

# VATICAN-CHINA UPDATE

## September 2020

5 Updates

- 1. The Vatican is ready to renew its deal with China. Privately, officials admit they're walking a tightrope.**
- 2. Human rights concerns raised as Vatican extends agreement.**
- 3. Appointment of bishops: the Vatican and China to renew their agreement.**
- 4. China's Catholic Church still divided and under stress.**
- 5. Vatican wants to extend China deal: Cardinal Parolin - China stifles underground church.**

1.

**The Vatican is ready to renew its deal with China. Privately, officials admit they're walking a tightrope.**

15<sup>th</sup> September 2020

Gerard O'Connell

[https://www.americamagazine.org/china-doc?utm\\_source=Website&utm\\_medium=inline\\_promo&utm\\_campaign=china\\_doc](https://www.americamagazine.org/china-doc?utm_source=Website&utm_medium=inline_promo&utm_campaign=china_doc)

The Holy See will communicate to representatives of the Chinese government a proposal approved by Pope Francis for the renewal of the provisional agreement with China.

Cardinal Pietro Parolin, the Vatican secretary of state and a key figure in the dialogue with China, responding to journalists' questions on Sept. 14, confirmed

---

the Vatican's intention to extend the provisional agreement for "at least 2 years" and "in that way to verify its usefulness for the church in China." He said he thinks and hopes China wants this too.

Sources contacted by America, who asked not to be identified because they are not authorized to speak to the press, also expect an extension of the provisional agreement because they believe it is practical for both sides.

While Vatican officials have thus far publicly defended the agreement with enthusiasm, privately, they are more sober in their analysis. In several conversations, they have acknowledged the obstacles and challenges that remain while expressing hope for future talks.

From the Vatican's perspective, the agreement is functional because it has opened a way to engage in a direct dialogue with China not only on the nomination of bishops but on other questions like the normalization of the life of the church in China and, in due course, to diplomatic relations with China, something that has been severed since 1951.

From the Chinese perspective, the agreement can be seen as facilitating the official registration of all Catholic bishops, priests and communities, including those of the so-called underground community, which according to some estimates account for almost half of the country's 10 million Catholics. China moreover sees that it stands to gain in international reputation from a positive relation with the Holy See and Pope Francis; particularly at this moment in history when opposition to, and distrust of China is growing in many countries, including the United States, because of its crackdown on Hong Kong, its repression of the Uighurs and its initial handling of information regarding coronavirus. Notably, Pope Francis and the Holy See have been silent on these issues of human rights and international law.

When asked by Phoenix TV, (a Hong Kong-based media company with close ties to the Chinese Communist Party) at the regular press conference at the foreign ministry in Beijing, Sept. 10, to confirm reports that China and the Vatican "are in negotiations on renewing the 2018 interim agreement on the appointment of bishops," a spokesperson for the ministry, Zhao Lijian, said, "With the concerted efforts from both sides, the interim agreement on the appointment of bishops between China and the Vatican has been implemented successfully since it was

---

signed nearly two years ago.” He concluded, “The two sides will continue to maintain close communication and consultation and improve bilateral relations.”

The provisional agreement was signed in Beijing in September 2018 and came into force one month later. The Vatican then hailed it as “the fruit of a gradual and reciprocal rapprochement” and “a long process of careful negotiation” that “foresees the possibility of periodic reviews of its application.”

To this day, the text of the provisional agreement has been kept secret, much to the chagrin of many Chinese Catholics who say the secrecy allows the Chinese authorities to claim that bishops and priests must obey their instructions because the Vatican agrees with Beijing.

America has learned that China insisted on the secrecy and the Vatican acquiesced perhaps because, as one source remarked, “while it’s not a good agreement, it’s better than no agreement, and there’s hope it can be improved.”

The agreement only concerns the nomination of bishops. It does not deal with other important questions that the Vatican wished to address, but the Chinese side refused to discuss prior to the signing. It does not address the question of the underground bishops and priests; the status of the Chinese bishops’ conference, which is not recognized by Rome because only state-recognized bishops belong to it or the number of dioceses on the mainland.

From the Vatican’s viewpoint, one of the most positive aspects is the existence of a de-facto international agreement between the Holy See and China; the first such accord since the communists came to power in 1949, and one that recognizes that the pope has the final word in the nomination of bishops.

Additionally, as a consequence of the act of reconciliation of the eight illicit bishops by Pope Francis prior to the signing of the agreement, all the Catholic bishops in China are now united with the Successor of Peter. There were 100 at the end of 2019, of whom 69 are officially recognized by Beijing, and the 31 underground are not, according to The Holy Spirit Center, Hong Kong.

Vatican sources describe the Holy See’s relations with Beijing as “cordial” and more friendly since the signing of the agreement. They note “a changing attitude” on the part of the Chinese. Nevertheless, they acknowledge that there have been

---

tensions and problems continue to exist.

At the time of the agreement's signing, a crackdown on religion was already underway in China as Beijing demanded that all bishops and priests be officially registered with the Patriotic Association. Pressure was being put at the local level, though more forcibly in some provinces than others.

A Vatican source reminded America that "there is not just one China," referring to the different political realities at provincial level and how the church's relation with the authorities varied from province to province following the agreement. It has improved in some, not changed in others, but deteriorated in a number of places.

Since Sept. 2018, for example, crosses have been removed from church edifices in many dioceses in provinces across the country, including Anhui, Hebei, Henan, Guizhou and Zhejiang.

Perhaps most troubling, Beijing has sought to enforce regulations over the past two years that make it illegal for parents to give a religious education to their children up to the age of 18 and prohibits children and young people from participating in any church or religious related activities, including church organized summer camps. The Vatican has protested this in a diplomatic way to Beijing, but to little or no avail.

Even as the time for renewal of the agreement approached, pressure regarding registration continued to be forcibly exercised in some places according to sources in China. In early August, for example, the underground Bishop Julius Jia of Zhending, Hebei, was again taken away by government officials seeking to get him to register.

In another case, on Sept. 1, the Rev. Liu Maochun, an underground priest of Mindong diocese, was also taken away as he was on his way to visit sick people in a hospital. By Sept. 12 his whereabouts remained unknown. America has learned that the Vatican privately protests such disappearances, but China continues the practice regardless.

Overall, the concrete fruits of the agreement are still meager when it comes to nomination of bishops, as Vatican officials admit. Only two new bishops have been ordained since the agreement was signed, but their nominations were already

---

agreed before Sept. 2018.

America has learned that three more bishops will soon be ordained, but this is a small number given the more than 40 dioceses that lack a bishop. Nevertheless, although the agreement did not address the situation of the “underground” bishops, seven have been recognized by the state over the past two years.

In the absence of diplomatic relations, the Holy See has long sought to open an office in Beijing with a permanent representative there to facilitate communications with the authorities and the local church, as has happened with Vietnam, but so far China has refused.

Vatican officials recognize that China has the upper hand in the negotiations. Prior to the signing of the agreement one official told me, “they have the knife in the hand,” meaning if the Holy See had not signed, then China could simply go ahead and appoint bishops to some 40 dioceses and thereby greatly compromise the church’s future in a country where it has existed for centuries.

The signing has given rise to some positive fruits, nonetheless. First, the dialogue continues, and in a more positive spirit. The Chinese embassy to Italy serves as a channel for ongoing communication.

Second, official delegations from both sides meet once or twice annually, at the deputy-foreign minister level, either at the Vatican or in Beijing. The next meeting is to be in Rome and was expected to formalize the extension of the provisional agreement, but no date has been set because of Covid-19 travel restrictions.

In addition to these official encounters, there is also a joint working group that meets with some regularity. It most recently met in Beijing last November. On that occasion, the Chinese allowed Archbishop Claudio Maria Celli, the head of the Vatican delegation, to celebrate Mass in the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception in Beijing, the first time a Vatican bishop has been permitted to do so since 1949.

Beijing’s Bishop Li Shan and other priests concelebrated, and the bishop invited the Vatican delegation for dinner afterwards. On that and earlier occasions, the Vatican delegates made closely monitored visits to some dioceses to meet the local bishops in connection with the agreement.

---

While Pope Francis has publicly expressed his wish to visit China, the communist authorities consider this “premature,” sources told America. Nevertheless, a significant diplomatic step forward was taken on Feb. 14, 2019, when the secretary for relations with states, Archbishop Paul Gallagher, met his Chinese counterpart, Foreign Minister Wang Yi, during an international security conference in Munich.

It was the first such high-level encounter since the communists came to power. Up to then, meetings took place at the lower level of deputy-foreign minister.

If China were to pursue the diplomatic ladder approach with the Holy See, the next logical step would be a meeting between its prime minister, Li Keqiang, and Cardinal Pietro Parolin, the Secretary of State, who has long played a key role in the China-Vatican dialogue.

Such an encounter could pave the way to the establishment of diplomatic relations, but China would require the Holy See to break diplomatic ties with Taiwan at that same time. Neither question has been broached so far in the bilateral negotiations, according to Vatican sources.

However, the Holy See has been ready for that eventuality since the pontificate of St. John Paul II. As Cardinal Angelo Sodano, then secretary of state, told journalists in 1999, the Vatican is ready to move its embassy from Taipei to Beijing “not tomorrow, but tonight if the Chinese authorities allow it.”

If the provisional agreement is extended for another two years, as is expected, then some headway may be made on the many unresolved questions that remain. But it is difficult to predict where progress may come or how soon.

[Read this next: The risks for the Catholic Church in China are real—but the church is ready to face them.]

[https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2019/03/21/risks-catholic-church-china-are-real-church-ready-face-them?utm\\_source=website&utm\\_medium=inline\\_promo&utm\\_campaign=read\\_this\\_next](https://www.americamagazine.org/faith/2019/03/21/risks-catholic-church-china-are-real-church-ready-face-them?utm_source=website&utm_medium=inline_promo&utm_campaign=read_this_next)

[WATCH: The Catholic Church in China: a short documentary]

<https://www.americamagazine.org/china-doc?>

---

[utm\\_source=Website&utm\\_medium=inline\\_promo&utm\\_campaign=china\\_doc](#)

\* *Gerard O'Connell is America's Vatican correspondent.*

@gerryorome

---

2.

## **Human rights concerns raised as Vatican extends agreement**

16<sup>th</sup> September 2020

Human rights concerns raised as Vatican extends agreement

**Source:** CSW

Pope Francis has signed off on a two-year extension of an agreement with the Chinese government on the appointment of bishops, according to Reuters.

Catholics inside China and observers worldwide have raised concerns about the decision to extend the controversial agreement at a time of increasing violations of the right to freedom of religion or belief (FoRB) in the country. Vatican Secretary of State Cardinal Pietro Parolin has also confirmed the plan to extend the agreement.

In September 2018, China signed a Provisional Agreement with the Holy See on the appointment of bishops. Details of the deal remain unknown. Since the Agreement was signed, the Pope has recognised several Chinese bishops who were not previously in communion with Rome. However, the authorities have continued to harass, intimidate and detain clergy.

Reuters reports that there will be no changes to the agreement and it will not be extended to include Hong Kong.

Prior to the extension, a number of CSW sources expressed their disappointment with the agreement, but said they were resigned to the deal being renewed, since

they had no expectation that the Vatican position would change. "We cannot feel any benefit [from the agreement]", said one source, who cannot be named for reasons of security. When asked whether the FoRB situation had improved since the agreement, the source said they thought it had not, but "all religions are suffering - it is no surprise that Catholics are suffering as well".

In recent years, the level of FoRB and other human rights in China has rapidly and significantly deteriorated. CSW continues to receive reports of violations against every major religious community in the country, including Christians, Uyghur Muslims, Tibetan Buddhists, and Falun Gong adherents. Examples of violations include the demolition of places of worship, mass arbitrary detention, enforced disappearance, intrusive surveillance, and restrictions on freedom of movement. Those who defend the right to FoRB and other human rights are also regularly targeted.

One Catholic leader also queried the need for bishops recognised by the Vatican but not previously recognised by the government to be 're-inaugurated' following the agreement, saying: "If someone is already a bishop, if he is appointed again in the name of the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association, it is like denying that he was a bishop before. But now all over the country it is like this. Through this, you can work here openly. Otherwise, you can't do anything."

Shortly before the renewal was announced, UCANews reported that several underground priests in Jiangxi had been issued notices banning them from celebrating the liturgy on grounds that they are not recognised by the state.

CSW's East Asia Team Leader Benedict Rogers said: "We echo the concerns expressed by Catholics inside and outside the country about the renewal of the agreement between the Vatican and Beijing. This comes at a time of rapid and significant deterioration in the level of freedom of religion or belief for people across China, including Catholics. Catholic leaders not recognised by the government continue to be harassed, and sometimes even detained or disappeared, while registered churches are under pressure to show their loyalty to the Party by flying the national flag, removing religious symbols, and stopping religious activities for under-18s. We are also deeply concerned about the lack of



transparency concerning the agreement. We call on the Vatican to put freedom of religion or belief at the centre of all its decisions concerning Catholics in China, and to prioritise the release of prisoners of conscience still detained or disappeared in China, including Bishop James Su Zhimin."

## **LINKS**

*Reuters: Pope gives green light for extension of accord with China*  
- <https://uk.reuters.com/article/us-pope-china-accord/pope-gives-green-light-for-extension-of-accord-with-beijing-idUSKBN26539L>

*Vatican wants to extend China deal* - [www.ucanews.com/news/vatican-wants-to-extend-china-deal-cardinal-parolin/89535](http://www.ucanews.com/news/vatican-wants-to-extend-china-deal-cardinal-parolin/89535)

*China: CSW raises concerns about Vatican agreement* [www.csw.org.uk/2018/09/25/press/4082/article.htm](http://www.csw.org.uk/2018/09/25/press/4082/article.htm)

*China Report* - [www.csw.org.uk/2020-china-report](http://www.csw.org.uk/2020-china-report)

*China stifles underground church as Vatican looks to extend pact* [www.ucanews.com/news/china-stifles-underground-church-as-vatican-looks-to-extend-pact/89530](http://www.ucanews.com/news/china-stifles-underground-church-as-vatican-looks-to-extend-pact/89530)

**Tags:** [China](#), [Cardinal Parolin](#), [Christians](#), [Uyghur Muslims](#), [Tibetan Buddhists](#), [Falun Gong](#), [FoRB](#)

---

3.

**Appointment of bishops: the Vatican and China to renew their agreement**

16<sup>th</sup> September 2020

## **ANALYSIS: China and the Vatican have agreed to extend the historic agreement reached in 2018 for another two years**

[Loup Besmond de Senneville](#), Rome

### Vatican City

Two years ago, it was hailed as a historic agreement. And it was.

After almost 70 years without diplomatic relations, the two-year agreement China and the Holy See, signed on September 22, 2018, on the appointment of bishops was widely welcomed.

But the content of this text has always been kept secret and is due to expire in a few days. Until now, it was not clear whether it would be renewed.

But *La Croix* has learned from a source close to the negotiators, who insisted on total anonymity, that the agreement will be extended for another two years under the same terms as the one signed in 2018.

The very renewal of the Sino-Vatican is itself an event.

While the question of the appointment of bishops may seem technical, what is at stake in the eyes of Rome is nothing less than the unity of Chinese Catholics and the avoidance of a possible schism.

This is in a country where the Communist authorities have been appointing the bishops they wish for decades and without Rome's approval, while "clandestine" bishops loyal to the pope were being ordained at the same time.

On two different occasions -- in 2016 and 2018 -- the authorities challenged the Holy See by appointing about 40 bishops independently.

These were massive appointments that would have anchored the Chinese Church's separation from Rome, and would have made it difficult for them to be recognized later.

What is known about the terms of the current agreement is that the pope has the last word on episcopal appointments -- that is, a kind of right of veto -- while Rome commits to no longer appointing clandestine bishops without Beijing's agreement.

On the very day the agreement was signed in 2018, Rome confirmed seven official bishops.

Almost a year later, in August 2019, two new ones were ordained. As a result, all Chinese bishops are now recognized as being in communion with the Bishop of Rome.

### **Regular meetings**

According to information gathered by *La Croix*, the Chinese and Vatican delegations meet regularly. Not even the pandemic lockdown last spring interrupted these encounters.

In November 2019, a Vatican delegation led Archbishop Claudio Maria Celli was even granted government authorization to celebrate a private Mass with the archbishop of Beijing in his cathedral in the Chinese capital.

This was an historic first.

That event was followed in February 2020 by a historic meeting between Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi and his Vatican counterpart, Archbishop Paul Richard Gallagher.

Two new bishops could also be appointed and ordained in the coming months.

It should be noted, however, that the renewal of the Sino-Vatican agreement comes in the context of a hardening of Chinese power, which has led many to strongly criticize the text.

Cardinal Joseph Zen, former Bishop of Hong Kong, is among the fiercest critics of the deal. As early as October 2018 he began warning that it could lead to "the annihilation of the true Church" in China.

In less harsh tones others have expressed concern that the agreement has led to a deterioration of living conditions for some Chinese Catholics.

Father Bernardo Cervellera, a priest at the Pontifical Institute for Foreign Missions (PIME), says he has received information the past few months that Chinese soldiers have destroyed Church properties, kidnapped priests and placed police at the entrance of churches to prohibit the entry of minors.

"The fact that this agreement remains secret is a real problem, because the Chinese authorities can rely on a Vatican guarantee so as to carry out these actions," worries the priest who heads the AsiaNews press agency in Rome.

He also deplores the fact that in some dioceses, priests and bishops have to commit themselves not to evangelize outside their parish territory and register with the Chinese Patriotic Catholic Association.

"All these elements suggest that this agreement does not lead to respect for religious freedom," the missionary says.

Like others, he also wonders about Pope Francis' silence on two very sensitive issues in recent months: the treatment of the Uighur minority and the situation in Hong Kong.

"I understand that the pope does not want to speak for fear of being manipulated. But maybe it is better to take the risk of being instrumentalized, than to remain silent," he points out.

**"The situations are very diverse depending on the provinces"**

But defenders of the agreement oppose a policy based on realpolitik. They also say China should not be considered as a monochrome block.

"The situations are very diverse depending on the provinces. In some places things have improved, in others they haven't," says a source close to the negotiators.

"To believe that the pope's words on Hong Kong or the Uighurs could have the same effect as those of John Paul II on communist Poland is an analytical error," says historian Massimo Faggioli in reference to John Paul's support for the anti-communist trade union Solidarnosc.

"The two regimes have nothing to do with each other, and today's China is not the Poland of the 1980s," Faggioli insists.

"In addition, there is always the question of the link between a possible public position by the pope and the safety of local Catholics," he points out.

"Even if the significance of the pope's words remains strong on a symbolic level, he has no embassy, no ties and no tools of geopolitical pressure," says Gianni Valente, China specialist for the Fides News Agency, which is linked to the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples.

"The pope is not a head of state [in the conventional sense], so we cannot expect him to act as such," says Valente.

He also cautions that one should not overestimate the weight of the pope's words in China.

### **A Chinese edition of "La Civiltà Cattolica"**

"Even if it obviously has room for improvement, it is a very positive agreement, allowing us to move from a clandestine Church to an official Church," argues Father Antonio Spadaro, one of the pope's close advisors and editor of the Jesuit periodical *La Civiltà Cattolica*.

Last April, the periodical, which appeared after being vetted by the Secretary of State, created a Chinese edition with an attached website.

It regularly relays the pope's messages to the Catholics of China, as in April and May, when Francis prayed publicly for the believers in the country.

"It's another instrument for dialogue," says Spadaro.

*La Civiltà Cattolica* also has a WeChat account, a popular social media network in China, that it uses to further disseminate its articles.

It's another way of maintaining this tenuous but real link between Rome and Beijing. It makes possible the experience of what some in the Vatican call "the martyrdom of patience".

---

4.

### **China's Catholic Church still divided and under stress**

16<sup>th</sup> September 2020

#### **China's Catholic Church still divided and under stress**

**The agreement signed in 2018 between Rome and Beijing on the appointment of bishops of China did not concretely promote the unity of the Catholic Church in China**

[Dorian Malovic](#)  
[Vatican City](#)

"The agreement between China and the Vatican has been successfully implemented, and both sides will continue to maintain consultations and close communication in order to further improve our bilateral relations."

Questioned on September 10 in Beijing on the assessment of the agreement signed between Rome and Beijing on September 22, 2018, pertaining to the appointment of bishops in China, the spokesperson for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Zhao Lijian, expressed his satisfaction with the evolution of diplomatic relations between the Vatican and China, which broke down in 1951 with the coming to power of Mao Zedong.

## **"This agreement has helped to bring closer ties between China and the Vatican"**

But on the ground the situation is much more complicated. It is always a challenge to draw up a general panorama of the Catholic Church in China.

"Since the revival of dialogue with the Chinese Catholic world in 1974, we have gone through multiple phases of mistrust, tolerance and tensions, as well as of relaxation and cooperation," says Father Jean-Pierre Charbonnier of the Foreign Missions of Paris (MEP), one of the top experts on Sino-Vatican relations.

He says the agreement, which is "in line with the two previous popes, John Paul II and Benedict XVI, has brought the ties between Rome and Beijing even closer".

"This agreement, which is going to be renewed, goes in the direction of history to integrate the Church of China into the universal Church," he adds.

Father Charbonnier has been travelling widely throughout China for decades.

He says it is important to distinguish between the disparity of each situation, depending on the dioceses and parishes where the authorities monitor and control certain priests and bishops who are reluctant to join the "official Church".

"Here, we do not feel political pressure on our bishop, our priests, our religious sisters or our faithful," said a Chinese priest from the diocese of Xian in Shaanxi province, on condition he remain anonymous.

Historically, the diocese has been very involved in social issues, yet it has not suffered the repression that has hit other dioceses in the country.

"We know how to navigate between the prohibitions of the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association (CCPA), with whom we are constantly negotiating, but it is more difficult in other provinces," he continued in an encrypted email.

**In some provinces, priests and bishops are arrested by the authorities**

In early September, several priests from the diocese of Yujiang in the southern province of Jiangxi were arrested for refusing to join the CCPA, the political control body of the Catholics.

Over the past two years, in Zhejiang province, hundreds of crosses on Protestant churches have been removed.

"Since August, Bishop Julius Jia, the underground bishop of Zhengding in Hebei province (a historic stronghold of the underground Church) seems to have disappeared," said a Catholic from Hong Kong who still travels clandestinely to mainland China.

"In my opinion, this pressure on the underground violates the agreement signed between Rome and Beijing. Many would like it to no longer be a secret so that the true substance of the agreement can be known," the person said.

Certainly, the Vatican has lifted the excommunications against eight official bishops, now recognized since September 2018. And Beijing has recognized six clandestine bishops, allowing them to be officially installed at the head of their dioceses.

"The outcome is meager, but it is evolving," Father Charbonnier admits.

On the other hand, an authorized Chinese religious source says, "This agreement has resulted in even more tension and mistrust than harmony and unity in the last two years, especially in the context of the policy of 'Sinicization' of all religions led by Xi Jinping".

---

5.

**Vatican wants to extend China deal: Cardinal Parolin - China stifles underground church**

15<sup>th</sup> September 2020



UCA News - [www.ucanews.com](http://www.ucanews.com)

## **Vatican wants to extend China deal: Cardinal Parolin**

### **Catholics question the need to renew an agreement that could further divide the China Church**

UCA News reporter

The Vatican wants to extend its two-year-old agreement with China on bishops' appointments, the Vatican's Secretary of State Cardinal Pietro Parolin has said.

The cardinal, who was instrumental in creating the agreement signed in September 2018, told media on Sept. 14 that the Vatican is hoping to renew the deal when it expires next month.

"The agreement has not yet expired," Cardinal Parolin said, clarifying that it is due to expire in October when two years are completed since it came into force.

The agreement, which was the first bilateral pact since 1951 when Vatican and China severed diplomatic relations, aims to provide Vatican-approved bishops in China rather than state-appointed bishops.

Cardinal Parolin said the agreement was signed "*ad experimentum*" (as an experiment) and the Vatican plans to continue in that fashion.

"Our intention is that it [the agreement] be prolonged, that we continue to adopt it *ad experimentum*, as has been done in these two years, to further verify its usefulness for the Church in China," he said, according to a report by Rome-based Zenit news service.

The church leader expressed hope that China is interested in continuing with the agreement.

"I think and hope so, even if these first results were not particularly striking. However, it seems that a direction has been marked that is worth continuing. Then we will see at the end of this further period what to do," he said.

The cardinal, who has been criticized for pushing the agreement without adequate consultation with leaders of the Chinese Church, said the deal aimed to benefit the Church in China.

"As we have said many times and here too, our interest is to normalize life as much as possible so that the Church can live a normal life," he said.

He further explained "normal life" as meaning the Church in China having relations with churches in other parts of the world and "the Holy See and with the Pope and then that there is unity within the Chinese Church."

"And all this of course, [we want to see] with a background of peaceful coexistence, searching for peace and overcoming tensions; but our perspective is on this ecclesiastical theme, then we will see," Cardinal Parolin said.

### **Resentment in China**

A Catholic priest in China who did not want to be named said Cardinal Parolin was wrong and the agreement brought "nothing good" to the Church in China.

"Cardinal Parolin said that the agreement aimed to unite and improve the situation of the China Church, but it has only further divided and wounded the Church in China," he said.

According to him, ever since the agreement came into force, China began to force priests of the underground church to join the state-run church, particularly in dioceses where underground bishops were accepted into state-run churches.

Since the agreement, the Vatican has lifted excommunication on seven living bishops and one dead bishop who had been appointed without a papal mandate.

In turn, China installed six underground bishops into the state-controlled Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association, which the Chinese present now as the church that has the recognition of both the state and the Vatican.

"The officials want the entire Church in China under the communist party. That is the end result," said the priest.

The priest said Cardinal Parolin and the Vatican officials pushing for the agreement's renewal have "lost both logic and theology."

"Why renew an agreement that worsens the situation? Why push for it when it helps the atheists to decide for the Church," he asked.

\*\*\* \*\*

## **China stifles underground church as Vatican looks to extend pact**

### **The situation of the church loyal to the Vatican is worse than it was a decade ago**

UCA News reporter, Hong Kong

Updated: September 15, 2020 06:29 AM GMT

As the Vatican looks to extend its pact with China on bishops' appointments, the communist nation has accelerated efforts to arm-twist underground priests to join the state-sanctioned open church.

The Church aims to normalize relations with China by extending the agreement, Vatican Secretary of State Cardinal Pietro Parolin told media in the Vatican on Sept. 14.

The provisional agreement signed in September 2018 expires in October, two years after it took effect. But local Catholics said communist officials had intensified a crackdown on the underground church in recent months.

In southeast China's Jiangxi province, several underground priests have been issued notices banning them from celebrating the liturgy on grounds that they do not have state recognition as priests.

One such notice to a priest said that starting Sept. 1, "you are not allowed to practice any religious activity in religious clergy's capacity."

The priest has not been recognized as religious clergy because he has not reported to the government's religious affairs department as the state's regulations require,

the notice said.

The Regulations on Religious Affairs that China's communist regime issued in 2004 and revised in 2017 prohibit persons without official recognition from engaging in religious professionals' activities.

The revised regulations do not recognize the underground church and its priests, but they can function as priests after registering with the government and by joining the state-run church.

Local Catholic Paul told UCA News that the government was trying to choke the underground church by forcing priests to join the official church.

He said such efforts increased after September 2018 when the Vatican and China signed the agreement on appointing. But the details of the temporary pact have still not been made public.

Peter, another local Catholic, said that in the past the government only talked about the regulations. "But officials have become serious about it now" after the Vatican-China agreement was signed.

### **Priests continue underground**

Another local Catholic, Joseph, said some underground priests continue their ministry in secret and parishioners attend their liturgical services in secret. "In some places, they gather weekly, but in some places monthly and in others only once in six months," he said.

The situation during such Masses is "very tense. We have to send parishioners on lookout duty. Our main aim is to keep the priests from being arrested," Joseph said.

Joseph, who was sentenced to five years in prison for his participation in a liturgy in the 1990s, said the present situation of the underground church is worse than it was a decade ago.

"Now, we have no leaders and the church is deeply divided. The local church has split into three groups," Joseph said.

Besides the open church, the underground church is divided. One group follows late Bishop Thomas Zeng Jing-mu and the other follows current Bishop Johannes Peng Weizhao.

The Vatican appointed Bishop Peng in 2012 and he was secretly consecrated a bishop in 2014. He replaced Bishop Zeng, who retired in 2012.

The situation is also complicated by a 1985 government move that merged open church communities in five dioceses in Jiangxi province as Jiangxi Diocese.

However, underground church communities continued to follow the Vatican demarcation. They do not have churches now. "They celebrate Masses in homes to live their faith," Joseph said.

For the Vatican, the Sino-Vatican agreement may have been an expression of Pope Francis' desire for friendly relations with China. "But the Chinese government is using it to force the underground church to join the open church," Joseph said.

He said a vicious campaign tarnishing the Vatican and Pope Francis goes on in China, which tells Catholics that the Vatican has betrayed the underground church by accepting the state-run church.

Joseph said: "In order to make the underground church distrust the pope completely, they say that the pope has betrayed you; that the pope has asked underground Catholics to join the [Chinese Catholic] Patriotic Association. Those who do not join the state-run church are disobeying the pope, they say."

**End**