



## The Erosion of Church Authority The Vatican's Ominous Negotiations with Communist China

A Chinese state-run newspaper, the *Global Times*, reported in late January that the Vatican and China will soon establish formal diplomatic relations. Critical to current negotiations is whether the one-party Chinese government will have input on future appointment of bishops in a unified church merging the Vatican-recognized “underground” Catholic Church and the government-sponsored Catholic Patriotic Association. This announcement of an impending accord was preceded in December by a request of the Vatican for two underground bishops to surrender their positions to individuals approved by the Chinese government. Then, on February 1, the *Wall Street Journal* reported that Pope Francis has decided to accept the legitimacy of seven Catholic bishops appointed by the Chinese government.

These steps by the Vatican show that Pope Francis seeks to placate the Chinese Communist government in extraordinary ways to ensure a diplomatic accord between Rome and Beijing. Following the 1949 Communist takeover of China, diplomatic relations between the two were broken. Catholic missionaries were expelled from the country, and Catholic hospitals, schools and churches were seized by the state. Stories of priests who were arrested and tortured by the Chinese Communists at the time of the takeover have seemingly been forgotten.

Perhaps Vatican diplomats should check out from the Vatican Library Fr. Harold W. Rigney's horrifying account of his four years in a Chinese prison in the early 1950s, *Four Years in a Red Hell* (1956). But these diplomats do not need to read history. The destruction of Catholic and Protestant church buildings, the arrests of Christian dissidents, and the orchestrated attack on Christians and other religious groups continue, while the Vatican negotiates.

Meanwhile, in Europe Pope Francis and his allies have set the stage for reconsideration of fundamental church

doctrines on marriage. Pope Francis continues to insist that the flood of immigrants from the Middle East and Africa should be welcomed with open arms by European governments. Opponents of immigration are denounced as xenophobes and anti-Christians.

The Vatican appears to be in a mode of capitulation—all in the name of “social justice.”

### Hoping for an Accord with China

The Vatican is clearly eager to sign a diplomatic accord with the Chinese government. At this point we do not know what these ongoing discussions will yield. Will an accord protect religious liberty in China? Will the Chinese government promise to stop destroying church buildings and arresting Christians? Will the Communists release thousands of members of the Falun Gong, a Buddhist religious sect? (The *Mindszenty Report* discussed the campaigns against Chinese religious dissenters in the November 2015 and November 2014 issues.)

Will atheistic Chinese government officials be given the power to appoint Catholic bishops subject only to veto by the Vatican? Will government officials stop barring minors from entering churches? And will the Chinese government keep its word in any final agreement? The Chinese government's track record in Hong Kong, where democracy is being slowly suppressed contrary to an accord reached with the British government, and its record on trade, intellectual property rights and currency manipulation all belie the notion that the government should be taken at its word in any agreement.

Reports are that an accord between Rome and Beijing on the appointment of bishops could be reached in a matter of months. The Chinese government-organized Catholic Patriotic Association does not recognize the authority of the Pope, while the underground church does. This

is not to say that all bishops in the Catholic Patriotic Association are tools of the government. Some bishops in the official recognized church are quite doctrinally traditional—perhaps even more so than the Pope himself—but as shepherds to their flocks, many of whom secretly practiced their faith and educated their children as Catholics during the horrible years of Mao’s Cultural Revolution, these bishops accepted compromise with the government.

The underground Catholic Church is a large and formidable counterweight to the Chinese government. It represents about half of the 10 to 12 million Catholics in China. The other half worship in the official church run by clergy appointed by Beijing. Under Xi Jinping the government has become increasingly centralized and is reviving the cult of Mao under the slogan of the “new era of socialism.” The *Global Times*, which is published by the Chinese Communist Party’s official organ *People’s Daily*, touts the pending accord as showing “wisdom” on the part of the Vatican.<sup>2</sup>

There are many difficulties ahead for a final settlement. The looming question is what to do with the underground church and its bishops. Three years ago Pope Francis told Cardinal Joseph Zen, the 86-year-old former bishop of Hong Kong, that the government-sponsored Catholic Patriotic Association represented an objectionable schism. Vatican diplomats appear to be moving toward mending this schism by any means necessary.<sup>3</sup>

### Dangers of Church-State Entanglement

In December, the Vatican announced that two underground bishops were to surrender their positions to individuals approved by the Chinese government. This ouster is extraordinary in itself, but the Vatican’s willingness to have government-approved bishops harkens back to the pre-Reformation church which allowed French royalty to appoint bishops. This church-state collusion fostered deep corruption within the church.

French kings used church appointments for political and personal gain. Men notorious for their sexual exploits, sinful lifestyles and decadence were appointed to high positions within the French church. The list of these corrupt bishops is too long to cite, but it can begin with Charles Maurice de Talleyrand, who was appointed Bishop of Autun before the French Revolution. Talleyrand followed in the footsteps of his corrupt uncle, the bishop of Reims. Talleyrand received the bishop’s hat even though he was a notorious womanizer and an Enlightenment “free thinker.” With the outset of the French Revolution, he switched sides to become one of the church’s major

enemies and later a key supporter of the despot Napoleon. The lessons of history seem to be lost on today’s Vatican.

The Vatican’s approach to reconciling the official church and the underground church is to cautiously reassure Beijing not to worry about obstinate bishops in the underground church. Dr. Tsung-ming Chen, research director at the Ferdinand Verbiest Institute in Belgium, has been carefully watching the negotiations. He told the *New York Times*, “My feeling is the Vatican wants a breakthrough. If they can solve, little by little, the problem of the illegal and the underground bishops, then it may help create a model of negotiations.”<sup>4</sup>

The obvious question is why is the Vatican so anxious to reach an accord with Beijing? Dr. Chen suggests that the reason is that Catholicism is growing relatively slowly compared to the number of Protestants in China. Today Protestants number at least 50 million, while Catholicism has grown more slowly because of the schism within the church.

### Accommodation vs. Resistance

Dr. Chen suggests that Pope Francis’s background as a Jesuit priest might also be playing a role. Jesuits arrived in China 400 years ago and established a presence on the mainland by conforming to local norms. Pope Francis’s own background in Argentina, where he adjusted to a military junta notorious for its human rights violations, might be playing a role as well. Pope Francis perhaps believes that short-term accommodation with dictatorships can pay long-term dividends for the church.

There should be no doubt that Pope Francis sees his mission in Beijing and the world as historic.

Long-time Vatican watcher George Weigel observes in *National Review* that there is little reason to trust the Chinese government on any accord.<sup>5</sup> He assesses the situation as grim. If China becomes more repressive, then “what reason is there to have any confidence that the Chinese Communist regime would not tighten the screws on Catholics who challenge the state on human-rights grounds?” (Of course, this presumes that a state-controlled church would actually challenge an increasingly repressive regime.) If, on the other hand, conditions get better in a liberalizing China with a rising middle class, Weigel wonders why people would be interested in a Catholicism that “kowtowed” to the Communist regime.<sup>6</sup>

Former bishop of Hong Kong Cardinal Joseph Zen Ze-kun has been closely following the year-and-a-half negotiations between Rome and Beijing. He met with Pope

Francis on January 12 to personally deliver a letter from an underground bishop who has refused to resign. The letter came from 88-year-old Bishop Zhuang Jianjian, who was ordained with Vatican approval in 2006.

In December 2017, Bishop Zhuang was escorted by government officials to the Dianoyutai State Guesthouse to meet a papal delegation who asked Bishop Zhuang to step aside in favor of Huang Bingzhang, an excommunicated bishop and member of the National People's Congress. Huang had been excommunicated for accepting a government appointment as bishop against Vatican wishes. Shortly afterwards, the Vatican envoys traveled to Fujian Province to ask another underground bishop to step down to serve as an assistant to another government-appointed bishop, Zhan Silu, whose consecration the Vatican had earlier declared illegal.

Cardinal Zen reported on his meeting with Pope Francis in an open letter on Facebook on January 29. He stated that the pontiff expressed sympathy with the underground church and said he had instructed the Vatican negotiators **“not to create another Mindszenty case.”** It is not entirely clear what Pope Francis intended by this remark.

As regular readers of the *Mindszenty Report* well know, Jozsef Cardinal Mindszenty was a Hungarian archbishop imprisoned by the communist government from 1949 to 1956. During the unsuccessful Hungarian revolution in 1956, he took refuge in the U.S. embassy in Budapest, where he lived for 15 years, until he was permitted to leave the country. Pope Paul VI, desiring to conciliate the Hungarian communist government, removed Mindszenty's titles as archbishop and Primate of Hungary in 1973 after Mindszenty refused to resign. A hero to anti-communists all over the world, Mindszenty believed that there should be no compromise with an evil totalitarian regime.

### Chinese Catholics in a ‘Cage’?

Cardinal Zen has become less sanguine about where the negotiations with China are headed. He has declared publicly that allowing the Chinese government to appoint bishops will place the Chinese Catholics in an “iron cage.”<sup>7</sup>

The Rev. Bernardo Cervellera, the editor of *AsiaNews.it*, was even more direct in his criticism of where the negotiations seem to be heading. He warned that the Vatican negotiators appeared to be giving “carte blanche, and accept all requests and pose no opposition on questions that affect the church in China.”<sup>8</sup>

The Vatican's apparent eagerness for a rapprochement with mainland China is evident in public statements by church officials in Rome praising China as a conduit for social justice. Bishop Marcelo Sánchez Sorondo, chancellor of the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences, described China in a recent interview with the Spanish-language edition of the *Vatican Insider* as **the country “best implementing the social doctrine of the Church.”** He asserted that in China “You do not have shantytowns, you do not have drugs, young people do not take drugs.” (Obviously he has never been to a Beijing or Shanghai nightclub.)

### Equating Catholic and Chinese Social Justice

**T**he economy does not dominate politics, as happens in the United States,” he added, noting that Beijing had embraced environmental politics advocated by Pope Francis. He accused President Trump of being “manipulated” by global oil firms while the Chinese are working for the greater good of the planet.<sup>9</sup> This “charm offensive” by the Vatican ignores a record of human rights abuses in China, while manifesting an anti-American sentiment certainly shared by the Chinese Communist one-party state.<sup>10</sup>

Bishop Sanchez's comments are particularly disheartening in light of the severe new government regulations on churches that went into effect in China on February 1. An independent Catholic news source in Asia reports that authorities in some regions are banning children and young people from obtaining religious instruction or taking part in Christian church services.<sup>11</sup>

Pope Francis's efforts to reach an accommodation with the atheistic Chinese government may be motivated by a sincere desire to save the church from further marginalization in China, but losing control over selection of bishops (and, by extension, priests) is a high price to pay. Reportedly at least two of the seven excommunicated bishops selected by China have had relationships with women and even fathered children.<sup>12</sup> One wonders how faithful underground Chinese Catholics will receive bishops and priests who have been vetted by the anti-Christian government.

Sandro Magister, who writes for Italy's *L'Espresso*, describes Pope Francis as a “man of extreme realism who calculates very much the effects of what he says or does.” He adds that Pope Francis in order to achieve certain results is “quite ready to play down” concerns expressed by critics that he might otherwise show for “the persecuted and the oppressed.” This realism of Pope Francis led Ukrainian Christians to complain that the Vatican has

de-emphasized Russian aggression against their country in order to cultivate relations with the Russian Orthodox Church supported by the Kremlin. In 2016, Pope Francis and Russian Orthodox Patriarch Kirill signed a harmonious joint declaration in Havana, Cuba. Ukrainian Catholics are wondering at what cost.<sup>13</sup>

### Erosion of Traditional Teachings

**W**hile Pope Francis tries to open doors with the Chinese government, the Vatican appears to be closing doors for traditionalists within the church. Cardinal Raymond Burke and three other cardinals have been waiting in vain since September 2016 for a response to a private letter requesting clarification from Pope Francis on his suggestion in his apostolic exhortation *Amoris laetitia* that the sacraments might be made available to divorced and civilly remarried Catholics who have not received an annulment.

More recently, Cardinal Reinhard Marx, a German prelate and close advisor to Pope Francis, reportedly told the German media that “one must encourage priests” to give liturgical blessings to homosexual unions. His words echoed a similar statement by Bishop Franz-Josef Bode, vice president of the German Bishops’ Conference, who is on record as suggesting the possibility of blessing homosexual unions, which he described as “positive and good.”<sup>14</sup>

This is a strange new world that is being created by the Vatican. Communist China is portrayed as a conveyor of the social gospel, while the evil of human rights abuses in the country is ignored; faithful Chinese bishops are being pushed out in favor of Communist Chinese government-approved bishops; the door is open to communion for divorced and remarried Catholics who have

not obtained annulments; and some bishops are apparently advocating liturgical blessings for homosexual unions. Pope Francis denounces those who want to stem the flood of immigrants into Europe as sinners, even as Western culture in Europe is being destroyed. Concerned Catholics worldwide are asking: What is next?

- 1 Christian Shepherd, “China’s Neo-Maoists Welcome Xi’s New Era,” *Reuters*, October 27, 2017; and Shuheng Zhao, “Xi Jinping’s Maoist Revival,” *Journal of Democracy*, July 2016.
- 2 “Chinese Paper Says Diplomatic Ties with Vatican Inevitable,” *Reuters*, February 5, 2018.
- 3 The other large roadblock to a final accord remains Taiwan. In what little word has leaked out about the negotiations, the *Global Times* says that the final accord will not include Vatican-Taiwan relations. Given the mainland’s obsession with Taiwan, which is denounced as a wayward province, this assertion seems plausible. The Vatican maintains official relations with self-ruled Taiwan and remains Taiwan’s sole remaining European ally. After the election of Tsai Ing-wen and the pro-independence Democratic Progressive Party in 2016, Beijing has escalated its efforts to isolate Taiwan. If the Vatican is willing to push aside bishops of the “underground” church for a deal, there is little to prevent the Vatican from breaking relations with Taiwan.
- 4 Quoted in Ian Johnson, “Vatican, Eager for China Ties, Asks ‘Underground’ Bishops to Step Aside,” *New York Times*, January 20, 2018.
- 5 George Weigel, “On the Vatican’s Reported Capitulation to Beijing,” *National Review*, February 5, 2018.
- 6 *Ibid.*
- 7 “Cardinal Zen Speaks Out About China-Vatican Compromise and Meeting with the Pope,” *OnePeterFive*, January 29, 2016.
- 8 Ian Johnson, “Vatican, Eager for China Ties, Asks ‘Underground’ Bishops to Step Aside,” *New York Times*, January 20, 2018; also, “Vatican Archbishop Praises Communist China as ‘Best’ at Implementing Church’s Social Doctrine,” *LifeSite*, February 6, 2018.
- 9 Christopher Lamb, “Beijing Praises ‘Wisdom’ of Pope Francis,” *The Tablet*, February 6, 2018.
- 10 Links for Chinese human rights abuses can be found on <http://www.state.gov/jhrrpt/humanrightsreport/indix.htm#wrapper>. Also, Ed Morrissey, “Vatican Bishop: You Know Who Really Aces Catholic Justice These Days,” [hotair.com](http://hotair.com), February 2, 2018.
- 11 “China Church Further Squeezed by Revised Regulations,” [ucanews.com](http://ucanews.com), February 8, 2018.
- 12 Mark Simon, “Who Made Xi Jinping Pope?” *Wall Street Journal*, February 9, 2018.
- 13 Francis X. Rocca, “Pope’s China Calculation Clashes with Image as Champion of Oppressed,” *Wall Street Journal*, February 12, 2018.
- 14 “One of Pope’s 9 Advisor Cardinals Proposes ‘Liturgical’ Blessings of Homosexual Unions,” *LifeSite*, February 5, 2018.

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