

TESTIMONY OF
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DIRECTOR OF ITS CENTER FOR RELIGIOUS FREEDOM
TO THE
CONGRESSIONAL-EXECUTIVE COMMISSION ON CHINA
ON
China's War on Religion: The Threat to Religious Freedom and Why it Matters to the United States
The Situation Facing the Catholic Church in China
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The Catholic Church in China, numbered between 10 and 12 million, currently faces its most intense religious repression since the Mao era. This repression negates religious freedom and impacts all Catholics there. It is part of the government's systematic effort to consolidate Chinese Communist Party control over all civil society groups, institutions, leadership and ideologies.

While the CCP applies all the restrictions to Catholics that it does to Protestants, its principal tactic against the Catholic Church in China is to decapitate its leadership by marginalizing the pope and suppressing or replacing the bishops who are essential to the functioning of this hierarchical church. This is specifically calculated to cow, manipulate and diminish the Catholic Church in China, and at the same time avoid more graphic and bloodier measures or ones involving mass numbers of victims that would draw international headlines and Western trade sanctions.

China's treatment of the Catholic Church is the modern face of religious persecution. It coerces that Church mostly through the quiet methods of leadership control, technology, brain washing, and indefinite detention rather than the tiger chair tortures and show trials used against some other minority religious groups, such as the Uyghurs, Tibetan Buddhists and Falun Gong. With the recent arrest of Pastor Ezra Jin and other Protestant Church leaders, China may now be using its Catholic model to repress the Protestant Church in China.

At least nine Catholic bishops are currently detained, have disappeared or are otherwise persecuted. Their names are not well known partly due China's cover up of them and also to the Vatican's Ostpolitik policy, which it used in Communist Eastern Europe prior to Pope John Paul II. Today, the policy means that the Vatican avoids any criticism of the Chinese Communist Party and even will defend it from criticism by others, including about the [persecution](#).

One Catholic lay person, Jimmy Lai, the Hong Kong pro-democracy hero and a devout Catholic and a major supporter of the Catholic Church, has gained world-wide name recognition as a prisoner of conscience. The West feels free to raise Lai's unjust imprisonment because he is seen primarily as a free press and pro-democracy advocate.

The CCP Decapitates Chinese Church Leadership:

Uniquely impacting the Catholic Church, the government prevents the Catholic Church in China from having full communion with Rome, as it bars the pope from visiting the Catholic Church there, tightly controls episcopal visits to the Vatican and demands that Catholic bishops and clergy pledge independence from papal authority. It blocks bishops from being appointed to about a third of the dioceses with vacant episcopal sees. Beijing works to further undermine this Catholic leadership structure by naming bishops without prior papal approval or even notice in some cases and by persecuting some bishops with papal approval, including by placing them in indefinite detention. It also has unilaterally redistricted and eliminated certain dioceses. Within the Catholic Church, bishops are the hierarchical leaders essential for communications with the pope, ensuring that Catholic teaching is correctly taught at the local level and for forming and ordaining the priests needed to transmit the faith and administer the sacraments. By obstructing and undermining papal authority over Chinese bishops, Beijing is deliberately thwarting the perpetuation and propagation of the Catholic Church in China.

The state and Chinese Communist Party dictate which Catholic churches are legal or illegal and which Catholic clergy meet official approval and which are banned. To get official approval, Catholic clergy must be part of the Chinese Patriotic Catholic Association, which, since 2018, has been overseen by the party's United Front Work Department, its main propaganda arm. Clergy who join the Patriotic Association face a lifetime of party surveillance and indoctrination or "reeducation."

The Patriotic Association has unique implications for the Catholic Church: to join, its bishops and priests are forced to take a pledge of independence from papal authority, which -- as Pope Benedict XVI stated in his 2007 [letter](#) to the Catholic Church in China -- "Independence" from the "Successor of Peter" is "incompatible with Catholic doctrine." In 2019, the Holy See, under its name, not the pope's, issued pastoral guidelines that normalized membership in the Patriotic Association for the Catholic clergy in China despite that association never having been formally legitimized in canon law by any pope.

Those who refuse the Patriotic Association's pledge cannot be legally registered with the state and are considered part of the "underground" church. The underground church has experienced persecution that has waxed and waned since the Mao era and beginning in 2026 is to be officially criminalized.

The China-Vatican agreement of 2018 has not exempted the Catholic Church from China's directive to conform religion to Chinese Communist Party values, goals and policies. In 2018, Xi Jinping began enforcing in earnest the so-called "Sinicization" religious regulations, which have been continuously added to and intensified since then. They bar the Catholic Church from administering the sacraments to children under 18 years old, educating them in the faith and allowing them to attend Mass. Catholic priests are required to base sermons on the thoughts of Xi Jinping and to teach Chinese communist party values, whether or not they conflict with the Gospel and Church teachings. The Catholic Church in China is prohibited from promoting Catholic teachings that conflict with the party's practices and policies. These include teachings concerning abortion, genocide, forced organ harvesting, immigration and political asylum. Catholic parish churches that resist are being shut down and their priests detained and forcibly indoctrinated or defrocked by the state.

As experienced by others in China, all Catholics in China are restricted by a web of regulations on what they can say about religion, whom they can meet with, speak to and educate on religious matters, the time, place, method and form of their religious activities and gatherings, and what information they

may consume, post, and publish about their faith and religion generally. Enforcement entails the close policing of clergy and churches, including technological surveillance such as facial recognition cameras outside and inside of places of worship, formal registration of clergy and members of the congregations with the state in a computerized system that links to individual social credit scores, and the detention and “reeducation” of clergy by party and state functionaries.

The state censors Catholic literature and restricts access to the Bible, including on the Internet. State religious personnel are embarked on a project to retranslate and reinterpret the Catholic edition of the Bible to reinforce CCP teachings and have pressed Chinese clergy, including those in Hong Kong to collaborate with them on this.

The CCP Uses the China-Vatican Agreement as an Instrument of Control Against the Catholic Church:

In addition, the Chinese Communist Party coopts and coerces the Catholic Church by exploiting the provisional China-Vatican agreement of 2018. To preserve continuing dialogue with Beijing, the Vatican has withdrawn support for the underground church and it refrains from all criticism of the CCP, while fulsomely [praising](#) Beijing’s climate policies, and Xi Jinping’s “Community of Common Destiny for Mankind,” a project to change the world order under Beijing’s domination. The chancellor of the Pontifical Academy of Sciences infamously made headlines when he lauded Beijing for “best realiz[ing] the social doctrine of the Church.” The Vatican does this in the hope that the agreement will strengthen Church “unity” and “communion with Rome”. Repeatedly the Vatican says that the agreement will lead to more Chinese episcopal appointments and Beijing’s recognition of the pope as the head of the Catholic Church in China. So far, those goals have been elusive, rather the CCP has found the agreement to be a highly effective tool in tightening its control over the Catholic Church in China.

When the agreement was concluded, the Vatican heralded it as a historic “breakthrough” that would benefit the Catholic Church there. Since then, the Vatican, like Beijing, has insisted that the agreement is working, and in October 2024 renewed it for four more years. But this deal, whose contents are kept secret, is gradually delivering over the Catholic Church in China to the CCP. The agreement appears to have allowed Beijing to determine whether bishops can be appointed at all and, if so, to lead in determining whom should be picked. China immediately began using it to pressure bishops into joining the Patriotic Association. The agreement’s implementation by the CCP is designed to eventually transform the Catholic Church in China, diocese by diocese, into a party apparatus.

Vatican Secretary of State Cardinal Pietro Parolin, who had a pivotal role in brokering the deal, revealed that the agreement concerns the sharing of power between the pope and Beijing in the appointment of Catholic bishops in China. Two years after signing it, Beijing published regulations on appointing bishops that omitted any papal role and, in several of the dozen or so episcopal appointments since the signing, the pope seems denied even a veto. For example, in 2022 the government transferred one bishop behind Pope Francis’ back to a diocese the government created for which the Vatican issued a formal note of “regret.” Because Beijing continues to block appointments of bishops to vacant episcopal sees, even as some bishops pass away, about one third or 30 of China’s diocese remain without a bishop to lead them.

As the agreement has played out over the last seven years, we see the Communist government unilaterally naming bishops to posts that the pope eventually ratifies. For example, On April 29, in the period after Pope Francis’ death when the papal chair was vacant, the China Patriotic Catholic

Association unilaterally picked Father Joseph Wu Jianlin, then a priest, to be a bishop and decided that he should serve as auxiliary bishop in Shanghai. Three and a half months later, on August 11, Pope Leo XIV “approved his candidacy within the framework of the Provisional Agreement.” On October 15, 2025, Fr. Wu’s episcopal consecration took place in Shanghai’s St. Ignatius Cathedral. Meanwhile, the Vatican already has an approved auxiliary bishop for Shanghai but the CCP keeps him locked up. Bishop Thaddeus Ma is in his thirteenth year of indefinite detention, a form of house arrest, for quitting the Patriotic Association.

Moreover, in 2023, the Patriotic Association’s council of bishops unilaterally appointed Bishop Joseph Shen Bin, its own head, to be the principal bishop of Shanghai, the Chinese Church’s most important diocese. Bishop Shen expressed full commitment to the CCP’s demand for autonomy from the pope. In a 2023 diocesan [interview](#), he had declared with fervor:

“We must ... adhere to the principle of independence and autonomy in running the Church, adhere to the principle of democracy in running the Church, and adhere to the direction of Sinicization of the Catholic Church in China. This is the bottom line, which no one can break, and it is also a high pressure line, which no one should touch.”

It was Shen who shocked the Hong Kong clergy in 2022, [stating](#): “It is necessary to jointly promote [with the government] the translation and interpretation of the Bible.”

Pope Francis waited three months before approving Shen’s transfer to Shanghai and stating that he approved for the sake of “unity and communion.” Cardinal Parolin explained that this was needed “to rectify the canonical irregularity” of Shen’s unilateral appointment by the CCP-controlled body. He also [hoped](#) in vain that cooperating with China might “favor a just and wise solution” for Bishop Ma and his predecessor Bishop Xing, who had disappeared from his Shanghai episcopal post in 2011.

Since the seventeenth century, Shanghai has been China’s largest and most important diocese. It was the diocese of Ignatius Cardinal Kung Pin-Mei, the world’s first Chinese Catholic bishop, who endured thirty-three years of imprisonment for refusing to renounce the pope. This venerable diocese is now dominated by the Patriotic Association.

Other episcopal posts have been filled with CCP zealots, approved by the Vatican, while the faithful bishop is replaced and persecuted, as shown in below in the case of Bishop Vincent Guo.

The Persecuted Bishops

A year ago, I wrote a 50-page report documenting [at least ten Catholic bishops](#) in China that were then in indefinite detention or otherwise restricted in their ministries for opposing government control over their church. One of those, Bishop Jia, died while forcibly confined.

On October 29, 2025, having spent a total of over 20 out of 30 years interned in prisons and secret places of detention, the prelate of Hebei’s Zhengding diocese, **Bishop Julius Jia Zhiguo**, aged 91, passed away at his residence while under house arrest. In a statement sent to AsiaNews on the day of Bishop Jia’s death, Hebei province’s Catholic community gave a moving tribute to their deceased shepherd:

“We are grateful to you, for your extraordinary courage in founding and leading multiple dioceses, transmitting the flame of the Church; we are grateful because, even when you were

repeatedly arrested and imprisoned, you continued to care for the flock, preserving the flame of hope in the darkest nights.”

As bishop, he spread the Gospel, resisting state-imposed impediments and demands that would have compromised his principles. He inspired many young Catholics and ordained several of them as priests, and four as bishops. He is credited with rebuilding the Hebei Catholic Church after Mao left it shattered.

Bishop Jia had been imprisoned during the Cultural Revolution for 15 years until 1978 and was rearrested for foreign collusion in 1982 and imprisoned until 1987. After that, he was detained without charges multiple times, including being confined to house arrest in 2018, the year the agreement was signed. In recent years, police dismantled the orphanage he ran for 30 years with the help of Catholic nuns and the support of local Buddhists. There, in defiance of state “Sinicization” laws, he allowed children to pray. “The Church must be open to all, even to minors under the age of 18,” he said in 2020, as AsiaNews.it relates, calling it his “final battle.”

At least nine Chinese Catholic bishops, all Vatican-approved, remain persecuted. They are either in indefinite detention, have disappeared, been forced from their episcopal posts, or are under open-ended investigation by security police.

1. Baoding’s **Bishop James Su Zhimin** suffers the longest continuous secret detention: 28 years so far, after he led a large procession to a Marian shrine in his diocese. The CCP had previously imprisoned and severely tortured him.
2. In April 2025, Chinese state security authorities indefinitely detained **Bishop Peter Shao Zhumin** of the Catholic diocese of Wenzhou. This is the sixty-one-year-old underground prelate’s eighth detention without due process over the last seven years. While detained, he is isolated and subjected to communist indoctrination sessions, which can be reinforced by threats, humiliation and psychological torture. During the times of his release, he is always on edge, uncertain when his ministry will be again be suddenly ended for months or years at a time because he cannot in good conscience pledge “independence” from papal authority.
3. **Bishop Augustine Cui Tai** of Xuanhua diocese was last arrested in April 2021 and placed in secret, indefinite detention for the fourth time since the agreement was signed. This continues a cruel 30-year pattern against him.
4. In May 2021, local police closed the seminary of Xinxiang’s **Bishop Joseph Zhang Weizhu** and placed him in indefinite detention at an unknown location. He was arrested soon after having cancer surgery.
5. Shanghai’s **Bishop Joseph Xing Wenzhi**, at age 48 and having served as a bishop for six years, went missing in 2011. Last year, in a tacit acknowledgment that he is being persecuted, the Vatican [expressed hope](#) for a “[just and wise solution](#)” to his case as well as to that of his successor, Bishop Ma (below).
6. **Bishop Thaddeus Ma Daqin**, who succeeded Xing as Shanghai’s auxiliary bishop, has been detained at a seminary since 2012 by state authorities, after renouncing his membership in the

Patriotic Association. He was immediately put under house arrest in a seminary where he remains imprisoned without due process. In April 2025, during the time after Pope Francis' death when there was no pope, the government named the priest Fr. Wu to replace Ma as the auxiliary bishop, which was approved by Pope Leo in August.

7. **Bishop Melchior Shi Hongzhen** of Tianjin has been detained for the one and a half decades in his parish church compound. He spends his days reading in his study, except when the government has allowed him out to hold last rites. In August 2024, the Vatican reported that China "officially recognized" the then 95-year-old bishop and [declared](#) this "a positive fruit of the dialogue" and some Catholic media reported it as a "hopeful" sign. It's a bitter fruit, considering his advanced age. The gesture aimed to influence public opinion in the weeks before the agreement was to be renewed. It is on par with Beijing's cynical practice of releasing prisoners of conscience once they are on their deathbeds. Bishop Shi insisted that the government's episcopal "consecration" of him occur in a hotel instead of his cathedral on the basis that he was already a bishop, consecrated with papal approval in 1982. There have been no reports about him or his ability to carry out his episcopal ministry since the 2024 announcement.
8. As a precondition of the agreement, in 2018, China had Pope Francis demote **Bishop Vincent Guo Xijin** from his position as Mindong diocese's principal bishop, and replace him with a government-appointed bishop, whose previous excommunication was then lifted by Francis. Then-auxiliary bishop, Guo faced restrictions in his pastoral ministry and was evicted from his home, forcing him to sleep on the street in wintertime. Later, the government cut off his utilities and arrested and tortured some of his priests. In 2020, he resigned under pressure because he resisted joining the CCP Patriotic Association and said he would "retire to a life of prayer." Catholic mission sources at AsiaNews.it report that since then he has been confined to his residence behind a heavy, chained gate that imprisons him and keeps out visitors. In January 2025, the 67-year-old prelate was photographed on the 40th anniversary of his priestly ordination distributing communion to well-wishers through the bars that lock him in his compound. A video shows the faithful passing rosaries and religious objects through the bars for him to bless.
9. **Cardinal Joseph Zen Ze-kiun**, bishop emeritus of Hong Kong, is a prominent figure in the Catholic Church, known worldwide for his public criticism of China's repressive policies, including those targeting the church. It has been widely recognized, including by Pope Francis, that he is being persecuted because of this. Zen explained in his 2016 open [letter](#), "I speak out because I am the voice of the voiceless. In China there is no freedom of expression!" Now, the CCP is stifling his political dissent. In 2022, police arrested him twice. For two months, the nonagenarian endured the daily ordeal of a trial over a minor regulatory infraction for helping pro-democracy protestors, for which he pleaded not guilty, and was convicted and fined. Authorities also began an open-ended investigation of him under a national-security law and confiscated his passport, which they returned twice only for brief visits to Rome during prescribed periods of a few days. Not only could he face a life sentence in a national security conviction for the sweeping charge of "[colluding with foreign forces](#)"; the diocesan school

system could also be at stake, as Beijing's *Ta Kung Pao* newspaper threatened. No doubt that he feels compelled to self censor any criticism of the CCP because of this threat.

Few outside China know of these persecuted bishops. Yet they are an essential part of the faithful leadership needed to ensure that the 400-year-old Chinese Catholic Church continues in communion with Rome and follows Catholic teaching. They stand as a testament to the reality that China represses the Catholic Church along with all its other religions.

Prohibiting papal authority over the Church in China and repressing the ministries of a significant part of that church's faithful leadership also denies religious freedom to millions of Chinese Catholic faithful. This is a repression of the Chinese Catholic Church at large.

American policymakers and public figures should recognize Beijing's tactics against the Catholic Church in China for the religious repression it is. Religious freedom and human rights play an important role in American foreign policy, and for this reason it is important for the United States government to recognize that China's Catholic Church, as with all religious minorities in China, is repressed and persecuted, though the methods vary. It is apparent that the CCP aims to suppress all religions—including Christianity—and replace them with the dogma, values, and images of the party.

1. President Trump should use the White House bully pulpit to highlight the suffering of these 9 persecuted bishops, Catholic layman Jimmy Lai, Protestant Pastor Ezra Jin, Pastor Wang Yi, and all other prisoners of conscience. This would bring more attention to their cases and could help protect them from further abuse and restrictions. The president should follow the example of President Ronald Reagan, who frequently raised the names of the persecuted in the Soviet Union, personally intervened with Soviet Premier Mikhail Gorbachev on behalf of prisoners of conscience, and met with their family members when possible. Jewish refusenik Natan Sharansky, Lithuanian Catholic cleric Father Alfonsas Svarinkas, and Russian Orthodox priest Vasili Shipilov are among those who credit Reagan with freeing them and saving their lives. The president should give a major address to the American people about China's religious repression against Catholics as well as other Christians, Turkic Muslims, Tibetan Buddhists, and Falun Gong.
2. The secretary of state should raise these bishops' cases and other religious freedom concerns in every bilateral meeting with China. The State Department International Religious Freedom Office's annual reports should include religious persecution against these bishops and others in the Catholic Church in China. The American embassy in China should seek meetings with the persecuted bishops and visit their dioceses.
3. The U.S. government should facilitate the dissemination of religious persecution in China digitally inside China and Hong Kong. This information should also be translated into other languages and disseminated worldwide, particularly in Latin America and Africa. As the United States competes with China for allies and trading partners, it should make known the ugly coercion undergirding the CCP's political system. In China, only the CCP's version of history is permitted, and the party routinely conceals its human rights violations.

4. The State and Treasury Departments should impose Magnitsky sanctions against the CCP security officials responsible for the bishops being persecuted and the other prisoners of conscience, including those mentioned in my testimony, Pastor Jin and Jimmy Lai.
5. The Justice Department should continue to prosecute Chinese agents who interfere with religious freedom on US soil. In one case, the Federal Bureau of Investigations [identified](#) a Chinese spy who was fraudulently acting as a Catholic priest in the Church of the Transfiguration in the New York Archdiocese. In another case, the Justice Department brought [charges](#) against Chinese agents who threatened violence against a Christian-American pastor running for Congress. The department should issue a report on the status and disposition of all such cases on American soil of persecution and harassment by China and its agents.
6. President Trump should issue an executive order to ban all public and private American cooperation with and support for China's organ transplant sector. In 2021, 12 UN human rights experts asserted that they had received credible evidence of forced organ harvesting that targets all religious minority groups in China.