

Vatican consistory upends meeting of Asian bishops

Thomas C. Fox | Oct. 31, 2012

A gathering of about 100 Asian bishops originally scheduled for November had to be rescheduled after the Vatican announced Oct. 24 it would hold a consistory to create six new cardinals.

After two years of planning, the 10th plenary assembly of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences was set to be held in Vietnam Nov. 16-25 to celebrate 40 years of Asian episcopal pastoral work. However, it came into conflict with the announced Nov. 24 consistory at the Vatican.

Protocol requires the Asian cardinals and other prominent Asian bishops attend the consistory. One of the newly named cardinals, Archbishop Luis Antonio Tagle, heads the archdiocese of Manila, the Philippines.

The unexpected Vatican announcement forced Vietnamese bishops and FABC officials to find alternative dates, causing the bishops to rearrange their calendars and reschedule flights in and out of Vietnam. After days of uncertainty, including the possibility of canceling the Vietnam gathering altogether, a new set of dates for the assembly was agreed upon: Dec. 10-16 in its original location, the grounds of a seminary 50 miles west of Ho Chi Minh City.

"I have no idea as to whether the Holy See was aware of our plenary," Scarboro Foreign Mission Society Fr. Raymond L. O'Toole, FABC assistant secretary general, wrote in an email. "A few weeks before the announcement of the consistory the Holy See did appoint a papal envoy for the Nov. 16-25, 2012, FABC plenary."

"We had to make sudden adjustments because all the Asian cardinals will have to attend the consistory," he wrote. Those include the FABC secretary general, Cardinal Oswald Gracias of Mumbai, India; Cardinal Gaudencio Borbon Rosales, papal envoy and archbishop emeritus of Manila; and Cardinal Pham Minh Man of Ho Chi Minh City.

Upon learning of the consistory, the vice general secretary of the Vietnamese bishops' conference, Auxiliary Bishop Nguyen Van Kham of Ho Chi Minh City, met with Vietnamese government officials to determine an alternative date, O'Toole said. Kham and government officials eventually agreed on new dates.

The Asian bishops gather under the aegis of the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences in plenary session every four years. Many view this year's gathering, the first in a communist country, as a crowning achievement for the 78-year-old Man, who during his tenure as head of the Ho Chi Minh City archdiocese has worked to better relations with communist officials.

For years, the Vietnamese government has been notoriously suspicious of religious gatherings and activities. The government has closely monitored religious leaders -- Catholic, Buddhist and others -- and has limited the numbers of candidates to seminaries and temples. In recent years, the government has shown more tolerance of religious bodies, allowing them greater leeway for ministry, especially in education and medicine.

Pope Benedict XVI announced the consistory during the Synod of Bishops, held Oct. 7-28 at the Vatican. It came as a surprise to many church observers, including the bishops who had gathered for the synod in Rome.

The announcement of the consistory caused considerable consternation in Vietnam and elsewhere, according to the source familiar with FABC operations in Hong Kong, where the administrative offices of the organization are based. The source asked not to be named because of the sensitivity of his position.

"Immediately there was a crisis on two levels," the source told *NCR*. "First, some key bishops would not be able to attend the FABC conference. Second, all the Asian cardinals were also being called to attend the consistory in Rome. It was a major disappointment."

The source said the assembly planners did not blame the pope, since they did not expect him to have known about the FABC gathering. Instead, the source said, they placed the blame on Vatican Secretary of State Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, "who made the decision without any consideration toward a major world church body that had been planning the conference for years."

The source noted that Man personally involved himself in efforts to reschedule the gathering, working with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Religious Affairs offices in order to get new visas for all the prelates attending the gathering.

"Many FABC bishops and cardinals were shocked and dismayed at the timing by the Vatican," the source said. "The thoughtlessness of the decision ... is a blatant example of the carelessness of Vatican officials toward Asian religious leaders."

Once the initial gathering was scratched, it took "days of scrambling" to find a new date acceptable to the wide cast of Asian bishops. The Vietnamese bishops, the source said, quickly needed a new date to offer the Hanoi government. The FABC staff, meanwhile, felt it necessary to survey the Asian bishops before fixing a new date.

"Finally, the Vietnamese demanded a decision be made or the conference be terminated in Vietnam," the source said. "The Dec. 10-16 dates were settled despite the fact that not all FABC episcopal members will now be able to attend since it is so close to Christmas."

Vietnam and the Holy See do not have diplomatic relations, but in 2009, after years of informal meetings, they formed the Vietnam-Holy See Joint Working Group to begin the work of establishing formal ties. The group has met three times, most recently in February.

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