

WORLD & NATION

Chinese ordinations elude Vatican's approval

By John Thavis
Catholic News Service

VATICAN CITY — In a move that appeared to aggravate China-Vatican divisions, the government-approved Chinese church ordained five new bishops without papal approval.

The ordinations were performed Jan. 6 during a Mass in a Beijing cathedral, just hours before Pope John Paul II ordained 12 new bishops in St. Peter's Basilica. Church officials in Rome said the timing was a deliberate provocation, and the Vatican expressed its "astonishment and disappointment" at the act.

"This decision comes at a time when voices have been raised in many parts which lead one to hope for a normalization of relations between the Holy See and Beijing," spokesman Joaquin Navarro-Valls said.

"But this gesture poses obstacles that certainly will hamper that process," he said.

China's longstanding refusal to recognize the pope's right to appoint bishops has been one of the biggest obstacles in Chinese-Vatican relations and a major factor in the division between the Chinese underground church loyal to Rome and the government-sanctioned Chinese Catholic Pa-



Reuters/CNS

Bishop Liu Yuanren, head of China's government-approved Catholic bishops' conference, arrives at the Beijing cathedral Jan. 6. Bishop Liu ordained five new Chinese-appointed bishops in defiance of Pope John Paul II, who alone has the authority for naming bishops in the church.

triotic Association.

Some 300 people, a relatively sparse crowd, attended the ordinations at Immaculate Conception Cathedral. Among the congregation were representatives of the Communist Party's religious affairs office.

Bishop Liu Yuanren of Nanjing, president of the Bishops' Conference of the Catholic Church in China, was the ordaining bishop, with Bishop Michael Fu Tieshan of Beijing, chairman of the patriotic association, as co-ordinator, reported UCA News, an Asian church news agency based in Thailand.

Five additional bishops and 30 priests concelebrated the ordination Mass. All the bishops laid their hands on and embraced the newly ordained bishops.

Bishop Fu told the congregation that the ordinations reflected China's prosperity and said the development of the church in China had to keep pace with the development of the country.

The newly ordained were Bishops Peter Fang Jianping of Tangshan, 39; Jin Daoyuan of Changzhi, 71; Lu Xinping of Nanjing, 36; Su Changshan of Baoding, 74; and Zhan Silu of Mindong, 39.

Bishop Zhan later told UCA News that the new bishops had pledged obedience to

the pope during the ceremony — a point the others did not confirm. He said the timing of the ordinations was not confrontational.

"We were ordained today because it is the Epiphany Day, a big feast day in the church. If it happens on the same day as the Vatican's ordinations, isn't it even better?" he said.

The vice chairman of the patriotic association, Liu Bainian, told the Italian news agency ANSA that the ordinations were a sign of the church's vitality.

"The Chinese church has bishops who are helping it prosper as in few places in the world. So I think the pope should be pleased," he said. He added that there would be more ordinations in the future because the average age of Chinese bishops was too high.

The pope made no mention of the new Chinese bishops during his annual ordination Mass at the Vatican. But veteran China-watchers said the Vatican saw the Chinese ceremony as an act of defiance at a sensitive moment in church-state relations.

Coadjutor Bishop Joseph Zen Ze-kiun of Hong Kong said the ordinations were an "act of confrontation" that shows that China has "no real intention of reconciling with the Vatican," UCA News reported.

Suggestion that pope could resign sparks once-taboo talk

By John Thavis
Catholic News Service

VATICAN CITY — A German bishop's suggestion that Pope John Paul II could one day resign has stimulated open discussion on a once-taboo subject at the Vatican.

The remarks by Bishop Karl Lehmann Jan. 9 — misreported by the Italian press as a request for the pope to step down — provoked immediate controversy and a rush to defend the pope by Roman Curia officials.

A flurry of denials and clarifications followed, with everyone — including Bishop Lehmann — agreeing that the 79-year-old pontiff was capable of continuing in office.

"Even though the pope appears very tired, the Holy Father is in the fullness of his mental faculties. I don't think the hypothesis of resigning has been considered, not even recently," said Dominican Father Georges Cottier, theologian of the papal household.

Cardinal Pio Laghi, a longtime Vatican official who recently retired, said: "We have an excellent Holy Father. I think a decision like resignation cannot be suggested to the pope. It's a decision that would be his alone."

The pope appeared to offer an unintentional response to the debate when, speaking about the elusive goal of world peace, he told diplomats Jan. 10: "God never asks us anything above our capabilities, in the sense that he gives us the strength to com-

plete what he expects of us."

But even at the Vatican, some acknowledged that Bishop Lehmann, president of the German bishops' conference, had voiced what many people have privately wondered as they watched the pope struggle through the first big Holy Year events, frequently looking frail and unsteady.

Bishop Lehmann said that while he thought the pope was at the "high point" of his pontificate, it was not disloyal to talk about papal resignation as a possibility.

Several experts pointed out that church law allows a pope to resign, and there has been at least one pope who did.

"This is not an eternal assignment. It is limited first of all by death, and then perhaps by other circumstances. If a pope, having reflected and prayed deeply, feels in conscience that he no longer has the capacity to carry out the office, he could decide to resign," said one highly placed Vatican source who asked not to be named.

Such a resignation would not show a lack of confidence in God, he said.

"God entrusts responsibilities to people who are capable of carrying them out. Even someone ill can do this. But suppose the

pope were to lose his ability to speak, for example. That would raise a very delicate problem," the source said.

Modern medical advances have made it more likely that the church will sooner or later have to face such problems, he said. Pope John Paul is being treated for a nervous system disorder believed to be Parkinson's disease, a debilitating illness.

"A pope might reach the point where he thinks he can continue in office only with a miracle — but you can't demand a miracle," the Vatican source said.

Other observers praised the pope's current leadership role, but believe resignation is possible at some future moment.

Vittorio Messori, an Italian who has interviewed the pope at length, said the pope could choose to withdraw in seclusion to a Polish monastery if his health fails.

"On a human level, the temptation to return to Poland to die is very strong," Messori said.

Luigi Accattoli, an Italian journalist who has written extensively about the pope, said in the newspaper *Corriere della Sera* that the pontiff "who has brought so many new things to the throne of Peter would also be

capable of stepping down..."

"One has the impression that John Paul II would not be convinced to remain for reasons of 'image' if he felt he could not continue to govern the church," he said.

Accattoli noted there no longer exist political impediments to retirement, such as the risk that a retired pope would mobilize forces against a reigning pontiff.

Pope Paul VI, who is said to have considered and rejected the idea of retirement late in his papacy, once said that a paternal role — that of the Holy Father — cannot be resigned.

That's a point recalled by U.S. author George Weigel, who spent many hours with Pope John Paul in preparing the papal biography, *Witness to Hope*. He said the fact that church law makes provisions for papal retirement shows that "it's not inconceivable."

"But it does raise a question about the theological character of the pope's paternity for the universal church," Weigel said.

"It seems to me that one way to think about this is: fathers and families. Fathers get old, and it's not a bad thing for families to have parents who are older," he said.

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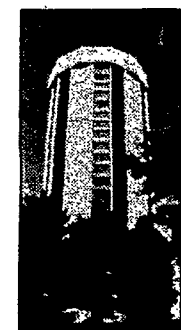
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