

Underground Episcopal Consecrations in the PRC — Thirty Years Later

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On March 26, 1980, in Fengxiang Diocese, Shaanxi province, an unusual ceremony took place. The local Roman Catholic bishop, Anthony Zhou Weidao (1905-1983) secretly consecrated his own successor Lucas Li Jingfeng (born 1924), a man who was to play an influential role in the Church during the next thirty years, within the confines of his north-western province. At times, Bishop Li Jingfeng would sternly and consistently express an opposite opinion even to Bishop Li Du'an, the bishop of Xi'an, an intelligent and courageous man in his own right.

About this time, the two bishops — Zhou Weidao and Li Jingfeng — came to know that the then bishop of Baoding, in Hebei Province, Peter Joseph Fan Xueyan (1907-1992), had been released from prison, after serving many years in detention. Through intermediaries, contact was soon established, and after a while the frail bishop of Baoding proposed to his senior colleagues that they proceed to secretly ordain some new bishops. After some hesitation, both agreed, and three new prelates were consecrated.

They were: Casimir Wang Milu, ordained on January 28, 1981, as bishop of Tianshui, Gansu Province; Julius Jia Zhiguo, consecrated on February 8, 1981, as bishop of Zhengding, Hebei Province; and Francis Xavier Zhou Fangji (d. 1989), on June 16, 1981, as bishop of Yixian, also Hebei Province.

A short note, written in Latin, explained the reasons behind their controversial decision. The regime, they were convinced, could not be trusted to respect the freedom of its citizens. Both men had languished for long years in labour camps without a proper trial. They — as so many others before them — were guilty of being religious believers, and of course the same thing could happen

again, as in fact it did. On the other hand, they were convinced that the Church without an authentic episcopal office could not last.

This was the start of a movement unique in the history of the whole Church, at least for the dimensions it took. There were strong reasons for taking such a course of action, which ultimately only produced mixed results. The State found enough motives for trying to suppress it, fearing that it would eventually have to confront “counterrevolutionary activities” from the Catholic camp. On the other hand, although the very existence of a large group of believers ready to defend their faith served as a strong reminder to all that freedom has its price, Catholics were not simply called to reaffirm a vague and distant doctrine but to show their loyalty to the person of the risen Christ. And that required genuine religious freedom.

There are still some discrepancies in the history of the beginnings of this somewhat “organised” underground Catholic movement, founded to ordain bishops to fill vacancies. The present bishop of Hong Kong, Bishop John Tong Hon, in a conference paper delivered in 1988 and later published,¹ wrote that: *“At that time, Bishop Zhou Weidao of Fengxiang diocese in Shaanxi province wrote to admonish him [Bishop Fan Xueyan] about ordaining bishops without papal approval. Bishop Fan replied that in this extraordinary situation canon law grants such a faculty. His reply eventually reached Rome, where the Pope, after hearing Bishop Fan’s position, agreed with what Bishop Fan was doing. The Pope indicated privately that as long as grave reasons existed and the candidates’ qualifications were examined and proved satisfactory, the ordination was licit.”*

This description however does not match with the dates of the episcopal ordinations. Li Jingfeng was ordained in March 1980, while Bishop Fan ordained three bishops one year later, in 1981, during the months of January, February and April respectively. If these dates are proved correct, then the succession of events would have to be slightly adjusted.

More than thirty years have elapsed since that humble start. Without looking for its numerous merits or demerits, it is worth

¹ J. Tong, “The Church from 1949 to 1990,” in E. Tang and J.P. Wiest, *The Catholic Church in Modern China*, New York, Orbis Book, 1993, p. 23.

revisiting the main elements that gradually contributed to making the “underground Catholic movement” a significant and mostly silent protest against the unreasonable intrusion of the Party-State into the realm of the individual conscience.

In detention, prisoners, including the bishops were not kept informed of events taking place in the world outside. It was difficult and dangerous to talk about religious matters, which Chairman Mao Zedong (1893-1976), at the beginning of the Cultural Revolution, had declared obsolete and of no interest to anyone. People had to decipher by themselves what to believe of the doctored news they were being fed. But now, out of prison, they faced a sad situation, all alone. Nor could they rely on visiting friends and relatives to inform them, as these were still few and closely supervised. Their health also was usually in bad shape, after so many years of deprivation.

An anguishing case of conscience

Hopes for the better were aroused by the release of thousands of people from work camps and prisons, but more encouragement came from the big initial discussion on the political future of China, carried out by the central leaders of the Party, in particular by paramount leader Deng Xiaoping (1904-1997). He resolutely pushed for radical changes for a nation that was on the brink of bankruptcy. The two magic words were reform and openness, at all levels. Time proved Deng Xiaoping to be at least partly right.

The question believers were asking themselves was whether “religion” was to be included in the plans for reform and openness. Believers wondered if the old religious policy was to be revived. It was in fact a policy inimical to religion, meant to control and eliminate religion through policies put into practice by the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association (CCPA). Pope Benedict XVI, in his 2007 Pastoral Letter to the Church in China, had declared this organization to be alien to the Catholic Church. Chairman Mao himself had declared the CCPA “suppressed” at the beginning of the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976). After the December 1978 3rd Plenum of the 11th Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party, which initiated the new policies of openness and reform,

many citizens expected new ideas and new directions for the future of the country, including in the area of religion, to be forthcoming.

However, the Catholics were greatly shocked when the episcopal ordination without papal approval of Michael Fu Tieshan took place in Beijing on December 21, 1979. Michael Fu Tieshan (1932-2007) was consecrated as bishop of Beijing at the Nantang cathedral by two illegitimate bishops — Yang Gaojian (1914-1995) and Zhang Jiashu (1893-1988) — and the legitimate bishop of Hohhot, Neimeng Province, Wang Xueming (1910-1997).

Fu Tieshan did not have the papal mandate for his ordination. He had been “self-elected” on the orders of the United Front Department and of the Religious Affairs Bureau. He was supported by a group consisting of a few bishops, priests, religious and lay people, who made the most of the opportunity to obtain again a share of the power, which Chairman Mao had taken from them years previously.

A haunting past

The ordination without papal approval of Fu Tieshan was a terrible blow to the whole Catholic community, within China and elsewhere. Perhaps it marked a turning point, leading to the decision to ordain “proper” bishops. The Catholics understood well that the Government would soon ask for their assent to what had already been done. It was urgent then to act quickly before Government made its move, and again arrested the leaders active in the Catholic camp. At the same time it became evident that the old unjust religious policy was to continue, notwithstanding the numerous declarations to the contrary.

The recent past was full of extremely painful memories that could not be forgotten, nor underestimated. Declarations from civil authorities had to be read correctly, as threats and violent interventions against innocent people continued to be the order of the day, motivated (when expressed) by seemingly lawful reasons.

That past stretched back the 1950s, when the Chinese government was openly intent on suppressing any reality that was or could become out of control. In the Catholic camp, the Party knew well where to strike. Bishops and religious superiors in

general had to be left with only nominal authority, and made to subscribe to the reform movement calling for an “autonomous and independent” Church.

Under that pretext, the CCPA was founded in 1957 and was given full authority over the Catholic Church. Shortly thereafter (in 1958) steps were taken leading to the forced “autonomous and independent election and consecration” of bishops. Those who dared to oppose or to raise objections simply disappeared — for good or for decades of years. However, a few bishops cooperated with the Party.

The results of this policy were considerable. In the year 1958, 24 bishops were illegitimately ordained; eleven were consecrated in 1959; six in 1960; seven in 1962, and three in 1963. A total of fifty one illegitimate bishops were consecrated in six years.²

By way of comparison, the last episcopal ordination with “open” papal mandate took place in 1955,³ preceded by nine in 1951, two in 1950, and seven in 1949. Nineteen bishops in all were consecrated in that six-year period, many of them experiencing harsh treatment and conditions in subsequent years. Four of the nineteen openly cooperated with the Party to organize an autonomous and independent Church: Ignace Pi Shushi (1897-1978), Joseph Li Daonan (1902-1971), Luis Li Boyu (1908-1951), and Francis Wang Xueming (1910-1997).

A turning point

The year 1980 was a turning point indeed, a year of reflection and prayer before deciding what to do. The discussion revolved around the urgent necessity of ordaining younger bishops to serve the Church in China and of preserving Church’s Catholic authenticity. But for that they needed the consent of the Pope, who was practically unreachable, since travelling abroad was arduous and almost impossible for a Chinese Catholic priest or bishop. These former labor camp detainees considered themselves to have

² At least two bishops were secretly ordained in that period: Bishop Alphonse Zong Huaimo on 29 July 1951 and Bishop Zhou Qingyun in 1960.

³ Yang Guangqi (1912-1957) was ordained for the diocese of Yuci, Shanxi province.

maintained a continuity with the authentic Catholic Church, a prerogative they were not prepared to concede to those who had crossed over to the Party camp.

These bishops and their would-be successors had strong reasons which explained their hesitation. At the same time they were absolutely unaware that in Rome, the Authorities concerned were studying the proposal to grant "*special faculties*" to the Church in China, meant to authorise bishops in communion with Rome to elect and consecrate their own successors as bishops, or bishops for neighbouring dioceses.

Would they be seen as doing the same thing as the patriotics, while at the same time proclaiming loyalty to the Church and to the Pope? Would they, in the end, become "schismatics" themselves? Or would their decision worsen the government's treatment of the Church as a whole? They asked these and similar questions. The dangers were numerous and enormous. But on the other hand, they felt their sense of responsibility as bishops. Keeping silent when faced with the destruction of the Church, the ultimate aim of the Party, would have meant making a grave mistake, they felt.

So they took the risk. Bishop Fan Xueyan of Baoding ordained the first three clandestine bishops. In time, the Holy See was informed, but by that time the "*special faculties*" were in force in the Church in China, and for the time being at least, there seemed to be no evident or serious consequences.

For those bishops who took that step, much time must have been spent in prayer and in anxious reflection. They had all endured much suffering over many long years, isolated from society, locked up in jails and forced labour camps, maltreated and derided, with no hope for a change in sight; all this for their religious beliefs. Others, however, followed a different path, choosing to make compromises for a plethora of reasons.

Now the underground and loyal bishops, though still very few in number throughout the immense territory of China, took upon themselves the task of reorganizing the structure of the Church. The consecration of bishops, the formation of future priests and religious Sisters, the restoration of churches and of other church properties, many other projects were all on the agenda.

The feeling that things in the country were moving fast towards a more relaxed atmosphere gave way to a rather dangerous attitude among many Catholics. A tendency developed in the way they looked upon themselves and upon those “other” Catholics, who had differing views about how to relate to the civil authorities, and consequent approaches. Simply put, the Catholic camp increasingly leaned towards a tendency of dividing believers between good and bad Christians, “patriotic ones” and “loyal ones”. They even ignored the many instances of bishops and priests who were genuinely searching for ways to coexist with civil society as a whole, and with believers who held different opinions from them.

It was not a matter of some Catholics making concessions to the other side at the expense of essentials to the faith. Rather these same Catholics were trying to visualize acceptable conditions for coexistence. Instead, a devastating confrontational mentality often prevailed, supported by reciprocal accusations and counteraccusations, all too often with people on both sides forgetting what actually was at stake.

Clandestine Episcopal Ordinations

The reorganization of dioceses meant primarily the presence of a bishop as the legitimate authority to which Catholics could refer. Reorganizing then became the key activity of the clandestine movement starting from the year 1981, after the ordination of the first three underground bishops, mentioned above, up to around the year 1988. A considerable number of underground bishops were thus ordained and became operative in different parts of the country.⁴

Seven in 1981:

Wang Milu	Tianshui	Gansu
Jia Zhiguo	Zhengding	Hebei
Zhang Chenguo	Siping	Jilin

⁴ The asterick (*) means that the bishop obtained State recognition at a later date.

Zhou Fangji	Yixian	Hebei
Zhang Huaixin	Anyang	Hebei
Yu Chengti	Hanzhong	Shaanxi
Yang Libo	Lanzhou	Gansu

Fifteen in 1982

Min Xilian	Zhaoxian	Hebei
Fan Yufei	Zhouzhi	Shaanxi
Sun Yuanmo*	Hongtong	Shanxi
Song Weili	Langfang	Hebei
Chen Jianzhang	Baoding	Hebei
Han Jingtao	Siping	Jilin
Liu Shuhe	Yixian	Hebei
Li Side	Tianjin	
Shi Hongzhen	Tianjin	
Shi Enxiang	Yixian	Hebei
Liu Guandong	Yixian	Hebei
Shi Hongchen*	Tianjin	
Li Weidao*	Changzhi	Shanxi
Zheng Shouduo*	Yuncheng	Shanxi
Xiao Liren	Xingtai	Hebei

Five in 1983

Lu Zhensheng	Tianshui	Gansu
Li Xinzheng	Tianshui	Gansu
Li Zhenrong	Xianxian	Hebei
Wang Chonglin	Zhaoxian	Hebei
Ma Zhongmu	Otoqe Qianqi	Nei Mongol

Eight in 1984

Liu Hede	Hankou	Hubei
Xie Shiguang	Mindong	Fujian
Yang Xiaohuai	Hankou	Hubei
Meng Ziwen	Nanning	Guangxi
Ye Ershi	Fuzhou	Fujian
Hao Zhenli	Chongli	Hebei
Zhu Yousan	Baoding	Hebei
Li Congzhe	Hohhot	Nei Mongol

Two in 1985

Huang Shoucheng	Funing	Fujian
Fan Zhongliang	Shanghai	

One in 1986

Zhang Boren	Hanyang	Hubei
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Five in 1987

Yang Shudao	Fuzhou	Fujian
Shi Chunjie	Baoding	Hebei
Zong Huaide*	Sanyuan	Shaanxi
Li Hongye	Luoyang	Henan
Hu Daguo	Shiqian	Guizhou

No underground bishop was consecrated in 1988, but a total of 43 clandestine bishops were consecrated in the seven years 1981-1987. Practically all of these men were legitimately ordained into the episcopate under the provision of the 1981 Special Faculties. The Pope was informed later, after the ordination had already taken place; at that point the ecclesiastical communion was established. The Holy See had almost no direct means of intervening in the selection process. That was set in motion with the clear aim of safeguarding the necessary religious freedom. In fact, the responsibility for these unusual ecclesial procedures had — and still has — to be placed squarely at the door of the Communist Party. The obsessive control and interference of the State in the religious area — in this case, in the election of a bishop — are the real cause of the secrecy sought by the believers. State and Party have other tasks to attend to, and certainly do not belong in the sphere of religion.

Beijing is often denounced as dragging its feet in seeking a solution to the long standing dispute between it and the Holy See, and it is no secret that so far all negotiations have failed. In fact, every time the two parties seemed to have come to an agreement over some small detail, Beijing soon found an excuse to call for a halt, at least temporarily to such negotiations. The Chinese Government has never been serious at the negotiating table.

An article by Paul Mooney that appeared in *The South Morning Post* of August 22, 2011, quoted Ren Yanli, the former head of the Christian Studies Section of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences' Institute of World Religions as saying, "Beijing never had any intention of normalising ties" with the Holy See. "China never said it wanted to restore relations with the Vatican," said Ren.

The Church in China might "end up with bishops that are completely ineffectual because their own priests, Sisters and lay Catholics will ignore them", adds Mooney. Ren "puts the blame on the government," saying "it should not get involved in religion." "It is not in the interest of the government or the country," he said. "The Church has no military, no power to overthrow you. What country is so foolish as to challenge religion?"

Two alarms, which seriously affected the Church, were set off in the mid-1980s. Reorganization was certainly a positive activity, but it came to the attention of the public authorities. Worried that it could result in organized anti-Government activity, such loss of control could not to be tolerated. Reports reached the Party Central. Prime Minister Li Peng ordered an investigation into the situation. This resulted in a warning to officials at lower levels to be on the alert, and not to underestimate the changes that were taking place. As a result, Catholics in Hebei Province, where the movement was particularly strong, were placed under severe scrutiny.

The second "event", on the other hand, was a cause of worry to the clandestine Catholic sector. Rumour had it that the Beijing authorities were about to approach the Holy See for talks on establishing diplomatic relations. The question arose among them: who would be representing the Church in China at the eventual talks? In a naïve move, clandestine bishops thought that numbers — especially in the case of bishops — would count for much. They consequently opted to carry out more secret ordinations.

Thirteen in 1989

Guo Wenzhi	Qiqihar	Heilongjiang
Pei Shangde	Beijing	
Jiang Liren	Hohhot	Nei Mongol
Li Bingyao	Heze	Shandong

Yuan Wenzai	Haimen	Jiangsu
An Shi'en	Daming	Hebei
Liang Xisheng	Kaifeng	Henan
Liu Difen	Anguo	Hebei
Zhang Jingmu	Xuanhua	Hebei
Zhao Zhendong	Xuanhua	Hebei
Han Dingxiang	Handan	Hebei
Yu Chengxin	Hanzhong	Shaanxi
Gao Yuchen	Jingxian	Hebei

For the first time, the nation's capital had an underground bishop of its own. By the middle of the year 1989, however, things changed radically culminating in the Tiananmen Square massacre, and the subsequent crackdown on any activity lacking the previous blessing of the authorities.

To complete the picture regarding legitimate secret ordinations we must add a few more lines. Bishops ordained.

One in 1990

Zeng Jingmu	Yujiang	Jiangxi
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Three in 1991

Gu Zheng	Xining	Qinghai
Zhang Weizhu	Xinxiang	Henan
Xie Tingzhe	Urumqi	Xinjiang

Two in 1992

Zhang Qingtian	Yixian	Hebei
Lin Xili	Wenzhou	Zhejiang

Four in 1993

Jin Dechen	Nanyang	Henan
Su Zhemin	Baoding	Hebei
An Shuxin*	Baoding	Hebei
Gao Kexian	Yantai	Shandong

One in 1994

Li Zhiyuan	Shenyang	Liaoning
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Two in 1995

Zhu Baoyu	Nanyang	Henan
Wei Jingyi	Qiqihar	Heilongjiang

One in 1996

Zhang Zhiyong	Fengxiang	Shaanxi
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Two in 1997

Chen Cangbao	Yixian	Hebei
Lin Jiashan	Fuzhou	Fujian

Two in 2000

Jiang Mingyuan	Zhaoxian	Hebei
Lan Shi	Sanyuan	Shaanxi

One in 2002

Yao Liyang	Xiwanzi	Hebei
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Since 2003, only a few underground bishops have been ordained, marking a considerable decrease in the number of underground ordinations. In all, 82 underground bishops are known to have been ordained in this manner. The obsessive and unrelenting interference of the civil authorities into the selection and ordination of bishops may lead Catholic communities in China to reappraise the situation, and result in further underground episcopal ordinations, the Holy Father's 2007 Letter notwithstanding.

The "Eight Points"

On March 22nd, 1988, the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples issued a document, called the "Eight Points" that initiated endless discussions. The document came out years after another document, known as "*The 13 points*", purportedly attributed to Bishop Fan Xueyan, was circulated. This latter document contained several unacceptable statements on doctrinal and disciplinary matters. As such, the document worsened positions, and led to conflicts between those who were searching for ways to

reach an understanding with the government, and those who favoured a harsher line.

Not all welcomed the “Eight Points.” It touched raw nerves. And critics remarked that nowhere in the document was it stated that it came from the Holy See; it was not printed on official stationery; it had no date and was not signed by anybody in a position of authority. It certainly did not seem to be the best way to settle disputes involving theological issues, with political implications. It stayed in effect for several more years.

November 1989

An important event took place in 1989. The clandestine bishops had dreamt for a long time of establishing an authoritative group able to represent the bishops throughout the country, which could offer some leadership to respond to the challenges of the time. The most likely leader was Bishop Peter Liu Guandong, born in 1919, and consecrated secretly on July 25, 1982, by Bishop Zhou Fangji. As bishop of Yixian, Liu was in constant contact with Bishop Fan Xueyan, of Baoding. Bishop Fan was the widely recognized authority among the clandestine bishops, but he was under constant police surveillance. Liu Guandong constantly advocated for choosing and ordaining many more underground bishops, to reach a number at least equal to that of the patriotic prelates.

The bishops had long dreamt of convening a national Episcopal Conference whose members would exclusively be those bishops who were in explicit communion with the Pope and the universal Church. Having a formal episcopal organization — they thought — would have meant having a position of strength in obtaining an authentic representation at any future dealings between Beijing and Rome. They were worried that loyalty to the complete Catholic faith would be traded for some undetermined freedoms by uninformed Vatican officials.

From the first few months of 1989, they had repeatedly asked Rome for permission to establish a Chinese Episcopal Conference. The Holy See, on the one hand recognized the importance of their request and allowed them the freedom to decide the issue. On the

other hand, Rome asked that they consider anew whether such a move would be “opportune”.

The bishops then decided to act, and on November 21, 1989, they gathered at Zhangerci, a village a short distance from Xi’an, Shaanxi Province, and established their Episcopal Conference. They were not naïve, They knew that the Conference was for the most part a symbolic act, but one which they considered worth doing. They knew that there would be a price to be paid, and they were prepared for that. Only about fifteen bishops and priests showed up for the meeting on that day. But they claimed to represent another 50 bishops who could not travel, either for health reasons or because they were under house arrest. In a matter of weeks, all those who had attended the gathering were arrested, and sent for different periods of time to detention and to “study”.

Pope Benedict XVI’s *Letter to the Catholics of China*

During the last years of Pope John Paul II’s pontificate, it was felt that the time was right for sending a strong and clear signal to the Church in China, touching upon several urgent and important issues. The planned letter would particularly focus on the selection and ordination of bishops, and at the same time call upon all concerned to move quickly in the direction of reconciliation, where that was needed. The Holy See went through the long, hard work of writing a text that could be understood as a communication of faith, in which people could feel and see themselves involved in giving a responsible answer to God.

Pope Benedict XVI wanted to sign the Letter himself. It bears the date of May 27, 2007, although it was published a month later, at the end of June. Reactions were mixed, as is always the case in similar conditions. However, I would say clear points were made on some hot issues. For instance, it took into account the nature of the Patriotic association (CCPA), and declared it to be an organization “alien” to the Church. It also took pains to clarify the role of the bishops, the method of their selection and the significance of their consecrations. Results were forthcoming, sometimes unperceived, being as they are of a spiritual nature. As a whole, the Letter

inspired hope, reminding the whole Church that its existence proceeded from the heart of Christ.

Conclusion

The Catholic Church in China is still nursing its wounds, after a dramatic twentieth century during which its roots were tended and strengthened by numerous witnesses to the faith. The Catholics tell stories of courage and of a radical commitment to Christ, on all sides. Depressing stories are also told of fear and capitulations, of efforts for change and of persistence in past positions. Stories also abound of violence by the mighty State, seemingly incapable of respect for the religious beliefs of its citizens.

The “underground” movement is still alive and attracting followers, perhaps with more enlightenment and patience in understanding the opinion and the points of view of “the other” camp. Together, patriotic and loyal Catholics will hopefully be able to see the reasons for which to take issue and to dissent from the official line.

Besides rejection of the unacceptable “doctrine” of the independent and autonomous running of the church and the consequent interference in the selection and consecration of bishops, other issues have to be tackled. The leadership of the Party can be respected and accepted in the political field, but that has nothing to do with religious issues, where the Gospel is “sovereign”. Bishops and private persons should not be dismissed from their positions simply for dissenting on this ground. Equally, the National Assembly of Catholic Representatives cannot be described as being the highest and most sovereign institution of the Catholic Church.

The road ahead is still long and tortuous. Surely agreements acceptable to both sides will gradually be achieved.