

## Between hope and sadness, the top ten news of the Chinese Catholic Church in 2018

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Fr Peter, a member of the Chinese Church, highlights last year's main moments and events, such as the Sino-Vatican agreement, Pope Francis's letter to Chinese Catholics, acts of persecution and arrests, as well as the first steps towards reconciliation between official and underground bishops.

For Catholicism in China, 2018 was probably an exceptional year. Whilst hope grew for some, sadness prevailed in many others. The Holy See ostensibly saw considerable progress at the political level, but for Catholics living in China, there were no new real opening to practise their faith. For Catholicism in China, the road ahead is still long.



### **1. Demolition of crosses and campaigns of religious repression across China**

It is a known fact that the spread of Catholicism in China has always met difficulties and hostility, but in an age of globalisation to hear about the persecution of the Catholic Church and the destruction of church crosses is really sad. The Cross is the quintessential symbol of the Catholic faith; so, for the faithful, the removal of a church cross is a painful blow to their faith. Faced with all this, what can Christians do other than pray in silence?

### **2 Bible sales banned on online shopping platforms in China**

The Bible is not only the pillar of the Catholic faith, but also the world's best selling book. In the past it was possible to buy the Bible safely on the internet, but now the sale of Bibles has been completely banned, leaving many flabbergasted. Religious culture is one of the main factors in human development. Instead of being respected and promoted, it is banned. This is disconcerting. How can one explain such a decision other than as an attempt to block the development of the Chinese nation?

### **3 "Love the country, love the party" is infiltrating the Church. The Red Army of Bishops is meeting at Jing Gang Shan[1] to train**

When Jesus preached to the world, he famously said: "Then repay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God." The purpose of religion is spiritual elevation and the elevation of the soul. Catholic clergy ought to know their proper identity and mission. However, some "red" bishops and priests, to show off their patriotic faith, were elated to wear Red Army uniforms in Jing Gang Shan, causing bewilderment among many people. Behind the bishops stood monks wearing their religious garments, which awakened instead feelings of attachment to religion in people.

### **4. Cardinal Joseph Zen Ze-kium met the Pope to discuss the right to appoint bishops**

The election of Pope Francis and the appointment of Card Pietro Parolin as Vatican Secretary of State were instrumental to the signing of an official agreement between the Catholic Church and the Chinese government, thus sparking hope that the Church in China could exist peacefully and develop. This aim is obviously good, but in the long run what will this agreement change with respect to the principle of unilateral selection of bishops by the Catholic Church? The bishop emeritus of the Diocese of Hong Kong, Card Joseph Zen, expressed deep concerns, fearing that the signing of a Sino-Vatican agreement would curtail or remove the power of the Pope to appoint bishops in China. Despite his advanced age, he went to Rome to meet the Pope and express his concerns. This step is worthy of admiration and praise.

### **5. The Vatican signs a provisional agreement on the appointment of bishops**

On 22 September 2018, the Chinese government and the Holy See signed a provisional agreement on the question of episcopal appointments. The Pope recognised as legitimate the Chinese bishops appointed and ordained by the Chinese government, and ordered Bishop Zhuang Jian Jian of Shantou to resign. In his place, he appointed Guo Xijin as auxiliary bishop of the Diocese of Mindong. The specific content of the agreement is still secret, but apparently China will first select possible candidates for the episcopate, who will then be approved by the Holy See. If the Pope rejects the names presented to him, the dioceses will pick new candidates. For the Secretary of State of the Holy See, Card Parolin, although this is not the best deal, a bad deal is better than no deal.

### **6. Letter from Pope Francis to the faithful of the Catholic Church in China**

After the signing of the interim agreement with the Chinese government, two radically different positions

emerged within the Church. On the one hand, some praised wholeheartedly the success of Vatican diplomacy; on the other, certain people expressed deep concerns and doubts about the deal. This is why Pope Francis felt the need to explain to Chinese Catholics the good will and motivations behind the signing of the agreement in a letter dated 26 September 2018. First, the Pope notes that he will be the guarantor and defender of the Catholic faith, stressing the value of suffering in the history of Chinese Catholics; secondly, he adds that he must also guarantee the survival and witness of the Catholic Church in China for the future. The letter brought some comfort to those who have always been faithful to the Pope and his Church.

### **7. Two Chinese bishops are "invited by the pope" to take part in the world bishops' conference**

On 3 October 2018, two Chinese bishops – Bishop Yang Xiaoting of Yan'an and Bishop Guo Jincai of Cheng De – arrived in Rome for the Synod. This was the first time that bishops from China took part in a world episcopal meeting since the 1950s. In the opening Mass, Pope Francis appeared very pleased when he said, "We offer them our warm welcome: the communion of the entire Episcopate with the Successor of Peter is yet more visible thanks to their presence." Like a merciful father, the Pope is full of hope in his heart that the Church in China can reach full communion with the universal Church, working hard to avoid a schism.

### **8. Following the signing of the agreement, two Marian pilgrimage sites in Shanxi and Guizhou were demolished**

Despite the signing of the agreement with the Vatican, the statues and crosses of the Marian shrines of Shanxi and Guizhou were torn down or removed, leaving priests and worshippers with a sense of powerlessness. True, these actions against Catholicism are certainly not part of the Sino-Vatican deal, but the Holy See will not protest nor express its displeasure. Thus, the Sino-Vatican agreement does not improve the reality of the Catholic Church in China at all. Those who still hope that the agreement can improve the life of the Chinese Church do not yet understand China's official ideology and the objective conditions in today's Chinese society.

### **9. Four underground priests in Hebei Province refused to receive the certificate and were taken away by government officials**

The province of Hebei is the heart of the underground Catholic Church. For a long time, local Catholics fought to defend the principles of the Catholic faith and loyalty to the successor of Peter, rejecting government authority in selecting and ordaining bishops. They strongly oppose independence from the Pope of Rome and are against the Patriotic Association. Although the Catholic Church Committee in Hebei Province approved the recognition of all priests, by giving every priest a membership card, underground clergymen find this compromise unacceptable, and for this reason many have refused to take the "identity card" of official priests. Since our country's religious policy has precise rules for each religion, the authorities recognise only registered religious groups. The only official Catholic groups recognised by the Chinese government are the Chinese Patriotic Catholic Association and the Assembly of Chinese Catholic Representatives. The National Committee of Chinese Catholics comes under the Assembly of Chinese Catholic Representatives, just as the local committees of the Catholic Church come under the National Committee. Consequently, the pastoral and missionary activities of underground churchmen who refuse the priest ID card are considered illegal by government authorities, so that it becomes very easy to arrest these priests.

### **10. Underground bishop Guo Xijin quits in favour of formerly unlawful bishop Zhan Silu**

Before the signing of the provisional agreement rumours circulated that the Holy See was going to send a special envoy to China to convince Bishop Guo Xijin of Fujian to resign to allow Bishop Zhan Silu to take up his post. After the signing of the agreement, these rumours became reality. The Holy See sent Archbishop Claudio Maria Celli as "ambassador" to Beijing to ask Bishop Guo Xijin to leave his post in favour of Bishop Zhan Silu. Bishop Guo Xijin humbly accepted the Holy See's order and became the auxiliary bishop of the Diocese of Mindong. This could be a step towards unity between the official and underground Church, and the dawn of communion between the two communities.

Looking at the main news events of 2018 involving the Chinese Catholic Church inevitably leaves us with a lot of confusion and angst. Although the Holy See and the Chinese government have signed a provisional agreement, the path to the unity of the Chinese Catholic Church is still long, not only because of the many misunderstandings and enmities that have developed over time, but also and especially because of outside political interference.

Catholicism's long flow through human history is about 2,000-years old. During this time, the countless frustrations and difficult conditions that the Church in China has faced can be considered "normal". As Jesus put, "I am with you always, until the end of the age." Thus, the certainty of His presence fills the future of the Catholic Church in China with hope.

[1] The Jinggang Mountains are where Mao and his companions took refuge after the Kuomintang turned against them in 1927. From here they began the conquest of China. The Jinggang are considered the birthplace of the People's Liberation Army and the "cradle of the revolution".