

The Holy See Confirmed the Signing of a Provisional Agreement with China

Tripod Staff

The Holy See announced the signing of a provisional agreement with the People's Republic of China regarding the appointment of bishops on 22 September. At the same time, Pope Francis lifted the excommunication of seven bishops who had been ordained with government approval, but without Vatican consent. They are Zhang Silu, Ma Yinglin, Liu Xinghong, Guo Jincai, Lei Shiyin, Huang Bingzhang and Yue Fusheng. Also on the list was the deceased Bishop Anthony Tu Shihua, of the diocese of Puqi. It was said that Bishop Tu expressed his wish for reconciliation with the Pope before his death on 4 January, 2017.

According to *Vatican News*, the agreement was signed by Msgr. Antoine Camilleri, undersecretary for the Holy See's Relations with States, and Wang Chao, Chinese deputy foreign minister. They headed respective delegations at a meeting in Beijing, during which they signed an agreement regarding the appointment of bishops.

The objective of the Holy See is a pastoral one. According to the Holy See, the provisional agreement "is the fruit of a gradual and reciprocal rapprochement, has been agreed following a long process of careful negotiation and foresees the possibility of periodic reviews of its application. It concerns the nomination of bishops, a question of great importance for the life of the church, and creates the conditions for greater collaboration at the bilateral level."

The Chinese side issued a statement saying the two sides will continue communicating to promote bilateral relations.

Cardinal Pietro Parolin, Secretary of State, issued a statement noting that the Provisional Agreement between the Holy See and the People's Republic of China concerning the appointment of Bishops is of great importance, "especially for the life of the Church in China, for the dialogue between the Holy See and the

Authorities of that country and for the promotion of a horizon of peace in this present time in which we experience so many tensions at the international level.”

Leaders of the Churches in the Greater China region respond

In an interview with Reuters, Bishop Michael Yeung of Hong Kong expressed his support of the provisional agreement. He thought it was very significant, after many year of negotiations, for both sides to reach consensus and move forward. But he also thought that the agreement would not prevent the oppression of the Church in China, such as the demolition of churches and prohibiting young people aged under 18 from attending religious activities. Such problems will take time to resolve.

In a statement released on 24 September, Bishop Stephen Lee Bung Sang of Macau said that he was pleased to learn that China and the Vatican had signed a provisional agreement concerning the appointment of bishops in mainland China. The agreement is “a positive move especially in favour of the communion of the Catholic Church in China and the Universal Church.” He encouraged the faithful to “continue to pray for progress in Sino-Vatican relationship, with the hope that this provisional agreement may really be implemented, so as to contribute to and benefit the Chinese society and the Church’s charitable, pastoral, social and educational apostolates, striving to spread the Gospel of Jesus Christ far and wide.”

Fr. Otfried Chen, Secretary General of the Chinese Regional Bishops’ Conference in Taiwan, told Radio Veritas that he received a Holy See communiqué in English, Italian and simplified Chinese, stating that The Holy See had signed a provisional agreement with China in Beijing. According to the communiqué, the agreement “is purely pastoral, regarding the appointment of bishops. So it concerns the internal affairs of the Church, and it is provisional.”

On the mainland, some Catholics welcomed the agreement while others do not expect the deal to improve the situation of the Catholic Church there. An underground priest said, “The Holy

Father has accepted the illegitimate bishops, there is no reason for us to reject them.”

At the same time, quite a number of clerics of the underground Catholic Communities are still under detention. They include Fr. Liu Honggeng and Bishop Su Zhimin, both from Baoding Diocese.

According to UCAN (12 October, 2018), local Chinese officials still harbour distrust of the Vatican, despite the signing of the agreement. On 8-11 October, a Hubei Ethnic and Religious Affairs Committee seminar was held in Wuhan, attended by more than 80 priests, Sisters and lay people. During the seminar, the Committee deputy director cautioned that the “Vatican's attempt to interfere with our Catholic affairs has not changed.”

The officials also warned that the Vatican’s advocacy of the hierarchy would not stop, but would only become “more subtle and more diversified in the future.” Provincial officials warned Catholic leaders in Hubei to follow the revised State religious affairs regulations, standardise religious activities according to the law, and strengthen institutional building.

In October, following the signing of the agreement, two bishops from Mainland China were able to participate in the 2018 World Synod of Bishops. One of them was the newly pardoned Bishop Guo Jincai, who is secretary-general of the “Bishops’ Conference of China.” The other was Bishop Yang Xiaoting, vice-chairman of the “Bishops’ Conference of China.” On 3 October during the opening Mass of the Synod, the Holy Father extended a warm welcome: “Today, for the first time, we have also with us two bishops from mainland China. We offer them our warm welcome: the communion of the entire episcopate with the Successor of Peter is yet more visible thanks to their presence.” In 2005, Pope Benedict XVI had invited four bishops from China, Bishop Li Du’an of Xi’an, Bishop Jin Luxian of Shanghai, Bishop Li Jingfeng of Fengxiang and Bishop Wei Jinyi of Qiqihar, to attend the Synod in October of the same year. But the Chinese Government did not grant them permission to leave China.