

Religious Policy in China before and after the Sino-Vatican Agreement

Bernardo Cervellera



Photo: Archiv China-Zentrum.

Churches closed or destroyed; crosses torn down from bell towers or ripped from the walls of the churches; domes razed to the ground; ancient statues of shrines seized; religious signs removed from inside and outside homes; priests driven out of their ministry; others forced to return to their village of origin; young people under the age of 18 blocked and stopped in front of churches because they are not allowed to enter or receive any religious instruction.

These are some of the realities of life in the Catholic Church in China. For some Chinese priests it is a new cultural revolution, perhaps without the original iconoclastic fury and chaos. In reality, these situations respond to a very precise project,

which is not at all chaotic, indeed pursued with precision and systematic capillarity and it began several years ago.

The New Regulations

These forms of suppression have become even more common since the promulgation of the New Regulations on Religious Activities. Issued on February 1, 2018, these regulations are characterized by:

1. a negative view of religions, such as possible sources of terrorism, ethnic and national divisions, threats to national security and the health of citizens, ... (see in particular Chapter VIII of the New Regulations);

The following text is the contribution of Fr. Bernardo Cervellera PIME (editor-in-chief of *AsiaNews*, Rome) to the 10th European Catholic China Colloquium “*Laudato Si*” and Technoscience – Implications with Focus on the Church in China,” Siegburg/Germany, 30 August – 1 September 2019. We will publish a detailed conference report in the next issue of *RCTC*. Bernardo Cervellera’s text was first published in *Asianews* on 12 September 2019 (www.asianews.it/news-en/Religious-policy-in-China-before-and-after-the-Sino-Vatican-agreement-47980.html). There you can find the article in English, Italian, Chinese and Spanish; passages in these *AisaNews* versions are linked to further *Asianews* articles for reference.

2. the affirmation that the exclusively top-down control exerted by religious affairs offices at all levels – national, provincial, county, city or village – alone renders a religion livable and acceptable. The representatives of the religious affairs offices at all levels are continuously invited to “work,” “organize,” “verify,” “control” the work of the communities of the faithful (see art. 6, 26, 27);
3. new provisions not only regarding the construction of places of worship – which require permits at diverse levels: local, provincial, national – but also the erection of crosses, statues, their dimensions, colors and positions. These must also be verified and receive the permission of the religious affairs office (articles 29-30). In any case, “the construction of large religious statues outside temples and churches is prohibited.”
4. New areas of control, concerning texts posted on the internet, which must have the permission of the government authorities and “must not contain prohibited contents” (articles 47-48), with a ban on live streams of any religious ceremony;
5. the perennial requirement to register religious personnel (priests and bishops), demanding they commit to support independence, self-governance, self-financing;
6. a new data: massive fines (up to 200 thousand – 300 thousand *yuan*) if there are religious activities in unregistered places and with unregistered personnel, including the seizure of the building in which illegal gatherings take place (see art. 64).

Precisely these fines and the possibility of the expropriation of buildings where unregistered (illegal) religious gatherings take place prompted many unofficial priests to immediately advise their faithful not to gather anymore, as it involved a serious economic risk that would profoundly damage the communities.

Indeed, the New Regulations (NR) seem to be aimed primarily at eliminating the experience of unofficial communities. Immediately after the launch of the NR, for several months police and representatives of the Religious Affairs Office held a succession of meetings with bishops, priests and lay faithful of the underground communities to “drink a cup of tea” and “advise” them to register in the official communities. This would explain the “forced vacations” of Wenzhou’s bishop, Msgr. Peter Shao Zhumin, and the indoctrination lessons for priests in Hebei, Henan, Inner Mongolia, ...

Zero Tolerance for Underground Communities

It now appears that there is “zero tolerance” for unofficial communities. Hebei, Henan, Zhejiang, Fujian are among the most affected areas. One example among the many is the fate of at least 10 churches in the diocese of Qiqihar, all closed, and with some priests driven out and forcibly taken back to their villages of origin.

Since the end of September 2018, at least seven churches and their communities have been suppressed in that diocese, whose bishop, Msgr. Joseph Wei Jingyi, is recognized by the Holy See, but not by the government. Members of the United Front, police, representatives of the Religious Affairs Office entered churches while mass was being celebrated, interrupted liturgical services, drove the faithful away, threatened them and decreed the

closure of the communities. The penalized communities are those of Shuang Fa, Zhangzhou, Feng Le, Wu Yuan, Wu Da Lian Chi, Tong Bei, Jia Ge Da Qi.

Some priests were asked to leave the area or face being forcibly expelled. The suppressed communities are all “underground,” that is they are not registered. However, they had lived in good relations with local authorities for years, which easily turned a blind eye to their gatherings.

Another key example is what is happening in Henan, where the government recognizes almost none of the dioceses – minus Anyang – and where the campaign to destroy underground communities and register priests is very strong.

In April 2018 a church was destroyed in Hutuo (Xicun, Gongyi), in the diocese of Luoyang. In the same diocese, a few days later, the tomb and tombstone of the underground bishop Msgr. Li Hongye (1920–2011) were desecrated. The faithful think that the violence against the tomb is because there were signs of his episcopal office, which was not recognized by the regime, on the tombstone.

On April 28 last, the local authorities of Weihui, in the Diocese of Anyang, destroyed the huge iron crosses that towered over the two bell towers. Two videos of the operation, sent to *AsiaNews*, show technical staff removing one of the crosses on tall cranes. Dozens of police officers are deployed in the churchyard to prevent possible protests or resistance. Many faithful, impotent against abuse, knelt on the steps of the churchyard to pray and sing. The faithful remained in prayer throughout the day.

Control of Official Communities

Even the official Church is suffering from tighter and more intolerant controls. A few examples: on the night between 6 and 7 May 2019, the demolition of the Catholic church of Shen Liu village in the diocese of Handan (Hebei) began. So far, the destruction has limited itself to removing a huge cross from the bell tower, but soon the walls will be torn down. Local authorities have motivated their decision because the church and the cross are “too visible” from the nearby highway and passing cars can be distracted by the Christian symbol and the building. They also say that the church does not have all building permits. The faithful claim instead that the church – which belongs to the official community – was built with the permission of the Religious Affairs Office. According to some priests of the diocese, the local government has already planned the destruction of 23 other churches, all belonging to the official community.

In July and August 2018, two (official) churches were destroyed in the name of urban planning – in Qianwang and Liangwang (Shandong); their land was seized for building development without any compensation.

In October 2018, two shrines dedicated to Our Lady were dismantled and destroyed by the Chinese authorities. They are the shrine of Our Lady of the Seven Sorrows in Dong’ergou (Shanxi), and of the shrine of Our Lady of Bliss, also known as “Our Lady of the Mountain” in Anlong (Guizhou).

Some faithful told *AsiaNews* that the Dong’ergou shrine was [partly; the editors] destroyed in the name of “sinicization:” the authorities declared that there were “too many

crosses” and “far too many decorations which exceeded all limits” and for this reason, they had to be removed and destroyed.

The shrine of Our Lady of the Mountain in Anlong was destroyed because the authorities declared that it lacked the necessary permits for construction.

Priests and bishops are victims of this crackdown: Fr. Liu Jiangdong, of Zhengzhou (Henan), has been expelled from his parish since October 2018 and banned from living as a priest, for daring to organize meetings with young people even under the age of 18, in contravention of the ban on giving religious education to minors.

It is also worth remembering here – even if his case pre-dates the NR – Msgr. Thaddeus Ma Daqin, bishop of Shanghai, in solitary confinement and under house arrest since 2012 for daring to detach himself from the Patriotic Association. Even his rethinking was of no use because the PA “does not trust him.”

Sinicization

The control over the life of the Church also takes place through “sinicization,” which while highlighting the need to inculturate the faith, exalts a nationalist patriotism disrespectful of faith and its expressions. In the name of “sinicization,” the Church must not only assimilate to Chinese culture, and express its beliefs with Chinese categories, but must develop theologies, history and works of art according to Chinese culture. The ultimate verification of this process rests with the Patriotic Association.

The push towards inculturation has also become iconoclasm and destruction of works of art from the past (“too Western”), external and internal decorations of churches, elimination of crosses from bell towers, destruction of domes and facades “not in Chinese style.” Even the couplets that express greetings for Chinese New Year must be devoid of all religious signs or phrases, in favor of the Chinese (atheist?) style. It is also forbidden for churches to sell couplets with religious expressions; the faithful are forbidden to display them in front of their homes.

Xi Jinping launched the theme of sinicization back in 2015. After an analysis of the situation, in which the Chinese Communist Party feared a fate similar to the USSR, on May 20, 2015, in a meeting with the United Front, Xi decreed that religions must “become synonymous” if they want to continue living in China. The same concept was reiterated at a national meeting on religious affairs in April 2016, and then led to his notes on religions at the 19th Congress of the CCP, in October 2017.

For Xi Jinping, sinicization means:

1. assimilation of religions to Chinese culture “eliminating external influences” from the cultural point of view;
2. independence from any foreign influence;
3. submission to the Chinese Communist Party² and its leadership.

2 According to the *People's Daily* of April 24, 2016, in his speech on religions, Xi Jinping reaffirmed that the Party has to “effectively” and “forcefully” guide all religions, and to “firmly grasp hold of the leading role of all religious works.” They must “adhere to the leadership of the party, strengthen the party’s position in office,” and “serve the

In this way, we understand why the communities are obliged to hoist the flag of China on every religious building, to sing patriotic hymns before functions, to hang a portrait of Xi Jinping even on the altars all in the name of patriotism and support for the Party.

It also includes another element: the destructions that take place in China are not only the result of the zeal of some local authorities, but reflects the support of the leaders at a national level and of the supreme leader, exalted as “the heart of the leadership.”

Sinicization is a way to eradicate the Church’s public presence. This is made evident by the notes of an internal PA meeting (received in recent days), where a future line dictates that churches not be “monumental,” not visible from crossroads or major roads, “do not have western features (Romanesque, Gothic, Arabic, ...),” do not host any social function (for example: aid to pensioners, kindergartens for children, etc.). In short: by preserving a minimum freedom of worship, the place of worship and its charity become increasingly invisible.

The China-Vatican Agreement

The Provisional Agreement between China and the Holy See, signed on September 22, 2018, did not change this situation of control and suffocation. It is true that the agreement is somewhat of a conquest, given that for the first time in the history of modern China the Pope is recognized as head of the Catholic Church also in China. At least, this is what the Vatican said, but we do not know what is written in the text of the agreement because, to date, it has never been published.

However, last December, Wang Zuo’an, deputy director of the United Front and former director of the State Administration for Religious Affairs, stressed once again that the principles of independence and self-management will not be eliminated “at any time and under any circumstances.”

According to what the Pope would have said to an underground bishop (Msgr. Guo Xi-jin), if the agreement was not signed, China threatened to ordain 45 illegitimate bishops, “independent” from the Holy See, creating the basis for a true schism. Therefore, the agreement was blackmail.

It should be noted that immediately after the agreement was signed, in many regions of China the United Front and the Patriotic Association held meetings for priests and bishops explaining to them that “despite the agreement” they had to work for the implementation of an independent Church. The destruction of crosses, churches, indoctrination sessions, arrests continued just as before the agreement.

After the Agreement

After the agreement, one can see the rigor with which the civil registration of the clergy is being carried out, rendering priests and bishops veritable State officials, defenders of

highest interest of the state and the overall interest of the Chinese nation: supporting the leadership of the CPC, supporting the socialist system, and adhering to the socialist way with Chinese characteristics.”

the religious policy of the State. The example comes from a document sent to us from Fujian, entitled “Letter of commitment for those responsible for places of worship and for consecrated persons.” If you sign this document, the priest can be pastor and exercise his ministry, within the limits provided; otherwise, he will remain unemployed and can be sent back to his home. The same for the sisters, the “consecrated persons” (in China the government does not allow male religious life).

Among the most striking factors:

1. Adhering to the fact that we must “prohibit the entry of minors into the church,” or “not organize education courses for minors.” It must be said that this prohibition, as well as being contrary to the Gospel (see Matthew 19, 14), is also contrary to the Chinese constitution, which guarantees religious freedom without setting any age limit.
2. In the name of independence, it is necessary to “consciously boycott foreigners’ interventions; not to contact foreign powers, not to welcome foreigners, not to accept interviews, formations or invitations to conferences abroad.” In practice: remain isolated and not share the faith with other Catholics scattered around the world. This also contravenes the UN Conventions on religious freedom and civil rights, which Beijing signed on 5 October 1998, but has never ratified.
3. There are a number of limits to evangelization: you cannot sing without permission; or display – even at home! – “manifestos and insignia” with “evangelical purposes;” you cannot post about religious topics online; you cannot speak about religion in hospital visits to the sick ...

The problem is that in the past this was the government’s policy towards religions, with which it sought to stifle a body that was too alive, which submitted with difficulty to state rules. **Now the government requires priests and bishops not only to obey, but also to be advocates of government policy, active participants in the persecution and suffocation of the life of the Church.**³

The Vatican Guidelines for the Civil Registration of the Clergy

Immediately after the agreement, Pope Francis sent a Message to the Chinese faithful and to the universal Church in which he wished that all the faithful work for reconciliation among themselves, in universal communion, with the Chinese government and society.

A year after the agreement was signed, there appear to be more signs of division and opposition.

Even before the agreement, the underground communities declared that they were “forgotten” by the Holy See because they did not take into account their experience of refusing to join the PA or support the independence of the Church. With the new forms for the registration of the clergy, which demand they underwrite independence, they find themselves even more embarrassed than before.

³ The government also asks the population to take an “active part” in Church control, offering benefits and cash prizes to anyone who denounces illegal religious activities and carries out espionage work. For now, we know of a document released in Guangdong, but there is also a website in Hebei, which invites the population to denounce all illegal religious activities (see *UCAN* July 18, 2019).

The greatest hindrances are due:

1. to the fact that the government, emboldened by the signing of the agreement, attempts to blindside the underground faithful, saying that “even the Vatican agrees with us;”
2. in the Vatican documents, in the comments on the agreement, in the total reception of the seven excommunicated bishops, the underground faithful see a “history passing over” their position.

Many official priests are also discontent with an agreement that does not give greater religious freedom, but rather renders priests and bishops “State officials.” In addition, priests and bishops, instead of enacting gestures of reconciliation with the underground communities, are taking on the role of functionaries disinterested in their fate, and even go so far as to accuse the underground counterparts of “not following the pope.”

A silent persecution is taking place in the universal Church all in the name of the agreement and the “patience” that must be shown towards Beijing. The expected response is that “everything is fine” and those who denounce persecutions are accused of doing so for “ulterior motives.”

In recent months, second thoughts on the agreement and on the way in which it is implemented seem to be emerging from the Vatican.

In an interview with *Vatican News* (dated 3 February 2019), Card. Fernando Filoni was the first in the Vatican world to admit that there are “perplexities” in the agreement and that the government “forces” membership of the PA, instead of leaving this membership “optional,” as it should have been in the agreement.

He also criticizes a “patriotism” based on a selfish and closed nationalism, while supporting true patriotism and service to the country.

On June 28, 2019, “the Holy See” published the document titled “Pastoral Guidelines for the Civil Registration of the Clergy in China.” It admits to “difficulties” in the implementation of the agreement. In a somewhat indirect way, it notes priests and bishops are subject to violence and constrictions that are contrary to Catholic doctrine, “despite the commitment given by the Chinese authorities to also respect Catholic doctrine.”

The document then urges patience and reconciliation between the official and underground communities, respecting the respective choices, hoping that the future bring greater clarification with the Chinese authorities.

For several official and underground priests, the document is “ambiguous” because it allows everyone to decide on their own without indicating any “regula fidei.”

Furthermore, as one of my confreres pointed out, the text of the Guidelines “does not take into consideration the factual data of the restrictions in force on the structures of the Church and above all on the life of Catholics (in particular for young people under 18 years of age) and of undue measures in the name of ‘sinicization.’ Above all, it does not seem to realize the clear intent of the Chinese authorities to reduce the Church to a state institution and the clergy to state officials.”

From the Chinese state, it is clear that with the agreement it is implementing what was established already in 1982 with the famous Document 19: under which the Party ended

its attempts to eliminate religions, because every initiative of this type is counter-productive. Rather the Party claims the right to take total control of religions.

From this point of view, what happens with the registration of religious personnel is in line with this project and the fact of having recognized the Pope as “head of the Catholic Church” or better of the “Vatican” does not change their vision in the slightest way: the Chinese Church belongs to the State and no “foreign power” can say anything about it, without being accused of “meddling in China’s internal affairs.”

On the other hand, the silence on the part of the Vatican and of the World Church regarding the persecution, destruction, prohibitions, confirms Beijing in its vision: the Chinese Church is a national Church that belongs to the State alone.