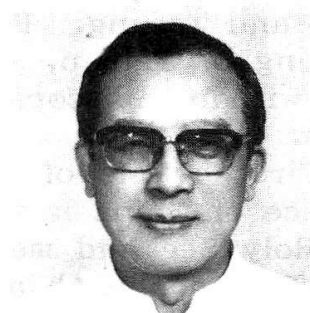


Regional Episcopal Conference of China:

A Brief Introduction

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The Establishment & Structure of the Bishops' Conference

From the establishment of the Chinese hierarchy on April 11, 1946 to the time of Vatican II, the coordination of China's church affairs fell under the Catholic Central Bureau, which was attached to the Apostolic Nunciature in Beijing.

With the political changes after 1949, all foreign missionaries were obliged to leave China. Some came to Taiwan to continue their work of evangelization. In 1952, the Internuncio, Archbishop Anthony Riberi, arrived in Taiwan to ordain Joseph Kuo as archbishop of Taipei. He took up residence there and reestablished the Catholic Central Bureau. In 1959, Riberi left Taiwan and was replaced by Archbishop Joseph Caprio, who, in 1966, was given the title of pro-nuncio. During his tenure in office, Caprio then moved the Catholic Central Bureau to a new headquarters built on land which he purchased in Taipei. The bishops' conference secretariat is presently housed in this building.

On April 21, 1967, the resident bishops of Taiwan and some who had come over from Mainland China held a meeting chaired by the pro-nuncio. At the meeting, they approved the establishment of the Chinese Bishops' Conference, and ratified its new constitution. After a long discussion, it was finally decided upon to use "Regional Episcopal Conference of China" for its official title. "Taiwan Bishops' Conference" had

been considered, but rejected because 10 of the 16 bishops attending the meeting, still held dioceses on the China Mainland. Among the ten were Cardinal Thomas Tien of Peking, Archbishop Paul Yupin of Nanking, Bishop Thomas Niu of Yangku (Administrator in Chaiyi in Taiwan), Bishop André Vérineux of Yinkou (Administrator of Hualien in Taiwan), Bishop Philip Côté of Hsuchow (Administrator of Kinma in Taiwan), Msgr. Eugene E. Fahy (Apostolic Prefect of Yangchow), Bishop Frederick A. Donaghy of Wuchow, and Msgr. Alfons Van Buggenhout, Administrator of Yunping, Minwang and Tatung. Peter Tou of Hsinchu, William Kupfer of Taichung, Paul Cheng of Tainan, and Joseph Cheng of Kaohsiung were among the bishops without episcopal sees on the Mainland.

The first article of the constitution states: "The Regional Episcopal Conference of China is the hierarchical organization of Taiwan, approved by the Holy See and meeting at determined times to exchange views, to discuss Taiwan church affairs, and, with wisdom and mutual cooperation, to promote the common good, share those opinions and methods of evangelization deemed suitable to the area and the times."

Article II of the Constitution states that "all diocesan ordinaries, excluding vicars general but including all bishops in Taiwan, even titular bishops, are ipso facto members of this Regional Conference."

At the time of its establishment, Archbishop Joseph Kuo was elected president of the Conference; Archbishop Stanislaus Lokuang, Archbishop of Taipei, vice-president; and Msgr. Alfons Van Buggenhout was elected secretary-general. A five-member standing committee was also chosen. Originally, eleven commissions were set up, with one for pastoral care added later, but a series of changes and alterations over the years, reduced them to their number of six: the commissions for doctrine and catechetical instruction, liturgy, the clergy, education and culture, evangelization, and social development, which includes Justice and Peace.

At a meeting held on April 13, 1971, Cardinal Paul Yupin was elected president of the Conference and re-elected in 1975. When Cardinal Yupin died in Rome in 1978, Archbishop Joseph Kuo became acting president until Archbishop Matthew Kia succeeded him at elections held in the following year. Archbishop Lokuang was elected president in 1983. The present leadership of the Conference took office in 1987, with Bishop Paul Shan serving as president, with Archbishop Kia and Bishop Wang continuing in their post of vice-president and secretary general. The present standing committee consists of Paul Shan, Matthew Kia, Paul Ching, Luke Liu and Joseph Lin.

In September of 1975, the Secretariat began publication of a monthly newsletter to keep the dioceses informed of the progress of the various works undertaken by the Conference and to strengthen communication among the dioceses. It has proved most useful.

The Bishops' Conference is a community of equals. Its work is determined at its plenary sessions, the meetings of its standing committee, meetings of the individual commissions and the office of the Secretariat. Decisions are arrived at through consensus. The president is simply first among equals. His role is to preside at meetings and to represent the Conference in its relations with the outside. When he speaks in his capacity as President, he must adhere to the policies set down by the Bishops' Conference.

The Standing Committee is responsible for deciding the agenda for plenary sessions for implementing decisions made at the sessions, and for handling urgent and extraordinary matters that may occur during the interim between sessions. As it is impossible for the individual bishops themselves to implement all the decisions made by the Conference, special powers have been delegated to the various commissions to carry them out. The direction and principles whereby they operate are also determined at the plenary sessions, where each commission is required to give a detailed report.

The Secretariat deals with ordinary internal affairs, such as editing the newsletter and handling matters pertaining to individual bishops and commission members. It also maintains communication with Bishops' Conferences in other parts of the world. The Secretariat consists of the secretary-general and the secretaries of the various commissions. It has a key role in the functioning of the Conference, addressing matters which individual bishops because of pastoral demands are unable to address.

In the years immediately after its foundation, the Conference was supported by outside funds and by grants from the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples. Later each diocese was asked to contribute 5% of its subsidy from the Holy See. To defray Conference expenses, also, each diocese makes an annual independent contribution to the Conference. A third source of income is from the sale of materials published by the Secretariat. All this has made outside funding no longer necessary.

The establishment of the Bishops' Conference has greatly facilitated communication and mutual cooperation among the dioceses, where Tai-

wan's rapid economic development also brought with it a decline in involvement in church affairs, the Bishops' Conference convened a number of island-wide seminars to discuss the problem. A special symposium on evangelization was held two years ago to encourage the laity to make greater efforts to share the gospel message. While the increase in the number of Catholics has been slow, our Catholics have become more mature. The goal towards self-support in parishes and dioceses has progressed steadily in recent years.

Under the direction of the Bishops' Conference, the Secretariat has throughout the years translated and published many important official church texts, such as Liturgical books, papal encyclicals, and the documents of Vatican II. These publications have benefited not only the church in Taiwan but overseas Chinese communities as well as the churches on mainland China.

The decisions and directives of the Bishops' Conference have given evangelical impetus and pastoral direction to the whole area and have generally been regarded favourably by the clergy, religious and laity, who are free to submit their ideas for inclusion in the agenda of the Bishops' Conference itself.

The Bishops' Conference also plays a bridge-role between the Church and Government and between the Church and society. When the government has something it wishes to communicate to Catholics, it usually contacts the president of the Bishops' Conference. The Conference is also consulted about social concerns. The Church through the Bishops' Conference expresses its position on such issues as the legalization of abortion and the importation of foreign labour. The Bishops' Conference also communicates its social concerns through its Commission for Social Development on such matters as Vietnamese refugees, child prostitution, starvation in Africa, and the Cambodian refugees in Thailand.

Conclusion

There is no one set model for structuring a Bishops' Conference. When the Holy See prepared a working-paper on the subject, two years ago it met with negative reactions from a number of Conferences. To date no decision has been taken on establishing a uniform pattern or structure of organization. However, the vast amount of experience accumulated over the years by the Regional Episcopal Conference places it in a position to offer invaluable assistance to the Chinese Bishops' Conference when China is finally reunified. We all hope this day will come soon.