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Playing 'spin the pope' in China

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All over the world, children play some version of the game 'spin the bottle.' In the Catholic church, there's an analogous indoor sport we might call 'spin the pope.' The rules are that when a papal edict appears, the players are stuck with the language of that decree, and have to find some way to make it say what they want it to say.

In the West, a classic example came with the Vatican's 2005 document barring the admission of homosexuals to seminaries. Did that mean any candidate with a same-sex orientation is ineligible, or only someone who's part of the so-called 'gay lifestyle'? In seminaries and religious orders, the document has been interpreted both ways, resulting in a wide diversity in actual practice.

Westerners aren't the only ones who know how to play the game, however, as a recent package on China in the indispensable Italian Catholic magazine *30 Giorni* illustrates.

The occasion for the package was publication of a Chinese-language edition of a small collection of traditional Catholic prayers called *Who Prays is Saved*, along with a brief introduction by Bishop Aloysius Jin Luxian of Shanghai. To accompany it, Gianni Valente of *30 Giorni* authored a profile of Bishop Francis An Shuxin of Baoding, and the magazine also presented an interview with Ren Yanli, a member of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and the Research Institute for World Religions (a scholarly body sponsored by the Chinese government).

What emerges is a portrait of a church divided. The core issue is how the church ought to relate to the Chinese government, and the battleground is formed by competing interpretations of Pope Benedict XVI's June 2007 letter to Chinese Catholics.

Valente presents Bishop An, 60, as a misunderstood hero, a bishop loyal to Rome who spent ten years in

prison for his fidelity, and who has now chosen to come out into the open and cooperate with government officials because that seemed the face-value reading of the pope's instructions from two years ago.

"Clandestinity does not come within the normal life of the church," Benedict wrote at the time, saying there's nothing wrong with cooperating with state officials and religious bodies as long as "essential principles of faith and ecclesiastical communion" aren't compromised.

An says that when he was released from prison in 2006, he initially refused to join the Patriotic Association, the official government body that oversees Catholic affairs in China, and whose very existence is considered an affront by many Catholics. After the pope's letter, An said, he changed his mind.

For that decision, Valente reports, An has been vilified among hard-liners in the Chinese Catholic community and their supporters in the West, including a cross-section of news agencies and blogs. In China, Valente writes, some laity and clergy have refused to accept An's authority, considering him illegitimate, despite the fact that Cardinal Ivan Dias of the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples released a letter in June 2008 stating that An "has the total support and confidence of the Holy See."

Valente contrasts An with the 78-year-old emeritus archbishop of Hong Kong, Cardinal Joseph Zen, who's more reluctant to go along with the state. Last November, Zen published a 22-page guide to interpretation of Benedict's letter, the overall thrust of which is to buttress his hard-line position. (Valente calls Zen's effort to set himself up as the arbiter of what the pope meant "out of the ordinary and self-inspired.")

Valente also quotes An as saying that some Chinese priests still haven't presented the pope's letter to local Catholics, in some cases suggesting that Benedict was "confused" or got bad advice.

At stake is which vision of the future Chinese Catholics ought to embrace: Continuing defiance until the one-party Communist system collapses under its own weight, as in Eastern Europe; or gradual normalization, accepting that the state is not going to disappear, and thus working to reform existing institutions to make them more congenial to the church.

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The thrust of Valente's piece is to suggest that the latter is clearly the understanding of the Vatican and of Benedict XVI. He notes, for example, that in November Cardinal Tarcisio Bertone, the Secretary of State, addressed a letter to Chinese priests indicating "reconciliation within the Catholic community and respectful and constructive dialogue with the civil authorities" as the guidelines of the pope's 2007 letter.

In that regard, Valente appears to suggest that while thorns in the side of the Communists such as Zen may get adoring press in the West, moderates such as An are the ones actually pointing the way to the future. That's hardly the only way of sizing things up, of course — but it is striking that this is the diagnosis of perhaps the most influential Catholic publication in Italy, and one often close to the thinking of senior Vatican officials.

If normalization is to occur, it presupposes that both sides in the church/state relationship are willing to give. In that regard, the interview with Ren Yanli is particularly interesting, because he suggests that government policy vis-à-vis Catholicism is shifting.

De facto, Yanli argues, the Chinese government has abandoned the original Communist vision of a completely autonomous church cut off from Rome, in favor of a distinction between matters of faith and ecclesiastical discipline (where they're willing to concede that the pope is in charge) and questions of politics (where bishops and clergy are essentially expected to mind their own business).

What explains the change? According to Yanli, it's the faith of local Catholics. In effect, the compact refusal of Chinese Catholics to accept leaders perceived as illegitimate has forced the government's hand.

The idea of imposing independence on the church that separates it from Rome and the universal church has been set aside in fact, Yanli said. The decisive factor was the faith itself of Chinese Catholics, both laity and clergy.

Coming from a scholar who's effectively on the government payroll, that has the smack of an important concession.

Many new bishops at the beginning and end of their consecration wanted to show in public the letter of appointment received from the pope, not least because they knew that the faithful would never heed pastors elected and consecrated autonomously, without the consent of the pope, he said. The last bishops appointed without papal mandate were isolated and no one wanted to take the Eucharist from their hands during Mass.

As a result, Yanli says, if in the past someone might have been tempted to make a career in an independent Church, the faith of the people helped everyone to make the design ineffectual. And that also helped the government to redirect its policy.

Yanli predicts that the broad trajectory is toward normalization, but warns that steps perceived as aggressive or unilateral can revive old tensions. For example, he notes that every Catholic bishop appointed in China in 2005 had the prior consent of the pope, but when Zen was made a cardinal in 2006, the government returned to naming bishops without papal mandate.

The key for today's more pragmatic brand of Chinese leader, Yanli argues, is carving out a religion policy that understands autonomy in political terms rather than in the spiritual and ecclesiastical realm. He said the government has hinted that it's willing to revise the statutes of state-sponsored religious bodies along these lines, but without blatant shifts that might be perceived as destabilizing.

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