles of the Catholic Church, the Pope also gave Chinese bishops permission to make various decisions concerning the affairs of the local church because they understand the situation well.

Regarding the Chinese episcopate, Benedict was aware that some pastors have received episcopal ordination without permission from Rome. The church is in favour of establishing full communion with these pastors; they were (later) invited to ask to be received into communion with the Holy See and most of them agreed to do so. However, Benedict lamented,

27. Ibid., no.10.

28. Ibid.

In most cases, priests and the faithful have not been adequately informed that their Bishop has been legitimized, and this has given rise to a number of grave problems of conscience. What is more, some legitimized Bishops have failed to provide any clear signs to prove that they have been legitimized.²⁹

It is important for these pastors to make known their legitimisation by Rome to the public – and preferably as soon as possible – as a way to signal full communion with the Pope. There are also validly ordained bishops who have not asked for pontifical mandate. Although these bishops's administration of sacraments is valid, Benedict wished that they would enter into communion with the Pope and the entire episcopate. Benedict wrote:

Therefore, although not in communion with the Pope, they exercise their ministry validly in the administration of the sacraments, even if they do so illegitimately. What great spiritual enrichment would ensue for the Church in China if, the necessary conditions having been established, these Pastors too were to enter into communion with the Successor of Peter and with the entire Catholic episcopate! Not only would their episcopal ministry be legitimized, there would also be an enrichment of their communion with the priests and the faithful who consider the Church in China part of the Catholic Church, united with the Bishop of Rome and with all the other particular Churches spread throughout the world.³⁰

Here we witness the Pope's generosity, patience and openness to bishops from China who are not in communion with the Successor of Peter. Anxious to preserve the unity and catholicity of the church, he is extending them a warm friendship.

Benedict emphasised the importance of an Episcopal Conference to be comprised of legitimate bishops. While the Bishops' Conference deals with doctrinal and pastoral issues, it must not interfere in the internal affairs of the local church, for the responsibility lies with the ordinary. While favouring cooperation between church and state, the Episcopal Conference cannot be subject to any civil authorities regarding the teaching of faith, morals and the sacramental life. This is the exclusive task of the church. Benedict wrote,

29. Ibid., no. 8.

30. Ibid.

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.³¹

While Pope Benedict XVI admired the faith and zeal of the underground movement, he was more concerned about the conflicts and obstacles caused by the division. The 'clandestine' bishops, those not recognised by the Chinese government, cannot form part of the Episcopal Conference. In many ways, the Pontiff is giving respect to the Chinese authorities while insisting on the importance of papal authority, specifically in the appointment of bishops. Episcopal appointment is one of the sensitive issues in the relations between the Holy See and the Chinese government.

The Chinese government is attentive to the choice of bishops who will lead the flock in the local church. They do not want bishops who are outspoken and critical of the regime. For the Holy See, the appointment of bishops touches the very heart of the church – bishops in communion with the Pope guarantee the unity of the church. Only the Pope has the apostolic mandate for the ordination of bishops – it falls strictly within the spiritual, not the political sphere. Benedict assured the Chinese government that this is not a political issue, and Rome is not interfering in the affairs of China when it appoints its own bishops.

According to Pope Benedict XVI, 'the appointment of Bishops for a particular religious community is understood, also in international documents, as a constitutive element of the full exercise of the right to religious freedom'.³² The Holy See must be completely free to appoint bishops for the needs of the church. The Pontiff sincerely hopes to reach an agreement with the Chinese authorities to resolve certain issues regarding the choice of candidates for the episcopate, the publication of their appointments and recognition by the church, the government and the laity.

The 1983 Code of Canon Law, Canon 377 § 5 states that no rights and privileges of appointing bishops are granted to civil authorities. The Second Vatican Council's decree on bishops, *Christus Dominus*, states:

31. Ibid.

32. Ibid., no. 9.

this holy council desires that in future no more rights or privileges of election, nomination, presentation, or designation for the office of bishop be granted to civil authorities. The civil authorities . . . are most kindly requested voluntarily to renounce the above-mentioned rights and privileges which they presently enjoy by reason of a treaty or custom, after discussing the matter with the Apostolic See.³³

In the past, the clergy and faithful elected their own bishops. It was only in the fourteenth century that intervention by the Pope became common; it became the legal norm in the 1917 Code of Canon Law. There are ample precedents for the local church selecting its own bishop.³⁴ In fact, for most of church history, the local clergy and laity elected the bishops. The Pope had no direct involvement in the election, although he was subsequently informed because communion existed and still exists between all the local churches and with Rome. It was only from the nineteenth century onwards that popes began to claim the exclusive right to appoint bishops.³⁵ Hence, this exclusive right of the Holy See to appoint bishops is a fairly recent development in the Catholic Church's two thousand years of history.

However, one must distinguish between the local selection of bishops and state interference. The 'Gregorian' reformers of the eleventh century wanted the clergy and laity to select their own bishop to prevent interference by the monarch and princes.³⁶ In modern times, the move towards papal domination was motivated by the need to prevent secular influences and powers from appointing bishops. In China, of course, interference by government officials is the main concern.

Reflection

In this conciliatory letter of 2007, Benedict XVI revoked 'all the faculties previously granted in order to address particular necessities that emerged in truly difficult times'.³⁷ These 'faculties' refer to dispensations

33. Pope Paul VI, *Christus Dominus*, Decree Concerning the Pastoral Office of Bishops in the Church, Proclaimed by His Holiness, Pope Paul VI on 12 October 1965. http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19651028_christus-dominus_en.html, no. 20.

34. King, 'A Schismatic Church? – A Canonical Evaluation', 97.

35. Richard P. McBrien, 'Papal Appointment of Bishops Is Not Traditional', *National Catholic Reporter* 45, no. 13 (17 April 2009), 17.

36. King, 'A Schismatic Church? – A Canonical Evaluation', 97.

37. Pope Benedict XVI, *Letter of the Holy Father Pope Benedict XVI to the Bishops*,

given to allow the underground church to ordain priests and appoint bishops. This revocation was given as a gesture of reconciliation with the official church and the Chinese authorities. Official seminaries have better facilities for the formation of priests compared with the underground seminaries, which operate on a master-apprentice system. In revoking the faculties given to the underground church, the Vatican was depriving the underground movement of its power and at the same time regularising the official church.³⁸

It does seem that the Vatican was anxious to regularise its relationship with the Chinese Church, thus following the path of least resistance to allow the official church more freedom to act on its own. This is in line with post-Vatican II ecclesiology that favours an alliance between church and state. Peter Moody, a professor of political science, warns that the Leninist negotiation strategy is to obtain concessions without offering any in return.³⁹ This suggests that Pope Benedict's letter can be regarded by the CCP as a blank endorsement of what was previously illicit, such as the appointment of bishops without Vatican approval. Chinese authorities tend to insist strongly on principles when negotiating with foreigners, but once an agreement is finalised, the Chinese tend to be flexible or ambiguous on executing specific issues.

The main aim of Benedict's letter was to forge reconciliation between the underground church and the official church, which presupposes an accommodation between the universal church and the Chinese government. The official church in China has embraced Vatican II's teaching on inculturation and greater local autonomy as a rationale for its adherence to the demands of the Chinese government.

Since its foundation, Christianity has always sought to accommodate itself to the political and social reality in which it was planted. Although Christianity had a Jewish origin, it adapted successfully to the Hellenistic-Roman milieu in its early days. Its religious practices and doctrinal expressions were influenced by the cultures of Greece and Rome. In spite of their diverse expressions, Christian truths, however, transcend culture. One of the themes of Vatican II was inculturation – adapting Christian truths to particular cultures – which resulted in using the vernacular and other cultural expressions in its liturgy.

Priests, Consecrated Persons and Lay Faithful of the Catholic Church in the People's Republic of China, no. 18.

38. Peter R. Moody, 'The Catholic Church in China Today: The Limitations of Autonomy and Enculturation', *Journal of Church and State* 55, no. 3 (Summer 2013), 411.

39. *Ibid.*, 412.

This policy of inculturation naturally leads to the desire for greater ecclesiastical autonomy in worship and pastoral practices. This desire for greater autonomy is related to pastoral concern that the church should engage with the modern secular world instead of closing in upon itself, a church versus the world mentality.⁴⁰

Keen to normalise the position of the church, some Catholics have regarded the underground church as an obstacle to moving forward. Much as they admire the underground church for their fidelity to the Pope, they see the underground Christians as self-righteous and intolerant of those who joined the official church. The underground church is unwilling to cooperate with the civil authorities and condemns Christians who do so. Their strong faith allows them to face persecution, but in peaceful times, they are incapable of seeing anything beyond their own sufferings and hardships, and of moving to a more positive view that would allow them to play a constructive role in modern Chinese society.

The letter of Pope Benedict offered many concessions to the official church in the hope that the Chinese authorities would reciprocate. While the Pope was firm on certain basic principles of Catholicism, such as papal authority, he left room for accommodation and compromise on particular matters to be worked out between the local church and the relevant Chinese authorities. There was no alternative to forging a united church. Benedict's goal is unity based on apostolic succession symbolised by the Pope and the bishops under his authority.

The Church has a long history of accommodation to different political realities. In fact, many governments in the West, through concordats, were able to participate in episcopal selection. For many, this is a fair price to pay for greater religious freedom; but for the underground Catholics in China, it is seen as giving in to the CCP. The reality is that some accommodation from both sides of the divide could go a long way to heal the division between Catholics.

40. Ibid., 404.