

Sino-Vatican Relations in the Last Ten Years: Review and Prospects

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Since the 1980s up to the present time, relations between China and the Vatican have been a focal point for the world's media. Any action on the part of either side has aroused the interest of many observers, and has stirred the hearts of millions of believers. It even affects changes in international structures. From opposition to the canonization of saints during the jubilee year (2000) to the self-election and self-consecration of several bishops in the year 2008, and up to the opening of the 8th assembly of Catholic representatives in December 2010, all these activities have caused China-Vatican relations, in the past two decades, to drop to a freezing point. However, in 2013, new leaders came to power in both China and the Vatican. Both sides tried to make contact with one another once again. It was hoped that knotty problems could be solved, and a win-win situation could be arrived at. Summing up all the media reports and analyses from all sides, from the start of 2014, traces of a warming up seemed to appear amidst the tenseness between both sides. At one point, it was even reported that the establishment of diplomatic relations between the two sides was a distinct possibility. Worth noting was that everyone was in favor of dialogue, rather than being in opposition to one another. The Second Vatican Council had required that the Church be in dialogue with all kinds of organizations, even with atheists. Actually, only through sincere and constructive dialogue, can true meaningful fruit be really achieved.

All Kinds of Difficulties in Sino-Vatican Relations

The travails in Sino-Vatican relations are unimaginable to secular people. In the last analysis, what obstacles yield only failure

and prevent the establishment of relations? On the level of technique, can negotiations lead to the establishment of diplomatic relations? Can diplomatic relations help to solve the situation of the Catholic Church in China?

As the ruling party, the Communist Party thoroughly implements the Party's ideology. "Atheism" and "the leadership of the Party" are the two fulcrums on which the Party stands. Atheism has for a long time been the indestructible moral foundation upon which the ruling party exercises its absolute rule over the country. It requires that only the Party can determine all standards of morality and of behaviour. Persons are tools of political struggle. The purpose is to protect the Party's absolute leadership and the temporal power of the central collective authority. In international relations, the Party often plays an idiosyncratic role, denying the existence of universal values. In marked contrast to the CCP, the Vatican makes spiritual power the foundation of their country. Its special characteristic of the union of politics and religion is so that it can independently serve all the believers throughout the world. It is not secular rule. The ideals of freedom, equality and love, that Catholic doctrine preaches, become the standard of the Vatican's policy of worshipping God and respecting mankind. Comparing the CCP's ideology and the Roman Catholic Church's faith, one can easily see the contradictions, and even the incompatibility, between the two. For the two to come in contact with each other, and to dialogue with each other, and for either one to weaken their standpoint essentially would be very difficult. This kind of difficulty causes each one to always run into the bottom line of the other, when negotiating about diplomatic relations. This is exactly the obstacle in Sino-Vatican relations.

The Vatican's Foreign Relations Principles are Firm

In the face of such a difficult situation, some Catholics always worry about the wisdom of Vatican diplomats when they are negotiating with the communists. Actually, people can be at ease about the ability of the Holy See's diplomats. Retired Pope Benedict XVI once gave a talk to the students at the Holy See's Foreign Service Academy. He clearly told them what qualities a

foreign service officer should have as he prepares himself for his work: "During dialogue, one should have patience, perseverance, present arguments reasonably, and have a firm attitude." The basic mission of the Holy See's diplomacy and governance is to help the Chinese Catholic Church to truly and completely practice their Catholic faith, and to be in communion with the universal Church.

During diplomatic contacts between China and the Vatican, and the dialogue which has taken place, the Vatican always takes the initiative, expresses good will, and is clear and self-confident. The CCP's attitude, however, has always been one of stalling, obscurity and defensive. Early on, at the beginning of China's opening up, Pope John Paul II wrote a letter to the former Chinese leader, Deng Xiaoping, expressing respect and good will. Up to today, the Chinese government still repeats the same diplomatic vocabulary that has remained unchanged for over 30 years, to fortify its determined ideology and to block any development in Sino-Vatican relations.

The 2007 letter of the retired Holy Father, Benedict XVI, to all the Catholics of China clearly states that the principle of the independent and democratic running of the Church is incompatible with the doctrine of the Catholic Church. The Chinese government precisely uses this religious policy to supervise and change the faith and the organization of the mainland Catholic Church. Up to now it has used this forceful method to control religion. The Vatican has continually hoped that with the new CCP leaders, they could break the shackles in the ideology of the CCP's religious policy, which bind China-Vatican relations. However, after extending an olive branch for so many years, they have been unable to secure the sincerity and the flexibility of the CCP's highest leaders. The world cannot see any change in the ideology and behaviour of the CCP. The Vatican's hoped for change also does not appear in any of China's present documents of legislation, administration or law.

Contrary to the Chinese side, Vatican diplomacy regards human beings as being more important than political equilibrium. A central point of the Holy See's diplomacy is protection and respect for the human person. The safeguarding of religious freedom, and the promotion of education and works of charity are the guidelines of the Vatican's diplomatic policy. These principles and the threats

to political power, which some CCP leaders worry about, are far apart from each other. But just because of this, they pose a challenge and attack the ideology, which forms the basis of the CCP's authority and intellectual foundation in all areas of life. Therefore the CCP is unwilling to loosen its control over Chinese Catholic organizations. They must force each religious organization to become their political tool. In this kind of situation, Catholic organizations are gradually sinking into becoming a national church in service to the communist government. Their role of preaching the Gospel of the salvation of souls is naturally becoming weaker. In the national United Front conference, Xi Jinping requested that religious work maintain "the direction of sinicization." Chairman Xi most likely has a deep understanding of culture, and the effect of traditional moral factors on the masses and on human life. The removal of the crosses from the Christian churches in Zhejiang Province is probably a tightening up in the CCP's religious policy, a new wave of actions to fully implement the state's religious policy of "sinicization."

The Holy See absolutely cannot accept or tolerate a national church, independent from the rock of Peter. It will be very difficult for bargaining techniques in diplomatic negotiations to make a breakthrough in the ideology of the CCP's religious policy. If the CCP does not make a complete turn around in its ideology, make concrete and visible adjustments, and the Catholic Church cannot obtain a place outside the rule of the policy, then the future development of Sino-Vatican relations will never see good results.

The life of any local church should be out in the open. Those which touch upon social issues should cooperate with the local government on a fairly deep level. The problems of the Catholic Church in China are not isolated, individual cases. They have a close relationship to the problems of other religions and ethnic minorities. The Chinese government would not, or probably could not, leave aside the problems of other religions to individually solve the Catholic Church's problems. If the Chinese government does not respect freedom of conscience, nor make a step in the direction of improving religious freedom, it is bound to lead to a worsening of many other problems, like problems in Tibet and Xinjiang, problems with other political parties, or with each religion. If the

Chinese government cannot bring about a comprehensive solution to these ethnic minority or religious problems, then it would be very difficult to arrive at an essential agreement with the Vatican, which would protect the rights and religious freedom of the Catholic Church. Likewise, if the Catholic Church struggles only for some space for itself, and does not care about the rights of the Chinese people, and thus display its wonderful reputation, it would be even less capable of achieving a special place for itself. If they cannot help the Chinese people to enjoy freedom of conscience and freedom of religion, then China-Vatican diplomatic relations are merely discussions among lovers of peace in a closed room.

On March 11th this year, Cardinal Pietro Parolin, the Vatican Secretary of State, in answering a reporter's question about China-Vatican relations, said: "Contact is just now taking place. Both sides are willing to dialogue. Dialogue has its rhythms and times, and we hope that they will bear some fruit. But now there are no important new developments." He emphasized: "Dialogue between the two sides is the only way to make progress, and to find a common meeting point, to try to arrive at mutual understanding, and to look for solutions to present problems." But if China and the Vatican both have unshakeable principles, how can parallel tracks arrive at a "common meeting point?"

The Problem of the Bishops is Profound and Lasting

"Episcopal Candidates" seems to be a "Common Meeting Point" that both sides pay attention to. Each side maintains its own essential standards for judging and role of mission. Bishops recognized by both sides is the result both China and the Vatican would be happy to see. This "weird embryo," as some people call it, is a risk for the life of faith. The CCP has never loosened its use or control of the "vested right" of individuals or of opportunists. Experience over a long period of time has proven that if the Chinese government does not have complete control, or adopt controlling methods, it is very difficult to suggest someone for the office. Regarding this point, the Hong Kong political situation gives a very clear warning to the world. The Vatican's appointment, retroactive recognition or a "mutual declaration of legality" of

official bishops maintains the communion required by canon law. But the majority of such bishops are close to the CCP, or are weak. They do not care about canon law, and they are kidnapped by the CCP to carry out acts opposed to the faith and to the communion of the Church. They continue to stand on the platform of the “three-self” and the “democratically-run” national church. Some people worry that the Chinese Church will become a schismatic organization blessed by the Vatican! The Vatican’s over-cautious approach to the CCP is not only because they fear that the CCP will cruelly oppress the Catholics on the mainland. What is even more worrying is the Chinese Catholic Church will become like the Anglican Church or the Russian Orthodox Church. If we want to talk about what the Vatican accomplished in its over 30-year dialogue with the CCP, it would be that, to a certain degree, it protected and saved the Chinese Catholic Church from becoming a schismatic church in the full sense of the word. In the present anxious situation of Sino-Vatican diplomacy, how can the Church fight against the conditions of the “sinicization” of a national church? How can it avoid the situation of “to raise tiger is to court disaster” (appeasement)? What should the Holy See do?

The Curia Should Strongly Maintain Its Position

There is no need for the Vatican to waver in appointing bishops for the Chinese Church for fear of upsetting the Chinese government. The Church’s starting point is faith, theology and pastoral work, and not politics and diplomacy. The latter things exist to serve the former. The office of bishop is for the sake of the life of the local church. The experience of the life of the Church continually tells us that where there is a bishop, there is the church. The bishop’s office represents an expression of the local church’s faith. It is a continuation of the apostolic Church. If a local church does not have a bishop, and the Catholic people urgently need one, the Holy See, within a certain area, after examining the qualifications of candidates, should resolutely appoint a bishop to that local church. Only in this way, can it really carry out its responsibility to strengthen the faith of the brothers and sisters. Without God’s help, no one is suitable to be a bishop. If the

candidate has already prepared well in his life to carry his cross and follow Jesus, the Holy See has the duty to appoint him to be the bishop of a local church, even though his politics or ideology is not in line with that of the authorities. The political authority's persecution of religion should not become an obstacle to the Holy See's appointment of a bishop. On the contrary, if the Holy See appoints a bishop who is not afraid of difficulties when faced with government persecution, and who courageously bears witness, this would even more manifest the strength of the Gospel and the love Christ has for the Church; at the same time, it would serve as evangelization amongst a certain people, or within a certain country. The Korean Church, which resurrected from the fresh blood of the martyrs, is a model for the life of the Church in East Asia, and a visible image of the future. On the other hand, those who maintain the principle of the "independent and democratic running of the church," who have not obtained the appointment of the Holy See, but are self-elected and self-consecrated, even though their virtue and pastoral care of the faithful is outstanding, they should not become candidates for bishop. This would be a public scandal, because those are the words of a schismatic church. If the Holy See were to appoint such a person as bishop, this would greatly increase the danger that the Catholic Church of China would become schismatic, and it would bring unimaginable chaos to the Catholic Church in China. Regarding those priests who openly oppose the policy of "the independent and democratic running of the church," if there is a need in a local church, and the Holy See recognizes that his moral character makes him suitable to be an episcopal candidate, then he should have the priority to be appointed bishop, over those who just echo the CCP's religious policy. Truly, when Sino-Vatican relations continue to be in a deeply worrying situation, the greatest, most practical, and visible contribution the Holy See can make to the Church in China is to choose a real pastor for the Church – a bishop.

In the enterprise of preaching the Gospel of Christ to one billion Chinese people, the Holy See has an authority and a role which cannot be replaced. However, at a certain level, the real main role belongs to the bishop and the mass of Chinese Catholics. They are really the ones who come in contact with the CCP, and can

really dialogue with them, even though they may not be “brought” as equals before the government officials. To preach the Gospel in such a chaotic situation as exists in China today, they will always face many new challenges. Therefore, the loyalty, firmness and purity of the faith of all levels of pastoral worker and of the mass of believers is the foundation of the Church’s continuous evangelization and development. Just as our emeritus Holy Father Pope Benedict XVI pointed out in his 2007 pastoral letter to the Chinese Church, now and for a certain period of time in the future, the most important task of the Chinese Church is still formation. Only formation work can help each mature Catholic living in China to learn how to be a prophet in these times, and how to be leaven in this society.

A Look Ahead

For the healthy development of China-Vatican relations, one can only hope that there is a complete turn around in the CCP’s governing political strategy. Of course, this undoubtedly would require that the CCP undergo a complete transformation. This change would require a miracle, and a great person to carry it out. It could not come about through human technique and capability.

Some people consider the chess match between the CCP and the Vatican to be a battle between the red dragon and the woman and her progeny (Revelation 12). This is a picture of a fierce struggle between life and death. Christ and His Church are the weak ones. However, counting on impregnable fortitude and God’s help, victory can be attained. When no “common meeting point” can be arrived at, only a firm hold on the faith, and all that that means, can save us. We need patience and in the midst of difficulties, wait for a miracle to happen!