

Chinese bishop ordained with OK from Rome and Beijing: May signal improved relations

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In an event that could signal improved relations between China's state-run Catholic church and the country's underground church loyal to Rome, a new Chinese bishop was ordained September 8 with the approval of both China's communist government and the Vatican.

Paolo Xiao Zejiang, 40, became coadjutor bishop of the southern diocese of Guizhou, placing him in line to succeed the diocese's incumbent bishop, 88-year-old Anicetus Wang Chongyi. Although Xiao was chosen by the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association, which is controlled by Beijing, his ordination was approved by the Vatican several weeks in advance.

Substantial numbers of clergy and laypeople from China's underground church were among the 3,000 people who attended Xiao's ordination. The presence of underground church leaders at a state-sanctioned ordination is possibly unprecedented, and in any case an "important step in reconciliation between the two branches of the Chinese Church," according to AsiaNews.

Chinese Catholics have been divided for half a century between an underground church loyal to Rome—many of whose leaders have been imprisoned for long periods by the government—and an "official" church which now claims 5 million members. The total number of Catholics in China today is estimated at 12-15 million.

In an open letter to Chinese Catholics in June, Pope Benedict XVI reiterated the Vatican's longstanding demand that the Chinese church be free of state control and emphatically described government-approved bishops as "illegitimate" unless their appointments are confirmed by Rome. But he also called for unity among the faithful and offered conciliatory words to China's communist government.

Rome made another conciliatory gesture a few weeks later, when the Vatican secretary of state, Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, called the government's choice for bishop of Beijing a "very good, well-suited" candidate. -*Religion News Service*