

Sino-Vatican Relations Reach a New Low

Katharina Wenzel-Teuber

Translated by Jacqueline Mulberge

Since the episcopal ordination in Chengde (Hebei) on 20 November 2010, carried out under intense pressure from the State authorities but without a papal mandate, Sino-Vatican relations have grown steadily worse and the situation of the Catholic Church in China is becoming more and more difficult. Basically the crux of the matter is control of Church leadership structures in China and of future generations of Church leaders. This was expressed concretely in recent months in the conflicts surrounding the filling of the many vacant diocesan sees.

Firstly in 2011 there were two episcopal ordinations, on 30 March and 20 May, which – like the first ten episcopal ordinations of 2010 – took place with the agreement of both the Vatican and the Chinese government. But the authorities in Wuhan planned another episcopal ordination for 9 June, this time without a papal mandate; it was apparently postponed at short notice and for an indefinite period only because – after calls from Rome – the candidate for ordination supposedly refused to be consecrated. Not long afterwards the Diocese of Handan (Hebei) found itself obliged to carry out the ordination of an episcopal candidate, who had both the papal mandate and in principle the approval of the Chinese authorities, prematurely and in secret on 21 June, so as to avoid participation by the illegitimate Bishop of Chengde, on which the authorities were insisting. The newly ordained Coadjutor Bishop of Handan, Sun Jigen, who until now has not been recognized by the government, and two priests of the diocese were temporarily detained.

Two episcopal ordinations without papal mandate. Next the government went ahead with the ordination of two bishops, on 29 June in the Diocese of Leshan (Province of Sichuan) and on 14 July in the Diocese of Shantou (Province of Guangdong) for whom no papal approval had been given and of whom it was already known beforehand that they would not be recognized by Rome (where recently compromises had certainly been made regarding the appointment of Chinese bishops, as Archbishop Savio Hon confirmed in an interview on 1st April). Against the priest Lei Shiyin in Leshan the Vatican had undisclosed “very serious, proven reasons.” According to *Asianews*, the priest Huang Bingzhang in Shantou, who has already held a political function as a delegate to the National People’s Congress since 1998, was regarded by local critics as too close to the party. When the authorities pushed his election through on 11 May 2011, there was opposition in the diocese. Moreover, Shantou already has a bishop (who is not recognized by the government).

Both the ordination of Leshan and that of Shantou were carried out exclusively by bishops who were recognized by the government and by Rome – seven in Leshan and eight in Shantou. Some of them had already participated in episcopal ordinations without papal mandate before (among them the main consecrator in both cases, Bishop Fang Xingyao, Chairman of the Patriotic Association), others were involved in such an ordination for the first time. Whereas in the ordination of Leshan it was not known in how far the participants were placed under pressure, for the ordination in Shantou at least the four bishops from the Province of Guangdong were forced by the authorities to participate. The Bishop of Shenyang and the Bishop of Xiamen were able to avoid the compulsion – one thanks to the protection of his priests, the other, according to reports, by going into hiding. (Details of the above-named incidents and the statements quoted below can be found in the “News Update on Religion and Church in China” in this issue of *RCTC*.)

The reactions of the Holy See to both these ordinations were unusually sharp. In a statement of 4 July (on Leshan), Rome declared that “the effects of the sanction which he has incurred through violation of the norm of canon 1382 of the Code of Canon Law” applied to the priest Lei Shiyin who was ordained without a papal mandate. This means that Lei now finds himself excommunicated – confirmed the (for the Chinese Church responsible) Papal Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, elucidating the Vatican Document on 12 July. The Holy See’s statement regarding the ordination in Shantou was almost word for word the same – Huang Bingzhang, therefore, is now also in a state of excommunication.

The two statements of the Holy See on the situation of the consecrating bishops were distinctly different. According to the Leshan Statement, they have exposed themselves to “the grave canonical sanctions laid down by the law of the Church (in particular, canon 1382 ...).” The Shantou Statement, on the other hand, stresses that some of the participating bishops had endeavoured in various forms to resist, which “is meritorious before God and calls for appreciation on the part of the whole Church,” as also were the efforts of those who had defended their pastors.

Ripostes from the Chinese side. In his statement of 7 July, the priest Yang Yu, recently appointed Speaker for the Patriotic Association of the Chinese Catholic Church and the official Chinese Bishops’ Conference, described the statement of the Holy See of 4 July as regrettable, it did not contribute to the unity of the Chinese Church and would compromise both the spreading of the gospel and the development of the Church. In its comment of 25 July, the State Administration for Religious Affairs (SARA) described the “so-called excommunication” of the two newly ordained bishops as an “extremely unreasonable and rude act which has deeply wounded the Catholic Church of China.” In the 1950s the Vatican had already threatened with excommunication, at which the Chinese Church had taken to the path of electing and ordaining on its own and which it now – with the full support of the government – would pursue with even greater determination, SARA declared.

Commentators outside mainland China spoke in terms of a “showdown” in which “both sides are playing all the cards they have” (thus a Hong Kong academic quoted by the *South China Morning Post*). “It’s a war,” said Cardinal Joseph Zen at a press conference in New York on 14 July. One could see that Beijing had been “wanted to pick a fight” when it selected two episcopal candidates knowing they would be totally unacceptable to Rome, was the opinion of Jim Mulroney of the *Hong Kong Sunday Examiner* in an interview on 15 August. As did others, Mulroney pointed out that never before had the Vatican talked about excommunication in connection with the Chinese Church (in fact, also in the case of the first two Chinese bishops ordained without papal approval on 13 April 1958, Rome had never declared the possible excommunication; cf. E. Wurth MM – B.A. Maheu MM, *Papal Documents Related to China 1937–2005*, Hong Kong 2006, p. 93). An unnamed canon law expert told *UCAN*, however, that the publication of the excommunication was necessary. If still more illegitimate episcopal ordinations take place, the Catholic Church in China would become “a State Church, founded by the government,” he argued. Other commentators said basically the same thing.

Archbishop Savio Hon, Secretary of the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, stated in an interview with *La Stampa* newspaper on 12 July that the latest episodes meant a step back to the situation of the 1950s. These words were taken up from several sides, lastly also by Zhuo Xinping, Director of the Institute of World Religions of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences, quoted by *China Daily* on 22 July. He stated, China had carried out ordinations without papal approval already earlier but an excommunication from Rome was rare.

The main reason why Beijing has so greatly increased the pressure on the Catholic Church in China since November 2010 is thought to be the coming change of power in China in November 2012 which has caused a massive “move to the left” in the political sphere [visible also in other areas, such as in dealing with those who think differently and with advocates of human rights]. Savio Hon, in the above-mentioned interview of 12 July and Ren Yanli, former director of the Department for Christianity of the Institute of World Religions of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences speaking to the *South China Morning Post* expressed similar thoughts. According to Ren Yanli, Beijing has never said that it wanted to restore relations with the Vatican, this was only ever the wish of the Vatican.

Gianni Valente in *Vatican Insider (La Stampa)* has a problem with the explanations published by the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples on the Leshan Statement of the Holy See. According to these explanations, he says, all consecrating bishops would be momentarily suspended, due to “presumed imputability” and they would not be allowed to administer the sacraments legitimately to their faithful until the Vatican had evaluated their situation. That would launch a mechanism that could lead to an “exponential” increase of bishops who, from the point of view of the Holy See, were illegitimate – a “political-ecclesial tsunami,” fears Valente. According to him, still in November last year, of the 80 Chinese bishops recognized by the government, only 5 had not been recognized by Rome.

An unnamed expert expressed the concern in the *South China Morning Post* that some Chinese bishops might begin to feel that the Catholic Church in China “could do without

Rome” and it would be better to take the side of the Chinese government. Such bishops would be totally ineffectual, however, because their priests, sisters, and faithful would ignore them, the expert said.

The psychological plight of many bishops was also recognized, however. According to Mulroneo one bishop had said he lived in terror that the telephone would ring and he would be ordered to go to an illegitimate consecration. The pressure to participate in a consecration was enormous, Mulroneo explained: the bishops were taken away somewhere, their mobile phones confiscated, security agents would even come to the toilet with them and sit in their bedroom at night, so that they could literally do nothing and then they were taken under police escort [to the place of the consecration].

It was also pointed out (e.g. by *Asianews*) that there had lately been increased signs of resistance on the part of the Chinese Church against illegitimate episcopal ordinations – as was also confirmed in the Vatican statement on the ordination in Shantou. As always the Internet played a certain part in the matter. Thus on the diocesan website of Handan, in a sharp note of protest on 27 June addressed to the United Front Department and the Religious Affairs Bureau of the City of Handan, the priests demanded that their bishop (candidate) be freed; the following day the website was shut down. On blogs, however, these and other announcements continued to be passed on. Unusually, the website of an official diocese in East China took in all the critical reports of the Hong Kong Catholic news agency *UCAN* concerning the events (and remained open, at least to persons from outside China – the reports have in the meantime, however, been removed). The website of *Xinde (Faith)*, the largest Catholic newspaper in mainland China, mentioned not a single word about the illegitimate ordinations – that was apparently its only possible form of protest or of distancing itself. Its discussion forum was closed for a while in July.

The events surrounding the episcopal ordinations have also to be seen against the background that since the 8th National Assembly of Representatives of the Chinese Catholic Church in December 2010, Chinese authorities and State sanctioned church governing bodies have endeavoured to promote the systematic expansion of the official Catholic Church structures (e.g. by setting up a website, the appointment of a speaker, etc.). At the same time in recent months there were again increased reports of persecution of priests in the “underground,” especially in North Hebei, whom the authorities tried to force to join the Patriotic Association through taking them away and sometimes also through maltreatment. Taken together all these developments have made efforts towards unity and reconciliation within the Chinese Church once again more difficult but, therefore, all the more necessary.

Seven further episcopal ordinations are in preparation, stated the Secretary General of the official Chinese Bishops’ Conference, Bishop (not recognized by Rome) Guo Jincai in *China Daily* on 22 July. According to reports, there is already a government supported candidate in Harbin, the priest Yue Fusheng, who according to sources of *Asianews* is “ready and eager,” and whose ordination, for which there is no papal mandate, the priests of the diocese have been resisting for months.

Anthony Lam of the Holy Spirit Study Centre of the Diocese of Hong Kong recently called it a tragedy that some priests, who do not meet the Church requirements, are supported by government officials to become bishops. And he pointed to the traditional wisdom of the Church, according to which those who are eager to become a bishop are the least suited for that office.

Sources (2011): *Asianews* May 16; July 18, 14 and 25; *Australian Broadcasting Corporation* Aug. 15; *Avvenire* April 1; *China Daily* July 22; *La Stampa* July 12; *South China Morning Post* Aug. 22, *UCAN* May 12; June 7, 26 and 27; July 7 and 16; *Vatican Insider* July 15 and 19.

Details of the events mentioned in the text and further sources can be found in the "News Update on Religion and Church in China", entries of June 19, 21, 22 and 29; July 4, 7, 12, 12/13, 14, 14, 23 and 25; August 10, 21/22 and 23; September 28, 2011, in this issue of *RCTC* (on more past events in the "News Update" of the last issue).