

For first time since 2006, China ordains bishop without papal approval

CHENGDE, China - Under close surveillance from local government officials, Father Joseph Guo Jincai was ordained bishop of Chengde - the first bishop ordained without papal approval in four years.

Eight bishops in communion with Pope Benedict XVI laid their hands on Father Guo, whose ordination was illicit in the eyes of the church. Some of the ordaining bishops had been detained by government officials in the days before the ordination in an effort to force them to participate, reported the Asian church news agency UCA News.

Retired Bishop John Liu Jinghe of Tangshan refused to attend the ordination, sources told UCA News.

More than 100 Catholics and dozens of government officials attended the ordination Mass at the church in the rural town of Pingquan Nov. 20. The village was surrounded by about 100 uniformed and plainclothes police. Cameras were banned in the church, and mobile phone signals were blocked in the area.

Bishop Guo also became the first bishop illegitimately ordained since Pope Benedict XVI issued his letter to Chinese Catholics in 2007. The papal letter strongly criticized the limits placed by the Chinese government on the church's activities, but on several key issues, including the appointment of bishops, it invited civil authorities to a new and serious dialogue.

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. If such approval was given, it often was announced at the episcopal ordination. Ten Chinese bishops already have been ordained with Vatican approval this year.

The Vatican had no immediate reaction to the illicit ordination. However, in a statement Nov. 18, Jesuit Father Federico Lombardi, Vatican spokesman, said that if reports of the planned ordination were true, “then the Holy See would consider such actions as grave violations of freedom of religion and freedom of conscience.”

“It would also consider such an ordination as illicit and damaging to the constructive relations that have been developing in recent times between the People’s Republic of China and the Holy See,” the statement said.

But Hong Kong Cardinal Joseph Zen Ze-kun, who attended the pope’s creation of 24 new cardinals at the Vatican Nov. 20, said he was saddened by news of Bishop Guo’s ordination and information that some bishops were forced to participate.

However, he told UCA News, “We should not be so quick to condemn those, our brothers, before listening to their self-justification.”

The cardinal criticized Anthony Liu Bainian, vice president of the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association, who said China proceeded with the ordination because the Vatican had not given a good reason for its lack of approval. Bainian told UCA News, “We have waited for a long time and could not wait any longer.”

“The last word belongs to him,” Cardinal Zen told UCA News. “We thought there was a sincere negotiation going on. No, that was not so. He wants everything his way.”

The cardinal criticized “the kidnapping of persons (bishops), the cutting of all communications, the huge show of police force as if dealing with dangerous criminals ... Are we not living well into the 21st century?”

Ordained a priest in 1992, Bishop Guo has been vice secretary-general of the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association and a Catholic representative of the National People’s Congress, China’s parliament.

Church sources told UCA News that the laypeople in Chengde, who are simple in their faith and loyal to the pope, have no choice but to accept their new bishop.

“After all, (Bishop) Guo’s reputation among the local faithful is not bad,” a Pingquan

Catholic told UCA News.