

Vatican strengthens ties with Vietnam but not with China: Beijing consecrates bishops for state-run church

News in the [February 20, 2007](#) issue

Rome's push to restore diplomatic relations with Vietnam took an "important step" forward as Pope Benedict XVI met last month at the Vatican with Vietnamese prime minister Nguyen Tan Dung.

The encounter in the papal library January 25 was the first of its kind in decades, thawing tensions that date back to the rise of Vietnamese communism. The talks also burnish the Vatican's credentials for negotiating with communist governments as it pushes for greater religious freedom in China and reestablishment of diplomatic ties with Beijing.

"The Holy See expressed satisfaction for the visit, which marks a new and important step toward the normalization of bilateral relations," a statement from the Vatican said. In a rare departure from Vatican protocol, Ngo Yen Thi, Vietnam's head of religious affairs, also sat in on the meeting.

The Vatican and the communist leadership in Hanoi have long clashed over who holds the power to appoint bishops in Vietnam's 6-million-strong church. In recent years, the two sides have settled on an agreement under which Hanoi nominates three candidates and the pope chooses one.

"Those relations have, over the last few years, made concrete progress, opening new spaces of religious freedom for the Catholic Church in Vietnam," the Vatican said.

The progress stands in glaring contrast to the Holy See's troubled relations with China. Hopes that those two sides were edging toward reestablishment of ties, which

were severed more than a half-century ago, have largely receded amid public sparring over the appointment of bishops.

Over the past year, Beijing has consecrated three bishops for its state-run church, prompting searing condemnations from the Vatican and threats of excommunication. Beijing has dismissed the criticism, calling on the Vatican to stop interfering in China's "internal affairs."

An estimated 12 million Chinese Catholics remain divided between followers of a state-run open church and members of an underground church administered by a clandestine network of clergy who are routinely harassed. According to Asia News, a Vatican-affiliated news agency, at least 17 underground bishops have disappeared or are currently being detained by Chinese authorities.

Despite a decade of economic liberalization in China, its leaders remain deeply suspicious of organized religion—especially the Catholic Church, which led popular uprisings that toppled a communist regime in Poland. Vatican officials, working through unofficial channels, have tried to dispel the notion that the Roman Catholic hierarchy is inherently opposed to communism and inclined to mount public protests. *-Religion News Service*