

## The Church in China Urgently Needs the Attitude and Spirit of Francis

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### Abstract

Since the 1980s, following the 30-year-long “harsh winter season,” the Church in China had been recovering and growing slowly along with the trend of further opening and reforming process in China. However, due to the long period of suppression and disruption, as well as the ups and downs of the Sino-Vatican relations, the Church in China is still facing various obstacles and challenges while showing signs of hope and life. The obstacles and challenges can be described as the following: difficult transition between the old and the new, lack of integrity and direction for the education and formation of clergy and religious vocations, the negative impact on the clergy and religious vocation of secularization, the division between the open and underground communities, etc.

Both Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI had shown great concern and care for the Church in China and tried very hard to improve the Sino-Vatican relations and to help the Church in China towards unity and communion. Nevertheless, plagued by the historical baggage, conservative political elements and internal disputes, the Church in China can only take delicate steps against various odds.

Since his election, Pope Francis has been expressing his blessings and love for both the society and Church in China on various occasions. This in turn has caused great attention by all sectors concerned. He also invited us to re-read the pastoral letter that Benedict XVI wrote to the Church in China in 2007 and regarded it as “still timely today” and “it is good to reread it”! Meanwhile, through his short but clear daily homilies, we have been hearing a very Gospel-oriented message; through his concrete actions, interviews by the media, apostolic exhortation and papal bull, we have seen an elevated vision for the Church and felt the attitude and spirit of St. Francis of Assisi: to build the Kingdom of God on earth through caring for the poor and weak, building the channels of dialogue, creating friendship and peace, and protecting the ecosystem and environment.

Through a brief introduction of the current situation of the Church in China, and in light of Pope Francis’ exhortation, bull, letters, and homilies, I wish to share some of my observations and viewpoints, with a hope of arousing more informed discussions and reflections, so as to help the Church in China towards a better future.

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## Introduction

Up to now more than two years have already passed since Pope Francis became the successor of St. Peter and took over the pastoral principles. Within these past two plus years, besides the short and refreshing Gospel messages he delivers during the homilies of the daily Mass, people were also able to gain a more insightful and broader perspective of the Church through other channels such as the interviews by the media, the exhortation and bull he published – to witness to the coming of the Kingdom of God on Earth. As for the society and the Church in China in the far East, he has been showing increasing concern and love. He not only expresses these sentiments through his sincere and constant prayer, but also encourages us to reread the pastoral letter of Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI to the Church in China in 2007, being convinced that “That Letter is still timely today. It is good to reread it.”

Through a brief introduction of the present situation of the Church in China and in light of Pope Francis’ exhortation, bull, letters and the spirit of his talks and homilies, this article aims to share some of my own opinions and observations, with a hope of getting others involved in the reflection and discussion process, so that they may be ready, as well, to offer some of their own precious insights, and more people may pay attention to the needs and future of the Church in China.

## 1. The Challenges the Catholic Church in China Is Facing as a Marginalized Group

Since the time when Fr. Matteo Ricci entered China, the Church in China has already had a history of more than 400 years. While 1.4 billion people are currently living on this large area of land, the Church in China is still a “small flock of sheep” that is not yet even able to cast off the pressures and challenges coming from both outside and inside. Let us first have a look at the statistics of the Church:<sup>1</sup>

Year Vocations	1920	1930	1948	1991	2009
Priests	964	1,441	2,690	1,000	3,270
Sisters	2,000	2,835	5,112	2,200	5,451
Major seminarians	656	858	524	800	628
Minor seminarians	1,650	2,732	?	?	630
Lay faithful	1,994,483	2,498,015	3,274,740	3,600,000	5,714,853

1 The statistics of 1920, 1930 and 1948 are taken from the *Atlas Societatis Verbi Divini*, edited by Henrico Emmerich (St. Gabriel 1952), p. 17; the statistics of 1991 are taken from *Tripod* (鼎) 11 (1991) 66, p. 38; the statistics of 2009 are from the study results of Hebei Faith Institute for Cultural Studies. In the “Review of the 2014 Major Events of the Catholic Church in China” published in the 2015’s Spring edition of *Tripod*, the Holy Spirit Study Centre stated that by the end of the year 2014 the Catholic Church had ca. 10,500,000 believers, 1,500,000 less than the estimated 12,000,000 in 2009. At the moment Hebei Faith Institute for Cultural Studies is contacting all local churches, hoping to be able to provide the most up-to-date statistics.

No matter whether or not the statistics regarding the number of the faithful are correct and reliable, if we only pay attention to the growth of vocations of the Chinese priests and sisters, we have enough reasons to be pleased with the situation. It is not my intention to overlook the joyful fact and even less to deny it that many clergy, religious sisters and lay people are generously and creatively committing themselves to the pastoral and evangelical works,<sup>2</sup> I would nevertheless like to turn the attention to the hidden crisis and challenges behind these statistics.

Everybody knows, at the beginning of the 1980s, with the opening up and reform process of China, the Church in China also welcomed her springtime following a long and harsh winter season. Some priests and superiors of religious orders of the older generation were released from prisons and labor camps. Soon afterwards, with all their strength and energy, they took up the heavy responsibility to revitalize Church life and to educate young vocations. In a relatively short time they were remarkably successful with their efforts. However, just during the time when both the country and the Church were going through the process of dismissing the old and welcoming the new in order to transform them, achievements and problems were bound to emerge at the same time.

Firstly, during the rapid process of development which was brought about by China's reform and opening to the outside world, the government and the people had to face a lot of severe and thorny social problems, such as the tussle between the old and new, the unbalanced and overheated development of the economy, the widening gap between the rich and the poor, the corruption of government officials, lack of honesty and trust within society, the breakup of family structures, rising criminal behavior of the youth, rapid HIV/AIDS epidemic, etc. Moreover, following the international trend, all kinds of conflicting views and problems are aggravating the domestic situation without finding any solutions. This sort of problem will continue to be with us for some time – if not to even make things worse.

Secondly, although we may say that the Chinese economic model is not lagging behind the so-called western “capitalist society” in terms of what it has achieved, in the political domain there is a relatively conservative undercurrent still prevailing.<sup>3</sup> This undercurrent not only restricts the openness of Chinese society towards further reforms, but is also of considerable influence on the normal development of religious life. Regarding the administration and operational mechanism of the Catholic Church, due to the broken relationship between China and the Vatican with its twists and turns, there exist also many conflicts and confusions. These can be said to be the following: the blurred borders of the old and new dioceses, division between the open Church community and the underground

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2 During these past years, many lay believers have already very much felt their responsibility to get involved with pastoral work and their mission to spread the Gospel. In order to improve the quality of the believers' faith, to strengthen their energy for evangelizing and to do social services, they find many ways and methods. For example, courses for catechumens, disciple and apostle classes, charitable associations, etc. Many priests and sisters are using microblog, WeChat, web radio broadcast and other similar modern media to evangelize and become involved with social issues. These efforts unavoidably have given rise to some chaos and new problems (as will be addressed later) that need to be better addressed and regulated, but the positive effects are obvious to all.

3 According to the former Prime Minister Wen Jiabao, this influence is the result of the Cultural Revolution and effect of feudalism that have not been cleaned up completely. See: <http://news.cntv.cn/20120316/123306.shtml>.

community, lack of bishops in quite a few dioceses for a long time, no clear assignments and affiliation for a good number of priests, loosely administrated religious orders, etc.

All in all, at the moment everywhere in the whole country there are many churches, big and small, old and new, open for normal religious activities such as administering sacraments and spreading the Gospel. Furthermore, every year there are non-Christians joining the Church community in great numbers. At the same time Church groups and individuals from Taiwan, Hong Kong, Macao, as well as from Europe and America, are coming to pay visits to the Mainland communities, offering support for the training of personnel and providing material help. These all can be described by terms like “frequent,” “great amount,” “generous,” “selfless” and so on. What can be considered most gratifying is the fact that there are many young people, both male and female, full of vitality, healthy and lively, who would like to serve the Church with concrete actions and are not afraid of sacrifices and involvement. Among them there are also quite a number willing to commit themselves completely to evangelization by choosing to become priests or join a religious order (as could be seen from the above statistics). But there is a fact we cannot avoid facing: in the history of the growth of the Church in China there was a break that lasted for 30 years (from 1950–1980). This led to the present condition of the Church, looking like a baby that had been forcefully weaned for a long time and now is showing the symptoms of undernourishment. On one side it reveals the signs of longing for nourishment and recovering after having received some nutrition. On the other side it reveals also many repercussions that make people worry, such as the organizational looseness and weakness of the Church, the backward and old-fashioned theological thinking and outdated concept of spirituality, the loss of contact with social life, the continuously occurring internal conflicts, etc.

The above mentioned situation of both the society and the Church not only affects the growth of the Church as a whole, it also directly impedes and influences the normal growth and formation of the life of the clergy and the religious orders. The problems can be summarized as the following:

### 1.1 The Difficult Transition from the Old to the New

During the “phase of recovery” in the 1980s, because the old generation of clergy and religious had to shoulder the significant task of the historical transition, the Church from top to bottom showed them highest esteem and gratitude, and the new generation of clergy and religious in turn naturally became the focus of hope and future of the Church. At that time, the number of young people who chose to become priests or enter religious life was continuously growing. In view of the fact that the Church was in urgent need of them, the requirements for the priestly and religious vocations naturally were not very high. Although their number was rising rather fast, the quality, however, was relatively neglected. Lacking the proper environment of a seminary, adding to it the unawareness of “Vatican II” spirit, the new generation’s understanding of the Church and the religious vocation was nothing more than what the older generation in words and example transmitted to them from the traditional teaching in the field of theology and spirituality. At the same time those old priests and religious superiors who had just walked away from the haze of

the Cultural Revolution were themselves quite often carrying in their own bodies, hearts and souls wounds and traumas. Without ever having received proper treatment for a healing process and for integration, they had to immediately throw themselves into the task of spreading the Gospel and get involved with the formation of prospective vocations. They naturally transmitted their own wounds and traumatic experiences to the following generation as well.

With the current of time, the old generation one by one went to their eternal rest. The new generation had to take over in a rather short time all those heavy burdens and march ahead. Still, at this time both society and the environment of the Church had already gone through a tremendous change. Especially in recent years urbanization has taken place in China very rapidly; most of the young clergy and religious persons who had come from the countryside felt lost and were not able to cope with it. No doubt, they were trying hard to adapt themselves and accommodate to the new situation of the Church and society as well. However, the old theological and spiritual thinking, and the evangelizing model and administration methods they had become acquainted with, often times bundled up their minds and actions. Furthermore, both the new wounds and the old scars, which had settled deeply inside their hearts, started breaking out anew following their midlife crisis. Slowly, quite a few honest young and promising bishops, priests and sisters were at a loss. They in turn either choose to go back to a rather conservative and lifeless deadlock, or adopt many rather unreasonable means and methods for evangelization and administration, in order to bring about a breakthrough. But the end of it was frequently an even greater mess and chaos. Eventually they got fed up with all, either leaving the priesthood and their religious life or falling sick from constant overwork; some even died in the prime of their life. This is a great loss for the Church and a sad tragedy for the younger generation of priests and sisters.<sup>4</sup>

Another phenomenon that cannot be neglected is that, in recent years, some of the priests and sisters who had come back to the Church community of their hometown after having spent many years abroad for studies, because of the difficulties and problems in finding a suitable platform to properly make good use of their talents and skills, have to choose another way of life and service. Although different people may have different explanations for this situation, I still consider this as the result of difficult transition from the old to the new, wherein they were not able to find the connection to the right track.

## 1.2 The Lack of Integration and Orientation with Regard to the Ongoing Formation of Priests and Religious Vocations

With the further understanding of Vatican II Council's concept of theology and spirituality, more and more local Church communities and religious congregations in China

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4 Presently it happens everywhere in the local Churches that all kinds of "charismatic" activities, "prophetic" behavior, "do away with sacraments" theory, etc., are appearing and causing controversies and struggles within the Church; these are clear examples that some groups or individuals unfortunately got stuck in various types of evil cults and cannot free themselves anymore. The root cause leading to this chaotic situation, where such things happen, can be found with some priests, religious sisters and lay believers who are unfamiliar with the teaching of the Church on issues regarding theological and spiritual matters and the Holy Scripture, and, intentionally or unintentionally, distort the correct teaching of the Church and practice it accordingly.

started with their own various ways of taking up the task of formation for their faith life and vocations. The purpose is to provide the clergy and members of religious orders, who, due to historical reasons, had been suffering from “undernourishment,” with additional nutrition. Presently, besides the eight officially recognized major seminaries that go by the regular program for the formation of priests and sisters, some dioceses and religious orders have also set up their own training courses with the principal purpose of providing sisters and lay Catholics with the opportunity of an ongoing faith education. In addition to this, some Church communities and organizations abroad have arranged short term overseas educational programs for the clergy and sisters from Mainland China, making great efforts and providing substantial financial support to meet the needs of the Church in Mainland. All these efforts are of great value and are highly appreciated. However, there is one aspect that should not be ignored. Since many dioceses and religious congregations one after another have started running essentially rather similar study programs, the shortage of qualified teachers has become a serious problem for all these institutions. A few teachers, specialized in certain areas, are running up and down between different seminaries, dioceses and congregations without taking any adequate rest, just to satisfy the needs everywhere. In view of this, many places can only carry out compressed intensive courses in order to absolve a teaching program, which ordinary seminaries would need a whole semester to complete, in just a few days. In this way, the professors and the students often feel tense and tired; therefore, both sides will not have enough time to communicate and share with one another and discuss the issues. What is more, they cannot even really digest the content of what they have studied and therefore will not produce the expected results of the study program.

Another phenomenon that needs to be addressed is that in several places I happened to meet some students who either had repeatedly attended some courses that were more or less of the same content, or had participated in the study programs that were of no relation to the pastoral ministry they were normally engaged with. The reason behind this phenomenon might be that a certain number of students are required in order to carry out some particular study programs; therefore, those who are to attend the courses are not being filtered to see if they are suitable at all. It is also possible that some students may take the courses just because they would like to follow the fashion, without knowing exactly what these courses are for and if they later on are of any use for them at all. If the ongoing formation, focused on the clergy and members of religious orders, continues to go on in this direction, people will surely have to raise some doubts whether it should be continued and worry about its validity and usefulness.

### 1.3 Secularization, Skepticism and Indifference towards the Priestly Religious Vocation

Secularization has brought upon the priestly and religious life within the Catholic Church in all European and American countries a lot of negative influences that cannot be overlooked, and the clergy and members of religious orders of the Church in China are also being affected and cannot escape its impact. Particularly, along with China's economic progress and the rising living standard, the life of the older generation of priests and re-

ligious members, having been deprived of the most basic essentials of life and having endured great hardships during their prime time in the last century, has been brought to an end. What followed was the fervent desire of some of the priests and religious to enjoy material pleasure and accumulate wealth. Such an obsession naturally led to the decline of interest in one's spiritual life and to the weakening of moral standards. In recent years news of scandals keeps on surfacing from time to time everywhere in the Church, being ample proof for the seriousness of this problem. Although it is not just the Catholic Church that is suffering from secularization, and the damage done to other religions might even be wider and deeper, to the "little flock" of the Catholic Church in China, its power of destruction is big enough.

The present day secularized mentality of the clergy and of the members of religious communities brings about disappointment and pain to many lay faithful and is also creating much suspicion and indifference towards the vocation for priesthood and religious life. When this suspicion and indifference reaches a certain degree, it will sooner or later engender a kind of anti-clergy and anti-religious ideology among some groups of people. Being aware of this, we should not be surprised if in many instances and places the opinion that "clerical and religious life is of no use" is gaining ground. On the other hand, if things like this keep on appearing, they will seriously do harm to the image of the fervent and hardworking priests and members of religious orders; as a result of this, some of those who might be thinking about the religious vocation will shrink back when catching sight of it. In recent years it happens everywhere and frequently that priests and members of religious congregations are quitting their vocation and becoming laicized. The number of new vocations is visibly going down, which makes us more and more aware that the Church in China is also having a "vocation crisis," and that this is not anymore just a distinguishing feature of the Church in Europe or America.<sup>5</sup>

It is important to be aware that the above analysis of the situation does not cover all the problems and challenges, nor can it deny the fact that, within the Church in China, a good number of priests and members of religious orders have been carrying out their mission and living out their vocation faithfully and loyally under various difficulties. The Church in China has to take care of the physical reconstruction and repair work for sure, but a healthier and more mature Church needs the regeneration and the recovery of her spiritual orientation, especially with regards to the spiritual healing and reintegration of the clergy, the members of religious congregations and the lay faithful.

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5 Recently, within the Church in China the discussions and debates regarding the online video circulation of the so-called "Confessions of Fr. Wang" are becoming quite fervent. This video is about Fr. Wang Haibo from Jilin Diocese who, after having studied "Standards for Being a Good Student and Child" (弟子规), "The Discourse on the Ten Wholesome Ways of Action" (十善业道经), "Treatise of the Most Exalted One on Cause and Effect" (太上感应篇), the so-called "roots" of Confucianism, Buddhism and Daoism, felt that in his priestly life during the past ten plus years, he actually had led a way of life incompatible with his priestly identity, going only after money, longing for power and vanity. At the same time Fr. Wang frankly confessed, according to his experiences, a priest like him in the present Church of China is not rare. Up to today Fr. Wang is still studying outside and propagating the "Standards for Being a Good Student and Child" and other similar products of traditional Chinese culture and has not come back to the diocese to work.

## 2. The Problem of Sino-Vatican Relations

Besides the repercussions of the transition from the old to the new and the backwardness of her theology and spirituality which led to the above mentioned difficulties that are hindering the development of the Church in China so much, another major element is nothing but the broken relationship between China and the Vatican, prevailing already for many years and creating a great obstacle. Considering this problem, in case the question of the China–Vatican relations could take a positive turn and bring about an essential change and improvement, it surely could be of direct influence for the future development of the Church in China. We gladly realize that Pope Francis, despite his busy and heavy schedule of activities, has not forgotten far away China. Just the opposite is true; he frequently remembers in his heart both the society and the Church in China.

March 13, 2014 was the first anniversary of the election of Pope Francis. Right on this anniversary he gave both the society and the Church in China joy and comfort in a way nobody had actually expected: While many people, due to his silence regarding the Church of China, were feeling uneasy and anxious, he announced explicitly via the *Corriere della Sera*: “I care for China. President Xi Jinping was elected three days after me.<sup>6</sup> After he was elected I wrote him a letter and he sent me a reply. We are in touch with China. I really care for this great nation.”

On August 14 of the same year, on the flight to Seoul in South Korea, for which the Chinese government gave permission to fly over its territory, he sent a telegram with greetings to President Xi Jinping: “Upon entering Chinese air space, I extend best wishes to your Excellency and your fellow citizens, and I invoke the divine blessings of peace and well-being upon the nation.”<sup>7</sup> On his return flight from South Korea to Rome, on August 18, he once more sent greetings to Xi Jinping. Thereafter he said to the journalists: “We must not forget that fundamental document for the Chinese problem which was the Letter to the Chinese written by Pope Benedict XVI. That Letter is still timely today. It is good to reread it. The Holy See is always open to contacts: always, because it has genuine esteem for the Chinese people.”<sup>8</sup>

The above mentioned blessings of Pope Francis for the society of China and attitude towards the Church in China not only expressed his sincere care and love for both of them in his capacity as the supreme pastor of the Church, it also communicated to the Chinese government and its people his friendship and earnest desire for dialogue. At the same time it also reflected his distinctive similarity with the “attitude and spirit of Francis.” However, there is an interesting phenomenon that makes people puzzled though it does not take them completely by surprise: Following Pope Francis’ showing of concern towards both the society and the Church of China, there appear to be two different voices among the Church people from both inside and outside of China with regard to the issue of whether there is some hope to take up a real China–Vatican dialogue, and whether the

6 This could be a speech mistake. Pope Francis was elected in the evening of March 13 Roman time, Xi Jinping was elected president of China in the morning of March 14 Beijing time – with a time difference of not even one day.

7 See <http://www.news.va/en/news/pope-francis-sends-telegram-from-plane-to-china-an>.

8 See [https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2014/august/documents/papa-francesco\\_20140818\\_corea-conferenza-stampa.html](https://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2014/august/documents/papa-francesco_20140818_corea-conferenza-stampa.html).



Sino-Vatican diplomatic relations should be opened for negotiation. On one side were the Bishops Wei Jingyi from Qiqihar, Han Zhihai from Lanzhou, Xie Tingzhe from Xinjiang, Ma Cunguo from Shuozhou, Huo Cheng from Fenyang, who were interviewed by *Vatican Insider* during the first half of the year 2015, representing the voice of the “Church of China.”<sup>9</sup> Their voices go along with the voices of Pope Francis, the State Secretary of the Holy See Cardinal Parolin and the spokesperson for the Holy See Fr. Lombardi, etc. Even though they clearly pointed out that the internal problems of the Church in China and the conflicts between China and the Vatican, both of which had been passed down by history to today, are not a simple question that could be resolved overnight, we as a Church should not sit down and wait till the meat pie falls from heaven, or wait till the Chinese government will have completely dissolved the “Patriotic Association,” which has already had a history of nearly 60 years, and only then be ready to start dialogue and cooperation. Facing difficulties and resistance the Christian faithful should, under the inspiration and light of the Gospel truth, be even more ready to stretch out the hands of mercy, goodness, forgiveness and reconciliation towards the originally, completely incompatible enemies. In so doing, we will try to not only make friends out of enemies but also win “disciples hidden among the evil ones.”<sup>10</sup>

Yet there are completely contrary voices saying that the present Chinese government will not change its attitude, given the fact that those bishops who “had disappeared” for many years have not been released yet. If the Church would be discussing with this government and starting a dialogue with it, it would be equal to giving up her principals, greatly harming her faith and disregarding justice. There are people who even criticized *Vatican Insider* for interviewing the bishops in Mainland China, saying that this is “cruel towards the bishops and misleading for the readers,” because “they are not free people and are not able to say in public what they would like to communicate,” and those who believe that they can speak freely are rather “naïve.”<sup>11</sup> There are also people who say that there is “Nothing to toast between China and the Vatican,” because “Beijing wants complete control.”<sup>12</sup> When it came to the idea of applying the “Vietnam model” for the appointment of bishops in China, as suggested by the spokesperson of the Holy See Fr. Lombardi through the Phoenix Website, there came even greater suspicion and criticism.<sup>13</sup>

The reason why there are people firmly defending such an opinion, according to my observation, is because there are readers, both in and outside of the Church in China, knowingly or unknowingly, neglecting Pope Francis’ real attitude and spirit expressed in his homilies, pastoral visits, exhortation and bull, which are completely in conformity in word and spirit with the letter of Benedict XVI. These people are directing their attention only to “some entities, desired by the State and extraneous to the structure of the Church, to place themselves above the Bishops and to guide the life of the ecclesial community,

9 See <http://vaticaninsider.lastampa.it/en/vatican-insider-cinese>.

10 See St. Augustine’s *City of God*, Book I, Chapter 35.

11 See <http://china.ucanews.com>, February 16, 2015.

12 “Nothing to toast between China and the Vatican: Beijing wants complete control,” <http://www.asianews.it>, March 17, 2015.

13 “To talk about the Vietnam Model in Appointing Chinese Bishops,” <http://china.ucanews.com>, March 20, 2015.

does not correspond to Catholic doctrine” (Letter: no. 7). These so-called “entities” are indeed “desired by the State and extraneous to the structure of the Church,” nevertheless, the efforts made by the Church in China to search for reconciliation within herself should not be further obstructed by mixing it with the question of history and politics. After eight years, Pope Francis invites us to read once more the letter of his predecessor. What is he actually asking us to pay particular attention to?

It is quite common knowledge that on May 27, 2007, Pope Benedict XVI issued an open letter to the “bishops, priests, consecrated persons and lay faithful of the Catholic Church in the People’s Republic of China.” Reading that letter of Benedict XVI, it is not difficult for us to realize that it addresses many topics, but the central spirit and idea still is: The Church in China herself should first of all find a way to reconcile and unite, set up a clear structure, foster the formation of vocations, be engaged in the propagation of the Gospel, and start to establish relations with the authorities of the state under the premise of mutual respect and constructive dialogue in order to solve the misunderstanding and obstruction that had been existing between the government and the Church during the many years past, “all this should be lived out in communion and in fraternal understanding, avoiding judgements and mutual condemnations” (Letter: no. 7). In his letter, Pope Benedict XVI made special reference to his predecessor, Pope John Paul II, who at the beginning of the Holy Year 2000 encouraged the Church in China by saying:

*In your preparation for the Great Jubilee, remember that in the biblical tradition this moment always entailed the obligation to forgive one another’s debts, to make satisfaction for injustices committed, and to be reconciled with one’s neighbour. [...] My ardent desire is that you will respond to the interior promptings of the Holy Spirit by forgiving one another whatever needs to be forgiven, by drawing closer to one another, by accepting one another and by breaking down all barriers in order to overcome every possible cause of division. [...] I rejoiced when I learned that you intend your most precious gift on the occasion of the Great Jubilee to be unity among yourselves and unity with the Successor of Peter. This intention can only be a fruit of the Spirit who guides the Church along the arduous paths of reconciliation and unity (quoted in Letter no. 6).<sup>14</sup>*

Besides the various opportunities and circumstances where he gave us his speeches and writings, on the occasion of the second anniversary of his election, Pope Francis declared an “Extraordinary Jubilee Year” with “God’s mercy” as its central message. This is not just an echo of the spirit of the proclamation at the beginning of the Holy Year 2000 which his predecessor Pope John Paul II pronounced towards the Church of China, but is to give orientation to the universal Church as well. We should earnestly review his spirit and accept his guidance.

14 John Paul II, Message to the Catholic community in China *Alla Vigilia* (December 8, 1999), 6: *L’Osservatore Romano*, English edition, December 15, 1999, p. 5.

### 3. What Did Pope Francis Actually Tell the Universal Church?

People surely still remember, beginning with his taking office, Pope Francis has in many ways created a new atmosphere through very concrete and practical actions: He gave up staying in the beautiful papal palace and preferred to move to St. Martha's House; on Holy Thursday he washed the feet of young prisoners and of Muslim women; he kissed a man's face deformed by his sickness and frightening people away; he consolidated the badly-run Vatican Bank and reorganized the inner administrative system of the Vatican; he appealed to people from all over the world to fast and pray for the peace of Syria, the Middle East and the whole world; he helped America and Cuba to start diplomatic talks and bring about reconciliation; he found concrete ways for other religious leaders to join together for dialogue and cooperation, etc. In many open speeches and communicated viewpoints, he deeply touched the minds of many people and inspired them.

In the second half of August 2013, when he was interviewed by Father Antonio Spadaro, the chief editor of *La Civiltà Cattolica*,<sup>15</sup> he said:

*I see the church as a field hospital after battle. It is useless to ask a seriously injured person if he has high cholesterol and about the level of his blood sugar! You have to heal his wounds. Then we can talk about everything else. [...] The church sometimes has locked itself up in small things, in small-minded rules. The most important thing is the first proclamation: Jesus Christ has saved you. [...] We have to find a new balance; otherwise even the moral edifice of the church is likely to fall like a house of cards, losing the freshness and fragrance of the Gospel (see "The Church as Field Hospital" section).*

November 24, 2013, at the closing of the Year of Faith, he issued his first exhortation *Evangelii gaudium*,<sup>16</sup> in which he wrote:

*I prefer a Church which is bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out on the streets, rather than a Church which is unhealthy from being confined and from clinging to its own security. I do not want a Church concerned with being at the centre and which then ends by being caught up in a web of obsessions and procedures (no. 49).*

Especially when taking up the division and conflict within the Church, he expressed it like this: "Those wounded by historical divisions find it difficult to accept our invitation to forgiveness and reconciliation, since they think that we are ignoring their pain or are asking them to give up their memory and ideals" (no. 100). And he still adds:

*Conflict cannot be ignored or concealed. It has to be faced. But if we remain trapped in conflict, we lose our perspective, our horizons shrink and reality itself*

15 After the full text had been translated and published by Radio Vatican, many Church websites in China have also carried it. For example: <http://www.chinacatholic.org/News/show/id/26456/p/1.html>; for the English translation see: [http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2013/september/documents/papa-francesco\\_20130921\\_intervista-spadaro.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2013/september/documents/papa-francesco_20130921_intervista-spadaro.html).

16 The Chinese edition was translated and authorized by the Taiwan Bishops' Conference, published by Hebei Faith Press.

*begins to fall apart. In the midst of conflict, we lose our sense of the profound unity of reality* (no. 226).

*When conflict arises [...] Others embrace it in such a way that they become its prisoners; they lose their bearings, project onto institutions their own confusion and dissatisfaction and thus make unity impossible* (no. 227).

On April 11, 2015, when he announced the Year of Mercy and published the bull of indication *Misericordiae Vultus*,<sup>17</sup> he got right to the point when he wrote: “Jesus Christ is the face of the Father’s mercy. These words might well sum up the mystery of the Christian faith.” Shortly thereafter he elaborated on this and continued: “These (justice and mercy) are not two contradictory realities, but two dimensions of a single reality that unfolds progressively until it culminates in the fullness of love” (no. 20). For this reason, he continues:

*If God limited himself to only justice, he would cease to be God, and would instead be like human beings who ask merely that the law be respected. [...] God does not deny justice. He rather envelopes it and surpasses it with an even greater event in which we experience love as the foundation of true justice* (no. 21).

Besides the viewpoints and opinions regarding the mission of the Church which he expressed through the interview, exhortation, and bull mentioned above, Pope Francis never neglected any other opportunity to encourage people and appeal to them to return to the very essence of the Gospel and to witness the mercy of God.

On the 100th anniversary of the foundation of the Faculty of Theology of the Catholic University of Argentina, he sent a letter (written on March 3, 2015) to the president of the university and Archbishop of Buenos Aires, Cardinal Mario Aurelio Poli, pointing out that

*Teaching and studying theology means living on a frontier, one in which the Gospel meets the needs of the people which should be proclaimed in an understandable and meaningful way. [...] Mercy is not just a pastoral attitude but it is the very substance of the Gospel of Jesus. [...] Without mercy our theology, our right, our pastoral care runs the risk of collapsing into bureaucratic pettiness or ideology, which of itself wants to tame the mystery.*<sup>18</sup>

In the homilies during the daily Mass at St. Martha’s House, he repeatedly advised the people to get a feeling for God’s mercy and put it into practice, especially on March 23, 2015; using the stories of the three women in the Bible, namely Susanna who was entrapped by false evidence, the woman who committed adultery, and the poor widow who suffered unjust treatment, all having to do with “three kinds of judges,” as background, he pointed out the fact that these three were severe, harsh and corrupt judges, who were only after profit, did not know the word mercy and had no idea what mercy means. The people of God, when coming across such kind of judges, would only greatly suffer due to their lack of mercy, no matter if it was in society or even in the Church; where there was no mercy there could not be any justice either.

17 The Chinese translation was carried out by the Committee for Liturgy of the Hong Kong Diocese.

18 For the English text see: <http://www.news.va/en/news/pope-sends-letter-for-argentina-university-celebra>.

No matter whether it is through his actions or through his speeches and writings, in the person of Francis, what people always find is a Pope whose attention is directed towards the poor and the weak and to those at the margins of society, and what people always hear is a pastor whose talking is simple, open and honest. He hopes that people will keep close to the central message of the Gospel, taking the manifestation of the great love and mercy of God as the main mission of the Church through serving the people, especially the poor and the weak, not letting the Church get restricted by structures, mechanisms and traditions in the process. Even if not all the people might agree with some of his theological thoughts and social teachings, there is no one who can deny or question that he is raising his voice in favor of justice in society and peace in the world, and also appealing and acting for the value and importance of the poor. All of this is exactly the voice and action that our time urgently needs.

Let us take an honest look at our world and our Church! An obvious problem society is facing is the widening gap between the rich and poor; this fact is causing an immense danger to the peace of the world and to the survival of humanity. Meanwhile, the tremendous challenge and difficulty which the Church has to deal with is the decline of faith, struggles and conflicts within, the bad example of clerics causing serious damage. Today, as Pope, through his talks and actions, Francis is carrying out what Pope Innocent III in his time saw in his dream: the “spirit and attitude of Francis” stepping forward bravely to support with his hands the Lateran Basilica, tottering on the verge of collapse. This kind of attitude and spirit is able to bring feelings of guilt and uneasiness to those who are used to living like princes in vanity and luxury and considering themselves always right. As for the Church Community and for all levels of society, this kind of attitude and spirit is able to cause great challenge and tension. Nevertheless, exactly because of this, the Church will get the strength to reform, recover and renew; it is also exactly because of this, that every one of us will search for the road towards the truth of the Gospel and the original vision of the Kingdom of God. Maybe it is also because of this, that the American magazine *Time Weekly* selected Pope Francis as “Person of the Year,” highly appreciating the contributions he has made and the energy he has invested for human society during the less than nine months following his Papal election.

A living example in real life can speak well to the fact that Pope Francis’ efforts towards forgiveness and reconciliation both within and outside the Church did not go wasted: In December 2014, the leaders of America and Cuba openly expressed their gratitude for his irreplaceable contributions to the improvement of relations between the two countries. On May 10, 2015, Cuba’s leader Raúl Castro, after he had visited the Pope at the Vatican, again expressed it openly and said to the media people:

*I told my advisors and cabinet members already that I read all the speeches of the Pope. I mean, if the Pope continues to talk like this, I may sooner or later start to pray again and return to the Catholic Church, and this is not just a joke. I am a Communist. In the past the Communist Party in Cuba would not allow this, but now it is possible, it is a real progress.*

He continued to say that when the Pope visits Cuba in September of 2015, he surely will go and hear what he has to say. He even promised it by saying “I shall with an open heart

attend all his Masses together with the hundreds of thousands of people. The meeting this morning left a very deep impression in my heart; his wisdom, knowledge and humility and all his virtues which we know touched me very much.” What Pope Francis did to make Raul “the Communist” become convinced and consider starting “to pray again and return to the Catholic Church” is nothing novel but is to follow that Gospel teaching according to its true meaning and real spirit. Should not the Church in China take careful consideration of this concrete example today?

#### 4. What Can We Learn from History?

About four hundred years ago, the Jesuit missionaries Matteo Ricci, Adam Schall, Ferdinand Verbiest, etc., despite the well-fortified and heavily guarded imperial city with a hierarchical structure of the Ming and Qing Dynasties, autocratically ruled and tightly controlled both inside and out, were able to build up friendly relations with the higher classes of Chinese officials, interact with them, and even get into a dialogue with the imperial family, the Emperor included, in order to spread the Gospel. This was ample proof that an exchange between the Chinese and Western culture and religion was possible. Poems from Emperor Kang Xi, such as “Song of the Cross” (十字歌), “The Most Precious Treasure of Life” (生命之宝), as well as plenty of rhyming couplets, are the living witnesses of Kang Xi’s reverence and respect for Christian faith and still sound very familiar to us today. However, in the long run and because of the “rites controversy” with its political haggling, Kang Xi became rather indignant to the extent that he issued an official order forbidding Church activities, herewith closing the door for the China–Western cultural and religious exchanges. It was not until the 1840s that, relying on the “unequal treaties” after the Opium War, the gate was forcefully opened again. At that time Matteo Ricci, Adam Schall and Ferdinand Verbiest could only silently cry in Heaven because what they had earnestly tried to avoid – that the Chinese look at the Christian religion as a “foreign religion” that would do harm to the Chinese society and culture – turned to the opposite.

As time went by, with the many ups and downs and the violent thunderstorms in connection with the establishment of the New China and the Cultural Revolution, the Church in China suffered severe persecution and destruction. Although the springtime for revival came in the 1980s, she has still yet to go through these painful dilemmas: “Can love of country and love for the Church be in harmony?” “Is it possible to be a real Chinese and at the same time be a faithful Christian?” All this is largely due to the ongoing conflicts between the government and the Church: seen from the perspective of the Chinese government, the Christian Church, especially the Catholic Church, is nothing else but an influential power “interfering in Chinese politics” and a “soft power” to infiltrate and disintegrate its political power;<sup>19</sup> according to the opinion of some Church people from inside and abroad, any words and actions that do not follow the traditions of the Church oppose the principles of faith and show a behavior of “not being loyal and faithful.” This is what is leading to dispute, conflict and collision, no different from what happened two

19 Through the recent violent demolishing of crosses on top of hundreds of churches in Zhejiang Province, we can see a glimpse of this deeply imbedded fear, suspicion and even hatred.

hundred years ago during the “rites controversy” when the deadly wounds were inflicted on the Church in China!

Thanks be to God! Under the support of Matteo Ricci and the Jesuit pioneer missionaries, a Jesuit Pope carrying the name of Francis of Assisi not only understands the pioneer Jesuit missionaries’ experience and wisdom, but also embodies the attitude and spirit of Saint Francis who in 1219, unarmed and defenseless, dared go to Egypt to meet the head of the Muslim army Sultan al-Kamil. Therefore, he does not care about other people’s repeated “advice” and even “warnings,” but has a few times expressed his hope – if possible to come to China “tomorrow”. His Secretary of State Cardinal Parolin also openly expressed that the dialogue between the Holy See, the Church and the Chinese Government should bring great benefit to the peace of the world. His spokesperson Father Lombardi was moving even one step further by saying: “that you can be a good Chinese citizen and a good Catholic at the (same ) time. There is no contradiction in being a good Catholic and a good Chinese citizen.”<sup>20</sup> There is no doubt that this echoes the words of the apostle of China Fr. Vincent Lebbe: “China belongs to the Chinese; the Chinese belong to Christ!”

## Conclusion

Needless to say, though having been in the capacity of Pope for a bit more than two years and regarding himself not as a “superman” but an ordinary person, Francis has already spelled out clearly his orientation and presented a model for the universal Church including that of China. As a member of the universal Church, we as the Church in China should at this moment be aware that although we have been walking with Pope Francis for more than two years, God’s plans for him might have just begun to be implemented. Now, no matter how other people may react, are we already prepared to go further with him? Are we ourselves ready to respond positively to the “attitude and spirit of Francis” that he has shown for both the society and the Church of China, instead of just looking for all kinds of excuses and neglecting or even boycotting it in a rather negative way? Furthermore, are we, aware of it or not, as the Holy Father in *Evangelii Gaudium* said, becoming “prisoners” of conflict, losing our bearings and projecting onto institutions our own confusion and dissatisfaction and thus making unity impossible? Or are we, like what he said in *Misericordiae Vultus*, setting “mercy” and “justice” against each other, gladly putting the blame on the “sinner” and punishing the “bad fellows,” but completely ignoring to show them sympathy in their misfortune and give them a helping hand in their most urgent needs? – For a positive answer to these questions we need to completely rely on concrete acts done out of true evangelical humility and simplicity, nothing else will do! In view of this, we can confidently say that the reason why Pope Francis invites us today to read once more the pastoral letter Benedict XVI wrote eight years ago to the Church in China is not just because it has “some relation to today’s situation,” but because it “will be of great benefit.” In a word, it can let us discover anew the truth of the Gospel hidden in it!

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20 See <http://vaticaninsider.lastampa.it/en/world-news/detail/articolo/cina-china-vaticano-vatican-39712/>.