

VATICAN-CHINA UPDATE

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1. Can religion hold a dialogue with communism?

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Can religion hold a dialogue with communism?

Talking with communists about religious freedom is futile as they work to eliminate religion

By: Thomas Wang, Hebei

An agreement China and the Vatican signed in September 2018 is nearing the end of its two-year term. Media reports suggest that the two sides will return to the negotiation table this month.

The pact reportedly agreed on the terms of regularizing and appointing bishops in China with papal approval, but its content remains undisclosed to date.

Exchanges between the two sides quietly resumed in mid-June. The Rome-based SEDOS (Latin acronym for service of documentation and study of global mission) held a webinar titled "China Mission Today." It invited several distinguished guests to share their views on the situation of the Church in China after the signing of the agreement.

The overseas China experts at the conference were full of praise for the pact. One speaker mentioned that persecution of the Chinese Church still exists, but most guests lauded the agreement for bringing about the so-called renewal of the Church in China and even touted dialogue as the only effective way forward.

But is this the case? Do these so-called Chinese experts believe that dialogue between the two sides has brought about change? Is it not a case of Chinese expediency using the Vatican?

It is essential to understand that dialogue requires mutual understanding of terms so that there is room to continue bringing about change.

Unfortunately, these experts may have too many illusions about their counterparts in the negotiations. Perhaps we should take a look at how religion is defined in the ideology of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP).

The CCP view of religion is based on the views of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels. "Religion is the sigh of the oppressed, the emotion of a heartless world, just as it is the spirit of a spiritless system, and religion is the opium of the people," Marx said. According to Marx, religion is the product of a private system and will perish with the private system's demise.

And, for Engels, "the great international center of the feudal system was the Roman Catholic Church. It united the whole of feudal Western Europe (despite all the internal wars) into one large political system. It gave the feudal system a ring of divine light."

The CCP's concept of religion is firmly based on the views of these masters of communism. It is clear that religion and communism are incompatible because the spirit of the Bible is diametrically opposed to communism.

The Marxian concept of religion was put into practice in Russia after the October Revolution of 1917. Lenin further developed it and began to promote a series of measures to combat religion after the establishment of the Soviet Union. Chinese communism, which was influenced by Russia, accepted the Soviet view of religion almost entirely and incorporated it into its united front strategy.

In the Soviet Union's Central Revolutionary Base in Jiangxi, missionaries were regarded as accomplices of imperialism. Church land in villages was confiscated and clergy were not allowed to occupy the land.

During the Anti-Japanese War and the Communist Civil War, the strategy was adjusted to tolerate churches' existence to win over Catholics for their own use. After the CCP came to power in 1949, the Ministry of United Front Work restricted the development of educational, medical and social service institutions in China to cut the influence of Catholics and Christians

In the 1960s, there were discussions within the United Front Workers' Office on religion, with two different opinions. One group argued religions should be controlled by communism, but the other believed religion is entirely negative, not much different from superstition, and should be brought to extinction by all means. Although opinions look different, their ultimate goal is the same: religion needs to be eliminated because its very nature is contrary to

communism.

In 1966, with the outbreak of the Cultural Revolution, all religious activities were banned, and churches were closed down, outwardly eliminating religion. After the Cultural Revolution, China adopted an open-door policy in the 1980s, and the principle of freedom of worship was included in the constitution again.

In the past few years, the Chinese government has been trying to keep a tight rein on China's political and economic situation. But it also started to select some regions to carry out pilot projects to eliminate religion. In Hebei, Baoding, Handan and some villages, followers of religion gathered to carry out a withdrawal movement. For example, Wenzhou Pingyang is a religion-free region today.

Li Weihan, the Chinese Communist Party's united front minister, said of China's policy of freedom of religious belief. "The implementation of the policy of freedom of religious belief can unite the largest majority of the religious community at home to serve socialism and isolate the minority reactionary elements among them ... This is conducive to breaking down religious despotism and reactionaries, to the revolution as a whole, and to destroying the roots of religion."

This shows that the purpose of freedom of belief is to make use of its value and that the ultimate goal of destroying religion has not changed. In recent years, such as in 2014, the cross demolition movement started in Zhejiang, and within a few years it spread to other provinces. In Jiangxi, Henan, Shanxi and Anhui, thousands of crosses have been demolished or removed, and some churches have been razed to the ground, regardless of whether they are official or unofficial.

The Sinicization of religions means the doctrine and dogma of religions should be guided by the core values of socialism and should include the values of the state, the values of society. The doctrinal texts of all religions should be interpreted under the guidance of socialist values.

As St. John Paul II, then pope, said in the encyclical *Centesimus Annus*, "totalitarianism arises from a denial of truth in the objective sense. If there is no transcendent truth, in obedience to which man achieves his full identity." The culture and practice of totalitarianism also reject the Church. It claims to lead history to the true good, placing itself above all values. It explains why tyranny has the intention of destroying the Church, or at least of subjugating it.

It is clear from history and current policies that the CCP's ideological hostility towards religion remains unchanged.

Those dialoguing with communists need to be clear about who they are dealing with. An insincere dialogue is just another application of united front tactics. Do not let dialogue become a weapon against the Church.

St. John Paul II warned the Chinese faithful abroad when he met them in 1986 to "have no illusions about communism." The foreign "Chinese experts" who unrestrainedly tout dialogue

as the way forward, please reflect on the teachings of the late pope. Do not continue harming yourself and others by fabricating "the American dream" equality of opportunity available to all in China.

* Thomas Wang is a Catholic in Hebei, China, and comments on religion. The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official editorial position of UCA News.

2. Vatican-China agreement: Catholics keep the faith in historic deal despite slow progress

20th July 2020

South China Morning Post**Vatican-China agreement: Catholics keep the faith in historic deal despite slow progress***** Beijing and the Holy See signed a landmark agreement concerning the appointment of bishops in China in September 2018* Vatican ‘conscious agreement will not solve everything ... [but] provides foundation to resolve key religious conflict’**By: Mimi LauThis is the last in a three-part series examining the role of the Roman Catholic Church in China and how the difficult and complex relationship between the Vatican and Beijing has shifted and evolved since the Communist Party broke diplomatic ties in 1951. This instalment looks at how Catholics continue to be persecuted despite a landmark deal being signed between the Vatican and Beijing in 2018.If James Su Zhimin is still alive, he would have turned 88 this month. While he has not been seen for 17 years, Su is still listed by the Holy See, the worldwide government of the Catholic Church, as the Bishop of Baoding in China’s Hebei province.Between 1956 – five years after the Vatican and Beijing broke off diplomatic relations – and 1997, Su was arrested at least eight times, spending more than 30 years in prisons and labour reform facilities for refusing to switch allegiance from the Pope to China’s state-sanctioned Catholic Church.He was last seen in 2003, when he was in hospital. Since then, no one has had any news about him and the authorities have been silent about his whereabouts and status. Many fear he might already be dead.Hopes rose that the Chinese government might be more willing to share information about so-called underground bishops like Su when Beijing and the Vatican signed an agreement two years ago to address the decades-old problem of bishop ordination in mainland China.However, it seems the agreement, which will expire in September unless it is extended, has contributed little in the way of rapprochement between the Holy See and Beijing or greater freedom for Catholics in China.Exact details of the agreement are secret but it essentially attempts to resolve conflicts regarding bishop appointments in mainland China, with the Pope expected to have a veto on candidates. That power, however, has yet to be tested as no new bishops have been chosen since the agreement was signed.A spokesman for the Chinese Foreign Affairs Ministry said in a fax response to the South China Morning Post that the agreement was implemented smoothly.“Both sides will continue to maintain close communication over the implementation of the agreement and negotiate relevant arrangements to push for continuous improvement of ties,” he said.The Holy See’s press office declined to comment.In June last year, the Vatican publicly asked Beijing to stop

pressuring clergy who wanted to remain loyal to the Pope to say they accepted the principles of independence, autonomy and self-administration of the Chinese Catholic Church. According to a Catholic source who has knowledge of the 2018 agreement negotiations, Vatican negotiators regularly tabled persecution cases of underground clergy in meetings with their Chinese counterparts. “For the Vatican, they are conscious that the agreement will not solve everything. It simply provides the foundation to resolve a key religious conflict but many political leaders and critics have viewed the agreement through a political lens,” the person said. The names of several clergy, including Su, Thaddeus Ma Daqin – the bishop of Shanghai who has been under partial house arrest for years – and Augustine Cui Tai – the bishop of Xuanhua in Hebei province, who was arrested last month – have been raised. “Their names were brought up every time but it was always met with excuses, such as the local authorities were not collaborating,” the source said. “There are a lot of lies and [the Vatican] is aware of it. China has such advanced technology to track and trace its citizens, how can you not know the whereabouts of a man who has been missing for nearly 20 years,” the person said, in reference to Su. When the Vatican and Beijing broke diplomatic ties in 1951, Communism was seen as the “enemy of faith” by Rome, and the Catholic Church was kicked out of China. In its place, Beijing set up its own autonomous Catholic body – independent of the Holy See. For decades, bishops who were ordained by the Pope would lose communion if they joined the state-sanctioned Chinese Patriotic Catholic Association, which appointed bishops without papal approval. On the other hand, bishops who chose to remain loyal to the Pope were often harassed, pressured or even jailed. At the same time, religious practitioners in China also pointed to a tightening of freedom in recent years as the authorities implemented a “sinicisation” policy on religions, emphasising loyalty to the state and the Communist Party. They lamented that the policy was being applied across the board, affecting religions from Catholicism and Protestantism to Islam. Under the restrictive policy, religious icons, symbols such as crosses and holy buildings like churches, mosques and Buddhist monasteries were dismantled. Draconian policies to disrupt Islamic religious practices in Xinjiang and suppress support for the Dalai Lama in Tibet have continued. People under 18 have been barred from entering religious venues, and the sale of religious publications including academic research has been subject to close scrutiny since 2018. Such high pressure tactics explain why many Catholics have continued to refuse to join the state-sanctioned church in spite of a thaw of ties between the Vatican and Beijing in recent years. A leading government think tank researcher on Christianity told the Post that China’s repressive religious policies had hurt its international image and contributed to domestic instability. “This is rooted in an outdated Marxist outlook that sees religion as a backward and reactionary idealism, and crackdown and containment are the only response,” said the person, who is a Communist Party member and asked not to be named. “Religions and religious believers are products of an evolving society. Completely denying the value of religion today is no different to completely denying the value of our own society. This is pure self-sabotage,” the person said. The researcher faulted the Chinese authorities for overlooking the complexity of religion in China and treating believers as “opposing forces”. “But persecution will only lead to faster growth of unauthorised religious groups, especially among Christians,” the person said. “I have never been more worried about our religious policy than now after decades of studying it.” Pope Francis has faced criticism for his non-confrontational approach towards China and failing to lobby an effective defence over the interests of the underground clergy. The person with knowledge of the China-Vatican agreement negotiations said there was little the Vatican could do at this point. “But the CCP [Chinese Communist Party] has made a tremendous mistake by declaring war against religion. When you attack religion, you are only going to

create unsatisfied citizens and this threatens your domestic stability. “I’m not just talking about Catholics here, but all the other religions,” the person said. However, people should remember to look at the bigger picture rather than just focus on persecution, the person said, citing the example of the Wenzhou diocese that held more than 3,000 baptisms last year under the leadership of underground bishop Shao Zhumin, who remains a frequent target for local authorities. “We can’t just focus on persecution or else we would miss out on the bigger picture. It’s not the time to walk away even though it seems nothing can be changed,” the person said. “The church must keep lighting the candle of hope, trusting only God can bring forth the change. If we lose hope, we will lose everything”.

Read part one of this series,

which investigates the agreement signed two years ago and asks if there is any potential for common ground between Pope Francis and President Xi Jinping, and part two, on the role Taiwan plays in the relationship.

3. Vatican hits stumbling block on road to rebuilding ties with China

6th July 2020

South China Morning Post **Vatican hits stumbling block on road to rebuilding ties with China**
*** Agreement reached in 2018 giving Pope veto over Chinese bishop appointments remains untested as renewal date looms**

*** Both sides indicate they will extend pact despite persecution of Catholics and delays in appointing clergy**
By: Mimi Lau
This is the first in a three-part series examining the role of the Roman Catholic Church in China and how the difficult and complex relationship between the Vatican and Beijing has shifted and evolved since the Communist Party broke diplomatic ties in 1951. The first story investigates an agreement signed two years ago that suggested both sides seemed to be showing signs of compromise. What is at stake in this discussion and is there any potential for common ground between Pope Francis and President Xi Jinping? When Beijing and the Vatican reached a provisional agreement in 2018 over who had the authority to appoint Roman Catholic bishops in China, it signalled a possible breakthrough in a troubled relationship stretching back six decades. It seems the signals were wrong. Details of the pact – forged after more than three decades of negotiations – have never been made public, but the agreement marked the communist state’s first indication it was ready to share some authority with the Pope over control of China’s Catholic Church. It was hoped it would help in healing a rift from the 1940s when Beijing kicked the church out of China and later started an autonomous Catholic church, independent of Rome. The schism directly affects around 12 million Catholics in China, who are roughly evenly split into a so-called underground church that looks to the Pope for authority, while others attend Sunday mass in

state-run churches controlled by Beijing's Chinese Patriotic Catholic Association. It is understood that Pope Francis has veto power over bishop candidates proposed by Beijing, but this has never been tested. Anthony Yao Shun was installed last August by Chinese authorities as bishop for Jining diocese in Inner Mongolia, but he was a bishop candidate chosen by the Vatican more than six years ago. No new heads have been chosen for the 52 bishop-less dioceses in the two years since the agreement was signed, according to sources with knowledge of the negotiations, who declined to be named. "Bishop appointments were supposed to be the first obstacle to be resolved under the agreement, but while China and the Vatican have come closer, they are not interacting and conversing on the same bandwidth," said one of the sources. The 2018 provisional agreement expires in September, but Rome is reportedly ready to extend it by another two years, despite being unhappy with what it sees as a failure by Beijing to fulfil its part of the bargain. Sources said the Vatican had waited for a reciprocal gesture from Beijing after Pope Francis accepted eight bishops appointed by Beijing without his approval – including one who had passed away – in December 2018, three months after the agreement was signed. They said the onus had been on China to respond in kind by recognising the same number of bishops, chosen by Rome, in the unregistered church. But China's delay in acting had generated an undercurrent of frustration, the sources said, which had grown while Beijing was preoccupied by its deteriorating ties and trade conflicts with the US, as well as the Covid-19 pandemic. Lawrence Reardon, an expert on Chinese politics at the University of New Hampshire, said he was not surprised by the lack of a breakthrough in relations between the Vatican and the Chinese Communist Party. "The Vatican is faced with a more dogmatic CCP leadership that feels under siege from internal and external threats," he said. Despite the frustrations, there have been some signs of progress. Last month, Beijing recognised two authorities in the church loyal to the Vatican: Lin Jiashan, the 86-year-old archbishop of Fuzhou diocese in Fujian province, and Li Huiyuan of Fengxiang diocese in Shaanxi province. Another bishop, Jin Lugang of Nanyang diocese in Henan province, was recognised by Beijing in January 2019. But there are still 23 bishops chosen by the Vatican awaiting recognition by Beijing, according to the sources. Beijing requires written approval for the clergy to join the Chinese Patriotic Catholic Association, followed by a pledge of loyalty and obedience to the party leadership. This two-step verification is based solely on political reliability but the approved bishop is not authorised to minister to his congregation until a ceremonial public installation, but these processes can take years. The recent moves by China to recognise Vatican-appointed church leaders are expected to help move relations forward when Beijing negotiators meet their Vatican counterparts later this month in Rome to discuss the extension to the agreement, which both sides are understood to be willing to go ahead with, according to the sources. The Vatican press office in Rome and China's Foreign Ministry in Beijing didn't immediately respond to an email and fax seeking comment on the status of the agreement and the talks. The South China Morning Post has learned that negotiators from both sides have met only once in the past 12 months, in November, after Beijing postponed discussions citing emergencies. A Beijing-based religious affairs researcher said China was moving slowly because "the Cold War mentality still looms large in its strategic thinking" but said the Chinese leadership did have an interest in building ties with the Vatican because of its relations with Taiwan. "To China, the Vatican is a hot potato. On one hand, China wishes to sever Taiwan's only European ally by building diplomatic ties with the Vatican, but the Vatican is not like Taiwan's other allies that will succumb to chequebook diplomacy," said the researcher, who asked not to be named because of the sensitivity of the matter. "And yet, Beijing is reluctant to move quickly ahead with the Vatican as it might trigger growth of

religious believers, which is not aligned to the interest of the mainland government.”Pope Francis has faced criticism within the church – including from two of his own cardinals – for sharing authority with a communist state. The attacks have included accusations of “selling out” the Chinese underground clergy, many of whom served jail terms for remaining loyal to Rome.Church followers are still subject to arrest and persecution in China. Underground bishop Augustine Cui Tai, of Xuanhua diocese of Hebei province in northern China, has not been seen since he was arrested last month. Another underground bishop, James Su Zhimin from Baoding diocese, also in Hebei, disappeared more than 20 years ago. Shanghai bishop Thaddeus Ma Daqin remains under partial house arrest in the city’s Sheshan Seminary.At the same time, Chinese authorities have acted to contain the growth in numbers of religious believers by banning minors from attending church services. Religious symbols over churches as well as mosques have been demolished or removed.A source said the Vatican had adopted a quiet approach to avoid confrontation with China, as it would only trigger a harsher response resulting in more sufferings for mainland Catholics. The Vatican “has not forgotten” those that face persecution and their names are brought up in talks with Beijing, the source said.Francesco Sisci, an Italian sinologist with Renmin University of China, said global conservatives were also calling on the Pope to stand up to China on other religious and human rights abuses, including the treatment of Muslim Uyghur people in Xinjiang province. “For the Vatican, issues with China are not just bilateral but multilateral. There are lots of forces pulling the Holy See in all sorts of directions so things might snap at any given time,” Sisci said. “Beijing should not underestimate the value of friendship with the Vatican, especially in a time like this and should step up its game [by following through with the agreement],” he added.In addition to the Covid-19 pandemic and its economic disruption, China faces a chorus of international criticism for weaponising its trading clout, ignoring complaints of its Asian neighbours over the building of military facilities on disputed islands in the South China Sea, and for imposing a national security law on Hong Kong to curb dissent.Recognising the internal and external forces influencing Xi, Reardon said the Vatican would continue its low-key approach and avoid publicly criticising Beijing. “They are working behind the scenes to limit the party-state's crackdown on the unofficial church,” the University of New Hampshire expert said.The Pope allows vocal critics, such as retired Cardinal Joseph Zen Ze-kium from Hong Kong and Myanmar's Cardinal Charles Maung Bo to “make the world aware of the pernicious nature of the party-state and exert external pressure on the Chinese party-state”, he said.“With the power of the Pope, he can stop Zen anytime he wants to, but he hasn't done that because his criticism is important. It serves him [by telling Beijing] you can have Zen or you can have me, who do you want to deal with? I think this is the way the church is trying to tell the official Chinese church that we are one family and we need to work together.”

4. Delicate Vatican-China pact negotiations likely next month

29th June 2020

Delicate Vatican-China pact negotiations likely next month

Church's involvement in Hong Kong's pro-democracy movement is considered a 'challenging factor' in the talks

UCA News reporter, Hong Kong

As the two-year agreement between the Vatican and China on the appointment of bishops expires in September, officials of the Catholic Church and the Chinese Communist Party are to meet in July to discuss its renewal, a top church official said.

The agreement signed on Sept. 22, 2018, was considered a breakthrough as it was the first joint agreement in almost seven decades after the Vatican and China severed diplomatic relations in 1951.

"China believes that the provisional agreement should be continued. The two sides will start negotiations on a renewal of the agreement in July," said a top-ranking church official who declined to be named.

"The two sides should meet. It should take place in Rome. July is very realistic and possible."

Since the last such meeting took place in Beijing last July, "it is logical that the next talks could take place in Rome in July," he explained.

He said China preferred to keep the agreement secret and for two years, so it should remain that way.

He said China would benefit the most if the agreement were to continue because "it would help its international reputation. For the Church, the only issue is the illegal appointment of bishops, which divides the Church."

The deal agreed to appoint bishops by mutual consultation and agreement. "But this has not happened since the agreement. The bishops currently consecrated were all bishops appointed before the agreement," the source said.

The source also said that China-Vatican relations are "not as good as people think. China did not call Pope Francis when it invited some other national leaders to support its fight against the epidemic" of Covid-19.

Agreement excludes Hong Kong, Macau

The China-Vatican agreement does not include the appointment of bishops in Hong Kong and Macau, two former colonies that have become autonomous administrative regions under China.

Hong Kong Diocese was without a bishop for more 17 months after the death of Bishop Michael Yeung Ming-cheung on Jan. 3, 2019.

But the agreement only deals with mainland China and has nothing to do with Hong Kong and Macau, said Cardinal John Tong, Hong Kong's present apostolic administrator.

The Vatican appointed Cardinal Tong, former bishop of Hong Kong, as apostolic administrator on Jan. 5, 2019, just two days after the death of Bishop Yeung.

Church laws allow the college of consultors in each diocese to elect a diocesan administrator to temporarily govern the diocese within eight days of the death of its bishop. The Vatican did not wait for this to happen in the case of Hong Kong in 2019.

In June last year, the Vatican completed a consultation on a bishop's choice but did not appoint a bishop.

The selection of a bishop for Hong Kong was already well advanced before the pro-democracy movement started last June. The Chinese administration sees the campaign as a rebellion against the mainland, the source said.

Division in Hong Kong Church

With some clerics including Auxiliary Bishop Joseph Ha and Cardinal Joseph Zen openly supporting the pro-democracy movement, the Church in Hong Kong is divided into pro-government and anti-government factions.

The Vatican had already decided on a bishop but had to change its mind in view of the changed situation. "The Vatican is waiting for the right opportunity to announce the new bishop of Hong Kong," the church source said.

He said if the pope appoints someone supportive of the pro-democracy movement, the Vatican will be accused of being at war with China. In the other scenario, the Vatican will be projected as being afraid of Beijing. "It is a critical decision," he said.

In the interests of the Hong Kong Church, the churchmen should not plunge the territory into a political crisis.

A church observer who asked not to be named said that although the Vatican-China agreement does not include Hong Kong, the Church's involvement in the pro-democracy movement will be a "challenging factor" in the upcoming negotiations.

"If Hong Kong is not a factor in negotiations, why was the Vatican in such a hurry when Bishop Yeung died? It even interfered with the diocese's legal right to elect its administrator," noted the church observer

He said the Vatican did not anticipate the death of Bishop Yeung, the pro-democracy movement and the change in international diplomacy towards China in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic.

"Under the changed circumstances, it is understandable that the pope should change his

preferred candidate. The new candidate should be a person to end the division within the Diocese of Hong Kong gradually," the observer said.

End