

The Chinese Bishops' Conference in Beijing

by Anthony Lam

Brief History

When the Chinese Bishops' Conference was established in 1980, it was something totally new to the Church in China. Such an organization did not exist prior to the Communist takeover in 1949 nor even after the establishment of the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association in 1957. While the Apostolic Delegate to China Archbishop Celso Constantini did convene a bishops' meeting in 1924 for the purpose of establishing the Chinese hierarchy, it did not result in a Bishops' Conference. So the Conference established in 1980 represents an entirely new structure for the Church in China.



In May 1980 more than 200 delegates representing the Catholic Church in China gathered in Beijing to attend two important meetings: the Third National Convention of the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association and the inaugural meeting of the Chinese Catholic Conference. The reason for the reorganization of structures within the Church was to clarify the role and specify the responsibility of the CCPA. From this point forward, the CCPA relinquished its role as overseer of all Church concerns, relegating itself to merely external affairs and Church-State relationships. Responsibility for doctrinal and pastoral matters was given over to the clergy and related church leaders.¹

At that time Bishop Zhang Jiashu of Shanghai was elected Chairman of the Bishops' Conference. Bishops Wang Xueming of Hohhot, Yang Gaojian of Changde, Zong Huaide of Zhoucun, Dong Guangqing of Hankou, Tu Shihua of Hanyang, Fu Tieshan of Beijing and Qian Yurong of Xuzhou were elected vice-chairmen.² In all, there were 33 members of the Conference which included Bishops Deng Jizhou, Duan Yinming, Han Tingbi and Wang Zueming, who had been appointed by Pius XII. But five other Papal appointees were not listed.³ There seems to have been little move-

ment in membership after 1980 beyond the addition of a few newly ordained bishops and the retirement ("for personal reasons") of some others. When in March of 1986, both the CCPA and the Chinese Catholic Conference met once again in Beijing... this time delegates numbered 278...participants at the Bishops' Conference were the same as those who attended the first meeting. New elections were announced, but the only change seems to have been the addition of one more vice-chairman, Bishop Wang Ruihuan of Harbin.⁴

The Bishops Conference chairman Zhang Jiashu died in February of 1988. At a gathering of bishops in Beijing in April, it was decided to appoint Bishop Huaide of Zhoucun as acting chairman and call a special Bishops' Conference to meet later in the year to elect the new permanent chairman. There has been no word up to this time as to the exact date this meeting will take place. In April of last year, a majority of the bishops were called to Beijing, but no decision regarding a Conference date was made. I learned from a newly ordained bishop in September of last year that a new chairman would be elected at the general meeting of the Bishops' Conference. But again there is no indication of when it would be convened.

Structure and Constitution

When the Chinese Bishops' Conference was established in Beijing in 1980, it did not have its own constitution. Its juridical status is derived from the constitution of the Administrative Commission. Articles 3 and 7 of that constitution deal with the subject of the Bishops' Conference. Article 3 states: "the supreme organization of the Commission is the Chinese Catholic Conference. Its role is to establish and revise the constitutions of the individual commissions, to listen to and supervise the work reports of such commissions, and to elect members to the Chinese Bishops' Conference." According to Article 7: "The Chinese Bishops' Conference consists of the episcopal ordinaries of the different dioceses. Its role is to study and explain the doctrines of faith, to regulate Church discipline, to exchange pastoral experiences and to promote relationships with the churches outside of China. It should have a chairman and a number of vice-chairmen, and one secretary-general. These should be elected at the Bishops' Conference general meeting."⁶

In January of 1985, Bishop Jin Luxian and Bishop Li Side were elected "auxiliary bishops" for Shanghai. At the meeting of the Bishops' Conference held in 1986, the term "the auxiliary bishops", was added to Article 7 of the constitution of the Church Administration Commission

stating that "the Bishops' Conference consists of the episcopal ordinaries and the auxiliary bishops of the different dioceses."

According to Article 7 of the Administrative Commission Constitution, the main functions of the Bishops' Conference are: to guard the deposit of faith, maintain church discipline, and share pastoral experience. On June 3, 1980, the Bishops' Conference issued a directive on "Decisions Concerning the Granting of Faculties for Administering the Sacraments"; and again in November of 1986 it issued another directive, this time in conjunction with the Administrative Commission, entitled "Some Regulations Concerning Church Affairs"⁷. A reading of these two directives indicates that the authority of the Bishops' Conference goes beyond its stated boundaries of doctrine and discipline to reach into the area of episcopal appointments and the curtailment of their powers. In Article 3 paragraph 4 of the direction on regulations, it is stated that a bishop who fails to abide by Article 1 paragraph 3 of the regulations is to be ostracized and his powers and functions only restored after receiving approval from the Bishops' Conference.⁸ Thus the power of the Bishops' Conference supersedes that of the individual diocesan bishop. When Jin Luxian and Li Side were elected as auxiliary bishops in December of 1984, the Church in Shanghai applied for their approval from both the Chinese Catholic Administrative Commission and the Chinese Bishops' Conference. From this we must surmise that the Bishops' Conference has the authority to approve the election of bishops.⁹

The Bishops' Conference soon became aware of the necessity to have its own constitution, independent of that of the Administrative Commission. At its meeting last year, an ad hoc committee was set up to draft the new constitution. It is now in the process of researching the constitutions of various Bishops' Conferences throughout the world, including that of the Taiwan Bishops' Conference. Work on the new constitution is believed to be near completion.

Practical Function

The meeting of 1980 had intended to bring together the Bishops' Conference and the Administrative Commission. Both groups are made up of the same members and many directives are issued under both names. This, however, has only succeeded in confusing the identity of each group and making less clear the proper functions of both.

The Bishops' Conference in China is a national organization with no regional subdivisions. This is in contrast to the Administrative Commission which is organized on the provincial, county and even municipal

level, and has under its jurisdiction the practical disposition of local pastoral affairs. However, the fact that there are no regional bishops' conferences does not mean that the bishops do not cooperate on a regional level. They are in constant communication and share both financial and manpower resources. The newly established seminaries also provide a forum for episcopal exchanges. To date there are in China six regional and five provincial major seminaries, in addition to the national seminary in Beijing.¹⁰ Their boards of governors are made up of all concerned diocesan bishops and local church leaders. They meet regularly to discuss curriculum, staffing, finances and such related matters. These bishops have formed close working relationships with each other that enable them to solve their common problems. Another factor linking the bishops is that seminarians throughout the country are exposed to the same basic formation-education programmes. This provides further opportunities for mutual cooperation among the bishops of different dioceses, especially in such areas as liturgical renewal and pastoral training.

Because of their frequent contacts, the bishops overall have developed more than just close ties with each other. When in 1988, the board of governors of the Sichuan Seminary met in Chongqing, they were able to settle the problem of electing a new bishop for Zhaotong in Yunnan Province with relative ease. One must conclude from this that seminary boards serve as de facto regional bishops conferences in many cases. The major seminary in Xian has developed into a center of activity for China's north-western dioceses, where many regional pastoral problems are discussed and solved. Thus it can be said that while regional bishops' conferences do not exist on paper, they do exist in fact, but in other forms.

Relationship with the Universal Church

In his address at the closing ceremony of the inaugural meeting of the Chinese Catholic Conference in 1980, Chairman Zhang Jiashu stated: "The Chinese Church Administrative Commission and the Chinese Bishops' Conference...will carry out the sacred mission of governing an independent and autonomous Catholic Church in China."¹¹ Bishop Zhang by placing the issue of autonomy first was speaking in accord with the political climate of the time. Since this had been the principle motif of the CCPA from its establishment in 1957, the statement came as no surprise to anyone. But with the developments that have taken place over the past years, the meaning and interpretation of "independent and autonomous" have taken on different modifications. It does not necessarily imply separation from and confrontation with the universal

Church.

What the establishment of the Chinese Bishops' Conference might mean is that the role of the CCPA could be gradually phased out. Such a change would enable the Church in China to develop closer ties with the universal Church. Also, the Bishops' conference's declared role as providing leadership in the areas of church doctrine and church discipline means that its efforts will be directed toward pastoral and not political concerns. Although Zhang underlined the Conference's intention to maintain an independent and self-governing church, in practice the Conference does support efforts towards reconciliation with the universal Church. During April of last year when church leaders, many of them bishops, were called to attend a meeting in Beijing, the majority voiced their approval of the move towards accepting the primacy and the authority of the Pope. This indeed is an important doctrinal step for the Chinese Church in achieving better relationships with the universal Church, and one that would have been unthinkable prior to the establishment of the Bishops' Conference.

The Bishops' Conference can serve as an invaluable instrument in helping to bring the Church in China structurally into line with the other local churches throughout the world. Since their own bishops' conferences maintain close ties with the Holy See, the Chinese Bishops' Conference, in furthering good relations with these local churches, would also be brought into closer contact with Rome. We do not know the day, but, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, I believe it is only a matter of time before full communion will be realized.

Relationship with Other Bishops in China

While the Chinese Bishops' Conference has the active support and membership of many bishops, there are still others who do not participate as members. These bishops work on their own, independent of the Conference. They do from time to time have contacts with bishops and priests on a local level where they engage in the exchange of pastoral opinion, ideas and experiences. Their way of serving the Church is different from that of the bishops who belong to the Conference; however, both groups are engaged in the same task of building up the Church.

It has become apparent that the government does not trust these bishops who do not join the Conference. According to media reports from Hong Kong and overseas, last year a group of ten such bishops and priests were arrested after attending a private gathering. No word of their release has reached us yet. Without going into great detail, it

can be said that these bishops are pastorally orientated and pose no political threat to the country. But their arrest did create a negative shock wave which was felt both inside and outside China, which only served to diminish peoples' trust in the present religious policy put forth by the government. Their early release would not only help to clarify matters with regard to their role and identity, but they would also be in a better position to continue to carry out their pastoral functions, free of political involvements. Also, making an issue of this case could bring embarrassment to the government-sanctioned Bishops' Conference. What is clear is that the basic issue and crucial task facing the Church in China today is how to enable and assist all the bishops of China to achieve reconciliation and unity.

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Authority in the Church: A Central Issue and Some Other Issues

by David Stagaman

Editor's Note: David Stagaman is the Dean of the Jesuit School of Theology at Berkeley, California, U.S.A.

He never wanted to help out at Mass on the village feast days. The priest from the neighboring district who came to say those Masses asked him to serve as sacristan, frequently he demanded it. Lahuaymarca had an Indian sacristan.

"That Indian doesn't know anything; he repeats the words like a parrot, and he's almost not Christian. You're a mestizo and the organist, and you can answer in Latin. The Mass will be a bigger affair with you," the priest told him the night before the big fiesta.

"I'm suffering, Father," the sacristan answered. "The Church inside my breast is burning. How am I going to be able to sing. This Gertrudis sings like an Angel."

"This Gertrudis doesn't think about God; she's too melancholy when she sings--yeah--because she's deformed."

"Look, Father, you don't understand the soul of the Indians; Gertrudis, even though she doesn't know God, belongs to God. If not, then