

## EDITORIAL

In this issue we examine three documents on church management which a joint conference of Chinese Catholic bishops and standing committee members of the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association (hereafter referred to as the CCPA) passed at a meeting in Beijing on March 21-22, 2003. We publish the documents in both Chinese and English, and then present commentaries written by observers for the most part from outside of China.

The three documents are entitled: *A Management System for Catholic Dioceses in China*, *The System for the Joint Conference of Chairpersons of the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association and of the Bishops Conference of the Catholic Church in China*, and *Work Regulations for the Catholic Patriotic Association*.

Perhaps due to the SARS outbreak in Hong Kong and China, and the U.S. invasion of Iraq, which all took place at the same time as the joint conference of Chinese Catholic leaders, the conference itself, and the documents issued by it, received little coverage in the foreign press. However, the documents aroused a storm of interest in Catholic circles, both in China, and abroad.

In its April 2003 issue, *China Religion*, the periodical of the National Bureau of Religious Affairs, published a seven-page article, part text and part interview, with participants of the March conference. The author describes the “three documents and systems” as the culmination of 50 years of experience of the Chinese Church administering itself independently. He points out that the establishment of the CCPA in the 1950s, was already a moment of liberation in Chinese Catholic Church thinking, and a great undertaking in running the church democratically.

To the outside observer, it seems that the government wants the Church to return to the situation where the CCPA “participates in the management of church affairs.” Since the re-opening of the churches in 1979, there has been a division of labor in the Church. The bishops and clergy would take care of ecclesiastical matters, while the CCPA would handle relations with the government. The clergy were in charge of celebrating Mass and administering the sacraments, while the

CCPA worked on physical matters, such as getting church properties back. The CCPA was considered to have more of a “servant role” in the church.

Now the three documents indicate a change. The CCPA is to have a say in such ecclesiastical matters as the election and consecration of bishops, in the formation of priests and Sisters, and in the assignment of pastors to parishes. This is alarming to outside observers. Since the CCPA is a political organization, does this mean that episcopal candidates are now to be vetted for their political rectitude? Are formation programs to be heavily laden with political study classes? Will political study programs now outweigh pastoral programs at the parish level?

The participants interviewed in the *China Religion* article think a balance can be struck between clergy and CCPA members at joint assemblies at both the local and national levels. They feel that members of both groups will mutually respect and fully cooperate with each other. Others, mainly foreign observers, have their doubts, especially in the choice of episcopal candidates. They fear that the most malleable candidate, or the one who can “get along with the government,” will be chosen, rather than the most spiritual or apostolic candidate. The one who is best for the government is more likely to be chosen rather than the one who is best for the church. Nothing whatsoever is mentioned about obtaining the Holy Father’s approval for the candidate!

In the commentaries and quotes cited in this issue, we try to present all sides. The readers are left to make their own choices. However, we at *Tripod* are of the opinion that the recent documents are an effort to bring the Chinese Catholic Church more under the control of the Party and the government, and more cut off from the universal church. (PJB)