

DIPLOMATIC FAILURE

The ordination of a bishop in Shanghai is another slap in the face for the Vatican by China

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On 15 October, Shanghai auxiliary bishop Joseph Wu Jianlin will be consecrated bishop in St Ignatius Cathedral. This represents a resounding slap in the face to the Holy See and, in particular, to secretary of state Cardinal Pietro Parolin, the architect of the secret

agreement between the Holy See and China. This agreement was signed in 2018 and renewed every two years until October 2024, when the duration of the 'provisional' agreement was extended to four years.

Wu Jianlin was one of the two bishops appointed by the Patriotic Association of Chinese Catholics (a body dependent on the Communist Party) on 29 April, just days after Pope Francis's death on 21 April, while the See was vacant.

This decision clearly defies the agreement, which should ensure that the Pope has the final say in the appointment of bishops. In reality, only around a dozen bishops have been appointed in the last seven years. Beyond the official declarations, the impression is that the Chinese government has made the decisions and the Pope has ratified them. By appointing two bishops during the vacancy of the See (in addition to Wu Jianlin, Li Jianlin was appointed bishop of Xinxiang), the Chinese regime has demonstrated its intention to act unilaterally, disregarding the Holy See entirely.

The question of the Catholic Church in China has not yet been addressed since the start of the new pontificate, and above all, there has been no official reaction regarding the two illegitimate bishops. It is likely that secret talks have been taking place between China and the Vatican during this time (the Secretariat of State has not changed), but the results must not have been very positive for the Vatican if the Patriotic Association is now calling together all priests, seminarians, religious men and women for the episcopal consecration of Wu Jianlin in a letter dated 9 October (see photo).

This is a double snub for Cardinal Parolin, who yesterday, 10 October, released a statement that, given the circumstances, seems surreal. Speaking on the sidelines of a conference at Urbaniana University in response to a general question about relations with Beijing, the Vatican Secretary of State said that 'the tentative agreement with China continues to move forward. We consider it a positive step regarding the appointment of bishops'. There are difficulties, and patience and trust are needed".

However, the ordination of a bishop appointed by the Chinese authorities without communicating this to the Holy See is not just a 'difficulty'; it is a failure of the approach taken by the Secretariat of State and endorsed by Pope Francis and the influential Community of Sant'Egidio. This is an embarrassing situation, so it is unsurprising that the director of the Vatican Press Office, Matteo Bruni, did not respond to our precise question on the reaction to this news from Shanghai.

Pope Leo now finds himself in a very complicated situation from which it will not

be easy to emerge with dignity. In a recent interview with Elise Ann Allen, published in the American journalist's biography, Pope Leo said that he still does not know exactly what his approach to China will be: 'In the short term, I will continue the policy that the Holy See has followed for some years,' he said. I am also in constant dialogue with several Chinese people, on both sides, about some of the existing problems. I am trying to gain a clearer understanding of how the Church can continue its mission while respecting the culture, the political issues — which undoubtedly have great importance — and a significant group of Chinese Catholics who, for many years, have experienced oppression or difficulty in practising their faith freely without taking sides.

In other words, Pope Leo may change his approach in the medium to long term, but for now he is dealing with the problem he inherited. Now, the Chinese regime is openly defying him by presenting the Holy See with another fait accompli. This means that the time for decisions has come for Pope Francis too, whether he likes it or not.

Moreover, Shanghai is the diocese that has historically symbolised the clash between the communist regime and the Catholic Church. As early as the 1950s, Shanghai witnessed the strongest resistance to Mao Zedong's attempt to 'nationalise' the Church. It was here that the communist regime unleashed its harshest repression: Bishop Ignatius Kung Pinmei, a symbolic figure of the Shanghai Church, was imprisoned in 1955, released after 30 years, and sent into exile thanks to international pressure. However, Kung Pinmei was appointed cardinal in pectore by John Paul II in 1979, a fact that was not revealed until 1991. He remained the official titular of the Shanghai diocese until his death in 2000. The diocese is also home to the national Marian shrine of Our Lady of Sheshan, which Benedict XVI requested be addressed on the Day of Prayer for the Church in China, established in 2007 and held every year on 24 May.

Even after the secret China-Vatican agreement, Shanghai remains a symbol of this clash. On 4 April 2023, the Chinese authorities unilaterally announced the [appointment of Monsignor Joseph Shen Bin as bishop of Shanghai](#), openly violating the agreements with the Holy See. This was a hard blow, and it took the Secretariat of State three months to come to terms with it, before complying with Beijing's decision and recognising Shen Bin as bishop of Shanghai. Furthermore, Shanghai has had a legitimate bishop since 2012: Thaddeus Ma Daqin, who was appointed as auxiliary with Beijing's consent. However, immediately after his ordination, he was placed under house arrest for announcing his intention to resign from the Patriotic Association.

The latest development is the ordination of the new auxiliary bishop, Wu Jinlian, which was strongly desired by Monsignor Shen Bin himself.

Therefore, it is easy to foresee that the future of China-Vatican relations, as well as that of the Church in China, will depend on how Pope Leo plans to resolve the 'Shanghai case'.