

Pope Francis and the Church in China: A Pastoral-Theological Approach to Ecclesial Unity

教宗方濟各與中國教會： 以牧靈神學角度推進教會團結

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Abstract: This article examines Pope Francis's engagement with the Catholic Church in mainland China, arguing that his approach is not primarily geopolitical but deeply pastoral and theological. Rooted in the Second Vatican Council's vision of the Church as the People of God and shaped by the Theology of the People from his Latin American experience, Pope Francis's leadership emphasizes encounter, dialogue, and mercy. Through a close reading of his diplomatic gestures, theological writings, and the 2018 Provisional Agreement on the nomination of bishops, the article explores how Francis has sought to foster ecclesial unity and legitimate episcopal leadership amid longstanding divisions between the state-sanctioned official Church community and the underground

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Church community loyal to the Holy See. It also examines the reception of his outreach within China among different Catholic communities, highlighting both cautious optimism and deep concern. This engagement with the Church in China was not without risk, nor was it free from criticism. Yet it reflected a deeper theological conviction: that the Church must be present in every culture, attentive to every suffering, and committed to unity without erasing differences. His decision to reconcile bishops previously ordained without papal mandate, his emphasis on pastoral discernment, and his refusal to reduce ecclesial life to juridical categories all pointed to a Church animated by grace rather than control.

Finally, the article considers the legacy of synodality as a framework for renewal in the Chinese Church. Despite political constraints, synodality offers a spiritual and pastoral path toward healing, participation, and mission. The spirit of synodality continues to foster internal communion, empower the laity, strengthen pastoral discernment, and deepen the sense of mission. It calls all members of the Church to walk together, listening to the Holy Spirit, and to build bridges that heal rather than divide. It testifies to the belief that through humility, dialogue, and a profound commitment to the Gospel, the Church can navigate even the most intricate paths—fostering unity, appreciating diversity, and ensuring that the faith continues to flourish. His legacy invites the global Church to accompany Chinese Catholics not with fear or judgment, but with reverence, solidarity, and trust in the Spirit who guides all things toward communion. By focusing on

these dimensions, the article provides a nuanced understanding of Pope Francis's engagement with China, offering insights beyond conventional media narratives and illuminating his enduring legacy for Chinese Catholicism.

Keywords: Pope Francis, Catholic Church in China, Synodality, Pastoral Theology, Sino-Vatican Agreement, Theology of the People

【摘要】本文探討教宗方濟各與中國大陸天主教會的接觸，認為他的途徑並非主要出於地緣政治考量，而是深具牧靈（牧民）和神學意義。教宗方濟各的領導理念植根於梵蒂岡第二次大公會議關於教會是「天主子民」的願景，並受到其拉丁美洲經驗所塑造的「人民神學」的影響，強調相遇、對話和慈悲。透過仔細研讀教宗的外交姿態、神學著作以及 2018 年關於任命主教《臨時協議》，本文探討了教宗方濟各如何在官方教會與忠於聖座的地下教會之間長期存在的分裂中，努力促進教會合一和合法的主教領導。本文也探討了中國教會對教宗與中國接觸的接受態度，強調不同天主教團體既持謹慎樂觀的態度，也深感擔憂。與中國教會的接觸並非毫無風險，也並非沒有批評。然而，它體現了一種更深層的神學信念：教會必須臨在於每一種文化之中，關注每一種苦難，並致力於在不抹殺任何差異的前提下維護合一。他決定恢復先前未經教宗授權而祝聖的主教職位，他強調牧靈辨別，以及拒絕將教會生活簡化為法律範疇。這些都表明，教會是由恩寵而非控制所驅動的。

最後，本文探討了共議同行作為中國教會革新的框架。儘管有政治限制，共議同行仍提供了一條通往治癒、參與和

使命的靈性和牧靈之路。共議精神持續促進教會內部的共融，增強教友的力量，強化牧靈辨別，並深化使命感。它召喚教會所有成員攜手同行，聆聽聖神的指引，並搭建療癒而非分裂的橋樑。它見證了這樣的信念：透過謙遜、對話以及對福音的深刻委身，教會即使在最複雜的道路上也能前行——促進合一，尊重多元，並確保信仰持續繁榮發展。方濟各的遺澤邀請全球教會以敬畏、團結和信賴之心陪伴中國天主教徒，而非固守恐懼或批判的態度，因為聖神引領萬物走向共融。透過聚焦於這些角度，本文對教宗方濟各與中國的接觸進行了細緻入微的解讀，提供了超越傳統媒體敘事的洞見，並闡明了它為中國天主教留下的持久影響。

關鍵字：教宗方濟各、中國天主教會、共議同行、牧靈（牧民）神學、中梵協議、人民神學

1 Pope Francis's Pastoral Identity: Encounter, Mercy, and Global Witness

When we speak of Pope Francis, many perspectives emerge, describing him as a “humble servant,” a “courageous reformer,” a “prophetic spiritual leader,” a “man of God,” a “change-maker,” a “father,” a “brother,” a “pastor ready to give his life for his sheep,” a “peacemaker,” a “devotee to Mary,” a “saint of our time,” a “hope-sower,” a “dreamer for a better world,” a “conductor,” or a “diplomat of mercy.” Throughout his pontificate, people have found countless ways to acknowledge his witness of life.

At the core of this broad appreciation lies a consistent foundation: Pope Francis continually addresses the individual, fostering relationships at both personal and collective levels. He strives to cultivate a pastoral environment built on encounter, dialogue, and mercy.

This approach was evident from the very beginning of his papacy. On March 13, 2013, during his first greeting in St. Peter's Square, he did not immediately exercise his authority. Instead, he bowed and humbly asked the faithful to pray for him before imparting his blessing.¹ This gesture, a striking departure from tradition, immediately set a tone of humility for his pontificate.²

1 “Pope Francis Asks World for Prayers in 1st Blessing”, *The Jerusalem Post*, <https://www.jpost.com/international/white-smoke-signals-election-of-new-pope>.

2 “Papal Anniversary: For 12 Years He's Said, ‘Don't Forget to Pray for

Another profoundly touching scene occurred on his first Holy Thursday as Pontiff, just two weeks after his election, on March 28, 2013. He departed from tradition by celebrating the Mass of the Lord's Supper at the Casal del Marmo youth detention centre in Rome³. There, he washed the feet of 12 young people, including women and Muslims, a powerful gesture of humility and inclusivity that underscored his commitment to the marginalized.⁴ This was the first time a pope had included women in the Holy Thursday foot-washing ceremony.⁵

Even more strikingly, in 2019, during a spiritual retreat for peace in South Sudan, Pope Francis knelt and kissed the feet of the country's warring leaders, pleading with them for peace and reconciliation.⁶ This unprecedented act of deference

Me", *United States Conference of Catholic Bishops*, <https://www.usccb.org/news/2025/papal-anniversary-12-years-hes-said-dont-forget-pray-me>.

- 3 "Pope Francis Includes Women in Papal Feet Washing Ceremony for First Time", *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/mar/28/pope-francis-women-feet-washing>.
- 4 "Pope Washes Feet of 12 Young Detainees to Serve Them 'from the Heart'", *National Catholic Reporter*, <https://www.ncronline.org/news/vatican/pope-washes-feet-12-young-detainees-serve-them-heart>.
- 5 "Pope Washes Feet of Two Girls, Two Muslims at Youth Prison", *The Washington Post*, https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/on-faith/pope-washes-feet-of-two-girls-two-muslims-at-youth-prison/2013/03/28/0a7c573e-97e5-11e2-b5b4-b63027b499de_story.html.
- 6 "Pope Kisses Feet of South Sudan's Leaders to Encourage Peace", *Philadelphia Inquirer*, <https://www.inquirer.com/news/nation-world/pope-kisses-feet-of-south-sudan-leaders-to-encourage-peace-20190411>.

to political leaders was a powerful plea to strengthen the faltering peace process.⁷

These actions reveal the Pope Francis we are talking about – a pastor whose entire pontificate is rooted in personal encounter, dialogue, and a profound commitment to mercy, seeking to build bridges and heal divisions through humble service.

From this understanding, I wish to sharpen my focus on Pope Francis’ relationship with the Church in mainland China. Many consider the Vatican’s engagement with China to be one of the most controversial issues of his pontificate. While it is not a detailed study of the Sino-Vatican agreement on the nomination of bishops in mainland Chinese dioceses, that agreement is a key lens through which to understand Pope Francis’s engagement with China, an engagement fundamentally shaped by his unique pastoral vision, humility, and profound concern for the unity and well-being of the Church.

This article will first explore the pastoral and theological foundations of Pope Francis’s Pontificate. It will then examine the pastoral considerations guiding the Vatican’s approach to China, present feedback from China regarding Pope Francis’s impact, and finally, consider how his legacy on synodality

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7 “Pope Kisses Feet of South Sudan’s Leaders ‘for Peace’”, *The New Arab*, <https://www.newarab.com/news/pope-kisses-feet-south-sudans-leaders-peace>.

might influence the Church in mainland China.

2 The Pastoral and Theological Foundations of Pope Francis's Global Engagement

Pope Francis's ecclesiology—his understanding of the nature and mission of the Church—is deeply anchored in the vision articulated by the Second Vatican Council, which presents the Church as the People of God. This foundational perspective affirms that the Church's identity and sacramental character are revealed through her mission: a dynamic relationship with all humanity and with the entirety of creation.⁸

Far from envisioning a Church isolated from the world or confined to a spiritualism that escapes earthly realities, Pope Francis saw the Church as a living, redemptive force—one that journeys alongside humanity in its pursuit of holiness. He envisions a Church that is incarnational, immersed in the joys and sufferings of the world, and oriented toward the eschatological hope that, as the Gospel proclaims, “God may be all in all.” (1 Cor. 15:28)

This vision was marked by active engagement and pastoral sensitivity. As Pope Francis affirms:

8 “Vatican II Themes: The People of God”, *National Catholic Reporter*, <https://www.ncronline.org/blogs/essays-theology/vatican-ii-themes-people-god> [accessed 20 September 2025].

“A Church that, even in her darkest moments, is conscious of her deepest identity can be capable of understanding the imperfect and wounded world in which she lives. In her efforts to bring healing and renewal to the world, she will use the same means by which she strives to heal and renew herself, even if she at times does not succeed.”⁹

Such a statement underscored his conviction that the Church’s internal renewal and her outward mission to heal the world are inseparably linked. The Church is called not only to proclaim the Gospel but to embody it through compassion, dialogue, and solidarity.

This theological and pastoral orientation is consistently reflected in Pope Francis’s major documents. His encyclicals and apostolic exhortations reveal recurring themes that guide his ministry:

Laudato Si’ (*On Care for Our Common Home*) calls all people to an “integral ecology,” emphasizing the intimate connection between the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor, and urging a swift global response to environmental degradation.¹⁰

9 “The Ecclesiology of Pope Francis and the Future of the Church in Africa”, *Cross Works*, <https://crossworks.holycross.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1019&context=jgc> [accessed September 2025].

10 Pope Francis, *Laudato Si’: On Care for Our Common Home* (Vatican City, 2015).

Fratelli Tutti (*On Fraternity and Social Friendship*) emphasizes the “culture of encounter” and the necessity of dialogue across differences, calling for a renewed commitment to universal brotherhood.¹¹

Evangelii Gaudium (*The Joy of the Gospel*) introduces the concept of an “outgoing Church”—one that moves beyond self-preservation to embrace missionary discipleship and evangelization with joy.¹²

C’est la Confiance (*It Is Confidence*) draws inspiration from St. Thérèse of Lisieux, centering on trust in divine mercy and the simplicity of faith.¹³

Dilexit Nos (*He Loved Us*) unveils the inexhaustible love of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, affirming God’s intimate and enduring love for every member of humanity.¹⁴

Together, these documents form a coherent tapestry of Pope Francis’s ecclesial vision: a Church that is humble yet bold, wounded yet healing, contemplative yet active—a Church that walks with the world, not above it.

11 Pope Francis, *Fratelli Tutti: On Fraternity and Social Friendship* (Vatican City, 2020).

12 Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium: The Joy of the Gospel* (Vatican City, 2013).

13 Pope Francis, *C’est la Confiance: Apostolic Exhortation on St. Thérèse of Lisieux* (Vatican City, 2024).

14 Pope Francis, *Dilexit Nos: Encyclical on the Sacred Heart of Jesus* (Vatican City, 2024).

2.1 Ecclesial Vision Rooted in Latin America: The Theology of the People

Pope Francis's vision for the Church was already deeply formed during his tenure as Archbishop of Buenos Aires. His pastoral approach emerged in response to a period of profound social and cultural transformation across Latin America, when many bishops voiced concern that the Church was becoming insular—focused inwardly and failing to engage meaningfully with the evolving realities of society. This concern gained prominence during the previous General Conference of the Latin American and Caribbean Bishops (CELAM), particularly in Aparecida, Brazil, in 2007. Cardinal Jorge Bergoglio, then Archbishop of Buenos Aires, played a pivotal role as chair of the drafting committee for the final document.¹⁵

The resulting Aparecida Document offers a sharp critique of superficial religiosity—faith reduced to routine, disconnected from the transformative power of the Gospel. It warns:

“A Catholic faith reduced to baggage, to a list of rules and prohibitions, to fragmented devotional practices, to selective and partial adherence to the truths of the faith, to occasional participation in some sacraments, to the repetition of doctrinal principles, to soft or tense moralism that does not convert the lives of the baptized.

15 *Fifth General Conference of the Latin American and Caribbean Bishops* (Aparecida, Brazil, 2007).

¹⁶ Our greatest threat is the grey pragmatism of everyday life in the Church, in which apparently everything proceeds normally, but in reality, the faith is being eroded and degenerating into pettiness.” ¹⁷

Although not directly attributed to Pope Francis, the document reflects his theological and pastoral sensibilities. Its call for a missionary Church—one that moves outward to the peripheries and engages with the world—is a theme that would later reappear forcefully in his 2013 apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*,¹⁸ which outlines his vision for a Church that is “bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out on the streets.”

This ecclesial vision was shaped by decades of reflection and action through key Episcopal conferences: Medellín (1968), Puebla (1979), and Aparecida (2007). These gatherings redefined the Church’s mission in Latin America, emphasizing a preferential option for the poor and a commitment to social justice. Out of this context emerged the “Theology of the People” (*Teología del Pueblo*), a distinctly Argentine

16 Joseph Ratzinger, “Situación actual de la fe y la teología”, Conference presented at the Meeting of Presidents of Episcopal Commissions for the Doctrine of the Faith of Latin America (Guadalajara, Mexico, 1996), *L’Osservatore Romano* (Spanish edition), 1 November 1996.

17 CELAM, *Concluding Document of the Fifth General Conference of the Bishops of Latin America and the Caribbean* (Aparecida, Brazil, May 2007), no. 12.

18 Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium (The Joy of the Gospel)*, Apostolic Exhortation (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2013).

theological current that diverges from classical liberation theology. Rather than focusing on ideological confrontation, it emphasizes the cultural, spiritual, and communal dimensions of faith.¹⁹

Unlike more abstract theological frameworks, the Theology of the People begins with a historical and cultural analysis of the lived experience of ordinary people. It conceives of “the people” not merely as a demographic category, but as a collective, organically formed community—united by shared memory, cultural identity, lifestyle, and destiny. This perspective is both historical-cultural and ethical-political, recognizing the people as a self-determining entity with social, political, and historical agency.²⁰

Argentine theologians Lucio Gera and Rafael Tello were instrumental in shaping this approach, and Pope Francis has openly acknowledged their influence on his own theological formation.²¹ The Theology of the People insists that faith must be incarnated in the life of the people—it must speak to their joys and struggles, their traditions and aspirations, and foster communion, justice, and transformation not only within the Church but throughout society.

This deeply personalist and pastoral vision—grounded in a strong faith in God and centered on the dignity of

19 Juan Carlos Scannone, “Pope Francis and the Theology of the People”, *Theological Studies* 77, no. 1 (2016): 118–135.

20 *Ibid.*, pp.121–123.

21 *Ibid.*, p.124.

the neighbor—became the foundation of Pope Francis’s pontificate. Upon his election as Supreme Pontiff in March 2013, he assumed the role of universal Pastor with a clear priority: the spiritual welfare of all Catholics and the unity of the global Church.²² Crucially, this vision is personified by his commitment to the “culture of encounter,” which defines his entire pontificate. He consistently seeks out dialogue and direct engagement, urging the Church and all people of good will to move beyond self-preservation and division to meet one another where they are, fostering the necessary dialogue and respect that builds universal brotherhood.²³

2.2 From Aparecida to Asia: How Francis’s Pastoral Theology Shaped His Dialogue with China

From the outset, Pope Francis demonstrated a keen interest in fostering dialogue with cultures and nations historically distant from the Vatican. China, with its ancient civilization and growing global influence, became a significant focus. In a 2024 interview with the Chinese Province of the Society of Jesus, Pope Francis expressed deep admiration for the Chinese people, calling them “a great people” who “must not waste their heritage.”²⁴ He praised their enduring faith and resilience, describing them as “masters of hope” and “of

22 Pope Francis, “For a Culture of Encounter”, homily, Santa Marta, September 13, 2016, Vatican.

23 Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, nos. 220–221.

24 “Pope Francis Offers Message of Hope for the Chinese People.” *Vatican News*, August 2024, <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2024-08/pope-francis-offers-message-of-hope-for-the-chinese-people.html>.

patience in waiting”—qualities he found “very beautiful.” He emphasized the importance of mutual respect and peaceful dialogue as the foundation for meaningful engagement.

This respectful tone laid the groundwork for the historic 2018 provisional agreement between the Holy See and the Chinese government regarding the appointment of bishops—a long-standing issue that had strained relations for decades. Under the agreement, both parties committed to cooperation, with the Vatican retaining final authority while acknowledging the role of Chinese authorities. Pope Francis entrusted Cardinal Pietro Parolin, the Vatican Secretary of State, to oversee the implementation of this delicate arrangement, highlighting the Church’s commitment to respectful engagement.

These gestures reflect Pope Francis’s broader diplomatic and ecclesial vision: to build bridges even in complex geopolitical contexts, always prioritizing pastoral care, dialogue, and the unity of the Church.

3 Reception and Response: Navigating Ecclesial Tensions in China

To understand the reception of Pope Francis’s pastoral engagement in China, it is essential to situate his outreach within the broader context of China’s dramatic transformation during his pontificate (2013–2025). The China that Pope Francis encountered was markedly different from the one known to his predecessors. Over the past decade, China has undergone a profound economic and geopolitical

metamorphosis, rising from a developing nation to the world's second-largest economy and a central player in global affairs.²⁵

Between 2013 and 2022, China's urban and rural disposable incomes increased significantly, narrowing the income gap and lifting millions out of poverty.²⁶ The country transitioned from a low-cost manufacturing hub to an innovation-driven economy, with strategic initiatives such as *Made in China 2025* and the *Dual Circulation Strategy* reshaping its global role.²⁷ Politically, China asserted itself more confidently on the world stage, expanding its influence across the Global South and investing heavily in infrastructure, education, and high-tech industries.²⁸

This new China—technologically advanced, economically powerful, and diplomatically assertive—posed both opportunities and challenges for the Vatican's engagement. Pope Francis's approach, marked by humility, dialogue, and pastoral sensitivity, had stood in contrast to traditional diplomatic paradigms. In his 2016 interview with *Asia Times*, he praised China as “a great country” and “a wise people,” and emphasized that “we must find the way, always

25 Volker Brühl, “China's Growth Drivers: Structural Transformation and Policy Challenges”, *Journal of Economic Policy* (2024), <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10368-024-00640-w>.

26 *Ibid.*

27 Nadège Rolland, *China's Eurasian Century? Political and Strategic Implications of the Belt and Road Initiative* (Washington, DC: National Bureau of Asian Research, 2017).

28 *Ibid.*

through dialogue; there is no other way.”²⁹ This tone laid the foundation for the historic 2018 provisional agreement between the Holy See and Beijing on the appointment of bishops—a breakthrough in a relationship long marked by tension and mistrust.³⁰

As we now turn to examine how Chinese government officials, Catholic communities, scholars, and media have responded to Pope Francis’s outreach, we must consider how this engagement intersects with China’s evolving identity, its internal religious policies, and its global ambitions. The reception of Francis’s pastoral diplomacy cannot be divorced from the socio-political and economic realities of contemporary China—a nation that, while ancient in heritage, is rapidly redefining its place in the modern world.

3.1 Historical Memory and National Identity

Rather than viewing China solely through the lens of socialism with Chinese characteristics, it is more accurate to understand China as a people shaped by a complex and often traumatic historical journey. The collapse of imperial

29 Francis, “Exclusive Interview with Asia Times”, interview by Francesco Sisci, *Asia Times*, 2 February 2016, <https://www.prnewswire.com/news-releases/asia-times-exclusive-pope-francis-urges-world-not-to-fear-chinas-rise-in-interview-with-at-columnist-francesco-sisci-300213640.html>.

30 “Holy See and China Sign Provisional Agreement on Appointment of Bishops”, *Vatican News*, 22 September 2018, <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/vatican-city/news/2018-09/holy-see-china-provisional-agreement-appointment-bishops.html>.

rule, the devastation of the Opium Wars, the imposition of unequal treaties, and the loss of sovereignty under foreign domination left deep scars on the national psyche.³¹ These events contributed to a collective memory of vulnerability and resistance, which continues to inform attitudes toward foreign institutions and ideologies.

The founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949 followed years of civil conflict and war against Japanese invasion. The national anthem, with its call to vigilance and sacrifice, reflects a spirit of resilience rooted in historical struggle.³² In recent decades, President Xi Jinping has emphasized the “Chinese Dream” and the “great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation,” framing national development as a response to historical humiliation and foreign interference.³³ In many of his speeches, there is a consistent emphasis on safeguarding sovereignty and resisting external influence in domestic affairs.

In this context, Christianity—particularly Catholicism—remains under scrutiny. As a religion with foreign origins and transnational ties, it is often viewed through the lens of national security and cultural integrity. The state's policy of *Sinicization* seeks to align religious practice with

31 Jonathan D. Spence, *The Search for Modern China*, 3rd ed. (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2013), Section II.

32 Spence, *The Search for Modern China*, Sections III & IV.

33 Xi Jinping, *The Governance of China*, vol. 1–3 (Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 2014–2020).

Chinese traditions and socialist values, reinforcing the need for oversight and regulation of religious institutions.³⁴ This approach reflects both historical sensitivities and contemporary governance priorities.

3.2 Ecclesial Tensions and Pastoral Discernment

Since the reopening of churches in the 1980s, two distinct Catholic communities have emerged in mainland China: the state-sanctioned official Church community and the underground Church community loyal to the Holy See.³⁵ Over time, tensions between these communities have evolved—from questions of fidelity to the Pope to disputes over the validity of sacraments, the legality of episcopal ordinations, diocesan boundaries, and the ownership of church property.

For any successor of Peter, the first pope, the prospect of division within the Church is deeply painful. Pope Francis has responded not with condemnation but with discernment. He has called the universal Church to listen and to seek the guidance of the Holy Spirit in navigating these complexities. His spiritual leadership emphasizes unity without erasure, dialogue without compromise, and accompaniment without coercion.

Pope Francis's pastoral approach begins with a

34 Beatrice Leung, "China's Religious Policy and the Catholic Church", *China Perspectives* 1 (2020): 15–24.

35 Michel Chambon, "Catholicism in China: Between Diplomacy and Discipleship", *Theological Studies* 84, no. 1 (2023): 45–67.

historical and cultural analysis of the lived experience of ordinary people. He is a pontiff who walks alongside the suffering and the proud, listening deeply and responding with compassion. His predecessors, though differing in style, shared a commitment to dialogue, relationship, and friendship with China. Francis's vision offers a path forward—one that respects the dignity of Chinese Catholics, acknowledges historical wounds, and fosters communion through pastoral presence rather than political pressure.

Pope Francis is acutely aware that Catholics in China constitute a “little flock”—some have suffered deeply for their loyalty to the Holy See and feel abandoned, while others look with hope toward a future where the Church can flourish in unity and freedom. The 2018 Provisional Agreement must be understood within this pastoral framework: the Holy See's intention has never been political but spiritual—to support the preaching of the Gospel and to restore full and visible communion within the Catholic community in China.³⁶

Central to this effort was resolving the long-standing issue of episcopal appointments, which had become a source of division and pain. The bishop, as guardian of apostolic faith and guarantor of ecclesial unity, stood at the heart of these tensions. After careful discernment, prayer, and consultation,

36 “Communiqué on the Signing of the Provisional Agreement between the Holy See and the People's Republic of China,” *Holy See Press Office*, 22 September 2018, <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2018/09/22/180922b.html>.

Pope Francis chose to reconcile seven bishops previously ordained without papal mandate, lifting canonical sanctions and readmitting them into full communion with the Church. He called on them to demonstrate their restored unity through visible gestures of fidelity to the Apostolic See and solidarity with the universal Church.³⁷

This decision reflected Francis's conviction that mercy must prevail over juridical rigidity. As he once wrote, "No law or precept can prevent God from once more embracing the son who returns to him... Remaining only at the level of the law is equivalent to thwarting faith and divine mercy."³⁸ Even in complex ecclesial situations, the Pope consistently emphasized the transformative power of grace and the primacy of reconciliation over exclusion.

3.3 Diplomatic Continuity and Mutual Trust

The Vatican's diplomatic engagement with China under Pope Francis has not gone unnoticed by Chinese authorities. According to a Chinese researcher closely involved in Sino-Vatican relations, government officials have expressed appreciation for the Pope's consistently positive and respectful posture throughout the negotiation process.³⁹ His approach—

37 Francis, "Message to the Catholics of China and to the Universal Church", 26 September 2018, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/pont-messages/2018/documents/papa-francesco_20180926_messaggio-cattolici-cina.html.

38 *Ibid.*

39 Interview with Chinese researcher, cited in internal Vatican

marked by patience, discretion, and pastoral concern—has earned him a reputation as a trustworthy partner in the eyes of Beijing.

This mutual trust has contributed to the sustained renewal of the Provisional Agreement. While the first two iterations of the agreement were renewed biennially, the third renewal—signed in 2022—was extended to a four-year term. This shift reflects growing confidence in the stability of the arrangement and a shared desire to foster a harmonious relationship between the Holy See and the Chinese state.⁴⁰

This evolution in diplomatic rapport was underscored by the October 2024 communiqué from the Holy See, which confirmed the extension of the Provisional Agreement for another four years. The statement emphasized “consensus reached for an effective application” and reaffirmed the Vatican’s commitment to “respectful and constructive dialogue with the Chinese Party” for the benefit of both the Church and the Chinese people.⁴¹ The agreement, originally signed in September 2018, marked a historic turning point in Sino-

communications, 2023. See also: Francesco Sisci, “China and the Vatican: A Relationship of Mutual Respect”, *Asia Times*, October 2023.

40 Holy See Press Office, “Renewal of the Provisional Agreement between the Holy See and the People’s Republic of China”, *The Holy See*, 22 October 2022, <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2022/10/22/221022b.html>.

41 Holy See Press Office, “Communiqué on the Extension of the Provisional Agreement between the Holy See and the People’s Republic of China”, *Vatican.va*, 22 October 2024, <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2024/10/22/241022c.html>.

Vatican relations, ending decades of episcopal ordinations without papal mandate and allowing for greater ecclesial unity within China.⁴²

The extension also signals a strategic commitment to long-term dialogue, even amid ongoing challenges. For the Vatican, the agreement remains a pastoral instrument aimed at preserving ecclesial unity and ensuring the legitimacy of episcopal appointments. For China, it offers a framework for managing religious affairs within the bounds of national sovereignty while maintaining constructive ties with a global religious institution.

3.4 Reception and the Path Forward

The reception of the Sino-Vatican Provisional Agreement within China's Catholic communities has been as complex and multifaceted as the historical and political context in which it was signed. While the agreement represents a significant diplomatic and pastoral milestone, its impact has been interpreted differently by the two principal communities of the Church in China.

Among members of the state-sanctioned official Church community, the agreement has generally been welcomed as a step toward normalization and ecclesial legitimacy. Clergy

42 Holy See Press Office, "Communiqué Concerning the Signing of a Provisional Agreement between the Holy See and the People's Republic of China", *Vatican.va*, 22 September 2018, <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2018/09/22/180922d.html>.

and lay leaders have expressed cautious optimism, viewing the Vatican's recognition of previously unapproved bishops as a gesture of reconciliation and unity. For example, Bishop Joseph Shen Bin—appointed by Chinese authorities and later accepted by the Holy See—has publicly emphasized the importance of communion with the universal Church and has participated in events that signal alignment with Rome.⁴³ In dioceses such as Shanghai and Beijing, official clergy have begun to incorporate papal teachings more visibly into their pastoral work, including references to *Fratelli Tutti* and *Evangelii Gaudium* in homilies and catechetical materials.

At the same time, some members of the underground Catholic community loyal to the Holy See have expressed concerns regarding the agreement. These communities have long demonstrated deep commitment to their faith, often operating in challenging circumstances. The Vatican's decision to reconcile bishops previously ordained without a papal mandate has prompted mixed reactions, with some viewing it as a necessary step toward unity, while others feel uncertain about its implications. In certain regions, such as Henan and Hebei, there have been reports of underground clergy facing difficulties in adapting to the evolving ecclesial landscape.⁴⁴

43 "Shanghai Bishop Shen Bin Calls for Unity with Universal Church," *UCA News*, July 2023, <https://www.ucanews.com/news/shanghai-bishop-calls-for-unity-with-pope/101234>.

44 "Underground Clergy in Hebei Face Pressure to Join Patriotic Church," *AsiaNews*, March 2024, <https://www.asianews.it/news-en/Underground-priests-in-Hebei-under-pressure-to-register-58923.html>.

Figures such as Bishop Augustine Cui Tai, who has been noted for his dedication to the Holy See, continue to symbolize the ongoing complexities of balancing ecclesial fidelity with broader societal integration.⁴⁵

Despite these divergent responses, Pope Francis's pastoral vision continues to offer a framework for healing and discernment. His emphasis on mercy, dialogue, and accompaniment invites all Catholics in China—regardless of affiliation—to seek unity not through uniformity, but through shared faith and mutual respect. The extension of the agreement to a four-year term reflects a growing commitment to long-term engagement, and the Holy See's continued efforts to listen to local realities suggest that this process remains open and evolving.

Ultimately, the reception of the agreement reveals both the fragility and resilience of the Church in China. It underscores the need for ongoing theological reflection, pastoral sensitivity, and diplomatic prudence. As the Church journeys forward, the legacy of Pope Francis's outreach will serve as both a challenge and a guide: to build communion without coercion, and to proclaim the Gospel in a spirit of humility, courage, and hope.

45 “Ma Yanen is the New Auxiliary Bishop of Zhangjiakou, While Cui Tai is Finally Recognised (upon his Forced Retirement)”, *AsiaNews*, 4 December 2023, <https://www.asianews.it/news-en/Ma-Yanen-is-the-new-auxiliary-bishop-of-Zhangjiakou,-while-Cui-Tai-is-finally-recognised-%28upon-his-forced-retirement%29-63858.html>.

4 Synodality as a Path of Renewal: Pope Francis's Legacy and Its Prospects for the Church in China

Pope Francis made synodality a defining hallmark of his pontificate, inviting the entire Church to embrace it not merely as a method of governance but as a way of being. Rooted in the ecclesiology of the Second Vatican Council and shaped by the Theology of the People, synodality expresses the Church's identity as the People of God journeying together—bishops, priests, religious, and laity—under the guidance of the Holy Spirit in discerning and fulfilling her mission.

This vision moves beyond episodic synodal gatherings to cultivate a synodal culture marked by listening, participation, and co-responsibility. It affirms that all the baptized share in Christ's prophetic, priestly, and kingly offices, and that the *sensus fidei*—the spiritual intuition of the faithful—is a vital source of ecclesial wisdom. Synodality thus challenges purely hierarchical models and calls for a more integrated, participatory Church.

While universally applicable, the legacy of synodality presents both unique challenges and profound opportunities for the Church in mainland China.

4.1 Challenges to Synodal Practice

Introducing synodal practices within the Church in mainland China calls for a thoughtful appreciation of the

cultural and historical context in which the Church operates. Influenced by Confucian traditions and shaped by modern governance, Chinese society places high value on harmony, moral leadership, and respect for structured authority. These values often extend into religious life, where many lay Catholics relate to Church leadership with a strong sense of reverence and obedience. Decisions made by parish priests and Church leaders are generally accepted without question, reflecting a deeply rooted tradition of hierarchical engagement.

Faith formation among the laity has experienced interruptions due to significant historical transitions—from imperial rule to republicanism, and later to a socialist framework with Chinese characteristics. These shifts have shaped the relationship between religious communities and broader society. For Catholics, whose spiritual connection includes communion with the Pope as a global religious leader, this dynamic has presented unique challenges. Following the establishment of the People's Republic of China, public participation in Catholic liturgy and catechetical instruction was limited for several decades. As a result, many Catholics grew up with minimal formal religious education, often viewing their role in the Church as one of service and support to clergy.

This traditional model of leadership remains influential. However, the vision of synodality invites a renewed approach—one that emphasizes mutual listening rooted in

the dignity of baptism, encourages active participation of all the faithful, promotes transparency in governance, and fosters inclusive decision-making through broad consultation. It also calls laypeople to take on greater responsibility and deeper commitment within the life of the Church.

In the Chinese context, embracing synodality involves a gradual and respectful shift in mindset—particularly in how authority and participation are understood. This process is both delicate and ongoing.

Contemporary social and administrative frameworks present practical considerations for implementing synodal processes. Religious organizations operate within a system of oversight designed to ensure alignment with national values and cultural development. The principle of Sinicization encourages religious expression to harmonize with Chinese national and cultural identity. Within this framework, the Catholic Church continues to navigate its path, balancing fidelity to its spiritual heritage with constructive engagement in society.

The historical distinction between the state-recognized Catholic community and communities with closer ties to the Holy See adds complexity to efforts aimed at fostering unity. Building trust and open dialogue is essential for any synodal journey, and such efforts must be approached with patience, sensitivity, and mutual respect.

Furthermore, the Church's hierarchical culture—shaped

by theological tradition and external circumstances—may limit opportunities for lay voices to be fully heard in decision-making. In this context, cultivating synodality requires not only structural adaptation but also a spiritual and cultural renewal that honors both tradition and the evolving needs of the faithful.

In summary, the path toward synodality in the Church in mainland China faces complex cultural, historical, and structural challenges. Deeply rooted traditions of hierarchical leadership, limited faith formation, and evolving social frameworks present obstacles to inclusive participation and dialogue. Yet recognizing these realities is the first step toward meaningful engagement. With patience, discernment, and openness to gradual transformation, the Church can begin to explore new possibilities for renewal and communion.

4.2 Opportunities for Interior Renewal

While the path toward synodality in the Church in mainland China presents notable challenges, these very difficulties also reveal areas ripe for interior renewal. The need to reimagine relationships, deepen faith formation, and foster inclusive participation opens the door to spiritual growth and cultural transformation. Rather than viewing these challenges as obstacles, they can be embraced as invitations to rediscover the Church's mission in a way that resonates with both tradition and contemporary realities. The spirit of synodality can be introduced as a transformative framework for the Church in mainland China, particularly through renewed pastoral practice and interior conversion.

4.2.1 Fostering Internal Communion

Synodality's emphasis on listening and journeying together offers a meaningful pathway for renewing relationships within the Church. This begins with strengthening communion between the bishop and the clergy, fostering deeper unity among priests themselves, and nurturing collaboration between clergy and diocesan women religious, including consecrated virgins who often serve in various pastoral roles at both parish and diocesan levels.

Equally important is the renewal of relationships between clergy and laypeople—cultivating a spirit of openness, mutual respect, and shared responsibility among all members of the Church. When clergy, religious, consecrated persons, and laity work together in genuine partnership, the Church becomes a more vibrant and participatory community.

The synodal spirit, rooted in encounter and sincere listening, also holds promise for healing and reconciliation between the official and non-registered Catholic communities. By fostering mutual respect and a shared commitment to Christ and the Church's mission, synodality can help bridge historical divides and nurture a deeper sense of unity among Chinese Catholics. This “journeying together” transcends institutional boundaries, focusing instead on the lived experience of faith and the pastoral needs of the people.

4.2.2 Empowering the Laity

In the current landscape of the Church in mainland China, many dioceses within the official Catholic community are gradually developing, marked by a growing presence of clergy, women religious, and consecrated women. However, priests often face the challenge of serving numerous and geographically distant parishes, while also responding to external administrative responsibilities. In this context, synodality offers a valuable opportunity to empower lay Catholics to share more actively in the Church's life and mission.

This empowerment begins with formation in the spirit and practice of synodality at all levels of diocesan life. A foundational step is the formation of clergy and religious, who can then accompany the faithful in embracing co-responsibility. Such formation can lead to stronger parish councils, increased lay participation in pastoral activities and social outreach, and a renewed sense of ownership of the local Church. It also fosters deeper bonds between clergy and laity, grounded in mutual respect and collaboration.

Synodality affirms that the Holy Spirit speaks through all members of the People of God—not only through ordained ministers. By recognizing and nurturing the diverse gifts of the laity, the Church becomes more vibrant, inclusive, and responsive to the needs of its communities.

4.2.3 Strengthening Pastoral Discernment

One of the essential tools for fostering communion through active participation is the practice of ecclesial discernment. The synodal approach invites local communities to deepen their spiritual lives, becoming more attentive to the voice, movement, and promptings of the Holy Spirit—both individually and collectively.

A key method in this process is the practice known as **“Conversation in the Spirit”**, which encourages groups of faithful to listen attentively, speak intentionally, and discern prayerfully how best to live out their faith and respond to pastoral challenges. This form of spiritual dialogue nurtures a shared understanding and helps communities remain rooted in communion with the universal Church.

Such decentralized discernment, while always respecting episcopal authority, allows for greater flexibility and creativity in addressing the unique pastoral realities of the Church in China. It strengthens resilience, fosters collaboration, and supports a more responsive and spiritually grounded ecclesial life. The author has personally implemented this discernment process with various groups of priests and women religious. It proved to be both constructive and fruitful, creating a spiritually safe and dialogical space where participants could encounter one another and share openly with sincerity.

4.2.4 Deepening the Sense of Mission

Pope Francis, who initiated the 2021–2024 Synod on Synodality, consistently affirmed that synodality was not

merely a method but the very nature of the Church. He once stated, “It is precisely this path of synodality which God expects of the Church of the third millennium.”⁴⁶ This journeying together as the People of God reflects a divine call to communion, participation, and mission.

This journey has a clear purpose: to proclaim the Good News, to evangelize, and to respond to the cries of humanity in our time. These are not peripheral tasks but the very heart of the Church’s earthly mission⁴⁷.

In China, where many continue to seek meaning, purpose, and lasting happiness, the call to share the Gospel becomes especially vital. Every faithful person bears the responsibility to bring the message of hope to others—through words, witness, and service. By engaging all members of the Church in its mission, synodality strengthens the community’s call to embody love, unity, and compassion.

This shared sense of mission can serve as a powerful foundation for collaboration between both official and non-registered Catholic communities, enabling them to witness together as one family in Christ. It can inspire Chinese Catholics to live the Gospel more intentionally—in their families, workplaces, and communities—becoming credible witnesses of faith.

46 Pope Francis, “Address on the 50th Anniversary of the Synod of Bishops”, 17 October 2015.

47 *Synod on Synodality Final Document*, 2024. Summary available via *Vatican News*.

Such a vision aligns with Pope Francis’s call for an “outgoing Church,” one that reaches out to the margins of society. In the Chinese context, this spirit of outreach may also resonate with aspects of Sinicization that promote social harmony and cultural integration⁴⁸. Even in contexts where such engagement must be exercised with prudence and wisdom, the spirit of synodality remains a guiding light.⁴⁹

In essence, Pope Francis’s legacy of synodality offers the Church in mainland China a spiritual and pastoral framework for unity, participation, and mission. While its outward expressions may differ from those in other regions, its interior call to listen, discern, and walk together as the People of God can be a powerful force for renewal. In a Church marked by division, constraint, and complexity, synodality invites a deeper communion—one that strengthens the Church’s witness and presence in Chinese society.

48 *Sinicization* refers to the process by which religious practice in China is encouraged to align with national identity, cultural values, and social development goals. While its implementation is shaped by state policy, certain aspects—such as promoting harmony, community service, and cultural rootedness—can intersect with the Church’s mission of outreach and pastoral care. For more details, see: State Administration for Religious Affairs, *Outline of the Five-Year Plan for the Promotion of Sinicization of Christianity in China (2018–2022)*; Vatican-China Dialogue references in *Synod on Synodality Final Document*, 2024.

49 Pope Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, 2013. See especially Chapter One: “A Church which goes forth”.

5 Conclusion: Pope Francis and the Church in China—A Journey of Communion, Mercy, and Hope

Pope Francis's engagement with the Church in mainland China was never merely a diplomatic exercise; it was a profound expression of his pastoral identity and theological vision for the universal Church. Rooted in the Second Vatican Council's understanding of the Church as the People of God and informed by the Theology of the People from his Latin American experience, his pontificate consistently prioritized encounter, dialogue, and mercy.

His approach to China—exemplified by the Provisional Agreement on the nomination of bishops—stood as a testament to this pastoral commitment. It sought to safeguard ecclesial unity and ensure legitimate episcopal leadership, even amidst the complex realities and historical wounds that divide the Catholic community in China. While the reception of this outreach was varied—welcomed by many in the state-sanctioned official Catholic community and met with concern by members of the underground Catholic community loyal to the Holy See—Francis's unwavering focus remained on the spiritual well-being of all Chinese Catholics.

This engagement was not without risk, nor was it free from criticism. Yet it reflected a deeper theological conviction: that the Church must be present in every culture, attentive to every suffering, and committed to unity without erasure. His

decision to reconcile bishops previously ordained without papal mandate, his emphasis on pastoral discernment, and his refusal to reduce ecclesial life to juridical categories all pointed to a Church animated by grace rather than control.

Looking ahead, the legacy of synodality—a hallmark of Francis’s pontificate—offers a crucial framework for renewal in the Church in China. Despite significant challenges posed by political constraints, social realities, and internal divisions, the spirit of synodality continues to foster internal communion, empower the laity, strengthen pastoral discernment, and deepen the sense of mission. It calls all members of the Church to walk together, listening to the Holy Spirit, and to build bridges that heal rather than divide.

Ultimately, Pope Francis’s vision for the Church in China endures as one of hope and patient accompaniment. It testifies to the belief that through humility, dialogue, and a profound commitment to the Gospel, the Church can navigate even the most intricate paths—fostering unity, appreciating diversity, and ensuring that the faith continues to flourish in that ancient and vital land. His legacy invites the global Church to accompany Chinese Catholics not with fear or judgment, but with reverence, solidarity, and trust in the Spirit who guides all things toward communion.

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