

China repeats demands after Vatican overture: Beijing insists on break with Taiwan

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Beijing reiterated demands this month that the Vatican must break its diplomatic links with Taiwan and practice “noninterference” in China’s internal affairs if the Roman Catholic Church wishes to improve its relations with the communist-ruled state.

“China’s stance on improving relations with the Vatican is consistent. Namely, the Vatican should sever the so-called diplomatic ties with Taiwan, and recognize the People’s Republic of China as the sole government representing China,” the official Xinhua news agency quoted Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesperson Qin Gang as saying.

Qin was reacting to a 55-page letter issued June 30 by Pope Benedict XVI to Roman Catholics in China. The pontiff had called for increased cooperation between clandestine Catholic communities and those officially recognized by the government.

China’s Catholics—collectively estimated by Rome at 8 to 12 million—are divided into two groups. The state-approved Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association does not acknowledge the authority of the pope, while the unrecognized Catholic Church is loyal to the pope and, some observers say, has faced persecution by Chinese authorities.

Benedict acknowledged in his letter the existence in China of greater religious liberty than in the past, but he also referred to “grave limitations” on freedom that could “suffocate pastoral activity.”

The Vatican has protested repeatedly against the appointment of bishops by the Patriotic Association without any consultation with Rome. Beijing, however, considers such protests to be interference in the internal affairs of the People’s Republic of China.

The pope said he wished to reach an accord with Beijing on the “choice of candidates for the episcopate, the publication of the appointment of bishops, and the recognition—concerning civil effects where necessary—of the new bishops on the part of the civil authorities.”

A July 2 editorial in the Hong Kong-based *South China Morning Post* noted, “In expressing trust that an agreement can be reached, the Vatican has in mind the arrangement in communist Vietnam, where it proposes a few names and the government chooses.”

The pope did not mention the issue of Taiwan. However, in an accompanying note, the Vatican repeated its readiness to transfer its embassy from Taiwan to China “at any time” in the event of an agreement with Beijing.

In addressing the Catholics in China, Benedict urged them to move beyond “personal positions or viewpoints, born of painful or difficult experiences,” in order to arrive at “pardon and reconciliation.” —*Ecumenical News International*