

CHINA Choice of bishop candidates without papal approval

The choice of bishop candidates made by several mainland Chinese dioceses would need to be subjected to further scrutiny, says a leader of the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association (CCPA).

Anthony Liu Bainian, a CCPA vice-chairman, said that five dioceses have reported the results of their bishop election to the Bishops' Conference of the Catholic Church of China (BCCCC) for its approval. The dioceses are Haimen in Jiangsu, Hohhot in Inner Mongolia, Sanyuan in Shaanxi, Taizhou in Zhejiang and Wuhan in Hubei, Liu said. The reports were submitted to the provincial Church Affairs Committee and then the BCCCC last year or earlier. UCA News learned that while Sanyuan has two retired bishops, both Vatican-approved, the other four dioceses are without bishops.

Liu said it would be difficult to say if the candidates would be approved and ordained this year. "There is no need to ordain a bishop right after his election," he added. Liu also noted that as the China Church now has quite a number of young bishops, in their 40s, the issue of leadership succession in dioceses is now less critical than in the past.

"We must prudently consider all aspects (of the candidates) and hear more comments when conducting investigations," Liu said. He explained that approving a bishop is "a matter of concern for the diocese's future in the coming decades." He observed that in some cases, different opinions about the bishop candidate emerged after his election.

Liu also added that papal approval would not be a factor for the BCCCC determining a candidate's suitability. "Since China and the Vatican do not have diplomatic ties and normal communication channel, we will endorse the qualified candidate just as in the past," he said. Liu added that **it is up to the local diocese to ask the Vatican to approve the bishop candidate if the diocese wished to**. BCCCC regulations state that once approved, bishop candidates should be ordained within three months.

The Vatican has consistently criticized China's practice of ordaining bishops without papal approval. Pope Benedict XVI's June 30, 2007 letter to Chinese Catholics said that these bishops "lack a pontifical mandate" and are to be considered "illegitimate."

The last episcopal ordination in the government-sanctioned "open" Church was Coadjutor Bishop Joseph Li Jing of Ningxia in northwestern China on Dec. 21, 2007.

Some China Church observers noted that episcopal ordinations were suspended prior to the 2008 Olympic and Paralympic games in Beijing that ended last September. However, they wondered as to why no such ordinations have taken place since then. Meanwhile, Liu said that the National Congress of Catholic Representatives, which elects new leaders for the CCPA and BCCCC, would meet in the second half of this year, but did not give any date. [UCAN 4-29-09]