

THE DIPLOMATIC RELATIONS BETWEEN THE HOLY SEE AND CHINA*

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*Abstract:*The Catholic Church in China has been through periods of harmonious and fruitful collaboration with the local establishments, as well as persecutions and violence. After 1949 and the coming to power of the Chinese Communist Party the relations with the Vatican were suspended, and a new stage for the diplomatic relations between China and the Holy See opened only after 1978, when Deng Xiaoping became the leader of the Chinese Communist Party. Despite the openness, unsurmountable obstacles remained. The article analyses the Sino-Vatican relations under the papacies of John Paul II, Benedict XVI as well as the new impetus given to negotiations with China under Pope Francis.

Keywords: Diplomacy, Holy See, China, Religion, Christianity.

1. Historical Overview of Catholicism in China

The beginning of Christianity in China goes deep back in time, to the 7th century and the activity of the Nestorian monks during the prosperous Tang dynasty, a period of extraordinary cultural flourishing. There were churches and monasteries built under the influence of Nestorianism however the order made no lasting impact. With the 13th century the Franciscans will begin their mission in China and beyond many obstacles and challenges their influence will consist not only of the inculturation of religion and evangelization but encompassed a great humanitarian involvement as well, from education activities to assisting those in need, caring for the poor etc.

The tumultuous mission of the representatives of the Jesuit order in China will start with the 16th century and during the Ming and Qing dynasties they will focus on "natural studies and mathematical astronomy" in order "to gain the trust of the imperial throne and its literati elites," as they "realized that by promoting natural studies they could improve the cultural environment for converting the Chinese to Christianity".¹ The legacy the Jesuits left is undisputable, they "added precision to the investigation of things by exposing seventeenth-century literati to early modern European classifications, forms of argument, and organizational principles for specialized knowledge, that is, *scientia*."²

The Catholic Church in China has been through periods of harmonious and fruitful collaboration with the local establishments, accomplishments, as well as

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¹ Benjamin Elman, *A Cultural History of Modern Science in China*, Harvard University Press, 2006, p. 2.

² *Ibidem*, p. 15.

persecutions and violence. One such context was the Boxer Uprising (1900) when *the fighters for justice and concord* rose violently against the Christians and their missions and overall against what was considered to represent the source of all evil- the foreigners and the Western influence. Among the victims there were numerous Chinese Christians, but beyond the persecutions the Catholic community will manage to survive, strengthen and increase its numbers.

In the first half of the twentieth century, as Cindy Yik-Yi Chu analyses in *Catholicism in China, 1900-Present. The Development of the Chinese Church*:

the foreign Catholic missionaries retained many of their traditional roles in China. They had come to evangelize among the Chinese people. Throughout the years, they brought in Western learning to the Chinese; provided the local people with the basic education, medical care, and social services; and often developed working relationships with the society elite. While these decades produced many successes, there were also many incidents of initial collaboration that unfortunately ended in disillusion and conflict. The foreign missionaries had to adapt to local circumstances, while the Chinese, for their part, began to accept some of the teachings of the Catholic Church and learned ways to work with the foreigners. Gradually both parties internalized some of the characteristics of the other. The processes of learning, mediation, and compromise went hand in hand.³

1.1. The Maoist Era

After 1949⁴ and the coming to power of the Chinese Communist Party the relations with the Vatican were suspended, the Papal representative expelled (1951), gradually the Christian missionaries would leave their missions and starting with 1957 the state controlled Catholic Patriotic Association became the authority of the Catholic Church in China. Thus, "The Catholic Church was *Chinese* under the leadership of the Chinese and only served the interests of the Chinese people or rather government. It was than a *Chinese Catholic Church* with its own form of Chinese Catholicism."⁵

The response from the Vatican was expressed in the Encyclical of Pope Pius XII *on Communism and the Church in China, Ad Apostolorum Principis*, in which he criticized the Association, understood as an instrument to suppress the faithful. Under a false appearance of patriotism, "which in reality is just a fraud, this association aims primarily at making Catholics gradually embrace the tenets of atheistic materialism, by which God Himself is denied and religious principles are rejected,"⁶ warned the Pope. The Association was condemned for spreading rumors and accusations about the bishops

³ *Ibidem*, p. 6.

⁴ The Government also created The Religious Affairs Bureau, whose role would be the monitoring of the religious landscape in China and restricting the religious manifestations beyond the recognized religions: Daoism, Buddhism, Catholicism, Protestantism, and Islam.

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 8.

⁶ Pope Pius XII, *Ad Apostolorum Principis*, 1958, http://www.vatican.va/content/pius-xii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xii_enc_29061958_ad-apostolorum-principis.html, accessed January 30th, 2021.

and the Holy See, and for using „a variety of means including violence and oppression, numerous lengthy publications, and group meetings and congresses.”⁷

As to the status of the bishops who “have been neither named nor confirmed by the Apostolic See, but who, on the contrary, have been elected and consecrated in defiance of its express orders,”⁸ Pius XII clearly indicated that they

enjoy no powers of teaching or of jurisdiction since jurisdiction passes to bishops only through the Roman Pontiff as We admonished in the Encyclical Letter *Mystici Corporis* in the following words: “. . . As far as his own diocese is concerned each (bishop) feeds the flock entrusted to him as a true shepherd and rules it in the name of Christ. Yet in exercising this office they are not altogether independent but are subordinate to the lawful authority of the Roman Pontiff, although enjoying ordinary power of jurisdiction which they receive directly from the same Supreme Pontiff.”⁹

Thus, “for the next several decades, it was assumed that there were two Catholic communities in China— a true Church, underground, and numbering perhaps 6 to 10 million adherents, and the false PCA, which by the 1990s was reckoned to have 10 million congregants.”¹⁰

1.1.1 *The Cultural Revolution (1966-1976)*

Mao Zedong’s Cultural Revolution would violently impact religion in China as churches, temples, mosques would be destroyed, in an unprecedented effort to eradicate religion. Mao “understood, as had Stalin and Hitler, that religion (some religions in particular) poses a threat to the totalitarian state by encouraging fidelity to a greater authority.”¹¹

A violent demolition was unleashed: “churches were desecrated, looted, and turned into factories and storerooms. Priests, pastors, and nuns were tortured, raped, murdered (some were burned alive), and imprisoned in labor camps.”¹² But beyond systematic destruction and millions of deaths there stood the reality of the religious faith carried on underground and the worshiping in secret, once again proving that religion could be at times suppressed, controlled, persecuted, but not killed.

As analyzed by Thomas F. Farr in his article *China’s Second Cultural Revolution*:

The Cultural Revolution merely confirmed that even totalitarianism cannot destroy mankind’s religious impulse. In a riff on Deng’s economic realism, Mao’s successors grudgingly acknowledged the truth with a new strategy—one that continues to this day. The strategy concedes that trying to kill religion is not

⁷ *Ibidem.*

⁸ *Ibidem.*

⁹ *Ibidem.*

¹⁰ George Weigel, *Witness to Hope*, Harper Collins, 1999, p. 752.

¹¹ Thomas F. Farr, *China’s Second Cultural Revolution*, 2020, <https://www.firstthings.com/web-exclusives/2020/01/chinas-second-cultural-revolution>, accessed January 30th, 2021.

¹² *Ibidem.*

realistic, but that religion poses a mortal threat to communist rule and must be controlled. To this end, Chinese scholars have studied religions for decades, and party leaders have experimented with mechanisms of control.¹³

In the aftermath of *The Cultural Revolution*, after a time when the only accepted divine figure was its initiator, worshiped by some like a god, a religious revival took place and since the 1980's there has been an ascendancy of religion in China.

Freedom of religion would also be part of the Constitution of the People's Republic of China, adopted in 1982, with Article 36 stipulating that

No state organ, public organization or individual may compel citizens to believe in, or not to believe in, any religion; nor may they discriminate against citizens who believe in, or do not believe in, any religion. The state protects normal religious activities. No one may make use of religion to engage in activities that disrupt public order, impair the health of citizens or interfere with the educational system of the state. Religious bodies and religious affairs are not subject to any foreign domination.¹⁴

However it is important to underline that among the five official religions recognized by the government of the People's Republic of China, Catholicism remained under a stricter observance as it was associated with a more intrusive interference and a problematic connection with the Pope and the Vatican State.

2. *The Sino-Vatican Relations since 1979*

2.1. *The Pontificate of John Paul II*

A new stage for the diplomatic relations between China and the Vatican seemed open after Deng Xiaoping became the leader of the Chinese Communist Party (1978). Despite the openness and the new course for Chinese Catholics, unsurmountable obstacles remained: the existence of both an underground and the *open* Church, the appointment of bishops without the Vatican's approval, as well as the pre-conditions asked by China to consider the dialogue and diplomatic relations with the Holy See: Vatican's rejection of any ties with Taiwan, and the strict non-interference in China's internal affairs.

During the papacy of John Paul II, not only a religious leader but a *geopolitician Pope*, who had an undisputed role in the fall of communism, and whose positive involvement in tensioned and violent contexts across the globe echoes to this day, there were however no significant improvements in the relations with China. The many accomplishments of the 27 years of papacy of the most well-traveled Pope did not include a visit to China¹⁵, and the diplomatic relations between the two countries

¹³ *Ibidem*.

¹⁴ *Constitution of the People's Republic of China*, <http://en.people.cn/constitution/constitution.html>, accessed on January 30th, 2021.

¹⁵ The other *unaccomplished visit* remained the one to Russia, because of the opposition of the Russian Orthodox Church.

remained problematic, although only a few years after his election, in 1982, John Paul II was declaring that "concern for the Church in China has become the particular and constant anxiety of my pontificate."¹⁶

On many occasions John Paul II would declare that he prayed for China everyday and a recurrent expression used by the Pope made reference to the *Great Chinese Nation* and this appreciation would not only consider the geographical settings and its population, but the historical and cultural heritage as well. The unity of the Catholic Church in China was considered of utmost importance, and such an ideal was envisioned as a communion and "reconciliation in truth between the underground Chinese Church loyal to Rome and the regime-sponsored Patriotic Catholic Association."¹⁷

In 1983 John Paul II wrote a personal letter to the Chinese leader Deng Xiaopin, in which he expressed "that the pursuit of the common good of humanity encourages something that is also the object of my own lively desire: a direct contact between the Holy See and the authorities of the Chinese people. . . ."¹⁸ In the letter that would remain unanswered, The Pope reflected on

the profound responsibility that is proper to my religious ministry as universal pastor of the Catholics of the whole world, which inspires within me a special solicitude toward Catholics who are in China. Men and women, scattered throughout the country, who feel a deep loyalty and love for their own land . . . and who at the same time feel united with the Pope and with the Catholic communities of all the other countries. It is a bond which, for the religious faith of Catholics, is an essential one, and which, on the other hand, cannot harm the ideal and concrete unity of their own nation or be to the detriment of its independence and sovereignty . . .¹⁹

Along the following years of his pontificate there would be other attempts to construct bridges to connect with China. In October 1989, during the Forty-fourth International Eucharistic Congress held in Seoul, South Korea, the Pope expressed for the first time his *ardent desire* to visit the People's Republic of China and "his hope for a reconciliation in truth between the underground Chinese Church loyal to Rome and the regime-sponsored Patriotic Catholic Association"²⁰:

Deep within my own heart, there is always present an ardent desire to meet these brothers and sisters in order to express my cordial affection and concern for them and to assure them of how highly they are esteemed by the other local Churches. I am deeply moved when I think of the heroic signs of fidelity to Christ and his Church which many of them have shown in these past years. Through the

¹⁶ *L'Osservatore Romano*, English weekly edition, February 1, 1982, in Gianni Criveller, *Pope John Paul II and China*, Tripod Summer 2005 Vol. 25 - No. 137, http://hsstudyc.org.hk/en/tripod_en/en_tripod_137_02.html#_ftn2, accessed on January 30th, 2021.

¹⁷ George Weigel, *op.cit.*, p. 595.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 596.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*.

²⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 595.

intercession of Mary, help of Christians, may Christ be their consolation in every trial and in all of life's daily challenges. May the Lord also inspire within them a firm commitment to the delicate task of fostering reconciliation within the ecclesial community, in communion of faith with the successor of Peter, who is the visible principle and foundation of that unity.²¹

In 1993 the personal diplomatic exploration of China in which The Pope had sent the French Cardinal Roger Etchegaray would bring clarifications "that the situation was far more complex than the "true Church/false Church" dichotomy suggested,"²² and that "many, perhaps most, of the PCA bishops were in communion with Rome in their hearts."²³

An iconic moment took place in 1995, during the World Youth Day, celebrated in Manila, when an official delegation of Catholics from China participated, and some priests even concelebrated with the Pope during the Mass attended by an impressive estimated five million people.

But beyond such scattered moments there were no real steps forward, and the People's Republic of China was showing no signs for renewing its diplomatic ties with the Holy See, in fact "while continuing to insist that the Vatican sever diplomatic relations with Taiwan, the PRC stepped up the pressure on the underground Church in various regions of the country. Anti-Catholic government policy frequently overlapped with the regime's one-child-per-family policy and led to further persecution."²⁴

In 1996, on the occasion of the seventieth anniversary of the consecration of the first Chinese bishops by Pope Pius XI, John Paul II wrote a "Message to the Church in China," insisting on the need for reconciliation among divided Catholics and addressing the Chinese government:

The civil authorities of the People's Republic of China should rest assured: a disciple of Christ can live his faith in any political system, provided that there is respect for his right to act according to the dictates of his own conscience and his own faith. For this reason I repeat to the governing authorities . . . that they should have no fear of God or of his Church. Indeed, I respectfully ask them, in deference to the authentic freedom which is the innate right of every man and woman, to insure that those . . . who believe in Christ may increasingly contribute their energies and talents to the development of their country.²⁵

Another opportunity for the restoration of the diplomatic relations arose in March 1999 when the Chinese leader Jiang Zemin visited Italy. As expected there was no visit to the Holy See on the agenda but a message from the Pope was communicated to

²¹ John Paul II, "Prayer for North Korea and China," *Origins* 19:20 (October 19, 1989), pp. 324–325 in George Weigel, *op.cit.*, p. 595.

²² *Ibidem*, p. 753.

²³ *Ibidem*.

²⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 755.

²⁵ John Paul II, "Message to the Church in China," *OR [EWE]*, December 11, 1996, p. 8, in George Weigel, *op.cit.*, p. 755.

Zemin through the Italian prime minister; although there was no meeting or immediate response other than the reiteration of *the two usual pre-conditions: break with Taiwan and no interference in China's internal affairs*, "Beijing seemed interested in starting a dialogue concerning diplomatic relations. In fact, for a few months there were persistent rumors that diplomatic relations would soon be established."²⁶

However just a few months later any such hopes vanished when a secret document No. 26 "Regarding the Strengthening of Catholic Church Work in the New Circumstances" was revealing that in fact the Chinese government was interested in the diplomatic relations only to reach a complete control over the Catholic Church, to eliminate the underground communities, and to strengthen the Catholic Patriotic Association. The period that followed was one of renewed persecution of the underground Catholics: "bishops and priests were arrested, churches were destroyed and children of underground Christians were prevented from attending schools and universities."²⁷

Moreover, in the summer of 1999 the Pope was denied the possibility of a visit to Hong Kong. The culmination and a clear "act of defiance against the Vatican"²⁸ indicating there would be no immediate reconsideration of the diplomatic relations took place during the Feast of the Epiphany in January 2000 when the Catholic Patriotic Association consecrated five new bishops without the approval from the Vatican.²⁹ This event was essentially a *pure confrontation* and "the Beijing ceremony turned out to be an extraordinary anti-Pope and anti-Church demonstration, where nothing was religious and everything was political: a bad sign for developments in the new millennium."³⁰

A last attempt to reach a communion with China was made by John Paul II in 2001 on the occasion of the 400th anniversary of the death of the most famous missionary, the Jesuit Matteo Ricci, a remarkable scientist and one of the most important representatives for the beginning of Catholicism in China. The Pope used the opportunity to express his *deep sadness* for any errors and limits of the past,³¹ asking for "the forgiveness and understanding of those who may have felt hurt in some way by such actions on the part of Christians."³² He reiterated his hopes for dialogue with the Authorities of the People's Republic of China, to overcome the misunderstandings of the past and to create ties of friendship and solidarity. There was no reaction from the Chinese authorities to the Pope's last message as there has been a deep silence to the other attempts from the Holy See to reach reconciliation and communion.

The justification offered by the Chinese government for the rejection of any diplomatic channels with the Vatican remained unchanged and focused on the

²⁶ Gianni Criveller, *op.cit.*

²⁷ *Ibidem.*

²⁸ Alvin Y. So, *China's Developmental Miracle Origins, Transformations, and Challenges*, Routledge, 2003, p. 255.

²⁹ *Ibidem.*

³⁰ Criveller, *op.cit.*

³¹ *Papal Message on Anniversary of Matteo Ricci's Arrival in China*, <http://www.katolsk.no/nyheter/2001/10/27-0014>, accessed on January 30th, 2021.

³² *Ibidem.*

imperativeness of the Vatican's rejection of any ties with Taiwan, and the strict non interference in China's internal affairs.

G. Criveller explains in his article *Pope John Paul II and China* that these justifications and pre-conditions asked by China to open the dialogue and diplomatic relations with the Holy See are "just a smoke screen, an alibi for China's unwillingness to open a discussion with the Holy See,"³³ and that it was made clear on various occasions both by private (Pope's letter to Deng Xiaoping in 1983) and public diplomacy that the Vatican was eagerly open to finding an adequate solution for this problem. There was also a clear statement made by the Secretary of State, Cardinal Angelo Sodano, that "the Vatican was ready to transfer the apostolic nunciature from Taiwan to China immediately, if Beijing would agree to the move."³⁴ There are also significant examples that "the recognition of the Republic of China in Taiwan was never a stumbling block to Chinese diplomacy":

Chinese leaders like Mao Zedong and Zhou Enlai warmly received Richard Nixon in 1972, when the United States had full diplomatic relations with Taiwan, not to mention US military assistance and collaboration. Similarly and more recently, China accepted South Korea's (1992) and South Africa's (1998) switch of diplomatic relationships from Taipei to Beijing, after the conclusion of intense negotiations, not as a pre-condition. Demanding the break of diplomatic relations as a pre-condition is unfair on the part of Beijing; it is in fact a diplomatic blunder.³⁵

At John Paul II's funeral People's Republic of China was the only nation in the world not sending a delegate and the motivation offered was the presence of Taiwan's President Chen Shui-bian.³⁶

2.2. *Pope Benedict XVI*

Pope Benedict XVI placed the stringency for diplomatic relations with China as a priority on his agenda. His 2007 "Letter to Bishops, Priests, Consecrated Persons and Lay Faithful of the Catholic Church in the People's Republic of China", expressed his fraternal closeness to Chinese Catholics. In the first part of the document the focus was placed on theological aspects and on the situation of the Church, addressing the challenges represented by globalization, modernity and atheism, while the second part offered guidelines on the pastoral life.

While not being a political document, Benedict XVI addressed his willingness for a constructive dialogue with the civic authorities, in order to overcome misunderstandings and establish the cooperation between the Holy See and the People's Republic of China.

³³ Criveller, *op.cit.*

³⁴ *Ibidem.*

³⁵ *Ibidem.*

³⁶ *Ibidem.*

The Pope also addressed the appointments of Bishops as one of the most delicate problems in their relations, emphasizing that such appointments are “understood, also in international documents, as a constitutive element of the full exercise of the right to religious freedom”³⁷ and that “the Holy See would desire to be completely free to appoint Bishops.”³⁸ Considering the recent particular developments of the Church in China the Pope expressed his confidence that “an accord can be reached with the Government so as to resolve certain questions regarding the choice of candidates for the episcopate, the publication of the appointment of Bishops, and the recognition – concerning civil effects where necessary – of the new Bishops on the part of the civil authorities.”³⁹

2.3. Pope Francis

Starting with 2014 there was a new impetus given to negotiations with China, and in 2018 Beijing and the Vatican signed a provisional agreement on the appointment of Chinese bishops, based on which the Chinese government disposed of the right to appoint bishops, while the Pope was given veto power. The agreement was intended to unify the underground and official churches, and the Vatican referred to it as *the fruit of a gradual and reciprocal rapprochement*, but more substantial information regarding the agreement were not made public.

There have been many critical voices against this agreement, not only religious ones but political as well. Cardinal Zen of Hong Kong “advised Pope Francis not to sign the agreement unless more freedom were granted to the Chinese Catholic Church as a sign of the good will from China.”⁴⁰

Thomas Farr, President of the Religious Freedom Institute, named the accord a *disaster*: “China’s Catholics are demoralized and confused by this decision that abets the most virulent anti-Catholic policy in the world. In a letter sent earlier this month to the College of Cardinals, Hong Kong Cardinal Joseph Zen nailed the issue: “[C]an we passively witness the murder of the Church in China by those who should protect and defend her . . . ?”⁴¹

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo was another critical voice and revealed that the U.S. government did not support the agreement.

Beatrice Leung in her article *The Catholic Church in China: One Year After the Sino-Vatican Agreement* claims that one cannot speak of an increase in confidence between Beijing and the Vatican after the signing of the agreement and points to the events

³⁷ Pope Benedict XVI, *Letter of The Holy Father Pope Benedict XVI to The Bishops, Priests, Consecrated Persons And Lay Faithful of The Catholic Church in The People's Republic of China*, 2007, http://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/letters/2007/documents/hf_ben-xvi_let_20070527_china.html#_ftnref43, accessed on January 30th, 2021.

³⁸ *Ibidem*.

³⁹ *Ibidem*.

⁴⁰ Beatrice Leung, *The Catholic Church in China: One Year After the Sino-Vatican Agreement*, 2019, <https://berkleycenter.georgetown.edu/responses/the-catholic-church-in-china-one-year-after-the-sino-vatican-agreement>, accessed on January 30th, 2021.

⁴¹ Thomas F. Farr, *op.cit.*

related to an international conference held in Fatima, Portugal on October 21, 2019, when Beijing pressured the organizing committee to cancel the invitation of two Hong Kong representatives: Cardinal Joseph Zen, and Martin Lee, "the patriarch of democracy of Hong Kong,"⁴² as the Sino-Vatican Agreement, and the protests in Hong Kong were on the agenda. Leung concludes that "the agreement did not serve much of the Catholic purpose, but assisted Xi Jinping's policy of Sinicization of religion."⁴³

Despite substantial criticism, on October 2020, the Vatican announced the renewal of its provisional agreement with China on the appointment of bishops for two more years. According to the *Communiqué on the extension of the Provisional Agreement between the Holy See and the People's Republic of China regarding the appointment of Bishops*, from 22 October 2020, "The Holy See considers the initial application of the Agreement – which is of great ecclesial and pastoral value – to have been positive, thanks to good communication and cooperation between the Parties on the matters agreed upon, and intends to pursue an open and constructive dialogue for the benefit of the life of the Catholic Church and the good of Chinese people."⁴⁴

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⁴² Beatrice Leung, *op.cit.*

⁴³ *Ibidem.*

⁴⁴ *Communiqué on the extension of the Provisional Agreement between the Holy See and the People's Republic of China regarding the appointment of Bishops*, 2020, <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2020/10/22/201022a.html>, accessed on January 30th, 2021.

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