

# Pope signs with China

Jim Mulroney ssc

Australia

*Amid much criticism and lack of enthusiasm among Church people, Pope Francis indicated he would sign on for a two-year extension to the Provisional Agreement on the Appointment of Bishops between the Vatican Secretariat of State and the Foreign Ministry of China*

**G**hosts, a decaying mansion and diplomatic relations between China and the Holy See conspired in the renovation and refurbishment of an elegant structure at Chaonei No 81 in Beijing, which had been handed back to Church ownership shortly after the conclusion of the Cultural Revolution.

In the pre-Communist era, the mansion had served as a language school for foreign missionaries and diplomats, later becoming a shelter for the Red Guards.

However, the brave custodians of revolutionary orthodoxy abandoned the gracious architectural structure in the face of nocturnal rumblings of ghoulish ghosts believed to haunt the corridors, leaving free run of the domain to its nebulous interlopers.

In the mid-1990s, the diocese of Beijing suggested that the elegant Baroque-style building be spared the demolition ball, as it would make a suitable dwelling for a Vatican nuncio should diplomatic ties with China be resumed.

The suggestion that the ruptured diplomatic relationship may one day be repaired was not regarded as either unpatriotic or heretical, and the stately mansion was eventually beautifully refurbished.

The 25 years since the demolition ball was stalled have seen a significant progress in relations between Beijing and the Vatican, although both sides freely admit that diplomatic ties have not seriously been on either's agenda.

As the current Vatican Secretary of State, Pietro Cardinal Parolin, notes, "[They] are not an end in themselves."

However, on 22 September 2018, a *Provisional Agreement on the Appointment of Bishops* was signed between the Vatican Secretariat of State and China's Foreign Ministry. While not as rosy or all-embracing as some may



*The spookiest house in Beijing at Chaonei No 81.*

*The upshot has seen the apostolic administrator, John Cardinal Tong Hon, declare that the 300-odd Catholic schools will teach correct thought and patriotism, as well as instructing his priests to watch their Ps and Qs in homilies by avoiding personal political opinions*

have hoped, a mutually acceptable process was hammered out and, although far from being tested in its overall process, has at least on the surface been adhered to by both sides.

This has been a significant breakthrough, as in the past, China has always referred to the Vatican having any say in the appointment of bishops as an outside interference in the country's internal affairs.

This was an agreement some 20 years in the making. Tentative beginnings around the turn of the millennium saw a series of good will gestures, featuring exchange exhibits from the Vatican Museums and the Beijing Palace Museum, as well as the Beijing Philharmonic Orchestra playing at the Vatican.

Meanwhile, unsung talks between the Vatican Secretariat of State and the Chinese Foreign Ministry got under way.

Then in 2007, a letter to the Catholic people of China penned by Pope Benedict XVI pleased Beijing to some extent as it placed some limits on the unofficial (not registered with government) Catholic communities, but drew its ire as it condemned unilaterally bodies created by the government within the official (registered with government) Catholic communities.

This, coupled with some other incidents, led to a rupture in the talks and a string of government orchestrated illicit episcopal ordinations between 2010 and 2012.

*While the Foreign Ministry declared it was happy with the agreement and intended to renew it for a further two years when it expired on September 18, no one at the Vatican seemed to be wildly excited at the prospect*

However, a new wind was beginning to blow. On 13 March 2013, Pope Francis ascended to the Chair of Peter and, on the following day, Xi Jinping assumed office as head of state of the People's Republic of China.

Pope Francis sent a congratulatory message, which was duly acknowledged. In 2014, he became the first pope to fly over Chinese air space on his way to Asian Youth Day in Seoul and in February 2016 a papal greeting addressed to the president and people of China on the occasion of the Lunar New Year was published by the *Asian Times* in Hong Kong.

In one way or another, these gestures were acknowledged positively.

Pope Francis has also been spared the negative press his predecessor was subjected to, and television programmes featuring historical Church contributions to Chinese culture and science received occasional airing. In addition, the pope's picture occasionally appeared in magazines—mostly tabloid style, big pictures with few words.

The exchange of gifts between the Vatican and Beijing resumed and most significantly the on-again-off-again talks between the Foreign Affairs Ministry and the Secretariat of State held more consistently to their twice-yearly schedule.

Nevertheless, the sixty-four million dollar question has always been, "What is being discussed?" Apart from the episcopal appointment dilemma, little has been leaked.

The last British governor of Hong Kong, Chris Patten, noted that China has a profound sense of the importance of history, so it is maybe no surprise that among the few clues dropped by the Vatican, is the interpretation of the history of relations between the Church and China.

Speaking at Pordenone, Italy, in 2014, Cardinal Parolin described the talks as "ordered toward the good of Chinese Catholics, the good of the entire Chinese people and the harmony of the whole society, in favour of world peace."



*Cardinal Zen speaking with the media.*

In this, he appears to be placing the Vatican between Chinese concerns over Western aggression and Western fears over the rise of the Middle Kingdom.

The cardinal explained that the Vatican approach to this dialogue must be one of justice earmarked by mercy in a spirit of generosity and forgiveness, rather than one of fear of loss.

"Pope Francis... knows well the baggage of suffering, of misunderstanding, often silent martyrdom which the Catholic community carries on its shoulders; it is the weight of history!" Cardinal Parolin said.

He also referred to the burden of the Unequal Treaties forced upon China at the conclusion of the Opium Wars in the late-19th and early 20th centuries, which are seen as solidifying a link between western oppression and Christianity.

He then added the memory of the insult of France usurping the right to place all missionaries and Christians under its jurisdiction as remaining raw in the Chinese consciousness, as well as the more recent role played by Pope John Paul II in bringing down the Communist government in Poland.

Cardinal Parolin hints strongly that part of the charter of the Vatican delegation is to draw attention to another side of events, what he terms those who sought to change the direction of this

history, by casting off French protection and western colonial oppression.

He pointed to the first apostolic delegate to China, Archbishop Celso Costantini, who strongly opposed the traditional diplomatic line in the 1920s and 1930s and the more recent role played by Pope Francis in brokering an agreement between the Communist government in Cuba and the United States.

However, much more remains raw in Chinese consciousness. Under the tutorage of Archbishop Costantini's successor, the first fully-fledged nuncio to China, Archbishop Antonio Riberi, it became strongly attached to and supportive of the Nationalist government of Chiang Kai-shek.

Even in its exile in Formosa (Taiwan), the Church was exceptionally accommodating of Chiang's white terror, martial law, colonising regime and remained vehemently anti-Communist.

At the same time, what was viewed by Beijing as being Archbishop Riberi's secretariat, the Shanghai Central Bureau (1949 to 1951), was discouraging cooperation with the newly installed government of the People's Republic of China over the creation of an independent Church.

One upshot of this is that the Church was viewed as antagonistic towards the Communist Party, especially when in the face of the Party's insistence, Archbishop Riberi, the only foreign envoy not to be officially informed of the change of regime, stated, "... the Catholic religion... is [supra]-political, indivisible by national boundaries or political differences... Any so-called Independent Catholic Church... is simply a schismatic Church and not the true and one Catholic Church."

While his remarks were viewed as antagonistic by Beijing, Archbishop Riberi did put his finger on the point of major dispute between the Communist Party

Columban  
Intercom

*There may not have been any illicit ordinations of bishops, but the new approach on the part of government bodies that handle day-to-day affairs of the Church is characterised by tighter surveillance, harsher restrictions on young people's religious education and government interference in the understanding of theological matters*

and the Church—the interpretation of the Three-Self Manifesto, which demanded a Church that is self-governing, self-supporting, and self-propagating.

Although promoted as a purely patriotic movement by the Communist Party, it was judged unacceptable by the Church at the time and remains a major point of dispute to this very day.

While the 2018 agreement does address the selection and appointment process for bishops, there is a divergence in the role these Church leaders are seen to play.

The Vatican regards them as spiritual pastors of the people, whereas Beijing sees them more as public servants responsible for instilling patriotism and promoting harmony.

In addition, interpretations of freedom of religion and belief remain divergent.

While the Foreign Ministry declared it was happy with the agreement and intended to renew it for a further two years when it expired on October 22, no one at the Vatican seemed to be wildly excited at the prospect.

Critics point to considerable tightening of freedom on religious practice imposed by the government over the past two years and question whether or not it is appropriate to dialogue with a government that is conducting cultural cleansing of the Uyghur people and has imposed draconian security laws on Hong Kong, which has left the diocese facing the old question of whether to buckle under or resist.

The upshot has seen the current apostolic administrator, John Cardinal Tong Hon, declare that the 300-odd Catholic schools will teach *correct thought* and *patriotism*, as well as instructing his priests to watch their Ps and Qs in homilies and avoid expressing any personal political opinions.

Critics also argue that in protecting the dialogue with Beijing, Pope Francis has been too accommodating of Chinese sensitivities and consequently remiss in not speaking out over these

issues, as well as what is seen as a deteriorating human rights situation on the mainland.

Others point to the futility of dialogue with Communist regimes, suggesting the failed *Ostpolitik* (eastern policy) adopted by the Holy See in the mid-1960s with Soviet Russia and Eastern European countries illustrates this.

They say its failure to benefit day-to-day pastoral work, only touching episcopal appointments, the drawing of diocesan boundaries and limited Church-state agreements, is mirrored in the current Chinese experience.

The Vatican may now be having second thoughts over an enthusiastic press release made at the signing of the agreement in 2018 that says, “The shared hope is that this agreement may favour a fruitful and forward-looking process of institutional dialogue and may contribute positively to the life of the Catholic Church in China.”

Its most vocal opponent, the former bishop of Hong Kong, Joseph Cardinal Zen Ze-kiun, points out that since the signing of the agreement, the official government-registered communities in China are further being reduced to Communist Party mouthpieces and much pressure is being placed on the unofficial communities to abandon their seven-decade struggle for religious freedom.

The curtain of secrecy shrouding the full content of the agreement is being manipulated by government agencies to force Catholics to throw their lot in with the registered communities and priests to join the government-sponsored Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association.

The Vatican has placed the legitimising of the bishops as its number one value, but it has not followed that this would lead to a new approach to all levels of Church life.

The press release says, “... [as] all Chinese bishops are in communion with the Apostolic See, [it is] legitimate to expect a new approach on the part of

everyone, also when addressing practical questions about the life of the Church.”

However, Cardinal Zen points out that this expectation is far from being met.

There may not have been any illicit ordinations of bishops, but the new approach on the part of government bodies that handle day-to-day affairs of the Church has been characterised by tighter surveillance, harsher restrictions on young people's religious education and government interference in the understanding of theological matters.

While Pope Francis is no doubt well aware of this, much criticism of him seems to be aimed at his refusal to be confrontational and his belief that if a mutually acceptable understanding of the ghosts of the past cannot be reached, a mutually agreeable understanding of the ghosts of the present cannot be either.

He may also be demonstrating what the primary author of his 2016 Lunar New Year greeting to the president and people of China, Francesco Sisci, from Peking University, describes as the tremendous patience and ability of the Church to suffer the wait until the time is ripe.

Pope Francis appears to be placing his faith in the value of dialogue, which he strongly encourages with other Christian denominations and religious faiths, as well as those of no faith.

However, it takes two to tango and no one side can dictate all the terms of a dialogue.

Nevertheless, much frustration lies in the secrecy that hides what is going on from the uninitiated, which is almost everyone.

Meanwhile, there is no sign of a ghost of a Vatican apostolic nuncio coming to haunt the corridors of the stately mansion at Chaonei No 81 in Beijing and no reason to hope that the ongoing dialogue will brighten the prospects of a better life for the Catholic people of the Middle Kingdom in the near future.