

China retaliates against the Vatican over the question of bishops



China has taken an aggressive stance against the Vatican over the key question of the nomination of bishops, in the run up to its leadership elections in 2012. Will the Holy See and Beijing manage to reach an agreement in time to prevent a meltdown in relations?

China has a history of meeting fire with fire. Nowadays, as the internal political struggle intensifies in the lead up to the election of the country's new leadership in 2012, China does not hesitate to retaliate whenever anyone dares to oppose its will.

Since early June, it has repeatedly hit back against the Holy See for rejecting a number of candidates that the Beijing authorities had wanted to make bishops and, in particular, for excommunicating two Chinese bishops whose ordination they had forced through, without papal approval, in June and July,

Vatican Insider has learned that Beijing has drawn up a blacklist of around 20 names, most of them priests, that it considers to be linked to the Holy See in one way or other, and whom it does not want to allow into the country in reprisal for the Holy See's actions.

Since June, it has blocked 9 Catholic priests from entering the mainland, even though they all had valid visas. Four of the priests are Italian, four are of Chinese origin, and one is French. Most are living in Hong Kong.

Seven were blocked at border control points on the mainland, and had their entry visas cancelled without explanation. Two were stopped at Beijing's international airport, had their visas cancelled and were put on the next flight back to where they had come from.

News of these latest retaliations circulated in diplomatic and Church circles over the summer months. Several of the priests have opted for anonymity, or chosen not to speak publicly about their experiences lest they prejudice their future chances of returning to China, or further aggravate the

situation. The Holy See too has not commented on this.

The first to break the news was Father Franco Mella, 62, an Italian missionary who resides in Hong Kong and has been a regular visitor to China over the past 20 years. A well known social activist and fearless defender of the right of abode of children of migrant workers born in the mainland to reside with their families in Hong Kong, he was blocked from entering the mainland at Shenzhen in the southern province of Guangdong, at the end of July.

Some time earlier he had participated in a protest in Hong Kong against the illegitimate ordinations of bishops in the mainland. He denounced the violation of his rights in the media, and has been advised not to return for a visa for at least two years.

Likewise, the French priest, Bruno Lepeu, Superior of the Paris Foreign Missions in Hong Kong, where he has lived and worked for the past 17 years, was prevented from entering the mainland in this same period. He reported that his entry visa has been cancelled in a recent publication of his institute.

Four priests of Chinese origin were also refused entry to the mainland, including Peter Choy Wai-Man, Professor at the Centre for Catholic Studies of the Chinese University in Hong Kong. Their visas were cancelled at the frontier, without any explanation.

The case of the Italian priest, Gianni Criveller, is somewhat different. A recognized international scholar on the history of Christianity in China, he was granted a visa to work as an academic in Beijing, and was engaged in a major research program at one of the city's prestigious universities. Returning from a visit to Hong Kong, late July, he was blocked at Beijing's international airport, held there overnight, and made take the first flight back to Hong Kong next morning, again without an explanation.

Respect for the elderly has long been part of the traditional Chinese culture dating back at least to the time of Confucius (557-479 BC), but sadly this noble tradition too was sidelined as Beijing struck back at the Vatican.

In mid-September, the Chinese authorities blocked the 86-year old Italian missionary priest, Angelo S. Lazzarotto, from entering the country. He had travelled from Milan to the Chinese capital with a large group of pilgrims but was refused entry at Beijing's international airport even though he had been granted a visa two weeks earlier. He was obliged to take the next flight back home, three hours later. An unpleasant ordeal for a man of his age! Fr. Lazzarotto is a distinguished China scholar with many friends in the mainland. He has visited China every year since 1978. This was the first time he was refused entry.

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