SALA STAMPA DELLA SANTA SEDE
BOLLETTINO
HOLY SEE PRESS OFFICE BUREAU DE PRESSE DU SAINT-SIÈGE PRESSEAMT DES HEILIGEN STUHLS
OFICINA DE PRENSA DE LA SANTA SEDE SALA DE IMPRENSA DA SANTA SÉ
BIURO PRASOWE STOLICY APOSTOLSKIEJ دار الصحافة التابعة للكرسي الرسولي

N. 190628c

Friday 28.06.2019

Pastoral guidelines of the Holy See concerning the civil registration of clergy in China

For some time requests have been received by the Holy See, from Bishops in Mainland China, for a concrete indication of the approach to be adopted in relation to the obligation of presenting an application for civil registration. In this regard, as is known, many Pastors remain deeply disturbed since the modality of such registration – which is obligatory, according to the new regulations on religious activities, on pain of inability to function pastorally – requires, almost invariably, the signing of a document in which, notwithstanding the commitment assumed by the Chinese authorities to respect also Catholic doctrine, one must declare acceptance, among other things, of the principle of independence, autonomy and self-administration of the Church in China.

The complex reality of China and the fact that there does not appear to be a uniform praxis with regard to the application of the regulations for religious affairs, make it particularly difficult to decide on the matter. On the one hand, the Holy See does not intend to force anyone's conscience. On the other hand, it considers that the experience of clandestinity is not a normal feature of the Church's life and that history has shown that Pastors and faithful have recourse to it only amid suffering, in the desire to maintain the integrity of their faith (cfr. Letter of Pope Benedict XVI to Chinese Catholics of 27 May 2007, n. 8). Thus, the Holy See continues to ask that the civil registration of the clergy take place in a manner that guarantees respect for the conscience and the profound Catholic convictions of the persons involved. Only in that way, in fact, can both the unity of the Church and the contribution of Catholics to the good of Chinese society be fostered.

In what concerns, then, the evaluation of the eventual declaration that must be signed upon registering, in the first place it is necessary to bear in mind that the Constitution of the People's Republic of China formally guarantees religious freedom (art. 36). In the second place, the Provisional Agreement of 22 September 2018, recognising the particular role of the Successor of Peter, logically leads the Holy See to understand and interpret the "independence" of the Catholic Church in China not in an absolute sense, namely as separation from the Pope and the Universal Church, but rather relative to the political sphere, as happens everywhere in the world in the relations between the Universal Church and the particular Churches. To affirm that for the Catholic identity there can be no separation from the Successor of Peter, does not mean making the local Church an alien body in the society and the culture of the country in which she lives and works. In the third place, the context of the actual relations between China and the Holy See, characterised as they are by a consolidated dialogue between the two Parties, differs from that which saw the birth of the patriotic structures in the 1950s. In the fourth place, a

factor of great importance should be added, namely, that over the years, many Bishops who were ordained without the apostolic mandate have asked for and received reconciliation with the Successor of Peter, so that today all Chinese Bishops are in communion with the Apostolic See and desire an ever greater integration with the Catholic Bishops of the whole world.

In light of these facts, it is legitimate to expect a new approach on the part of everyone, also when addressing practical questions about the life of the Church. For its part, the Holy See continues to dialogue with the Chinese Authorities about the civil registration of Bishops and priests in order to find a formula that, while allowing for registration, would respect not only Chinese laws but also Catholic doctrine.

In the meantime, bearing in mind what has been noted above, if a Bishop or a priest decides to register civilly, but the text of the declaration required for the registration does not appear respectful of the Catholic faith, he will specify in writing, upon signing, that he acts without failing in his duty to remain faithful to the principles of Catholic doctrine. Where it is not possible to make such a clarification in writing, the applicant will do so at least orally and if possible in the presence of a witness. In each case, it is appropriate that the applicant then certify to his proper Ordinary with what intention he has made the registration. The registration, in fact, is always to be understood as having the sole aim of fostering the good of the diocesan community and its growth in the spirit of unity, as well as an evangelisation commensurate to the new demands of Chinese society and the responsible management of the goods of the Church.

At the same time, the Holy See understands and respects the choice of those who, in conscience, decide that they are unable to register under the current conditions. The Holy See remains close to them and asks the Lord to help them to safeguard the communion with their brothers and sisters in the faith, even in the face of those trials that each one will have to face.

The bishop, for his part, “should nurture and publicly manifest his esteem for his priests, showing them trust and praising them, if they deserve it. He should respect and require others to respect their rights and should defend them against unjust criticism. He should act swiftly to resolve controversies, so as to avoid the prolonged disquiet which can overshadow fraternal charity and do damage to the pastoral ministry” (*Apostolorum Successores*, Directory for the Pastoral Ministry of Bishops, 22 February 2004, n. 77).

It is important, then, that also the lay faithful not only understand the complexity of the situation, described above, but in addition accept with an open heart the anguished decision taken by their Pastors, whatever it may be. The local Catholic community should accompany them in a spirit of faith, with prayer and affection, refraining from any judgement of the choices of others, maintaining the bond of unity and demonstrating mercy towards all.

In any case, until such time as a modality for the civil registration of the clergy that is more respectful of Catholic doctrine, and thus of the consciences of those involved, is established through a frank and constructive dialogue between the two Parties, as agreed, the Holy See asks that no intimidatory pressures be applied to the “non official” Catholic communities, as, unfortunately, has already happened.

Finally, the Holy See trusts that everyone can accept these pastoral indications as a means of helping those faced with choices that are far from simple, to make such choices in a spirit of faith and unity. All those involved – the Holy See, Bishops, priests, religious men and women and the lay faithful – are called to discern the will of God with patience and humility on this part of the journey of the Church in China, marked, as it is, by much hope but also by enduring difficulties.

From the Vatican, on 28 June 2019, Solemnity of the Most Sacred Heart of Jesus.

The Holy See