

# *Our Time Belongs to God: A Reflection on China-Vatican Relations*

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*Translated by Annie Lam*

Since the beginning of the 1980s, the topic of China-Vatican relations has been an object of international media scrutiny. Any incident related to this issue always draws media attention, and analyses are made of the situation. In recent years, especially after 2008, China has ordained the largest number of illicit bishops (ordinations without papal mandate) since the Great Jubilee Year of 2000. They also convened the Eighth Assembly of Catholic Representatives in 2010. This caused China-Vatican relations to fall to the lowest point in the last decade. According to media reports and analyses, since the middle of 2014, both China and the Holy See have seemingly softened their stances. Today, the contacts between China and the Holy See are quite frequent, and it is rumored that the communications have even created the chance for the establishment of diplomatic relations. Anyway, no matter what these contacts lead to in the future, the dialogue between the two sides is always commendable and appreciated. In fact, only through sincere contacts and constructive dialogue, can the situation be a win-win one. Regarding the crucial point of such relations and their perspectives for the future, I would like to raise a few points for discussion and reflection.

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*Editor's note: This article was sent to the Holy Spirit Study Centre in 2015, before Father Yu Heping died in November of the same year. Tripod now publishes it in commemoration of his death.*

First, in the process of dialogue and contact, including efforts to establish diplomatic relations between China and the Holy See, both sides obviously have approached the process with different purposes. For the Chinese government, it must consider the extent of religion's influence in the area of ideology; and what gains in international politics would the establishment of diplomatic relations with the Holy See bring about. The Chinese government would weigh the pros and cons of establishing such relations. As for the Holy See, the principal hope would be that the Catholic Church in China enjoy genuine religious freedom.

Since the early 1980s, the attitude of the three successive Popes regarding China has always been clear and consistent. The Chinese Catholics, like all the faithful in other parts of the world, should be able to enjoy the right to full religious freedom in the People's Republic of China. This means each Catholic in China should have the human dignity and humanity to enjoy the right to religious freedom, in accordance with the "Universal Declaration of Human Rights" promulgated by the United Nations. The Holy See has, on many occasions, urged the Chinese government to take concrete steps to guarantee this fundamental right to all citizens of the People's Republic of China. Regrettably, we do not see any such solid steps taken, nor do we see any legal protection given through China's current legislative, administrative and judicial processes. Therefore, we believe that the right to religious freedom should be the main demand in the dialogue and contacts between China and the Holy See. Looking at the current situation of Chinese society and from a political point of view, it is hard to say if the Chinese government will put into practice any means to protect the right to religious freedom of all the citizens of the People's Republic of China. Under the present social and political conditions in China, it seems hard to identify any positive signals that indicate that the Chinese citizens' exercise of the right to religious freedom is safeguarded. Please consider the following points:

1. The first concerns the oft-repeated issue of the principles of "independence, autonomy, and a democratically-managed Church" laid down by the Chinese government regarding the Catholic Church in China. Such principles were clearly "incompatible with

Catholic doctrine,” as cited in emeritus Pope Benedict’s 2007 “Letter to the bishops, priests, consecrated persons and lay faithful of the Catholic Church in China.” Nevertheless, since then, we have observed the attitude of the Chinese authorities toward the Catholic Church in China to be one of control by the Communist Party. Today, we have not seen any indication or chances that the Chinese government will abandon such principles.

2. The matter of the appointment of bishops is always a major prickly issue that affects China-Vatican relations. How should this question be resolved? This is one of the difficulties in the dialogue between both sides. What we see here is that the Chinese government has substantial leverage because the Holy See has recognized a considerable number of Chinese bishops over the past 15 years. These bishops, mostly in their 50s, are favored by the Chinese government. In the next 20 years at least, the difficulties for the life of the Church in China brought about by this issue are immeasurable.

3. To say the least, even if these two difficult problems can be solved in the dialogue and contacts between China and the Holy See, this does not mean the Catholic Church in China will enjoy genuine religious freedom. Because the realization of the right to religious freedom in the Church in China does not depend solely on resolving the two issues (important as they are to the life of the Church); rather, it depends on the realization of freedom and human rights in Chinese society. It is not optimistic that this will happen in the current political and social situation of China. The reasons for this are:

i. Regarding the political situation, conflicts and struggles within the Communist Party are very intense now; so we are unable to know clearly which faction is interested in dialogue with the Vatican. We wonder if those opposed to talks with the Vatican may use this chance to censure and block those who favor such a dialogue. At least in the light of this very murky, and possibly unstable political situation in China, perhaps this is not the best time for the Holy See to dialogue with China.

ii. For the Chinese government, the Catholic issue in China is not an isolated matter. It is linked to problems of other religions and ethnicities. It is impossible for the Chinese government to solve the Catholic problem without dealing with other issues, such as Tibet, Xinjiang and autonomous management among ethnic groups. If the Chinese government has not come up with a comprehensive plan to resolve all ethnic and religious issues, it is difficult to separate the issue of the Catholic Church in China by entering into an agreement with the Vatican to protect the religious freedom of Catholics in China.

iii. For the Catholic Church, even if the Chinese government is sincere enough to solve the problem of an "independent, autonomous, and democratically-managed Church," as well as the Holy See's appointment of bishops, this does not necessarily mean that the Catholic community in China will be able to enjoy full religious freedom. If the Chinese government does not provide the means to really implement the rights of freedom, democracy and human rights, then just to have a means to resolve the two thorny issues cannot bring about genuine religious freedom for the Catholic community in China. For instance, if there is no means to exercise freedom of speech, and of the press, then the Catholic Church will continue to lack the ability to freely communicate in China; if the Chinese government does not respect the right of parents to choose educational opportunities for their children, then education in the Catholic faith will continue to be restricted; if China's land problems cannot be resolved properly, then the Catholic Church in China cannot own its real estate or other assets. There are still many more social problems that cannot be resolved in the near future by Chinese society and the Chinese government. If these problems are not solved, then no matter what kind of agreement both sides reach, the issue of religious freedom will remain an empty letter, without any actual content.

Having considered all the factors above, we can see that a guarantee and respect for the right of religious freedom in China still lags far behind, and it will take a long time to be implemented. And the resolution of these problems depends on whether the

Chinese Christians can acquire a social conscience, and if the seeds of the Gospel can be sown on this land. Here, at this moment, they should become prophets for their times, and become salt and light for their society. Therefore:

i. For Catholics in China, as addressed in emeritus Pope Benedict XVI's "Letter to the bishops, priests, consecrated persons and lay faithful of the Catholic Church in China," the fundamental and foremost task remains formation. This is important for the present, and for a considerable period of time in the future. Only formation will allow every bishop, priest, consecrated person and lay Catholic to become a prophet for this age, to be the yeast of society, and to spread the seeds of the Gospel throughout the land of China.

ii. From the perspective of the Holy See, its main responsibility is neither diplomatic nor political, but to help the Holy Father to confirm the faith of the Christians in China. The ultimate mission of the Holy See's diplomacy and politics is nothing more than to help the Christians in China to live in full ecclesial communion. The life of any local church should be open. On issues relating to social affairs, there must be a considerable degree of collaboration between the Church and the local government. However, the prerequisite is that local governments must conscientiously respect the right of religious freedom for Church groups, or at least they should not allow ideological and political forces to forcibly intervene in the internal affairs of religion. In the dialogue between the Secretariat of State of the Holy See and the Chinese government, the Chinese government should endeavor to promote the right of religious freedom for the faithful and for the Catholic communities; the Holy See should strive through diplomatic means to encourage the Chinese government to avoid using ideological and political forces to intervene in the Catholic Church. The Chinese government needs the church to become a true Catholic Church in China, in union with the universal Church's own "independent and self-managed church," rather than one where the government intervenes in religious work and in the internal affairs of the Church.

Regarding the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and the Holy See, *the pre-requisite should be that ecclesial communion with the universal church, and religious freedom for the Catholic communities in China are ensured and guaranteed.* In the event that this fundamental right of religious freedom of Chinese Catholics is not achieved, I think there is no hurry to establish diplomatic relations. A Chinese saying says: “What one wants to get in a hurry will never be achieved.” The time of the Church is the time of God. The Church believes in a Christ who died and resurrected. Our Church has the time, and she can wait, even if it takes 300 years.

Moreover, the Holy See need not suspend the appointment of bishops for the Church in China just to avoid agitating the Chinese government. The starting point of the Church is always faith, theology and pastoral needs, and not for politics and diplomatic reasons. This is because the existence of the latter is for the service of the former. We believe that the episcopal ministry is essential to the life of a local church, and the experiences of Church life have continually shown that where there is a bishop, there is the Church. The episcopal ministry becomes a fundamental expression of the Church in a locality. If a local Church community does not have a bishop, and the People of God are in urgent need of a pastor, the Holy See should consider the suitability of potential candidates through all possible means. Then she should appoint a bishop for the local Church decisively. Only by doing so, will she reaffirm the faith of her brothers and sisters in China. In the case where there is no suitable candidate for the episcopacy, then any candidate who is willing to accept this mission in life, and to bear the Cross connected with this mission, should be considered for appointment. The Holy See has no right to delay or to deny the appointment of bishops for the local Church because of political or ideological differences with the Chinese authorities. Political persecution cannot be the reason for blocking the papal appointment of bishops. On the contrary, if the Chinese bishops appointed by the Holy See can bravely bear witness to their faith under political persecution, this practice will reveal the inner strength of the Gospel and the love of Christ for His Church.

Finally, the aforementioned principles of an “independent, autonomous and democratically-managed Church,” as well as the election and ordination of bishops without papal mandate, as practiced by some within the Catholic Church in China, are not acceptable and they should not be supported. Therefore, a priest who has participated in one of those two actions, even though his personal virtues and his leadership capabilities are quite outstanding, should not be selected as a qualified candidate for bishop. This would be a public mistake. If the Holy See appoints such a person as bishop, morally speaking, it is equivalent to recognizing that those two wrong actions are correct. By doing so, one is not living in the truth, unless the candidate acknowledges publicly that he has abandoned those principles and that he does not put them into practice. For the same reason, those priests who publicly express opposition to the principles of “independence, autonomy, and a democratically managed Church,” as well as oppose the ordination of bishops without papal mandate, if a local Church really needs a bishop, the Holy See should consider whether such priests have the personality and qualities needed in an episcopal candidate. It would be far better to appoint such a person as bishop than to appoint those who adhere to the two measures that injure ecclesial communion mentioned above. Such a person should have the priority of being appointed bishop.