

## *China: New Norms, The Eternal Problem*

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*Angelo Lazzarotto, PIME*

*The authorities justify the three new documents as necessary to fill a normative void. As a matter of fact, these documents, discussed last March, aim to tighten the dependence of the Church on the political power. They do it too in a most deceitful manner, giving an appearance of legality by involving the bishops themselves.*

**W**here is the Church of China heading? The question is raised again among foreign observers of Chinese matters, as they face three new documents that deal with the running of the Catholic Church in China. The documents became known to the outside world at the end of April. But they had been discussed and apparently approved at a joint meeting of the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association (CCPA) and the Bishops Conference of the Catholic Church of China (BCCCC) held on March 21-22 in Beijing. The documents deal with three different topics and have the following titles: *“Work Regulations for the Catholic Patriotic Association,” “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 *“A Management System for Catholic Dioceses in China.”*



The overall situation that emerges from the documents underlines the dangerous schizophrenia in which the Chinese Catholic Church lives. The communist government has been trying for over half a century to cancel the Roman Pontiff's authority, while the Church herself is desperately trying to preserve her traditional characteristics (one, holy, catholic, and apostolic) in order to remain part of the universal Catholic communion.

The longest document, the one on the Diocesan Management System, contains 83 articles divided into 12 chapters. It tries to answer

real needs in the Catholic communities where, due to the tragic events of the past decades, all ecclesial administrative tradition has been lost and every pastoral experience has been interrupted. Although not making any explicit reference to the new Canon Law or to directives issued by the Roman Curia during those years (only the Vatican II Constitution *Lumen Gentium* is quoted once, on the responsibility of the lay people for missionary activity, no. 33), the norms represent a praiseworthy effort at ecclesial responsibility, and are pastorally up-to-date.

However, the other two documents confirm the limitation on the bishops' authority, which is more and more controlled by the Patriotic Association. Referring to the "principle of democratically running the Church," they impose the method of using the CCPA to "mutually discuss, collectively lead and commonly decide" with the Church affairs committees "important Church matters."

The association, whose first purpose is stated as "to support the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party," aims also "to implement the principle of the independent administration of the church, to jointly manage church matters in conjunction with church affairs organizations, to carry out a democratic running of the church, and to conscientiously promote the adaptation of the Catholic Church to socialist society" (art. 2 of "*Work Regulations*").

To give to this interference the appearance of legality, the document "*The System for the Joint Conference*" calls for the establishment of a joint conference of the chairpersons of the CCPA and BCCCC, and spells out the rules which will govern it. The first of its nine articles declares that the text is based on the CCPA and BCCCC statutes, has been formulated "in conjunction with the spirit of Vatican II\*, the tradition of the Church and the requirements of the times," and tries "to make more complete and to strengthen the Chinese Catholic independent enterprise," through "collective leadership, democratic supervision, mutual discussion and joint decision-making." Then, Article 3 specifies 16 areas, about which the BCCCC must discuss and come to a compromise with the CCPA. These include the election of bishops, the management of seminaries and convents, the political, professional and spiritual formation of the clergy, the preparation of the National Assembly of Catholic Representatives, etc. From now on, the joint conference of the CCPA (always mentioned first) and the BCCCC should be held every half year (art. 4). This practically tightens the hands of the bishops, forcing

the natural shepherds and teachers in the church to work systematically with the political requirements of the Patriotic Association.

Mr. Ye Xiaowen, the director of the State Administration of Religious Affairs, seemed to indicate that there is now a determination to have more decisive control even over the pastoral decisions of the Church. Speaking at the conclusion of the meeting, Mr. Ye emphasized that the Church in China must carry out the three principles of independence, autonomy and self-administration. He also mentioned that through the "one regulation, two systems" documents, an instrument has been found "to fill a void" in the democratic running of the Church. Some analysts note that in the past years the shepherds of the Church in China have shown a remarkable capacity to increase in their communities a sense of affiliation to the universal Church, despite the many limits and controls. One cannot forget that in the last three or four years the highest authorities have often called for a firm control over religious activities, and that Catholic communities refusing to cooperate with the CCPA are periodically dealt with very harshly by the public security forces. This same phenomenon is also noted in the strict repression of the spiritual movement, known as Falun Gong.

"*The System for the Joint Conference*" document also underlines the importance of the National Assembly of Catholic Representatives, which is being formally recognized as the supreme authority over the Catholic Church in China. As a matter of fact, such a role for the National Assembly has been practically exercised since the summer of 1957, when the Patriotic Association was established during an *ad hoc* meeting of Catholic representatives. Therefore, it is not strange that the Patriotic Association and the Bishops' Conference should refer to it. The statutes of both organizations were approved (in 1992) and amended (in 1998) by the National Assembly of the Catholic Representatives. It was also this National Assembly that elected the chairman, the vice-chairmen, the standing committee members, and the secretary-general of the BCCCC, and the corresponding leaders of the CCPA. Up to the sixth National Assembly, held in January 1998, the same person, Bishop Joseph Zong Huaide, was elected to preside over the two structures. In 1998, the Catholic Representatives elected Joseph Liu Yuanren, bishop of Nanjing, to head the Bishops' Conference of the Chinese Catholic Church, and Michael Fu Tieshan, bishop of Beijing, to head the Patriotic Association. The National Assembly, due to meet this year to renew these appointments, has so far been postponed because of the

SARS emergency. Even up to the present day, the National Assembly of Chinese Catholic Representatives does not have proper statutes. But from the ten articles in the "*System for the Joint Conference*" document, we can better see the prerogatives and the operational methods that are being put forward. There is a push to make them permanent and definitive, thus formalizing the "democratic" administration of the Church.

Considering that this goes against the nature of the Church founded by Jesus upon Peter, and continued throughout the centuries with his successors up to the present Pope John Paul II, it is legitimate to wonder what the future of the Catholic Church existing in China today may become. Is it possible to continue living with this equivocation and double standard? How can the bishops, who declare themselves members of the one Catholic Church, be forced at the same time to avoid (at least in official papers) any explicit reference to the Pope and to the ministries assisting him in the pastoral care of Christianity? All three documents neglect to mention the Pope's authority, nor do they make any reference to the Roman Curia. Obviously, the officers appointed to manage religious affairs at various levels are obsessed with the idea that they have to defend the nation's sovereignty and independence at all cost. For this reason, they multiply controls, and intervene in the bishops' activities, considering the Pope to be a foreign power interfering in China's internal affairs. They most likely justify these impositions with another word repeated frequently from the upper echelons of authority, that all religions must "adapt" to socialism, the ideology to which China still adheres.

The Chinese Constitution (approved in 1982) grants (in art. 36) to every citizen "freedom of religious belief," adding that "no state organ, public organization or individual may compel citizens to believe in, or not to believe in, any religion." We must recognize that it is difficult to rationally understand the "mystery" that is behind the nature of the Catholic Church, as Jesus Christ wanted it. But a State cannot claim the right to change the nature of a religion whose existence it has recognized as legitimate. It should be clearly stated that the logic behind these documents is illegitimate, because it runs against the freedom guaranteed by the Chinese Constitution to its citizens.

It is time for the top political leaders to take note of this abnormal situation. The staff responsible for "managing religions" and for enforcing the established "policy of religious freedom" ignore or pretend to ignore the fact that, by imposing certain practical decisions



on church leaders and faithful, they attempt to change the very nature of the Catholic Church. The leaders of the People's Republic of China, while asking all the components in society to adapt themselves to socialist society, should ask themselves up to what point can they push this adaptation. If they have any knowledge of the Catholic Church, they should realize that it does not stand on a consensus from the base, but on the authority that Jesus Christ gave to the bishops, to run each Christian community in communion with the whole "catholicity." This re-appraisal appears more urgent after the 16<sup>th</sup> Congress of the Chinese Communist Party, which claims to represent all the active forces in the nation today.

China, now a member of the World Trade Organization with ambitious goals for the next several years, is revising her legislative bodies and operational methods to conform to international standards. Will the "fourth generation" leaders be enlightened enough to study again the whole "religious policy" from a realistic point of view, pragmatically taking into account at the same time the experience of western countries? For years the leaders of the PRC have been repeating that they are interested to open a dialogue with Rome. John Paul II has made no secret of his readiness to enter such a dialogue. This is particularly true of his message of October 24, 2001, in which he promised a fruitful collaboration, for the good of the Chinese nation and of the whole of mankind. The dialogue has been blocked so far by the prevailing narrow vision in Beijing about "the Vatican" being only a tiny political entity. Such a narrow vision denies the very reason of its existence. Indeed, the worldwide moral authority enjoyed by the Pope is due to the fact that he is the visible head of the Catholic Church. And this is the same Church that is present also in New China. Perhaps, applying once more the wise motto of paramount leader Deng Xiaoping, "seeking truth from facts," would help to reach a new understanding, useful for social stability in China, and for her prestige in the world.

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*Note: When Angelo Lazzarotto wrote this article, only the draft version of the documents was available to him. The phrase, "in the spirit of Vatican Council II," was omitted from the final version of the documents.*