DIVIDED YET ONE: THE TWO CATHOLIC COMMUNITIES IN CHINA

Gabriel Liu, SJ

Most people with good intentions believe that there are two Catholic Churches in China. As a native Chinese Catholic, I have experienced the confusion and pain caused by that division. However, I would never say that there are two Catholic Churches in China. Instead, there are two divided Catholic communities. No one from the Church intended such division. Even though the division was not the initial intention of the Chinese communist government, the latter took advantage of it. Hence, in this short paper, I will review the two divided communities and their formation and evolution over the last decades. While some explorations will include reflections in the context of Chinese social and political realities, the primary aim of this paper is to introduce a public image of the Catholic Church in China, which has its clear cultural mark but remains a part of the Universal Church.

Suppression and Control

After winning the civil war, the new Communist regime established tight control over all Chinese religious communities. From its perspective, the Catholic Church was a minority religious group that was anti-communist, and its foreign network included nation-states that opposed the Communist regime. One of the regime's strategies to control extra-territorial influence was establishing organizations that would serve as transmission belts from the party to the Church. According

to Richard Madsen, "these organizations were formally under the authority of religious leaders deemed 'reliable' by the government, but they were really under the control of the Chinese Communist Party's United Front Work Department, whose policies were implemented by the state Religious Affairs Bureau."[1] In other words, the nature of these organizations was religious on the outside but political on the inside.

In 1950, the government set up local Catholic reform committees, which eventually became the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association (CCPA). The Vatican denounced these committees and excommunicated their members.[2] The government retaliated by expelling the Vatican internuncio and all the foreign missionaries. From these exchanges, the Sino-Vatican tensions began. Different levels of persecution commenced in local churches, including the Shanghai Catholic Church's crackdown. The CCPA's formal establishment in 1957 led to centralized control of all local Catholic patriotic associations. The Vatican appealed to Chinese Catholics to "resist any patriotic movement even to the point of bleeding and death."[3] However, the Chinese government permitted the ordination of several bishops without a mandate from the Holy See. As a result, Pius XII released the third encyclical that denounced the CCPA and its episcopal

[1]Richard Madsen, "Catholic Conflict and Cooperation in the People's Republic of China" in *God and Caesar in China: Policy Implications of Church-State Tensions*, eds. Jason Kindopp and Carol Lee Hamrin (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2004), 94.

[2]Pius XII's encyclical in 1952 defended the missionaries and condemned the communist. Two years after, he issued another encyclical that denounced the brewing CCPA's self-governance, self-support, and self-propagation. Ibid., 94.

[3]Kim-Kwong Chan, *Struggling for Survival: The Catholic Church in China* (Hong Kong: Christian Study Centre on Religion and Culture, 1992), 52.

https://publications.lst.edu/

consecrations.[4] His successor, John XXIII, formerly called the pro-government faction a schism in 1958.[5]

The CCPA-controlled church communities were few. A number of lay people shunned the bishops and priests who collaborated with the CCPA and remained united—although in the least passive opposition—to government control. However, the Cultural Revolution (1966-76) persecuted Catholics and members of other faiths. There was neither pro-CCPA nor resistants in these series of torments. Bishops, priests, and lay people were imprisoned, tortured, humiliated, and died as martyrs for the Catholic faith.

The Chinese government's new leader, Deng Xiaoping, started an era of reform and ended the harshest forms of religious repression. Under his rule, the CCPA founded the Bishops' Conference of the Chinese Catholic Church (BCCCC) and the National Administrative Commission of the Chinese Catholic Church (NACCCC). The purpose of these was "to make it easier to change the overall leadership of the Patriotic Association to special foreign affairs in the future. The Bishops' Conference and the National Administrative Commission of the Chinese Catholic Church will manage doctrinal and pastoral affairs."[6] The BCCCC could appoint and dismiss bishops without the pope's approval. Thomas Qinghe Xiao explains that "if the BCCCC appoints and removes bishops, it violates the Canon Law."[7] During those years, the quick actions of the government intervening in

[4]Chan, *Struggling for Survival*, 55.

[5]Madsen, "Catholic Conflict and Cooperation," 95.

[6]Thomas Qinghe Xiao, "中国教会史 Chinese Church History blog," *Academy: To Think Positively*, May 12, 2008, accessed May 15, 2022, http://academier.blogspot.com/2008/05/blog-post_7822.html.

[7]Xiao, "中国教会史 Chinese Church History."

Church affairs set the tone for a further movement toward an explicit division of the Catholic Church in China.

Division and Confusion

In 1982 the government launched a series of new regulations on religions, which led to the reopening of previously existing churches. Although the Catholic bishops and priests were autonomous in their decisions about doctrine and worship, they were prohibited from accepting the Holy See's leadership. The CCPA claimed power to decide in almost all affairs, from simple matters such as constructing places of worship and communicating with foreign church members. Nevertheless, Madsen writes that "the Chinese government had relaxed its regulatory framework enough that many Catholics found it acceptable to worship publicly in officially approved 'open churches.' The open churches filled up."[8] Yet, division and confusion prevailed and progressed.

Some bishops, like Bishop Peter Joseph Xueyan Fan (1907-92) of the Baoding diocese in Hebei province of Northern China, opposed episcopal ordinations that did not receive the Holy See's approval. The Congregation of the Evangelization of Peoples in 1978 specially allowed local bishops to ordain a priest but not a bishop.[9] Nevertheless, Bishop Fan secretly consecrated three bishops without the Holy See nor the CCPA's knowledge. He asked for an exemption from the Holy See afterwards. According to Rachel Xiaohong Zhu, John Paul II "exempted him and gave Bishop Fan his blessing and the authority to make decisions on church affairs without

[8]Madsen, "Catholic Conflict and Cooperation," 97.

[9]The full name of the document is *Sacra Congregatio Pro Gentium Evangelizatione Seu De Propaganda Fide Facultates Et Privilegia Sacerdotibus Fidelibusque in Territorio Sinarum Degentibus Concessa His Perdurantibus Circumstantiis,* while the archive number is Prot. N. 3242/78.

https://publications.lst.edu/

first receiving the Vatican's approval."[10] Since then, the bishop (and those he consecrated) had ordained more than eighty bishops.

In the sacramental theology of the Catholic Church, the sacraments are efficacious for as long as the ministers are validly ordained and are in communion with the Pope. In the beginning, most Catholics were willing to receive sacraments from priests approved by the CCPA. However, Bishop Fan's secret ordination started an opposition publicly confronting the CCPA and the government. Hence, confusion between "underground" and "approved" approaches began.

Even unto death, Bishop Fan did not waiver. After several arrests and imprisonments, the bishop died in April 1992. A few years before his last detention in 1988, he released the "Thirteen Points," a document that opposed the approaches of the CCPA. Zhu explains, "the 'Thirteen Points' declares that the CCPA is trying to break away from the Vatican's influence and separate the Chinese Church from the Apostolic Church."[11] For this reason, several faithful avoided receiving sacraments from priests who joined the CCPA. The Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples backed the protests with the "Eight-point Directive," a document that confirmed the statements made in the "Thirteen Points." The Holy See granted "full and legitimate exercise of Episcopal jurisdiction" to underground bishops, and stated that the CCPA, "is not a religious organization in full communion with the universal church, and therefore, is not qualified to

[10]Rachel Xiaohong Zhu, "The Division of the Roman Catholic Church in Mainland China: History and Challenges," *Religion,* 8, 39 (March 14, 2017): 6.

[11]Zhu, "The Division of the Roman Catholic Church in Mainland China," 7.

direct any ordination of bishops and religious activities."[12] Under such circumstances, the underground bishops founded the Bishops' Conference in Mainland China on November 20, 1989, at the Sanyuan diocese of the Shanxi province. The approaches of the "underground" and "approved" became more apparent, but the wounds of the division became deeper.

Conflict and Wound

One of the side effects of the underground's public opposition is "the anger of the underground church toward fellow church members whom they believe have betrayed the faith."[13] Furthermore, the underground Church hurled bitter and harsh verbal denunciations against bishops, priests, and lay people closely associated with the so-called "patriotic" Church. Growing up in a Catholic family in Northern China, I have heard many stories about the tensions and struggles between the two communities. Being not far from Bishop Fan's hometown in Baoding,[14] our local communities were heavily influenced by their conflicts. As misunderstandings and hatred prevailed over the Mainland, suspicions amongst the faithful of the "underground" also grew. Those who were found suspicious in reporting the "underground's" activities would be reprimanded with verbal and physical assaults. Some families were broken for entering into different communities. But the most horrible cases against the "approved" could have been the poisoning of the mass wine in 1992 and cutting the

[12]Ibid.

[13]Madsen, "Catholic Conflict and Cooperation," 100.

[14]The other three are Fuzhou in Fujian, Wenzhou in Zhejiang, and Shanghai. During the 1980s and 1990s, these four dioceses were called by the underground Catholics the four "loyal and faithful dioceses" of Chinese Catholicism.

https://publications.lst.edu/

ear of an open-church priest in Heilongjiang Province on Good Friday in 2001.[15]

The tension seemed to diminish when the Holy See quietly gave an apostolic mandate to bishops from the open Church. By 2002, Rome had approved more than two-thirds of such bishops.[16] As a result, more bishops sought forgiveness from the Vatican who, in the process, regained the respect of the faithful. Ideally, these movements could have ended the tensions. However, the wounds are deep, and reconciliation is far from reality. If bishops from both the "approved" and the "underground" received the mandate, who would take the place as the head of a local diocese? Some of those who were approved were still accused of being unfaithful.

Change and Openness

Shades of gray seemed to replace a black-and-white conflict in any event. Madsen remarks that "open" and "underground" are no longer sociological divisions.[17] Furthermore," "official" and "unofficial " became another pair of contrasts referring to the divided Catholic communities. Although the two communities are divided, the official and unofficial are not strictly separated. For example, some local dioceses are "unofficial" in not joining CCPA or other related organizations. But they evangelize openly for as long as the local government permits them to do so. Another example is that some official theological and liturgical training institutions would invite religious nuns from the unofficial community and offer scholarships and better learning resources. Recently, the younger generation of Catholics appears less committed to the old divisions.

[15]Madsen, "Catholic Conflict and Cooperation," 100.

[16]Ibid.

[17]Ibid.

They freely choose to attend services based on convenience rather than ideology.

There are also changes in the official church communities at the higher level. Many younger bishops in the official church communities began with "creative" approaches to dealing with the government. For instance, since all the bishops are automatically the head of the diocesan CCPA, the older generation bishops tried to avoid it so as not to be criticized by the counterpart unofficial community members. However, instead of avoiding the position—like most of their predecessors did—the younger generation of bishops accepted it out of practical concern. Since all the members of CCPA are the Catholic faithful of his diocese, the bishop who accepts the position becomes the policy manager. Nevertheless, this kind of "creative" approach is still condemned by ideological mindsets who paid less attention to the practical needs and common good of the local Church in China.

On May 27, 2007, Pope Benedict XVI wrote a public letter to all the Catholics in China. It was the first open letter from a pontiff. It sought to console the suffering Catholic communities and advised movements toward reconciliation and unity. The late pontiff affirmed the positive developments[18] and stressed the need for pastoral actions during difficult times.[19]

[18]"The requisite and courageous safeguarding of the deposit of faith and 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." Pope Benedict XVI, *Letter to the Bishops, Priests, Consecrated Persons and Lay Faithful of the Catholic Church in the People's Republic of China,* May 27, 2007, no. 7.

[19]Pope Benedict XVI, Letter to the Bishops, Priests, *Consecrated Persons and Lay Faithful of the Catholic Church in the People's Republic of China,* no. 18.

https://publications.lst.edu/

He revoked the special privileges, not to abandon the "underground" church but to insist on its irrelevance. [20]

I would like to believe that neither Bishop Fan nor any "underground" community bishops wanted to increase the divide. The wounds over the years complicated the circumstances. This personal reflection resounds with Anthony Lam's take over the special privilege granted by John Paul II to bishop Fan and senior bishops in China.[21] This is not to justify what bishop Fan and the rest did, nor to give signals for comprising with the communist government. On the contrary, clarifying unclear or correcting false information is for the common good of the Catholic Church in China.

The decades-long issue of episcopal appointment was yet to be resolved. Three years after Benedict XVI's letter from 2010 to 2012, several illicit episcopal ordinations happened across the Mainland. The Holy See responded to those ordination events with a solid objection. Furthermore, the Church also waited for time to make a further step.

Hope and Dream

On March 13, 2013, Argentine Cardinal Jorge Mario Bergoglio was elected Pope. Since the beginning of his papacy, Pope Francis has repeatedly expressed his sincere and cordial attention to the Chinese people, which "has helped create a new and relaxed atmosphere and effectively resume dialogue

[20]Anthony Lam, "Recalling the 1981 Episcopal Ordinations and Their Consequences for the Chinese Catholic Church," *Tripod,* No. 163, Winter 2011, 31.

[21]"Bishop Fan clearly understood that in that difficult period for the Church in China, the Holy Father had a lot of trust in him and in the other bishops, who were struggling in the midst of difficulties. This was also the background and the reason why Pope John Paul II later gave special faculties to the 'old bishops.'" See Lam, 26.

between the Holy See and the Chinese authorities."[22] After a period of effort, on September 22, 2018, the Holy See and the People's Republic of China signed a two-year Provisional Agreement regarding the appointment of bishops. The agreement has been renewed for two more years in 2020 and 2022. Such action exclusively treats the process for the selection of bishops. Andrea Tornielli explains, "the goal of the Provisional Agreement has never been merely diplomatic, much less political, but was always genuinely pastoral."[23] In the hopes of easing the Sino-Vatican tensions, the agreement directed that the appointment of bishops must be from both the Holy See and the Chinese government. This was to help in the reconciliation between the two communities.

Shortly after the agreement was signed, Pope Francis wrote a public letter to all the Catholics in China. He restored to full communion the seven bishops who were ordained and appointed without the Holy See's approval. Furthermore, he said, "the Catholic community in China is called to be united to overcome the divisions of the past that have caused and continue to cause great suffering in the hearts of many faithful pastors. All Christians, none excluded, must now offer gestures of reconciliation and communion."[24] Some opposite voices could be heard not so much from the Church in China

[22]Federico Lombardi, "Looking back on the long journey of the Holy See's relations with China," *Vatican News,* September 25, 2018, accessed May 16, 2022, https://www.vaticannews.va/zh/vatican-city/news/2018-09/zh-china-holy-see-agreement-lombardi.html.

[23]Andrea Tornielli, "The Holy See and China: reasons for Agreement on the appointment of bishops," Vatican News, September 29, 2020, accessed May 16, 2022, https://www.vaticannews.va/en/vatican-city/news/2020-09/holy-see-china-provisional-agreement-appointment-bishops.html.

[24]Pope Francis, Message of the Holy Father to the Catholics of China and to the Universal Church, September 26, 2018, 6.

https://publications.lst.edu/

but outside it. For instance, Cardinal Fernando Filoni said in an interview with the *L'Osservatore Romano*, "only with a superficial spirit or in bad faith could one imagine that Pope Francis and the Holy See would abandon the flock of Christ."[25]

Pope Francis' efforts in dialogue with the Chinese communist government have greatly inspired and encouraged the two Catholic communities. Perspectives of each gradually changed to positive. Some bishops from both camps expressed both support and calls for the resumption of dialogue.[26] Two incidences of dialogue are worth mentioning. For instance, Mindong and Shantou's southern dioceses started the bishops' transition from their respective communities. Although the process was painful for each, their efforts and sacrifices would eventually bear fruits. After all, the bishop's leadership is "not only a formal unity but also a real unity, yet without being forced. The underground status will fade away, but not the people involved. The entire diocesan community still enjoys their faith, traditions, and spirituality".[27] The path toward unity and reconciliation is challenging but possible.

[25]PIME AsiaNews, "Card. Filoni: The China-Holy See Agreement is historic, but I share some perplexities," PIME AsiaNews, April 02, 2019, accessed May 16, 2022, https://www.asianews.it/news-en/Card.-Filoni:-The-China-Holy-See-Agreement-is-historic,-but-I-share-some-perplexities-46151.html.

[26]Vatican News, "The Vatican and China: Dialogue and Negotiation." Vatican News, July 03, 2018. accessed May 16, 2022, https://www.vaticannews.va/zh/vatican-city/news/2018-07/dialogue-china-5.html.

[27]PIME AsiaNews, "Card. Filoni: The China-Holy See Agreement is historic, but I share some perplexities."

The efforts of the two Catholic communities and the Holy See[28] will never go in vain. Despite the unpredictability of the Chinese community government's religious policy, the path of unity and reconciliation for the Catholic Church is not over-optimistic but real hope.

To conclude, I would like to quote the late Jesuit Bishop of Shanghai Aloysius Jin. As controversial as he was, his vision was beyond many of his contemporaries and many of us today regarding the Catholic Church in China:

Why talk about two churches in China? There is only one Catholic Church in China. We can discuss two of these groups: one that recognizes the Vatican. There is a discord between the authorities and the Chinese authorities; the other recognizes both the Vatican and the Chinese government and maintains a dialogue with both sides. I believe that the confrontation should be overcome through dialogue to achieve cooperation and mutual respect with both sides. Our efforts in this direction have yielded some results, but there is still a long way to go. Our only goal should be to seek dialogue and cooperation together.[29]

[28]"What the Holy See has strived to do for thirty years has been to foster reconciliation between the two communities by rediscovering and reinvigorating their properly Christian and Catholic identity through a common journey toward a greater realization of what it means to be Christ's Church in China today." Ibid.

[29]Stephan Rothlin, "Anticipating China's Future: The Legacy of Jesuit Bishop Jin Luxian," *La Civiltà Cattolica,* January 23, 2020, accessed May 20, 2022, https://www.laciviltacattolica.com/anticipating-chinas-future-the-legacy-of-jesuit-bishop-jin-luxian/ .

https://publications.lst.edu/