

Editorial

Who would have benefited, and who would have been harmed, had Bishop Duan Yinmin and his auxiliary, Bishop Xu Zhixuan, flown to Rome for the Asian Synod?

At first glance, it seems that everybody would have been happy. Bishop Duan studied in Rome in the 1930's and, his health permitting, would have retraced the steps of his youth. He and Bishop Xu would have enjoyed meeting bishops from other parts of Asia, plus people in the curia, not to mention an audience with the Holy Father. At age 90 and 82, the bishops from Wanxian in Sichuan probably would have slept through half of the numerous speeches, but the Synod would still have been more catholic, more universal, with representatives from Mainland China present. It would have been a boost for the morale of Mainland Catholics, and Beijing would have received favorable media coverage for waiving the red tape and promptly granting exit visas.

With 14 Cardinals, 6 patriarchs, 148 archbishops and 418 bishops in Asia not everyone could be invited to synod. About 30% of the 240 participants were selected ex officio, 37% were elected and 10% were nominated by the Pope. Bishops Duan and Xu were in the last category, but their names were not announced until the Pope preached during the opening Mass on April 19. The Pope is free to invite someone at the last minute, and no bishops' conference would dream of protesting or recommending another name.

Yet things are not so simple in China. Which bishops' conference speaks for the Catholic Church in the Mainland? The government approves of the China Catholic Bishops' Conference, established in 1980. But in practice the bishops consult the Catholic Patriotic Association before making important decisions, and the United Front Department takes an interest in those decisions. But somehow a letter from Cardinals Sodano and Schotte reached Bishop Duan, who was able to reply in Latin.

Bishop Duan was naturally grateful for the invitation, which somehow reached him. But he immediately realized that he could not get an exit visa on short notice. He wrote that he was so grieved he could not sleep for two nights. As the last surviving Chinese bishop appointed by Pope Pius XII, it is obvious why he was invited.

In the end, unable to respond positively to the invitation he so highly cherished, he consoled himself with being present in spirit at the Asian Synod.

From Beijing's viewpoint, the favorable publicity to be gained by permitting Bishops Duan and Xu to attend would be outweighed by the bad precedent of letting the Pope deal directly with Catholic bishops.

Not far from Wanxian the terrain is mountainous and the gravel roads are poor. A recent visitor was in a truck that had to stop because of a huge rut in the road. A dozen farmers with shovels appeared and offered to fill in the rut for a fee – a small fee if expressed in U.S. dollars, but a fair sum in the Sichuan hinterland. The driver said: "I know they made the rut in the road, and will redig that hole for the next truck, but I have to get to town. What can I do? We cannot stay here overnight." So he paid the fee. Beijing and Rome are still creating roadblocks for each other. Somehow both sides must be willing to pay for repairing the road, but both seem to be willing to wait. Sad to say, at least for the time being, the roads from China do not yet lead to Rome.■ MJS