

Prospect of Diplomatic Relations between Taiwan and the Holy See, according to a Taiwanese Catholic

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Taiwan has maintained diplomatic relations with the Holy See under the title of “Republic of China.” Would that change with the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) gaining control over both the executive and the legislative branches of government in 2016? Doubts have emerged since the second half of 2015 when polls predicted the results of the coming election. In fact, speculation regarding a change in Taiwan-Holy See relations did not begin today. Since 1971, when the Republic of China lost the China seat in the United Nations to the People's Republic of China, rumors have been going around for the past 45 years. Recently, the Holy See actively publicised her contacts with the Chinese government, and it seems that they are close to establishing diplomatic ties.

As history is my specialty, I am supposed to be concerned with the past, and should not speak of the present or future. However, it is natural to extend from the past, and form opinions and observations about the present situation, based on historical understanding of Sino-Vatican negotiations. These ideas are not professional, and do not represent the position of the Church; they are only my personal opinions.

1. The Diplomatic Status of Taiwan (The Republic of China)

Since the Republic of China lost the China seat in the United Nations, Taiwan has been losing ground on the diplomatic front. In the past, when Taiwan's trade and economy were strong, she could

still rely on the so-called “dollar diplomacy.” However, after the main rival, the People’s Republic of China, became strong, Taiwan has lost diplomatic relations with many major countries. Apart from some countries in Central and South America, as well as several small countries in Africa, the Vatican is the only country in Europe, with whom she has diplomatic ties. For this reason, in terms of traditional or conventional diplomacy, it was considered important to maintain diplomatic relations with the Holy See. Diplomacy is an invisible war of maintaining or extending sovereignty. Defeat in diplomatic battles is a disgrace for a country, not to mention that the previous diplomatic allies have turned to Taiwan’s rival, China. Traditional tactics of diplomatic battles include fighting for rights and interests, as well as cutting the ground from under the rival’s feet. Therefore, to lessen contacts between the Holy See and China seems to be an important diplomatic strategy of Taiwan. However, such traditional notions actually do not conform to the real diplomatic strategy of Taiwan.

We can cite an example to show the diplomatic practice of Taiwan: Which is more important to Taiwan, the Taiwan-United States relations or the Taiwan-Holy See relations? The answer is very simple: the former. Taiwan-U.S. relations involve politics, economics and the military, etc., but Taiwan-Holy See relations involve only religion, and more specifically, Roman Catholicism with a limited population. Nevertheless, the diplomatic relations with the U.S. is unofficial, while relations with the Holy See are official. Taiwan has unofficial diplomatic relations with Japan, Korea, France and the European Community; all these relations are more important than Taiwan-Holy See relations. Taiwan is faced with its unavoidable rival, China, and is unable to establish official diplomatic relations with these countries; thus the government has to adopt pragmatic diplomacy. It has established quasi-diplomatic relations with these major or neighboring countries. These countries do not officially recognize the Government of the Republic of China, but in a sense they recognize Taiwan. For example, although the rights or interests are limited, Taiwan can still sign trade agreements with these countries, and the Taiwanese passport is accepted in these countries.

What is really important to Taiwan is the cross-strait relations. The way that the Chinese government treats the Taiwanese government essentially recognises Taiwan's identity. For example, the Chinese state media uses the term "Leader of the Taiwan Authorities" or "Leader of the Taiwan Region" to describe Tsai Ing-wen or Ma Ying-jeou, which means that China cannot rule the Taiwan Region. There exists an "authority" in Taiwan. For cross-strait contacts, the "Straits Exchange Foundation" (SEF) and the "Association for Relations Across the Taiwan Straits" (ARATS) were established. The two institutions are the "white gloves" of both governments. Although known as civil organizations, they are actually supervised by the government. In this sense, they could be described as forming quasi-relations between two states.

When President Ma Ying-jeou was in office, he knew very well the importance of relations with China. It is not only because peace in the Taiwan Strait was indispensable to the political and economic development of Taiwan, but was also due to the pragmatic diplomatic situation of Taiwan. Through communications with the Chinese government, Taipei and Beijing have reached a "diplomatic truce" in the past few years. Taiwan did not take any initiatives to establish new diplomatic ties, and by tacit agreement, China did not try to poach diplomatic allies from Taiwan, for example, Panama or the Holy See. As for the Democratic Progressive Party, its relative tendency toward Taiwan independence, and its unwillingness to mention the "1992 Consensus," would seem to break the stability achieved over a period of time, and could result in the establishment of diplomatic relations between China and the Holy See.

2. The Characteristics of the Diplomacy of the Holy See

For the Holy See, the purpose of establishing diplomatic relations with secular countries is to increase the influence of Catholicism in these countries. The Holy See has no political, military or economic interests. The main interest is the Catholic Church, followed by Christian values, e.g. humanitarianism, freedom of religion etc. In terms of belief and values, although the Holy See clearly states its opposition to abortion, the death penalty,

and euthanasia, etc., it does not sever diplomatic relations with the concerned countries where those practices exist. It can be said that the Holy See will not take the initiative to break off diplomatic relations. For the Catholic Church, the role of the *Apostolic Nuncio* is: to represent the Pope in communicating with the local Church; to supervise the local Church; to assist in the communication between the local Church and the local government. Compared with international relations in general, the relations between secular countries and the Holy See are relatively simple and easy. The ambassador to the Holy See is usually aloof from politics and material pursuits, and is generally quite well-known. Many countries are not afraid to appoint Catholics to take up the post, because they consider the Catholic Church as a common civil community. From this viewpoint, Taiwan-Holy See relations, except for the management of Catholic Church affairs themselves, are relatively simple and easy. However, as the Holy See is the only European country with formal diplomatic ties to Taiwan, whereas diplomatic relations with other European countries are unofficial, therefore, the relations between the Republic of China and the Holy See has one more purpose, namely, "visibility." This purpose is important for traditional and regular diplomatic relations, but it is not as important as pragmatic diplomacy. It is not as important as the relations with Europe and the United States, because those relations involve economic and trade cooperation, as well as the beneficial exchange of interests.

In the history of China-Holy See relations, there was a period of time when there were no official diplomatic relations. In 1922, Pope Benedict XV appointed Archbishop Celso Benigno Luigi Costantini as the Apostolic Delegate to China. Although as the Holy See's delegate to the local Chinese Church, Archbishop Costantini did not have diplomatic status, he still had frequent contacts with the Chinese Government. In 1933, Archbishop Mario Zanin succeeded him. During their tenure (1922-1946), the Church in China tried to cast off vestiges of imperialism, and put effort into building up the local Church. This shows that the primary purpose of Vatican diplomacy is not country-to-country relations, but the fostering of ties between the Universal Church and the local Church. For this purpose, it is not necessary to have an official Apostolic

Nuncio, because an unofficial Apostolic Delegate can also fulfill the same role. As the local Church is the target of diplomacy, therefore, having official diplomatic relations or not with the Holy See does not have much of an impact on the Church in Taiwan.

Another characteristic of the Holy See-Taiwan relation is that the nunciature (embassy) in Taipei is called "*Internuntiatura Apostolica in Sinis*." When the Apostolic Nunciature moved to Taipei in 1952, the Holy See considered the Republic of China as the government of China. When the People's Republic of China won its seat in the United Nations in 1971, the Holy See immediately removed its Apostolic Nunciature from Taipei. However, after the tireless lobbying of Cardinal Paul Yu Pin and Archbishop Stanislaus Lo Kuang, the Holy See confirmed that the Nunciature would remain in Taipei, but only appointed a chargé d'affaires to head it, and take care of communication with the Government and with the Catholic Church in Taiwan. In recent years, the chargé d'affaires (who does not have the title of an archbishop), to a certain extent, instructs the archbishops and bishops of Taiwan. It seems that the rank is not high enough and leads to an infringement on the dignity of the bishops of Taiwan. However, these chargés d'affaires can be appointed as Apostolic Nuncios in other countries after leaving Taiwan, e.g. Msgr. Paul Russell, the former chargé d'affaires to Taipei, was appointed as Apostolic Nuncio to Turkey. Hence we can consider these chargés d'affaires as quasi-Nuncios.

3. Trilateral Relationship Among the Holy See, China and Taiwan

I put the Holy See in the first place, so as to consider its relation with China and Taiwan from the Vatican point of view. In its official memorandum, the Holy See clearly affirms the "one-China" principle. This was the reason why the Holy See recalled its Nuncio after the People's Republic of China joined the United Nations. But China has not discussed with the Holy See about the re-installation of Apostolic Nunciature in Beijing. Therefore, under the concept that "Taiwan is a part of China," the Holy See temporarily kept its nunciature in Taipei. This situation has lasted for 45 years. The absence of a nuncio shows that Taiwan cannot

represent China. The chargé d'affaires to a certain extent is similar to the other consul generals in major cities. Thus Taiwan is marginalized under the one-China principle. According to the one-China principle, Cardinal Angelo Raffaele Sodano, the former Secretary of State of the Vatican, could speak plausibly that the Holy See would be ready to switch its nunciature from Taipei to Beijing as soon as Beijing agreed to the move.

However, the one-China principle is only on the surface of Holy See-China diplomacy, or better to say, in name only. The one-China principle was formed in the context of mainstream international diplomacy, but in practice, as mentioned above, international diplomacy generally considers China as China, and Taiwan as Taiwan, although the recognition of Taiwan is unofficial. Could the Holy See not follow the trend of international diplomacy? Observing the work of the Holy See, we can see that its actions are not necessarily in accord with its declaration. For example, the chargé d'affaires to Taipei does not get involved in the political and church affairs of China. It only manages Church affairs in Taiwan, and only communicates with the Taiwanese government officials. The political and Church affairs of China are dealt with by the so-called chargé d'affaires in Hong Kong. The Holy See adopts a balanced approach in handling the affairs of Taiwan and China. For example, "The Treasures of Heaven Vatican Museum Exhibition" held at the National Palace Museum in Taipei, which displayed 60 artifacts from the sacristy of the Holy See, was considered as a cultural exchange between the Holy See and Taiwan. Meanwhile, a delegation of Vatican officials visited Beijing for negotiations with Chinese authorities. All this indicates that the Holy See adopts different principles in dealing with the governments of China and Taiwan.

According to the above-mentioned principles of competition and cooperation, the Holy See has been expecting to establish or to resume diplomatic relations with China, but the Holy See does not have the initiative. For more than 40 years, Beijing did not want to establish diplomatic relations with the Holy See. This is the real reason why the establishment of Sino-Vatican relations has not been realized. According to conventional diplomatic thinking, it is not important for China to have diplomatic relations with the Holy See.

There have been no diplomatic relations for a long period of time, and the Chinese government succeeded in controlling and weakening the Catholic Church in China. Would she be willing now to reduce control over the Church in order to establish diplomatic ties with the Holy See? From a different perspective, although the Catholic Church in China does not threaten the authorities in China, the Chinese government is still presumptuous and opinionated, creating an imaginary enemy. However, this is not the theme of this article. If this is the basic thinking of the Chinese government, she will not want to reduce her control over religion. She should not establish diplomatic relations with the Holy See in order to avoid shooting herself in the foot. Or perhaps there is another purpose for the establishment of diplomatic relations.

In this trilateral relation, Taiwan basically has no say. Before the establishment of Sino-Vatican relations, the Holy See is supposed to break off its ties with Taiwan. This requirement is only the diplomatic rhetoric of the Chinese government to justify the present situation. On the other hand, Taiwan's diplomatic personnel in recent years have understood this situation very well. Thus they did not add any pressure when the Holy See communicates with the Chinese government. Meanwhile, they give symbolic support to the religious and humanitarian objectives of the Holy See through donations and speeches. They also keep frequent and friendly contacts with the Chinese clergy and religious Sisters, who are studying in Rome. For the Holy See, the friendly and sensible reactions of the Taiwanese diplomatic personnel puts some pressure on her to a certain extent, reminding her that she has to achieve more freedom of religion through her communications with the Chinese government, or at least obtain a greater loosening of control over the Church. If not, why does she have to establish diplomatic ties with China?

4. Our Attitudes

Viewing Taiwan-Holy See relations under the influence of China-Holy See diplomatic relations—from a faith angle—we are more concerned with how the Chinese government deals with religion. If the Catholic Church in China and all religions can

obtain greater freedom of religion through the establishment of Sino-Vatican diplomatic relations, we Catholics in Taiwan should be glad to see that it works out. Every Christian has the right to love his own country, but the final goal is the Kingdom of God. Every secular country has its own limitations. As St. Augustine said, “the City of God is superior to Rome.” Moreover, as mentioned above, the Taiwanese government’s position on this issue is: if the Chinese government grants freedom of religion, we will not oppose the Holy See improving its relations with China. Therefore, the Catholics in Taiwan do not need to put pressure on themselves because they may have a different position from the government.

As for the Catholic Church in Taiwan, under the premise that the diplomacy of Holy See is actually related to the local Catholic Church, there is no difference between official diplomatic relations and quasi-diplomatic relations. We can even expect that the Holy See would appoint a representative with higher ranking, i.e. an archbishop, to Taiwan, out of the respect to the government and the Catholic Church of Taiwan. In fact, enhancing the position of the Catholic Church in Taiwan can improve the unreasonable condition of a chargé d’affaires being appointed to a nunciature. During the transitional period, it will inevitably cause emotional pain, and this is exactly the sacrifice that the Church in Taiwan should make for the sake of our sister Church.

On the contrary, we are not glad to see the Holy See compromise its principles in order to establish diplomatic relations with China. What are these principles? They are: first, the hierarchy of the Catholic Church. The bishop has the full power of order and jurisdiction over his diocese. Therefore, the Holy See must insist on nominating its bishops. The second is the question of the separation of church and state. China’s present policy on Christianity weakens the Church through its exercise of strict control at all levels. If the establishment of Sino-Vatican relations allows the government to continue to control the bishops, and the objectives of the government are different from those of the Church, then the establishment of diplomatic relations will not have any positive effect on the Catholic Church in China. We observe that the Chinese government has recently increased its supervision and intervention in the Church, and it seems that it does not have the

intention to make any change. Under such circumstances, the Holy See should think about what consequences diplomatic relations will bring to the Church in China. If it ignores these principles, and hurts the feelings of the Catholics in Taiwan in order to establish diplomatic relations with China, we have the right to protest in front of the nunciature. This is not a dogmatic problem. If the Holy See does not act in accordance with the principles of religious belief and organization, we shall certainly manifest our own position.

5. Two Observations

Being a Taiwanese Catholic, I am more concerned about the Holy See's reasonable diplomacy than with the attitudes of the governments of China and Taiwan. However, the trilateral relations involves the three parties. Thus I have two observations regarding the governments of China and Taiwan.

Does the Chinese government's decision to establish diplomatic relation with the Holy See depend on its good or bad relations with Taiwan? If China has a rational diplomatic strategy, then it should not be like this. In the short run, this will cause frustration and confusion to the Taiwanese authorities and widen the distance between both sides. In fact, Taiwan is already accustomed to having unofficial diplomatic relations with different countries, and the international society has already established such quasi-diplomatic relations with Taiwan. On the other hand, if China continues to control the Church in China, then the establishment of Sino-Vatican relations will actually do no good to China, because China has also to make compromises in diplomacy. What the Chinese government really has to think about is: why must it control the Church? Is it not possible to consider the Church as a member of the great, harmonious Chinese society? I believe that this is exactly the heartfelt expectation of the universal Church.

Will the Sino-Vatican relations deliver a heavy blow to the Taiwanese government? No, it will not. Firstly, the Holy See wants to establish diplomatic ties with China, and this is an open secret. The Taiwanese government should already have noted this. Secondly, as mentioned above, in Taiwan-Holy See relations, the most important element is visibility. As there is no economic and

political benefit, then there will not be any loss of advantage. Only that Taiwan is one of the political entities in international community, with considerable economic and trade strengths. However, under the pressure of its powerful neighbor, China, Taiwan cannot publicly and properly have contact with different countries, including the Holy See. Psychologically this will increase her hostility against China. However, the stronger one has the say in international politics. Taiwan can only maintain quasi-diplomatic relations with other countries at the present time. If Taiwan wants to maintain formal relations with the Holy See, it should work hard on developing cross-strait relations.