

Chinese Catholics welcome papal letter, but some doubt its effects

HONG KONG – Catholics in mainland China say they welcome the recent letter from Pope Benedict XVI, but some say they worry it will not produce the desired effects.

Bishop Paul Xie Tingzhe of Urumqi, in northwestern China's Xinjiang province, told the Asian church news agency UCA News the pope's June 30 letter could help promote reconciliation and "remove obstacles in the path of unity." Bishop Xie has not registered with the Chinese government, and the pope's letter called for unity between Catholic communities that have obeyed government orders to register with the State Administration for Religious Affairs and those that have refused to register.

Another nonregistered prelate, retired Bishop Casmirus Wang Milu of Tianshui, said the pope has clearly shown a way for the church to develop in China.

Bishop Wang said he would follow the pope's instructions by making every effort to work for reconciliation between the Catholic communities in his diocese and to dialogue with clergy belonging to the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association, which acts as a liaison between the government and registered communities.

A nun identified only as Sister Cheng from a registered church community said the papal letter has prompted Chinese Catholics to reflect on the reality of divisions in their local church, which have hindered its evangelization work.

To promote reconciliation and unity, Sister Cheng said, "We should respond to the pope's call and learn the spirit of forgiveness from Jesus so as to begin dialogue and reconcile our differences."

Likewise, a nun from Hebei province whose local community has not registered called the letter "a wake-up call for us to examine whether our church has strayed from the Catholic faith." She said it encourages Catholics to develop an open attitude and start dialoguing with state agencies and others to enhance church development and attain reconciliation.

However, a priest identified only as Father Joseph, whose community has not registered with the government and has been operating clandestinely, said he was upset by the pope's call for reconciliation with the registered church community and by the pope authorizing clandestine bishops to receive recognition from the

government. Nevertheless, he said, he is willing to obey the pope.

The pope's letter said it is acceptable to concelebrate Mass with registered bishops and priests who are in communion with the pope. It also says the faithful who have no access to clergy recognized by the pope may turn to clergy who are not in communion with the pope for eucharistic celebrations and other sacraments.

Father Joseph said he worries that some conservative Catholics in the unregistered community will not welcome the new directives because they appear to contradict "truths" they have valued for many years.

A clandestine priest who serves at a remote parish in southeastern China said the letter provides "a guiding role" for clergy, but its effect on laypeople will be minimal. Due to his parishioners' minimal education and conservatism, he said, "any sudden change will not yield a good result." He added that his parish is unlikely to organize any study of the papal letter.

But a clandestine priest in another diocese said there is an urgent need to organize laypeople to study the pope's letter, since they are affected when members of different church communities come into conflict.

"This has confused their conscience, and they do not know what course to take," he said.