PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC OF CHINA AND THE HOLY SEE: A LONG HISTORY OF AGREEMENTS AND DISAGREEMENTS

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1. Introduction

In April 2nd, 2005, the death of the Pope John Paul II marked the end of one of the longest papacies in the history of the Roman Catholic Church. Initiated in 1978 it was characterized by world changes and it differentiated itself by the various travels done by the Pope. By the time it ended, in the account of these international visits there were just two unaccomplished travels: those to Russia and to China. These were the countries that John Paul II had wanted to visit since the beginning of his papacy, but hadn’t been able to.

The obstacle to travels to Russian territories has been raised by the Russian Orthodox Church and not by the government, whose representatives have many times visited the Pope in the Vatican.

The second unaccomplished travel was the one to China. This visit had always been longed for by Pope John Paul II, considering his desire to diplomatic relations with the People’s Republic of China, which had been interrupted in 1951.

Unlike the Russian case, this visit has been denied by the Chinese government for several reasons, the most evident one being the non-acceptance of a foreign leader’s interference on Chinese internal affairs. The absence of diplomatic relations with the People’s Republic of China was one of the questions that remained unsolved, in spite of John Paul II’s many attempts.

Currently the Holy See, located in the State of the Vatican City, maintains diplomatic relations with 174 countries. It keeps relations of a special nature with the Russian Federation and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). Among the 174 countries is the Republic of China (Taiwan), with whom the Holy See has tightened its diplomatic relations shortly after the establishment of the Chinese Communist Party in command, when the relations with the People’s Republic of China (PRC) became so difficult that they finally broke off in 1951.

Since the official relations were interrupted, China and the Holy See are trying a re-approach that, because of the reasons which we will try to analyze in this article, still hasn’t happened.

Even nowadays, the Chinese government does nothing but reluctantly tolerate the bond of the Catholic Church in China with the Pope, seeing that Chinese leaders do not accept the fact that, being the Pope the Head of State of the State of Vatican City – considered by the Chinese a foreign state – he is the spiritual leader of the Catholics living, even if in small percentage, in Chinese territory.

The Chinese Catholics wish to see recognized by the communist government their own spiritual connection with the Pope, just like all Catholics around the world do. And it is in this connection that the core of the problem is hidden. The Chinese government has considered dangerous this bond. The Government thinks over that as a potential cause of sovereignty violations.

It is important to keep in mind that this situation of control doesn’t include, at least equally, the other great religions. There are five great official ones...
recognized by the Chinese government: Buddhism, Taoism, Islamism, Catholicism and Protestantism. Excluding the Cultural Revolution’s period that eliminated, or at least tried to eliminate, any type of religion, in the periods of openness of the communist government the catholic religion has always been object of a stricter control, due to the fact that, among these religions, it is the only one that makes reference to a foreign leader whose authority, although spiritual, is imposed on citizens of sovereign nations.

China has always been a country that considered itself the center of the world. Its name in Chinese is Zhong Guo, which means Middle-Country, representing the importance reserved to the own nation, where the other countries would stay at the rim of civilization itself. Being that China regards itself as self-sufficient, it has always been difficult for other nations, mainly from the West, to establish relations with the largest country of the East. Its strong cultural identity has always led China to assimilate local cultures that it has been in contact with for commercial or religious motives. Of these assimilations, a clear example is the Chinese Buddhism’s case. Buddhism, derived from India, has been gradually brought in to China by monks coming from Central Asia. Gradually, Chinese monks undertook journeys to India in order to learn Sanskrit and to translate the Buddhist canon to the Chinese language. As many of the Indian Buddhism’s concepts weren’t corresponding to the Chinese realities, Taoist terms were used in such a way that Buddhism mixed itself with the Taoist religion and ended up acquiring Chinese characteristics, having to adapt itself to the culture of that country and creating Chinese schools that did not match the Indian ones at that time.

A comparison can also be with Marxism coming from Europe and which the former Soviet Union helped spreading throughout China. Mao Zedong adapted the Marxist thought to the Chinese reality.

In what concerns the Roman Catholic Church, China has tried the cultural assimilation experience distinctive of its history, wagering on the creation of a Catholic Church ex-novo, independent of the Roman Church and its leader, the Pope.

2. The reasons of the Chinese mistrust

The Chinese government’s mistrust towards the Roman Catholic Church and, in a special way, towards the Pope may be understood analyzing the characteristics of the events of European colonialism in China, called the Time of the Uneven Treaties, during which China’s sovereignty has ceaselessly suffered attacks by great western powers. The colonialist powers have occupied the land and divided it in several regions of Western influence where they ruled and Chinese authorities were obliged to submit to this foreign power.

Facing this, all foreigners have automatically become enemies to the Chinese people, including the missionaries that were there by that time and who have received some protection from their countries of origin – what has made their job easier, due to the freedom of evangelization guaranteed by the treaties. On the other hand, this situation made the missionaries look like the foreign settlers under the Chinese point of view, i.e. they resembled accomplices of the humiliation that China was being subject to.
In the years of imposed opening, several missionaries came into China in the same ships that had brought the foreign invaders. Between the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th, the European nationalist spirit was really strong and the catholic missionaries in China couldn’t help being affected by this tendency. What would Chinese Christians experience when they saw English or French flags hanging on their churches? Frequently the traditional evangelization methods wouldn’t take Chinese customs and traditions into account, besides forcing them to adopt certain western cultural elements that didn’t belong to the essence of Christian faith. China has been seen by some missionaries as an underdeveloped nation, whose people need salvation through liberation from a culture of superstitions and false beliefs. With this conviction, they have been led to adopt an attitude of superiority leaving Chinese priests in a position of submission.

Consequently Christianity has been considered a “foreign religion” acting a tool of imperialism. The patriotic spirit that grew among the Chinese people in the first years of the 20th century was the only possible answer to safeguard their integrity.

In the first decades of 20th century some missionaries and Holy See’s envois tried to reverse this situation promoting the establishment of a Chinese catholic hierarchy and defending China from foreign interference. However, the association of Christianity with the West couldn’t be undone. When the communists took power, the papacy was considered a threat to Chinese sovereignty, because of its close links with the West and its overt opposition to communism.

3. The disagreements between the Roman Catholic Church and China

The history of the relations between China and the Holy See has been characterized by the almost inexisten tune between both governments. Many times they fail to reach an agreement because of the intransigency of both. The context of internal politics from both countries and their roles in the international scene influenced their foreign policies, marking significant disagreements that contributed to the persistence of the misunderstanding.

The first great disagreement came after the rise of the Qing dynasty in 1644, when the emperor Kangxi became an important guardian of Christianity and of the Catholic missionaries living in China. The future of the Catholicism in the country seemed brilliant with the emperor’s support. Actually the Jesuit missionaries, following the example of Matteo Ricci, managed to present Christianity in harmony with Chinese traditional values. Nevertheless the charm’s effect wore off when other religious orders working in China reported the new evangelization methods used by the Jesuits to the Holy See. A Question of Rites closed with a intransigent attitude of Rome, that afraid of losing and distorting their own orthodoxy and Catholic faith principles, cshut itself off to the dialogue and refused to listen to its own emperor, who overtly defended the Jesuits’ work. Two Popes signed the documents that marked the apparent end of Catholicism in China: Pope Clement XI, the Bull Ex Illa die (1715) and Pope Benedict XIV, the Bull Ex quo singulari (1742).
The second disagreement was shortly after the proclamation of the People's Republic of China, which marked the commencement of the communist regime. After World War II, the alignment of the Holy See with the western powers against the communist block was one of the difficulties imposed to its relations with the new Chinese government. Chinese authorities knew about the fierce struggle of Pope Pius XII against communism. He was striving so radically in this fight that he couldn’t clearly gauge some of the openings the communists were willing to grant the Roman Catholic Church in China in the first stage of the revolution. Regarding this, some of the Chinese bishops, priests and catholic believers doubtlessly shared the yearnings for relief and independence to the Chinese nation, ideals in common with the communists. Factually, in the revolution’s first years, the communists still wouldn’t deny the Chinese Catholics the possibility of spiritual bonding to the Pope. The consideration of this Chinese authority’s inclination perhaps would have allowed the Chinese Bishops to start negotiations and cooperation, once they had Vatican’s approval.

It is true that the proposal launched by the Three-Self Patriotic Movement (TSPM), which claimed for a national Catholic Church based on self-governance, self-support and self-propagation principles, seemed to want to transform categorically the Catholic Church in China into a national institution without any connection to the West. Facing this prospect, the Holy See couldn’t stand still. Working on that interpretation was the attempt made by some bishops seeking to keep the door open to conversation. Nevertheless, Pius XII, certainly influenced by the position the Holy See was occupying in the world order and by the occasion these things happened, cut off the roots of these timid dialogue attempts and strongly and harshly condemned communism and all of its allies (chiefly bishops, priests and believers). In that context, the Chinese government had no doubt about declaring Rome an enemy of China. The western imperialist powers were also declared as enemies because of its exploitation in China.

From this divergence arose the Chinese Patriotic Catholic Association (CPCA) in 1957 in order to be the link between the Chinese Communist Party and the Catholic Church in China. It will always have a fundamentally negative role in the relations between the Holy See and the Chinese government.

Pius XII’s refusal to understand the peculiarity of the Catholic Church’s situation in China aggravated the state of affairs. He didn’t trust those bishops who had chosen to work next to the Chinese government in spite of the political differences. In 1958, when the Chinese government decided to consecrate two catholic bishops autonomously, the Pope found himself facing a difficult choice. Both candidates hastily sent to the Holy See the request of recognition of their consecration, which, in our view, represented an evident declaration of communion with the Pope, even if the situation seemed to imply the contrary. However, the Holy See wasn’t able to detect the unexpressed meaning of that request and rejected the Episcopal consecrations judging them illicit.

The Chinese government received such rejection as some kind of war declaration by the Vatican and returned in the same way.

From that moment on, a rift had been opened, not only between the Holy See and China, but within the Chinese Catholic Church itself.

Up to that moment was the incompliance of the Roman Catholic Church that caused most of the disagreements, even taking into account that it wasn’t easy for the Holy See to find a common work scope with a communist country, whose
ideology consider religion a human invention that should be vanish from the face of the earth.

In the end of the fifties, the international Church became more activist with the election of Pope John XXIII in 1958. The Holy See renounced its reproaching tone so as to take in the challenges presented by social, political and economical changes. His successor, Paul VI, got underway several initiatives to re-approximate the Holy See to China. In 1965, during one of his visits to the United Nations, he appealed to the western powers for welcoming China among the UN members.

Nevertheless, this openness from the Holy See coincided with China’s darkest years.

After 1956, Mao Zedong launched campaigns of “purification” with the purpose of ousting his supposed enemies until reaching the establishment of the Cultural Revolution. This had lasted until 1976, the year of his death. The reconciliation appeals from Paul VI meant nothing.

The negotiations between the Holy See and China were resumed in the beginning of the nineteen eighties when the country entered into the modernization era and inaugurated the Open Door policy, during Deng Xiao Ping leadership.

Under him, Chinese economy had started to pick up and to grow faster. In order to reach this goal, communist China figured out that it should promote not only its economic growth but also improve the opinion that other countries had about it. Chinese rulers realized that most of countries they had the intention of setting diplomatic and economic relations was Catholic. Such as many of the emigrated Chinese (huaqiao) who wanted to come to terms with their own homeland. In this context, the coordination with the Holy See is something that would make the relations with the rest of the world easier and would help its intent of showing to the world China’s new face.

Gradually churches were re-opened and Catholics were able to attend religious celebrations once again. Religious communities benefited from the openness policy launched by Deng Xiaoping, but they had to accept the conditions offered by the government. Xiaoping wanted to demonstrate being able to give space for everybody, including religious communities, provided that they would accept forming with the government a United Front to work for the construction of a new China.

However, not all Catholics trusted in such a tolerance display. It was actually a religious freedom that wouldn’t leave room for any kind of divergence and that kept under control all communication efforts with the Vatican, still considered a dangerous factor for Chinese independence. Government organizations undertook the task of managing religious matters, including intervening in Chinese Catholic bishops’ nominations. The government judged inadmissible that a foreign head of state, as the Pope was deemed to be, would be allowed to assign the administrators of Chinese Catholic communities (the bishops). The appointment question has always been one of the key subjects of the complicated relations between the Holy See and the Chinese government which generated lots of problems for the Chinese Catholic community.

In the course of decades, three bishop groups have been formed in China. The first composed by a minority which, by Chinese government’s invitation, had accepted to completely break off relations with the Pope and had the intention to form an independent Catholic Church. The second group, forming the majority, was
constituted by bishops who had chosen to stand next to the Chinese government with the purpose of saving Catholicism in China by any means available to them. Many of these bishops, assigned without Vatican’s approval, have secretly sought, after their Episcopal consecration, the consent of the Pope re-establishing surreptitiously the communion with him. The third group comprised those bishops who had chosen clandestineness over submitting themselves under control of the communist government. Many of them have been tortured and locked up in jail, where they spent over 20 years. These groups have been followed by thousands of Catholics, who were divided between themselves as well.

The Holy See, especially in the papacies from Paul VI and John Paul II, tried to keep channels of communication not only with the Chinese authorities, but also with the diverse communities from the Catholic Church in China. Letters, orientations, directives have been sent to the Chinese communities. Even though, these guidelines wished to help the Roman Catholic Church not to succumb under total control of the Chinese government, some of them have backfired.

In 1978, for instance, the Vatican sent out a document which gave special powers to bishops and the Catholic clergy reducing the formal obligations to the least possible. Based in it, bishops would be allowed to ordain priest Catholic men with known and proved virtue even if they hadn’t received formal theological education. To this document, a few years later, it was added John Paul II’s decision to permit clandestine bishops to consecrate other bishops even when, for safety reasons, they couldn’t get Holy See’s consent. From then on, both the ordainment of clandestine priests without due theological background and the consecration of also clandestine Catholic bishops have dizzily grown reinforcing the rows of the underground Catholic community, which, feeling stronger, have begun to combat and, at times, to slander the “official” Catholic communities, defining them as sinners’ nest. The communist government, facing this, issued lots of official documents in order to defeat the underground communities, seen as Vatican’s infiltration in China.

Holy See’s friendly attitudes, which in several occasions had shown its appreciation towards the Catholic Church in China – such as Deng Yimin’s, the then Canton bishop, nomination to Archbishop (1981), or the canonization of the 120 Chinese martyrs (2000) –, instead of convincing the Chinese government of the Vatican’s good intentions, only worsened the already complicated status of the Roman Catholic Church in China. The Chinese government and the CPCA, its representative in the Catholic field, responded to these conciliatory offers with radically negative reactions.

The political and religious opening didn’t come with the economic one. The happenings concerning the fall of communist governments in the USSR and other East European countries, in the end of the nineteen eighties, strengthened in the Chinese government the mistrust not only towards the Pope, who had given an important contribution to those events, but also towards religion, only seen as a non-destabilization factor to the Chinese society in the case of having its activities extremely limited.

In fact, the Chinese government agreed only to those realizations of religious acts pre-approved by the CPCA. Catholics, priests and bishops should register themselves at governmental departments. The unregistered ones were considered clandestine people mining the public order by the Chinese authorities.
The division between patriotic and underground groups engendered great difficulties to the Catholic Church in China.

Until his death in 2005, the Pope John Paul II had tried to talk to Chinese authorities, bishops and Catholics so as to make all work towards reconciliation. During the papacy’s 26 years, he had addressed China 60 times, through official speeches, messages and greetings. Nevertheless, his efforts had not been able to talk the Chinese government into his sincerity, and his dialogue attempts had been as successful as he had hoped for.

4. The beginning of a new phase

With John Paul II's death and the election of Benedict XVI, the Chinese authorities, maybe only for pragmatic and propagandistic reasons, have started sending positive signs to the Holy See.

For the first time ever, the Chinese government sent its condolences for the death of a Pope and the felicitations for the election of a new one. The participation, in a certain way, in Holy See's internal events, as it has been usual in the diplomacy from countries around the world, was something entirely new to the People’s Republic of China. Moreover, Chinese authorities showed interest in resuming diplomatic relations with the Vatican.

Then, we can ask ourselves why this change has happened, considering the fact that the religious policy of the Chinese government hasn’t suffered any major changes. What are the reasons of this renewed concern towards the Holy See?

We believe that the main motives which have led the Chinese government to settle on resuming diplomatic relations are of a practical order.

It hasn’t been able to defeat religion and to nationalize the Catholic Church in China, making it an exclusively Chinese institution. We must remember that this tendency to “making everything Chinese”, to the absorption of foreign phenomena by the Chinese culture, has been constant in their history. It has happened with Indian Buddhism, which has become a Chinese Buddhism with its own schools. It has happened with nations and their leaders who, defeating China and creating their own dynasties, have ended up adopting Chinese customs and traditions, abandoning their original ones. The same thing has happened to communism, which, in China, has acquired Chinese peculiarities following the countries’ transformations, just like the economy, which Deng Xiaoping re-designed in the shape of a socialist market economy.

Conversely, with the Roman Catholic Church the same thing hasn’t happened. The Chinese government faced the fact that, for 56 years, since the foundation of the People’s Republic of China, this institution linked to Rome, in spite of some moments when it seemed to have been eliminated, has managed to keep on in Chinese territory without losing its connection with the Pope, symbol of universality and communion with other local churches.

Hence, the Chinese government has almost been obliged to act with a distention policy, lesser driven by economic interests, as it has happened with diplomatic relations with other countries, than by pragmatic ones.

Chinese authorities still have been accused by partner governments of locking up Catholic bishops, of human rights violations, also in the religious field, and of intrusion by the State on religious matters. These continuous pleas have
certainly convinced them of the convenience of showing sympathy towards the Vatican, in order to make easier their wholly international acceptance, having the 2008 Olympic Games in mind.

There is, however, another major factor which has led the Chinese government to seek distention in its relations with the Holy See. A factor found in the government field. It’s about the Chinese Patriotic Catholic Association, whose action is hindering more than helping the government in the management of religious affairs.

The Chinese government itself, in the last years, for several times, has kept distance from CPCA’s radical initiatives, because this government organization has been trying to block every distention attempt between the Holy See and China. A sign of that have been the last Episcopal ordainments considered illicit by the Holy See owing to the fact that they have been made without its prior consent. The facts bring us back to May 2006. This incident created uneasiness between both. Even though, there was no explicit accord regulating Episcopal ordainments between them, in the last years, these have happened with Holy See’s approval under tacit consent of the Chinese government.

CPCA’s initiative towards these Episcopal ordainments caused friction between the Vatican and the Chinese government. The Pope couldn’t help complaining against such an act, showing his annoyance with it. Nonetheless, if this annoyance manifestation has been considered usual with the Holy See, the disapproval from the Chinese government – which has ordered the CPCA to halt such ordainments, getting the message over that these had been CPCA’s exclusive enterprise –, hasn’t been considered the same. This disapproval by the Chinese government points out the dissatisfaction of the authorities with CPCA’s actions, which hasn’t had the approval from most of the Chinese Catholics for a long time. The CPCA, ruled by the vice-president Antonio Liu Bianian, has been getting more conscious of the danger that would be the resumption of the diplomatic relations between the Holy See and the People’s Republic of China. Some people say that, with the diplomatic relations’ resumption, the CPCA might be snuffed out. However, we don’t believe it would happen, since the CPCA is the creation of the first years of the communist regime and, as such, is part of an almost untouchable patrimony. Certainly its leaders are aware of that, but, at the same time, they know that, if the CPCA’s extinction is out of question, the effective loss of powers and positions in the communist party can’t be a priori discarded.

The CPCA is becoming a destabilization factor not only regarding the relations with the Holy See, but also internally, due to the disorders it’s been causing within Catholic organizations approved by the government.

The latter are getting closer and closer to the so-called underground communities, filling, in this fashion, the gap which has characterized, for a long time, the history of the Catholic Church in China. This approach owes to the fact that, currently, almost all of the patriotic Chinese bishops have obtained Holy See’s recognition.

That’s what the Holy See has officially declared in a press release sent out after an important meeting about the situation of the Roman Catholic Church in China. The conference has been gotten up by the Holy See and has taken place in Rome in January 2007. Important members of the State Department and of the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, besides many personalities
connected to China, have attended the summit. At the end of it, the participants have forecasted a normalization of the relations between the Holy See and China.

Benedict XVI’s plan corroborates the deep interest that the new Pope harbors towards the situation of the Chinese Catholic believers. From his actions, we can assume that his intention is to work mainly for the unity of the Catholic Church in China, strengthening and encouraging the enterprises of reconciliation between clandestine and patriotic groups.

The former are asking for a special attention by the Holy See, in acknowledgment of the long sufferings and ordeals bore for many decades. Perhaps the Catholic Church in China would’ve succumbed and the patriotic groups would’ve lost their connection with the Pope if it wasn’t for the contribution of the clandestine groups.

5. Conclusion

Therefore, the current situation shows positive signs. If on the one hand both governments want a standardisation of their relations, on the other, reasons that lead them to seek reconciliation have different starting points.

China, as we’ve seen, has pragmatic reasons: get rid of accusations from its commercial partners; improve its image in the international scene; eliminate destabilization factors which don’t help the implementation of Hu Jintao’s political program (the “Harmonious Society”). The Chinese government regards the Pope as the leader of another State. The starting-point is, therefore, political. In this point of view, the diplomatic relations represent the first step to be given before solving other questions.

In contrast, the Holy See has completely different purposes. With the stabilization of the relations with China, first of all, it looks for guarantees of religious freedom, allowing Catholics and the clergy to practice their own faith in communion with the Pope. This would entail the freedom not only of nominating bishops, even though, accepting the participation of the Chinese government, but also the freedom for all to attend international events of the Roman Catholic Church, such as the Synods or the ad limina visits that the bishops carry out by the Pope. Without these guarantees, resuming diplomatic relations with the People’s Republic of China makes no sense to the Holy See.

Obviously, the Holy See has its pastoral objectives. China embodies a promising country for the future of the Roman Catholic Church. Obtaining a certain degree of freedom for the Chinese Catholics also means a sensible increase of the Catholic population overall.

The Chinese government is aware of the Holy See’s moral strength, of its influence on every Catholic believer’s life, that’s why it has never insisted on speeding up the negotiations towards the regularization of their relations. Nowadays, however, the Chinese government faces gradually stronger pressures from the West, to which it will likely have to yield, at least partially, but not as much as the Vatican wishes. Certainly, there may be found a modus vivendi, which, year after year, may give the solution to this conflict, which, even unarmed, has caused suffering to so many people.

A few elements give us the clue for such a way out.
To begin with, the current Pope has never showed any anti-communist concern towards China. It is like that, because in China there isn’t any problem about involvement between Theology and Marxism, as it has been happening in Latin America with the Liberation Theology, reproved by him. In China, conversely, it is all about politics, since the problem doesn’t entail the theological principles of faith.

The Chinese authorities may agree with the religious opening as long as it doesn’t affect the political hegemony of the Chinese Communist Party, just like what happened with the economic one, which didn’t harm the communist regime.

If the Catholics’ religious freedom doesn’t spread out to the political sphere, the Chinese government may allow the reconciliation of the Chinese Catholics. Otherwise, the communist government will keep maintaining and upholding the CPCA – which has been working to keep the Catholic split up in China –, taking political advantage of the Catholics’ frailty from CPCA’s actions.

Yet we believe that the Vatican has no interest in being protagonist of an incidental instauration of representative democracy in China. Vatican’s aims in China seem to be exclusively pastoral. Also because the Roman Catholic Church (which has started valuing representative democracy after the Second World War) is, in the present time, facing problems in some democratic countries of Catholic tradition, which have been voting in favor of different projects (mostly in the bioethics field) than those supported by the Pope.

The Roman Catholic Church values democracy, but, at the moment, is more worried about the unity, freedom and increase of the Catholics under the communist government than about China’s political future.

The economic freedom is living relatively well with the lack of political freedom. And this appears to be Vatican’s immediate goal: showing that religious freedom can live without the political one. After all, democracy is an important moral orientation for the Roman Catholic Church’s social ethics, but it is not a part of its Faith.

References


