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Vatican hopes for end to illicit Chinese ordinations

Carol Glatz Catholic News Service | Jun. 13, 2011

VATICAN CITY -- The Vatican said it hoped the postponement of an illicit episcopal ordination in the diocese of Hankou would mark the end to all ordinations without papal approval in China.

The Vatican confirmed the planned illicit ordination of Father Joseph Shen Guoan was postponed indefinitely; he was to have been ordained bishop of Hankou, or Wuhan, June 9.

Passionist Father Ciro Benedettini, vice director of the Vatican press office, told Catholic News Service June 10 that the Vatican hopes "this kind of ordination without the permission of the pope doesn't ever happen again."

There was no new date set for the ordination or explanation for the postponement.

The postponement came after the Hong Kong-born secretary of the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples urged priests and bishops in China to show "some backbone" and resist government pressure to disobey the pope.

In an interview with the Rome-based AsiaNews June 3, Archbishop Savio Hon Tai-Fai said he had been aware of the planned illicit ordination in Hankou and that he knew the faithful there had been urging the government and the Chinese Patriotic Association not to go through with the ordination.

He said he would want to tell Father Shen: "I trust you to act the right way. The only thing to do is to refuse."

Archbishop Hon said even though the government still puts pressure on priests and bishops to follow government orders concerning illicit ordinations, he said the consequences of not obeying are not as harsh as in the past.

"Today, for instance, there is no risk of forced labor, prison or death," he said.

Clergy may still be punished, however, he said. For example, he said, they may lose public funding for their diocese, face difficulties in performing pastoral tasks, be isolated from other clergy or the faithful, be forbidden to travel abroad or within China, or they may be forced into a "re-education" program.

"In any case, the punishment that might be meted out is no reason not to resist. Submission is a public act that causes scandal, sending the wrong message to the faithful," he said.

He added that those who have succumbed to government pressure and acted against papal mandate should "make public amends" to show the faithful their actions were wrong.

Standing up to the government and not agreeing to participate in an illicit ordination also sends a powerful message to the government, the archbishop said.

"If you show some weakness or a propensity toward compromise, the government will take advantage of you,"

the archbishop said. On the other hand, "the government could do nothing" when people stood firm and refused to be ordained by excommunicated bishops, he said.

He said Blessed Pope John Paul II and his words "Be not afraid" are an inspiration to Chinese Catholics -- clergy and laity.

Those bishops and priests who are fearful of government retribution or pressure for not following orders should get support from others or else "they should simply ask to be released from their pastoral duties and have the courage to suspend their ministry."

Archbishop Hon said the government's strategy in setting up a church that is independent of the Vatican and the pope is a way to maintain government control over religion and yet create the impression that having Catholic priests and bishops administering the sacraments means there is religious freedom in the country.

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