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Overview of Relations between Catholicism and China



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Lecture by Prof. Giancarlo Valori, at the web conference of the Beijing State University, Faculty of International Relations, Chair of Peace, Security and International Development, titled “Overview of Relations between Catholicism and China”.



(Prof. Giancarlo Elia Valori with Cardinal Parolin)

The introduction of Christianity from the Eastern Roman Empire to China dates back to the ninth year of Emperor Taizong during the Tang dynasty, i.e. 635 AD. However, this was Nestorian Christianity, named after Nestorius, Patriarch of Constantinople (c. 381-451).

Nevertheless, diplomatic exchanges between the Roman Catholic Holy See and China actually began with diplomacy between Mongolia and the Holy See. In 1245, Pope Innocent IV (1195-1243-54) sent an envoy to Mongolia to persuade the Mongol regent Töregene Khatun not to harass Western delegations.

In 1271, Kublai Khan (1215-60-94) declared himself orthodox of the central plains and formally established the Yuan dynasty (1279-1368). After the Yuan dynasty, despite the arrival in China of the Italian missionary, the Jesuit from Macerata, Father Matteo Ricci (1552-1610), cartographer, mathematician, astrologer, and the first Western sinologist, whose tomb is in Beijing (the first foreigner, not an ambassador, to be buried in China).

Official exchanges between China and the Vatican were completely interrupted during the Ming dynasty (1368-1644). After the establishment of the Qing dynasty (1644-1911), German missionaries Johann Adam Schall von Bell and Ferdinand Verbiest came to China. After the First Opium War (1839-42), France replaced Portugal in controlling protective rights in China, and the suppression of the Boxer Rebellion meant that efforts to establish diplomatic relations between China and the Vatican during the Qing period came to nothing.

What impact did the protection rights have? This ironically reflects the problem before the 2018 agreement (*infra*): at that time, the French had the final say on who to choose as bishops, archbishops, and other clergy in China. They never consulted the Vatican.

On October 10, 1910, the Wuchang uprising of the 1911 Revolution overthrew the Qing dynasty and the Republic of China was founded. In 1922, the Holy See sent Archbishop Celso Benigno Luigi Costantini (1876-1958) to Beijing as the first apostolic representative to China, but at that time diplomatic relations had not yet been officially established.

Archbishop Costantini was the main architect of the Shanghai Council held from May 15 to June 12, 1924, serving as the first Apostolic Delegate to China from 1922 to 1933, and subsequently appointed to Rome as Secretary of Propaganda Fide and then Chancellor of the Holy Roman Church.

The Vatican City State, as is well known, was established in 1929. In June 1942, during World War II, the national government in Chongqing officially announced that it would send Xie Shoukang (1897?-1973) as the first Chinese minister to the Holy See, and China and the Vatican officially established diplomatic relations.

A significant episode of Cardinal Costantini's love for China is the following. When he learned from the Chinese ambassador to the Vatican, Xie, that Pius XII (1876-1939-1958) could not create a Chinese cardinal due to the number of cardinals already to be created in the Consistory at the beginning of 1946, Monsignor Costantini went to Pope Pius XII and asked him earnestly that his name be withdrawn and replaced with that of a Chinese bishop. Costantini went to Pope Pius XII and asked him earnestly that his name be withdrawn and replaced with that of a Chinese bishop. And so it happened. In the Consistory of February 18, 1946, the Pope appointed the first Chinese Cardinal in the person of Monsignor Tommaso Tian Gengxin (1890-1967), while Monsignor Costantini became Cardinal in 1953.

This fact seems very eloquent in presenting the figure of Cardinal Celso Costantini as a builder of bridges between Catholicism and China.

It is well known that he had to leave incognito to prevent news of his mission from reaching the French government, which, had it known, would certainly have prevented his departure, as it had already done in two other cases of nuncios who were appointed but prevented from reaching their seat in Beijing.

Cardinal Celso Costantini proved to be the right man in the right place, able to express himself admirably in different languages—pastoral and diplomatic, artistic and political—which enabled him to accomplish, in just eleven years, deeds of the highest order between the diplomacy of the Holy See and the Chinese people. Cardinal Costantini considered China his second homeland, which he never abandoned, as Monsignor Costantini's mission took on a connotation that affected the relationship between the Catholic Church and the entire Chinese people.

The unique role he played aroused great interest among the civil authorities of the land of Confucius, who were always in close dialogue with him, even in weaving the fabric of agreements between the Holy See and the Chinese Republic, which were prevented by the Paris government but were later sealed by the full diplomatic relations achieved in 1946 between the two subjects of international law.

After the Council of Shanghai, convened and presided over by Monsignor Costantini in 1924, Pius XII wanted to proceed with the election of the first six Chinese bishops, who were accompanied to Rome in 1926 by Costantini himself to be consecrated by the Pope and by him in St. Peter's Basilica. When he left China for health reasons in 1933, there were 23 Chinese prelates at the head of ecclesiastical districts. They formed the line

of apostolic succession of the current bishops in the land of Confucius.

In the 1950s, Costantini confided to Pius XII the serious difficulties he had encountered in achieving this result. He said: “Unfortunately, I have encountered lively opposition to the appointment of the first Chinese bishops.” And this opposition, let it be clear, came mainly from Western missionary institutes in China and much less from the government of the People's Republic of China.

Cardinal Costantini advised Pius XII not to view the Chinese situation through inadequate lenses, because there was no schism regarding the consecration without papal mandate of the first two Chinese bishops, which took place in Hankou on April 13, 1958. Even recently, unfounded accusations of schism and even apostasy have been made in China, but fortunately this has never happened, neither in the past nor today. And then it should not be forgotten that in Europe itself, since the Middle Ages, the emperor directly appointed bishops who received spiritual, public, and territorial powers, with papal approval *obtorto collo* (struggle for investiture), until the agreement was reached, sanctioned by the Concordat of Worms in Germany (September 23, 1888). territories, and dioceses with papal approval *obtorto collo* (struggle for investiture) – until the agreement was reached,

ratified by the Concordat of Worms in Germany (September 23, 1122) between Pope Callistus II and Emperor Henry V, which put an end to the struggle between temporal and spiritual power. Therefore, diplomacy always prevails.

Cardinal Costantini's suggestion to the Pope was not without effect: the encyclical announced and published in September 1958 under the title *Ad Apostolorum Principis* by Pius XII made no mention whatsoever of a “schism” on the part of Chinese bishops ordained illicitly. In it, Pius XII also reaffirmed the duty of Catholics to love their homeland, the People's Republic of China. And this is exactly what the Holy See asks today of the clergy and faithful in the land of Confucius, clearly distinguishing acts of civil value from those of intrinsically religious significance.

After the end of the war, on April 11, 1946, Pope Pius XII, with the bull *Quotidie Nos*, announced the establishment of the apostolic vicariate, elevated to a diocese, which included the city-prefecture of Lüliang in the Chinese province of Shanxi—meaning that China officially accepted the jurisdiction of the Holy See. The Monegasque-Lebanese Archbishop Antonio Riberi arrived in Nanjing in December of the same year and took up the post of Prime Minister of the Holy See in China.

On October 1, 1949, when the People's Republic of China was established, the Holy See did not recall its officials. Considering the safety of the clergy in China, it immediately sought to establish diplomatic relations with the People's Republic of China, but Mao Zedong's regime did not respond.

The ecclesial movement organized by the Chinese government also began to take shape.

In 1957, the Chinese Patriotic Catholic Association was founded, which since 1958 has chosen its own bishops and celebrated ordination ceremonies, i.e., self-selected and self-consecrated. And from here arose the well-known problems that are now being resolved.

What several scholars have called “the Constantini method” in the Holy See's relations with the largest state in Asia, and one of the most important in the world, represents a direction followed, more generally, by Pope Francis (1936-2013-2025). This line was clearly outlined by Pope Benedict XVI (1927-2005-2013, †2022) in his Letter to Chinese Catholics on May 27, 2007, and was concretized in the Provisional Agreement signed in Beijing on September 22, 2018, under the auspices of Pope Francis. The term “provisional” indicates that this is a positive starting point, confirmed twice more, and that it has been implemented in

important ways in concrete cases. As Pope Francis said in a speech to the Roman Curia: “We must initiate processes and not occupy spaces [...]. This gives priority to actions that generate new dynamics. And it requires patience and waiting.” The positive developments recorded so far give hope for even more on the horizon.

Following the aforementioned Agreement, all the bishops in the land of Confucius, who succeeded those whom Constantine brought to episcopal dignity, are in full communion with the successor of Peter. This is an enormous good for the Chinese faithful and for the entire Catholic Church, a good that reflects positively on the People's Republic of China and contributes to consolidating an international order of justice and peace.

In this direction, it is to be hoped that the dialogue between the Holy See and the People's Republic of China will continue in a fruitful manner. It is also to be hoped that the process initiated by Chinese Catholics to promote the greatest possible harmony among themselves will continue, under the guidance of their pastors and in full communion with the Holy See, which has given so much proof of its love for that great people, heirs to an illustrious civilization, whom Cardinal Costantini considered “his own” by mission, but also by adoption. Cardinal Costantini is still today a source of inspiration in promoting different cultures. In

this way, harmony is fostered within nations and among all nations within the one human family, which the Catholic Church intends to serve, averting, through dialogue and negotiation, absurd and tragic conflicts that unfortunately, even today, bloody the face of the earth.

Thus, after years and years of contacts between the most refined diplomats on the planet, the aforementioned historic Agreement between the Holy See and the People's Republic of China was reached in 2018 and has already been extended twice, in October 2020 and October 2022, and will be renewed on October 24, not for the usual two years but for another four. This brings to an end a decades-long Roman Catholic power struggle over the appointment of Chinese bishops.

The Vatican described a “completely changed situation” since the agreement was first signed, noting that ten bishops had been ordained and that China had officially recognized “the public roles of several previously unrecognized bishops.” There are an estimated 16 million Catholics in China.

For decades, the Vatican has worked carefully and tenaciously to reach an agreement with the Beijing government on the operations of the Church in the People's Republic of China, arguing that it was necessary to end this stalemate.

When the agreement was first renewed in 2020, it faced public opposition from the Trump administration. Then-Secretary of State Mike Pompeo warned that the Vatican was jeopardizing its moral authority. Mike Pompeo had forgotten one thing: the Salvadoran Archbishop Óscar Arnulfo Romero y Galdámez (1917-80) and other priests dedicated to the moral and ethical redemption of their faithful were killed and massacred in the banana republics controlled by the United States of America.

Since the signing of the Agreement, there have been no more illegitimate episcopal ordinations in China, those celebrated without papal consent, which since the late 1950s had wounded ecclesial communion and caused divisions among Chinese Catholics. In the last seven years, nine new Catholic episcopal ordinations have been celebrated in the People's Republic of China, with procedures involving the issuance of a bull of appointment by the Pope. At the same time, eight so-called “underground” bishops, consecrated in the past without following the protocols imposed by the Chinese authorities, have been publicly recognized in their episcopal role by the political authorities in Beijing at their own request.

On the occasion of the 100th anniversary of the Shanghai Council (May 2024), Cardinal Secretary of State Pietro Parolin stated: “The Pope wants Chinese Catholics to love their country and be

the best among its citizens. The Pope loves all nations, as God, whose representative he is; he loves China, your noble and great nation, and does not place it after any other.” Always with an eye to history, Parolin focused on the Shanghai Synod, which had “a broader ecclesial significance.” The Chinese assembly was in fact “a model for many other missionary countries which, following its example, would prepare to celebrate their respective national synods in the following years.” Cardinal Parolin also highlighted the promotion that Cardinal Costantini made of Chinese artistic and architectural forms “through which the inculturation of the Catholic faith could be further concretized.” At the same time, the Cardinal Secretary of State expressed his hope for “a stable presence in China [...]. Even if initially it may not take the form of a papal representation and an apostolic nunciature, it could nevertheless increase and deepen our contacts.”

Finally, Cardinal Parolin, alongside the Bishop of Shanghai, Joseph Shen Bin, stated: “We will continue to build the Church in China as a holy and Catholic Church that is in accordance with God's will, accepts the excellent traditional Chinese cultural heritage, and is pleasing to Chinese society today.”

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