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Vatican issues new bishops' policy

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VATICAN CITY -- Catholics forced to participate in ordinations of bishops without the pope?s approval may be exempt from the usual penalty of automatic excommunication, the Vatican said on June 10.

Bishops who consecrate other bishops without a papal ?mandate? incur automatic excommunication, as do the men they consecrate and all other ministers who participate in the ceremony, according to a church document published in the official Vatican newspaper *L?Osservatore Romano*.

All of those excommunicated are thereafter forbidden to celebrate Mass, administer or receive any Catholic sacraments, or ?exercise ministerial functions? unless their excommunications are lifted by the pope.

Yet the council?s statement allows for ?mitigating circumstances,? under which the penalty of excommunication does not apply. Specifically, if any of the parties was ?coerced by grave fear ... or grave inconvenience? to participate in an authorized ordination, he can avoid automatic expulsion from the church.

Although the statement refers to no specific cases, it is most clearly relevant to the ongoing struggle between the Catholic Church and the government of China, where a state-controlled official Catholic church competes with an ?underground? church loyal to Rome.

In recent years, the Vatican and Beijing have tacitly agreed on a number of bishops acceptable to both sides. But last November, Joseph Guo Jincai was ordained the bishop of Chengde without Vatican approval.

Another such ordination, in the diocese of Hankow, was scheduled for June 9, but was postponed at the last minute for unexplained reasons.

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