

The Church in China Codifies its Responsibilities

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During the month of April 2003, China's Catholic Church leaders circulated three documents, adopted by the Episcopal Conference and the Patriotic Association, regarding an important meeting held in Beijing on the 21 and 22 of March, 2003. Among the 64 participants, there were 40 bishops. The others were mostly people in charge of the Standing Committee of the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association. The three documents had already been proposed for the consideration of the bishops some eight years ago. These are the 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.*"



It goes without saying that these arrangements can seem disconcerting in Roman circles since this "democratic" administration of the Church avoids all reference to the authority of the Holy See and legalizes the participation of lay leaders in the government of the Church. Some of the regulations can, in fact, give rise to confusion between canonical and civil power. But Chinese tradition cannot conceive of the exercise of a religion without regulating its integration into the political life of the country.

The contents of these documents, however, reflect a number of positive aspects that we must neither ignore nor reject. The bishops have most certainly introduced into these documents the fruit of their local pastoral experience. They have also tried to follow the Roman Code of Canon Law in order to delineate the rights and duties of bishops, general and episcopal vicars, pastors and parish priests, etc. The 83 articles of the 12 chapters of the document dealing with the

administration of dioceses follow generally the 1983 Code of Canon Law while introducing some directives peculiar to the Chinese situation. Certain aspects are proper to China, for example the role of the "diocesan administrators" who, without episcopal power, administer the diocese in the absence of the bishop. They are not called "apostolic administrators" since all references to the Apostolic See of Rome are excluded for political reasons of national independence. The bishops have, however, been careful to note in an indirect way their fidelity to the Pope in introducing an unexpected enrichment in their profession of faith: "We believe in one, holy, catholic Church transmitted by the apostles whose head is St. Peter." That is perhaps a "Chinese idiosyncrasy" [*chinoiserie*] but nonetheless rich in meaning.

Chapter 10 dealing with feminine religious congregations has only six articles. The diocesan character of these congregations is confirmed along with the sovereign authority of the bishop. Certain positive recommendations are made concerning the intellectual and spiritual formation of religious as well as their learning professional skills that can provide them with a means of livelihood. Chapter 11 on the life of diocesan priests recommends a priestly spirituality, which includes obedience, chastity and poverty in the exercise of the ministry. The complete translation of this document will appear in the bulletin, *Eglises d'Asie*. We are of the mind that if all of China's dioceses followed these directives, many of the Church's internal problems would be solved.

The intervention of the civil power may not be totally useless in the face of certain abuses that could arise from civil tribunals in any country. The Catholic Patriotic Association can eventually play a positive role in the measure that those in charge act in a spirit of faith for the good of the Church. Throughout past years the Patriotic Association has often discredited itself for having acted in the interest of its members to the detriment of Christians. This is the reason the document dealing with the work of the Association recommends that lay leaders be motivated to act in a Christian way and to respect religious personnel.

We must mention also that these documents do not contain any attack on Rome and that the general orientation responds to a pastoral concern. They mark a significant effort to regulate numerous problems that presently affect the life of the Church in China at a time when many young priests, without sufficient pastoral experience, are called upon to take on heavy responsibilities. The Chinese bishops deserve encouragement rather than criticisms.