

The Establishment of the Ecclesiastical Hierarchy: Its Meaning and Effects

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On April 11, 1946, Pope Pius XII (1876-1958), with the Apostolic Constitution *Quotidie Nos*,¹ instituted the normal structure of the Catholic Church in China by establishing the local Ecclesiastical Hierarchy. What was the meaning of this decision and what effects did it produce?

Common effects in the universal Church

The normal structure of the Catholic Church in a given country, when the local Hierarchy is established consists mainly in raising the previous Vicariates Apostolic into Dioceses, that is into Particular or Local Churches, each having their own Ordinary Bishops. These bishops are the “*successors of the Apostles by divine institution, pastors within the Church so that they are teachers of doctrine, priests of sacred worship and ministers of governance... with functions of sanctifying, teaching and ruling, which, by their very nature, however, can be exercised only when they are in hierarchical communion with the head of the episcopal college and its members*” (Code of Canon Law, Can. 375).

Dioceses are grouped around an Archdiocese, and together form an Ecclesiastical Region or Province, in which the metropolitan archbishops and the suffragan bishops cooperate together to discuss and find solutions to common problems in their diocesan ministry. However, the full and total jurisdiction over a diocese remains in the hands of each local bishop.

In fact, the most meaningful change brought about with the establishment of the hierarchy concerns the authority and the role of

¹ See the English text in Sergio Ticozzi, *Historical Documents of Hong Kong Catholic Church* (Hong Kong Catholic Diocesan Archives, 1997), 6-9.

the ordinary Bishop as the head of the Local or Particular Church, that is the Diocese. With the establishment of the Hierarchy, all the Apostolic Vicars of yesterday receive a complete and immediate authority over their Dioceses, whose title they adopt, losing the previous fictitious one of a historical diocese. They are no more 'Vicars,' that is, sent as representatives of the Pope, but they are, united with him, the successors of the Apostles, directly responsible for the flock entrusted to them.

Regarding the scope of episcopal authority, Can. 381 §1 states:

A diocesan bishop in the diocese committed to him possesses all the ordinary, proper and immediate power, which is required for the exercise of his pastoral office except for those cases which the law or decree of the Supreme Pontiff reserves to the supreme authority of the Church or to some other ecclesiastical authority.

The bishop's functions are, therefore, strengthened and increased, both in front of his conscience and in front of his people.

Starting from the earliest centuries in the history of the Church, Synods or Synodal Assemblies of bishops of regions were recorded. The Second Vatican Council (*Christus Domini*, 38) took the decision to establish Episcopal Conferences or Conferences of Bishops, both regional and national all over the world. Pope Paul VI, with his 1966 motu proprio *Ecclesiae sanctae*, implemented the decision. The operations, authority and responsibilities of episcopal conferences are governed by the 1983 Code of Canon Law (Canons 447-459). Can. 447 gives the definition:

The conference of bishops, a permanent institution, is a grouping of bishops of a given nation or territory whereby, according to the norm of law, they jointly exercise certain pastoral functions on behalf of the Christian faithful of their territory in view of promoting that greater good the church offers humankind, especially through forms and programs of the apostolate which are fittingly adapted to the circumstances of time and place.

Can. 449 states that "it pertains to the supreme Church authority alone to erect, suppress or change the conferences of

bishops.” Concerning their authority, Can. 455 §1 specifies: “the conference of bishops can issue general decrees only in those cases in which the common law prescribes it, or a special mandate of the Apostolic See determines it.” In other cases, “the competence of individual diocesan bishops remains intact.” (Can. 455 §4)

Pope John Paul II in his 1998 *motu proprio Apostolos suos* further clarified the functions of the conferences of bishops, stating that they do not share in the teaching authority of the universal college of bishops. However, individual bishops do share in that authority as they are members of that college, in unity with, and under the authority of, the Bishop of Rome, the Pope. Consequently, conferences of bishops cannot make doctrinal declarations by themselves, and, while they can assist individual bishops, they cannot substitute for them in their teaching authority, which they individually possess in their own dioceses.

The Situation in China

In China, the new system inaugurated in 1946 with the establishment of the Ecclesiastical Hierarchy consisted in the raising of all previous Apostolic Vicariates into Dioceses, which were grouped around Archdioceses, and divided into the already existing twenty Ecclesiastical Regions. Therefore, 20 archiepiscopal metropolitan sees and 79 suffragan episcopal sees (or Dioceses), as well as 38 Apostolic Prefectures, were created. Chinese prelates led twenty-eight of these 137 ecclesiastical circumscriptions, 21 of whom obtained episcopal ordination.

It took a long time and constant effort to build up this normal structure of the Catholic Church in China, but what is the situation of that church at present?

Unfortunately, within a decade of the establishment of the Ecclesiastical Hierarchy, through the external intervention of the Chinese Government, the hierarchy was *de facto* abolished, with the introduction of the so-called “democratic management of the Church.” This took place in 1957 when the Government authorities summoned the First National Assembly of Chinese Catholic Representatives to Beijing (from July 17 to August 2, 1957) to set up an organization which was to be considered the supreme authority over the Church. The Assembly approved the Statutes of

the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association (CCPA), and on August 3, elected its members and its permanent committee.²

Practically, however, the highest authority in the Church was in the hands of the leaders of the CCPA, whose members accepted the full control of the Chinese Government through the then Religious Affairs Bureau (now called the State Administration for Religious Affairs) and United Front Work Department. They followed the principle of the Three Autonomies of the Church. Pope Benedict XVI in his 2007 Letter to Chinese Catholics clearly stated the position of the Catholic Church on this point:

Considering "Jesus' original plan", it is clear that the claim of some entities, desired by the State and extraneous to the structure of the Church, to place themselves above the Bishops and to guide the life of the ecclesial community, does not correspond to Catholic doctrine, according to which the Church is "apostolic", as the Second Vatican Council underlined... Likewise, the declared purpose of the aforementioned entities to implement "the principles of independence and autonomy, self-management and the democratic administration of the Church" is incompatible with Catholic doctrine, which from the time of the ancient Creeds professes the Church to be "one, holy, catholic and apostolic" (No.7).

After Deng Xiaoping launched policies of economic reform, liberalization and opening up to the world at the end of 1978, social changes started to affect also the structure and the geography of the Catholic Church. The number of the Catholic clergy, both those able to return to work in churches and newly trained priests, were quite limited in number and insufficient to cover the ministry required in all the traditional Church territories. Moreover, rapid economic development in neighboring cities and regions overtook the traditional centers and areas of Catholic activity. This became of primary social importance. Due to these factors, the Chinese

² See 中國天主教友愛國會 編, 1957; see also Guangyang Biweekly : (廣揚半月刊, 中國天主教教友代表會議專輯), no. 13-15, a special issue reporting the acts of the assembly.

Government authorities drew new administrative boundaries in some provinces. They also began to exercise expanded control over religious affairs, and in some places, changed the boundaries between ecclesiastical territories. They even moved episcopal sees to more developed cities and merged dioceses together. In some cases, they created a single diocese for one whole province.

Thus, the normal structure of the Ecclesiastical Hierarchy of the Catholic Church in China practically disappeared. All the differences among the ecclesiastical circumscriptions were abolished, since all such circumscriptions were called 'dioceses.' There were no Ecclesiastical Regions.

Later, a new institution, the so-called Chinese Catholic Bishops' Conference, was introduced in imitation of other national bishops conferences in the universal Catholic Church. The Third National Assembly of Chinese Catholic Representatives (May 21-30, 1980) established the 'Chinese Catholic Bishops' Conference', but with a different nature and different functions. Its members were 'elected' by the National Assembly of Catholic Representatives. Together with the CCPA, they have become the two authoritative organs (*yihui yituan* 一會一團), though formally and officially under the umbrella of the above mentioned National Assembly itself. The members of the *yihui yituan* are generally the same people and Government officials responsible for religious affairs, and exercise authority over them.

On November 21, 1989, the unofficial bishops also tried to establish their own Episcopal Conference. But they did not obtain the official approval of Rome. Therefore, the Holy See recognizes neither Bishops' Conference, official or unofficial, which operates now in China. This is because the official bishops' conference does not include all the bishops who have the right to be a member, and it includes others who do not have the right. Paragraph 8 of Pope Benedict's 2007 Letter to Chinese Catholics clarifies the situation:

An Episcopal Conference expresses the fraternal communion of all the Bishops of a nation and treats the doctrinal and pastoral questions that are significant for the entire Catholic community of the country without, however, interfering in the

exercise of the ordinary and immediate power of each Bishop in his own diocese.

The Holy See considers the democratic system and all the democratic organisms of the Church in China to be incompatible with the nature and doctrine of the Catholic Church. Consequently, Rome keeps the traditional normal structure of the Church in China, which was fixed with the 1946 institution of the Ecclesiastical Hierarchy. However, it remains open to the arrival of a suitable time to discuss the issues involved with the Chinese Authorities. Pope Benedict clearly stated this in his 2007 Letter to the Chinese Catholics:

Numerous administrative changes have taken place in the civil sphere during the last fifty years. This has also involved various ecclesiastical circumscriptions, which have been eliminated or regrouped or have been modified in their territorial configuration on the basis of the civil administrative circumscriptions. In this regard, I wish to confirm that the Holy See is prepared to address the entire question of the circumscriptions and ecclesiastical provinces in an open and constructive dialogue with the Chinese Episcopate and – where opportune and helpful – with governmental authorities (No. 11).

The celebration of the 70th anniversary of the establishment of the Ecclesiastical Hierarchy in China would provide a good occasion to reflect upon and deal with the issues involved.