



Pope Francis, seen here in a photomontage with Chinese President Xi Jinping, has been sending overtures to Beijing since he became pope in March 2013, signaling he wants to transform the frigid relations between the Vatican and China. **Pictures by Jason Lee and Stefano Rellandini**

Inside their secret negotiations

China and the Vatican

BY LISA JUCCA, BENJAMIN KANG LIM, GREG TORODE, PHILIP PULLELLA AND NATALIE THOMAS

JULY 14 — DECEMBER 23 HONG KONG/BEIJING/ROME/CHENGDU

After decades of mistrust, Pope pushes for breakthrough with China

BY LISA JUCCA, BENJAMIN KANG LIM AND GREG TORODE

JULY 14 HONG KONG/BEIJING

Pope Francis is leading a determined push to fundamentally alter the relationship between the Vatican and China, which for decades has been infused with mutual suspicion and acrimony.

Interviews with some two dozen Catholic officials and clergy in Hong Kong, Italy and mainland China, as well as sources with ties to the leadership in Beijing, reveal details of an agreement that would fall short of full diplomatic ties but would address key issues at the heart of the bitter divide between the Vatican and Beijing.

A working group with members from both sides was set up in April and is discussing how to resolve a core disagreement over who

has the authority to select and ordain bishops in China, several of the sources told Reuters. The group is also trying to settle a dispute over eight bishops who were appointed by Beijing but did not get papal approval — an act of defiance in the eyes of the Vatican.

In what would be a dramatic breakthrough, the pope is preparing to pardon the eight, possibly as early as this summer, paving the way to further detente, say Catholic sources with knowledge of the deliberations.

A signal of Francis' deep desire for rapprochement with China came last year in the form of a behind-the-scenes effort by the Vatican to engineer the first-ever meeting between the head of the Roman Catholic Church and the leader of the Chinese Communist Party. Aides to the pope tried to arrange a meeting when both Francis and Chinese President Xi Jinping were in New York in late September to address the United Nations General Assembly.

The meeting didn't happen. But the overture didn't go unnoticed in Beijing.

While the two sides have said they are discussing the issue of the bishops, Catholic sources gave Reuters the most detailed account yet of the negotiations and the secret steps the Vatican has taken to pave the way to a deal.

The current talks come more than six decades after victorious Communist Party leaders, having vanquished the Nationalist forces of Chiang Kai-shek, expelled Vatican envoy Antonio Riberi from Beijing in 1951 as they banished missionaries and began a crackdown on organized religion. The Vatican remains the only Western state that does not have diplomatic ties with Beijing, maintaining instead formal relations with the Republic of China, based in Taiwan, which Beijing views as a renegade province.

For the Vatican, a thaw in relations with China offers the prospect of easing the plight of Christians on the mainland who for decades have been persecuted by the authorities. It may also ultimately pave the way to diplomatic relations, giving the Church full access to the world's most populous nation.

An official relationship with China “would crown a dream that the Catholic Church has cultivated for many centuries: to establish a regular presence in China through stable diplomatic ties,” said Elisa Giunipero, a researcher at the Catholic University of Milan who has studied the history of the Catholic Church in China for 20 years.

For China, improved relations could burnish its international image and soften criticism of its human rights record. It would also be an important step in prizing the Vatican away from Taiwan, handing China an important diplomatic victory in its efforts to isolate the self-governing island.

Spokespeople for the two sides acknowledged the talks are continuing but declined to answer detailed questions about them.

“The aim of the contacts between the Holy See and Chinese representatives is not primarily that of establishing diplomatic relations, but that of facilitating the life of the Church and contributing to making relations in ecclesial life normal and serene,” Vatican spokesman Father Federico Lombardi told Reuters.

“We are willing, on the basis of the relevant principles, to continue having constructive dialogue with the Vatican side, to meet each other halfway and jointly promote the continued forward development of the process of improving bilateral ties,” China’s Foreign Ministry said. “(We) hope the Vatican can likewise take a flexible and pragmatic attitude and create beneficial conditions for improving bilateral relations.”

A PAPAL INVITE

Forging an agreement won’t be easy. There is resistance on both sides.

Among Chinese leaders, there is concern that a deal would give the Vatican a powerful foothold on the mainland, challenging the Communist Party’s absolute authority.

In the “underground” church in China, whose members have been systematically persecuted for decades by the authorities, many devotees may feel betrayed by a Vatican

deal with Beijing. Catholic clergy belonging to the underground church have been detained and jailed through the years, and several bishops have died in prison, according to Catholic sources who monitor the situation on the mainland.

The Catholic Church in China, where there are an estimated eight to 10 million devotees, is divided into two communities: the “official” church, which is represented by the state-sanctioned Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association, and the “underground” church, which swears allegiance solely to the pope in Rome. Scholars estimate the number of Christians in China belonging to all denominations may be as many as 70 million.

Despite resistance in some quarters of the Catholic Church, including in Hong Kong, Pope Francis has made improved ties with China a priority, and a tight-knit circle of envoys and advisers around the pontiff are working on a deal, multiple sources told Reuters.

After he was elected pope in March 2013, Francis sent a message to Xi congratulating him on having become president of China. Then, while flying over China in August 2014 on the way to Seoul — the first time Beijing had allowed a pope to enter its airspace — the pope sent his best wishes to Xi and the Chinese people. The next month, Francis sent a letter to Xi via Argentinean politician Ricardo Romano, who had met the future pope when Francis was the archbishop of Buenos Aires, inviting the Chinese leader to a meeting, Romano told Reuters.

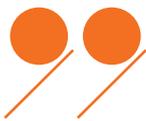
In early February this year, the pope sent wishes to Xi for the Chinese New Year, the country’s most important holiday. And on his way back to Rome from Mexico two weeks later, the pope told a news conference on the plane that he would “really love” to visit China.

NEW YORK RENDEZVOUS

An early indication that Pope Francis was serious about improving relations with China was his appointment in August 2013 of then Archbishop Pietro Parolin as his Secretary of State, the highest ranking diplomat in the



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Agostino Giovagnoli
Professor of
contemporary
history at the
Catholic University
of Milan

Vatican. Under Pope Benedict XVI, Francis' predecessor, Parolin had been the Vatican's chief negotiator with Beijing and was near to hammering out a deal with China on the appointment of bishops in 2009, people with direct knowledge of those negotiations say.

"In 2009, Parolin came very close to an agreement (with China)," said Agostino Giovagnoli, a professor of contemporary history at the Catholic University of Milan who closely follows the Vatican's relationship with China.

Ultimately, an agreement on the bishops wasn't reached as the Vatican considered it too narrow, say Catholic Church sources.

Parolin then moved to Venezuela in 2009 as the Vatican's representative there. His departure marked the start of a period of chilly relations with China.

In June 2014, the sides restarted contacts with a meeting in Rome, according to a Catholic official. A year later, the Vatican made its attempt to get Francis and Xi Jinping together in New York.

The pope was scheduled to fly from New York to Philadelphia on the morning of Sept. 26 last year, departing from John F. Kennedy Airport, his itinerary shows. Xi was heading to New York from Washington. The airport, three Catholic officials told Reuters, could have provided a discreet venue for a meeting between the two leaders, away from the media glare.

Catholic officials and clergy, and sources in China with knowledge of the contacts, offer differing accounts of why the leaders ultimately didn't meet, but all agree that the pope wanted to meet Xi and that this message was communicated clearly to China.

According to a Chinese source with direct knowledge of the matter, Beijing "could not make up its mind whether it should take place before or after the signing of an agreement."

In October, though, a six-person Vatican delegation made a visit to Beijing, followed by another meeting in January. A breakthrough came in April this year when the sides agreed to set up a working group, according to two Catholic Church officials. The group is modeled on the Joint Liaison Group that Britain and

China adopted to iron out issues before the handover of Hong Kong to the mainland in 1997, according to one of the officials.

The pope, says one Catholic official, has given "clear instructions to continue the dialogue (with China) and find a resolution."

The working group, which met in May, has been charged with hammering out technical solutions to the dispute over the ordination of bishops in China. It is currently discussing how to resolve the issue of eight bishops who were ordained in China without papal consent, according to Church officials and other Catholic sources with knowledge of the deliberations. Going forward, the Holy See wants to prevent a situation in which bishops are appointed by an authority other than the pope.

EXCOMMUNICATED BISHOPS

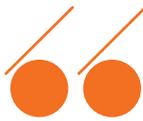
Catholic officials say there are 110 bishops in China, most of whom have been sanctioned by the Communist Party. There are about 30 bishops who are part of the underground church and have pledged allegiance only to the pope.

Most of the bishops recognized by Beijing have also sought the pope's blessing and received it. But there are eight bishops who were ordained in China and don't have papal approval. They are considered illegitimate by the Vatican.

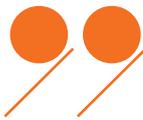
Three bishops in this group of eight have been officially excommunicated by the Vatican, according to public statements issued by the Holy See. The other five were told through informal channels that the pope opposed their ordination as bishops, according to Catholic sources.

The issue is further complicated by the fact that at least two of the eight bishops allegedly have children or girlfriends, according to two Catholic sources. That's a direct affront to the celibacy pledge taken by Catholic priests. Reuters was unable to independently confirm the personal status of these bishops.

Catholic Church officials and Catholic clergy with knowledge of the discussions told Reuters that the pope is preparing to pardon these eight bishops. The papal pardon would coincide with



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Father Jeroom Heyndrickx

Belgian missionary and member of the Vatican Commission for the Church in China

the Jubilee of Mercy, a year in which Catholics are urged to seek forgiveness for their offenses and forgive those who have offended them. The Vatican hopes a pardon would be interpreted by China as a goodwill gesture.

“I believe Pope Francis wishes to use the occasion of the Holy Year of Mercy to force a breakthrough,” says Father Jeroom Heyndrickx, a Belgian missionary and member of the Vatican Commission for the Church in China, which was set up under Pope Benedict to advise the Holy See on relations with China. The jubilee year ends in November.

The eight bishops whom the Vatican considers illegitimate can be readmitted to the Catholic Church if they receive a papal pardon. By the end of June, two out of the eight had not yet sent Francis a clear request for pardon, Catholic Church officials said.

Since the Vatican does not consider these eight bishops fit to run a diocese, the two sides are discussing a possible compromise that would allow them to retain their titles but be assigned to other tasks, according to Catholic officials.

Chen Jianming, director of the foreign affairs office of the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association, told Reuters it would be difficult to arrange interviews with any of its bishops. “They’re very busy people, often out in the field. Interviews would be very difficult,” Chen said.

The Patriotic Association and the State Administration for Religious Affairs in Beijing did not respond to questions from Reuters about the negotiations with the Vatican.

A BISHOP’S CHANGE OF HEART

The joint working group is also discussing another vexing issue — a mechanism whereby new bishops will be selected. The sides have failed to resolve this matter in nearly 30 years of on-off contacts. Attempts to find a solution under Benedict and Pope John Paul II failed.

In line with centuries of Catholic tradition, bishops are appointed by the pope. But China adopts a model whereby bishops are chosen by the local Chinese clergy, who are members of the Communist Party-controlled Patriotic Association.

Under a solution currently being discussed, the bishops would be selected by the clergy in China. The pope would have the power to veto candidates he considers unfit, but the Vatican would need to provide evidence that the person in question is unqualified for the position, according to Catholic Church officials and clergy. A key concern for Rome is that priests in China could face pressure or be offered inducements to favor candidates.

A source in Beijing with ties to the leadership said the sides have reached a tentative agreement on the future appointment of bishops, but did not provide details.

If a deal can be forged on the selection of new bishops, the Vatican then hopes to focus on an agreement that would see Beijing recognize the bishops who are members of the underground church.

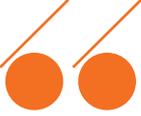
A sudden reversal last month by a high-profile Chinese bishop underscores the sensitivity of this issue. Thaddeus Ma Daqin, the auxiliary bishop of Shanghai, angered Beijing when he announced that he couldn’t remain in the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association at his ordination ceremony in 2012. But Ma, who has since been under house arrest at the Sheshan mountain seminary on the outskirts of Shanghai, wrote in a June 12 blog post that in retrospect, the move had been “unwise.”

It is unclear why Ma recanted, but some Catholic officials are concerned that the bishop was pressured into making the statement by the Chinese authorities. That could be interpreted as an affront to the pope, one Catholic official told Reuters. Other Catholic sources speculated that Ma may have acted voluntarily in an effort to defuse his confrontation with Beijing and help smooth the way to a deal.

The Chinese authorities did not reply to questions from Reuters about Ma’s decision.

FEAR OF FOREIGN INFLUENCE

In his effort to forge a breakthrough with China, Pope Francis will have to overcome deep-seated fears. China views the Church with suspicion, says the source in Beijing with ties to the Chinese



The Chinese government has no intention to give in on anything.



Cardinal Joseph Zen
Former bishop of Hong Kong

leadership. For the Communist Party, which is officially atheist but recognizes five religions — Buddhism, Taoism, Islam, Protestantism and Catholicism — the existence of a religion that recognizes a foreign leader as its moral authority is viewed as a potential threat.

Communist Party leaders, who were traumatized by the disintegration of the Soviet Union, are acutely aware of the role played by the Catholic Church in the fall of communist regimes, such as the 1989 revolution in Poland, the homeland of the late Pope John Paul II.

Within China there are also competing forces that could trip up an agreement, say Chinese and Catholic officials. The Foreign Ministry views détente with the Holy See as a way to isolate Taiwan, as the Vatican would likely have to sever ties to Taipei in the event of full diplomatic relations with Beijing. But the United Front Work Department, a party body whose mission is to spread China's influence, is less enthusiastic, fearing the threat of foreign religious infiltration.

“Internally, there is division over whether the Pope can be trusted or not,” says the source with leadership ties.

For centuries, the Catholic Church has struggled to make inroads in China, where foreign influence, including Christianity, has been met with suspicion. That distrust erupted at the turn of the 20th century with the outbreak of the Boxer Rebellion, which targeted foreigners, including Christian missionaries, as well as Chinese Christians.

But relations have not always been fraught. Matteo Ricci, a Jesuit like Pope Francis who arrived in the country in the late 16th century, embraced Chinese culture and became fluent in Mandarin, earning him access to the court of Ming dynasty Emperor Wanli. Ricci, who died in 1610, was buried in Beijing with the approval of the emperor.

In some quarters of the church, there are varying degrees of opposition to a deal with China. While Parolin is spearheading the drive for an agreement, the Vatican department in charge of foreign missionary work is more cautious about a deal, according to Catholic sources.

‘WE NEED TO FOLLOW THE POPE’

Criticism is especially strong in Hong Kong which, along with Macau, has long served as a beachhead for Catholicism on the mainland. The former British colony is home to missions and clergy that maintain extensive networks among both foreign and Chinese priests working in China, many underground.

The most outspoken opponent is Cardinal Joseph Zen, a former bishop of Hong Kong, who is a member of the Commission for the Catholic Church in China, the advisory body set up by Benedict. Some members of the commission opposed the draft deal the Vatican hammered out with China in 2009, according to several people with knowledge of the deliberations.

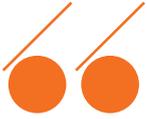
“The Chinese government has no intention to give in on anything,” Zen, a respected figure in Hong Kong's pro-democracy movement, told Reuters.

Under Francis, the commission has been sidelined. While it hasn't been dismantled, the body hasn't convened since he became pope. And the talks with China are being led by Rome-based Vatican officials.

“Chinese Catholics want to be reunited in a single church,” said a Chinese bishop who was appointed by Beijing and is also recognized by the pope. “But it is difficult to think of a deal that could satisfy everyone.”

Some members of the underground church, who spoke to Reuters on condition of anonymity, are especially dubious about a deal with China. Many have faced harsh persecution. Catholic clergy are closely watched by Chinese security forces, and priests have been pressured to register with the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association, Catholic sources say.

China Aid, a Texas-based group that monitors the government's treatment of all Christian denominations in China, said in its 2015 annual report that repression by the Chinese state had escalated. In areas where state repression was particularly strong, it pointed to the forcible closure of secretive house churches, the detention of “large numbers of pastors, church leaders and Christians,” and the confiscation of church property.



A full reconciliation needs time. If you go too fast, some segments of the underground Church could feel betrayed.



Antonio Sergianni
Former Vatican official

China’s Foreign Ministry did not respond to questions about religious persecution.

Bishops in the underground church have been jailed and subjected to forced labor, according to reports in the Catholic media. Shi Enxiang, the underground bishop of Yixian in northeast China, died last year after having been detained in 2001, according to UCANews, a Catholic news service focused on Asia. The bishop, who was 94, had been confined to prison or labor camp for about half his life, UCANews said.

“A full reconciliation needs time. If you go too fast, some segments of the underground Church could feel betrayed,” says Antonio Sergianni, a former Vatican official who worked on the China desk in Rome for 10 years until 2013. “But if the pope shows a new path, we need to follow the pope.” 

Additional reporting by **Philip Pullella** in Rome, **Ben Blanchard** in Beijing and **Hugh Bronstein** in Buenos Aires. Editing by **Peter Hirschberg**



Vatican and China in final push for elusive deal on bishops

BY LISA JUCCA AND BENJAMIN KANG LIM

OCTOBER 21 ROME/HONG KONG/BEIJING

Representatives from the Vatican and China are expected to meet before the end of the month in Rome in an effort to finalise a deal on the ordination of bishops on the mainland, a move aimed at ending a longstanding dispute, according to Catholic Church sources familiar with the negotiations.

The Church sources also told Reuters that China is preparing to ordain at least two new bishops before the end of the year and these appointments would have the blessing of the

Vatican. A person with ties to the leadership in Beijing confirmed that these ordinations would go ahead.

For more than six decades, China's ruling Communist Party has strongly opposed Rome's right to ordain Chinese bishops in a bitter contest for authority over as many as 10 million Catholics on the mainland. Bishops, priests and lay Catholics loyal to Rome have faced persecution, which has sparked scepticism over the détente in some Catholic quarters.

In yet a further sign of progress, the Vatican has reached a decision to recognise at least four Chinese bishops who were appointed by Beijing without the consent of the pope and so are considered illegitimate by the Holy See, according to Catholic Church sources and others briefed on the talks. The decision follows a breakthrough meeting in mid-August in Beijing between the Vatican representatives to talks with China and several of these bishops.

For the Vatican, an agreement on the ordination of bishops is important because it would lessen the possibility of a formal split within the Catholic Church in China, which is divided between a community that follows the state-sanctioned Catholic hierarchy and an "underground" community that swears allegiance only to the pope in Rome. A deal on the ordination of bishops would help to unite these two communities, say Catholic Church and Vatican sources.

An agreement "would definitely remove the risk of a schism (within the Church in China), which for sixty years has been a potential threat," said Elisa Giunipero, a researcher at the Catholic University of Milan who has studied the history of the Catholic Church in China for 20 years.

PRIORITY FOR POPE FRANCIS

The latest developments are part of behind-the-scenes negotiations that have been driven by Pope Francis. A deal on the ordination of bishops would be a major leap forward in efforts to bridge a decades-old rift between the Chinese Communist Party and the Vatican.



Pope Francis gestures to inmates as he meets with them at Curran-Fromhold Correctional Facility in Philadelphia.

Picture by
Tony Gentile

Since becoming leader of the Catholic Church in March 2013, Francis has made it a priority to chart a new course in the Vatican's contentious relationship with China. Reuters reported in July that Francis had sought to meet President Xi Jinping during a 2014 trip to New York in an effort to smooth the way to talks, and that a joint working group had been set up earlier this year in April to hammer out a deal on the bishops. The issue of full diplomatic relations is not currently on the table.

A deputy spokesperson for the Vatican, Paloma Garcia Ovejero, said the Holy See had no comment in response to questions from Reuters.

Chinese Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Hua Chunying told a daily news briefing in Beijing: "At present the channels for contact and dialogue between the two sides are unimpeded and effective. We are willing to work hard with the Vatican and meet each other halfway".

Vatican officials would like to see the appointment of the bishops before China's Ninth National Assembly of Catholic Representatives, which is expected to convene in December, according to Catholic sources. The Assembly is the highest authority governing the church in China and appoints the heads of the most important state-backed Catholic

institutions on the mainland — the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association and the Chinese Catholic Bishops' Conference.

The Assembly last met six years ago when tensions were high between Beijing and the Vatican over China's appointment of new bishops without papal consent. The Vatican retaliated by excommunicating three of these bishops in 2011 and 2012.

Now, the Vatican is anxious to conclude a deal on the ordination of bishops to head off another showdown with Beijing and to forestall a schism among China's Catholics, the Church sources say.

POSITIVE GESTURE

The ordination of new bishops in China is also pressing because some 30 of the more than 100 dioceses on the mainland are currently vacant, while a similar number are led by aging bishops who are 75 or older. Three people familiar with the negotiations said the talks about the appointment of the new bishops were focused on the dioceses of Changzhi, in the northern Shanxi province, and Chengdu, the capital of the southwestern Sichuan province. Separately, a person with ties to the leadership in Beijing said that the new bishops would be ordained in Chengdu and the city of Xichang, in Sichuan.

It was during the last round of talks in Beijing in August that the Vatican delegates were permitted to meet with several of the bishops whom the pope does not recognise. Catholic sources say they view this as a positive gesture by China, which had previously barred contact between the bishops and Vatican representatives. The meeting, the sources said, paved the way for Vatican recognition of some of these bishops.

One of the bishops who met the Vatican delegation was Joseph Ma Yinglin, the bishop of Kunming in Yunnan province, according to Catholic sources. Ma is president of the Chinese Catholic Bishops' Conference and vice-chairman of the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association. Both institutions answer

to the Chinese Communist Party and are not recognised by the Vatican.

Along with Ma, the other three bishops whom the Vatican is set to recognise are Guo Jincai, the bishop of Chengde in Hebei province near Beijing; Yue Fusheng, the bishop of Harbin in the northern Heilongjiang province; and Tu Shihua, the bishop of Puqi in Hunan province.

In total, there are eight bishops whom the Vatican has refused to recognise. Of the remaining four, two have children or girlfriends and the other two head dioceses where there is already an existing bishop who has been approved by the Vatican, according to Catholic sources.

During the August meeting in Beijing, the sides agreed on the principles that would govern the appointment of new bishops, say people with knowledge of the talks. According to a draft agreement, new Chinese bishops will be chosen by local clergy, with the pope making the final appointment. The pontiff can veto a candidate, for instance on ethical grounds, provided the Vatican presents evidence supporting such a decision to Beijing.

OBSTACLES REMAIN

For the Vatican, which is the only Western state that doesn't have diplomatic ties with Beijing, further détente with China following a deal on the bishops could make life easier for Christians on the mainland who have suffered decades of persecution at the hands of the Chinese authorities. For Beijing, better relations with the Holy See could improve its international standing and ultimately pry the Vatican away from the self-governing island of Taiwan, which China views as a renegade province.

Taiwan's foreign ministry said on Friday it was paying close attention to the developments and exchanges between China and the Vatican, adding that Taiwan and the Vatican had long been friends and had "firm" relations.

In some quarters of the Catholic Church, including among the underground community in China, there is concern over a deal between the Vatican and Beijing. That's especially the

case in Hong Kong, where local missions and clergy maintain ties with foreign and Chinese priests working on the mainland, often underground. Some fear the Vatican may make too many concessions to Beijing and that a deal will not lead to an improvement in the lives of Catholics in China.

Despite the progress toward an agreement on the ordination of new bishops, the Vatican and China are still at loggerheads over a range of other issues. In one case, for instance, some Chinese officials are still pushing for the appointment of a bishop without papal approval, according to two Church sources.

The matter of Thaddeus Ma Daqin also needs to be settled. Ma, the auxiliary bishop of Shanghai, was placed under house arrest in 2012 when he announced at his ordination as a bishop that he could no longer remain in the state-backed Catholic Patriotic Association. Ma remains under house arrest despite writing in a blog post in June that his move had been "unwise."

There is also the issue of some 30 bishops who belong to the underground Catholic community and who, along with local priests, face pressure from the authorities to join the state-sanctioned Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association. The Vatican is hoping that China will recognise these bishops once the issue of the eight bishops it considers illegitimate has been resolved, say Catholic officials. 

Additional reporting by **Philip Pullella** in Rome, **J.R. Wu** in Taipei and **Ben Blanchard** in Beijing; Editing by **Peter Hirschberg**



Chinese bishop excommunicated by Vatican takes part in ordination

DECEMBER 2 CHENGDU

A Chinese Catholic bishop excommunicated by the Vatican took part in the ordination of a new bishop in China on Wednesday, a move that some experts said could complicate Pope Francis' drive to heal a decades-old rift with the Communist government in Beijing.

The ordination of the new Chinese bishop, which was witnessed by a Reuters reporter, took place under heavy security at the cathedral in the southwestern city of Chengdu.

It was cordoned off from the general public

by dozens of police officers. About 200 people attended the ceremony.

Lei Shiyin, the government-backed bishop of Leshan in Sichuan province where Chengdu is also located, was ordained in China in June 2011 without Rome's blessing, at a time of heightened tensions between the Vatican and Beijing.

He was excommunicated by the Vatican for accepting an appointment to become a bishop without papal approval, the harshest punishment that can be imposed on a Catholic and which involves exclusion from sacraments.

Under Catholic church law, excommunicated clergy cannot actively participate in liturgical acts such as an ordination.

The Vatican did not have any immediate comment on the ceremony.

Lei could not be reached for comment.

The Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association, a Communist Party-controlled body that governs the Catholic community in China and is not recognised by the Vatican, declined to comment on Thursday.

ORDINATION A STUMBLING BLOCK

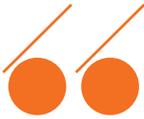
After several rounds of secret talks, Vatican delegates and Chinese government officials have hammered out a draft agreement on how to select and appoint new bishops in China, Reuters reported earlier this year.

Vatican officials had been hoping to sign a deal as early as this year in an effort to unite Chinese Catholics, split between a church that functions openly and is controlled by the party and an underground church that swears allegiance solely to the pope.

The direct involvement of Lei in the ordination in Chengdu could be seen by the Vatican as an act of defiance and risks derailing the talks, experts said.

Lei took an active part in the ordination ceremony, circling the new bishop, Tang Yuange, and holding his hand out over Tang's head. This is called the "laying of hands" and is one of the most sacred parts of the ordination ceremony.

"This will make a deal between China and the Vatican on appointment and ordination



If Lei was there, this means the government still has the upper hand.



Rachel Zhu
Professor of religious studies at the Fudan University

of future bishops more difficult,” said Meixiu Wang, a Beijing-based Chinese scholar who focuses on Sino-Catholic relations.

Still, Francis Yan, a Rome-based Chinese Catholic researcher, said Rome’s priority right now was to avoid further ordinations it considers illegitimate and that the “shadow of Chengdu can be overcome”. He noted both sides were making an effort to increase the dialogue.

The selection and ordination of bishops is the focus of current talks between the two sides, which have been at odds since the expulsion of foreign missionaries from China after the Communists took power in 1949.

A resolution of the dispute over the ordination of bishops would lessen the possibility of a formal split within the Catholic Church in China, Vatican and Catholic sources say.

The Chinese Communist government says bishops have to be appointed by the local Chinese Catholic community and refuses to accept the authority of the pope, whom it sees as the head of a foreign state that has no right to meddle in Beijing’s affairs.

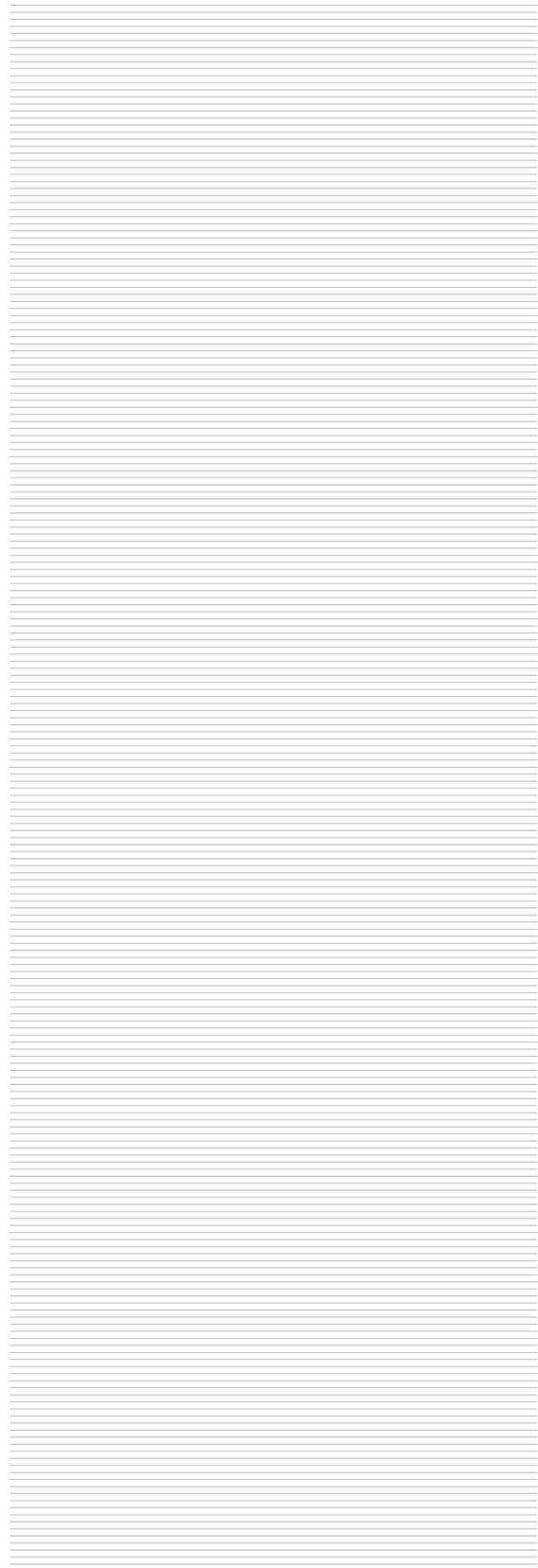
“If Lei was there, this means the government still has the upper hand” on Catholic matters in China, said Rachel Zhu, a professor of religious studies at the Fudan University who focuses on Chinese Catholicism.

Reuters reported earlier this year that the pope was prepared to pardon eight Chinese bishops, whom the Vatican has not approved but who are Beijing-backed, provided they showed willingness to repent.

Of these eight, some of whom met Vatican delegates in Beijing in August, the pope is ready to recognise at least four, Reuters reported.

However, Lei is not in this group, Vatican and Catholic sources have said.

Additional reporting by **Phil Pulella** in Rome; Editing by **Mike Collett-White** and **Alex Richardson**



“Underground” Catholics pose challenge for Pope’s hopes of better relations with China

BY LISA JUCCA, BENJAMIN KANG LIM AND NATALIE THOMAS

DECEMBER 23 BEIJING/HONG KONG

Every winter Sunday in the Chinese village of Youtong, hundreds of Catholic faithful brave subzero temperatures to meet in a make-shift, tin-roofed church. Tucked away in a back alley in a rural area of Hebei, the province with China’s biggest Catholic community, the gatherings are tolerated — but are illegal in the eyes of the local authorities.

These worshippers are among the millions of “underground” Catholics in China who reject the leadership of the state-sanctioned

Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association (CCPA), which proclaims itself independent of Rome. The underground Catholics are solely loyal to Pope Francis.

The Vatican, though, is currently seeking better relations with communist China — which is making some underground Catholics wary and concerned. Some are not ready to accept reconciliation with a Chinese government that has persecuted them for years. They now represent the biggest challenge to Francis’ hopes of developing a long-lasting entente with Beijing, according to Catholic Church officials and scholars.

Pei Ronggui, an 81-year-old retired bishop who was recognised by the Vatican, made plain his concern about the CCPA as he prepared to take confessions in a bare room at the make-shift church in Hebei.

“There’s no way there can be an independent (Catholic) Church (in China) because that is the opposite of the principles of the Catholic Church,” said Pei, who spent four years in a labour camp after a 1989 government raid on an underground Catholic service in Youtong. “They (the Chinese government) have to change; if they don’t change, then the pope cannot agree with them.”

Cardinal Joseph Zen, a former bishop of Hong Kong, is also openly critical of a soft approach by the Vatican to Beijing. “A bad agreement — such as one that imposes the underground Church to submit itself to the government — would make these underground people feel betrayed by the Holy See,” Zen told Reuters.

A senior Vatican prelate told Reuters that, while the Holy See appreciated Zen’s concerns, the situation in China “is not black and white and the alternative (to an agreement) is a deeper schism in the Church.”

The pope is keen to heal a rift that dates back to 1949 when the communists took power in China, subsequently expelling foreign Christian missionaries and repressing religious activities. Since then, the People’s Republic of China (PRC) has refused to submit the local Catholic Church to Vatican authority, and the Vatican has refused to recognise the PRC.



I gave up more than 30 years of my life for a principle: do you think I could ever join (the CCPA)?



86-year-old Chinese Catholic priest who runs a small underground church inside his apartment in Shanghai

Since taking office in March 2013, Pope Francis has vigorously supported talks aimed at rapprochement.

Chinese Catholics on all sides — underground and in the state-sanctioned community — number an estimated 8 to 10 million and are overall loyal to the pope. Dozens of interviews with clergy and faithful show both sides wish for a positive outcome to the current talks. Nevertheless, many, especially among the underground Catholics, remain sceptical that the talks will lead to any substantial improvement in their religious freedom.

A draft agreement on the thorny issue of how to ordain bishops in China is already on the table, as Reuters has previously reported. The Vatican is keen to prevent Beijing from appointing new bishops who have not been recognised by the pope. There are about 110 bishops in China. About 70 are recognised by both sides; 30 just by the Vatican; and eight just by Chinese authorities.

The negotiations do not at present focus on whether Beijing should recognise the 30 or so underground bishops who have been approved by Rome but not by the Chinese government, according to Church officials, Vatican officials and Chinese sources familiar with the talks. Nor do they focus on the role of the CCPA, a political body that was created in the 1950s to supervise Catholic activities in China and is considered illegitimate by the Vatican because it runs counter to the belief that the Church is one and universal.

“The biggest problem is still ahead. And this is the Catholic Patriotic Association,” said father Jeroom Heyndrickx, a Belgian missionary and member of the Vatican Commission for the Church in China who closely follows the negotiations. “I have no impression at all that China is willing to give in.”

A source with ties to the Chinese leadership hinted at the government holding to a firm line, telling Reuters: “There is a saying: ‘When in Rome, do as the Romans do.’ Catholicism needs to adapt to Chinese ways.”

In a statement earlier this week, the Vatican said it was asking Beijing for “positive

signals” about the talks. The CCPA declined to comment.

STATE WATCH

In interviews, underground Catholic clergy in China said they continue to face pressure to join the CCPA. That is problematic because the CCPA statutes say the organisation is independent of Rome, which clashes with the fundamental Catholic belief that the Church is one, holy, universal and apostolic.

“(Police) came to me again two years ago and asked me to sign up,” said an 86-year-old Chinese Catholic priest who runs a small underground church inside his apartment in Shanghai. The priest, who spent three decades in a labour camp in Western China for refusing to give up his faith, said he told the police: “I gave up more than 30 years of my life for a principle: do you think I could ever join (the CCPA)?”

The priest, who declined to be named, said his movements are restricted and that authorities have repeatedly refused to issue him a passport, denying him his long-standing wish to carry out a pilgrimage abroad.

Other underground priests and faithful interviewed by Reuters said they faced similar restrictions and were often questioned by police about their activities. Local authorities also ask to scrutinise all evangelical material, including adverts for charity events, according to Catholic faithful.

Reuters was unable to confirm these accounts. An official at China’s State Administration for Religious Affairs declined to comment, saying they had not received any reports of restrictions. The CCPA declined to comment.

In September, Chinese police took underground priest Shao Zhumin out of his diocese in Zhejiang province against his will, according to sources with direct knowledge of the situation. The police wanted to prevent Shao, who had been appointed by the Vatican as assistant bishop of Wenzhou, from running the diocese after the death of a local bishop, according to the sources. Officials did not respond to requests for comment.



The Catholic communities are very suspicious of each other. We are like a traumatised child.



Paulus Han
Cleric and a religious blogger in China

In Shanghai, the auxiliary bishop Ma Daqin has been under house arrest for more than four years following his resignation from the CCPA on the day of his ordination. The Shanghai seminary of Sheshan, where Ma resides, was once home to nearly a hundred Catholic students; but its activity has now ground to a near halt, with only six seminarians still studying here.

In the long term, such restrictions and declines pose problems for the Catholic Church, not least because Protestant churches are becoming increasingly popular in China. Those churches have opted for a less confrontational approach with the government.

NEW CHALLENGES

Amid the tensions and talks, one Catholic priest has thrown down a challenge to both the Vatican and Chinese authorities. In October, Father Dong Guanhua declared he had been ordained bishop of Zhengding, 300 km (185 miles) southwest of Beijing, in 2005. He said he had become bishop without the mandate of either the Chinese authorities or the Vatican, and he has so far refused to clarify the circumstances of his ordination, even to the Vatican.

Dong, who says he never went to seminary and taught himself the Bible during the chaotic 1966-76 Cultural Revolution when many clergy were imprisoned or defrocked, is a maverick. But he illustrates the risk that some radical elements of the underground Church in China may break away from Rome, according to Vatican and Church officials.

“The underground Church will be wiped out if I don’t do this,” said Dong, 58, referring to taking a stand against the state-led Church.

The Vatican has urged underground Catholics in China not to take matters into their own hands if they oppose the Holy See and Beijing mending fences. But it has stopped short of criticising Dong. Rome appreciates that if he refused to bow to Vatican orders, it would show the Chinese government that Rome does not fully control the underground Catholics, according to Vatican and Church officials.

In light of such challenges some senior

members of the Chinese clergy, in both official and underground communities, say they believe current talks between the Vatican and the Chinese authorities are going too fast. They feel a deal on the appointment of Chinese bishops, if signed, would be a historic step — but they caution that the wounds of repression cut deep and may take a generation to heal.

Even some of those who support dialogue between Rome and Beijing say a deal would not immediately bring together the official and underground communities after decades of suffering.

“The Catholic communities are very suspicious of each other. We are like a traumatised child,” said Paulus Han, a cleric and a prominent religious blogger in China. “We have to learn to live with a number of contradictions. It takes time.” 

Additional reporting by **Engen Tham** in Shanghai, **Jessica Yu** in Hong Kong and **Philip Pullela** in Rome; Editing by **Richard Woods** and **Peter Hirschberg**

