

Chinese officials ordain another bishop without papal approval

SHANTOU, China - Chinese officials ordained a bishop without papal mandate, just 10 days after the Holy See excommunicated another newly ordained bishop.

Father Joseph Huang Bingzhang was ordained July 14 at St. Joseph's Cathedral in Shantou, in southern China's Guangdong province.

The Asian church news agency UCA News reported that Bishop Johan Fang Xingyao of Linyin, president of the government-sanctioned Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association, was the main celebrant. He was one of eight Vatican-approved bishops at the ordination.

On July 4, the Holy See excommunicated Father Paul Lei Shiyin of Leshan, who was ordained a bishop without papal mandate. The July 4 statement also stated that the consecrating bishops, including Bishop Fang, have exposed themselves to serious canonical sanctions.

Earlier, UCA News reported that a bishop in Guangdong said he was en route to Shantou, accompanied by government officials. Some other bishops who tried to avoid going to the ordination were taken to guesthouses by officials.

In Shantou July 14, police sealed off all roads around the cathedral. Nobody could get near without an entry card. Only designated photographers were allowed to carry cameras or video recorders inside the cathedral, UCA News reported.

About 30 priests and more than 1,000 people were present. However, church sources said fewer than half of the 20 diocesan priests attended. The source told UCA News that many priests went into hiding days before the ceremony, but some were found by government officials and had to attend to the ceremony.

UCA News reported that Vatican-approved Bishop Peter Zhuang Jianjian of Shantou, whom the government recognizes only as a priest, said he would not recognize Father Huang as a bishop, because he violated church law and principles.

The bishop called on Catholics to recite the rosary for God's help to overcome the difficulties.

A Shantou priest who attended the ordination said he hoped the new bishop could unite the priests for the good of the local church.

"Forgiveness, tolerance and mutual support are more important," said the priest, speaking on condition of anonymity.

Even if the Holy See excommunicates Bishop Huang, "I will work with him except for sacramental communion and continue to serve my parishioners, who are innocent in this incident," he said.

The priest recalled that the new bishop said after the ceremony that he knows his job will be very difficult.

"Today is an unforgettable day for him. He is a humble man, who hoped to contribute for the country, the church and society," he said.

Jesuit Father Federico Lombardi, Vatican spokesman, told reporters July 14 the new ordination was "an event that is being followed here with much sorrow and much concern, for reasons that the Holy See has already expressed." He said it was an act that is "contrary to the unity of the universal church."

China insists that key Catholic leaders - including bishops - and church sites be registered with the government. Some Catholic officials have refused to do so because they feel the Chinese government tries to control the church.

In recent years, because of government requirements, the priests, nuns and laypeople of Chinese dioceses have elected their new bishops, and most of those elected have applied to the Holy See for approval. When such approval was given, it often was announced at the episcopal ordination.

However, since the election in December of new officials for the government-approved church bodies and the first of several valid but illicit ordinations of bishops - without Vatican approval - China-Vatican relations have appeared to worsen.

Born in 1967, Huang Bingzhang entered the seminary in 1985 and became a priest in 1991. He has been a deputy of the National People's Congress since 1998 and is a vice chairman of the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association.