

Pope urges commission to work in favor of Catholics

VATICAN CITY - Pope Benedict XVI urged members of a recently established Vatican commission "to continue their commitment in favor of the Catholic community in China."

After meeting March 12 with participants of the closed-door sessions in the Vatican, the pope also highlighted the upcoming May 24 Universal Day of Prayer for the Church in China that he established last year.

The commission, created by the pope to study key questions concerning the life of the church in China, held its first meeting March 10-12 at the Vatican.

According to a Vatican statement distributed to journalists March 13, the pope listened to a summarized report of the commission's work over the past three days.

The meeting used Pope Benedict's June 2007 letter to Chinese Catholics as its theme for discussions, the Vatican statement said.

"Participants first examined the reaction to the pontifical document, both inside and outside China," the statement said. Participants also "exchanged information and experiences concerning the life and activity of the church in China," it said.

The commission "reflected on the theological principles that inspired the letter in order to comprehend the future prospects they bring for the Catholic community in China," it said.

Just as the pope stressed in his groundbreaking letter to Chinese Catholics last year, the commission reiterated the need and desire for "respectful and constructive dialogue with the authorities," the statement said. The letter established new guidelines to favor cooperation between clandestine Catholic communities and those officially registered with China's communist government. The papal letter called for dialogue with the government on issues such as the appointment of bishops and asked government-registered bishops who have secretly reconciled with the Vatican

to make that fact clear to their faithful.

According to the Vatican's March 13 statement, the issues the commission discussed during its first meeting at the Vatican dealt with key aspects concerning "the church's mission as (an) instrument of salvation for the Chinese people."

In particular those issues included:

- Evangelization in a globalized world.
- How to apply the Second Vatican Council's doctrine on the nature and structure of the church in China's current situation.
- Forgiveness and reconciliation between the divided Catholic communities.
- What truth and charity require.
- The governance of dioceses, "which has great relevance for pastoral activity and for the formation of priests, seminarians, religious and lay faithful."

The Vatican said in an earlier statement that the commission's participants were top officials from departments "competent in the matter" - presumably the Secretariat of State and the congregations responsible for missionary activity, religious orders, bishops, clergy and doctrine.

Other members included Cardinal Joseph Zen Ze-kium and Coadjutor Bishop John Tong Hon of Hong Kong; Archbishop John Hung Shan-chuan of Taipei, Taiwan; Cardinal Paul Shan Kuo-hsi, retired archbishop of Kaoshiung, Taiwan; Bishop Jose Lai Hung-seng of Macau; and the heads of several religious orders, according to church news agencies that cover China.

The commission did not have any representatives from mainland China, the news agencies said.

A similar group of Vatican officials, Chinese bishops and China experts met at the Vatican last January. They suggested the Vatican form a commission on Chinese affairs, which the pope then approved and established.