

Recalling the 1981 Episcopal Ordinations and Their Consequences for the Chinese Catholic Church

Anthony Lam

Translated by Peter Barry, MM

Thirty years ago, in 1981, a group of old bishops, who had survived the religious persecutions of the 1950's to the 1970's, took a ground-breaking step. They consecrated a number of clergymen as bishops. This action directly led to a great change in the Chinese Catholic Church. It had far-reaching effects on the future development of that Church, no matter whether it was the official church or the unregistered church. Thirty years after those first ordinations, it seems appropriate now to review the whole matter of those secret ordinations.

The 1978 "Faculties" Granted to the Church in China by the Sacred Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples

In 1978, the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples issued the following special faculties and privileges for the use of the clergy and Catholics who resided on the China Mainland. (Here is a translation of the lengthy Latin title of this decree: "The Sacred Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, or Propaganda Fide, grants these faculties and privileges to the priests and faithful of China, who are living in difficult circumstances." The decree bears the number Prot. N. 3242/78.)

It contains dispensations from certain rules concerning the sacraments. The following are some examples:

(III) The Holy Eucharist

In cases of extreme necessity a priest may offer Mass without wearing vestments. He need not light candles, nor use an altar stone. He may use a glass or any other ordinary cup. He may use biscuits (if they are

made of wheat), even if they have been leavened. He can use ordinary wine, or if this is not convenient, "original" grape juice.

(IV) Confession

1. Any priest who is in communion with the Church can hear the confession of any Catholic from any diocese.

(V) The Sacrament of the Sick

1. If the head of a diocese is not present, a priest may bless the oil of any plant to be used for the anointing of sick people.

However, in the "Special Faculties," which we are reviewing these 30 years later, special attention should be paid to Paragraph No. 7, having to do with Holy Orders.

(VII) Holy Orders

1. In today's Church the Holy Orders are: bishop, priest and deacon. The minor Orders are reader and acolyte.
2. The bishop can choose an intelligent and charitable male Catholic, strong in the faith, loyal to the successor of St. Peter, one who has a correct knowledge of Catholic doctrine – this would be the case of a person who does not have a formal theological education – and if such a person is willing to lead a life of celibacy, the bishop may ordain him as a priest so that he can serve the Church and the Catholics.
3. The bishop may choose an intelligent male Catholic, who obeys the commandments, to be a reader or an acolyte, to preach the Gospel, to lead the Catholic community, administer Baptism and witness marriages, give the Last Sacraments to people who are in danger of death, and arrange a Catholic funeral for deceased Catholics.

On June 27, 1978, Pope Paul VI issued these faculties through the Congregation of the Evangelization of Peoples. The Prefect of the Congregation, Cardinal Rossi signed them, as did his secretary, Archbishop Lourdusamy. Father Michele Pagani, the Chancellor of the Hong Kong Diocese at that time, was responsible for having the "Special Faculties" translated into Chinese.

Bishop Fan Xueyan and the Secret Consecration of Bishops

According to the abovementioned faculties, bishops have the authority to ordain as a priest any male Catholic, who may not have completed a full course of theology. However, the first point of Paragraph No. 7 of the declaration reads, "In today's Church Holy Orders include: bishops, priests and deacons. They also include readers and acolytes." In the first place it mentions the bishop, who can ordain the others. But there is no mention of anyone who can ordain a bishop. The first one who decided to take the risk of ordaining a bishop was Bishop Fan Xueyan of Baoding, in Hebei Province. By performing this ordination ceremony, Bishop Fan thus became a key person in the underground Church.

After Bishop Fan was released from prison in 1979, he returned to Baoding. Because at that time many bishops, who were in communion with the Holy Father, had passed away, and because he himself was also at an advanced age, he made an earth-shattering decision. In 1981, he prepared to ordain three priests as bishops. (Anthony Lam, 1999, pp. 20-21)

Before embarking on this course of action, Bishop Fan asked the opinion of Bishop Zhou Weidao, bishop of Fengxiang Diocese in Shaanxi Province. Bishop Zhou answered that if one does not have any instructions from the Holy Father, one should not act unilaterally. But after a further period of reflection, Bishop Fan was still determined to perform the secret ordinations. He answered Bishop Zhou in this way: today the Chinese Church is in a period of crisis; so the Holy Father would certainly understand my decision. According to the writings of Shi Fan, "In 1981, Bishop Fan, over a period of time, ordained Bishop Jia Zhiguo of Zhending Diocese, Bishop Wang Milu of Tianshui Diocese in Gansu Province, and Bishop Zhou Shanfu of Yixian Diocese." (Shi Fan, 1994C)

Bishop Zhou Shanfu, mentioned in Shi Fan's account is perhaps Bishop Zhou Shangfu, an easy mistake to make because the names are similar, and Bishop Wen is most likely Bishop Wen Duomo. (Lam, 1999, pp. 20-21). Shi Fan describes Bishop Fan's thinking in this way: *"After the ordinations, Bishop Fan said: 'I was not lacking in doing my duty. I ordained a few bishops for China, but I did not receive the Pope's approval before performing the ordinations. If it is against*

Canon Law, I must announce my crime to the Holy See. I am willing to accept any punishment.” (Shi Fan, 1994C)

Finally, the news of Bishop Fan’s secret ordinations reached Rome. The opinion of the Vatican at that time leaned in the direction of recognizing these bishops. According to Shi Fan in his article entitled “A Solemn Remembrance of Bishop Fan Xueyan,” in the *Christian Life Weekly* of Taipei, for January 16, 1994, the Holy Father agreed with the decision of Bishop Fan. (Lam, 1999, pp. 20-21)

The Secret Ordinations Gave Authority to the Old Bishop

Shi Fan’s original article reported Pope John Paul II’s words in this way: “The wise Holy Father answered: ‘Dear Brother Peter Joseph, This action of yours is in complete accordance with my own thinking. Therefore, I bestow the Holy See’s eternal blessing upon you, and give you special powers. In all matters, you can first decide for yourself, and then later report to me.’” (Shi Fan, 1994C)

After receiving the agreement of the Holy See, and the spiritual encouragement of the Vatican, Bishop Fan and the bishops he consecrated, continued to consecrate many more bishops, up until Bishop Fan was sent to jail for a third time in 1983. However, the bishops Bishop Fan consecrated also consecrated other bishops all throughout the country. At the same time, the bishops of other dioceses, who had been appointed by Pope Pius XII in 1949 and the early 1950s also consecrated some priests as bishops. Among these latter bishops, some served in the open Church. From 1980 to 1993, outside observers have estimated that over 80 bishops were consecrated secretly. Actually these actions were not secret. Some foreign observers called them “underground bishops.” But the activities of most of these bishops were really carried out in the open. They just did not participate in the open Church recognized by the government. (Lam, 1999, pp. 20-21)

Up until the end of 1993, not counting the bishops, who had already died, or those who had joined the open Church, there were still over 60 bishops not recognized by the government. (Lam, 1999, pp. 20-21)

If we read Pope Paul VI's 1976 letter to the still imprisoned Bishop Fan Xueyan on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of his ordination to the priesthood, we can get a better understanding of the background of Pope John Paul II's bestowal of special privileges on Bishop Fan in 1981. Shi Fan revealed this letter in his article published in the January 2, 1994 issue of the *Christian Life Weekly*. The whole letter is as follows (Shi Fan, 1999A):

Dear venerable brother,

In view of the changes taking place in our generation, no one can be ignorant of the eternal will of God. Because of His will, I find my self thinking of you because since you have taken on the office of priesthood, 25 years have passed. "For God is greater than our hearts, and knows everything." (1 John 3:20) Only He can see clearly and is all-powerful. With the same feeling, I wish to send you heartfelt best wishes and a prayer for God's blessings as you reach this important milestone. May God fill up your happiness with the fragrant aroma of His grace. This special greeting is meant to convey this meaning to you.

However, dear brother, you have been stripped of the office of your beloved Baoding Diocese, and I do not know the time or place, nor where you are at this moment. But we know that you shine with loyalty, and are deserving of our respect. In the estimation of myself and of the whole universal Church, you are the leader and pastor of the beloved Baoding Diocese. No matter what happens, I will pray to the angel messenger to carry beautiful and comforting words to you. (Zechariah 1:13) I want to declare openly: although you are suffering humiliation, it is not because of a crime, but it is an exercise in virtue because you are brave, meek and pure. You are bearing patiently unlawful torments for the holy name of Jesus. Your heart is large, and you are constructing an incomparable respectful image. You are carrying out what Peter, the chief of the Apostles wrote: "If you should suffer because of righteousness, blessed are you." (1 Peter 3:14)

Therefore, do not bow before evil. On the contrary, even more

courageously go forward. With firm hope, I believe that all the sufferings you are undergoing by following the Sacred Mystery of the Holy Cross will change into a greater benefit for both you and for God's Holy People. Keep control of all your affairs, and no one will tarnish your glory. (cf. Sirach 33:23) Let the music of the Psalms comfort you every day. May God's heavenly secrets become a fragrance in the heart to overcome the dust of the secular world. May a deep study of theology penetrate your meditations with wisdom, and bring unending sweetness.

May you fervently honor the Blessed Virgin Mary, the bright star of our lives. May China's Queen always protect, help, and comfort you. May she always smile upon the people of your diocese, and increase the love they have for one another.

The Holy See sends its warmest best wishes to you.

Pope Paul VI

Given at the Vatican in 1976,

The 13th year of my pontificate

If we place this 1976 letter of Pope Paul VI together with the 1978 issuing of the "Special Faculties," we can understand the background to the 1981 secret ordinations of bishops. We can see that Bishop Fan clearly understood that in that difficult period for the Church in China, the Holy Father had a lot of trust in him and in the other bishops, who were struggling in the midst of difficulties. This was also the background and the reason that Pope John Paul II later gave special faculties to the "old bishops."

The Boundaries of the Use of the Special Privilege for Ordaining Bishops

Because of the tense situation, in 1981, the bishop of Baoding consecrated three bishops. Then after Pope John Paul II learned from the old bishops, who were appointed and ordained in the time of Pope Pius XII, from 1949 to 1955, the real situation of China at that time, he gave to those old bishops the special authority to choose bishops, and promised that any one of them that they

ordained, would receive recognition by the Pope. At that time, there were nine old bishops in this category.

Five bishops belonged to the underground Church (listed according to date appointed):

- Gong Pinmei, Ignatius, Jiangsu, Suzhou, June 9, 1949
- Zhang Kexing, Melchior, Hebei, Xiwanzi, November 3, 1949
- Zhou Weidao, Anthony, Shaanxi, Fengxiang, May 31, 1950
- Deng Yiming, Dominic, Guangdong, Guangzhou, October 1, 1950
- Fan Xueyan, Peter Joseph, Hebei, Baoding, April 12, 1951

Four bishops belonged to the open Church:

- Duan Yinming, Matthias, Sichuan, Wanxian, June 9, 1949
- Deng Jizhou, Paul, Sichuan, Leshan, June 9, 1949
- Han Tingbi, Francis, Shanxi, Hongdong, April 18, 1950
- Wang Xueming, Francis, Neimeng, Suiyuan, August 29, 1951

(Li Boyu of Zhouzhi in Shaanxi died on February 7, 1980, and so is not listed here.)

Not surprisingly this special faculty was very important for the underground Church. But it also held deep meaning for the open Church. Let us take Bishops Duan Yinming and Han Tingbi as examples. After those two bishops consecrated other bishops, the faithful all congratulated the new bishops as being in communion with the Holy See. Also, Pope John Paul II invited Bishop Duan Yinming to attend the 1998 worldwide Synod of Bishops in Rome. From this we can see that the Holy Father considered both the underground Church and the open Church as part of the universal Catholic Church.

Counting from the 1981 implementation of the special faculties, the record of each bishop using it is recorded here:

- Gong Pinmei, Ignatius, did not use the special faculties
- Zhang Kexing, Melchior, did not use the special faculties
- Zhou Weidao, Anthony, used the special faculties twice
- Deng Yiming, Dominic, did not use the special faculties

- Fan Xueyan, Peter Joseph, used the special faculties four times
 - Duan Yinming, Matthias, used the special faculties ten times
 - Deng Jizhou, Paul, did not use the special faculties
 - Han Tingbi, Francis, used the special faculties four times
 - Wang Xueming, Francis, did not use the special faculties
- (If a consecrator consecrated two episcopal candidates in one ceremony, it would be counted as using the special faculties twice.)*

A Related Problem: Should the Secretly Ordained Bishops Go Through A “Supplying of the Ceremonies” Rite?

Some of the open Church bishops were consecrated at an open Church ceremony, and some were consecrated at a secret ordination ceremony.

As for a secret ordination ceremony, we can take the case of Bishop Han Tingbi of the Hongdong Diocese as an example. Over a period of time, Bishop Han performed secret ordinations four times. Bishop Chen Bolu of Yongnian Diocese in Hebei Province, one of the bishops Bishop Han ordained, chose to administer his diocese in the open. He invited Bishop Liu Dinghan of the Xianxian Diocese to supply the ceremonies for him, in order to satisfy the government’s requirements. Then Bishop Han Tingbi became worried about whether supplying the ceremonies was against Canon Law. (Source: from a visit by this author to Bishop Han in Hongdong on October 15, 1988.)

Bishop Chen Bolu was secretly ordained in 1982. His open ordination ceremony took place on May 29, 1988. The magazine *Catholic Church in China*, in its 1988, No. 2 edition, announced the ordination in this way:

Early on the morning of May 29, 1988, many people made their way to the cathedral in Handan. At least 1,000 Catholics attended the ordination ceremony of Bishop Chen Bolu....

The ordination ceremony began at exactly 8 AM. The main consecrator was Bishop Liu Dinghan, the vice-director of the “Two Committees” in Hebei Province and the bishop of Cangzhou Diocese. Father Jiang Tauran, the secretary-general of the provincial “Two Committees,”

and Father Hou Jinde, a lecturer at the provincial College of Philosophy and Theology, were the co-consecrators. (*Catholic Church in China*, August 10, 1988, No. 2, p. 21)

Regarding the secret ordinations of bishops, Bishop Han wondered if it was possible to supply the ceremonies at the installation ceremony. He hoped to get instructions concerning this, and asked a Catholic to enquire about it from the Church authorities. At that time a Catholic from Hong Kong suggested having a simple Mass of installation, instead of supplying the ceremonies for a complete ordination. Bishop Han agreed with this method. (Source: from a visit to Bishop Han in Hongdong on October 15, 1988)

Moreover, from an examination of the open ordination ceremony of Bishop Chen Bolu, at present there is not enough evidence to prove into what category the Mass at that time fell. Most likely it was only an ordinary Mass of blessing, and not an ordination Mass for a bishop. We can see this from the fact that the two co-consecrators were simple priests, and not bishops. Moreover, the Mass in 1988 was still said in Latin. Any government officials at the ceremony would not know what was going on. Most times they basically did not pay attention to the real meaning of a ceremony. Therefore, most likely only an ordinary Mass of blessing took place at that time.

In summation, the four bishops ordained by Bishop Han Tingbi were all publicly installed in their dioceses from the mid-1980s to the early years of the 1990s. None of them faced any difficulties from the government authorities, nor were they held in suspicion by anyone inside or outside of the Church. The four bishops were completely loyal in their service to the Church until their dying day.

Government Pressure and Utilization

The Special Faculties for ordaining bishops had a different effect on each person. For Bishop Fan Xueyan, it led to him being returned to jail in 1983. Regarding this, Shi Fan gives a detailed description.

In July 1983, in the assembly hall of the provincial prison in Baoding City, a large meeting to pass sentence took

place. The following government units participated in the proceedings: the public security bureaux of every city and county in the Baoding District, the Religious Affairs Bureaux and the United Front departments of those same places, and the Beijing, Baoding and Shijiazhuang patriotic associations.

The court announced the so-called crimes Bishop Fan committed: contacting foreign countries, making reports to the Vatican, and privately and “unlawfully” ordaining bishops and priests.

Bishop Fan answered righteously and strongly: ‘I am the bishop of Baoding. I have the responsibility to report to our Holy Father on the situation of our diocese. The content of such reports is strictly religious. I have not committed any crime. I am a bishop, and so I have the authority to ordain bishops and priests. That is my office. I have committed no crime.

For the abovementioned so-called crimes Bishop Fan was sentenced to 10 years of hard labor in Shijiazhuang’s No. 2 prison. (Shi Fan, 1994E)

After serving many years, Bishop Fan was released from prison at the end of 1987. Afterwards he answered questions from members of the local Church community. He responded to 13 important questions. The copied down answers to that day’s interview became the famous 13 points of Bishop Fan Xueyan. They had a great influence on the Chinese Church.

At the same time, local governments in exercising their extreme pressure, knew how to make use of the grey areas in the Special Faculties in order to accomplish their policy of controlling the Church. In 1987, the candidate to become archbishop of Changsha in Hunan Province, Qu Tianci, who had received the Holy Father’s approval, invited the old bishop of Wanxian, Bishop Duan Yinming to Changsha to participate in his consecration ceremony. The date for the consecration Mass was set for December 8, 1987. However, the authorities supervising religion in Hunan, a quarter of an hour before the Mass was to begin, announced a procedure, which would put people “in a bind.” They

requested Bishop Duan Yinming to consecrate Father Wang Zicheng, a standing committee member of the national Patriotic Association, and the vice-rector of the National Seminary of Philosophy and Theology, as bishop of Nongxian. Actually, Bishop Duan was only a co-consecrator at this ordination ceremony. The main consecrator was Bishop Zong Huaide, president of the Chinese Bishops Conference, who was not approved by the Holy Father.

At that time, everyone knew that Father Wang Zicheng had not received the approval of the Holy Father. Bishop Duan Yinming had no intention of using the Special Faculties to ordain him. However, faced with that situation, perhaps Bishop Duan, in order to avoid putting Qu Tianci in a difficult situation, did not back out of the ceremony at the last minute. As a result the consecration ceremony took place as usual. Qu Tianci became the archbishop of Changsha, and Wang Zicheng became bishop of Nongxian. In the last analysis, whether in that situation Wang Zicheng can be considered a legitimate bishop is an unsolved mystery.

Finally, God's plans are beyond human comprehension. Wang Zicheng, a short while after being ordained, returned to Beijing, and continued in his job as vice-rector of the National Seminary. Most of his time was spent there. He never formally returned to Nongxian. Basically he held the title of bishop in name only. Wang Zicheng died on May 24, 1995, at 72 years of age. In the case of the Chinese Catholic Church, that was a rather young and unexpected age to die.

The Meaning of the 2007 Letter of the Holy See and the Revocation of the Special Faculties

On May 27, 2007, Pope Benedict XVI issued a "Pastoral Letter to the Bishops, Priests, Consecrated Persons and Lay Faithful of the Catholic Church in the People's Republic of China." Because it had to be translated into Chinese, it was formally published on June 30, 2007. Paragraph 18 of Pope Benedict's letter pointed out:

Considering in the first place some positive developments in the situation of the Church in China, and in the second place the increased opportunities and greater ease in

communication, and finally the requests sent to Rome by various Bishops and priests, I hereby revoke all the faculties previously granted in order to address particular pastoral necessities that emerged in truly difficult times.

These include the "Special Faculties" of 1978 and the 1980s "special faculties for the ordination of bishops." They also include all the other powers and privileges the Vatican granted to the Catholic Church of China in the past. It was announced that these special powers had reached the stage when they had completed their historical mission.

Shortly after the issuance of the Holy Father's letter, this writer, in the Chinese editorial in *Tripod* No. 146, entitled "The Future of China-Vatican Relations at a Crossroads," discussed the meaning of "the revocation of the special privileges and the pastoral guidelines." I quote some of the passages here:

Regarding the revocation of the special faculties, I invite our readers to pay attention to two points. First, the faculties were revoked because the Holy Father "considered that some positive developments had taken place in the situation of the Church in China, and secondly, because of the increased opportunities and greater ease for communication to take place." (Para. 18) They were absolutely not revoked because the special faculties and pastoral guidelines contained mistakes. Before the special faculties were revoked, if members of the Chinese Church carried out any procedures in accordance with these faculties, their validity and legality are still in effect. For example, some bishops have ordained priests in accordance with the 1978 special faculties. Now that the faculties are revoked, it just means that those bishops cannot use the standards envisioned in the 1978 faculties to select future candidates for the priesthood. For those who have already been ordained under the faculties, their ordinations are still valid, and they are still priests.

Moreover, the revocation of the special privileges and pastoral guidelines cannot be interpreted as the Holy Father abandoning the underground Church. The Holy

Father said that the situation now does not require these special faculties. It means that the members of the whole Chinese Catholic Church do not need these faculties now, no matter whether they belong to the underground or the above ground Church. From now on, if one acts in accordance with the pastoral guidelines in the Holy Father's letter, that is enough. Of course, in any situation "The Canon Law of the Catholic Church" can always be used." (Anthony Lam, 2007, pp. 3-4)

This author has used many pages to explain the conditions under which the underground Catholic communities and the open Church communities made use of the "Special Faculties." Hopefully they will be useful in helping our readers to understand the Holy Father's letter.

Conclusion

In conclusion it can be said that if there were no excessive control by the government authorities, there would be no need for "secret" ordinations. Rather, ceremonies of ordination (consecration) of bishops are purely religious in nature. Essentially they have no relationship with the government. When the secret ordinations began in 1981, it was in response to the government's interference into the religious affairs of its citizens. This created great dissatisfaction among those citizens, up to the point that they were willing to risk suppression by the government. This led to the clear and definite response of the secret ordinations.

At the same time, Bishop Fan Xueyan's brave actions brought him much suffering in his later years. In the end, they led him to offer up his life. However the sufferings he had undergone for more than ten years because of the secret ordinations brought him an untarnished reputation, which will never be destroyed. He is worthy to be called a saint for our times.

The thinking and outlook of such bishops as Bishop Fan, Bishop Han Tingbi, Bishop Zhou Weidao and Bishop Duan Yinming of course were not always the same. However, their loyalty to the Church was the same, and they were completely at one in their obedience to the Holy Father. They surprisingly

displayed a tacit agreement among themselves concerning this truth of the Catholic faith, so that it was able to come to life in the decade of the 1980s.

It is hoped that the present bishops on the China mainland can follow the strong and brave example of the old bishops, and courageously defend the traditional nature of the Church, so that the small tear that has appeared in the fabric of the Church recently can become a thing of the past, and the life of the Chinese Church can quickly return to normal.

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