Confrontation and Lack of Dialogue Cause a New China-Vatican Conflict

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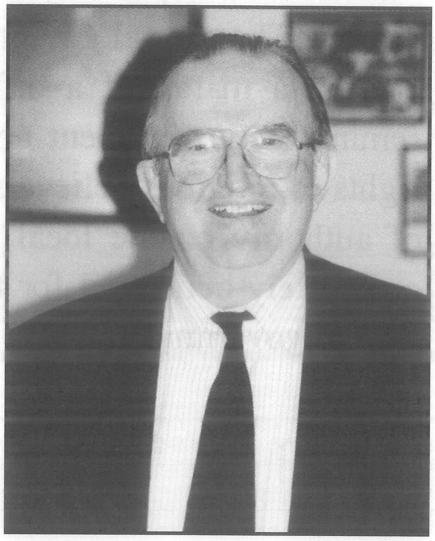

Who caused the conflict of Kunming and Anhui?

The carousel of Sino-Vatican relations is hard to follow. During the months of February-March the media brought us much hopeful news. Today both are again in open conflict because two young bishops were ordained without appointment from the Holy Father: one on April 30 in Kunming (Yunnan Province), and one on May 3 in Anhui. The Vatican reacted on May 4 with a declaration that showed some understanding for the two newly ordained bishops, the two main consecrators and the other more than ten co-consecrators because they had been put under heavy pressure by the civil authorities. But the Holy See also referred to Canon 1382 of Canon Law according to which all those bishops would be automatically excommunicated. Jurists on the other hand say that only if the Pope promulgates it will the excommuncation be applied. I was in Beijing and, together with Chinese friends, wondered how much damage this new conflict would cause to the Church.

Our first question was: who caused the conflict? The media in Hong Kong, Taiwan and the USA heavily attacked the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association (CPA), more particularly its vice-chairman Mr. Anthony Liu Bainian, and rightly so! But it is obvious to all of us that Anthony Liu or even the whole CPA does not have the clout to cause by themselves such a conflict in China. Higher authorities are behind it. For the past 20 years we have seen

that every time Chinese civil authorities call for it, the CPA strongly criticizes the Holy See. Afterwards the CPA takes all the blame for the critique while the Chinese civil authorities, the ones directing and inspiring it all, speak a soft, kind language. This is also the case for the ordination in Kunming. The real question is: what motivated the PRC authorities to provoke the conflict? Why do they once again put into jeopardy the normalization of Sino-Vatican relations, which the PRC so greatly desires? A close look at recent events can give us an answer to that question.

A quiet, positive evolution has been going on for five years

Many old Chinese bishops have died in recent years. As a result, there are now in China 42 dioceses without a bishop. This causes problems for pastoral work. For more than five years Chinese civil authorities have allowed Catholic priests—often also with religious sisters and lay Catholics participating—to elect a new candidate bishop for their diocese and to propose his name to Rome for appointment by the Pope. This happened during the past five years in the dioceses of Xianxian and Jingxian (Hebei Province), in Nanning (Guangxi), in Bameng (Inner Mongolia), in Xi'an (Shaanxi), Wanzhou (Sichuan), Shanghai, Suzhou, and most recently on May 7 in Shenyang (Liaoning). In all those dioceses bishops were ordained, who had the approval of both Rome and China. The Holy See was happy with this positive evolution. Even though there were still some complaints about too much interference by the government, Rome felt that it could approve the candidates. Some openness and goodwill was apparently growing on both sides. It happened that Chinese civil authorities told the local priests explicitly: "We know that you have to submit your proposal to Rome. You do your job, we will do ours."

In fact it was never officially or publicly admitted—not even for the ordinations in Shanghai or Xi'an—that the PRC accepted the principle of appointment of bishops by the Pope. But authorities turned a blind eye when the names of candidate bishops were sent to Rome for approval. There remained a great difference in the degree

of cooperation by local authorities, however. In Jingxian (Hebei) on January 6, 2004, priests and local authorities fiercely discussed for a whole night whether or not the document of the appointment by the Pope would be read out publicly during the ordination ceremony. Finally they reached an agreement by which both the appointment of the Pope and that of the government would be read. The point is that for several years, in spite of some struggle, a quiet evolution for the better was happening with regard to this most crucial point for the Chinese Catholic Church: the appointment of bishops by the Pope. Why is it that the ordinations planned in Kunming and Anhui, and expected to happen peacefully, turned suddenly into a conflict situation once again?

In March 2006, Pope Benedict XVI appointed the bishop of Hong Kong a Cardinal. The whole Chinese Catholic community—in Hong Kong and Taiwan, and also in the PRC—joyfully welcomed the appointment. But Chinese civil authorities were shocked because Bishop Zen had been known as a severe critic of the communists. Those who hoped that his appointment as Cardinal would motivate Bishop Zen to become more low-key were mistaken. Almost every day the media published the frank and sharp observations of the new Cardinal about how he would advise the Pope regarding China. It all culminated in a much publicized, open and pointed conflict between the Cardinal and Anthony Liu, vice-director of the CPA. Chinese civil authorities kept silent but everyone surmised that their answer would soon follow. And it did.

While this went on, bishops in China were concerned about the fact that the names of several of their successors-elect had been sent to Rome, and they were awaiting the approval of their appointments by the Pope. Among them were Fr. Ma Yinglin (Kunming) and Fr. Liu Hongxin (Anhui). It was known that both had been elected as candidates with a large majority, and that the results had been sent to Rome months previously. It was also said that several bishops and priests had sent positive recommendations of the candidates to Rome. But it took more time than planned for the much expected positive answers from Rome to arrive. Authorities were therefore obliged to

postpone the ordination ceremonies, which had originally been planned for February. They postponed them. But in March, after Bishop Zen had become a Cardinal, the rumor already circulated that local and national Chinese civil authorities would refuse to postpone the ordinations again. New dates for both ordinations were fixed, respectively on April 30 for Kunming and May 3 for Anhui. This time, so it was said, the authorities would go through with the ordinations, with or without the Holy See's approval. Rome learned of this decision, but hoped it would not happen.

The humiliation at Kunming

Civil authorities started to press bishops to preside over, and others to concelebrate at the ordinations. At least one bishop refused to participate in the ordination ceremony, as long as there was no appointment by the Pope. Other bishops were told that the application for the two young bishops' ordinations had long been sent in to Rome for approval, and that the Pope "had silently approved the ordination." This was of course not correct, but that was what one of the bishops told me on the eve of the ordination in Kunming. On that same day Chinese bishops and priests, who had already gone to Kunming, received emails and phone calls from Hong Kong and elsewhere informing them that the Pope had explicitly asked that the ordination ceremony be postponed once again. If the ordination went ahead, they were told, severe sanctions could be applied. It was expected that they would refuse to participate. After these hectic communication efforts, some people wondered whether any bishops at all would show up to perform the ordination.

Much to the surprise and disappointment of many, including Rome, the ordination in Kunming went ahead as planned. On top of that, the presiding bishop was precisely the 88-year-old sickly Bishop Dong Guangqing (Wuhan) who, already in 1958, had been the first to be illicitly ordained a bishop. He was finally approved by the Pope in the 1980s, and has since then been highly regarded by Rome. Together with him, eight other bishops ignored the warnings from Rome and concelebrated the ordination Mass. The comments given

by Chinese officials, as well as on the TV news that day sounded sarcastic. They stated: "Bishop Ma was ordained as Bishop of Kunming. The Pope has not yet appointed him, but we hope that he will do so soon. We need bishops for our work of evangelization, and we are sure that Rome will not disagree on that. Moreover, China wishes to improve its relations with the Vatican." That sounded like: "It does not matter whether the Pope makes the appointment or not. China has already ordained Bishop Ma, and we also wish to be good friends with the Holy See." It could hardly have sounded more sarcastic. The tone seemed aimed at humiliating the Holy See. The PRC gave its answer to Rome, saying: "We will show you who is the boss. No matter what, we want an independent Chinese Catholic Church here." Three days later, on May 3, Fr. Liu Xinhong was ordained bishop in Anhui. His appointment by the Pope had also not yet arrived. The confrontation between Beijing and the Vatican was complete. Sitting in the middle of all this in Beijing I wondered: Is this what we really want? Will this confrontation serve China? Will it serve the Chinese Church?

Let's follow Pope John Paul II on the road of dialogue

Once again we are now back to square one. Neither China nor Rome will ever reach their goal by mutual confrontation. At least that much should be clear after Epiphany 2000, after the canonization of the martyrs, and after this Kunming event. China cannot continue to pretend that there is freedom of religion, and at the same time deny the Catholic Church its normal relations with the Pope and the Universal Church. Chinese Catholics will never accept a Church that is independent from Rome. The Chinese Catholics are not only examples to other Chinese in loving their country, they are also models in their fidelity to the Pope. However, we all remember clearly the example of Pope John Paul II who, no matter what happened, remained faithful to his attitude of dialogue with China. In spite of all the disappointments he met, he looked for dialogue rather than confrontation. Did Pope John Paul II not call on the Churches of Taiwan and Hong Kong to be bridge-Churches? Is this not the time to

remember those words of the Pope, rather than to enter into open confrontation and conflict? Chinese Catholics in the USA spread the mentality that to dialogue is to show weakness. Pope John Paul II proved that the opposite is true, and that dialogue is the way that we must follow. It is not by promoting confrontation that one can build bridges and solve problems. The Kunming incident admonishes both the People's Republic and the Universal Catholic Church to walk once again on the way of dialogue.

The lesson of Kunming

The pioneers who walk in front of us on this road of dialogue are the underground bishops Zhao Zhendong (Xuanhua) and Jia Zhiguo (Zhengding). Long ago they were in confrontation with the government, but they have moved from confrontation to dialogue. They expressed their willingness to become official, and decided to accept some official priests in their dioceses. But they are now being criticized severely by some of their own priests because they, in the spirit of Pope John Paul II, are ready to dialogue with the communists to find a solution for their Church. Few seem to be aware that in this dialogue they challenge the communists to prove that they are no longer the communists of the 1950s. The bishops are willing to cooperate with the communist Chinese government, but they refuse to establish an independent Chinese Church. For this the Chinese authorities have put the two bishops under house arrest for months. By their attitude the bishops have shown that they themselves are open to dialogue and cooperation, but the communists failed to prove that they are now ready to give the Catholic Church true religious freedom. The attitude of these two bishops towards dialogue is an invitation to the communists to reflect. That's the strength of the dialogue of these bishops. Just as with Pope John Paul II, these pioneers of dialogue speak a strong language. Dialogue yields more fruit than confrontation. For confrontation can destroy more in one day than dialogue can build up over many years. That's the lesson we can all learn from the Kunming event.

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