

May 30, 2006

**US CATHOLIC CHINA BUREAU ISSUES STATEMENT ON
CHINESE-CATHOLIC RELATIONS**

SOUTH ORANGE, NJ – The US Catholic China Bureau at Seton Hall University issued the following policy statement in regards to recent events between the Catholic Church and the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association:

The US Catholic China Bureau notes with dismay and concern that the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association (CPA), at the apparent direction of its Secretary-General, recently promoted the ordination of two new bishops without full consultations with the Holy See. Reportedly a third bishop will be ordained in southern China on May 14. It further appears that the CPA may try to select and appoint several other new bishops this year. If so, this will seriously impede progress toward improved relations between China and the Holy See. The CPA has justified these ordinations with the assertion that China needs to ordain new leaders for the 40 dioceses currently without bishops. Earlier this year the Holy Spirit Study Center of the Hong Kong Diocese acknowledged this need for new bishops and predicted that 10 new bishops would be ordained this year, but did not anticipate this move by the CPA.

More seriously, however, these ordinations appear to reverse the recent positive trend of ordaining new bishops who have first been approved by the Holy See, as was the case last year when new auxiliary bishops were ordained for the major cities of Shanghai and Xian. This trend has continued in 2006 with the ordinations of a new bishop in Suzhou (the famous “Silk City” near Shanghai) on April 20, and the ordination of an auxiliary bishop on May 7 in Shenyang, the largest city in China’s industrial northeast. They also could seriously jeopardize the progress made by the Roman Catholic Church in China over the past 25 years and potentially undermine the growing contributions of the Church to China and its people through social services, moral and spiritual development, and engagement in the important academic dialogue on Christianity. After decades of persecutions and suffering the Roman Catholic Church in China has firmly established itself as a truly authentic local Church ready to take its place in the Universal Church to the benefit of both.

Pope Benedict XVI early in his papacy reaffirmed the long standing position of the Holy See that there is only one Roman Catholic Church in China, though still divided into different communities, those registered or not registered with the government. The ordinations, and potential for more, appear to represent an attempt by the CPA to reassert control over the registered community as it operates more openly in its expressions of loyalty and devotion to the Pope (devotion which is evident in the frequent reports and pictures of the Pope in the national Catholic newspaper and the pictures of Popes John Paul II and Benedict XVI found in every registered church), and expands its contacts with the Universal Church through interaction with Catholic aid agencies, the study abroad by many priests and religious sisters, and a steady flow of foreigners who live in or visit China.

This situation evokes memories of the 1950’s period when the Chinese government, under the influence of strong anti-imperialist nationalism, and in the face of equally strong anti-communist opposition from the Vatican, forced, and in some instances persuaded, Catholics to accept a church “independent” of the Holy See. Ordinations without papal mandates then led to a deep split between Catholics who accepted or did not accept the bishops. Conditions today, however, are

much different as China is open to the world, and in the words of Most Reverend Ignatius Wang, Auxiliary Bishop of San Francisco, “open to the Gospel.” The Holy See in its statement that it must wait and see to understand the conditions under which the bishops participated in the ordinations is consistent with how it has been open to the many bishops ordained in the 1950’s and 1960’s who later sought reconciliation and legitimacy.

With regard to unity within the Roman Catholic Church in China, the ordinations may achieve what has not been possible despite years of efforts by the Church itself. As reported in AsiaNews on May 5, priests in both the registered and unregistered communities have voiced clear support for Pope Benedict’s strong response to the CPA action. A priest from a registered community in north China said, “If the Pope did not speak up, the official (registered) Church was in danger of being swallowed up by the Patriotic Association.” These expressions of the importance of the Pope to the Church are welcome signs that both communities share the same faith and commitment to unity and opposition to the influence and control exerted by the government through the CPA.

The US Catholic China Bureau joins with the many Chinese Catholics who have welcomed Pope Benedict XVI’s strong reaction to the ordinations and his continued call for religious freedom. We greatly respect their courage in standing up for the faith in the face of the complex challenge of being Catholic in modern China. It is our hope that the leaders of the Roman Catholic Church in China will overcome this current challenge and with the help and support of US Catholics, in concert with the Holy See, continue to move toward reconciliation and unity with the Universal Church. We ask all Catholics to pray for reconciliation, harmony and unity within all segments of the Roman Catholic Church in China.

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The US Catholic China Bureau at Seton Hall can be visited online at www.usccb.net.