

VATICAN-CHINA UPDATE

May 2020

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1. The Donatist Temptation: A controversy in Catholic China

5th May 2020

By: Benoit Vermander, SJ

The Peace of Maxentius in 307 and the consequent official cessation of persecution led to a violent conflict in the Church. Led by Bishop Donatus, the “pure ones” refused the re-admission of the “traitors” (those who had handed over their sacred books and vessels) and the “lapsed” (those who had “fallen” during the persecution, beginning with the bishops). They wanted in particular to forbid them any priestly function. In various forms, the conflict lasted until the sixth century.[1] One of the greatest adversaries of Donatism – a movement which, because of its need for purity, was soon marked by all kinds of excesses – was Augustine. Several traits of Donatism were already present at the end of the 2nd century and at the beginning of the 3rd in the Montanist movement, to which Tertullian adhered for a certain period.

Today, the climate, both social and ecclesial, sometimes leads to hasty and intransigent judgments, so much so that we should pause for a moment to appreciate the meaning and scope of the decisive position taken then by the Church, through which the repentance expressed by those who had lapsed allowed their reintegration. Above all, the Church can never consider herself composed only of “saints,” excluding those who would not be judged to be so.

The situation in China today differs in many aspects from that of the 4th century. But it also presents some analogies: some like to pit those who are considered traitors against the pure, who always reject and will always reject any compromise. The motivations of those who engage in dialogue with the authorities are systematically viewed with suspicion. In some writings one even feels the fascination with “martyrdom,” which often seems less tied to sweetness and love than to the cursing of the adversary. Already in the Montanist and Donatist movements, the theme of “martyrdom” seemed to evoke that of “holy war,” to such an extent that the fascination with violence could pervert the most venerable of causes.

‘Semper reformanda’

On September 22, 2018, the Holy See announced that it had signed a Provisional Agreement with the Chinese government. It concerned a mechanism for agreement on the appointment of future bishops, the exact content of which was not revealed. This Agreement came at a time when the Chinese government was tightening its policy of Sinicization of religions.[2] But it was also part of an ecclesial context in China, which many have been slow to understand. This is a context formed over the last two or three decades by sociological and cultural factors, and not only, nor above all, political ones. The number of Catholics in China reached a peak of 12 million in 2005; it has stabilized in recent years and is now falling. Anthony Lam estimates that the total Catholic population is about 10.5 million. Moreover, between 1996 and 2014, again according to Lam’s estimates, the number of male vocations declined from 2,300 to 1,260, while that of female vocations from 2,500 to 156. The number of ordinations fell from 134 in 2000 to 78 in 2014 (66 in 2013).[3] The transition from a Catholicism “of the fields” to a Catholicism “of the cities” partly explains this phenomenon, which also gives rise to new data about Christian numbers.[4]

On September 26, 2018, four days after the announcement of the Agreement, the “Message of the Holy Father Francis to Chinese Catholics and the universal Church” was made public.[5] It is worth remembering some points here.

Reconciliation. “I have determined to grant reconciliation to the remaining seven ‘official’ bishops, ordained without papal mandate and, having lifted every relevant canonical sanction, to readmit them to full ecclesial communion. At the same time, I ask them to express with concrete and visible gestures their restored unity with the Apostolic See and with the Churches spread throughout the world, and to remain faithful despite any difficulties” (No. 3).

Pragmatism and rejection of over-politicization. “An Agreement is merely an instrument, and not of itself capable of resolving all existing problems” (No. 5).

Encouragement not to become closed up in a ghetto. “On the civil and political

level, Chinese Catholics must be good citizens, loving their homeland and serving their country with diligence and honesty, to the best of their ability. On the ethical level, they should be aware that many of their fellow citizens expect from them a greater commitment to the service of the common good and the harmonious growth of society as a whole. In particular, Catholics ought to make a prophetic and constructive contribution, born of their faith in the kingdom of God. At times, this may also require of them the effort to offer a word of criticism, not out of sterile opposition, but for the sake of building a society that is more just, humane and respectful of the dignity of each person” (No. 6).

Specific encouragement to young Chinese Catholics. “Let yourselves be surprised by the renewing power of grace, even when it may seem that the Lord is asking more of you than you think you can give. Do not be afraid to listen to his voice as he calls you to fraternity, encounter, capacity for dialogue and forgiveness, and a spirit of service, regardless of the painful experiences of the recent past and wounds not yet healed. Open your hearts and minds to discern the merciful plan of God, who asks us to rise above personal prejudices and conflicts between groups and communities, in order to undertake a courageous fraternal journey in the light of an authentic culture of encounter” (No. 8).

Nothing in this Message indicates that Francis lives under any illusions. He recognizes the Chinese state as a sovereign state, a source of uncontested law, both in the eyes of the international community and those of its citizens. This point should be obvious, and it remains independent of the moral and political judgments that can be made on the mechanisms by which this state exercises its sovereignty, and, in particular, on its constitution as a Party-State. It is with this state, as with any other state, that the Church is obliged to dialogue, both on questions concerning the status of its faithful and its institutions and on those concerning the future of the international community. It is also within this state that Christians live their faith and exercise their capacity for individual and community discernment.

The same spirit can be found in the “Pastoral guidelines of the Holy See on the civil registration of clergy in China,” made public by the Holy See Press Room on June 28, 2019. They concern above all the situation of priests and bishops, until now “underground,” who decide to register themselves civilly to facilitate the reunification of the Church in China, but who come up against ambiguous or unacceptable requirements. In such a case, the signatory “will specify in writing, upon signing, that he acts without failing in his duty to remain faithful to the principles of Catholic doctrine. Where it is not possible to make such a clarification in writing, the applicant will do so at least orally and if possible in the presence of a witness. In each case, it is appropriate that the applicant then certify to his proper Ordinary with what intention he has made the registration. The registration, in fact, is always to be understood as having the sole aim of fostering the good of the diocesan community and its growth in the spirit of unity, as well as an evangelization commensurate

to the new demands of Chinese society and the responsible management of the goods of the Church. At the same time, the Holy See understands and respects the choice of those who, in conscience, decide that they are unable to register under the current conditions.”[6]

Priority given to the good of communities – the pastors are there to protect them and help them grow in faith – and discernment carried out with respect for people and the diversity of situations are two elements in line with an ecclesiological and moral tradition that is likely to receive unanimous consent.

Recurring criticisms

And yet there is not universal assent. Civil registration, according to Cardinal Joseph Zen, “encourages the faithful in China to enter a schismatic Church, one that is independent of the pope and under the orders of the Chinese Communist Party.” All the orders of the CCP must necessarily be respected, “including the prohibition of minors under 18 years of age participating in any religious activity.” The cardinal fears that these “pastoral guidelines” will be “radically reversed” by Beijing, so that “what is normal becomes abnormal, what is legitimate becomes tolerated.”[7]

The criticisms made by Cardinal Zen not only reiterate those he has expressed on several occasions, but are added to others, such as, for example, those of Bernardo Cervellera: “For several official and underground priests, the document is ‘ambiguous,’ because it allows everyone to decide on their own, without indicating any *regula fidei*. [...] The silence on the part of the Vatican and the world Church about persecution, destruction and prohibitions confirms Beijing in its vision: the Chinese Church is a national Church that belongs only to the State.”[8] Sister Beatrice Leung pointed out that “the agreement [of September 22, 2018] has served the Catholic cause to a very small degree, but it has helped the policy of the sinicization of religions pursued by Xi Jinping.”[9]

Sometimes it happens that the criticisms expressed against the Agreement become much more violent, especially when they are supported by websites specializing in a systematic disapproval of the ecclesial orientations promoted by Pope Francis. Then a rhetoric develops according to which the Chinese policy of the Holy See contributes, along with other factors (the encyclical *Amoris Laetitia*, the Synod for the Amazon, etc.), to a “destruction” of Tradition and its principles. It should also be noted that, unfortunately, groups that support such opposition do not hesitate to spread it in China itself, and the Church in China (already tested enough) becomes the stakes in a similar battlefield. It is like a billiard table on which the “China” ball is targeted to get a better hit on the “Rome” ball.

Living Christian resilience in everyday patience

The analyses conducted by Cardinal Zen and Bernardo Cervellera have a good grasp of the objective pursued by the Party-State from the years 2015-2017[10]: to make all the communities of believers of “national” religions subordinate to a “civil religion,” for which the Party tries – not without great difficulty – to elaborate the content and ritual expressions.[11] This objective takes the form of restrictions that are progressively widening, although their nature and application continue to differ in some degree from one place to another.

Nevertheless, some obvious facts must be reported:

– However restrictive the legal framework in which religions develop, and however ideologically charged the requirements may be, it certainly does not require apostasy, and Article 36 of the Chinese Constitution continues to formally guarantee religious freedom. The current era cannot be identified with that of the Cultural Revolution, although the endorsement that some recent official speeches seem to show toward that era is worrying.

– The desire to make religions docile collaborators with the “civil religion” that the Party tries at all costs to build extends to all religions and also to all expressions of civil society. With respect to the pressure exerted on the governing bodies of Chinese Protestantism, one can even think that the Catholic Church is – for the moment – relatively spared following the Agreement of September 2018.

– The vast majority of Chinese Catholics today were born under the current government and know how to interpret its rhetoric: they know how to listen to it at a critical distance, like many of their fellow citizens. Whether they have converted or persevered in their faith, Chinese Catholics distinguish things; they “adapt” to the system; in short, they know how to carry out a daily discernment, which no one is authorized to operate in their place.

– Finally, the love for the country is as strong among Chinese Catholics as among their fellow citizens, and this sentiment requires them to adopt a responsible and prudent attitude rather than hastily resorting to intransigence, which is an attitude that would soon lead them to isolation, to being marginalized by the wider nation.

What we are witnessing, particularly in Shanghai,[12] is the resilience of living official parishes, which attract a regular number of catechumens, who often contribute actively to parish life after baptism. The lay groups in charge of the functioning of the parish – 12 groups in a medium-sized parish – provide reading services, musical entertainment, the welcoming of newcomers and formation. They are often carried out with greater care than what is offered by Western parishes of the same size. The priests in office must regularly participate in “training courses” organized by the Office for Religious Affairs, but they do so in the knowledge that they are safeguarding the existence of their community. They feel that so far they have not had to carry out morally

reprehensible acts, and they are ready to make a discernment if they are asked to do things beyond a certain threshold. Here we find that aim which the already mentioned Pastoral Guidelines of June 2019 explicitly proposed: “To promote the good of the diocesan community and its growth in the spirit of unity, as well as an evangelization adapted to the new needs of Chinese society and the responsible management of the goods of the Church.”

Should Christians – starting with the converts who have found a parish that has welcomed them and where their path has matured to baptism – decide to abandon the place of their ecclesial roots in order to fulfill the obligations established in New York, Hong Kong or Rome? Are they not able to make for themselves a discernment between situations that allows them to exist as open communities and other cases (if and when they arise) in which a drastic decision should absolutely be taken?

It seems to us that many of the critics of a Vatican policy that seeks above all to “promote the good and growth of communities” are “over-politicizing” what is at stake. Some speeches make one think of the French “emigrants” forced to take refuge outside France during and after the French Revolution: speeches characterized by a continuous overstating of the situation making things worse. Very often one gets the impression that those who dedicate themselves to such “heroic” speeches in fact subordinate the good of Christians to the unconfessed goal of attacking the Party-State, thus involving Chinese Christians in a struggle that is not theirs. It is necessary to let these Chinese communities live according to their own characteristics, in their own context, the daily encounter with Jesus Christ. We must recognize that they carry their cross and will continue to carry it, without having to seek martyrdom at all costs, in the way Poliuoto sought it.[13] It is deeply irresponsible to want to take them on the path of direct confrontation, all the more so when one does not live among them.

* * *

In his spiritual testament, made public sometime after his death, Cuban Cardinal Jaime Ortega y Alamino expressed a certain bitterness in the face of “criticism, attacks and misunderstandings from Cuban brothers living abroad.”[14] This resentment toward Chinese ecclesiastical leaders is sometimes perceptible. It is true that it is often very difficult to discern, but when the difficulty increases, it is good to reread the parable of the weeds (cf. Matt 13:24-30). One can never be mistaken if one chooses not to cut down life at the root, if one chooses to let the wheat and weeds grow together. One can never be mistaken if one remembers that he who judges will be judged in turn.

The letter sent by Cardinal Giovanni Battista Re, Dean of the College of Cardinals

Vatican, February 26, 2020

Prot. N. 1/2020

Dear Cardinals,

With reference to the various public interventions of Cardinal Joseph Zen Ze-kun, S.D.B., and in particular to the letter of September 27, 2019, which the

Bishop Emeritus of Hong Kong sent to us members of the College of Cardinals, I feel it is my duty to share some considerations and to offer elements that will facilitate a serene evaluation of the complex issues concerning the Church in China.

I wish first of all to point out that, in the approach to the situation of the Catholic Church in China, there is a profound harmony of thought and action on the part of the last three pontiffs. With respect for the truth they have fostered dialogue between the two sides, and not opposition. In particular, they had in mind the delicate and important question of the nomination of bishops.

Thus St. John Paul II, while on the one hand he favored the return to full communion of bishops illegally consecrated over the years since 1958, and at the same time it was his desire to support the life of “clandestine” communities led by “unofficial” bishops and priests, on the other hand he promoted the idea of reaching a formal agreement with government authorities on the nomination of bishops. This Agreement, the drafting of which took more than twenty years, was then signed in Beijing on September 22, 2018.

Cardinal Zen several times said that no accord would be better than a bad accord. The last three pontiffs did not share this position and supported and accompanied the drafting of the Agreement, which seemed the only one possible at the current time.

In particular, the cardinal’s statement that “the agreement signed is the same one that Pope Benedict had, at the time, refused to sign” is surprising. That assertion does not correspond to the truth. After personally researching the documents in the Current Archive of the Secretariat of State, I am able to assure Your Eminences that Pope Benedict XVI had approved the draft Agreement on the appointment of bishops in China, which could only be signed in 2018.

The Agreement provides for the intervention of the pope’s authority in the process of appointing bishops in China. Also starting from this certain fact, the expression “independent Church” can no longer be interpreted absolutely as “separation” from the pope, as was the case in the past.

Unfortunately, on the ground there is slowness in articulating all the consequences from this epochal change both on the doctrinal and practical level and tensions and painful situations remain. It is unthinkable, moreover, that a partial Agreement – the Agreement addresses, in fact, only the theme of the nomination of bishops – changes things almost automatically and immediately in other aspects of the life of the Church.

Cardinal Zen, evaluating the “Pastoral Guidelines of the Holy See regarding the civil registration of the Clergy in China” dated June 28, 2019, writes: “A text against the faith is signed and it is declared that the intention is to promote the good of the community, a more appropriate evangelization, the responsible management of the goods of the Church. This general rule is obviously against any principle of morality. If accepted, it would justify apostasy” (see *Dubia*). The Pastoral Guidelines, on the contrary, have been designed precisely to safeguard the faith in situations so complicated and difficult as to put personal conscience in crisis.

In his letter the Cardinal also speaks of the “killing of the Church in China by those who should protect it and defend it from enemies” and, in particular, in an interview, he addresses Catholics in these words: “Wait for better times, go back to the catacombs, communism is not eternal” (*New York Times*, October 24, 2018). These are, unfortunately, very controversial statements that challenge the Holy Father’s own pastoral guidance also to “clandestine” Catholics, despite the fact that the pope listened repeatedly to the Cardinal and read his many missives.

Dear brother cardinals, Cardinal Zen’s painful intervention helps us to understand how difficult the path of the Church in China still is, and how complex is the mission of the Pastors and the Holy Father! We are, therefore, all called to unite ourselves closely to him and to pray intensely so that the Holy Spirit may sustain the communities of the Catholic Church in China, which, even in suffering for a long time, show their fidelity to the Lord, on the path of reconciliation, unity and mission at the service of the Gospel.

Sending you all my best wishes, I cordially greet you.

Cardinal Re

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[1] On the risks of a possible neo-Donatist drift, cf. A. Gonçalves Lind, “The Benedict Option. What is the role for Christians in society today?” laciviltacattolica.com/the-benedict-option/

[2] See B. Vermander, “Sinicizing Religions, Sinicizing Religious Studies” in

Religions 10 (2019) 1-23; Id., “Making Christianity More Chinese?” in Civ. Catt. Eng. Ed. May iaciviltacattolica.com/making-christianity-more-chinese-pastoral-perspectives/

[3] Cf. A. Lam Sui-key, “The decline of China’s Catholic population and its impact on the Church” in AsiaNews.it, August 23, 2016 (www.asianews.it/news-en/The-decline-of-China’s-Catholic-population-and-its-impact-on-the-Church-38373.html). Cf. I. Johnson, “How the top-heavy Catholic Church is losing the ground game in China” in America, September 18, 2017.

[4] City dwellers accounted for 12% of the Chinese population in 1950, 20% in 1978, 52% in 2012, and over 60% in 2019.

[5] Francis, “Message to Chinese Catholics and the Universal Church,” September 26, 2018.

[6] “Pastoral guidelines of the Holy See on the civil registration of clergy in China” June 28, 2019.

[7] “Letter of September 27, 2019, sent by Cardinal Joseph Zen Ze-kium, Bishop Emeritus of Hong Kong, to all the members of the College of Cardinals”, quoted in C. Lesegretain (with CNA, Ucanews), “Polémique autour d’une lettre du cardinal chinois Zen”, in La Croix, January 9, 2020. We have included the text of the letter sent by Cardinal Giovanni Battista Re, Dean of the College of Cardinals, to all the cardinals at the end of this article

[8] B. Cervellera, “Religious policy in China before and after the Sino-Vatican agreement” in AsiaNews.it, September 12, 2019.

[9] B. Leung, “The Catholic Church in China: One Year After the Sino-Vatican Agreement” November 26, 2019, Georgetown University – Berkley Center (<https://berkeleycenter.georgetown.edu/responses/the-catholic-church-in-china-one-year-after-the-sino-vatican-agreement>).

[10] It should be noted that this is clearly a change of direction from the policy pursued between 1982 and 2012.

[11] Cf. B. Vermander, “Le rêve chinois de religion civile” in Esprit, n. 451, 2019, 171-182.

[12] Although, in this diocese, the bishop is no longer able to exercise his office normally since July 2012.

[13] He is the protagonist of the tragedy of the same name, written by Pierre Corneille in 1641.

[14] J. Ortega y Alamino, “Todo es nada, solo Dios” in Palabra Nueva, January

23, 2020 (<http://palabranueva.net/new/gracias-jesus-mio>).

<https://www.laciviltacattolica.com/the-donatist-temptation-a-controversy-in-the-chinese-church/>

2. The Vatican and the post-pandemic world order

29th April 2020

The Vatican and the post-pandemic world order

Massimo Faggioli looks at the Holy See's changing relationship with Europe, the United States and China

By: Massimo Faggioli
United States

The COVID-19 pandemic will have an impact on the world order and international relations, and of course also on the Catholic Church.

The papacy stands out as a global reference point. That's partly because most world leaders have lost credibility.

But it's also because Pope Francis, from the very beginning of his pontificate, has continually **articulated the vision** of the one human family in this one world: a world made of borders that can become thresholds for new human relations.

Papal teaching in recent years has paved the way for a "global peace process" – from *Laudato Si'* (the 2015 encyclical on care for our common home) to the Document on Human Fraternity (co-signed by Francis and the Grand Imam of Al-Azhar, Ahmad Al-Tayyeb, in Abu Dhabi on 4 February 2019).

The letter and spirit of these extraordinary texts could not be more visibly different from the policies of the strongmen that currently lead governments in places like the United States, Russia, India, Turkey and Brazil.

Post-pandemic world: speed bump or major detour?

We don't know what will happen to the world order once the pandemic is over. The end of this global crisis could be a speed bump or a major detour.

But it will probably look less like the global recession of 2008 and more like the year 1919 – opening to a new world order with very different consequences in different countries.

In Italy it meant the rise of Fascist rule between 1922-1925 and for two decades until the end of World War II. On the other hand, Benedict XV articulated a new Catholic doctrine on the missions with his 1919 encyclical *Maximum Illud*. This staked out the Catholic Church's independence from nationalist and colonialist enterprises.

The 1920s also marked an acceleration of the Catholic tradition of favoring multilateralism. For all the uncertainties, we know where the backbone of contemporary Catholic teaching stands on human rights, migration, the economy, globalization and the environment.

The pope's analysis is right

We can already see that the global health crisis has confirmed Pope Francis' interpretation of our times as a disruption of globalization. There is an undeniable crisis of multilateral institutions.

As Gaidz Minassian and Marc Semo wrote in [Le Monde](#) recently, this crisis is "old, profound, and by now more evident than ever".

There are different ways of looking at the consequences of the pandemic on the world order. Some see this moment as a crisis of internationalism in terms of trying to stop globalization as the path to prosperity.

"The pandemic has prompted an anachronism, a revival of the walled city in an age when prosperity depends on global trade and movement of people. The world's democracies need to defend and sustain their Enlightenment values," wrote former US Secretary of State, Henry Kissinger, in a [Wall Street Journal](#) op-ed.

Others say we are [witnessing a threat](#) to the liberal democratic model, given "the triumph of non-individualist democracies in Asia". It is a threat that is also looming in some countries of Europe.

Crisis of US leadership in the world

However one sees it, the pandemic certainly could accelerate shifts in the balance of power in particular parts of the world.

The biggest question concerns relations between and among Europe, the United States and China. The Vatican has already had to significantly adapt its geopolitical posture towards three entities over past several years, especially after Trump's election and thanks to the epoch-making agreement between the Holy See and the Chinese government on the appointment of bishops of September 2018.

There is no question that the response to the pandemic has deepened the crisis of American leadership in the world. The United States' legitimacy as a global leader has always been based on stable domestic governance, the provision of global public goods and the ability (and willingness) to coordinate a global response to crises.

"The coronavirus pandemic is testing all three elements of US leadership. So far, Washington is failing the test," said two US-based experts on Asia in a recent essay in [Foreign Affairs](#).

The future shape of Europe

On the other side of the Atlantic, the European Union stands at a crucial moment for its survival. In a similar way, a number of countries on the Old Continent that are vital to the Catholic Church are at a turning point.

Germany, for example, will soon see the retirement of Angela Merkel and the possible rise of a very different kind of Christian-Democratic party leader, such as [Friedrich Merz](#). This would put Europe's most powerful nation on a much more conservative path.

And what will happen in Asia?

"COVID-19 will also accelerate the shift in power and influence from West to East," wrote **Stephen Walt** in the magazine Foreign Policy.

"South Korea and Singapore have responded best, and China has reacted well after its early mistakes. The response in Europe and America has been slow and haphazard by comparison, further tarnishing the aura of the Western 'brand'," he said.

Some **experts predict** that the handling of the pandemic could be the beginning of an upheaval for Communist China.

The Catholic Church is watching with great concern the role China is forging in international relations.

The Holy See and China's charm offensive

Beijing has conducted a very **aggressive soft power campaign** that has divided Europe.

Eastern European countries (both members and non-members of the EU) have begun embracing Chinese leadership as they **began receiving aid** from the Chinese government.

What has been the Holy See's response to this very rapidly shifting situation? At first glance it would appear that it is reacting favorably to Chinese charm similarly to the way some European countries (including Italy) have.

But looking more carefully, one detects a much more nuanced and subtle approach. Vatican statements thanking China in early April for sending aid and supplies to fight the coronavirus are a case in point.

In the pages of **L'Osservatore Romano and communiqués** issued from the Holy See Press Office, the Vatican specifically expressed thanks to "the Red Cross Society of China and the Hebei Jinde Charities Foundation", as well as to "the bishops, the Catholic faithful, the institutions and all other Chinese citizens". The wordsmithing effort was clearly aimed at avoiding any interpretation of the Vatican's statement of gratitude as an endorsement of Beijing.

This approach is also meant to counterbalance the views of some prominent Catholics around the world who see the role of China in a much more negative way. Myanmar's **Cardinal Charles Bo**, for instance, took a very different and very strong public stance against the Chinese regime by connecting its handling of the pandemic to its record on human rights and religious liberty.

A Latin American pope gives a boost to Europe

Most importantly, the Vatican has not followed the same path of other Western countries in their retreat into a provincialism and parochialism, which are part of the intellectual collapse of the political elites.

Quite the opposite.

Francis has invested more energy and attention in Vatican diplomacy. He has put forth a new model for **training future papal diplomats** and has instituted a "third section" within the Secretariat of State explicitly dealing with papal nuncios. If the pandemic has temporarily reduced the functioning of Vatican offices in the Vatican, including the Secretariat of State,

there are changes that prepare the future.

In the last few weeks, the pope and his Vatican aides have focused on the European Union.

"Among the many areas of the world affected by the coronavirus, I think in a special way of Europe," Francis said during his Easter **Urbi et Orbi** address.

"The European Union is presently facing an epochal challenge, on which will depend not only its future but that of the whole world," he warned.

Francis is talking more directly to Europe than he possibly could to the United States or China. It is striking that under the Latin American pope's leadership, the Holy See has rediscovered the European Union's importance and need for survival.

Further evidence of Francis' focus on the Old Continent during the pandemic was his prayer for European unity at the Mass in Santa Marta on April 29, Feast of St. Catherine of Sienna, a co-patroness of Europe.

This new attentiveness comes after years of Vatican-led skepticism towards European institutions that were perceived as technocratic and secularist.

Catholic social teaching and the post-COVID 19 world

The coronavirus pandemic is raising questions on the viability of a set of political ideas and values that have shaped the international order in the post-1945 world.

Regarding the Catholic Church's teaching and understanding of humanity, some of them are no-brainers.

They include an espousal of multilateralism over nationalism; belief that constitutional democracy, rather than dictatorship and authoritarianism, is more compatible with the Gospel; and a commitment to the Church's work for peace and disarmament, as well as international social and economic justice, in the framework of a culture of life.

On other issues, the Vatican's posture will be more difficult to predict.

The post-1945 alignment between Catholicism and the geopolitics of NATO has been radically thrown into question by the aftermath of 9/11 and, lately, by the Trump administration.

It's still not clear what the import of the Holy See's diplomatic opening up to China will mean in the long run. And it faces other challenges in how to deal with the new ideological splits between Eastern and Western Europe.

Compared to previous pandemics, religious liberty has become an emerging issue for the Catholic Church in some countries not really affected by the culture wars. In Italy, for example, there have been **unprecedented tensions** between the bishops' conference and the national government.

The pandemic has created a situation of great uncertainty in international relations. And the papacy and Vatican diplomacy have to navigate this.

The difference is that Catholicism does not suffer from the same uncertainty in terms of doctrine: there is no real vacuum in how the Church's magisterium looks at the modern global world.

It is a doctrine that was tempered by a series of historical shocks that had consequence on

theological and magisterial development: the fall of the Papal States in 1870; the two world wars and their aftermath; the illusion of an unquestionable liberal world order at the end of the Cold War; the post-9/11 instability...

Compared to the ideological life rafts that dot today's horizon, the Barque of Peter has greater stability. The big question is how much sound Vatican social doctrine will be able to influence Catholics in their own local and national contexts.

Follow me on Twitter @MassimoFaggioli.

3. Sino-Vatican interaction in the midst of Covid-19 coronavirus

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Sunday Examiner - Hong Kong

<http://www.examiner.org.hk/>

Sino-Vatican interaction in the midst of Covid-19 coronavirus

By: John Cardinal Tong Hon

The pandemic segregates and locks down the world

Since late 2019, the Covid-19 coronavirus has started to manifest itself in certain people, upsetting their health and rhythm of life. Initially, many thought that this was merely a problem for certain regions of China, and given that it was still too remote, it could not affect their whereabouts and lives, and was no cause of concern and worry for them.

Nevertheless, it turned out that utterly beyond any anticipation, many areas of the world witnessed a massive and extensive outbreak of this virus, wave after wave, infecting almost two-and-a-half million people and claiming swiftly and unexpectedly the lives of over 169,000 people.

This has caught the great majority of the countries across the globe unaware and left them stunned, perplexed and at a loss.

In great panic and totally unprepared, they hastily made an official declaration of a state of national emergency issuing bans on entertainment, social gatherings, lockdowns on roads, cities and countries.

All of a sudden, the lives of the majority of people in the world seemed to have become stagnant, with cities, roads and streets heavily enshrouded in a deadly silence.

The Covid-19 coronavirus is just reminding us once again that the interdependency of human beings is a fundamental truth. This pandemic does not favour any particular group, race, social strata, sex or nationality in this world. Therefore, it is actually a problem of all humankind.

If we do not join forces and cooperate to combat and defeat it while it is raging and devastating a certain place, nation or country, but instead stay indifferent and remain inactive, gloat or even further exacerbate the situation by giving the victim a further kick, this virus will ultimately shatter and destroy the health of all humankind.

How should Christians face the Covid-19 pandemic?

How should we, as Christians, face the Covid-19 pandemic? The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World of the Second Vatican Council pointed out that the mission of the Catholic Church in the contemporary era is: “Drawn from the treasures of Church teaching, the proposals of this sacred synod look to the assistance of every man of our time, whether he believes in God, or does not explicitly recognise him. If adopted, the proposals will promote among men a sharper insight into their full destiny, and thereby lead them to fashion the world more to man’s surpassing dignity, to search for a brotherhood which is universal and more deeply rooted, and to meet the urgencies of our age with a gallant and unified effort born of love” (n. 91).

If we seriously fulfill the above-mentioned mission in our life, it is by no means difficult for us to find that faith demands us to combat the pandemic with concerted efforts, demonstrating the spirit of unity of mankind amidst distress.

The Holy Bible tells us “God is love” (1 John 4:8, 16). The Son of God was begotten of the Father in love, and the Holy Spirit proceeds from the Father and the Son also in love. The Holy Trinity is therefore one being of love.

In the beginning, God said, “Let us make humankind in our image, according to our likeness” (Genesis 1:26). Humans share the quality of God’s love. As “it is not good that man should be alone,” God therefore made “him a helper as his partner” (Genesis 2:18).

However, God did not use dust from another piece of ground to create another new man, but man’s rib. When man saw this newly-created woman, he exclaimed in jubilation: “This at last is bone of my bone, and flesh of my flesh.” Hence in God’s concept of creation, man should be mutually dependent in love (cf Genesis 2:18, 23).

Although sin jeopardises the interrelationship among human beings and causes a rift in the human language, sin does not change God’s plan of creation. God, through Christ’s descent from heaven 2,000 years ago, deliberately taught the disciples and us a new commandment. “Love one another. Just as I have loved you, so you also should love one another” (John 13:34).

Sino-Vatican interaction amid Covid-19 pandemic

The end of last year saw the initial outbreak of Covid-19 in mainland China. After praying the Sunday Angelus in St. Peter's Square on 26 January 2020, Pope Francis said: "I wish to be close to and pray for the people who are sick because of the virus that has spread throughout China. May the Lord welcome the dead into His peace, comfort families and sustain the great commitment by the Chinese community that has already been put in place to combat the epidemic."

The concern expressed by Pope Francis about the Covid-19 coronavirus pandemic was not confined to praying for its victims and families during the Angelus, but he also put his prayers into action.

According to a press statement issued by the Holy See Press Office on 3 February 2020, "The Vatican sent hundreds of thousands of facemasks to China in an attempt to help stall the spread of the coronavirus. The masks have been sent to Hubei, Zhejiang and Fujian provinces, which appear to be the areas most affected by this virus."

Another press statement on 12 February 2020 specified that "it was a joint initiative of the Office of the Papal Almoner and the Missionary Centre of the Chinese Church in Italy, with the collaboration of the Vatican Pharmacy."

However, following the rapid spread of this pandemic across the globe to almost every corner of the world, confirmed cases were also reported in the Vatican. When confronted by this grossly severe pandemic, a considerable number of countries took the initiative to enlist China's assistance.

As a region recently reviving from the ravages of the Covid-19 pandemic, China previously benefitted from the aid of other countries. In honour of the communal spirit of human fate, China is certainly willing to share its experience and resources in battling against the pandemic.

Despite the absence of Sino-Vatican diplomatic ties, China has, however, donated health supplies to the Vatican Pharmacy through non-official associations such as the Red Cross Society and the Hebei Jinde Foundation.

This gesture is "an expression of the solidarity of the Chinese people and the Catholic Communities" and moving "towards those involved in both the prevention of the ongoing pandemic, as well as the relief of those who have been affected" (Holy See Press Office, 9 April 2020).

In view of this, the Director of the Holy See Press Office, Matteo Bruni, expressed gratitude to China in the following words: "The Holy See appreciates the generous gesture and expresses its gratitude to the Bishops, the Catholic faithful, the institutions and all the other Chinese citizens for this humanitarian initiative" and assured them of the Holy Father's esteem and prayers.

Love surpasses segregation

At the initial outbreak of Covid-19 in Wuhan, segregation was adopted as a policy measure

with a view to eradicating the transmission routes of the pandemic. However, it is love and support from sources far and near that ultimately defeat the pandemic. It is hard work under such a spirit of love that we have witnessed the gigantic transformation of the pandemic in our motherland, evolving from the initial outbreak towards recent easing off or even achieving control at gradual intervals.

At the moment, countries other than our motherland have seen the initial outbreak of the Covid-19 crisis. We have also witnessed the way in which China and the Vatican, reflecting the same spirit, surpass segregation in love, eliminate the differences in race, colour, culture, nation, religion and political ideologies, mutually support each other and with concerted efforts, eradicate the devastating impact of the pandemic on the entire human world.

Although the end of the pandemic has yet to be seen, reciprocal assistance attributed to interdependence among human beings is the only effective response to address the situation. Any deviation from this direction is absolutely not a good course to resolve the problem.

Hence, in this historical moment which sees the imperative need of mutual assistance on the part of mankind, we should discard all our selfishness and hypocrisy, and dedicate our heart and efforts to collaborate with the whole world to dismantle among ourselves all the restraints of races, cultures, colour and political ideologies.

It is only then that we can hand in hand stride towards unity and expedite the early advent of a new heaven and a new earth.

4. Vatican dismisses rumors of papal visit to China

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Vatican dismisses rumors of papal visit to China

Vatican press office says even planned papal visits are canceled and no new visits are planned
Vatican dismisses rumors of papal visit to China

UCA News reporter
China

A Vatican office has rejected media reports of a possible visit by Pope Francis to China this year, dismissing it as mere speculation "without any substance."

Chinese media have been discussing the possibility of such a visit after Italian political journal La Verita recently reported that Vatican Secretary of State Cardinal Pietro Parolin was secretly arranging a papal visit to China.

The newspaper said Pope Francis planned to visit Wuhan city first and then Beijing and other cities.

Wuhan, an industrial city in central China, hit the headlines after Covid-19 infections were first reported there last December before the coronavirus became a global pandemic by March.

The reports of a "hypothetical journey are devoid of any substance," the Vatican press office told UCA News in a brief message.

Even papal journeys that were already planned "were postponed because of the worldwide health emergency. No new journey, to any country, is currently being examined," the message said.

Pope Francis has expressed a desire to visit China several times. During a visit to Thailand and Japan last year, he expressed his wish to visit China, saying: "I love China."

Diplomatic sensitivity

Speculation about a papal visit has been getting a lot of traction from Catholics in mainland China. It has also aroused interest in Taiwan because of its fragile relations with both the Vatican and China.

China considers Taiwan as part of the People's Republic of China and does not recognize it as an independent nation. However, the Vatican is among some 18 countries that have diplomatic relations with Taiwan, recognizing it as a nation.

Taiwan's central news agency reported that the Taiwan embassy had checked with the Holy See about a possible papal visit and received a response that "the foreign ministry of the Vatican does not know about this arrangement."

Rumors of a papal visit to China pop up periodically. Such speculation emerged soon after Pope Benedict XVI took office in 2005. Three years later, there were still rumors that Benedict was planning to visit China on the eve of the Beijing Olympic Games.

The speculation this time, some observers note, could have something to do with the recently frequent interactions between Beijing officials and the Vatican.

The two sides signed a provisional agreement on the appointment of Chinese bishops in September 2018. In October of the same year, two mainland bishops were invited to the Vatican to attend the World Conference of Bishops, during which Pope Francis was invited to China.

On Feb. 14 this year, Vatican Secretary for Relations with States Archbishop Paul Gallagher met with Chinese Foreign Minister and State Counselor Wang Yi at the annual Munich Security Conference in Germany. Such a diplomatic meeting came after a gap of 70 years.

Wang described the meeting as "opening up greater scope for future exchanges between the two sides" and expressed his willingness to enhance understanding further and build up mutual trust with the Vatican.

Early this month, China sent medical donations to the Vatican through the Red Cross to help it fight the Covid-19 pandemic.

Matteo Bruni, director of the Holy See press office, thanked the "generous act" from China, saying that he felt "the care of the Chinese people and the Catholic community." He also "assured them of the reverence and prayers of the Holy Father."

The new speculation comes at a time when China's international image has been hit by allegations that it was responsible for the eruption of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Observers say the speculation about a papal visit could help China build up a positive image as a country ready to welcome arguably the world's most known religious leader and advocate of human freedom.

Ren Yanli, an expert on China-Vatican issues, said China had taken a clear stance on the diplomatic issue.

It wants the Vatican to break diplomatic ties with Taiwan and not to interfere in China's internal affairs in the name of religion.

"None of this can be resolved overnight. Therefore, the pope's visit to China is believed to be unlikely soon," Father Sui Feng, a mainland Catholic priest and church observer, told UCA News.

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