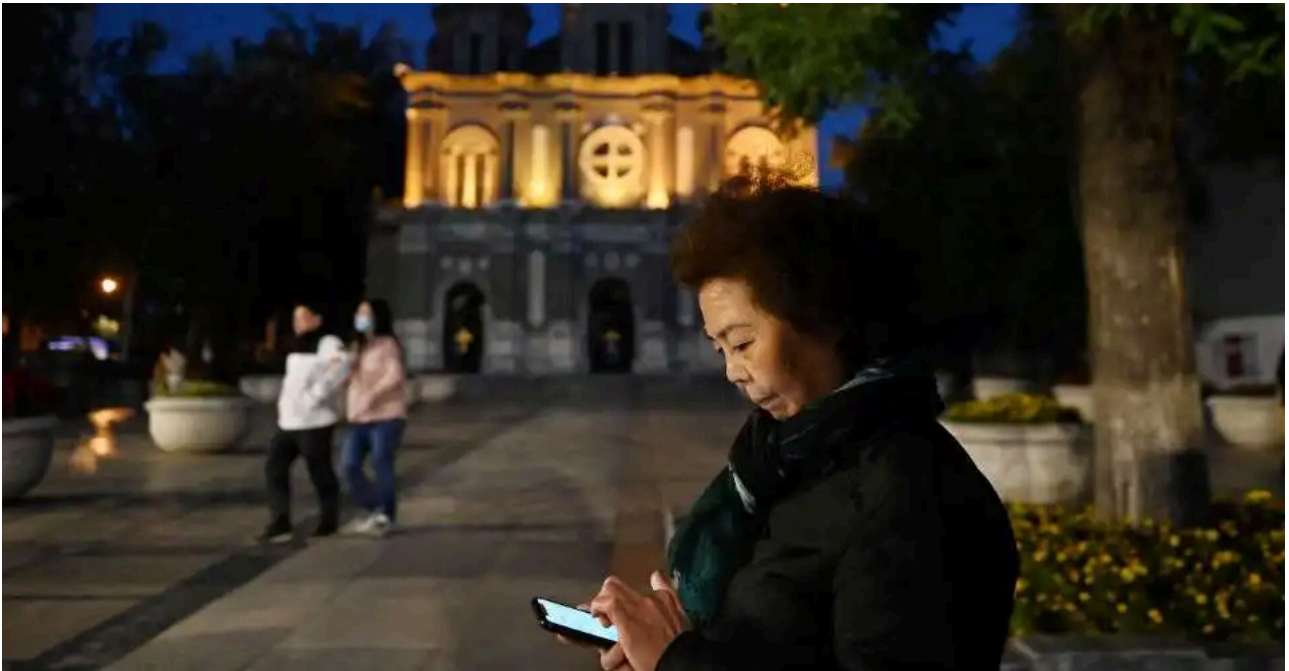


A new generation Sino-Vatican agreement



A woman uses her mobile phone outside St Joseph's Church, also known as Wangfujing Catholic Church, in Beijing on Oct. 22, 2020, the day a secretive 2018 agreement between Beijing and the Vatican was renewed for another two years. (Photo: AFP / GREG BAKER)

Last week, the Vatican and [China](#) announced separately that they had extended their 2018 agreement on appointing Catholic bishops for another four years. Several signs suggest that this agreement is entering a new stage of development and is more than a mere extension.

Since it was signed experimentally for two years in 2018, the Holy See has clearly said it expects the agreement to evolve. It was renewed twice for two years in 2020 and 2022 and was due for renewal in 2024.

If the 2024 renewal had been set at two years again, it would have been a sign of stagnation. However, the longer term of four years indicates that progress has been made in bilateral trust, even if the two parties remain cautious, as evidenced by the minimal communication around the agreement.

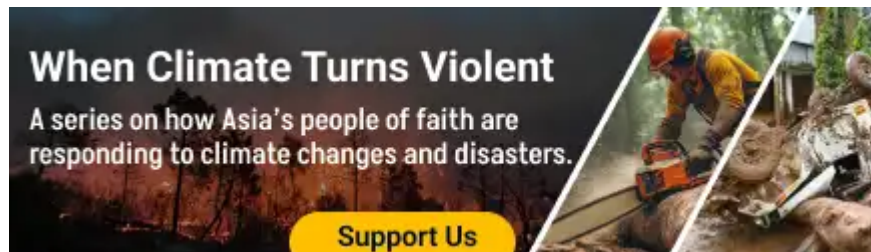
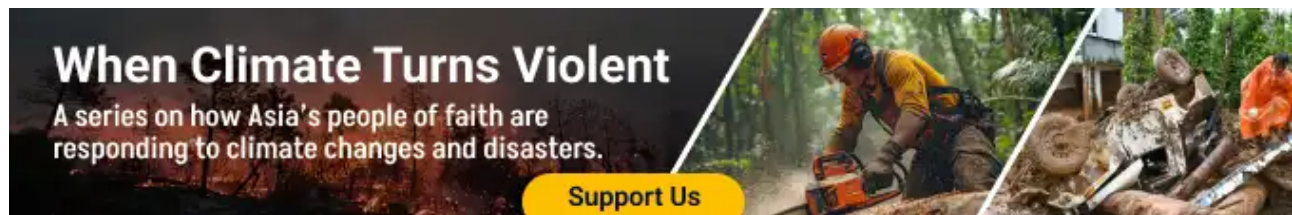
If one wants to analyze the fruits of this six-year agreement, one must examine carefully the appointment of bishops, which the Vatican presents as central.

Over the last six years, ten new bishops have been ordained (including one [ordained on Oct. 25](#)), and 16 others have been regularized, meaning both parties have accepted these bishops appointed by each other.

In six years, the agreement impacted more than 25 percent of dioceses in China, which is enormous. Today, approximately 70 percent of Chinese dioceses have a bishop, but 30 percent still do not.

For some, the fact that there are still empty episcopal seats is proof that the agreement does not work well and that the Holy See is being played by Beijing. But once again, we need to be specific. What are we talking about?

When the Vatican and China severed ties in 1951, China had 143 ecclesial units, including apostolic prefectures and vicariates, dioceses, and archdioceses. Some of these units were created to accommodate the national sentiments of foreign missionaries or other constraints of the time.



Some of these old units are obsolete today. In the 1990s, Beijing redrew a provisional map of Chinese Catholic dioceses and merged some units. Today, Beijing considers mainland China to have only 98 dioceses.

Therefore, when Rome and [Beijing](#) want to appoint a bishop, they must agree on the bishop's territory because some of the dioceses in Vatican records no longer exist in Beijing's records. The agreement on territory has become a slow process subject to negotiations on a case-by-case basis. Both sides are slowly confirming the map. Ultimately, China is most likely to have around 100 dioceses.

This transitional reality makes it difficult to say exactly how many dioceses are vacant. The figure is probably around 30. Currently, China has 70 Catholic bishops; therefore, there are approximately that many dioceses with bishops, too.

But what is certain is that China does not have 143 dioceses. Over the past six years, the Holy See has officially abolished several pre-1951 entities and erected new ones. In Minbei, the Holy See even used a transitional term to [describe](#) the diocese of Bishop Peter Wu Yishun. We must keep in mind that things are moving.

The 2024 agreement is becoming more than on bishops' appointment

Nonetheless, as we have seen, probably some 30 dioceses are still vacant. Yet, nothing proves that Beijing is dragging its feet. Other factors may explain the current situation.

Appointing a bishop requires a suitable candidate, systematic investigation, and a local agreement. Furthermore, Rome may play it safe as it probably wants to keep some levers. All the new bishops in China are between 55 and 65 years old. There is a strong generational pattern. If all the dioceses obtain a bishop now, the Holy See will no longer have a say for 10 to 15 years.

Some people also believe that the agreement should not allow Beijing to intervene in the selection of bishops. This is a naïve and unwise claim. Bishops' appointments follow a cumbersome investigation process that considers opinions from a cross-section of the Church and society. This vacates the idea that the pope alone decides on bishops' appointments.

In some countries, such as France, the public authorities have a right of veto. In some others, local church communities have their say. And sometimes, the Holy See can still let serious mistakes happen, such as with the former American Cardinal Theodore McCarrick, a sexual criminal who was laicized in 2019.

In short, in China as elsewhere, the Holy See needs local relays to ensure that the new bishops correspond to the mission incumbent upon them. Rome's criteria and priorities do not necessarily oppose Beijing's — the two authorities have different but reconcilable objectives.

If I understand correctly, Beijing would propose two or three names to Rome (in general, one). Then, the Holy See's investigation would focus on these candidates before informing Beijing which one can be appointed. All this takes time, but it is moving forward.

But the 2024 agreement is becoming more than bishops! A careful reading of the Oct. 22 Vatican press release shows a language change.

In 2018 and 2020, Rome insisted enormously on the pastoral dimension of the agreement, but the latest release clearly stated that it is a negotiation between the Vatican and China.

A negotiation with the pope is rarely a question of purely pastoral issues. Pastoral questions necessarily have social, political, and international repercussions. But in the 2024 announcement, Rome and Beijing are hiding less and less about this politico-diplomatic aspect.

With this new agreement, Beijing is more confident that Catholics do not represent a subversive foreign force. The party is less afraid of Catholic dissent. This change of attitude alone will help improve the situation of Chinese Catholics.

Over the past months, we have also seen an increasing number of [papal envoys go](#) to Beijing to discuss issues related to the wars in Ukraine and the Middle East. These are very thorny subjects for both Beijing and Rome. But both parties do not hide that they consult each other to see what could be envisaged diplomatically.

Furthermore, the timing of the Sino-Vatican agreement's renewals neutralizes some American interference.

As some people return to a Cold War mentality, they strongly oppose the Sino-Vatican agreement. For them, the pope should not negotiate with the enemy of the USA, he should only condemn the wrongdoings of Beijing.

The 2024 new agreement will most probably have experimental clauses that will be revealed only later.

However, this year, the renewal falls two weeks before the presidential elections in the United States. Voting Americans are not really interested in Sino-Vatican negotiations and opponents to the agreement have less room to attract attention. It will be the same in four years. While the Americans are in an election campaign, Beijing and Rome can negotiate peacefully.

Finally, it should be noted that in 2020, 2022, and 2024, the renewals fell systematically on Oct. 22, the feast day of John Paul II. In 2018, the agreement was revealed on Sept. 22. This shift toward and recurrence of Oct. 22 should not be considered trivial or accidental when one knows what John Paul II represents in the Catholic imagination and the post-USSR world. It would be interesting to hear what Beijing thinks about this specific date.

With all these factors in mind, the 2024 agreement is definitely more than a mere extension. It should be seen as a new generation agreement—not only with a longer term but also with a more global and diplomatic ambition. While the two parties remain cautious, they are committed to transforming and deepening their relations. The 2024 new agreement will probably have experimental clauses that will be revealed only later.

Over the past months, some high-level Chinese officials and bishops attended global events of the Catholic Church. In May 2024, Chinese delegates took part in the anniversary of the Council of Shanghai in Rome. In July, others went to Chicago for the conference of the US-China Catholic Association. In September, another Chinese bishop was in Paris for the San Egidio summit for

peace. And a month later, two Chinese bishops joined the entire second session of the Synod on Synodality.

This level of Chinese participation is unseen. China may start to believe that the Global Catholic Church is maybe more a potential partner to engage than a threat to circumvent.

While the concerns of those advocating for more religious freedom in China, less ideological pressure, as well as for the cultural rights of the Uyghurs and Tibetans, must be heard, one must also recognize the progress made by Pope Francis.

Despite the current political situation in [China](#) being tougher than in the early 2000s, Beijing finally gave the pope the right to regulate episcopal appointments, which the Chinese once considered an internal affair.

Simultaneously, ecclesial and diplomatic collaborations are clearly on the rise.

With a change of approach and a committed heart, Francis has built dialogue. No one can predict the future but, for the sake of the common good, we can only hope that collaboration will continue to grow.

**The views expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official editorial position of UCA News.*