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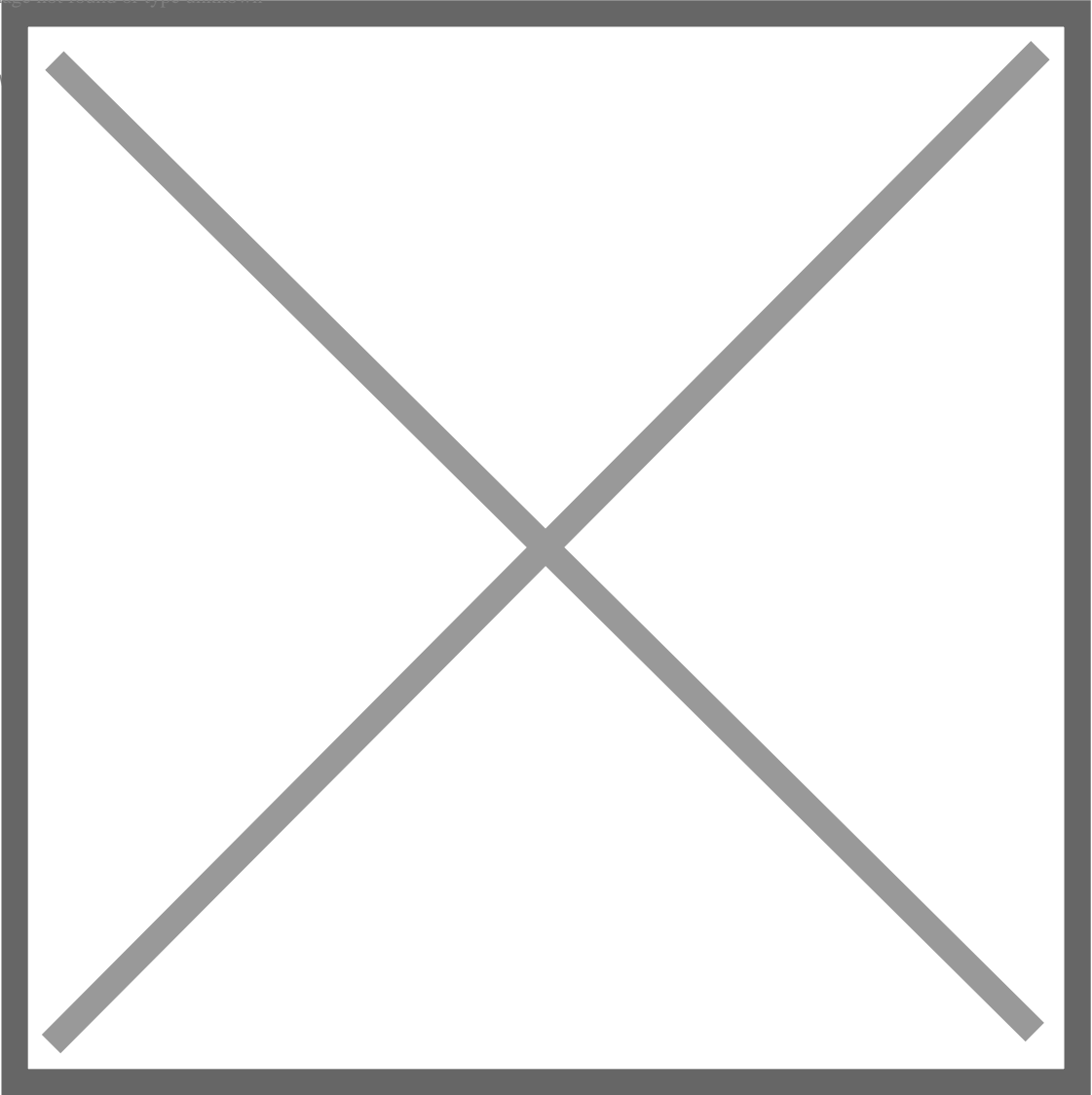
China is untouchable: the Vatican's conspiracy of silence on Jimmy Lai

RELIGIOUS FREEDOM

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Yesterday, condemnations of the Chinese and Hong Kong authorities continued throughout the day for their [conviction of Jimmy Lai](#), an entrepreneur and publisher who has become a symbol of Hong Kong's struggle for freedom and democracy, on charges of conspiracy and sedition. In a statement, the European External Action Service also spoke of a 'political trial' and the 'erosion of democracy and fundamental freedoms in Hong Kong since the National Security Law came into force in 2020', calling for 'the immediate and unconditional release of Jimmy Lai'. Italian Senator Giulio Terzi of the party Fratelli d'Italia expressed similar views, stating that 'with these spurious charges of sedition and collusion with foreign forces, the judges have deprived a British citizen of his liberty and destroyed Hong Kong's reputation as a place of freedom of expression, press, religion and enterprise'. Other harsh statements were issued by humanitarian organisations such as the [Committee for Freedom in Hong Kong Foundation](#), Human Rights Watch, Amnesty International, and Reporters Without Borders.

However, one detail is missing from this international chorus of protests: while Jimmy Lai is undoubtedly a symbol of the battle for freedom and democracy in Hong Kong, he is first and foremost a Catholic. Since his conversion in 1997, when he was baptised by Cardinal Joseph Zen, Archbishop Emeritus of Hong Kong, he has approached his work as a publisher and his civil battles differently, even accepting imprisonment to bear witness to the truth.

In the article we dedicated to him on the occasion of the presentation of the 'Made for Truth' award to his son Sebastien during the annual Daily Compass Conference on 25 October, [we recalled](#) how, in 2020, he refused to leave Hong Kong and faced his destiny with pride: 'If I left, I would be renouncing not only my destiny, but also God, my religion and what I believe in,' he said at the time. His story also symbolises the drama experienced by Catholics in Hong Kong, who are increasingly caught in the suffocating grip of Beijing and its Patriotic Catholic Church.

This is precisely what makes the silence imposed by the Holy See on his story even more painful and jarring. Not only has not a single voice from St Peter's Square been raised in recent years to highlight his imprisonment as a witness to the truth and call for his release, but total censorship has also been imposed on all Vatican media. For the Holy See, Jimmy Lai simply does not exist.

As in recent days, the media around the world are talking about the sham trial and conviction of Jimmy Lai — except for Vatican media. Yesterday, neither Vatican News nor *L'Osservatore Romano* mentioned the Hong Kong court's ruling at all. This absence was

made all the more striking by the enormous space devoted to the Sydney attack and the Pope's condolences to the Jewish community and victims of terrorism. Yesterday afternoon, in his address to the donors of the Christmas tree and nativity scene in St Peter's Square, the [Pope appealed for an end to anti-Semitic violence](#). Yet there was not a word or mention of the sentencing of a Catholic in Hong Kong — a symbol of the repression suffered by so many Catholics in Hong Kong and China. While the Vatican News homepage covered topics ranging from migration in South Africa to schools for children in Tegucigalpa and Martin Luther King's non-violent revolution, there was still no mention of Hong Kong or Jimmy Lai.

This shameful situation is one of the perverse effects of the secret agreement between the Holy See and the Beijing regime, which was signed in 2018 and renewed every two years until October 2024 before being extended for a further four years. The Vatican Secretariat of State has always strenuously defended this agreement in the name of the supposed good of the Church in China, primarily to resolve the issue of the appointment of bishops. However, as recent cases have shown, (read [here](#) and [here](#)) it has effectively been Beijing deciding and the Vatican executing all these years. Meanwhile, to avoid irritating Beijing, the Holy See turns a blind eye to the intensifying persecution of Catholics in China and abandons the Church in Hong Kong. Indeed, it is encouraging the transformation of the Church into a patriotic one, even though Hong Kong is not formally under the jurisdiction of the Chinese Bishops' Conference. It is therefore unsurprising that the Vatican remains silent in the face of the trial of a Catholic who is paying for his faith with his life.

Furthermore, the Vatican's conspiracy of silence extends even to the online edition of the [Sunday Examiner](#), the newspaper of the Diocese of Hong Kong, which simply ignored the news of Jimmy Lai's conviction. Meanwhile, [UcaNews](#), the agency of the Asian Bishops' Conferences, reported the news in a sterile manner as just one piece among many, avoiding any mention of his Catholic faith.

For the Vatican, therefore, Jimmy Lai simply does not exist. Some may kindly think that Vatican diplomacy is working discreetly behind the scenes. However, if this were the case, we would have to speak of a dramatic failure of diplomacy given that there have been no positive results in recent years: the situation of Catholics has worsened, Jimmy Lai continues to rot in a Hong Kong prison, and let us not forget that Cardinal Zen is also on probation.

The truth is that the Vatican Secretariat of State's diplomatic approach under Cardinal Pietro Parolin towards regimes that persecute Christians involves sacrificing

individual Catholics today in the name of a supposed future benefit to the Church. This view is unacceptable from a moral standpoint and ineffective from a diplomatic standpoint.

As Catholics, we must sadly acknowledge that if the Chinese regime ever releases Jimmy Lai, it will certainly not be because of Vatican diplomacy, but rather due to the actions of US President Donald Trump. Trump has already directly requested Lai's release from Chinese President Xi Jinping and has demonstrated his ability to secure the release of dissidents and hostages, most recently in Belarus.