

Chinese Catholic Bishops at the ‘Two Assemblies’

On the sideline of the meeting of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC) and the 13th National People's Congress (NPC), held in Beijing from 5 to 20 of March, the China-Vatican negotiations has been a topic of concern for many people. Even Wang Yi, Minister of Foreign Affairs, was asked about the imminent accord reportedly to be soon signed. He replied, “China and the Vatican is going through constructive dialogue”.

On March 4, Wang Zuoan, director of the State Administration for Religious Affairs, who attended the NPC, also was asked on the topic by to the Commercial Radio of Hong Kong: he said that “China has always been sincere about improving China-Vatican relations and has made great efforts to do so.” He described the communication channel between the two parties as effective and smooth. But, he also pointed out that China will continue to uphold the traditional principles and the ‘sinicization of religion’, and, at the same time, to make efforts to improve Sino-Vatican relations. Wang did not disclose whether the two sides would soon sign an agreement on bishop appointments. According to him, the expectation of and from the bishops and other religious leaders is to be united in their love of the country and love for the Church, in view of an healthy religious development and social harmony.

The official Catholic bishops who attended as members of the NPC (three: namely Huang Bingzhang of Shantou, excommunicated, Guo Jincai of Chengde, illegitimate and Fang Jianping, illegitimately ordained but later legitimized) and of the CPPCC (seven, namely, Ma Yinglin, illegitimate, Fang Xingyao, Lei Shiyin, excommunicated, Li Shan, Zhan Silu, illegitimate, Shen Bin and Meng Qinglu + one layman, Liu Yuanlong) voted for the decision to accept 21 amendments to the Chinese Constitution, including one that allows an unlimited term of office for the President of the State and to add the “Thought of Xi Jinping” in the Preamble of the national Constitution. The decision confirmed Xi’s consolidation of power.

In a various press interviews, they expressed their full support for President Xi Jinping and gave their views on the supposed agreement on the appointment of bishops between the Vatican and the Chinese Government, issue that recently has aroused widespread concern among Catholics in China and around the world.

Speaking to reporters on March 9 whether Chinese Catholics need to support Xi Jinping, Bp. Peter Fang Jianping of Tangshan, Hebei, said that “as a citizen of a country, citizenship should come before a religion and belief.” When he was asked whether God or the Communist Party is more important, Bishop Fang answered, “what’s God’s return to God and the country’s return to the country.” He hoped Sino-Vatican relations would have a good result this year, and he was confident that the two parties could reach an agreement on appointment of bishops. Bp. Fang pointed out that if all mainland bishops could obtain legal status from the church, it could effectively promote Sino-Vatican relations and the development of the Church. Although the specific contents of the negotiations are not very clear, he believed that China and the Vatican have been working hard for years to reach an agreement, and now no obstacles are between the two parties in the negotiations. President Xi proposed ‘sinicization of religion’ aims at apply religion to the development of China, adapting to national and social conditions and to think about how to make religions more accessible to Chinese people, he said.

As a CPPCC member, the excommunicated Bp. Lei Shiyin of Leshan told the media that if diplomatic ties between China and the Vatican were established, it would have a good impact on China's international influence and implementation of religious policy, while allowing the church to conduct its work more normally on the mainland.

Excommunicated Bp. Zhan Silu of Mindong, interviewed by *Sing Tao Daily* on March 10, said Sino-Vatican relations have made a big breakthrough: "There are no obstacles if everyone just thinks of the benefit of the church for the sake of peace." When asked how the underground church should be managed in the future, he said the church relies on joint management and it would be necessary for church members, priests and nuns to unite to be able to do well. "If [church management] is arbitrary, no one can manage it well...managing the church should be in accordance with the law."