

Catholic Church in China: ‘Two faces’ expressing one faith

BEIJING (CNS) — Sometime after Easter, Pope Benedict XVI will issue a letter to Chinese Catholics that many hope will call for reconciliation and unity between those who have registered with the government and those who have not registered.

In some places in China, that might cause surprise — but for different reasons in different areas.

Some priests and nuns reported not even knowing there was more than one church community as they grew up.

“We’re only one church in our village — everyone goes to one church,” said Father Joseph Xia Qingtian, dean of studies at the Liaoning regional seminary in Shenyang.

Sister Pauline Yu Chunjing, superior of the Sisters of Our Lady of All Holy Souls in Beijing, said her parish in her hometown of Nangong, in Hebei province, did not have a split.

“For me, personally, I didn’t know there were the two churches before I entered the religious order,” she said in mid-March.

She said she likes the words of the late Bishop Anthony Li Du’an of Xi’an, who said China had only one church, but “two faces to express our faith.”

When China began suppressing the church in the late 1950s, it established the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association, whose members initially were asked to reject ties with the Vatican. Many of the Catholics who joined indicated they chose to cooperate with the government and work within its restrictions, but remained loyal to the Vatican.

Catholics who refused to join the patriotic association maintained their loyalty to the Vatican and suffered decades of persecution. Some of these underground Catholics still think registering with the government would be a betrayal of everything for

which people have suffered, and some think the registered church is still controlled by the communist government, said one church source. Unregistered Catholics also refer to the last official word from the Vatican — in 1988 — that told them to avoid the patriotic association.

Today, bishops are asked to register with the government and join the patriotic association. At least one bishop has said he would register but not join the association. Nearly all the bishops who have joined the patriotic association have reconciled with the Vatican.

In some places in China now, the lines between the two communities are blurred.

Jean-Paul Wiest, a sociologist and scholar at a Beijing university, said the split between the two communities “does exist.” However, he said, “in big cities like this, people are moving in and out” of the different communities.

For instance, divisions among Catholics in Xi’an, in China’s Shaanxi province, are not as strong as other places, like Fujian province, said one church source.

The Diocese of Liaoning officially has 120,000 registered Catholics, but it also has unregistered Catholics. More than one church source said that, until one old underground priest died, unregistered Catholics would not attend the open Mass at Sacred Heart Cathedral in Shenyang, the provincial capital, but would attend Mass the old priest celebrated in a small chapel within the church compound. One source reported that on Sundays, some families would arrive for Mass together, then split, with some family members going to the chapel and others going to the cathedral.

Registered seminaries often receive local government funding — some more than others. And while some registered seminaries will not accept unregistered Catholics as students, others do.

One source in Beijing said the basics of the faith are the same in both communities: “We are in communion with the universal church” and “pray for the pope.”

But “to really understand the Chinese situation” and work in the church, “you must know how to deal with government officers,” how to deal with Catholics and “how to keep your face,” the source said.

In 2003, Bishop Michael Fu Tieshan of Beijing was elected as one of 15 vice chairmen of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress, China's legislature. The bishop is not recognized by the Vatican, but the Beijing source believed that "in his mind" the bishop is in communion with the pope. The source, who described the bishop as "a very kind person," emphasized that the situation in Beijing is complicated, and people do what they can within the system.

A nun in another city agreed.

"I always say 'do what you can,'" she said. "Yes, we are limited, but there are a lot of things we can do."

Belgian Missionhurst Father Jeroom Heyndrickx, who directs the Verbiest Institute at the Catholic University of Leuven in Belgium and is one of the most authoritative experts on Catholicism in China, said he anticipated difficult pastoral concerns after Pope Benedict issues his pastoral letter.

The most urgent question concerns the joint participation of registered and unregistered Catholics in eucharistic celebrations, he said.

Some "priests in several underground Catholic communities still preach that Catholics who attend the Eucharist in an official church community commit mortal sin and will go to hell," he wrote in a late-March commentary for UCA News, an Asian church news agency. He said they justify their stance by referring to the "Eight-Point Directive on Dealings with China," issued in 1988 by Cardinal Josef Tomko, then prefect of the Vatican's Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples.

"No church authority has ever contradicted this document, so relatively few underground Catholics responded positively to the repeated calls of Pope John Paul II for reconciliation," he said. Many anticipate the papal letter will address these directives and put the issue to rest.

He also said the Catholic Church in China could best be compared to the apostles.

"Each apostle reacted in his own way when the Lord Jesus was arrested, condemned and crucified," said Father Heyndrickx. "Some probably continued to believe in him in their hearts. Others doubted and were certainly not proud that they ran away."

He referred to Pentecost, when the apostles and Mary prayed together as they awaited the Holy Spirit.

“Only the Spirit could unite them and empower them to pass beyond their own past weaknesses,” he said. “Thus they emerged on Pentecost as a united church, preaching, full of energy and faith. Peter, who admitted being weakest in faith during the time of trial, became their leader.”

Precious Blood Father Robert Schreiter of the Catholic Theological Union in Chicago said that at the very heart of the Christian understanding of reconciliation lie two important insights: “that reconciliation is the work of God in our lives, not something we achieve on our own; and that reconciliation brings all parties to a new place.”

“Where God will lead Catholics in the underground and official church cannot be predetermined by either party,” he said March 28 in a statement issued in anticipation of the pope’s letter. “They must remain open to the working of the risen Lord. That path will be one that does not forget the suffering of the past, but also will make of both parties a new creation. The deep love of the church and loyalty to the Holy Father that all Catholics in China hold dear should bring them to place their trust and hope in how God will speak to them through the Holy Father.”