Layman wields enormous influence within church

BEIJING (CNS) — He's known as "the black pope of China" — a play on the "black pope" title given to the powerful head of the Jesuits — and whether or not people like his methods, they all agree that he is one of the most powerful laymen in China's Catholic Church.

Anthony Liu Bainian, 73, an ex-seminarian from Shangdong province, currently serves as vice president of the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association. To some he is a man trying to ingratiate himself to government authorities; to others he is the man with power to sway government decisions about the church.

"He has a strong, strong influence on what the government can or will do," said one Chinese church source, who added, perhaps "he's doing what he thinks is good."

In 1980, as the church in China began activities that had been suppressed during the 1966-76 Cultural Revolution, Liu was named secretary-general of the patriotic association, and he has remained in Beijing since then.

During the Cultural Revolution, Liu worked in a factory, but he said he did not give up hope for the church. He told a group of international visitors in mid-March that, during the dark times for the church, he believed the church's suppression could not continue forever and that, since the Holy Spirit is always with the church, it would be rebuilt.

"In my personal experience, if God is really in your heart … you always keep the joys and you will overcome any challenges or difficulties, because God will be with you," he said.

During the Cultural Revolution, he said, he was not allowed to use a rosary, "so I used fingers to pray the rosary." He said that sometimes today when he takes the bus, he forgets his rosary, so he still uses his fingers to pray.

Liu has always maintained that, in matters of faith, there has been no split between

the Vatican and Chinese Catholics. But he has maintained that the church in China should be "managed by our own bishops and priests," as he said in a 1988 interview.

When Bishop Michael Fu Tieshan of Beijing was elected to the Standing Committee of the 10th National People's Congress, China's legislature, in 2003, Liu said it would raise the status of the church in China and counter the impression that Catholicism is a foreign religion.

"This is God's arrangement," he told UCA News, an Asian church news agency, after the appointment.

At times, he seems to be sparring verbally with Hong Kong Cardinal Joseph Zen Ze-kiun; journalists go back and forth between the two for comments and reactions.

Responding to criticism from Liu in May 2006, Cardinal Zen said Liu presents himself as the representative of the government-approved Catholic Church in China, but if freedom were granted to the bishops, priests and faithful to speak out, one would hear views very different from Liu's.

In March, Liu told his visitors, "Many people abroad misunderstood me, but I understand" because not everyone can appreciate China.

"China is a special country; we have (a) different situation and different history," he said.

"In politics in different countries, there are different situations," he said. China's situation is not the same as Rome or the United States, he said. In other countries besides China the church might not agree with the government, he added.

For instance, he said, Pope John Paul II asked the U.S. government not to attack Iraq, but the U.S. government did it anyway.

"The most important thing is that we are one church," he said. "We belong to the one body of Christ," and all share his suffering.

"All the bishops, priests and laypeople, we are all loyal to the pope," he added.

Liu said the Catholic Church in the United States has played the role of John the

Baptist by clearing the way for the Chinese church to function since the Cultural Revolution. He said there is “more and more communication and dialogue between the church in China and church in America.”

He pointed out that of the 24 professors at China’s national seminary 12 are from China, and eight of those studied in the United States. Another 12 are from other countries, including three from the United States — so nearly half of the professors studied in the United States.

Last year, Los Angeles Cardinal Roger M. Mahony gave a series of lectures on priestly spirituality at the seminary, he said.

“Many people said I am too close to the United States,” he added, and joked that if the Chinese church makes mistakes it is learning them from Americans.

Liu was instrumental in getting government funding for completion of the new national seminary, formally known as the National Catholic Institute of Philosophy and Theology.

The architect wanted a Gothic design, but Liu said Chinese officials insisted on a Chinese design and, in the end, the architect won an award for it.

He said the three levels of the building represent the Holy Trinity, and the chapel’s 12 pillars represent the apostles. The colonnade outside the chapel is designed like Giovanni Lorenzo Bernini’s colonnade in St. Peter’s Square at the Vatican to show unity with Rome.

“The corridor in Rome is much bigger because it embraces the world; but here, we embrace all of China,” he said.