

Government-controlled Catholic groups in China elect new leaders

BEIJING - The Chinese-government-controlled National Congress of Catholic Representatives elected new leaders for the Bishops' Conference of the Catholic Church in China and the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association, the two groups responsible for the public life of the church in the communist country.

The new president of the bishops' conference is Bishop Joseph Ma Yinglin of Kunming, who was ordained without papal approval in 2006.

However, 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 statutes of the patriotic association and the bishops' conference say the organizations promote "principles of independence and autonomy, self-management and democratic administration of the church."

Pope Benedict XVI has said organizations, which are completely independent of the Vatican, are not in line with church doctrine. However, in a 2007 letter to Chinese Catholics, he also recognized the difficult situation of bishops and priests who often are under government pressure to cooperate.

The pope said the Vatican "leaves the decision to the individual bishop" regarding the appropriateness of cooperating in particular situations.

One source familiar with the Catholic Church in China speculated that bishops with papal approval might have made a decision to work within the government system, similar to a decision made by some of their predecessors when the Chinese government began lifting restrictions on the church in the early 1980s.

The Congress of Catholic Representatives, which met Dec. 7-9 in Beijing, was held less than three weeks after the ordination of Father Joseph Guo Jincai as bishop of Chengde; his was the first ordination of a bishop without papal approval in four

years. The Vatican said he faced church sanctions, including possible excommunication.

At the congress, Bishop Guo was elected secretary-general of the bishops' conference.

In a statement Nov. 24 announcing the possible sanctions against Bishop Guo, the Vatican also criticized the then-vice president of the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association for his role in moving ahead with the ordination of Bishop Guo without the Vatican's agreement.

Anthony Liu Bainian, the then-vice president, and 94-year-old Bishop Aloysius Jin Luxian of Shanghai were named honorary presidents of both the patriotic association and the bishops' conference during the Congress of Catholic Representatives.

A third bishop without papal approval – Bishop Vincent Zhan Silu of Mindong – was named one of the vice presidents of the bishops' conference.