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CHINA: China's Catholics, the Holy See and religious freedom

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The relationship between China's government and the Holy See has greatly improved, Forum 18 News Service notes. But contentious issues – such as government control of the selection of "patriotic" Chinese bishops and local officials cracking down on the "underground" church – remain. Some of this stems from conflicts between "patriotic" and "underground" Catholics. The current diplomatic situation may also reflect lack of consensus in the Chinese government on the desirability of a normalised relationship with the Vatican. The regular interactions between the Vatican and China can have a positive impact on Chinese political leaders' perceptions. Also, significant progress has already been made in uniting the Catholic Church in China. But, even if normal diplomatic relations between the Holy See and the Chinese government resume, there may not be any significant short to medium term practical religious freedom improvements. This is because, for Catholics and other religious believers, the major challenge to their religious freedom is the state's wish to control China's religious communities.

Many experts have noted that the relationship between the Chinese government and the Vatican has greatly improved over the last few years. They are quite optimistic that the relationship will be normalised relatively soon. What was once perceived as the major obstacle in the normalisation of bilateral relations, the Vatican's approach to diplomatic relations with Taiwan, has for all practical purposes been removed. The main issue of contention remains government control over the selection of Chinese clergy, especially bishops. However, even on this point, most, if not all, Chinese bishops appointed by the government-permitted Catholic Patriotic Association (CPA) unofficially seek the Vatican's approval even as they accept the government appointments.

Although some Chinese Catholics both inside and outside mainland China have condemned the CPA and have demanded that the Vatican declare the government-approved Chinese Catholic church to be schismatic, the Vatican has not taken this step. This may ultimately bear fruit for the Vatican, because a divided Catholic Church in China is very much in the interest of the Chinese government. A united Church that acknowledges the Vatican's authority, whether publicly or privately, may impede the government's efforts to control it and so may ultimately facilitate the growth of a church that is independent of the government, if not in law then at least in practice.

Among all the religions in China, Catholicism is notable for having a clear external political dimension. It is the one religious community in China that has a clear internationally recognised source of diplomatic power outside the country. The Holy See, after all, is a recognised state as well as a spiritual centre.

Tibetan Buddhism also has a source of power outside Chinese-controlled territory ever since the Dalai Lama escaped to India (see F18News 25 November 2004 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=462). However, it is clearly different from the Holy See as it is not an internationally recognised state.

Having a clear source of power outside China has always made the Catholic community in China dangerous in the eyes of the communist rulers. The establishment of the "patriotic" religious organisations at the founding of the People's Republic was, arguably, directed primarily at concerns about the Vatican's continued influence in China. The communist leaders were arguably less worried about the influence of the disparate foreign Protestant groups. This concern about foreign influence in general and the Catholic Church's foreign connection in particular continues to be seen in recent official documents.

For example, in the October 1997 White Paper on "Freedom of Religious Belief in China," the Chinese government focused completely on the Vatican and foreign Protestant organisations and individuals when justifying the need for Chinese religious communities to remain independent of foreign influence. The Catholic Church and the Protestant communities were portrayed in the White Paper as "tools" of hostile Western countries, which were seeking to colonise China. The White Paper portrayed these communities as unwilling to permit Chinese clerics to assume leadership positions in the churches in China. The White Paper, in particular, noted that immediately prior to the Communist Party taking power, "among the 20 archbishops in China were 17 foreigners and only three Chinese; in the 143 parishes there were some 110 foreign bishops but only about 20 Chinese bishops."

This non-Chinese dimension to Catholicism in China is not new, nor – in keeping with Catholicism's self-understanding of itself as a universal and not a national church – has it been unusual in other countries. As long ago as the 16th Century, foreign Catholic intellectuals were influential within China (see F18News 2 August 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=821). But

today, if the Church were able to freely exercise its religious freedom, the overwhelming majority of its leaders would be – as they are amongst both "underground" and "patriotic" Catholics – Chinese citizens.

An important part of this foreign dimension for Chinese Catholicism has been the fact that the Vatican and the Taiwan government have had formal diplomatic relations since 1951, two years after the defeated Chinese nationalist government headed by Chiang Kai-shek retreated to Taiwan. Undoubtedly, this decision was the reaction of a strongly anti-communist pope, Pius XII, and the Vatican's understandable outrage at the Chinese communists' purposeful and wanton destruction of Catholic churches in China and the persecution of Chinese Catholics.

To this day, Chinese officials continue to cite Vatican's diplomatic relations with Taiwan as one of the two obstacles toward the normalisation of Sino-Vatican relations – the other being the Chinese demand that the Vatican give up all rights and efforts to control the Catholic community in China, most notably the appointment of Chinese bishops. However, the Taiwan-Vatican relationship, for over 25 years, has been all form and no substance. Since 1980, the Vatican's delegation in Taipei has been led by a charge d'affaires rather than a full-fledged ambassador, or a papal nuncio. Second, the Vatican has already indicated publicly through various high-ranking Catholic clerics, including Hong Kong Archbishop Cardinal Joseph Zen Ze-kiun – who is known for his public statements against Chinese government controls on the Catholic Church - that the Vatican is ready to end its diplomatic relations with Taiwan.

Although the Chinese government was publicly outraged by the fact that Taiwan President Chen Shui-bian was present at Pope John Paul II's funeral, it would seem that the issue of Taiwan is a public relations point more than a substantive one. The substantive point may be the Chinese government wanting to secure political control of China's Catholic Church. If this is so, even if the Vatican were to end all diplomatic relations with Taiwan this break would make little difference to the issue of normalising relations between China and the Vatican.

On the other hand, some experts argue that the philosophical differences between Catholicism - and all other religions - and Communism remain the core obstacle to the normalisation of Sino-Vatican relations. Professor Beatrice Leung, an expert on state-religion relations and the Catholic Church in China, argued in a recent essay in the "Journal of Contemporary China" that the difficulty in the relations between the Vatican and the Chinese governments "rests in the ideological incompatibility between the dialectic materialism embedded in Marxism Leninism and religious idealism".

Undoubtedly, the contradictions between the doctrines of the Chinese Communist Party and the beliefs of most religious communities are too great and too numerous for some to overcome. Some Chinese Communist Party officials have been visibly alarmed that an increasing number of Communist Party members are also religious believers (see F18News 13 February 2007 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=910). In a book published in July 2005 on "United Front Work" [Tongzhan gongzuo], the authors wrote in the section on "religious work" that "[Communist] Party members must be firm in their belief in Communism; they must not believe in religions. For party members who have lost their qualification as party members due to their belief in religions, and even those who use their authority to facilitate religious fanaticism, they must be strictly dealt with according to the regulations and requirements contained in the party constitution."

Yet, the differences between Communist theory and Catholicism are clearly not permanent barriers to improving the relationship between China and the Holy See. It is commonplace for observers to note that very few people in China today believe in Communism. As Forum 18 has found within China, many, if not most, people in the country see Communist Party membership as an instrument for career advancement, not an ideology they believe in. And as the state has publicly declared that religions will be in China for a long time and that religious communities are important for the construction of a "harmonious society", the communist state has officially given its approval to holding religious beliefs.

Certainly, Communist ideology has not prevented the Chinese government from allowing the Catholic Church in China to pay spiritual homage to the Vatican. A parishioner in the church that houses the headquarters of the Catholic Patriotic Association (CPA) in Beijing, for example, told Forum 18 that all Chinese Catholic adherents recognise and accept the Vatican's spiritual authority. The parishioner insisted that the Chinese Catholic Church actively seeks communion with the Vatican. Supporting the parishioner's testimony were news items posted outside the Wangfujin Catholic church in Beijing, which clearly stated that Chinese Catholics were encouraged to boycott the 2006 film "The Da Vinci Code" in accordance with the Vatican's instructions (see F18News 5 December 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=883).

As suggested earlier, it seems that the main obstacle in the normalisation of Sino-Vatican relations remains political control, which is shown in the events of the past year. The Chinese government does not want the Vatican to have any say in the selection of senior Chinese clerics. This desire for exclusive political control is not necessarily connected with conflicts between Communism and Catholicism. To China, it just makes good political sense to make sure that it does not share domestic political authority with another government, especially when – as Communist party members admit in private – the Chinese Communist Party is insecure in its legitimacy and both the Communist Party and the Holy See are deeply suspicious of each others' motives.

For this reason, the Chinese government refuses to consider the "Vietnam model", which involves the Vatican submitting a list of candidates for bishops to the Vietnamese government, with the pope making a final decision based in part on the government's

opinions. The Chinese government is unlikely to compromise significantly on this issue. But it may be possible that the Catholic Patriotic Association might agree to provide a list of candidates to the Vatican, and then to take a decision based in part on the Vatican's opinions. If so, then the question is whether the Vatican would be willing to accept this approach.

But assuming for a moment that the relationship between the Holy See and the Chinese government is able to overcome this major obstacle and become a normal diplomatic relationship, what effects would that have on the situation facing Catholics in China?

The most egregious problems that confront the Catholic community in China today involve local officials cracking down on the clerics and lay members of the so-called "underground" Catholic Church. According to the Cardinal Kung Foundation, whose founder, Joseph Kung, is a nephew of former Cardinal Ignatius Pei-Min Kung (who had served 30 years in prison between 1955 and 1985), as of March 2007, five bishops and 14 priests in the underground church were in prison, eight bishops were under house arrest or surveillance, and two others were in hiding. The problem of local officials attacking religious freedom is a long-standing problem, and affects all China's religious communities (see F18News 1 September 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=641).

If the relationship between the Vatican and China were normalised today, it is unlikely that these crackdowns would completely disappear. During the short to medium-term future, the best that Catholics could hope for is a reduction in the frequency of these incidents. A normalised relationship would mean that the Vatican may be more able to get the central Chinese government to reduce or halt these attacks. However, as these crackdowns are often generated at the local level and in policy areas that are controlled by the Ministry of Public Security and the state security organs, the Foreign Ministry – which would be the primary ministry the Vatican would be relating to – would be unlikely to have much influence unless it was also supported by political leaders like Premier Wen Jiabao, or the Vice-premiers in charge of those policy areas.

Also, some of these egregious violations of religious freedom reflect "internal" conflicts between senior leaders of the "underground" Catholic Church and their government-permitted counterparts. One source of this is that – as Cardinal Zen has noted – without continuing state support the Catholic Patriotic Association has the potential to disintegrate, as its members may publicly join the "underground" Catholic Church. A normalised state-to-state relationship may allow the Vatican to become more directly involved in the affairs of the Chinese Catholic Church and thus able to intervene in such internal conflicts. However, this may not be permitted by the Chinese government, which is likely to be extremely wary of any public effort on the Vatican's part to "intervene" in the affairs of the Chinese Catholic community. Like the other state-recognised religious associations, a monolithic "patriotic" facade conceals great diversity and potential for disputes (see F18News 5 December 2006 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=883).

However, the Vatican has so far not formally declared that there is a schism between any part of the Catholic Church in China and the Vatican. This may indirectly help to remove the internal conflicts among Chinese Catholics, by providing the basis for a unified Chinese church. Here, the contents of Pope Benedict XVI's forthcoming "personal letter to Catholics in China" – announced in January 2007 - will have implications for both the church in China and for the Vatican's future influence on the Catholic community there.

Much of the internal conflict is between personalities, between those people who resisted the communist regime and suffered for their defiance, and those people who agreed to work within the government-permitted framework (see F18News 15 June 2005 http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=584). These personalities will over time become less influential, which may cause these conflicts to diminish.

In addition to these internal conflicts at the upper echelon of the Chinese church, it seems clear that the current diplomatic situation is a reflection of the absence of consensus within the Chinese government about the desirability of a normalised relationship with the Vatican. This is probably due to the tendency among Chinese political leaders to think of the relationship primarily in political terms. As Sister Betty Ann Maheu, a former editor of "Tripod," a publication of the Holy Spirit Centre in Hong Kong, wrote in November 2005, the current pope "must somehow convince the government in China that the mission of the church is religious, not political." This is a very large task, which one might even say is almost but not completely impossible.

It would be a mistake to overlook the positive effects that regular interactions between the Vatican and China can have on changing the perceptions of Chinese political leaders. Also, significant progress has already been made towards uniting the Catholic Church in China. This progress may eventually cause the Chinese government to change its position on diplomatic relations with the Holy See. However, whether full diplomatic relations will be restored still depends on whether the government thinks it is in its interest to strengthen the ties of China's Catholics to the Vatican, by allowing the Holy See to have a normal diplomatic presence in China.

But even if there is a normalisation of relations between the Holy See and the Chinese government in the near future, this may not bring any significant short to medium term practical improvements in the religious freedom of Chinese Catholics or of other religious communities. This is because, for China's Catholics as for other religious believers, the major challenge to their religious freedom is the state's wish to control Chinese religious communities. (END)

For analyses of other aspects of religious freedom in China, see <http://www.forum18.org/Analyses.php?region=3>

For an analysis of the impact on religious freedom in Xinjiang of tensions in the region, see F18News 23 August 2006
http://www.forum18.org/Archive.php?article_id=834

A printer-friendly map of China is available from
<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/xpeditions/atlas/index.html?Parent=asia&Rootmap=china>

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