

# Crossroads of Faith and Politics: Understanding Vatican-China Relations in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

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**Abstract:** This article offers a thorough analysis of the diplomatic relations between the Vatican and China, particularly focusing on the developments and challenges in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. It explores the historical context of Catholicism in China, the complexities surrounding bishop appointments, the duality of open and underground churches, and the geopolitical intricacies of addressing the "two-China" issue. The 2018 Provisional Agreement on Bishops' Appointments between the Vatican and China is scrutinized as an important milestone, shedding light on its implications for future Sino-Vatican diplomacy. The article assesses how this agreement has impacted the Catholic Church in China by considering ongoing challenges related to religious freedom, governmental influence, and broader geopolitical dynamics. It concludes by reflecting on potential future prospects for Vatican-China relations, emphasizing continued dialogue and negotiation to ensure safety for Catholic communities in China while securing stability in their relationship with both states.

**Keywords:** Vatican-China Relations, Catholic Church in China, 2018 Provisional Agreement, Appointment of Bishops, Open and Underground Churches, Two-China Problem, Religious Freedom, Geopolitical Dynamics, Sino-Vatican Diplomacy, Pope Benedict XVI

## Introduction

In recent years, the evolving diplomatic ties between the Vatican and China have garnered significant global attention. Rooted in a complex historical context, these ties have unfolded amidst a myriad of challenges and opportunities such as bishop appointments, open churches versus underground churches, cultural disparities, and pressing human rights concerns. The landmark 2018 Sino-Vatican Agreement emerged as a pivotal development in the annals of Vatican-China diplomacy signaling a potential path towards reconciliation. However, this deal also raised important issues about the future of religious liberty and the independence of the Catholic Church within China's socio-political context. Additionally, there are substantial geopolitical implications, especially with regards to the sensitive Taiwan-Vatican relations. This analysis seeks to offer a thorough understanding of the complex obstacles and opportunities involved in Vatican-China diplomacy. It aims to examine and investigate the historical foundations and potential future directions of this significant international relationship, providing insights into the intricate interplay of faith, diplomacy, and global politics.

## From Tang Dynasty to Modern Diplomacy

The introduction of Catholicism in China during the Tang dynasty in 635 by Nestorian priests marked the beginning of a complex journey characterized by the interaction between religion and politics. The arrival of Franciscans in the 13th century, followed by the influence of Jesuits during the Ming dynasty with prominent figures like Matteo Ricci, laid down foundations for Catholic presence in China. However, this expansion faced challenges, especially within the context of international relations and imperialism. Before 1949, the Catholic hierarchy in China was mainly controlled by foreigners, creating a perception of religion as a tool for Western colonialism. China's attempts to establish diplomatic ties with the Vatican in centuries XIX and XX were hindered by foreign powers' influence, particularly France's efforts to maintain control over Chinese ecclesiastical affairs. Following the establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949, relations between the Catholic authorities in Rome and Chinese authorities continued to face strains (Luehrmann, 2009). The

Chinese government's persecution of Catholics and control over the Catholic Church in China led to a rupture in relations between the Vatican and China, with each side holding its own grievances and mistrust (No easy solutions: a response to Weigel's critique of the Vatican-China ..., n.d).

Influenced by both political and religious factors, the historical dynamic between China, the Vatican, and Catholicism has undergone significant changes. Within the first decade of communist rule in China, the Vatican aimed to foster relations with the new government. There was a notable seven-year gap from 1959 to 1966 where Taiwan's representation to the Holy See was elevated without immediate reciprocation from the Vatican, indicating an effort on their part to wait for a chance to improve ties with China. In response, during this period, the Vatican withdrew its representative from Taiwan and left its ambassadorial post vacant in order to seek improved relations with China. However, it wasn't until 1979 that major developments occurred in Sino-Vatican relations when China initiated diplomatic relationships with various countries as part of its global opening up policy offering new opportunities for dialogue.

Amidst these historical developments, the emergence of constructive Sino-Vatican diplomatic relations has been riddled with challenges (China and the Vatican, 1979–Present, n.d). Amidst these historical developments, the emergence of constructive Sino-Vatican diplomatic relations has been riddled with challenges stemming from political, religious, and cultural complexities.

### **Challenges in the Appointment of Bishops**

One of the most significant challenges in Vatican-China diplomacy revolves around the appointment of bishops. This issue is manifested in the "self-consecration" of bishops in China without seeking the Pope's prior approval (Chan, 1989). These "self-consecrations" have been a source of tension between the Vatican and Beijing, as they go against the traditional process of episcopal appointments in the Catholic Church. The Vatican insists on the principle of papal authority in the appointment of bishops, while China argues for autonomy and local selection. The Vatican's position is rooted in the belief that the Pope, as the head of the Catholic Church, has the ultimate authority to appoint bishops. However, China views this as a form of interference in its internal affairs and insists on the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association's role in the selection and consecration of bishops (Holy See-China: Provisional Agreement on nomination of Bishops renewed ..., 2022). This issue has led to conflicts and disagreements between the Vatican and China, with instances of excommunication being threatened by the Vatican and resentment expressed by Chinese authorities over what they perceive as Vatican interference in their internal affairs (China and the Vatican, 1979–Present, n.d). These tensions are deeply rooted in historical events, including the initial attempts by the Vatican to establish ties with China in 1888 and 1918, and the subsequent division within the Chinese Catholic community (Luehrmann, 2009).

### **Open Church and Underground Church**

China's complex religious landscape is one of the main challenges. With a population of over 1.4 billion people, China is home to a diverse range of religious beliefs and practices, including Buddhism, Taoism, Islam, and Christianity. While Christianity is a minority religion in China, it has been growing rapidly in recent years. This growth has posed challenges for the Chinese government, which seeks to maintain control and regulate religious activities. The Chinese government has implemented strict regulations on religious practices, including the requirement for all religious organizations to register with the state and operate within a framework approved by the government. These regulations have created tension and division within the Catholic Church in China, with the emergence of the open and underground churches. The open church is the government-sanctioned Chinese Patriotic Catholic Association, which operates independently from the Vatican and appoints its own bishops without seeking the approval of the Pope. The underground church, on the other hand, remains loyal to the Vatican and practices in secrecy due to government restrictions. The division between the open and underground churches poses a significant challenge for the Vatican in its diplomatic relations with China.

The Chinese government has emphasized the principle of independence and self-government of the Catholic Church in China, as stated in the statute introduced by the Patriotic Association of the Catholic Church in China in 1957. This statute asserted the need for the Catholic Church in China to be independent from foreign influence and control. The Vatican, on the other hand, sees the Pope as the head of the universal Church and believes that all Catholics should recognize his authority (The Vatican, China, and evangelical prudence - Catholic World Report, n.d). This fundamental difference in perspective on the issue of independence and autonomy has been a significant hurdle for Vatican-China diplomacy. The Vatican has consistently called for

the recognition of the Pope's authority and the unity of the Catholic Church, while China has insisted on maintaining its own unique Chinese Catholic Church, separate from the authority of the Pope.

In her book "Catholicism in China, 1900-Present," Chu C. Y. provides a comprehensive analysis of the challenges faced by the Catholic Church in China throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. One of the main challenges for the Catholic Church in China has been navigating the complex relationship with the Chinese government due to their control over religious activities and bishops' appointments. The competition between open and underground churches for recognition by the Vatican has also been emphasized as an issue. The provisional agreement signed in 2018 aimed to address some of these challenges, but it has sparked debate and criticism concerning its impact on religious freedom and human rights (Catholicism in China, 1900-present : the development of the Chinese ..., 2016).

The ongoing tension between the open Church and the underground Church in China poses a continuing challenge for Sino-Vatican diplomacy in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The underground Church, which operates outside of the state-sanctioned Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association and remains loyal to the Vatican, faces persecution and restrictions from the government. Despite a provisional agreement, it continues to operate clandestinely, with bishops and priests often facing harassment, detention, and imprisonment. This agreement has also led to debates within the Catholic Church as some argue that it compromises its integrity by legitimizing government-appointed bishops not fully aligned with Vatican teachings. Additionally, issues regarding religious freedom and human rights present significant hurdles for Sino-Vatican diplomacy due to strict government control over religious activities including those within both state-sanctioned organizations like the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association as well as an independent underground church loyal to Rome.

### **The "two-China" problem**

Deeply rooted in the complex political history and ideological differences between the People's Republic of China (PRC) and the Republic of China (Taiwan), the "two-China" problem poses a multifaceted challenge to Vatican-China diplomacy. The Vatican's recognition of Taiwan, one of the few states to do so, stands in stark contrast to the PRC's "One China" policy, which views Taiwan as an integral part of its territory. This diplomatic stance of the Vatican has significant implications for its relations with the PRC. As noted by Madsen (2019), "The Vatican's historical support for Taiwan... has been a point of contention with the PRC" (p. 250). This situation encapsulates a dilemma for the Vatican: maintaining its commitment to Taiwan while seeking to engage with the Catholic community in mainland China.

The Vatican's diplomatic ties with Taiwan are linked to common principles, especially regarding religious freedom and human rights. Yet, the Vatican's desire to expand its involvement with the Chinese population, including its significant Catholic community, requires a reassessment of its diplomatic stance. Managing this delicate equilibrium is vital as any change in the Vatican's acknowledgment of Taiwan could potentially tense up its relations with the PRC. As Chu (2020) articulates, "The Vatican's desire to engage with the mainland Chinese population... requires careful consideration of its diplomatic stance" (p. 180). The resolution of the "two-China" problem in Vatican-China diplomacy thus requires a nuanced approach that respects both political realities and the Vatican's religious and moral principles.

Dealing with the complex political issues related to the "two-China" matter in the context of Vatican-China relations requires a thoughtful assessment of the religious and ethical values that influence the Vatican's involvement on an international scale. With the 2018 Provisional Agreement marking a crucial turning point, the future of this connection depends on how each side handles this ongoing issue, with far-reaching ramifications for global diplomacy, religious freedoms, and the independence of the Catholic Church in China. As Wiest (2020) observes, "The resolution of the 'two-China' problem... has implications for international diplomacy, religious freedom, and the autonomy of the Catholic Church in China" (p. 192). The evolving dynamics of this complex issue will likely shape the future of Vatican-China diplomacy.

### **Early 21<sup>st</sup> Century**

In the early 21<sup>st</sup> century, there were significant developments in the relationship between the Vatican and China, particularly due to the efforts of Pope Benedict XVI. His letter to the bishops, priests, consecrated persons, and lay faithful of the Catholic Church in the People's Republic of China in 2007 marked a milestone. This primarily theological and pastoral communication also addressed crucial canonical issues pertaining to Sino-Vatican relations. These issues included state control over bishops and the Bishops' Conference, as well as addressing challenges faced by both open and underground Catholic communities in China related to their independence

from political power. The letter also addressed the appointment and ordination of bishops, clergy formation, religious freedom, and ongoing dialogue with the Chinese government. It emphasized that this dialogue could help reconcile conflicts between open and underground Catholic communities in China while reviewing ecclesiastical circumscriptions and provinces. The discussion also touched on the abolition of extraordinary privileges previously granted to the Church in China. Pope Benedict XVI's letter carefully examined these matters in light of Canon Law, providing perspectives on conflict resolution and a deeper understanding of the Vatican's position towards China (Canonical Issues in Pope Benedict XVI's Letter to the Catholic Church in China (2007) – Continuation of Part Three, 2013).

The effect of Pope Benedict XVI's message was significant for both ecclesiastical and diplomatic ties between the Vatican and China. It made a sincere effort to close the divide between the two entities, recognizing the intricate dynamics of the Catholic Church in China. The letter's focus on conversation and peace-building marked an important milestone in repairing historical divisions and nurturing a more peaceful relationship. It emphasized the Vatican's admiration for China and its intention for positive involvement, despite the obstacles presented by the political situation and the fragmented state of the Catholic community in China. This strategy represented a significant moment in the Vatican's diplomatic endeavors in modern times, demonstrating a subtle grasp of both religious and political complexities and a dedication to seeking common ground for the welfare of Chinese Catholics (Canonical Issues in Pope Benedict XVI's Letter to The Catholic Church in China (2007) – Part Three, 2013).

### **Pope Francis: Shaping Vatican-China Diplomacy**

During Pope Francis' tenure, there have been substantial developments in the Vatican's diplomatic relations with China. This reflects a broader strategy of engagement and dialogue in global affairs by Pope Francis, who is renowned for his peacemaking role. His involvement in facilitating clandestine negotiations between the United States and Cuba in 2014 exemplifies his dedication to diplomacy and reconciliation. This approach illustrates his potential impact on shaping the Vatican's ties with China as well as other international contexts. Under Pope Francis, the Holy See has demonstrated a readiness to participate in transparent discussions, negotiations, and collaboration — crucial for addressing complex issues such as bishop appointments, open and underground Catholic churches' status, alongside more overarching concerns about religious freedom and human rights within China. By focusing on openness and dialogue in his diplomatic style, Pope Francis offers an encouraging framework for advancing Vatican-China relations which could lead to significant improvements across various facets including economic benefits whilst advancing human rights progressions within the region ("Dissecting a Miracle: Pope Francis the Peacemaker," 2015).

The impact of Pope Francis' diplomatic efforts on the Vatican-China relationship is particularly noteworthy in relation to the 2018 Provisional Agreement on the Appointment of Bishops. This agreement, a significant development in the history of the Catholic Church in China, marked a step toward resolving longstanding issues with bishop appointments. Pope Francis' approach to diplomacy, which emphasizes pastoral care and unity within the Catholic community, has been crucial in this progress. His initiatives to mend divisions within the Church and restore full communion with Chinese bishops ordained without papal mandate demonstrate his dedication to addressing the pastoral and spiritual needs of Catholics in China. The ongoing negotiations and extension of this agreement reflect an ongoing commitment to dialogue and cooperation - essential for tackling challenges faced by the Catholic community in China while enhancing relations between Vatican City and China. Pope Francis' involvement in these diplomatic efforts indicates potential for continued advancement and collaboration moving forward.

### **China-Vatican Provisional Agreement on the Appointment of Bishops**

The interim deal regarding the appointment of bishops between the Vatican and China, first signed on September 22, 2018, and later extended in 2020 and 2023, signifies a substantial cooperative endeavor between the Holy See and the People's Republic of China (Holy See Press Office, 2023; Vatican News, 2023). This agreement, demonstrating an enduring dedication from both sides, seeks to resolve longstanding concerns regarding the selection of Catholic bishops in China. The expansion of the agreement and its trial phase demonstrate both parties' commitment to assess the agreement's effectiveness and practicality in real-world conditions (National Catholic Register, 2023).

Challenges have arisen in its implementation. The Vatican has pointed out violations by the Chinese authorities of the terms stipulated in the agreement, particularly regarding the appointment of bishops. These infractions underscore the challenges of upholding a balance between the provisions of the agreement and the individual interests and policies of both the Vatican and Chinese government (Catholic News Agency, 2023).

China's track record on religious freedom and human rights, particularly regarding Catholics in the underground church, has been a concern for the international community (The Holy See and China: reasons for Agreement on appointment of bishops ..., 2020). The Chinese government's strict regulation of religious activities and authority in appointing state-endorsed religious figures present substantial obstacles to Vatican-China relations. Additionally, the autonomy of the Catholic Church in China is a contentious issue, fueled by historically unauthorized appointments of bishops by the Chinese government.

The signing of the China-Vatican Provisional Agreement on the Appointment of Bishops in 2018 was a significant milestone in the relations between China and the Vatican. This agreement aimed to address one of the long-standing challenges in Vatican-China diplomacy: the issue of the appointment of bishops. In 2018, an interim accord was signed with the aim of addressing the conflict over the appointment of bishops in China. However, this agreement has been met with opposition from certain Catholic factions, contending that it undermines the independence of the Chinese Catholic Church and validates government intervention in religious matters. These objections underscore the continuing intricacy of relations between China and the Vatican concerning religious autonomy and control within the Catholic Church in China.

### **Understanding the Provisional Agreement of 2018**

Central to the Agreement is the process of appointing bishops, crucial for the Church's life and the communion between the pastors of the Chinese Catholic Church, the Bishop of Rome, and bishops worldwide. The Agreement's focus, as Tornielli (2020) explains, is "exclusively treats the process for the appointment of bishops: an essential question for the life of the Church and for the necessary communion between the pastors of the Chinese Catholic Church with the Bishop of Rome and with the bishops throughout the world." Pope Francis, addressing the divisions within the Catholic Church in China, particularly regarding the bishop's role, has worked towards healing and unity. He reestablished full communion with Chinese bishops ordained without papal mandate, emphasizing that the Agreement's purpose is pastoral, aimed at supporting the Gospel's preaching and restoring the Catholic community's full and visible unity in China. As Pope Francis (2020) clarified, "The sole scope of the Provisional Agreement is 'to support and advance the preaching of the Gospel, and to reestablish and preserve the full and visible unity of the Catholic community in China'." The initial period of the Agreement led to new episcopal appointments with Rome's agreement, suggesting its positive impact and the potential for continued collaboration.

In evaluating the state of the Catholic Church in China after the signing of the Sino-Vatican Agreement in 2018, it is necessary to examine the impact of the agreement on the underground church, which comprises a significant portion of Catholics in China. The Catholic Church in China has undergone significant changes since the 1978 opening of China and the pontificate of John Paul II. Criveller (2020) provides a comprehensive overview, noting that "the 2018 provisional agreement on the appointment of bishops was a breakthrough in Sino-Vatican relations." However, he also acknowledges the persistent challenges, stating that "the difficulties for the Catholic faithful, in both the official or underground communities, are far from being over." This sentiment is echoed by Madsen (2019), who highlights the complex dynamics between the Chinese state, the Vatican, and local Catholic communities. Madsen observes that "the interaction between local communities and the long-term development of the Chinese Catholic church will depend... on the complex cooperative and competitive arrangements between the Vatican and the Chinese state."

The provisional agreement between the Vatican and Beijing, particularly regarding the appointment of bishops, marks a landmark in the history of the Catholic Church in contemporary China. Chu (2020) emphasizes the significance of this development, stating that it allows for "the ordination of bishops agreeable to both the Vatican and China." This agreement, while a step forward, does not fully resolve the tensions within the Church, as Wiest (2020) points out in his analysis of Sino-Vatican relations under Pope Benedict XVI. He reflects on the cautious optimism and eventual confrontation that characterized this period, suggesting a complex and evolving relationship between the Vatican and China. Wiest underscores the cautious optimism and eventual confrontation that characterized the Sino-Vatican relations under Pope Benedict XVI, highlighting a complex and evolving relationship between the Vatican and China.

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## Outlook on the Future of Vatican-China Diplomacy

The outlook for diplomatic relations between the Vatican and China after the 2018 Provisional Agreement reflects a multifaceted and changing situation, characterized by careful hopefulness and notable obstacles. The 2018 agreement, primarily focusing on the appointment of bishops, was a groundbreaking step towards reconciling the long-standing rift between the Vatican and the Chinese government. This agreement is described as "a landmark in the history of the Catholic Church in contemporary China" (People, Communities, and the Catholic Church in China, 2020, p. xix), signifying a mutual willingness to find common ground. The acknowledgment of seven Chinese bishops, who were previously ordained without Vatican consent, signifies a noteworthy change in the Vatican's strategy and could mark the beginning of a new phase in their bilateral relations. Nonetheless, the future outlook of this diplomatic endeavor relies on effectively managing the complexities related to religious freedom, governmental influence, and the broader geopolitical landscape.

The future dynamics of Vatican-China diplomacy are likely to be influenced by broader global political shifts and China's domestic political landscape. The agreement's effectiveness hinges on carefully balancing the Vatican's spiritual authority with China's sovereign interests. "The Vatican focuses on the ordination of bishops, which has a significant impact on the well-being of the Chinese Church and the Holy See's relations with China" (People, Communities, and the Catholic Church in China, 2020, p. 2). This equilibrium is essential for the future of the Catholic community in China and the overall connection between the two states. The ongoing negotiations are expected to continuously impact this relationship, affecting religious freedoms, global diplomacy, and the global influence of the Catholic Church. The future dynamics of Vatican-China diplomacy are likely to be influenced by broader global political shifts and China's domestic political landscape.

In the context of the 2018 tentative agreement between the Vatican and China, the recent situation in which China prevented its mainland Catholic bishops and faithful from accompanying Pope Francis to Mongolia can be understood. The choice to exclude mainland bishops from participating in the Pope's visit to Mongolia reflects ongoing intricacies and obstacles in implementing this Agreement, underscoring the tension between the Holy See's efforts to maintain diplomatic relations while upholding religious freedom, and China's approach of controlling and regulating religious practices within its borders. This incident not only examines the strength and effectiveness of the 2018 Agreement but also raises inquiries about future prospects for Vatican-China diplomacy, particularly concerning the autonomy of the Catholic Church in China alongside religious authority in a state that tightly controls religious expression. The varying treatment of bishops from Hong Kong and Macau, in contrast to those from mainland China, adds further complexity to the situation, highlighting the diverse regional policies within China's administration (America Magazine, 2023). This recent occurrence can be viewed as an important point in the continuous story of the 2018 Provisional Agreement and its effects on the future of relations between Vatican and China.

## Conclusion

Given the complexities and challenges that have characterized the Sino-Vatican relations, it is evident that the conclusion of the 2018 Provisional Agreement was a crucial moment in the history of the Catholic Church in China. This agreement indicated a mutual willingness to find common ground and highlighted a significant step forward in reconciling the rift between the Vatican and the Chinese government. Despite this positive development, navigating Vatican-China diplomacy moving forward requires careful attention due to various intricacies. The delicate balance between spiritual authority held by the Vatican and China's sovereign interests will continue to shape their relationship dynamics. Their approach to religious freedom, governmental influence, and global factors will significantly impact their future interactions. The challenges faced are exemplified through incidents like China preventing mainland Catholic bishops and followers from accompanying Pope Francis to Mongolia. These complexities highlight tensions between diplomatic efforts by the Holy See while safeguarding religious freedom on one hand, and China's regulation of religious practices within its borders on another.

In considering what lies ahead, ongoing reflections about how effective or sustainable this agreement may be will arise amidst tests it encounters over time; especially regarding its impact on autonomous decisions within state-controlled boundaries for religious expression. The longevity of this agreement's effectiveness must also consider unfolding geopolitical shifts alongside changes occurring within China's domestic landscape as they affect policies tied with these diplomacies - touching upon broader uncertainties surrounding religious freedoms which might transcend bilateral relations itself. Ultimately, although marking an important milestone in Vatican-

China diplomacy history—the 2018 Provisional Agreement brings into sharp focus multiple intertwined complications that mandate continued dialogue, understanding, and negotiation for ensuring both safety among Catholic communities in China and stability within the relationship between both states.

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