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## China Demands Vatican Revoke Excommunication

China has demanded that the Vatican revoke the excommunication of the two Chinese bishops, recently ordained without the pope's approval, **if it wishes to improve relations**. This was the Beijing's first official response after the Vatican declared the excommunication of Father Paul Lei Shiyin, who was ordained bishop of Leshan on June 29, and Father Joseph Huang Bingzhang, who was ordained bishop of Shantou on July 14.

Beijing's defiant response came in a statement issued by the State Administration for Religious Affairs (SARA), which was published in Chinese and English by Xinhua, China's official news agency, on July 25. SARA, in its statement, described the Vatican's threat of "**so-called excommunication**" of the two bishops as "**extremely unreasonable and rude**", and called for its revocation.

*"If the Vatican is sincere about improving relations, it should rescind the **so-called 'excommunications'**; and return to the correct path of dialogue" a **SARA spokesperson told Xinhua**. "The Chinese government is willing to improve Sino-Vatican relations through constructive dialogue", the statement said in English.*

The SARA spokesperson described the two new illegitimate bishops as devout and capable candidates who are supported by their priests and faithful. The Holy See, on the other hand, did not consider the two priests as suitable candidates to be bishops, and explicitly told them they did not have the pope's approval. It also instructed them not to present themselves for ordination, under pain of excommunication. The Vatican communicated to the Chinese government the reasons why it did not consider them suitable.

Since 1957, however, Beijing has insisted that its state approved "Catholic Church" can act independently of Rome and elect and ordain its own bishops. "*The practice of the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association ordaining elected bishops is for the sake of managing the country's Catholic work and spreading the belief*", the SARA statement said.



By accepting to follow the government's line and be ordained bishops, the two priests broke Church law and incurred automatic excommunication. The Vatican formally declared them excommunicated some days after their respective ordinations, on July 4 and July 16. It said it did not recognize them as bishops, and stated that **they had not "authority" to govern the Catholic community in those dioceses**.

Recalling similar threats of excommunication made by the Vatican when the first two "*self-elected and self-ordained*" bishops were consecrated without the papal mandate in 1958, the SARA spokesperson claimed that "*history has proved that the Chinese Church would not be held up by the Vatican's threat*". "*The majority of priests and believers will more resolutely choose the path of independently selecting and ordaining its bishops, and the government will continue to support and encourage such practice*," the statement said.

The SARA statement came three days after a senior official of the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association announced on China Daily, July 22, that the state-sanctioned Catholic Church community plans to ordain "**at least 7 new bishops**", with or without the pope's approval, as soon as "*the conditions are right*". It would appear significant, however, that while the spokespersons for SARA and the CCPA firmly insist that China has no intention of changing course on the "*self election and self-ordination*" of bishops, independently of Rome, at the same time they both signal an interest in dialogue with the Vatican on this whole question.

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