

**P**olitical regimes often consider the Church as a counter power, which they try to tame, or fight.

Although the Church has defined herself coherently, for at least two centuries, as only a spiritual and moral entity, it continues to be perceived by certain States as an unacceptable political actor. Those States are not ready to recognize the autonomy of the Catholic Church, since, while the Church is universal, States have their constituencies within a specific nation. As far as the autonomy of the Papacy is concerned, a key question concerns the status of Catholic hierarchies in certain states.

In the Western Hemisphere, between the end of the first Christian Millennium and the beginning of the second century of the new Millennium, the same matter poisoned the relationship between the Holy See and the Holy Roman Empire, that is, with Christian emperors and feudatories, through the so-called Investiture Controversy. The Concordat of Worms, also known as the *Pactum Calixtinum*, was signed on 23 September 1122, and deprived the Emperor of the right of investiture of bishops and other ecclesiastical figures with ring and crosier, that is, with the symbols of spiritual power. The clergy was declared free, and the properties of the Church inviolable. The Pope accepted that ecclesiastical elections in Germany would be witnessed by imperial envoys. At the same time, the investiture with a scepter remained the prerogative of the emperor, as a sign that the estates of the Church were held under the crown. In Germany, feudal investiture came before episcopal investiture; in Italy and Burgundy the practice was the reverse, where the full jurisdiction of the Pope was restored.

With the exception that China does not belong to the “*Orbis Christianus*”, the lesson of the Investiture Controversy and the solution agreed between Pope Callistus II and Henry V is a useful reference point for the case of relations between the Holy See and the People’s Republic of China (PRC).

### **The case of the People’s Republic of China**

The PRC, rooted as it is in Marxist atheistic doctrine, officially recognises Buddhism, Catholicism, Islam, Protestantism and Taoism. At the same time, the PRC was never able to accept the Roman Church’s need to keep its institutions free from the control of political power, so as to preserve the nature of its sacred ministry. As a result, the hierarchy faithful to Rome suffered repression and was often forced to operate undercover. At the same time, the State promoted the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association, CCPA<sup>1</sup>, whose “bishops” and “priests” did not have to refer to Rome but to local political authorities. During more than six long decades, Chinese Catholic believers, now 12 million, have carried the burden of this controversy.

In Autumn 1955, when the Italian Socialist Leader, Pietro Nenni, visited China and met Mao Tse Tung, the break in relations between the PRC and Rome had already taken place. Nenni writes in his memoirs that he spoke<sup>2</sup> to Mao about the matter of the Catholic missions, receiving the following answer:

... In China Catholics are 3 million, the other Christian communities 800,000. No measure has been taken or will be taken against the Catholic missions as such. There are missionaries

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who stood against the revolution and suffered the consequences. Coexistence is always possible. It’s enough that catholic missions deal with God and not with the interests of the ousted class.<sup>3</sup>

After meeting Mao, Nenni saw the Vicar General and the Assistant of the Catholic Diocese of Beijing. He noted that “they wear cassocks”, and received him “in the sacristy of the church of the Savior”. He added that, in the midst of their conversation, “the songs of the children gathered for catechism could be heard”. Both of them, writes Nenni, were convinced that China had “freedom of cult with no limitation”. They underlined that relations with the Holy See were unchanged with respect to the pre-revolutionary years. The Vicar affirmed: “Every year we report to the Holy Father about our activities. We receive his religious instructions and we scrupulously execute them”. Afterwards Nenni took note of the synthetic and detailed account of the evolution of the Catholic Church during the Maoist regime, as offered by the State Authority for Religious Affairs. At the end he gives his own position:

The government is able to guarantee the security of incoming new missionaries. Only one thing is requested: no conspiracy against the unity of the Chinese people, and respect for revolutionary laws<sup>4</sup>.

After the repression of the years 1951-1954, and the opening up of the Maoist regime in 1956-1957 (*Hundred Flowers Campaign*), which produced, inter alia, the liberation of Catholics previously arrested, the events of the Cultural Revolution raised tensions again between the regime and the Holy See. After the Cultural Revolution, two positions emerged: on the one side, the militant atheism of the state had to become tolerant, coherent with the season of reforms opened up by Deng; on the other side, religions had to accept that the state considered the practice of religion to be a private affair which should not influence public life and the behavior of the state. The dispute between the PRC and the Holy See could aim at a solution, if both positions could be harmonized.

FIVE obstacles had, and still have, to be removed.

1) Chinese political and cultural instincts and memory attribute Catholicism and Protestantism to Western civilization, i.e. to a civilization which exploited and humiliated the Chinese people. In this frame, historical figures such as the Jesuits Matteo Ricci and Michele Ruggieri at the end of 1500s, and two and half centuries before, those of a number of Franciscan ambassadors like Giovanni da Pian del Carpine<sup>5</sup>, sent by Pope Innocent IV to the Mogul Grand Khan, show the Chinese that they may have good friends in the Catholic environment.

2) The Chinese multimillennial culture shows periods of isolation from foreigners. The acme of this behavior was in the

1400s. At the beginning of the century, the Chinese civilization overwhelmed Western civilization, but the Ming dynasty shut all the ports and frontiers to the influence of foreigners. During the following century, those who built ships with more than two masts would suffer the death penalty. When, in 1793, Emperor Qian Long responded to the claims of King George III, he underlined the Chinese attitude to foreigners:

As to your entreaty to send one of your nationals to be accredited to my Celestial Court and to be in control of your country's trade with China, this request is contrary to all usage of my dynasty and cannot possibly be entertained. It is true that Europeans, in the service of the dynasty, have been permitted to live at Peking, but they are compelled to adopt Chinese dress, they are strictly confined to their own precincts and are never permitted to return home.<sup>6</sup>

No deal is possible with the PRC without accepting their "fear" of the foreigner.

3) The third obstacle comes as a consequence. Patriotism is a shared sentiment in China, and any agreement between the State and the Holy See has to deal with this. The cardinal of Hong Kong, John Tong<sup>7</sup> pointed out the loyalty of the Church to the state specifying that religious freedoms have nothing to do with separatism or claims to independence that are motivated by religious beliefs.

4) In his article, Tong deals with the opposition inside the Church to a deal. The Holy See is accused by some believers of excessive realism in dealing with Beijing. Tong has written that the Roman Church is not a special case, and that the matter relates to freedom of religion and cult for everyone in China. Joseph Zen Ze-kium, Bishop Emeritus of Hong Kong, is harshly against any bilateral agreement that, in his opinion, will inevitably undermine the moral authority of the Church, if signed before the restoration of full religious freedom in China. Friendly fire comes especially from the Southern East Asian Churches, which has suffered long periods of repression and physical attack by Communist regimes.

5) Last but not least, the Vatican has diplomatic ties to Taiwan which China does not recognize. When conditions will exist for establishing diplomatic bilateral relations, the Vatican will break with Taiwan.

Certain contradictions in Chinese government behavior are evident. A China Aid report shows that in 2012, persecution against Christians was growing<sup>8</sup>. In 2014, the Chinese government campaigned against religious proselytism. In doing so, the spread of Christianity was also attacked. Churches were demolished and Christian symbols cancelled. This happened in territories where the missionary spirit is particularly active<sup>9</sup>. At the same time, in 2017, 48,556 newly baptized were registered in China, according to the "Faith Cultural Society". The information is confirmed by the agency *Fides*. The province of He Bei looks to be the most active, with about 12,000 baptized, while in Beijing, the newly baptized in that year were 1,099.

## The Present Stalemate

In September 2018, the "Provisional Agreement between Holy See and China"<sup>10</sup>, confirmed that some results were ready to be recognised by both parties. The Pope is recognized as the head of China's Catholics: China will recommend Bishops before their appointment by the Pope, while the Pope is allowed to veto any Bishop proposed by China. Francis recognized the last seven "patriotic" excommunicated bishops. China will recog-

nize soon a number of the forty or so underground bishops appointed by Rome. For the first time in about 70 years, all the Chinese bishops are in communion with Rome, even though not all of them are recognized and agreed upon.

The Vatican spokesman Greg Burke responded to critics, affirming that no political interpretation is allowed, since the agreement is "pastoral, allowing the faithful to have bishops who are in communion with Rome but at the same time recognized by Chinese authorities"<sup>11</sup>.

It seems that the provisional agreement did not change certain Chinese habits. On October 26, 2018, AsiaNews reported, that two Marian shrines had been demolished in Shanxi and Guizhou<sup>12</sup>. On December 27<sup>th</sup>, 2018, The New York Times reported that "the most severe crackdown on Christianity in more than a decade"<sup>13</sup> was in process, referring in detail to the attacks against certain Protestant Churches, such as Early Rain, Zion Church, Rongguili Church.

The spreading of this kind of information has reinforced the opponents to the provisional agreement between Rome and Beijing. As reported by Reuters on September 26, 2018, Zen defined the deal "an incredible betrayal.". It is evident that Zen was not convinced by the arguments of Msgr. Tong in the quoted article. Tong distinguished between "complete" freedom and "essential" freedom, declaring the first impossible to attain for the Chinese Church. "Essential" means the chance of the historical return of all Chinese Catholics under the mantle of the Pope. According to Tong, not being a "perfect" Church does not imply being a "untrue" Church. Tong has recalled that to choose the lesser of two evils is normal Christian ethical behavior.

Criticism against the Vatican also comes from certain Protestant Churches that are connected with the religious American movements politically currently campaigning against China<sup>14</sup>

## NOTE

<sup>1</sup>Pope Ratzinger in 2007 sent an Apostolic letter to the Catholics in China, defining CCPA as a "governmental institution incompatible with the Catholic Faith". Years before, Canon 1382 had been the source of the excommunications of the hierarchy belonging to CCPA.

<sup>2</sup>Msgr Antoine Camilleri, Undersecretary for the Holy See's Relations with States, head of the Vatican diplomats dealing with PRC, in a private exchange of letters with the author at the end of November 2018, expresses gratitude for the contribution of Pietro Nenni in defending religious freedoms in China: "gratitudine nei confronti di Pietro Nenni per il suo generoso impegno in favore della libertà religiosa e dei prigionieri di coscienza".

<sup>3</sup>Quotations from P. Nenni, *Tempo di guerra fredda, diari 1943-1956*, Sugar Co, 1981, pp. 698 e 701.

<sup>4</sup>In 1955, the Bishop of Shanghai, Ignatius Gong Pinmei, and other Catholic leaders, were arrested. There were also Catholics who accepted to cooperate with the regime.

<sup>5</sup>Giovanni covered ten thousand kilometres, and arrived in China in July 1246 - the first person from the West to meet the Mogul Khan. He. At the end of the century, Pope Nicholas IV sent another Franciscan to China, Giovanni da Montecorvino: he erected two churches in Beijing, baptized more than 2,000 Mogul and translated psalms and religious songs from the Old Testament into Chinese. Clement V nominated him as the Archbishop of Beijing. Another Franciscan to be remembered is Odoricus from Pordenone, author of a Latin chronicle about his 12-year Chinese journey. Details on the Franciscan Chinese missions can be found in M. Lo Russo, *Il saio e la lince. Viaggio sentimentale nelle Umbrie dei miti*, Rusconi, 2017, pp. 37 e 38.

Ricci (called Li Madou) wrote that, for a long period, he was not accepted by the Chinese. He spent a 30 year period in China, sharing with the Chinese his knowledge, from Euclid's geometry to watches and maps. He would progressively be honored and respected. When he died,



on May 11th, 1610, he was buried in the campus of the Beijing Administrative College, in the Zhalan cemetery where his remains are with those of tens of other Jesuits, like Ferdinand Verbiest and Johann Adam Schall von Bell. The commemorative stele says: “The State Council declares that the Cemetery of Matteo Ricci and the other foreign missionaries represents a cultural memorial under State protection”. Another Jesuit missionary deserves attention, Prospero Intorcetta. A Sicilian, he arrived in China in 1659. He was the first to translate Confucius into Latin.

<sup>6</sup>The entire letter in

<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/1793qianlong.html>.

<sup>7</sup>In Hong Kong’s Sunday Examiner, 11th February, 2017.

<sup>8</sup>ChinaAid releases the annual report on “Chinese Government Persecution of Christians & Churches in Mainland China”, in February 2013. See [www.chinaid.org/2013/02](http://www.chinaid.org/2013/02).

<sup>9</sup>Asia News dealt with Zhejiang. It proposed a list of 64 demolished churches with pictures. [www.Asia News](http://www.AsiaNews.com).

<sup>10</sup>Here follows the text of the Communiqué concerning the provisional agreement:

Today, 22<sup>nd</sup> September 2018, within the framework of the contacts between the Holy See and the People’s Republic of China that have been underway for some time in order to discuss Church matters of common interest and to promote further understanding, a meeting was held in Beijing between Msgr Antoine Camilleri, Undersecretary for the Holy See’s Relations with States, and H.E. Mr Wang Chao, Deputy Minister for Foreign Affairs of the People’s Republic of China, respectively heads of the Vatican and Chinese delegations.

During that meeting, the two representatives signed a Provisional Agreement on the appointment of Bishops. The above-mentioned Provisional Agreement, which is the fruit of a gradual and reciprocal rapprochement, has been agreed following a long process of careful negotiation and foresees the possibility of periodic reviews of its application. It concerns the nomination of Bishops, a question of great importance for the life of the Church, and creates the conditions for greater collaboration at the bilateral level. The shared hope is that this agreement may favour a fruitful and forward-looking process of institutional dialogue and may contribute positively to the life of the Catholic Church in China, to the common good of the Chinese people and to peace in the world.

<sup>11</sup>“Vatican announces deal with China on bishop appointments”. NBC News, retrieved 23 September 2018. In [Wikipedia/org/wiki/Catholic\\_Church\\_in\\_China](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Catholic_Church_in_China).

<sup>12</sup><http://www.asianews.it/news-en/China-Vatican-accord-followed-by-the-destruction-of-two-shrines-in-Shanxi-and-Guizhou-%28videos%29-45306.html> <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/chinese-authorities-destroy-two-marian-shrines-despite-vatican-china-agreement-21910>. In [Wikipedia/org/wiki/Catholic\\_Church\\_in\\_China](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Catholic_Church_in_China).

<sup>13</sup>J. C. Hernández, “As China shuts churches, adherents vow to resist”, *The New York Times International Edition*, p. 5.

<sup>14</sup>At this respect the article of Hernández (see note above) shows two very interesting passages.

The first is the *crescendo* making clear the supposed antithesis U.S.A./Holy See:

Officials in the United States have denounced the Chinese government’s efforts to limit the spread of Christianity. But China’s growing influence in world affairs has shielded it from some criticism. One notably silent voice: the Vatican ...

The second is a sentence where Early Rain doesn’t appear as a pure religious movement:

Mr Wang (*the founder of Early Rain, note by the author*) called Mr. Xi (*the president of China, note by the author*) a sinner, held prayer sessions each year to mark the brutal crackdown on pro-democracy demonstrations around Tiananmen square in Beijing in 1989, and organized a fund to support relatives of political prisoners in China” ■