

**Chinese Totalitarianism and Bishop James Su Zhimin:
What It Means for Religious Freedom and the Holy See**

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Mr. Co-Chairman and members of the Commission, thank you for the opportunity to speak to you about one of the most serious violations of human rights and human dignity in the 21st century – the assault on religion in China under President Xi Jinping that has justly been called a Second Cultural Revolution.

Let me express my gratitude to you, Mr. Smith, for your decades of work to highlight and condemn the Chinese government's treatment of all its religious minorities, and for its cruel and inhumane policies in virtually every area of human endeavor, including its role in the spread of the COVID 19 pandemic. The Chinese government has threatened you for one reason only: you have been highly effective in both exhortation and in legislation. Please know that millions of Americans and others around the world stand with you. Thank you, Mr. Smith.

The Importance of Bishop Su's Case to China and Religious Freedom

In seven weeks the Sino-Vatican "provisional agreement" on the appointment of Catholic bishops will end, unless it is renewed by the two parties. If reports of the death of the Bishop of Baoding, James Su Zhimin, are true, the choosing of his replacement could occur under the terms of the agreement. I would like to focus my remarks on the fierce anti-religion, anti-Catholic policy of the Chinese regime, and once again urge the Vatican to abandon the agreement.

Speaking as a Catholic, and therefore an advocate for religious freedom of all China's citizens, I believe the accord was a serious mistake. In my view the Holy See cannot achieve its goal of unifying Catholics in China under one ecclesiastical umbrella whose bishops and priests are recognized both by the Vatican and the Chinese communist regime, while at the same time remaining faithful to the teachings of the Catholic Church.

In 1997 the government of China demanded that Bishop Su submit to the communist-controlled "Catholic Patriotic Association." He refused. His punishment was that given to many loyal Catholic bishops who sought to be truly Catholic in private and in public life: he was "disappeared." That is a modern neologism for kidnapping. He was kidnapped by Chinese authorities in 1997, and in the ensuing 23 years – so far as I am aware – has been seen only once by people outside the Chinese government. That was in 2003 in a hospital in Baoding.

Of course, the Chinese communist regime denies having kidnapped Bishop Su. Their Orwellian lies provide a window into the soul of a regime that both understands and fears the power of religion.

Bishop Su's "crime" was to demand the right to be a Catholic bishop in full. That meant then and it means now the right and the duty of Catholic bishops to be faithful to the magisterium of the Roman Catholic Church, and not to be harnessed to the secular objectives of any earthly

government, especially a persecuting, anti-Catholic government such as the communist regime in China. It means the right and the duty, as a bishop of the Roman Catholic Church and a successor to the Apostles, to witness and to teach the moral and social truths of the Church. It also means standing for the religious freedom of everyone – not just Catholics.

A Brief Overview of China's Religion Policy

Let me place the travail of Bishop Su, and other religious minorities in China, into brief historical context.

Chinese communists have a deep aversion to religion in general and to the Catholic religion in particular. China's first Cultural Revolution under Mao Zedong (1966-1976) was intended, among other things, to kill religion in China. Millions were murdered, starved or tortured to death. Hundreds of millions of innocent lives were decimated. Catholic bishops, priests, nuns and laypeople were, like other religious and non-religious Chinese citizens, victims of the carnage.

But Mao failed. Today there are some 300 million Chinese religious adherents, including an estimated 10-12 million Catholics.

Why did Mao seek to eliminate religion, especially religions like Catholicism and Protestant Christianity? Because — as despots from Stalin to Kim Jong-un have understood — religion is the mortal enemy of despotism. When citizens are faithful to an authority greater than the state, the state's power is organically limited. America's Protestant founders understood this very well, which is why we have the guarantee of “free exercise” of religion in our First Amendment.

Mao understood the threat of religion to despots. He overreached because he did not grasp religion's durability. However, his successors have experimented with other means of restricting religion after learning an important lesson from the Cultural Revolution: if the religious impulse in man cannot be destroyed, it must be controlled by harnessing it to the communist state.

This post-Mao experimentation yielded important lessons for the communist regime. Absent systemic persecution, some Chinese religions grew independent of the state, including committed Catholic and Protestant “underground” churches that resisted communist control.

Other results were more positive for the regime. Certain Chinese religions were by their nature patriotic and more open to being supportive of the regime, such as non-Tibetan Buddhism, or the quasi-religion of Confucius. Within Christian precincts, unfortunately, there was no shortage of people eager to kowtow to communism, including, tragically, the Catholic bishop of Beijing from 1979-2007, Bishop Michael Fu Tieshan. Unsurprisingly, Bishop Fu was also a fierce critic of the Vatican, openly defying Pope St. John Paul II's canonization of Chinese martyrs in 2000.

Unfortunately, during the decades since Mao's Cultural Revolution, Beijing learned that there were to be few if any real-world consequences to China's experiments in religion control.

Throughout these decades one of their most brutal policies was the kidnapping, and in some cases the murder, of Catholic bishops who refused to join the Communist-controlled “Catholic Patriotic Association.”

Xi Jinping and the Second Cultural Revolution

Xi Jinping became China’s president in 2013 and began to consolidate the lessons of his predecessors. His policies suggest a stark conclusion: if you can’t kill religion, you can control it, but only with a combination of law and terror more systematic than his predecessors had been willing to implement.

In 2016 Xi launched his campaign to “Sinicize religion,” through a series of regulations and state-sponsored brutality, consisting of a toxic blend of Mao’s ruthlessness and sophisticated 21st-century surveillance techniques.

The regulations are sweeping and unambiguous: “Religious organizations must adhere to the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party. ... “No one under the age of 18 may attend any religious service or event whatsoever.” Video surveillance cameras have been installed in houses of worship. DNA samples are forcibly or surreptitiously taken and used to track and punish. Bibles are being “amended” to accord with “the values of socialism.” Priests and pastors who resist joining the official churches are under growing pressure. Underground churches are being eliminated. Church buildings outside official control are being shut-down and, in some cases, bulldozed.

Tibetan Buddhism, long a thorn in communist flesh because of adherents’ devotion to the exiled Dalai Lama, has been subjected to a campaign of cultural decimation and population displacement. Recently Beijing made it clear that the Dalai Lama, now 85, will not be permitted to discover his reincarnated successor according to sacred Buddhist tradition. That task will be performed by the Chinese government.

Worst of all, however, has been China’s treatment of the Muslims of Xinjiang province. Not long after Xi’s accession, Chinese police began rounding up Uighurs and other Muslims, now totaling as many as 1.8 million, and placing them into concentration camps where human beings have been subjected to “re-education,” supplemented by rape, torture and sterilization. Adding to the horror, almost half a million Muslim children have been separated from their parents.

Chinese Catholicism and The Role of the Vatican

Until the accession of Xi Jinping, the Catholic Church in China was in a perilous position. Now, however, it is in mortal danger of being transformed into an arm of the Communist Party. As I have already observed, the Chinese government seeks to control all religions that posit an authority greater than the Communist party and the state. Most – although not all --- religions in China pose this threat.

Catholicism poses an added difficulty for China because of its distinct doctrine of fidelity to the Magisterium of the Church, that is, the teaching authority of the Pope in communion with the bishops. The bishops, as successors to the Apostles and in communion with the Pope, have the responsibility to care for their flocks. They also have a duty to teach the truth about the dignity of the human person, the sacredness of human life, and the right of religious freedom for all.

Negotiations over the renewal of the accord, and the appointment of a successor for Bishop Su, present an opportunity for the Holy See and Pope Francis. The Pope has a moral authority on issues of human rights and religious persecution no other world leader possesses. But the Vatican is far less likely to achieve its aims when it attempts to act as a secular diplomatic power.

Vatican diplomacy made this mistake during the Cold War with its policy of “Ostpolitik,” which was based on the naïve assumption that Catholics could be protected from the devil by doing a deal with the devil. The policy of Ostpolitik did lasting damage to the Church in eastern Europe.

That policy was reversed only in 1978 when a Polish pope, who had personally experienced the savagery of Nazi and Communist totalitarianism, identified the central flaw. Pope John Paul II believed it folly to attempt to “bargain” Marxists out of their inhumane ideology. Accordingly, he embarked on a policy of boldly witnessing to the truth, employing the moral authority of the Holy Father to speak to the world – from the Vatican, at the United Nations, and in scores of countries about the globe – of the evils inherent in communism. His moral authority was doubtless why the Chinese communists did not dare permit him to visit China.

In 2018, however, at the very peak of Chinese persecution – of Catholics, Protestants, Tibetan Buddhists, and the Muslims of Xinjiang -- the current Vatican decided to make a diplomatic deal with the Chinese communist government. The Sino-Vatican “provisional agreement” was signed in September 2018, and is set to expire on September 17, 2020.

China’s Catholics have for decades been divided between the “official” church controlled by the state, and the “underground” church loyal to Rome and represented by Bishops like Su Zhimin. It is quite understandable that the current Pope wishes to unite all Chinese Catholics so that both will come under the authority and care of bishops who are in communion with him and the Magisterium.

Unfortunately, the Vatican’s goal in the accord (as stated by its spokesman at its signing) is to “allow the faithful to have bishops who are in communion with Rome *but at the same time recognized by Chinese authorities.*” That is, once again, a devil’s bargain. There is absolutely no reason to believe that Chinese communist officials will approve bishops who will be true heralds of a faith that runs so contrary to their own ideology. *The quest for unity among China’s Catholics cannot be realized if it depends on the cooperation of a regime that seeks in effect to destroy Catholicism in China by making it an arm of the state.*

Indeed, in the two years since the signing of the agreement, the government has stepped up its “sinicization” of the Catholic Church, including the destruction of churches, arrests of priests, and the threats of violence that only a totalitarian government can make with such effectiveness. Why the Vatican should renew an agreement with such a government is difficult to understand.

However, it is not difficult to see how the Chinese government has used the agreement to pursue its aims of controlling and, ultimately, transforming Catholicism into an arm of communism. The text has never been made public but its terms have been widely reported. Beijing controls the nomination of any new bishop and sends his name to the Holy See. Reportedly, the Pope may veto the nominee. But that simply leaves the position vacant, or – as in the case of Baoding since Bishop Su's disappearance – left in the hands of an administrative bishop who serves the interests of Xi Jinping, not the Roman Catholic Church.

The Chinese government can certainly live with this situation, but Chinese Catholics cannot. Chinese Catholics need good and holy bishops to identify and educate good and holy priests. Chinese Catholics need bishops to defend their interests, and work against injustice, including injustices against Catholics and others in China.

Mr. Chairman, let me end by expressing the hope that the confluence of these two occasions – the end of the two year transitional agreement and the reported death of Bishop Su Zhimin – will lead this Vatican and this Pope to return to the real charism of the universal Roman Catholic Church: standing for the human rights of every human being, and condemning evil where it exists – as it surely does in the actions of the current Chinese regime.

Thank you.