

An Answer for the Mistaken Arguments in Support of Illegitimate Episcopal Ordinations

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In spite of many public statements of objection from the Holy See, Bishop Fang Xingyao, of Linyi, Shandong Province consecrated Father Lei Shiyin as bishop of Leshan, Sichuan Province at the Catholic Church in Emei City, on June 29, 2011. Under the same circumstances, Father Huang Bingzhang was ordained Bishop of the Shantou Diocese in Guangdong Province on July 14, 2011, with Bishop Fang Xingyao again being the main celebrant of the ordination liturgy. In view of the two illegitimate episcopal ordinations, the Holy See issued two declarations, on July 4 and July 16, 2011 respectively, announcing:

“Father Lei Shiyin, ordained without the Papal mandate and hence illegitimately, has no authority to govern the diocesan Catholic community, and the Holy See does not recognize him as the Bishop of the Diocese of Leshan. The effects of the sanctions which he has incurred through violation of the norms of canon 1382 of the *Code of Canon Law* remain in place. The same Father Lei Shiyin had been informed for some time before the ordination ceremony that he was unacceptable to the Holy See as an Episcopal candidate, for proven and very grave reasons.”

“Father Joseph Huang Bingzhang, having been ordained without papal mandate and hence illicitly, has incurred the sanctions laid down by canon 1382 of the *Code of Canon Law*. Consequently, the Holy See does not recognize him as Bishop of the Diocese of Shantou, and he lacks the authority to govern the Catholic community of the Diocese. Father Huang Bingzhang had been informed many times in the past that he could not be approved by the Holy See as an episcopal candidate, inasmuch as the Diocese of Shantou already has a

legitimate Bishop; Father Huang had, on numerous occasions, been requested not to accept episcopal ordination.”

In response to the Vatican’s public denunciation and declarations of “automatic excommunication” of the two illegitimate bishops, a spokesperson for the State Administration of Religious Affairs in China, on July 25, 2011, defended the illegitimate episcopal ordinations, pointing out that “it was for the development of the supervisory and pastoral needs of the Chinese Catholic Church that the two bishops were ordained.” He demanded that the Vatican “annul the so-called ‘excommunications.’”

When compared with previous objections towards illegitimate episcopal ordinations in China, the above declarations clearly show that the Roman Curia is intolerant of any infringement of the laws of the Church. The Curia’s actions regarding such infringements were prompt and straightforward. The Curia’s responses aroused serious repercussions in the Chinese Catholic Church. Some Catholic observers thought that “it was necessary for the Roman Curia to punish the illegitimate Bishop of the Leshan Diocese ... for the sake of maintaining discipline in the Church and for the benefit of the Catholic community ... It is the responsibility of the Holy See to punish those who harm the Church. Such declarations are the most appropriate actions to take against illegitimate episcopal ordinations ... They serve as a forceful warning against any future illegitimate episcopal ordinations ... If such illegitimate episcopal ordinations continue to occur, the Chinese Catholic Church would not only be a Church ‘with Chinese characteristics’, but a national church established by the Chinese government.”

The Fallacious Defenses of the Illegitimate Episcopal Ordinations in the Journal, *Catholic Church in China*

At the same time, there are “individual members of the Church” who have attempted to defend the illegitimate episcopal ordinations from different perspectives. They try to mislead the Catholic clergy and laity by their arbitrary selections of material and their deliberate distortions of historical events. Such discourses have appeared in several articles in the journal *Catholic Church in China*, the official magazine of the Chinese Patriotic Catholic

Association, (Vol. IV, 2011, No. 152). A more detailed analysis of these discourses will make it clear that their arguments in defense of illegitimate episcopal ordinations are erroneous.

Jesus Christ appointed Peter as the leader of all the apostles, and his successors are endowed with the highest authority from God over the Catholic Church. It is not only in doctrinal and ethical matters that they are endowed with such authority, but also in the administration and the management of the Catholic Church. This is part of the faith of the Catholic Church, and it was pronounced a dogma of the faith at the First Vatican Council.

In this particular issue of *Catholic Church in China*, the authors put forth the theory that the Patriotic Association's policy of "the self-election and self-consecration of bishops" "conforms to" the traditions of the Catholic Church. They stipulate that, in the history of the Church, there have been many different ways of choosing bishops. They can be chosen by public election, elected by the bishops of an ecclesiastical province or appointed by the king or the government. These are all delusive proclamations intended to deceive the Chinese laity and clergy, and they are not in accordance with the facts.

The historical records of the Church tell us that, since the beginning of the Church, the consecration of bishops was never a local issue only, but it was the concern of the whole Catholic Church. Therefore, a new bishop had to be ordained by a group of bishops in the name of the Catholic Church. Even during the early years of the Church, the Pope did not appoint or ordain bishops. The bishop of an ecclesiastical province, who was in direct communion with the archbishop or metropolitan, and hence indirectly in communion with the Pope (since all the archbishops and metropolitans were of necessity in communion with the Pope), ordained a new bishop. This means that, right from the beginning of the Catholic Church, new bishops were ordained by other local representatives (metropolitans, archbishops or provincial bishops) with the Pope's tacit approval. The illegitimate episcopal ordinations of 2011 in China took place under the strong disapproval of the Pope. This is clearly an infringement of the traditions of the Church. In order to prove the validity of an ordination taking place after "public election", the authors of

Catholic Church in China cited the example of St. Ambrose, who was ordained bishop after “a general election among the laity.” However, they overlooked the fact that the episcopal ordination of St. Ambrose was not conducted under the explicit objection of the Pope.

The *Catholic Church in China* (Vol. IV, 2011) cited the 1810 agreement between Pope Pius VII and Napoleon Bonaparte, and declared “the king had the authority to appoint new bishops.” Again, this statement is not in complete accord with historical facts. Either the authors are ignorant of the facts, or they deliberately overlooked one of the major points in the agreement: the Pope has the final say over the appointment of new bishops.

Because the aforementioned agreement decreed that it is the Pope who gives the ultimate permission for the appointment of new bishops, after the ratification of the agreement, Pope Pius VII refused to recognize the bishops appointed by the king, and for this reason he came into open conflict with the king. This shows that it was the Pope who had the final say over the appointment of new bishops.

As mentioned above, the two illegitimate episcopal ordinations in 2011 were conducted without the formal approval of the Pope. Moreover, those two illegitimate ordinations were conducted in face of the public opposition of the Pope. The facts the authors cite in support of their arguments are exactly evidence to show that the illegitimate episcopal ordinations of 2011 violated the traditions of the Church. As the authors mention, the Chinese government has not reached an agreement with the Holy See about the ordination of new bishops. This means that the illegitimate episcopal ordinations were conducted without any formal agreement. Therefore, the agreements between the papacy and the government, cited by the authors in support of the illegitimate episcopal ordinations, are all distortions of historical facts.

It is clear that those who cite the 1810 agreement between Pope Pius VII and Napoleon Bonaparte have deliberately ignored or overlooked historical facts. However, due to the impact of this agreement, theologians around the time of the First Vatican Council started a deep reflection on the relationship between the Pope and the bishops. This was because, in spite of the decree acknowledging the Pope’s final authority in the election of bishops, many ambitious politicians, using all sorts of excuses, attempted to

destroy freedom of religion and to harm the unity of the Catholic faith. The First Vatican Council and the theologians present at it emphasized the Pope's supreme authority, so that the freedom of religion might be protected. They considered Rome as the Church's stronghold and its centre of authority. They considered the primacy of the Pope as the guarantee of the liberation of the Church from the control of secular political powers.

A deceptive excuse: the "self-election and self-consecration of bishops" is necessary for evangelization

In order to defend the illegitimate episcopal ordinations, the authors of the articles in *Catholic Church in China* cite an "admirable" reason: "If there is no bishop, there is no Church." "Evangelization is impossible if there is no bishop." Therefore, the "self-election and self-consecration of bishops" is necessary for evangelization. They accuse the Holy See of hindering the work of evangelization in China, of preventing the Chinese Church from carrying out its work of saving souls, and of destroying the Chinese Catholic Church altogether, by not ordaining any bishops. Such false accusations are merely self-deceptions. Any person with the critical power to judge knows that what the Holy See opposed was neither the "consecration" of bishops by the Chinese Catholic Church nor the "consecration of new bishops" for the Dioceses of Leshan and Shantou. The decision not to approve the episcopal candidates for those two dioceses was based on "grave reasons," which led the Holy See to decide not to accept them for the office of the bishop.

The authors of the articles in *Catholic Church in China* draw a connection between the two unsuitable candidates and the destiny of the whole Chinese Catholic Church. By drawing a connection between the two, the impression they try to create is that whoever disapproves of the two candidates is in opposition to the whole Chinese Catholic Church. However, we might ask: how many bishops of the Chinese Catholic Church has the Pope recognized since the opening up of China? According to the list of Chinese bishops published in *China Today*, a German Catholic magazine, the Holy See has recognized most of the Chinese bishops.

Therefore, the two candidates should consider seriously the question: why has the Holy See recognized most of the other Chinese bishops, but objected to their ordinations?

Misunderstanding the meaning of “all things to all men”

The writers in *Catholic Church in China* (Vol. IV, 2011) quote the Bible passage to “be all things to all men” (1 Cor 9:22) as one of the reasons for the illegitimate episcopal ordinations, saying that the Catholic Church should conform to the national spirit of China and obey the Chinese law of running an “independent and autonomous Church.” Such an argument creates a gross misunderstanding of the meaning of “being all things to all men.”

It is true that inculturation is one of the principles of the universal Catholic Church. However, the principle of “being all things to all men” must not be understood as a reason to abandon the basic principles of the faith in order to accommodate the needs of inculturation. It is absolutely foolish to give up one’s faith for the sake of evangelization! Inculturation must not be done in such a way that it does harm to the basic doctrines of the Church. The apostle Paul, who is cited as an example in the *Catholic Church in China* articles, did say that we should “be all things to all men.” St. Peter also told us: “Be subject to every human institution for the Lord’s sake” (1 Peter 2:13). But St. Paul did not give up his faith in order to “be all things to all men”, nor did St. Peter surrender his faith in order to “be subject to every human institution.” Instead, these two saints sacrificed their lives in defense of their faith. If they had really given up the principles of their faith in order to “be all things to all men” or to “be subject to every human institution”, they would not have been killed by the Roman government, nor would they have been able to be courageous witnesses for all Christians.

Does “Caesar” have the right to appoint bishops? — A misinterpretation of the principle of “the separation of Church and State”

Are the “special Chinese self-elected, self-consecrated bishops” part of the Catholic faith? Are these “self-elected, self-

consecrated bishops,” as the Catholic Patriotic Association claims, “independent of the Pope only in administrative matters, but are subservient to him in matters of dogma and morals?” We shall answer these questions as follows. First of all, bishops are the successors of the twelve apostles. Their authority comes from God, not from any human authority. Secondly, the Church that God established is one, and Catholic or universal. It is not a disunited Church. This can be seen in the selection of the twelve apostles. The “unity and communion of the Church” is not only something that concerns law, but it is part of the Catholic faith. Thirdly, the Pope is the overseer of the whole universal Church. He is responsible for its unity. The Dogmatic Constitution from Vatican I, entitled *Pastor Aeternus*, declared the dogma of the Pope’s authority over the whole Church. The above three points prove that “the ordination of bishops in communion with the successors of Peter” is not only a legal matter, but it is more of a doctrinal one. The principle of the so-called “self-election, self-consecration” stipulated by the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association does substantial harm to the faith of the Church. Catholics should not be blind to this point and allow such acts to continue.

In view of the three principles stated above, *Catholic Church in China* is in great error when it quotes the Biblical teaching “render to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God” as an excuse and the basis for forcibly depriving the Church of its authority to ordain bishops, and ascribing such authority to the sovereign state instead. They give to “Caesar” what originally belongs to God, and in doing so they breach the principle of the separation of Church and state. This is because the action of “self-electing and self consecrating” bishops just contrarily violates the principle of “rendering to God what is God’s, and to Caesar what is Caesar’s.” Christians have a double identity in society. They are both “religious believers” and “citizens.” Since bishops occupy an influential position in civil society, through some negotiations between “Church and state”, the Holy See may seek the opinion of the secular authority in the matter of the appointment of bishops. However, any secular authority definitely should not forcibly strip the Church of its authority to appoint bishops. This is because a secular authority deciding Church affairs not only violates the

Church's faith, it also violates the principle of "the separation of Church and state." Religions, of course, should also observe their own principles and not interfere in political affairs, while secular authorities should also respect the principles of the Church's faith. Church affairs should not be nationalized or politicized. The absurd phenomenon of a "state-run Church" should not make an appearance. If those states with a religious ideology refrain from interfering in the Church, it is unreasonable for atheistic states to be so "concerned" about them.

Conclusion

From the above analysis, we can see that the policy of the "self-election and self-consecration of bishops" of the Chinese government and the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association is in opposition to the traditions of the Church, and does substantial harm to the contents of the Church's faith. We appeal to the Chinese government to respect the freedom of religious belief of millions of Chinese believers, and to put into practice the principle of the "separation of Church and state." We urge the Chinese government to respect the authority of the successor of St. Peter over doctrinal and moral matters, and his position of supreme leadership over the universal Church. This leadership includes the authority to appoint bishops.

The authority of the Pope is part of the Catholic faith. It is not only a matter of discipline. Here we would like to give an even more urgent appeal to the bishops of the Catholic Church in China: You are the successors of the apostles, and you are responsible for preserving the Catholic faith and the unity of the Church. This is part of your mission as bishops. Since the beginning of the Church, the successors of the apostles have followed in their footsteps with courage and determination. You must always remember that the successor of St. Peter, the Pope, is the foundation of the unity of the Church. It is only in communion with him that you are in communion with the universal Church. Only in this way will you truly belong to the Church that Christ Himself established.