

Vatican and China make deal on bishops

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The Vatican and China announced September 22 that they had signed what they called a provisional agreement on the appointment of bishops, a breakthrough on an issue that stymied diplomatic relations for decades and aggravated a split among Chinese Catholics.

The deal resolved one of the major sticking points in recent years, with the Vatican agreeing to accept seven bishops who were previously named by Beijing without the pope's consent.

The development comes nearly seven decades after the Holy See and Beijing severed official relations. Beijing's long-held insistence that it must approve bishop appointments in China had clashed with absolute papal authority to pick bishops.

With the status of the seven bishops now reconciled, the Vatican said all bishops in China are now in communion with Rome—even though Catholics in China are still split between those who belong to the official Chinese church and those in the underground church who remained loyal to the pope.

Pope Francis invited Chinese Catholics “to work towards reconciliation” in a message September 26, as reported by Vatican News. “We can initiate an unprecedented process that we hope will help to heal the wounds of the past, restore full communion among all Chinese Catholics.”

There was also no immediate mention in the deal of the status of several underground bishops named by the pope.

Vatican spokesman Greg Burke indicated the accord signed in Beijing would serve as a blueprint for future appointments of bishops, who lead the faithful in their dioceses. The aim of the accord “is not political but pastoral, allowing the faithful to have bishops who are in communion with Rome but at the same time recognized by Chinese authorities.”

The Vatican’s no. 2 official indicated that the pope and the Chinese authorities would jointly approve new bishop appointments.

“What is required now is unity, is trust, and a new impetus: to have good pastors, recognized by the successor of Peter and by the legitimate civil authorities,” said Pietro Parolin.

A Vatican official, speaking earlier this year on the contours of the plan, said the deal allows the pope to effectively veto future bishop names proposed by Beijing. That official, who spoke on condition of anonymity because diplomatic negotiations were involved, had described it as the best arrangement the Holy See could achieve for now. The deal’s provisional nature left open the possibility of improvements down the line.

While the agreement could help pave the way for formal diplomatic ties and possibly an eventual papal trip to China, it was also sure to anger Catholics who vigorously advocated for the Vatican to maintain a hard line on caring for the 12 million Catholic faithful in China.

Hong Kong cardinal Joseph Zen denounced the deal as a sell-out of Chinese Catholics who refused to join the state Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association and who paid the price of remaining faithful to Rome during years of persecution.

Even as China professed the desire for better relations with the Holy See, the deal was signed against the backdrop of a crackdown on religions under the government of President Xi Jinping.

In one glaring case of the plight of pro-Vatican Catholics in China, Bishop Guo Xijin, head of an underground diocese, was whisked away in March by government agents in the southern village of Saiqi.

It wasn’t immediately clear how the new accord affected him and others opposing Chinese authorities.

“The question now is: What is going to happen to the bishops who are under house arrest?” said Bernardo Cervellera, a Vatican-China analyst and chief editor of the missionary agency Asia News.

Cervellera cited Shanghai’s underground bishop and others under house arrest, as well as priests who were imprisoned. He said that about a year ago, some ten priests were in prison in Hebei province near Beijing, but he didn’t know their current situation.

The Vatican “had to start a dialogue from a weak position, because China is very powerful and therefore dictated the rules of this dialogue,” Cervellera said.

Zhang Ye, a 31-year-old Catholic leaving a Saturday evening mass in Beijing, said the Vatican couldn’t afford to ignore the importance of China and the growing number of believers in the country.

“My biggest wish is that we can have more communication and interactions with Vatican,” he said.