

China takes issue with Vatican's comments on recent church congress

HONG KONG - The Chinese government branded a Vatican statement on China's policy of religious freedom as "very imprudent and ungrounded."

The Dec. 22 statement was Beijing's first official response to a strongly worded Vatican communique that criticized the Chinese government-controlled National Congress of Catholic Representatives early in December, reported the Asian church news agency UCA News.

On Dec. 17, the Vatican condemned the methods of convoking the assembly, saying it reflected "a repressive attitude with regard to the exercise of religious liberty, which it was hoped had been consigned to the past in present-day China." Forcing people to attend the congress represented a "grave violation" of people's human rights, particularly their freedom of conscience and religion, said the Vatican.

China's official Xinhua News Agency quoted a spokesperson of the State Administration for Religious Affairs as saying the Vatican misunderstood the current situation of the Chinese church and was trying to use religion to implement its political values. The official said the attempt would bring serious harm to the healthy development of the Chinese church.

The unnamed spokesperson stressed that the national congress did not touch on Catholic doctrine, did not violate the fundamentals of Catholic faith and did not need recognition of other countries or foreign organizations.

The Vatican had tried to prevent the congress from taking place through various means and threatened to punish the clergy who would take part, the spokesperson said. "Isn't it very clear that who treated religious belief with the strong hand and who forced the Catholics against their conscience?"

The new heads of the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association and the Bishops'

Conference of the Catholic Church in China - the two groups responsible for the public life of the church in China - were elected by overwhelming majority, reflecting the wishes and expectations of the congress participants, the spokesperson said.

The Vatican voiced particular concern over the election of new presidents of both organizations during the congress. Bishop Joseph Ma Yinglin of Kunming, who was ordained without papal approval in 2006, became president of the bishops' conference. The new president of the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association is Bishop Yohan Fang Xinyao of Linyi, who was ordained in 1997 and is in communion with the pope.

The Vatican's condemnation of them was a "contempt" to the democratic wish of numerous Catholics and "extremely rude and disrespectful behavior," the government spokesperson said.

The Vatican offered no immediate response.