

ANALYSIS

Vatican-China, extending the agreement damages Catholic Church

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**Riccardo
Cascioli**



The Holy See is begging for some recognition, the Chinese government steers straight ahead. This is the impression one gets beyond the circumstantial words that yesterday accompanied the announcement of the renewal for four years of the secret agreement

between China and the Vatican on the appointment of bishops and the administration of the Catholic Church in China.

The renewal of the agreement - signed for the first time in 2018 and then renewed two years at a time - was a foregone conclusion after the declarations in recent months, especially by the [Secretary of State Pietro Parolin](#), in which the Holy See has demonstrated on every occasion its determination to continue its collaboration with the communist regime, despite the less than positive balance sheet. And it was taken for granted after the occasions created by Pope Francis to praise China - 'a promise and a hope for the Church' - and the Beijing government's attitude towards the Church ('I am happy with the dialogues with China, the result is good'): statements made during his [return trip from South East Asia](#) in September.

What was not taken for granted, however, was the duration of the agreement.

Up until a few months ago, it was taken for granted that the third renewal would be the definitive one, but Beijing's closure to any concessions caused the Holy See to hit the brakes, and therefore to propose a further two-year renewal. The Chinese government then relaunched for four years, it seemed that a final agreement would be reached for three years, but instead Beijing won.

It will be recalled that Cardinal Parolin on 22 May last, on the sidelines of a conference held in Rome to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the Shanghai Council, had declared that he hoped the agreement 'would be improved in some points', though without specifying which ones. And he also set as the [Vatican's goal](#) 'to be able to have a stable presence in China even if it might not initially have the form of a pontifical representation, of an apostolic nunciature...'. Beijing responded in spades to both requests.

To say that there are some points to be improved, however, is an understatement, because if the Holy See's goal is the unity of the Chinese Church and its freedom, it must be acknowledged that six years of secret agreements have moved the goal away rather than closer to it. The results with regard to the appointments of bishops (which were also made without secret agreements) have been scant: just nine bishops have been appointed in six years, while over 30 dioceses remain uncovered (one third of the total). Moreover, these appointments gave the impression of following the script whereby Beijing decides and the Vatican approves. And on some occasions the Beijing government has even 'forgotten' to warn the Holy See: the most sensational case was in April 2023 when the Chinese regime appointed Monsignor Shen Bin as bishop of Shanghai, moving him from the diocese of Haimen.

A blow hardly digested by the Vatican authorities, and only after three months did Pope Francis approve the appointment while Cardinal Parolin called the Beijing authorities to 'sincere dialogue'.

But the Vatican effectively also accepted the new geography of Chinese dioceses decided unilaterally by Beijing. Two cases were emblematic in this regard: in November 2022, the Chinese authorities appointed Monsignor John Peng Weizhao as auxiliary bishop of Jianxi, a diocese created by Beijing without the knowledge of the Holy See, which then had to put on a brave face. And last January, Monsignor Antonio Sun Wenjun was appointed bishop of Weifang, a diocese also created by the Chinese authorities but this time with the (obligatory) consent of the Pope. According to the geography of the Chinese Church decided by the Beijing government, there would be 104 dioceses compared to the 147 ecclesiastical circumscriptions (which also include prefectures and ecclesiastical administrations) traditionally recognised by the Holy See.

To these meagre results, all unbalanced in favour of Beijing, it must be added that the agreements have resulted in the de facto recognition of the Patriotic Association of Chinese Catholics, which is the body created and controlled by the Communist Party, and of which the two Chinese bishops present at the Synod on Synodality underway in the Vatican obviously also belong. The recognition of the Patriotic Association and the Vatican's invitation to join it has had the obvious side effect of increasing the persecution of those who refuse to submit to the party, which we have reported on several times.

Just in the last few days, the American Hudson Institute has published a report in which it gives evidence of the persecution suffered by ten bishops as a consequence of the Sino-Vatican agreement. [Ten Persecuted Catholic Bishops in China](#), is the title of the report edited by Nina Shea, a well-known researcher who has dedicated herself to the defence of religious freedom for decades. The report shows that the situation of the ten bishops examined is only the tip of the iceberg of a persecution that has intensified since the agreements with the Vatican signed in 2018 and that affects millions of Chinese Catholics.

Persecution that may intensify thanks also to the silence of the Holy See, more concerned with maintaining good relations with Beijing than defending Chinese Catholics. Absolute silence also for the situation in Hong Kong, where the Church is under increasing control of the Communist regime, thanks also to the [new National Security Law](#) that has already caused the arrest of many Catholics, the most famous of whom is the publisher [Jimmy Lai](#). And finally silence also for the increasingly aggressive

attitude in the Asia-Pacific area, starting with the large and repeated military manoeuvres against the island of Taiwan: a further threat to world peace totally ignored in the Pope's messages.

Lastly, one must also note how this agreement is corrupting the Catholic 'vocabulary'. In order to justify the 'sinicisation' of the Church imposed by Chinese President Xi Jinping, there is now a tendency to use that word as a synonym for inculturation. A terrible mystification, repeated not by chance by one of the Chinese bishops present at the Synod, **Monsignor Yang Yongqiang**, who in his speech reiterated his adherence 'to the direction of the sinicisation of Catholicism', which is nothing other than the submission of the Church to the directives of the Communist Party. One need only read the '**Five Year Plan for the Sinicisation of Catholicism in China (2023-2027)**', approved on 14 December last by the Conference of Catholic Bishops and the Patriotic Association (both bodies under the control of the Communist Party).

A very high price paid by the Holy See to keep alive a semblance of dialogue with China. And there are no signs that in the next four years things will be any different.