

The Consecration of Bishop Peter Feng *An historic event! What is the part of Caesar,* *what the part of God?*

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On Epiphany 2004 Bishop Peter Feng was ordained Coadjutor Bishop of Hengshui, also called Jingxian, a small diocese of Hebei Province with 27 priests, 60 sisters and 26,000 Catholics. The consecration took place in the presence of more than 1000 Catholics and many concelebrating priests. I had never before been present at an episcopal consecration in China. This time I was invited because the candidate, Peter Feng, was a scholar of Verbiest Foundation in Leuven. Together with the faithful and some other foreign guests we waited a long time, praying and singing hymns, because the ceremony started many hours late. We did not know in detail what was being discussed, but we sufficiently sensed the meaning and importance of what was happening. It was a remarkable event. One could call it "*historic.*" Both the community of all the priests of the diocese and the civil authorities made serious attempts to break through some of the old controversies that marred many episcopal consecrations in China during the past fifty years. Thanks to their efforts, some of the old controversies were clarified, at least for this occasion.



What then made the consecration of Bishop Peter Feng so "historic"? Were all the problems that previously caused misunderstandings suddenly cleared up in Jingxian? I do not think so. What was new and hope-giving in Jingxian was the fact that

Chinese civil authorities and the community of priests of the Hengshui Diocese had a long, open and frank discussion about the way the liturgy of the consecration was to be organized. The issue at stake was a clear application of the words of the Lord Jesus: "Give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God." (Mt 22:21). For civil authorities that kind of ceremony means the "installation of a bishop—i.e. administrator—of a diocese." For the priests it is the consecration of a "pastor for the People of God." A bishop is chosen to become the official "servant and pointer" of Christ's presence in today's world, and to lead his community in the celebration of the Eucharist. This is a strictly religious event wherein Catholics celebrate a mystery of their faith: one of their priests receiving the fullness of the sacrament of the priesthood and becoming their "pastor" (= bishop), whose task it is "to guide his flock of Christians in their faith." To become a "bishop" is a calling from God. Selecting the candidate bishop means to discern who among the priests is qualified for such a calling. This must happen in a process which allows priests and their community to reflect in faith. If material motivations, personal ambitions or outside pressure corrupt this faith reflection, the result is null and void for the Church. Consecrating the selected candidate is a liturgy in which this whole process is completed in a joyful celebration in faith by the community. It clearly belongs to the "part of God."

We are not surprised that it is difficult for professed non-believers to understand this, as they do not think in terms of faith. They see a bishop only as the *leader and administrator of a Diocese*. To Catholics that aspect of the task of a bishop is also important and real. But it comes after his first task as *pastor*. It points to the function of a bishop in society and represents the administrative part of his new function, which must of course also be respected and find its proper place. A bishop must be recognized by official authorities. His installation is an act which must be agreed upon with them. His Church must be registered according to law etc. All this is the field which comes under supervision of Caesar. It was truly worthwhile for Chinese priests and civil authorities to spend several hours in trying to define which part in their liturgy belonged to God, and which part belonged to Caesar. Only open and honest dialogue can achieve this. Both parties must

try to understand each other's viewpoint. That's what they did in Jingxian, and that's why it took so long. Both parties deserve praise for their efforts.

The distinction between the part of God and the part of Caesar in the selection and consecration of a bishop may seem to be simple at first look, but the prolonged controversies over this issue during the past fifty years in China show that it is not. Viewpoints were different and opposed, but seldom or never was there an open dialogue about it. Finally in Jingxian, priests and civil authorities had the courage to use several hours to frankly and openly discuss this controversial issue, and to work out a mutual agreement, even if they had to postpone the ceremony. It was worth it. Finally, the faithful joyfully celebrated the fact that the new bishop, according to the old Church tradition and Church law, after being selected by the community of priests in a faith reflection, was appointed by His Holiness Pope John Paul II. He was also approved by the Chinese Bishops Conference with the agreement of Chinese civil authorities. This event was celebrated in a Chinese liturgy which started in the small Catholic cathedral and, after a procession through the streets of Jingxian, continued in the local Hall of the People in the presence of over one thousand Catholics of the diocese. Among them were many unofficial ("underground") Catholics and priests. This way the celebration became an occasion of rapprochement between civil and Church leaders and also between Catholics belonging to both the official and underground communities.

One can say that the Jingxian episcopal consecration was different from most other episcopal consecrations in China since 1958. In that year two Chinese bishops were appointed by the PRC government and consecrated without first obtaining an appointment by the Pope. Because of that, the event became an historical controversy. Ever since 1958 episcopal consecrations in China have often been the cause of misunderstandings. Either, the new bishop was consecrated without an appointment by the Pope, which then made Church authorities as well as Chinese Catholics unhappy. Or else the bishop was consecrated without the agreement of Chinese civil authorities, which made him illegal according to Chinese law, and as a result his pastoral activities as bishop could be considered to be punishable by law.

Out of this fifty years history grew the “official” *Chinese Catholic Bishops Conference*, which was approved by the PRC but was never approved by the Holy See, and an “unofficial” (“underground”) *Chinese Catholic Bishops Conference* which was approved neither by the Holy See nor by Chinese authorities. We all know that over the past twenty years a great number of the *official Chinese bishops* applied to the Holy See to have their situations normalized. Many among them obtained a positive answer and were appointed by the Pope. By now, the Holy Father has approved about 80 percent of all Chinese bishops, both official and unofficial ones. But just the fact that there are two kinds of Catholic bishops in China—*legal* and *illegal* ones, according to either the law of the Church or the law of the country—is unhealthy and abnormal. Inside China it causes division among the pastors (= bishops) and confusion among Catholics, who are not sure where they may or may not attend Mass. Chinese authorities arrest some of the underground bishops because of their “illegal activities.” They insist that religious activities must be registered according to law, but they ignore the fact that the very existence of an *underground Church community* has its roots in the past intolerance of the regime. It enforced on the believers elements incompatible with the Catholic faith. This harms the Church, but it also harms the international reputation of the PRC, which is a world power guaranteeing “*Freedom of Religious Belief*” in its constitution. Why prolong this controversy which exists only in China, while 165 other countries in the world do not have this problem?

For years we had expected that normalizing Sino-Vatican diplomatic relations would clarify this situation but every time we hoped for a breakthrough some unexpected turn of events made all hopes vanish. We still continue to hope. But in the absence of diplomatic relations, one wonders whether an informal but true and honest dialogue—as in Jingxian—can help do away with these useless controversies, which benefit nobody and harm both the Church and the State! The episcopal consecration in Jingxian on Epiphany 2004 can be seen as a positive step in that direction. The physical effort spent by priests and authorities in long hours of dialogue have produced their fruits and resulted in a meaningful celebration. That was positive, even though both parties—civil authorities and priests of Jingxian—were probably not fully

satisfied with all aspects of the celebration. One may not expect to clarify a fifty-year-old controversy all at once. At least the results in Jingxian were positive. Hopefully these efforts will also benefit future celebrations, and result in a definitive and final solution to the controversy that has caused too many misunderstandings in the past. Such a solution would benefit both the Chinese Church and the PRC.



Here Father Jeroom Heyndrickx dedicates Globe of Verbiest at Louvain University, where Bishop Peter Feng studied, during Louvain Conference on "Historiography of Catholic Church in China," September, 1990.