

## **Six Months after the Signing of the Sino-Vatican Provisional Agreement**

According to a Reuters report on 17 March, although a visit to the Vatican was not on Xi Jinping's official schedule for his state visit to Italy (21-24 March), a senior Vatican source claimed that Pope Francis was willing to meet Xi and that the president's intermediaries had made overtures to the Vatican. During the time of his visit, a rumor spread that President Xi Jinping and Pope Francis could meet on Friday 22 March. That date would have been exactly six months since the official signing of the *Provisional Agreement on the Appointment of Bishops in China* on 22 September 2018. However, the meeting did not occur. This fact should help people to review the situation of the Church in China in a more realistic way.

First, let us look at the results of the Agreement. Already it has been six months since its signing, but up to now no new episcopal ordination has taken place. Since the content of the Agreement is kept secret, only an actual case of episcopal appointment could help shed light on the agreed-upon procedure.

In China, at the local level nobody knows about the agreed procedure, so those concerned continue to do things as before the Agreement. Ambitious priests who want to become bishops follow previous ways, that is, they try to remove any possible competitors and bribe the local officials responsible for religious affairs. One of these priests has even applied to join the Communist Party because he feels that the support of the Party will assure him the success. After that, he reckons, sooner or later the Holy See will recognise him. In some official communities, old bishops who are worried about ordaining their successors, wait for the order to proceed from the Government authorities, and not from the Holy See.

During the 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration (17-18 December, 2018) of the first episcopal ordination without papal approval in 1958, Wang Zuo'an, the deputy chief of the Party's United Front Department which now oversees the administration of religious affairs, repeated the urgent need to select "politically reliable" candidates for the vacant sees.

"Beijing will reportedly provide a list of candidates from which Pope Francis can choose bishops," Sam Brownback, the U.S. Ambassador at Large for

International Religious Freedom, told the *Washington Examiner* on 22 March. That list will contain, Brownback predicted, "only individuals whom the party deems loyal to its interests." And the Holy Father would have to accept one of them.

Within the last six months, not only was there no new episcopal ordination, but some of the recently legitimised bishops did not show any change of behavior. On March 4, the *Sing Tao Daily* of Hong Kong published an interview with two of them:

*Yesterday a delegate of the People's National Political Consultative Conference and vice president of the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association (CCPA), Zhan Silu, has emphasised to our Daily, that "it is wrong" for the faithful of the unofficial Church not to join the official Patriotic Association. He asked: "Who does not desire the unity of the Church?" Another Catholic delegate, vice president of the CCPA, Lei Shiyin, expressed great optimism about the implementation of the Agreement during the year, and denied that the restrictions of domestic churches in any way dampened the policy of religious freedom.*

When asked about the forced registration of unofficial clergy, Bp. Zhan answered that "there will be no official or unofficial church when the Church is united, and that people who refuse to join the official church are acting in their personal interests."

About the registration policy, the Chinese authorities continue to force underground clergy to register through the Patriotic Association, despite apparent requests by the Holy See that China cease the practice.

As to the recognition of unofficial bishops by the Chinese authorities, there is no news up to now. And even Bp. Guo Xijin, who was demoted to auxiliary bishop of Mindong, Fujian in order to let Zhan Silu become the ordinary bishop, has not yet been officially recognised by the Chinese Government, and Bishop Guo is not allowed to minister as bishop.

There have been reports of concelebrations between official and unofficial clergy: indeed, they are the positive results of the Agreement, carried out by people who want to show their loyalty to the Holy Father. Not a few priests, after the decision of the Vatican, agreed to become official through the CCPA. Concelebrations and official registrations in some cases have caused negative reactions among the clergy

and within the community. In Xuanhua, one charismatic priest, not only advocated reconciliation and concelebrated with official clergy but also created confusion and division in the community. As a result, Bishop Cui Tai suspended him from exercising the priestly ministry. The priest then accused the bishop, and reported him to the police who once again arrested bishop Cui. Several priests and members of the faithful did not accept the concelebrations and went further underground. Some priests even left the priesthood. In Zhengding diocese, the bishop rebuked priests who had registered with the CCPA in the name of reconciliation; while in another diocese the head of the unofficial community concelebrated with the official bishop, but many Catholics left the church in dismay.

Meanwhile, official restrictions of religious activities continue, gradually spreading to several provinces: children cannot attend liturgical celebrations, youths under 18 years of age cannot receive religious education, formation centres are closed, the printing and distribution of religious books are forbidden. Both official and unofficial clergy are sending out frequent appeals for prayer and support.

Never mind that people outside China consider the Catholic Church integrated, as opposed to being a “foreign” entity in Chinese society, Chinese authorities hold a different view, and their official policy is to try all efforts to ‘sinicise’ Christianity, that is to eliminate all the “foreign elements” of the Church and make it “Chinese.” They aim at forcing the Church to adjust herself to the socialist system under the control and guidance of the Party.

On 11 March, Xu Xiaohong, chairman of the National Committee of the Three-Self Patriotic Protestant Movement, addressed the delegates to the Chinese People’s Political Consultative Conference at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing, striking a strong nationalist tone to underline the need for Sinicisation:

*[We] must recognise that Chinese churches are surnamed ‘China’, not ‘the West’. The actions by anti-China forces that attempt to affect our social stability or even subvert the Government of our country are doomed to fail.*

“Some believers lack national consciousness,” he continued, “and that’s why we have the saying: ‘one more Christian, one less Chinese’...”

“We all know very well that in comparison to other religions, Protestantism in China carries a heavier historical burden and faces greater pressure from reality in its push for Sinicisation,” Xu said. Therefore the Protestant faith in China has to rid

itself of all imprints of a “foreign” religion, establish its own Chinese theology, continually drawing on the fine traditions of Chinese culture and to promote and practice the core values of socialism.

On 20 March, the provincial authorities of Guangdong province started to give financial rewards to people who report illegal religious activities, especially of foreign believers.

There are very pessimistic voices. Chan Shun-Hing, a professor at the Department of Religion and Philosophy at Hong Kong Baptist University, told participants at a recent seminar that members of the underground Church felt disappointed and betrayed by the Vatican. He had seen priests from the underground Church leave their ministry and refuse to join the open community. This, he argued, would lead to the gradual disappearance of the underground movement altogether. Professor Chan even speculated that underground members of the Church may "remain steadfast in their faith and loyal to God, but break away from the Church hierarchy to develop their own church."

Can these negative facts allow people to be optimistic about the situation of the Church in China? Christian faith gives us the vision of the final victory of Christ upon all world evils and this is the source of Christian hope and optimism. But faith and theology should not simply emphasise the eschatological final victory which is in the hands of God, but should also be contextualised. One must pay attention to the messages God is giving us through the daily events of life.

In order to avoid overly optimistic or pessimistic evaluations of the situation of the Church in China, we must carefully consider positive and negative events in order to perceive the plan of God. Only a realistic perspective can result in a more objective evaluation of the situation. It can also help us understand the real needs of the Catholic communities in China, in order to effectively contribute to their solution.

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