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National Assembly of Catholic Representatives postponed

The postponement of the state-sponsored National Assembly of Catholic Representatives (NACR) to 2010 was "a wise decision," Church-in-China experts and some mainland bishops told AsiaNews. On several occasions, Card Joseph Zen of Hong Kong said that Chinese bishops should try to avoid joining in the event.

About 100 Chinese Catholics, including 40 bishops, gathered in Beijing on 25 and 26 November 2009. During the meeting, they decided to postpone the assembly, without fixing a date. Wang Zuo'an, director of the State Administration for Religious Affairs (SARA), attended the meeting.

The two-day meeting was organized by the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association (CCPA) and the Bishops' Conference of the Catholic Church in China (BCCCC), a body that includes bishops from the official Church that is not recognized by the Holy See. Some bishops told AsiaNews that **the proposal to postpone the assembly was adopted unanimously.**

The NACR is the highest governing body of the Catholic Church, above both the CCPA and the BCCCC. It is "democratic" in structure but in which bishops are a minority. It is responsible for nationwide pastoral actions, Church activities, episcopal appointments and even theological issues. The fact that **it has jurisdiction over bishops** makes it incompatible with the Catholic Church.

The CCPA had been trying for some time to organize an assembly to elect new CCPA and BCCCC presidents. Both posts have been vacant for years. CCPA President Michael Fu Tieshan (elected in 1998) died in 2007, whilst BCCCC President, Mgr Joseph Liu Yuanren, official bishop of Nanjing, died in 2005.

Recently, Card. Joseph Ze-kiun, bishop emeritus of Hong Kong, wrote a number of articles and letters. In them he commented on the papal Letter to Chinese Catholics, making suggestions to the



bishops of China to avoid the assembly because it is "incompatible with Catholic doctrine," according to the Pope.

Bishops contacted by AsiaNews said that the assembly was postponed several times because of a number of events like the Beijing Olympics in 2008, the 60th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic on 1 October 2009 and the World Expo in Shanghai in 2010, as well as helping the victims of Sichuan earthquake in May 2009.

For Anthony Lam Sui-ki, a senior researcher with the Holy Spirit Study Centre of the Catholic Diocese in Hong Kong, "the Chinese government is starting to take into account reactions from outside of China. The delay will give Chinese leaders an opportunity to **find solutions to the problems they will face with changes to the leadership.**" Mr. Lam also stressed that it is abnormal for the assembly to be above the bishops' conference.

Kwun Ping-hung, a Hong Kong-based China-Vatican relations observer, said that a number of reasons were given for the postponement of the assembly, and that the decision was not unrelated to the China-Vatican situation. Delaying the assembly will in fact give Beijing and the Holy See more time to solve problems and find some common ground.

Hong Kong [AsiaNews]

Church News

Catholic Population

The size of the Catholic population in China depends on whom you ask.

The **Faith Institute for Cultural Studies in ShiJiaZhuang (Heibei)**, has released updated statistics on the Church in China. According to the Institute, there are nearly six million Catholics, 3,397 clergy, 5,451 women religious, 628 major seminarians, and 630 minor seminarians. The Catholic community on the mainland manages 381 charitable structures. These include 220 clinics, 11 hospitals, 81 homes for the elderly, 44 kindergartens, a higher-learning center, 2 vocational training institutes, 22 orphanages and centers for disabled children, 3 rehabilitation centers, 34 centers for social services. Some 80 religious sisters are working in twenty government structures for lepers.

While the statistics appear to ignore the unofficial Church community, **the International Religions Freedom Report 2009, from the State Department of the United States of America**, notes that the "Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association (CCPA) reports that 5.3 million people worship in its churches and it is estimated that there are an additional 12 million or more who worship in unregistered Catholic churches that do not affiliate with the CCPA. According to official sources, the government-sanctioned CCPA has more than 70 bishops, nearly 3,000 priests and religious sisters, 6,000 churches and meeting places, and 12 seminaries. There are thought to be approximately 40 bishops operating underground, some of whom are in prison or under house arrest. Of the 97 dioceses in the country, 40 reportedly did not have an acting bishop in 2007 and more than 30 bishops were over 80 years of age."

However, statistics compiled in 2008 by **the Holy Spirit Study Centre, Hong Kong** show a marked difference from the Chinese Institute's figures. It puts the number of Catholics at about 12 million, more than double what was quoted by the Shijiazhuang-based Institute.

UCA News reported on December 23 that Anthony Lam, Sui-ki senior researcher at the Holy Spirit Centre, said staff began collecting data from mainland dioceses in 1988 and there has always been a marked difference between the figures compiled from this information and the official figures from the mainland

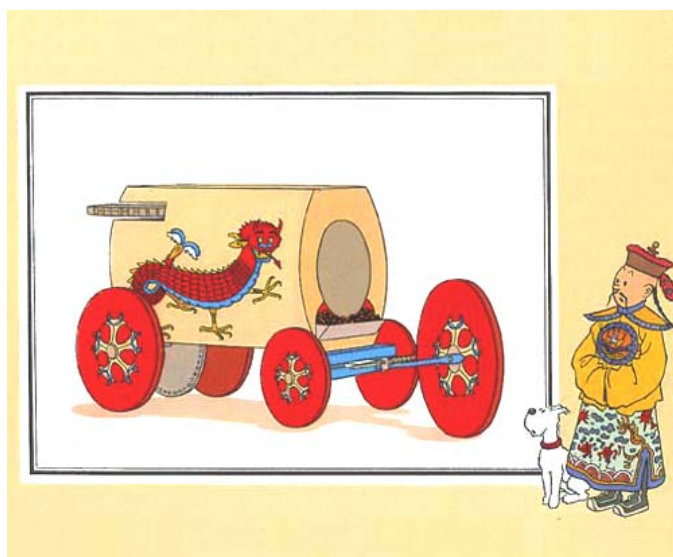
Church. Lam says that according to research done at his center, there are 80 Vatican-approved bishops, about half of whom are not recognized by the Chinese government. However, he added that there are fewer than 10 bishops in the government-approved Church community who do not have a papal mandate.

The Holy Spirit Study Centre spent three months gathering information through emails, telephone calls, faxes and personal interviews. The centre's survey lists more than 400 Church-run organizations, including schools, research institutes, publishing houses, medical facilities, and homes for the aged and orphans.

[Sunday Examiner]

The First Automobile

Flemish Jesuit Ferdinand Verbiest, a missionary at the Chinese Imperial Court, is credited with inventing the first motor vehicle, as a toy for the Emperor. **Built and tested in 1679**, it was two feet long and was operated by a mechanism that stoked embers. A steam jet struck a horizontal wheel with blades which meshed with the front wheels. It was tested in the courtyard of the Imperial Palace in Beijing to the great delight of the emperor and other spectators. Verbiest was an astronomer and mathematician who earned his Presidency of the Imperial Board of Mathematics in a competition with Chinese astronomers.



Reflections on National Day

October 1 2009 marked the sixtieth anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China. On this occasion, Elder Fu Xianwei, Chair of the Three Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM) made the following reflections. "Sixty years ago, a new chapter in Chinese history began as China entered a new era. In the new era, the **Protestant Three-Self Patriotic Movement** was also reinvigorated and set out on the road to glory."

The basic reason for this lay in the historical background of the intertwining of the missionary movement with Western powers' colonialist aggression towards China. Christianity was used by imperialism, and some missionaries played a dishonorable role in acts of aggression, injuring China's national pride. Culturally, Christianity also retained Western supremacy and self-centeredness. This created antagonism and conflict between Chinese and Western cultures and prevented Christianity from assimilating with Chinese culture. Further, Western missions shackled the Christian truth to their denominations, and demanded that Chinese believers join their own organizations in order to expand their influence. They referred to themselves as "parent organizations" and reduced Chinese churches to the status of "offshoots" without any sovereignty to speak of.

The TSPM was both an expression of national awakening and patriotism in the Protestant sphere and also consistent with Christian doctrine and biblical teaching. It was, therefore, enthusiastically supported by patriotic believers. From this time on, Chinese Protestantism cast off the yoke of imperialism and threw off the shackles of Western mission' control, **broke through the confines of Western conservative theology** and removed the binding fetters of being a "foreign religion." The TSPM thereby restored the original face of the gospel, enabling Christianity to be a glorious witness for the Lord in the new China.

Today, there are over 55,000 churches and meeting points across China, of which 70% have been built recently. The largest church can accommodate over 7000 worshippers! According to partial statistics, there are approximately 20 million believers throughout the nation – almost thirty times the 700,000 believers that were counted in the early years of the People's Republic. The quality of clergy and believers is also constantly increasing.

[Amity News Service]



Elder Fu Xianwei,
Chair of the
TSPM.



In the News

Muslims and Catholics in the southeastern city of Nanning have been urged to recognize the common roots of their religions and respect each other, during an interreligious exchange program. Nanning's Islamic Association initiated the exchange, which took place during the recent Chongyang festival. The event saw dozens of elderly Muslims visiting the Our Lady of China Cathedral in the capital of Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region.

For most it was their first time in a Catholic church.

Chongyang is a traditional festival during which Chinese people believe they would be able to avoid dangers and illnesses if they go hiking on this day. Others spend the day cleaning the graves of their ancestors. The festival fell on Oct. 26 last year.

Nanning, China [UCAN]

The small island of Shang Chuan, in the Province of Guang Dong, on the coast of southern China, where St. Francis Xavier died on December 3, 1552, is a favorite destination for pilgrimage among many individual communities, parishes, and organizations that bear his name. Many pilgrims come from all parts of the mainland, Hong Kong, Macao, and Taiwan, especially in recent days for the Feast of the Patron Saint of the Missions. In this place, there is a popular site visited by Chinese Catholics who are very devoted to St. Francis Xavier. It is with great faith and enthusiasm that the hymn dedicated to the saint is sung: "Great priest, sent by the Pope, Apostle of the East, who came to save us. He tirelessly proclaimed Jesus without rest...".

[AsiaNews]

2009 a Mixed End

The news regarding the Church in China in 2009 was mixed.

Fewer bishops in China

Seven bishops went to their heavenly reward after long lives of service and sacrifice: Damasus Zhang Hanmin of Jilin; Bartholomew Yu Chengti, unofficial, Hanzhong, Shaanxi; Nicholas Shi Jingxian recognized by the Chinese authorities and the Holy See, of Shangqiu, Henan; James Lin Xili, unofficial, Wenzhou, Zhejiang; Peter Chen Bolu, retired unofficial, of Handan; Matthew Luo Duxi, recognized by the Chinese authorities and the Holy See, of Leshan (Kiating), Sichuan and Leo Yao, unofficial, of Xiwanzi, Hebei. The average age of these bishops was 89.

China is running out of bishops over the age of 80. Younger bishops are under 50 years old. **No bishops were ordained in either 2008 or 2009.** More dioceses are in the hands of a priest or an administrator, but at least there has been no new friction over the selection of bishops.

On November 26, it was decided to postpone the National Assembly of Catholic Representatives until some unspecified date in 2010. The government expects all the bishops it recognizes to come, while the Vatican strongly discourages their attendance – another sensitive issue for this year.

Letters and Commentaries

The official Vatican website, www.vatican.va, added a Chinese section in March. New items will be translated into Chinese almost as fast as into French or English. People inside China continue to have difficulties accessing overseas websites.

On May 24, the Holy See issued a **Compendium of the Letter to Chinese Catholics**, in a question and answer format. This is an aid to those reading the letter of the Holy Father of June 2007. It rearranges the contents of the papal letter by topic, rather than making editorial comments. Two years after the papal letter, some tensions between official and unofficial communities in different dioceses have eased, and reconciliation has replaced confrontation here and there. The coming decade or two may not be long enough to complete the process.

Tarcisio Cardinal Bertone, the Vatican secretary of State, wrote an encouraging letter to all priests in China during the Year of the Priest, which was published on November 10. He urged attention to ongoing formation and witnessing to the faith by love and charitable works.

Women religious

One source lists 5,451 sisters in vows in 106 congregations, not counting those in the unofficial Church. Most congregations are diocesan. More sisters have been able to travel abroad briefly and even study for a year or more.

Sisters serve in clinics, hospitals, homes for the elderly, kindergartens, orphanages and social service centers. About 80 of them work in 20 government facilities for those with leprosy. The Union of Superior Generals for Female Congregations of Hebei held their Fifth Plenary Meeting in December and 12 superiors **prioritized formation, evangelization, giving testimony, spirituality and service.** There is an urgent need for lectures on theology and vocational training.

60th anniversary

October 1 was the 60th anniversary of the People's Republic of China. Bishop John Tong of Hong Kong and Bishop Jose Lai of Macau were among the guests invited to Beijing. Some Catholic communities celebrated with songs and fireworks, while others were low-key, with just a Mass or some special prayers.

Mission Sunday also falls in October and **several churches combined national Day with speeches and banners to encourage the faithful to spread the gospel.**

In the tight security before National Day, Internet surveillance was increased, a number of underground priests were questioned, and their congregations videotaped.

Unregistered clergy continue to risk questioning, fines, short-term house arrest, or longer confinement to their home village.

Step by step, with limited vision

This new decade begins with economic uncertainty, plus lack of consensus on energy security and global warming. Nations will exchange harsh words and protective tariffs, but a major war is almost inconceivable.

It is safe to predict that China and the Vatican will trade comments of frustration and disappointment, **especially when the time finally comes to select and ordain a dozen new bishops**, yet neither side will slam the door shut on the other.

[Holy spirit Study Centre]



Human Rights & Freedom of Religion

In 2009 the Chinese government continued to impose restrictions put in place for the 2008 Olympics, fearing unrest around a series of "sensitive" anniversaries including the 20th anniversary of the Tiananmen massacre and the 60th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China. Officials obstructed civil society organizations, including groups and individuals working with victims of the May 2008 Sichuan earthquake, broadened controls on Uighurs and Tibetans, and tightened restrictions on lawyers and human rights defenders.

The Chinese Communist Party continues its monopoly on political power and, despite legal system reforms, requires judicial institutions to toe the party line. **Citizens face significant limits on freedom of expression, association, and religion;** government surveillance and censoring of internet communications is far reaching. While China's international profile and economic clout continue to grow, it is also drawing increasing international scrutiny for a foreign policy that fails to prioritize civil and political rights.

China's constitution guarantees freedom of religion, but the government restricts religious expression to government-registered temples, monasteries, mosques, and churches. The government vets religious personnel, seminary applications, and religious publications, and periodically audits religious institutions' activities, financial records, membership, and employees. The Chinese government considers all unregistered religious organizations, including Protestant "house churches," **illegal**; members risk fines and criminal prosecution. It also continues to designate certain groups as "**evil cults**," including the Falun Gong, and regularly cracks down on followers. There are no publicly available data about how many people are serving prison or reeducation-through-labor sentences for practicing their religion outside of state-sanctioned channels.

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Change Religion Policy

A leading Chinese religious scholar called China ready for "an institutional guarantee for the legality and quality of all religions," according to a December article in China Daily, the official government English language newspaper.

In an interview, Chinese entrepreneur, researcher and religion expert **Liu Peng** called for a "system to be developed in such a way as to let more religious affairs be governed by law, instead of through administrative means. All religious groups should be provided with equal and standard access for legal registration."

The article signals that policy debate has outgrown academic or church circles and entered the public square.

Religious freedom experts say they are cautiously optimistic about the public pronouncement. They find it quite significant that this official government newspaper would publish this interview, which is very detailed and does touch on sensitive issues.

For some, a comprehensive law regulating religion, as Liu proposed, is the wrong approach. Because laws meant to regulate or register religions are abused, even when the drafters don't intend them to be abused. But on the other hand, **China seems to be emerging from a very suspicious attitude toward religion** in general. What is most exciting is the attitudinal change, the willingness to accept religion.

Legislating religious freedom may be the right step here because in China, people assume you cannot do certain things unless the government explicitly says you can. Legal recognition of different churches would be the easiest way to introduce freedom of religion, and would also be the best fit with China's culture.

This December 2009 article tells that the government is willing to float seriously a major change in religious policy. **It really is on the agenda.** Now it seems the government may be looking for stability through religious freedom. And Liu's proposition—to initiate experimental reform in five or six selected areas around the country—is the same model that brought about change in China's economic, housing, and population control policies.

This would be an important step for China. To get positive change without violence requires thinkers like Liu Peng to enter the debate, and it requires action on the part of people trying to exercise their legitimate rights. The interaction of those two will bring about progress.

[2009 Christianity Today]



Social Issues

Top religious affairs leader shuffled

The director of China's State Administration for Religious Affairs (SARA), **Ye Xiaowen**, has been appointed to a new posting with the rank of minister. Ye, 59, has been SARA director since 1995, with the governmental rank of vice minister. For his new posting at the Central Institute of the Communist Party of China (CPC), he takes on the titles of party chief and vice president of the political academy for democratic parties and people without party affiliation.

Church observers and a leader of the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association (CCPA) said that they did not expect the changes to have an impact on China-Vatican relations, even though SARA has an important role in framing religious policy.

Kwun Ping-hung, a Hong Kong-based China Church observer, commented that despite China-Holy See relations having had ups and downs through Ye's 14 years as SARA director, they have stabilized in recent years into a kind of detente. During Ye's tenure, he added, officials from China and the Vatican have "made efforts in forming a basic mechanism of regular contact and dialogue."

Anthony Liu Bainian, vice chairman of the Beijing-based CCPA, agrees that the change in SARA will not affect China-Vatican relations, which he pointed out are, "**not something decided by one person.**" Ye's promotion is a normal progression, given his notable work in implementing religious policy, Liu said.

The only negative statements to have been expressed by the Chinese government to the Pastoral Letter of Pope Benedict XVI to the Chinese Catholics were those of Ye Xiao-wen in a Canton newspaper in 2008. The statements are part of a long interview granted by Ye to the weekly *Nan Fang*. "**The Vatican presents itself to us with a double face:** while it is seeking diplomatic relations with Beijing, in reality it wants to return to the control and management of the Catholic Church in China".

And again: "the Vatican hates socialism, but for it, opening the doors of China is among the most important missions of the 'strategy of the new millennium' for the Catholic Church, a means of

acquiring political power and once again becoming the Centre of the world." At this point, "Cuba is administrated by them [by the Vatican]. Vietnam is administered by them. Among the socialist countries, **only China has continued to ignore them.**"

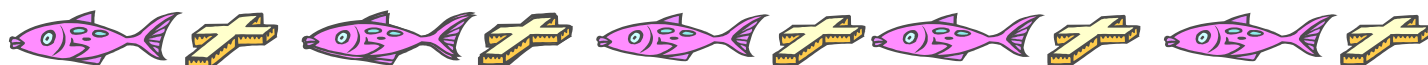
In his long interview, Ye speaks of "a conflict between China and the Vatican" that has lasted for more than half a century. In his view, the letter from Benedict XVI to the Chinese Catholics **is to be appreciated for its limitation of the faculties of the underground bishops**, but otherwise, "it is a step backward," because it forces, "Chinese Catholics to remain completely united to the pope, forcing them once again to choose between their party and the Church." Citing a Chinese expert on religious questions, he affirms that, "the publication of the pastoral letter demonstrates that the pope is continuing along the path of opposition to Beijing."

The "danger" of Benedict XVI's letter lies in the fact that it, "publicly denies the value of the Patriotic Association; it rejects the council of Chinese bishops, which the Holy See maintains is defective because it does not include the unauthorized bishops and does not have approval from Rome; it denies the principle of independence, autonomy, and the self-direction of the Chinese Church," above all in the appointment of bishops.

In his letter published in June 2007, Benedict XVI asked the Chinese authorities for religious freedom, especially in the appointment of bishops, because this "touches the very heart of the life of the Church," explaining that this responsibility is not a question of "a political authority, unduly asserting itself in the internal affairs of a State and offending against its sovereignty."

For Ye Xiaowen, "continuing to maintain the principles of **independence, autonomy, and self-direction is the supreme interest of the Chinese nation.**"

[UCAN & AsiaNews]



Building Contemporary China's Harmonious Society

Correctly, security and peace for China's 1.4 billion people is always a priority. Since 2009 was the 60th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China, the 80th anniversary of the May Fourth Movement (1919), the 50th anniversary of the Tibet uprising and the fleeing of the Dalai Lama to India, as well as the 20th anniversary of the Tiananmen Square Massacre (1989), international observers on many fronts have watched how these historic anniversaries influenced daily Chinese social and bureaucratic life expression and opportunity.

While post 9/11 government monitored security is a constant international reality, China's approach to social order remains an object of intense interest. For example, *Dialogue* 34 (Winter 2009) published by **John Kamm of the The Dui Hua Foundation, San Francisco, CA**, www.duihua.org, addressed the questions as to how China, in 2009, handled the notion of social pardon for wrongdoers. In effect, it raised the issue as to how China expresses its ongoing and diversified need and application of bureaucratic legal government freedoms and controls in everyday life and society.

As in the past, attention remained focused on 2009 executions in China which included two men responsible for deaths related to production of tainted milk (*AP* 11/24/09), a Chongqing gang leader in the city's crackdown of organized crime (*Xinhua* 11/27/09), and another man for corruption as a financial security trader (*Reuters* 12/8/09). Such news was watched with the awareness of the Jonathan Landreth *Times* (London) report that "China pledges drastic cut in execution rate." (7/30/09).

Gaining equal if not more attention, is the opinion voiced by *Wall Street Journal* writer Gordon G. Chang who wondered if "the Party is increasingly out of step with the dynamic people it governs" (9/20/09) especially as **it tries to build a harmonious society during world wide local and international fragile economic times**. Some decisions that signaled this possible out of step with the times trend included a Micheal Wines *NYTimes* report on Internet control: "China Applies New Strategies to Control Flow of Information" (7/8/09); an *AsiaNews* Bernardo Cervellera story: "Uygurs, Tibetans, Catholic Protestants; the Chinese Powder Keg" which commented on Chinese government controls of religious believers. Also, a Verna Yu contribution in *Asia Times Online* that "China's NGOs fear the worst" because officials perceive them "outside the control of the party and...they are still seen as destabilizing

agents." (8/15/09).

In effect, the buoyant spirit of the 2008 Olympics was short lived and paradoxical. Over a year after the Games, on the one hand *AP* reporter Alexa Olesen stated "China pledges to protect foreign media" rights in China as advocated by President Hu Jintao. (10/9/09). On the other hand when President Obama visited China she reported "Chinese censors block Obama's call to free the Web" (11/16/09) leading some to wonder as to the limits of information available for the average Chinese about the Obama visit.

Also attracting interest, Sky Canaves of the *Wall Street Journal* on (11/25/09) reported that "Beijing Widens Paramilitary Police Role" to "**handle riots, terrorist attacks and other social disturbances**" as the October 1 PRC anniversary approached. This was seen by some as providing "a legal framework for activities the People's Armed Police have long engaged in to control clashes" in Xinjiang between Muslim Uighurs and Han Chinese, a tension which had been widely reported in international news headlines during the summer of 2009. Canaves made an additional point: The change was "an apparent bid to prevent small protests from escalating into confrontations between villagers and paramilitary forces, whose presence would sometimes inflame tensions." Furthermore, "the law also aims to add greater procedural protections for citizens, prohibiting illegal searches, seizures and arbitrary detentions by the armed police and explicitly ordering them not to cover up crimes."

Such operative expressions of Chinese policy are being put into effect at the same time that government regulations seek a way to tackle effectively understanding new issues that keep showing up on the social horizon. Julie Makinen, reflected on how government regulations are having impact on social outreach of emerging Chinese philanthropies, (*NYTimes* 9/23/09) and Mark O'Neil told of "Legal Crusaders on the march." **There is a desire on the part of the Chinese public defenders to reform the legal system.** (*South China Morning Post* 9/8/09).

All this media attention underscores constant concerns about China's contemporary legal flexibilities in balanced relationships and personal freedoms. In other words, what are the opportunities and limits with public gatherings or free speech in the Chinese quest for a harmonious society?

[Fr. Rob Carbonneau, C.P., Ph.D.]

