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Vatican rips China for 'intolerance' and 'repression'

John L. Allen Jr. | Dec. 17, 2010 NCR Today

By JOHN L. ALLEN JR.

tA blistering Vatican statement today accuses China of ?unacceptable and hostile acts? during a recent government-orchestrated assembly of Chinese Catholics, which it said smacked of ?fear and weakness," a "repressive attitude? and ?intransigent intolerance,? producing a ?grave loss of trust.?

tNot only is it unusual for the Vatican to target a specific country in such public fashion, but today?s statement also ruptures the quiet diplomacy that has characterized the Vatican?s ?China policy? since the papacy of Paul VI.

tMost observers say the current row marks the most serious crisis in Sino-Vatican relations in recent memory, with one prominent Catholic expert on China gloomily claiming that things are headed ?back to the time of Mao.?

tThough there are no reliable religious statistics in China, conventional estimate peg the country?s Catholic population at around 13 million. China has long been a top diplomatic priority of the Vatican, not only because of its status as an emerging global superpower, but because China experts believe there?s significant potential for missionary expansion if the climate for religious freedom were to improve.

tIn May 2007, Pope Benedict XVI released a ?Letter to Chinese Catholics? which was widely interpreted as an olive branch for the government. It supported ending the split between an official and an underground church, and called on Catholics in China to normalize their relations with the state.

tThat atmosphere of détente, however, has been almost completely ruptured by current events.

tIn early December, two-government sponsored Catholic bodies in China held assemblies: the Episocopal Conference and the Patriotic Association. Both are seen as illegitimate by the Vatican, and reports from China suggest that the participation of at least some bishops and clergy in the early December meetings was coerced.

tDuring those meetings, a bishop ordained with papal approval was installed as president of the Episcopal Conference. That move was seen as especially provocative in Rome, since the Vatican and the Chinese government had appeared to have worked out a de facto system of choosing new bishops acceptable to both sides.

tAlthough ten of the last eleven Catholic bishops ordained in China came with papal approval, recently the government appears to have returned to its policy of promoting an ?autonomous? church in China.

tBackground on these developments can be found here: http://ncronline.org/blogs/ncr-today/crackdown-china-takes-church-back-time-mao

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tHere is the full text of today?s Vatican statement.

COMMUNIQUÉ OF THE HOLY SEE PRESS OFFICE: EIGHTH ASSEMBLY OF CHINESE CATHOLIC REPRESENTATIVES (BEIJING, 7-9 DECEMBER 2010)

1. With profound sorrow, the Holy See laments the fact that from 7 to 9 December 2010 there was held in Beijing the Eighth Assembly of Chinese Catholic Representatives. This was imposed on numerous Bishops, priests, religious and lay faithful. The manner in which it was convoked and its unfolding manifest a repressive attitude with regard to the exercise of religious liberty, which it was hoped had been consigned to the past in present-day China. The persistent desire to control the most intimate area of citizens? lives, namely their conscience, and to interfere in the internal life of the Catholic Church does no credit to China. On the contrary, it seems to be a sign of fear and weakness rather than of strength; of intransigent intolerance rather than of openness to freedom and to effective respect both of human dignity and of a correct distinction between the civil and religious spheres.

2. On several occasions the Holy See had let it be known, first and foremost to the Bishops, but also to all the faithful, and publicly, that they should not take part in the event. Each one of those who were present knows to what extent he or she is responsible before God and the Church. The Bishops in particular and the priests will also have to face the expectations of their respective communities, who look to their own Pastor and have a right to receive from him sure guidance in the faith and in the moral life.

3. It is known, moreover, that many Bishops and priests were forced to take part in the Assembly. The Holy See condemns this grave violation of their human rights, particularly their freedom of religion and of conscience. Moreover, the Holy See expresses its deepest esteem for those who, in different ways, have borne witness to their faith with courage and it invites the others to pray, to do penance and, through their works, to reaffirm their own will to follow Christ with love, in full communion with the universal Church.

4. Addressing those whose hearts are full of dismay and profound suffering, those who are wondering how it is possible that their own Bishop or their own priests should have taken part in the Assembly, the Holy See asks them to remain steadfast and patient in the faith; it invites them to take account of the pressures experienced by many of their Pastors and to pray for them; it exhorts them to continue courageously supporting them in the face of the unjust impositions that they encounter in the exercise of their ministry.

5. During the Assembly, among other things, the leaders of the so-called Episcopal Conference and of the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association were appointed. Concerning these two entities, and concerning the Assembly itself, the words written by Pope Benedict XVI in his 2007 Letter to the Church in China continue to apply (cf. nos. 7 and 8).
In particular, the present College of Catholic Bishops of China cannot be recognized as an Episcopal Conference by the Apostolic See: the "clandestine" Bishops, those not recognized by the Government but in communion with the Pope, are not part of it; it includes Bishops who are still illegitimate, and it is governed by statutes that contain elements incompatible with Catholic doctrine. It is deeply deplorable that an illegitimate Bishop has been appointed as its President.
Furthermore, regarding the declared purpose to implement the principles of independence and autonomy, self-management and democratic administration of the Church, it should be remembered that this is incompatible with Catholic doctrine, which from the time of the ancient Creeds professes the Church to be "one, holy, catholic and apostolic". It is therefore lamentable also that a legitimate Bishop has been appointed President of the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association.

6. This is not the path that the Church must follow in the context of a great and noble nation, which attracts the attention of world opinion for its significant achievements in so many spheres, but still finds it hard to

implement the demands of genuine religious freedom, despite the fact that it professes in its Constitution to respect that freedom. What is more, the Assembly has rendered more difficult the path of reconciliation between Catholics of the "clandestine communities" and those of the "official communities", thereby inflicting a deep wound not only upon the Church in China but also upon the universal Church.

7. The Holy See profoundly regrets the fact that the celebration of the above-mentioned Assembly, as also the recent episcopal ordination without the indispensable Papal mandate, have unilaterally damaged the dialogue and the climate of trust that had been established in its relations with the Government of the People?s Republic of China. The Holy See, while reaffirming its own wish to dialogue honestly, feels bound to state that unacceptable and hostile acts such as those just mentioned provoke among the faithful, both in China and elsewhere, a grave loss of the trust that is necessary for overcoming the difficulties and building a correct relationship with the Church, for the sake of the common good.

8. In the light of what has happened, the Holy Father?s invitation ? addressed on 1 December 2010 to all the Catholics of the world to pray for the Church in China which is going through a particularly difficult time ? remains pressing.

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