

Wuhan diocese suffers government interference, tampered with distress

While the Catholic Church and others have been observing the situation of Auxiliary Bishop Thaddeus Ma Daqin of Shanghai, Catholics in mainland China have passed on information from Wuhan diocese that has caused some concern (Please see Appendix).

From Nov. 25–30, 2012, all the priests of Wuhan diocese held a retreat, followed by a meeting. All priests present at the meeting voted in favor of a reshuffle of parish priests. However, some priests received warnings from provincial and city officials of related government departments, which alleged that the priests meeting was invalid and illegal. Days later, officials also announced the dismissal of Fr Shen Guo'an from his position as temporarily in charge of Wuhan diocese.

Researchers of our Centre have the following questions in mind:

China's Constitution stipulates that all citizens have the freedom of religious belief. Priests' meeting in the diocese and parish priests' changes are part of Church internal affairs; and priests have been called and trained to be leaders in their parishes. The parishioners hold them in respect and high esteem. Why doesn't the local government respect the priests, the faithful and the internal affairs of the Church? Why is there a need for government officials to approve or declare their meeting legitimate and valid or not? Parish priests' matters are normal religious activities. Then why is there a need for national security, public security, United Front Work Department, religious Affairs officials to direct or interfere? Isn't it an interference from government?

A temporary in-charge of the diocese represents the priests and the diocese. Why should government officials dismiss or appoint persons of diocese management committee arbitrarily and at their discretion. Where is the element of democracy in Church affairs and freedom of religious belief?

Is the Chinese government going to push the priests of Wuhan to walk in the path of Lei Shiyin, Huang Bingzhang and Yue Fusheng ?

Dec. 20, 2012

Appendix

In Wuhan diocese, at the end of the priests' retreat held from November 25 to 30, 2012, the priests held a meeting. Nineteen of the 23 priests attended. Four were absent (one was studying in Beijing, two overseas, one for special reasons). Participating priests voted, unanimously in favor of a reshuffle of all parish priests, a practice that had not been done for years or decades. However, before the meeting ended, certain priests have already received warnings from officials of relevant departments of city and provincial levels, and even declared the priests' meeting invalid and illegal. At 8 am on Nov. 30, Father Shen Guo'an, temporarily in-charge of Wuhan diocese, presided at a Mass with all priests and faithful at the cathedral on Shanghai Road to mark the beginning of the Year of Faith in the diocese. During the Mass, Father Shen solemnly announced the reshuffle of all parish priests, and the diocese would begin anew to welcome the Year of Faith. All the parishes' delegates took part in the opening Mass. The faithful were enthusiastic and joyful before and after the Mass, and applauded the news of the reshuffle. Afterwards, all the priests were interrogated by the government officials individually and were warned of any changes.

Father Cui Qingqi, who was absent because of his studies in Beijing, was recalled immediately upon hearing he would be transferred to another parish. On Dec. 1 morning, he arrived at Hankou, but did not return to the diocese. Instead, he was with government officials until evening.

On Dec. 8 morning, Wuhan diocese, despite heavy interference by officials at different levels, resolutely implemented the decisions made at the meeting of all priests: 1. To deliver a letter of appointment to each parish priest; 2. To deliver a letter of notification to government departments at different levels, for the record. That afternoon, the Hubei provincial government was angry, and immediately ordered a revocation of the title and dismissal from duties of Fr Shen Guo'an as temporarily person-in-charge of the diocese.

At 4 pm on Dec. 13, fifteen priests of the diocese were escorted under guard to attend a working meeting of Wuhan diocese convened by the Hubei provincial ethnic and religious affairs committee (religious affairs department). At the meeting, it was announced that Fr Shen Guo'an was dismissed from being a temporarily person-in-charge of the diocese. The secretary general of Provincial Patriotic Association and Church Affairs Commission Fr Shu Zigeng, was also dismissed. Under the government's strict arrangement, the diocese's management committee was reorganized: Cui Qingqi was named as in-charge, Sr Wu Lin (vice president of national Patriotic Association), Li Bangmeng, Fr Gao Leiqing, and Patriotic Association member Hu Guowei.

Participating priests and sisters were placed under the control of the departments of national security, public security, United Front Work Department, Religious Affairs. Only Fr Cui was allowed to speak at the meeting.

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