



Cardinal Joseph Zen, shown in Hong Kong on Dec. 5, 2018, told the Register that the situation is serious for the faithful in China.

VATICAN

Cardinal Zen: 'Terrible' Vatican-China Deal Sending Catholics 'to Catacombs'

The cardinal told the Register that 'it's useless to fight now' and urged a tactical retreat.

By Edward Pentin – Posted 3/26/20 at 10:53 AM

VATICAN CITY — The Holy See must reconsider pastoral guidelines it issued last year encouraging Chinese clergy to join the country's official state-run church and urgently make its secret 2018 agreement with China public, Cardinal Joseph Zen Ze-kuin has insisted.

In March 20 comments to the Register, the bishop emeritus of Hong Kong said he finds it "incredible" that through the pastoral guidelines the Holy See issued on June 28 last year, the Holy See is pushing for unity "with the wrong church, with a schismatic church."

He also added that the situation has now become so serious for the faithful in China that he is counseling them to retreat "to the catacombs," as it is "useless to fight now."

"If we fight, they will do even more [harm]," he said, and the faithful risk becoming "complete slaves" to the state-backed community.

The Vatican [issued](#) the pastoral guidance to clergy on civil registration in China last June 28 in response to requests from Chinese bishops for a response to a ruling regarding the Chinese Communist Party's obligations on religious groups to register with the authorities.

The guidelines were aimed at finding a way to cooperate with the authorities while at the same time guaranteeing as much respect for Catholic teaching as allowed by the laws of the Chinese state.

It also was hoped to foster what the Vatican stresses is “unity” between the underground Church in full communion with Rome and which has long resisted the communist authorities, often at risk of imprisonment and death, and the official church, called the Chinese Patriotic Catholic Association.

The Chinese Patriotic Catholic Association is a national church separate from Rome. Its central authority lies not with the Holy See but with the Communist Party. However, the Patriotic Catholic Association has never been formally declared by the Vatican as schismatic.

The Vatican insisted in the June 2019 document that, “under the current conditions,” Catholic priests could resist in good conscience from registering as members of the Patriotic Catholic Association, as stipulated by the communist government, but [reports](#) have emerged of Chinese authorities nevertheless applying pressure on clergy to register.

The Vatican also portrayed the guidelines as part of an effort to normalize relations between the Church and the communist regime, claiming in the document that because today “all Chinese bishops are in communion with the Apostolic See,” it was “legitimate to expect a new approach on the part of everyone, also when addressing practical questions about the life of the Church.”

But Cardinal Zen and others see the guidelines as part of a move to “push everybody” into joining the independent, official church and argue that it forcing clergy into apostasy.

“It’s terrible” and “the most evil thing,” he told the Register, adding that he believes it is worse than the controversial [provisional agreement](#) on the appointment of bishops that the Vatican and China signed Sept. 22, 2018.

Father Cervellera

Father Bernardo Cervellera, director of [AsiaNews](#), stressed that the Vatican was appearing to place the Patriotic Catholic Association on a level with the underground Church and so not separated from communion with Rome, “whereas in the past, not to belong to an independent church was a must.”

“I can understand that perhaps people in the past would join an independent church and secretly would try to be faithful to the Pope, to the universal Church,” Father Cervellera continued. “But this has become more and more difficult, also for

the official community, because they have to implement the new regulations” — 41 articles [enacted](#) by the Chinese Communist Party in February requiring religious groups to spread the party’s principles but which critics have called a “final blow to religious liberty.”

These include stipulations that they “must agree on not evangelizing young people below 18 years old, that they have to agree not to evangelize beyond of the borders of parish churches,” he explained. “So, practically, there is an attempt to reduce bishops and priests of the so-called independent church to bureaucrats and state clerks,” he said, adding, “that the official church is being reduced to a state church practically.”

Last September, Cardinal Zen wrote to all the Church’s cardinals to express his grave concerns about the pastoral guidelines. His missive prompted a sharp response from the dean of the College of Cardinals, Cardinal Giovanni Battista Re, who wrote a [letter](#) Feb. 26 to the cardinals criticizing Cardinal Zen for his approach and stressing the Vatican guidelines were conceived “precisely to safeguard the faith in situations so complicated and difficult that they place personal conscience in crisis.”

Cardinal Re also claimed that having seen the Vatican archives, he was sure that Pope Benedict XVI had approved a draft of the provisional agreement with China. Cardinal Zen [wrote](#) an open letter March 1 challenging Cardinal Re — whom he believes is a “good man put under pressure” by Cardinal Pietro Parolin, the Vatican secretary of state — to show the documents. But as of March 20, he had not received anything.

“It seems incredible,” he told the Register. “I’m 100% sure they can’t prove it to me. It doesn’t fit.”

The draft of the [provisional agreement](#), which Cardinal Zen believes Benedict did see but refused to sign, was thought to give Chinese authorities a decisive say in the appointment of bishops while allowing the pope to veto their choices, though not unlimitedly. It also coincided at the time with the Vatican lifting the excommunications of seven bishops who had not been in communion with Rome, principally, but not only, because the official, state-backed church had appointed them without papal permission.

“If this was a consequence of that agreement, you can see how liberal it is,” said Cardinal Zen, who has called it a “scandalous” betrayal and a “triumph” for those who for decades had acted against the Church. “They never showed any sign of repentance,” he observed, “and now they are made bishops.”

Continuing Crackdowns

The timing of the Vatican's diplomacy with the Chinese authorities has been roundly criticized as a mistake, as crackdowns on Catholics have not reduced but increased, and incidents of religious persecution are reportedly running at record levels. These include [closing](#) or destroying churches, jailing pastors and priests and [surveillance control and restrictions](#). Nor has the coronavirus reportedly [lessened](#) the extent of the crackdown, as [reports](#) have emerged of continued destruction of churches even during the lockdown.

China has undergone fluctuating periods of freedom and constraint, and this is a time of "restriction" and "sinicization," missionary Father Sergio Ticozzi, a member of the Pontifical Institute for Foreign Missions, explained in *Hong Kong-China: The Catholic Issue*, a new [documentary](#) by Elisabetta Valgiusti, produced by [Save the Monasteries](#). "All religions must be Chinese, especially those from outside, thus the Christian churches, Islam and Lama Buddhism of Tibet. It's a policy to force churches and religions to sinicize."

The Chinese authorities' main purpose is "political," Father Ticozzi continued. "The party must have control over every area of citizens' lives, including the religious aspect. Although they say they respect religion, they tolerate it but promote Marxism fully."

Cardinal Zen told the program it is a new form of persecution and that "with the help of the Holy See" they are succeeding in "destroying all the Church."

Christopher Patten, Britain's last governor of Hong Kong who spent many years negotiating with Beijing before handing the former colony over to the Chinese in 1999, [said](#) in February he thought the Vatican had "got it very badly wrong about China." A well-known British Catholic who usually takes a more liberal position, Lord Patten said he felt it was an "extraordinary time" to be dealing with China in this way, which has "gone back on human rights."

More opposition came on March 12 from a group of 31 British Catholics who wrote a [letter](#) to the *Catholic Herald* calling for the provisional agreement to be "torn up" on the grounds that China is continuing to commit human-rights violations, including organ harvesting and the persecution of Catholics.

"The case for opposing the Vatican's deal with Xi Jinping's government, which also harasses and detains leading Catholic clergy and destroys Catholic shrines and churches which refuse to join the official 'Patriotic Church,' was already formidably strong," the signatories state. "Now, it is unarguable."

They therefore said the “time has come for the Vatican to rescind its treaty” with Beijing and, “by so doing, stand in forthright solidarity with all victims of totalitarian oppression.”

The 2018 provisional agreement is set to expire in September if progress cannot be made, but for Cardinal Zen, the fate of the pact is “not so important” because “we don’t know what is in it.” That lack of knowledge about its contents is a “very serious situation,” he said. “We’ve been left in the dark.”

Father Cervellera pointed out that the faithful only know what Pope Francis and Cardinal Parolin have said about it, and “so we only know some parts”; but it is nevertheless possible to see the “effects, the consequences of this agreement.”

Vatican Media claimed that two episcopal [ordinations](#) took place last year as “the result of the agreement,” but they had, in fact, been decided long before the agreement was signed, so the pact is “practically useless,” said Cardinal Zen.

“We don’t see there has been any improvement in this dialogue,” he said.

Untrustworthy Dialogue Partner?

Those closely involved with the process principally blame China, as they see it as being an absolutely untrustworthy dialogue partner, at war within itself over the nature and extent of dialogue with the Vatican.

Cardinal Zen summed up three major concerns: the 2018 agreement, the legitimization of the seven bishops and the encouragement that “everyone join” the Patriotic Catholic Association. “The second thing is much worse than the first,” he said, “and the third thing is much worse than the second.”

And each of them, critics say, is having negative consequences on the Chinese faithful. Father Cervellera said the underground community now feels “abandoned by the Vatican because the Vatican doesn’t stress at all the freedom of religion.” According to Cardinal Zen, that sense of abandonment is growing, as the faithful are “considered inconvenient, almost as an obstacle to unity.”

In a March 21 blog post, the 88-year-old cardinal [blamed](#) this on the Holy See for pursuing the wrong policy with China for the “last 20 years” because they chose not to follow the line of the most recent popes. He also said that at the same time, the official church has grown “more and more numerous, fearless and defiant” because it has been “encouraged by people inside and around the Vatican, intoxicated by their illusions of the *ostpolitik*” — referring to the conciliatory approach the Holy See pursued with Soviet communism in the 1960s, which Pope

St. John Paul II and Benedict XVI saw as a well-intentioned failure and compromise that placed pragmatism over truth.

Observers also say such an approach has led to Vatican silence and a serious omission of the Church's important moral voice in the face of controversial Chinese policies, such as the [recent riots](#) in Hong Kong against the Chinese communist regime, as well as an unwillingness to touch on any issues sensitive to Beijing, including [opening](#) the beatification cause of the heroic underground Cardinal Ignatius Kung Pin-mei.

Added to the contentious situation is a very public and long-running spat between Cardinal Zen and Cardinal Parolin, with Cardinal Zen most recently [saying](#) he had the impression that Cardinal Parolin "manipulates the Pope." In his March 20 comments to the Register, the Hong Kong cardinal said he was "sure that Parolin allowed himself to be cheated" by the Chinese authorities.

Asked if he or Cardinal Parolin had tried to dialogue recently, he replied: "No, no, absolutely no." But Cardinal Zen said he has good relations with Pope Francis, whom he believes holds him in high regard and is therefore secure.

Some would like to see reconciliation between the two cardinals, and Father Cervellera believes that could be achieved by both Cardinal Zen and Cardinal Re speaking with Cardinal Parolin "to find a common way to improve this agreement," preferably in time for the expiration of the pact later this year.

Father Cervellera believes that given a key principle of Pope Francis is that "the whole is better than the one part," Cardinals Parolin and Re should be "compelled to dialogue with Cardinal Zen." Some kind of common response "would be absolutely important for the Church, not only for Church in China but for the universal Church," he said.

Cardinal Parolin

In comments to the Register on March 23, Cardinal Parolin said he appreciated the interest in Sino-Vatican relations, but that he thought it "more appropriate not to release interviews on this matter, since any statement about it can cause intense controversy, which is of benefit to nobody."

"We have seen this occur recently, not only in relation to opinions, but also to facts," he said, adding that, "besides, in recent times, I have already addressed the questions you pose on various occasions."

The questions the Register put to him were what tangible achievements had been made since the 2018 agreement; why the agreement is still secret and whether its

contents be made known; what he thought of accusations that the agreement's secrecy had led to more violence and persecution; his view on Cardinal Re's claim Benedict XVI had approved a draft of the agreement; whether any ordinations due to the agreement are expected soon; and clarification of the pastoral guidelines, given that parts are viewed by critics as unacceptable.

Last year, Cardinal Parolin urged patience over Sino-Vatican relations and advised not to rashly judge the provisional agreement that is meant to protect religious freedom. "History was not built in one day; history is a long process. And I think we have to put ourselves in this perspective," he [told](#) reporters last April.

The coronavirus has added further challenges to the situation. Due to obstacles to movement and communication, Cardinal Zen said he knew of no new developments since the new Chinese Communist Party regulations were enacted in February, but he is concerned about Beijing's approach to Hong Kong — that it is not respecting the autonomy they had promised it and that it is thinking of appointing a bishop for Hong Kong from the Chinese capital.

"Now everything has stopped," Cardinal Zen said, adding that he has few contacts now and noting that, due to the coronavirus, it is "more difficult" for people to come to Hong Kong and pass on messages.

Father Cervellera told the Register March 20 that churches were ordered closed when COVID-19 broke out and "are not open yet," despite the emergency being declared over and "people invited — I would say pushed — to go back to work because they have to grow the economy, which has been seriously wounded during this period."

In his comments to the Register, Cardinal Parolin urged all to "pray together for the Church in China, particularly at this time of difficulty for the whole world."

[Edward Pentin](#) is the Register's Rome correspondent.

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