

A Crucial Turning Point in the Chinese Church

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Recent Chinese politics appear to be somewhat disjointed. On the one hand, there is remarkable economic-financial development, with significant legislative consequences. The international community readily gives credit to the Chinese government for such progress. The new leadership of Hu Jintao and Wen Jiabao has succeeded in projecting a modern and reformist image and enjoys a notable international sympathy. But the Chinese communist government has not yet closed the books on the darker, oppressive aspects of its regime. The religious policy in general, and the attitude toward the Catholic Church in particular, not only has not benefited from the new political and economic course, but on the contrary there is a worrying hardening of positions, and a return to old policies of total control and oppression. A number of commentators, due to superficial or convenient analysis, do not even notice this striking contradiction. Or else they consider it to be transient and of little importance. But this is not the case. The policy of the regime towards the Catholic Church has been going backwards for at least four years, and signs are not good for the near future. It would be wonderful if the new political leaders could remedy this tragic confusion, which not only seriously damages the Chinese Catholic community, but also the integrity of the drive towards modernization of the Chinese government and people.

Already in the summer of 1999 the first signs of an authoritarian turn in policy appeared, with the publication of the notorious secret document No. 26. The sad peak of the new anti-Catholic policy was reached on January 6, 2000, when five bishops were illegitimately consecrated in a politically staged ceremony in Beijing. This was followed later in the year by the furious campaign against Pope John II's canonization of 120 martyrs of China on October 1, 2000.

During the following years the Chinese Catholic Church suffered further consequences. Let us cite a few of them here: the unilateral combining of ancient dioceses into a single one, ignoring the rights of the Church; the tightening of control over the seminaries, with the prohibition against many professors from Hong Kong and Taiwan from teaching their much appreciated courses; the rectification process in some seminaries and a strengthening of political education in them; the ostracism (until recently) of Hong Kong bishop Joseph Zen; the threat to a number of open (or official) communities of being banned as underground, if they do not accept the decisions of the authorities; some underground communities being threatened with being declared "evil cults," thus falling under the supervision of the special department against "evil cults," created to deal with the Fa Lun Gong. Moreover, the underground church is still suffering the arrests of leaders, priests and bishops, heavy fines, demolition of churches and other dictatorial measures.

The "Three Documents" of March 2003 have codified (if such was needed) the ideology that underpins the authoritarian anti-Catholic turn of the government, and tightens its control over the open church communities. The documents demand that the latter become really independent from the Universal Church, a move that would destroy the very catholicity of the Catholic Church.

The Catholic Church in China, especially the open church communities, is going through a crucial moment in their history: the change of leadership. The old bishops, one after the other, are dying out. Diocesan leadership is now passing into the hands of very young bishops, some of them not yet 40 years old. The officials in charge of the religious policy realize very well that this is a crucial moment. They do not spare any effort or means to elect to the episcopacy men submissive to the religious policy of the communist regime. Young priests, especially those with leadership qualities, undergo tremendous pressure to bow to the government's will. Through the principle of the "democratic running of the church," which is nothing but an euphemism for total control, the bureaucrats of the Party (United Front) and of the government (Religious Affairs Bureau) create, wherever they can, an artificial division in the Catholic communities. On one side is the episcopal candidate, the priest spontaneously acknowledged by all as the most suitable one for the episcopacy. He is usually supported by the

elderly bishop (if there is one), who guarantees the fidelity of the candidate to the Catholic tradition of unity with the Holy See. On the other side, there is the candidate of the government, generally a priest that, for one reason or another, can easily be manipulated by the cadres of the regime. The manipulation of the government consists in isolating their candidate from the rest of the diocese, and in offering him various kinds of privileges, both political and economical. As a consequence, a young priest, with a weak character, or with some ambition, can hardly resist the pressure and the allurements. The crises, both vocational and moral, of an increasing number of young priests, have their origins in this oppressive policy.

In the past 12 months there were the following ordinations of new young bishops: Joseph Tong Changping (Weinan, Shaanxi); Joseph Han Zhihai (Lanzhou, Gansu); John Tan Yanchuan (Nanning, Guangxi); Joseph Liao Hongqing (Meizhou, Guangdong); Ma Cunguo (Shuozhou, Shanxi), Peter Feng Xinmao (Hengshui, Hebei), and Zhang Xianwang (Jinan, Shandong). The different circumstances of these ordinations, which cannot be reported here in detail, have something in common, namely, the permanent conflict between the bureaucrats of the government and the catholic communities. This can be seen from the sometimes unsuccessful attempts to elect bishops according to the “democratic” system. In cases of both successful and unsuccessful elections, the standpoint of the Catholic communities is clear. They desire to be truly Catholic, that is to carry out the election and consecration of a bishop according to the Catholic tradition, which includes, as an essential element, the mandate or the approval of the candidate by the Holy Father.

The experience of these years clearly shows that the Chinese Catholics are not willing to be governed by an illegitimate bishop. This is said regardless of the personal worth of the person in question. An illegitimately ordained bishop will become, in fact, a deserted bishop, without people, a “shepherd” without a flock. It is quite dismaying to observe how the officials of the regime and of the Patriotic Association are unable to acknowledge that their policy does not work. There is no national church or a “patriotic” church in China. The faithful, religious, priests and bishops do not want an independent church. Nevertheless, the policy of the

government is still carried out with determination, sparing neither means nor personnel. There has been, for example, the intimidating presence of dozens of public security personnel at some of the recent episcopal consecrations. Other efforts at interference include the reading, during the Mass of consecration, of the letter of appointment of the Chinese Catholic Bishops Conference, instead of the mandate of the Holy Father, and the attempt to insert one or more illegitimate bishops as co-consecrators at the ceremony. On the other hand, where the clergy and the faithful have stood firm, united, and courageous, they were able to win some concessions, especially the public communication of the bishop-elect's communion with the Universal Church and with the Holy See.

It has been noticed that, the more the candidate was ready to renounce the episcopacy rather than transgress on the matter of communion with the Universal Church, the stronger he was in resisting the pressures coming from the officials. As a priest like them, my sympathy and my solidarity go out to the young priests of China. If these words could reach them, I would like to tell them: "Be free, be strong, and resist unreasonable pressures. Be ready to renounce the episcopacy rather than compromise with your conscience... The truth will set you free."