Rome Fiddles While China Burns

As the Communists crush religion in China, Cardinal Parolin hopes his agreement with the CCP can be “tweaked.”

Steven W. Mosher / April 25, 2022

Cardinal Pietro Parolin, the Vatican’s chief diplomat, signed a secret agreement with Communist Chinese officials in September 2018. Although its terms have never been revealed, it is widely thought to have laid out a process by which bishops could be selected by Beijing and confirmed by the Holy See.

The two-year agreement was renewed once in 2020, and the Cardinal expressed the hope that it can be renewed again this September.

In view of the increasing persecution of all religions in China by the CCP, it is hard to see why the Vatican should renew the agreement.

A little history: Back in 2017-18, in order to bring China to the table and to fill the 40 or so empty sees in China, the Vatican made major concessions. First, Pope Francis lifted the excommunication of the seven illicit “bishops” named by the Chinese Patriotic Catholic Association, which is to say, by the Chinese Communist Party. Second, he seems to have agreed that elderly bishops of the Underground Church must be forcibly retired and replaced with Patriotic bishops of Beijing’s choosing, while younger Underground bishops must be reassigned to subordinate roles in the Patriotic church. It is the prospect of this “sell-out” of the Underground Church that sent Hong Kong’s Cardinal Joseph Zen to Rome, to plead the cause of his Chinese co-believers to the Holy Father himself.
Cardinal Pietro Parolin, the Vatican’s chief diplomat

Even with these concessions, however, there have only been six ordinations of Catholic bishops in China over the past three and a half years. It seems clear that the CCP is content to leave many sees empty, perhaps because leaderless priests and laity are easier to control.

Since the signing of the Sino-Vatican agreement things have gotten worse—much worse—for believers in China in other ways as well. As one religious sister told me last year, “The walls are closing in.”

They are closing in, indeed.

In December 2021, CCP General Secretary Xi Jinping gave a speech at the National Conference on Work Related to Religious Affairs. Xi emphasized that “religion and religious organizations must be actively guided to adapt to socialist society,” and that those working on “religious affairs” within the Party must take the Sinicization of religion as their major task. And lest there be any misunderstanding that Sinicization simply means making modest adaptions to Chinese culture, he stated this: “Sinicization means that all religious communities should be led by the Party, controlled by the Party, and support the Party.”
Three months later, on March 21, 2022, an article was published in the *Study Times*, an official publication of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party, laying out how Sinicization was to be accomplished through total control of religious organizations, their staff, and their doctrines by the Party.

The Party, it says, intends to “strengthen the ideological and political guidance of religious circles, improve the political consciousness of the religious circles, [and] guide the religious community to support the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party and the socialist system, unite closely around the Party Central Committee with Comrade Xi Jinping at the core, and firmly follow the path of socialism with Chinese characteristics”.

It will, further, “encourage religious circles to diligently study Xi Jinping Thought on Socialism with Chinese Characteristics for a New Era, to study the history of the Party, the history of New China, the history of reform and opening up, and the history of socialist development in a targeted manner, and to educate themselves deeply on the theme of ‘Love
the Party, Love the Country, Love Socialism.’ “

Ominously, the article explains that some religions are simply incapable of Sinicized. Specific reference was made to religious groups that “copy the foreign teaching model, take foreign values as their standard, and even accept the orders and domination of foreign forces.”

Is this not an oblique reference to the Catholic Church, which has a universal catechism, is based in Rome, and is headed by an Argentinian Pope?

Such groups and others who refuse to submit to Party control will be considered to be “foreign hostile forces and extremist forces that are using religion to infiltrate and sabotage our country, leading our religions in a direction that deviates from the path of socialism, and plotting politically to defeat and subvert China.” Any religion that refuses to follow the Party’s direction in all things will be “resolutely suppressed and eradicated.”

It is hard to see how such a formulation leaves any room for fruitful collaboration between the Vatican and the CCP on anything, much less on the appointment of bishops.

Despite the above, Cardinal Parolin believes that the Sino-Vatican Agreement should be extended, although he does concede that it may need to be “tweaked.” “We are reflecting on what to do,” he remarked. “COVID did not help us because it interrupted the ongoing dialogue. We are trying to resume the dialogue concretely, with meetings that we hope will occur soon. We will reflect on the results of the agreement and possibly on the need to make clarifications or review some points.”

I do not share Card. Parolin’s optimism. A little bit of diplomatic “tweaking” here and there won’t come close to closing that vast chasm that separates the divine mission of the Catholic Church from the CCP’s attempt to use religious groups for its own secular, atheistic purposes.

After all, the CCP has now made it painfully clear that it will only suffer religious organizations to exist if they allow themselves to be used as extensions of the Party. The Party’s new directive states that any religious group that does not teach socialism [i.e., Communism] and the Party line, and does not teach its members to love the Party and socialism, is a ‘backward’ religion engaged in ‘illegal religious activities,’ and is to be stamped out.

The gap between the Catholic Church and the Chinese Communist Party is as wide as that which separates Heaven from Hell.
The suffering Church in China needs our prayers now more than ever.

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