

China-Vatican Talks: Covert Negotiations Aim to End Decades of Severed Relations

by Fabio Angiolillo

Far from the headlines, a hesitant rapprochement between the Vatican and Beijing is slowly taking form. The Holy See and the People's Republic of China (PRC) have intensified bilateral talks, with a number of meetings taking place as the parties seek to navigate the multiple complexities of an agreement for the appointment of Catholic bishops in Chinese territory.

A deal would end 70 years of troublesome relations since ties were severed following the Communist takeover of China. If successful, an agreement would represent the first time modern China establishes formal relations with a spiritual guide.

Details remain sketchy, but a source close to the Vatican has described the agreement as a compromise. The Holy See will allow and recognize the appointment of bishops indicated by the Chinese government but, in return, the Pope will appoint auxiliary

bishops without outside interference.¹ While neither side can consider this an optimal solution, a deal will provide concrete benefits to each and can thus be described as the second best outcome for both.

Christianity is the first non-Asian religion in China. Estimates range between 100 and 130 million, with a much greater concentration of Protestants compared to Catholics in China. Since the expulsion of Vatican envoy Antonio Riberi in 1951, the Holy See has been officially cut off from the estimated 10 to 12 million Catholics in the country.²

Over the years, Catholicism has mutated into two broad strands in China: official, state sanctioned Catholicism, governed

¹ Author's interview, Rome, 18 April 2018.

² Eleanor Albert, "Christianity in China", in *CFR Backgrounders*, last updated 9 March 2018, <https://on.cfr.org/2rQa1XH>.

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by the Chinese Patriotic Catholic Association (CPCA), and underground Catholics, made up of fragmented communities without a formal organizational structure or leadership.

The CPCA is responsible for appointing bishops throughout Mainland China, but these are not recognized by the Vatican. China's "underground" Catholics instead refer to an unsanctioned parallel community in which individuals gather in small private houses or congregations, without any formal institutional structure. Here, bishops are mostly self-appointed and are thus not recognized by Chinese authorities or the Vatican.³

Both sides have expressed interest in reaching an agreement. Today, 40 out of 94 "official" dioceses in Mainland China remain without bishops.⁴ The Vatican is concerned about its lack of influence in China but, at the same time, China's leader Xi Jinping also has an interest in managing relations with millions Chinese believers.⁵

There are at least two reasons for Beijing to sign an agreement with the Vatican. Both are directly related to China's growing international clout and efforts to consolidate the legitimacy of Xi Jinping. An official document signed with

the Vatican would signal a further consolidation of China's diplomatic relations. But there is more than simple recognition at play. Outstanding tensions between China and Taiwan (officially the Republic of China) may also play a role in Beijing's calculus.

The Holy See, which maintains a *chargé d'affaires* in Taipei, is the last diplomatic stronghold in Europe for Taiwan and, more in general, the only one remaining in the Western world. Xi Jinping has been pressuring Taiwan with economic dependency, yet China is also seeking to further isolate Taipei diplomatically, pressuring countries to sever relations and withdraw recognition. Since 2002, over ten states have recognized the PRC as the only legitimate Chinese State.⁶

Yet, interpreting the agreement in the context of Beijing-Taipei tensions would be a mistake. While it would no doubt result in an acceleration of the gradual diplomatic regression between the Vatican and Taiwan, a potential Sino-Vatican agreement should be framed in terms of Vatican-Chinese relations and broader efforts to resume formal relations after decades of rupture.

Indeed, a second driver for the agreement is that Catholics in China number about 10 to 12 million. Xi's political ambitions will no doubt pass through the necessity of consolidating support among these communities as well as through efforts to create a unified Catholic Church in the country, which would facilitate governmental

³ Social networks have been used as "virtual church" by the underground Church. Viola Zhou, "China's Underground Churches Head for Cover As Crackdown Closes In", in *South China Morning Post*, 10 September 2017, <https://www.scmp.com/node/2110433>.

⁴ Data on Chinese bishops are available in the GCatholic website: *Catholic Church in People's Republic of China (China)*, <http://www.gcatholic.org/dioceses/country/CN.htm>.

⁵ Author's interview, Rome, 18 April 2018.

⁶ Among others South Sudan, Panama and Dominican Republic.

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control over its activities. Indeed, since March 2018, authority over the CPCA was shifted from the State Council management to the China Communist Party United Front Work Department, signalling effort to further tighten state control over its activities.⁷

While the distinction between “underground” and “official” Catholics in China has become rather blurry, a re-unification between the two communities is also important for the Vatican.⁸ First of all, the Pope rejects the Church’s clandestine role in China, affirming that religion needs to be free from harassment.⁹ In this, the Vatican is seeking to preserve its influence and soft power, promoting freedom of religion in China.

Furthermore, the Vatican has been losing ground among Chinese believers due to the conflict with Chinese authorities. Thus, the steady growth in Protestantism in China, no doubt benefitting from its less structured organization, may also represent a motivation for the Vatican to seek to mend ties with Beijing. Nowadays, only about 10 per cent of the Christian community in China are Catholics.¹⁰

⁷ Teddy Ng and Mimi Lau, “Fears About Chinese Influence Grow As More Power Given to Shadowy Agency”, in *South China Morning Post*, 21 March 2018, <https://www.scmp.com/node/2138279>.

⁸ Gianni Valente, “Parolin, ‘Why We Are in Dialogue With China’”, in *Vatican Insider*, 31 January 2018, <http://www.lastampa.it/2018/01/31/vaticaninsider/parolin-why-we-are-in-dialogue-with-china-C8mlJsD0PDNsmsx7db6ZIJ/pagina.html>.

⁹ Author’s interview, Rome, 18 April 2018.

¹⁰ Eleanor Albert, “Christianity in China”, cit.

Moreover, according to canonical law, the establishment of the CPCA in 1957 was a schism. The CPCA was never recognized by the Holy See, yet its establishment signalled the formal exclusion of Vatican influence in China. As a result, the Holy Sea is seeking to remedy this exclusion, supporting the reunification of the two Churches as a means to consolidate the Pope’s formal legitimacy over Chinese Catholics.¹¹

There are also opponents to the agreement however.¹² Some parts of the underground Church in China perceive it as negative, fearing a loss of influence in the community if a unified Church is established.

Some top-ranking Chinese officials are also strongly adverse to an agreement, describing it as unconstitutional according to Article 36 of the Chinese Constitution, which affirms: “the state protects normal religious activities. No one may make use of religion to engage in activities that disrupt public order, [...] or interfere with the educational system of the state.”¹³

Within the Vatican, Hong Kong’s former bishop Joseph Zen is leading a fringe group of opponents to the deal, contending that such an agreement would mean giving up the nomination of bishops to a non-democratic

¹¹ Author’s interview, Rome, 18 April 2018.

¹² Harriet Sherwood, “Vatican Agreement with China Could ‘Deal Blow’ to Catholic Church”, in *The Guardian*, 13 February 2018, <https://gu.com/p/84eqq>.

¹³ See Chapter II on “The Fundamental Rights and Duties of Citizens” of the PRC Constitution: http://www.npc.gov.cn/englishnpc/Constitution/node_2825.htm.

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state. Indeed, the appointment of auxiliary bishops, which are a kind of deputy bishops, would represent an infringement on the Pope's traditional authority in these domains.¹⁴

It is evident how the debate is not a merely religious issue but rather a political matter.

The development of covert talks and the lack of details regarding the specificities of the negotiations are reflective of the two political systems at play. Although these are antithetic in many ways, there are also similarities and these are no doubt facilitating the process. Leaders in both China and the Vatican are not bound by democratic elections or strict term limits. Both systems are known for their murky decision-making processes, while transparency is not common trait either.

The issues at stake are entangled in a web of uncertainty that extend well beyond the confines of Sino-Vatican relations. The road ahead is likely to be long, as each actor will need to balance short-term interests with the medium and longer term effects such an agreement may have on their internal legitimacy and international credibility.

Since 2013, Pope Francis is giving positive momentum to the talks out of an effort to enhance the Vatican's influence and access to Mainland China. Meanwhile, Xi Jinping needs to ensure the stability of the Communist Party and seek to win over the still significant scepticism coming from the

more conservative strands of the CCP in order to sign a final agreement.

The fact that the talks are progressing and some information is leaking to the media is reflective of the existence of perceived benefits for both sides. Ultimately, the fact that the talks are happening at all is further reflective of the current changes in the international system and the continued rise of China. It is against this backdrop that the Vatican is seeking to end 70 years of severed relations, establishing the groundwork for a new formal relationship with what is set to be a key international player in the decades to come.

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¹⁴ Author's interview with Italian Vaticanist Andrea Tornielli, 19 April 2018.

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