

A Response to the Misleading Justification of Illegitimate Consecrations in China

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A brief review of history

The “self-elected, self-consecrated” cases of episcopal ordinations were historical products of the 1950s. The first cases of “self-elected, self-consecrated” bishops took place on April 13, 1958. Bishop Li Daonan of the Puqi Diocese officiated at the ceremony consecrating the first two bishops in China, who did not have the prior approval of the Holy See. These bishops were Dong Guangqing and Yuan Wenhua of the dioceses of Hankou and Wuchang respectively. (Lam, 1997, p. 37) Afterwards, about 50 “self-elected, self-consecrated” bishops’ ordinations took place during the period between 1958 and 1964. All “self-elected, self-consecrated” ordinations came to a halt during the 1966-76 Cultural Revolution.

Although Fu Tieshan was consecrated as Bishop of Beijing without papal approval in 1979, in the 1980s and 1990s more and more episcopal candidates tried their best to seek papal approval in advance, even if they had gone through a certain kind of “election” in their own dioceses. In the 1990s local governments seemed to be quite tolerant towards these candidates, and would often turn a blind eye towards their attempt to get the mandate of the Holy Father.

Unfortunately the situation changed in 2000. Although some bishops were consecrated with the appointment of the Holy Father, quite a few episcopal candidates ignored Canon Law, and participated in a “self-elected, self-consecrated” ceremony.

In the last few years a strange phenomenon has occurred, namely that the concerned parties in the “self-elected, self-consecrated” cases, including the consecrators, the consecrated and

the organizers of the ceremonies, have been trying to justify their actions. While they have not openly opposed the primacy of the Holy Father or the legal status of Canon Law, they have given misleading reasons to justify their “self-elected, self-consecrated” activities. In the text below, I will present an opposing view to their misleading arguments, and give our readers a clearer picture of the establishment of the episcopate in China.

Reasons against the excuse of “tradition”

Supporters of the “self-elected, self-consecrated” position claim that the practice of “self-elected, self-consecrated” cases has a history of 60 years. Therefore, they argue, the Church in China should continue to carry on this 60-year-old tradition.

My point is: A history of 60 years means that the tradition was created by government policy in the 1950s and '60s. But almost all of the new policies introduced in 1950s and '60s have proved to be mistakes and disasters, including the Anti-Rightist Campaign, the “Three-Antis Campaign”, the “Five-Antis Campaign”, the “Great Leap Forward”, and the “Cultural Revolution”. The policy of having “self-elected, self-consecrated” bishops in the Chinese Catholic Church was a product of the extreme leftist mentality of the 1950s. It was an ulcer in Chinese society, and therefore there is no reason for people (inside or outside the Church) to tolerate this practice today.

They claim they are running the Church democratically, but actually they are not

Supporters of the policy of “self-elected, self-consecrated” bishops have been repeatedly asking: What is wrong for the Church in China to run the Church in a democratic manner?

My answer is: It is possible for the Church to introduce a certain amount of democracy into church ministry. But the problem is that in China today (including in the Church in China), there is no democracy at all. “Self-elected, self-consecrated” episcopal ordinations are not democracy, but acts of dictatorship. They are a kind of cruel exercise imposed on the Church by a handful of

people (both Church people and non-Church people). Real Church people are not allowed to give their opinions in the process, and public security forces are employed to suppress all opposing voices. So, the “self-elected, self-consecrated” ordinations are totally against democracy.

They do the opposite of what they say

The “self-elected, self-consecrated” supporters borrow a phrase from the Fathers of the Church, who said “The Church cannot exist without the bishop,” or “If there is no bishop, there is no Church.”

My response is: Yes, the Church cannot exist without the bishop. But the bishops must be true and authentic bishops. The Church in China cannot afford the contamination of unauthentic bishops.

Because bishops are so important, the Patriotic Association, which is trying to override the power of the bishops, is thus implementing a sinful plot that will destroy the Church in China.

Where the bishop is, there is the Church, but it should be a legitimate bishop, otherwise, the so-called church is simply a sect.

Is the appointment of bishops really a matter of sovereignty?

Quite often supporters for the practice of “self-elected, self-consecrated” bishops use the excuse that the appointment of bishops is a matter of national sovereignty.

My answer is: The Chinese government will understand this question only in accordance with its basic nature. The Chinese government claims that it is atheist, and so it is impossible for them to discern anything about divine authority. The appointment of bishops is not a matter of national sovereignty. It is strictly a church affair and should be decided only by the top authority in the Church — the Holy Father.

The triple authority of bishops, namely to teach, to sanctify and to lead a particular local Church or Diocese is a spiritual authority, aimed at building up the Christian faith of the local church community. Being spiritual, the authority comes from God,

and cannot be bestowed by anyone else. Lay People and civil authorities can propose candidates, or they can be chosen by the priests of a diocese in a democratic way. But the appointment or mandate, as well as the laying of hands during the ordination, must be given by the successor of St. Peter, on whom Jesus Christ, the founder of the Church, has bestowed the spiritual authority of “binding and loosing” in the Church (Mt. 16: 19). In other words, only the Supreme Pontiff can appoint bishops, and only legitimate bishops can lay their hands on priestly candidates to ordain them as other bishops.

Is it a question of Chinese style?

At the same time, some of the “self-elected, self-consecrated” supporters use the excuse that the Church in China is run in a Chinese style, so “self-elected, self-consecrated” actions are necessarily part of a Chinese way of doing things.

My answer is: A Chinese style should not supersede the international standard, if China would like to be a member of the international community. Take the Olympic Games of 2008 for example. In carrying out the Games, the Beijing government observed all the requirements given by the International Olympic Committee. So, the Catholic Church in China should also be allowed to follow the universal Church’s standards, and it should be allowed to observe the Canon Law of the universal Catholic Church.

China is the most populated country in the world. The Chinese people deserved the right to run the Olympic Games. The International Olympic Committee, in 2001, approved of this right. The social situation may not have been completely satisfying, but still no boycotting action took place. China tried its best to fulfill all the requirements of the IOC. They observed all the rules and regulations of the IOC. We can say that only when China agreed to these rules and regulations, could they hold a successful Olympic Games. It would be a big joke if China ran a “self-select, self approved” Olympic Games, without the IOC’s mandate.

A similar pattern can apply to the Catholic Church in China. One can see that it is completely unacceptable for China to insist on ordaining “self-elected, self-consecrated” bishops. There is no way

that the Chinese Catholic Church can run a so-called independent Church, and still consider itself the Catholic Church.

Articles in Canon Law regarding the selection of bishops

After answering the “justifications” of the supporters of “self-elected, self-consecrated” bishops, let us review the articles on the selection of bishops in the Code of Canon Law. Under Chapter II, Bishops, canon 377, point 1, states:

The Supreme Pontiff freely appoints bishops or confirms those legitimately elected.

Canon 377, point 2 states:

At least every three years, bishops of an ecclesiastical province or, where circumstances suggest it, of a conference of bishops, can in common counsel and in secret compose a list of presbyters, even including members of institutes of consecrated life, who are more suitable for the episcopate. They are to send it to the Apostolic See, without prejudice to the right of each bishop individually to make known to the Apostolic See the names of presbyters whom he considers worthy of and suited to the episcopal function.

Canon 377, point 3 states:

Unless it is legitimately established otherwise, whenever a diocesan or coadjutor bishop must be appointed, as regards what is called the *ternus* to be proposed to the Apostolic See, the pontifical legate is to seek individually and to communicate to the Apostolic See together with his own opinion the suggestions of the metropolitan and suffragans of the province to which the diocese to be provided for belongs or with which it is joined in some grouping, and the suggestions of the president of the conference of bishops. The pontifical legate, moreover, is to hear from some members of the college of consultors and the cathedral chapter and, if he judges it expedient, is also to seek individually and in secret the opinion of others from both the secular and non-secular clergy and from laity outstanding in wisdom.

In the case of nominating a new bishop, the Legates of the Roman Pontiff should act according to canon 364, point 4 that says:

Regarding the nomination of bishops, to transmit or propose to the Apostolic See the names of candidates and to instruct them about the informational process concerning those to be promoted, according to the norms given by the Apostolic See.

What kinds of presbyters should be entitled to be nominated as candidates? Canon 378, point 1, gives 5 criteria.

The candidate must be:

- i. outstanding in solid faith, good morals, piety, zeal for souls, wisdom, prudence, and human virtues, and endowed with other qualities which make him suitable to fulfill the office in question;
- ii. of good reputation;
- iii. at least thirty-five years old;
- iv. ordained to the presbyterate for at least five years;
- v. in possession of a doctorate or at least a licentiate in sacred scripture, theology, or canon law from an institute of higher studies approved by the Apostolic See, or at least truly expert in the same disciplines.

As a conclusion to this aspect, canon 378, point 2, states:

The definitive judgement concerning the suitability of the one to be promoted pertains to the Apostolic See.

Conclusion

After reviewing the relevant articles in the Code of Canon Law, we can see that the Holy See already applies certain measures to broaden the consultation base and to accept the opinions of Church people at various levels. One extra advantage of this procedure given in the Code of Canon Law is that it does not involve any interested party. One great problem in secular democracy is that elections are a game among interested parties, which always fight for their own interest. People in civil society

have the right to do this. For the Church, however, the recommendation and nomination of episcopal candidates by uninterested parties can better guarantee impartiality and objectivity in the selection of bishops.

One thing we should bear in mind is that in the secular world people have to deal with the matter of public resources. So all stake-holders (all the citizens) should have the right to decide about how public resources should be distributed. The main aim of the Church, however, is not about how to make use of worldly resources. In the Church, most worldly resources were given freely by our predecessors. The Catholic Church as a community expecting the second coming of Jesus Christ, maintains as its ultimate mission to lead all people on a march through this world to the Next World. Therefore the whole Church must adhere to the instructions of Peter and the Apostles of Jesus and of their Successors.

REFERENCE

Lam, Anthony S.K. (1997). *The Catholic Church in Present-Day China: Through Darkness and Light*. Belgium: Ferdinand Verbiest Foundation Leuven and Hong Kong: Holy Spirit Study Centre.