



NEWS REPORT

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China Tightening Its Grip on Catholics

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ROME (Zenit.org) - An expert in Chinese affairs says that three official documents formalize stricter control over the lives of Chinese Catholics.

In an article Tuesday in the Italian newspaper *Avvenire*, Father Bernardo Cervellera, former director of the Vatican agency *Fides*, revealed that the documents aim to promote even further a Catholic Church "independent" of Rome, controlled by the Patriotic Association of Chinese Catholics.

The directives, which have been in force in Beijing and Hebei, will be applied on a national scale. They were approved at the end of March, amid the SARS epidemic.

Ye Xiaowen, director of the state Office for Religious Affairs, justified the three documents by saying that they "filled the void" in the "democratic" management of the Church. They stress "independence, autonomy and self-management," the Communist aide said.

In fact, the texts are not presented as government mandates, but as self-management regulations adopted by entities recognized by the state.

The titles of the three documents are telling: "Method of Management of Catholic Dioceses in China," "Rules for the Work of the Patriotic Association of Chinese Catholics" and "Method of Work of the Unitary Assembly of the Patriotic Association of Chinese Catholics and of the Chinese Catholic Episcopal Conference."

Excerpts from the documents quoted by Father Cervellera reveal that they impose a "democratic" concept of the Church, "which runs the risk of destroying the apostolic and sacramental dimension of the Catholic faith, with the risk of reducing the Church in China to the rank of a sect."

In any case, it seeks to sever the Chinese Church's dependence on the Pope.

"It is possible that the promulgation of these new rules, unacceptable for Catholics, gives way to a new wave of persecutions," he warned.

According to sources quoted by Father Cervellera, Catholics in China number about 12 million, though the government only recognizes some 4 million to 5 million. There are 117 Catholic bishops, only 70 of whom are recognized by the state authorities.

The government recognizes 2,600 priests; another 1,000 are not recognized. The Patriotic Association has ordained 1,500 priests over the past 20 years.

Women religious number 5,000; two-thirds of them are officially recognized.

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