

Vatican extends, defends secret deal with China on making bishops

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Pope Francis, left, in May 2019, and Chinese President Xi Jinping, right, in June 2019. (AP Photos)

A controversial deal between the Vatican and the Chinese government on the appointment of bishops was extended on Saturday, according to church officials, who defended the controversial accord as an important step in restoring relations between the two countries.

The agreement, signed initially in 2018 and renewed two years later, is still referred to as “provisional,” and its content remains secret, likely in part because the Vatican

recognizes the unpopularity of sharing the appointment of bishops with communist leaders. Under the deal, Beijing provides a short list of candidates, and the pope has the final say.

Pope Francis' critics say the deal concedes too much to Beijing and limits the Vatican's ability to condemn human rights violations in the country.

But the Vatican argues that the arrangement has improved its notoriously strained relations with the Chinese Communist Party, which officially restricts the population of some 6 million Catholics to government-regulated Masses. An unknown number of Chinese Catholics secretly attend illegal "underground" services officiated by an aging and sparsely distributed corps of priests approved by Rome.

Vatican authorities still hope to reconcile the official and underground church while maintaining open channels with Chinese leadership. Cardinal Luis Antonio Tagle, who heads the Vatican's Dicastery for Evangelization, said the lack of dialogue with China had led to "painful wounds within the church, to the point of casting a shadow of suspicion on the sacramental life itself."

In an interview with the Vatican newspaper *L'Osservatore Romano* on Saturday, Francis's top lieutenant at the Vatican, Cardinal Pietro Parolin, praised the agreement.

"The heart of the Agreement certainly has to do also with the consolidation of good institutional and cultural dialogue," Parolin said, "but it mainly concerns aspects that are essential to the daily life of the Church in China."

The deal has already led to short-term positive results, according to Parolin, the Vatican's secretary of state. All Catholic bishops in China are now in full communion with the pope, and Beijing has not appointed any new bishops that were not sanctioned by the Vatican. Priests in China can even mention Francis celebrating mass, which was once "unthinkable," Parolin said.

In the agreement's four years, however, only six bishops have been installed under the agreement, a small number considering the number of people in China and its vast geography. Parolin also said six bishops from the underground church have now been recognized by Chinese authorities.

“The ultimate goal of this journey is for the ‘little flock’ of Chinese Catholics to advance in the possibility of living serenely and freely their Christian life,” Parolin said.

Tagle told the church news agency Fides on Saturday that the life of the church in China takes precedence over diplomatic concerns. The main objective of the agreement, therefore, is to appoint “worthy and suitable” bishops. But the deal also seeks to “foster reconciliation, and to see the lacerations and contrasts opened within the Church by the tribulations it has gone through, healed.”

The cardinal said that the Vatican opts for dialogue with the People’s Republic to raise awareness of the suffering of local Catholic communities sometimes brought on by “inappropriate pressures and interference.”

“The Holy See has never spoken of the agreement as the solution of all problems,” Tagle said, but added that “one always has to dirty one’s hands with the reality of things as they are.” —Religion News Service