

(Roman) Catholics

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The Roman Catholic Church is the largest body of Christians with more than 1.2 billion members worldwide. The term ‘Catholic’ (from Greek καθολικισμός, meaning ‘throughout the whole’) applies broadly to the beliefs and practices of particular churches that claim continuity with the apostles. The term ‘Roman’ designates those Catholics who are in full communion with the Bishop of Rome, widely known as the Pope.

The Pope (Latin *papa* for ‘father’) is the jurisdictional head of the Catholic Church in Rome, an authority that the Church claims has been handed down in unbroken succession since apostolic times. The Gospel of Matthew (16:19) asserts that Jesus entrusted Saint Peter with ‘the keys of the kingdom of heaven’, thereby designating him the chief apostle who would eventually become the first Bishop of Rome. Roman Catholics accept the supremacy of the Pope on all matters of faith and doctrine.

However, the doctrine of papal supremacy has been vigorously contested over the course of its history, leading to conflicts, schisms, and harsh measures to contain dissent. Unsurprisingly, any claim to universal authority is bound to draw the ire of conflicting interests, whether in the religious sphere or the political. Historically, the papacy has fostered a climate that allowed the Church to amass considerable power and form unsavoury alliances with monarchs, tyrants and oppressive institutions. In effect, the Roman Catholic Church has perpetuated the culture of imperial Rome, from which it acquired its institutional character.

In modern times, the power that the Church once wielded has been sharply reduced. Regardless, its image as a powerful and influential institution persists, whether real or perceived. In fact, the ‘Holy See’ (*Sancta Sedes* in Latin) functions as a sovereign state, maintains diplomatic relations with other states and is recognised as a sovereign entity under international law. This has been

problematic for governments that have Roman Catholic residents in their countries and view loyalty to the Holy See as incompatible with loyalty to the state.

Teachings

The principal teachings of the Roman Catholic Church are shared by other Catholic traditions, which are summarised in the Nicene Creed and the Apostles' Creed. These include a belief in one God, the Holy Trinity, and the centrality of Christ as the Son of God and Redeemer of the world.

The Church also shares with other Catholic traditions a liturgical and sacramental approach to its common worship, allowing for wide variances in its cultural expression. The central celebration of all Catholics is the Holy Eucharist, the sacrament in which believers are said to share in the very life of Christ, who is believed to be present in the bread and the wine that is shared.

Catholic social teaching places great emphasis on works of mercy and justice, which finds lively and diverse expression in many countries throughout the world. The Roman Catholic Church is the largest non-governmental provider of education and medical services in the world.

However, the most clearly definable difference between Roman Catholicism and all other Christian traditions is one of authority. The Church maintains that Christ gave authority to his apostles and their successors to defend 'the deposit of faith', which circumscribes matters of doctrine and practice for the faithful.

CHINA: The Reasons for the Persecution of Roman Catholics

As of July 2018, the US government estimated the total population of China to be 1.4 billion.¹ The Chinese government officially recognises five major religions: Buddhism, Taoism, Islam, Catholicism and Protestantism. The Catholic Church officially has about six million believers,² but some sources claim that there are many more Catholics who belong to unregistered communities in China. The Pew Research Centre estimates that there are approximately 12 to 14 million Catholics in total in the country.³

¹ For more religious statistics, see [U.S. Department of State, Office of International Religious Freedom, Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, *Report on international Religious Freedom: China, 2018*. <https://www.state.gov/reports/2018-report-on-international-religious-freedom/china-includes-tibet-xinjiang-hong-kong-and-macau/>.](https://www.state.gov/reports/2018-report-on-international-religious-freedom/china-includes-tibet-xinjiang-hong-kong-and-macau/)

² The Law Library of Congress, Global Legal Research Center, *China: Religion and Chinese Law*, June 2018. <https://www.justice.gov/eoir/page/file/1068681/download>.

³ Immigration and Refugee Board of Canada, "Situation of Catholics and Treatment by Authorities, particularly in Fujian and Guangdong (2005 - 2010) [CHN103501.E]" [ecoi.net](https://www.ecoi.net/de/dokument/1170620.html), July 6, 2010. <https://www.ecoi.net/de/dokument/1170620.html>.

The Roman Catholic Church is one of the oldest religious institutions in the world and has played a prominent role in the history of Western civilisation. This alone has drawn suspicion of the Church as an agent of Western influence and, consequently, a target for suppression. Moreover, the Church acts as a sovereign state entity in the form of the Holy See, which has a centralised government, diplomatic relations with other states, and even its own sovereign territory, officially known as the Vatican City State.

It is the Church's position as a sovereign state in international affairs that has provoked friction with some states, including China. Notably, in 1957, the Chinese government established the *Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association* (CCPA), which is a group that consolidates all Catholic Church structures under the sole authority of the Chinese state. The following year, Pope Pius XII condemned the activities of the CCPA and declared that Roman Catholic bishops participating in the consecration of CCPA-appointed bishops would be excommunicated.

Religious associations in China must be registered with the government, otherwise they face hostility and suppression. The Religious Affairs Bureau exercises supervision over the activities of the CCPA.

Since Xi Jinping acceded to power in 2012, both officially registered religions and unregistered religious movements in China have suffered from an increasingly repressive regime under the motto of 'sinicization'.⁴

In 2018, the new *Regulations on Religious Affairs* came into force and, consequently, the Catholic churches that are not part of the CCPA and do not have registration certificates became illegal. 'Unpatriotic' Catholic churches are closed or destroyed across the country. Even state-approved Catholic clergy members are subjected to severe persecution if they question the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) oppressive religious policies.

All Catholic structures that remain loyal to Rome and refuse to join the state controlled CCPA are considered to be under 'foreign influence' and, thus,

⁴ This word has been used since the 17th century to indicate the assimilation of minorities in the Chinese empire into Chinese culture and language. It was adopted by Nationalist China to signify the effort to replace the foreigners who managed business, religions and civil society organisations with Chinese citizens. However, the CCP gives to the word 'sinicization' a different meaning. It is not enough that organisations operating in China, including religions and churches, have Chinese leaders. In order to be accepted as 'sinicized', they should have leaders *selected by the CCP* and operate within a framework of strategies and objectives indicated by the CCP. In Tibet and Xinjiang, the CCP pursues a politics of 'sinicization' in the traditional sense of the word, trying to assimilate Uyghurs and Tibetan Buddhists into Chinese culture.

Source: "HOME. Sinicization," Bitter Winter, accessed April 2020.
<https://bitterwinter.org/Vocabulary/sinicization/>.

outlawed. As a result, those Roman Catholic churches and their clerics have been forced underground.

On 22 September 2018, China and the Vatican signed a historic agreement concerning the appointment of bishops in China. However, they did not establish diplomatic relations despite the Vatican maintaining its diplomatic ties with Taiwan, which China does not recognise. Vatican spokesman Greg Burke described the agreement as ‘not political but pastoral, allowing the faithful to have bishops who are in communion with Rome but at the same time recognized by Chinese authorities’.⁵ The agreement states that China will recommend bishops before they are appointed by the pope,⁶ but the pope has the authority to veto a bishop that the CCP recommends.⁷ Pope Francis then approved seven bishops who had been appointed by Beijing, including one recently deceased. All of them had received episcopal consecration without papal approval.

Catholics in Prison in China

A number of Catholic clerics and communities faithful to the Vatican refuse to swear allegiance to the CCP. In the last few decades, many priests and bishops appointed by the Vatican without the approval of the Chinese authorities have been officially imprisoned or have ‘disappeared’ for refusing to join the CCPA.⁸ For years, these ‘missing’ Catholics’ whereabouts remained unknown until they died or were temporarily released. Their incommunicado detention without trial or charges is effectively a life sentence.

Catholics behind bars: some statistics

As of 1 June 2020, HRWF documented **three cases** of detained Catholics in its Prisoners’ Database.⁹ HRWF documented seven cases in 2017 and 2018, and six in 2019. While there has been an decline in the number of Catholic prisoners in China, it is not the result of reduced repression targeting this religious community. The main reason is that many elderly clerics have died while serving

⁵ “Vatican and China Sign Agreement on Bishop Appointments,” The Guardian News and Media, September 22, 2018, accessed May 2020.

<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/sep/22/vatican-and-china-sign-agreement-on-bishop-appointments>.

⁶ “Vatican Announces Deal with China on Bishop Appointments,” NBCUniversal News Group, September 22, 2018, accessed March 2020.

<https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/vatican-announces-deal-china-bishop-appointments-n912186>.

⁷ Rocca, Francis X., and Eva Dou, “Vatican and China Sign Deal Over Bishops, Allowing Pope a Veto,” The Wall Street Journal. Dow Jones & Company, September 22, 2018, accessed June 2020.

<https://www.wsj.com/articles/vatican-and-china-agree-deal-over-bishops-allowing-pope-a-veto-1537613087>.

⁸ “Situation of Catholics and Treatment by Authorities, particularly in Fujian and Guangdong (2005 – 2010) [CHN103501.E],” European Country of Origin Information Network, Immigration and refugee Board of Canada, July 6, 2010. <https://www.ecoi.net/de/dokument/1170620.html>.

⁹ Our Database is updated on a regular basis. For more details about imprisoned Catholics, see <https://hrwf.eu/prisoners-database/>.

their sentence. Most cases HRWF has documented since 2013 concerned individuals who were over 80 years old, except for Father Song Wanjun, who was 39 when he was arrested in 2013.¹⁰

In 2017, Bishop Peter Shao Zhumin ‘disappeared’ for seven months, which led to a public dispute between the Vatican and China and his subsequent release in January 2018.¹¹

International advocacy

On 18 April 2019, the **European Parliament** submitted a *Resolution on the situation of religious and ethnic minorities in China* which stressed that ‘China is home to one of the largest populations of religious prisoners’ and called for ‘the immediate release of arbitrarily detained people, prisoners of conscience’. However, the situation of the Catholic Church and the imprisonment of its clerics has remained relatively unnoticed.

In its 2020 annual report, the **United States Commission on International Religious Freedom** (USCIRF) highlighted the detention of Agostino Tai Cui, a bishop who refused to swear allegiance to the CCPA.¹² However, in the last five years, USCIRF failed to mention the cases of other detained Catholics in its annual reports.

CASE STUDIES

Tai Cui deprived of freedom since 2007

Agostino Cui Tai, a 69-year-old priest of the diocese of Xuanhua (Hebei) was arrested in 2007 for refusing to pledge allegiance to the CCPA. Since then, he has been held in multiple detention centres or labour camps around the country.

In January 2020, the Communist authorities temporarily freed him for Chinese New Year, but he was told he would be forced to return to his incommunicado detention after those festivities.¹³

¹⁰ “Hebei Underground Catholic Priest Arrested,” Asia News.it, October 8, 2013, accessed March 2020. <http://www.asianews.it/news-en/Hebei-underground-Catholic-priest-arrested-28710.html>.

¹¹ “Peter Shao Zhumin: Detained Chinese Catholic Bishop Freed,” BBC News, January 12, 2018, accessed March 2020. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-42666663>.

¹² United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, Annual Report, USCIRF-Recommended for countries of particular concern: China, 2020, accessed 15 June 2020. https://www.uscifr.gov/sites/default/files/China_0.pdf.

¹³ Eli, Bradley, “China Temporarily Frees Bishop Confined 13 Years,” Church Militant – Serving Catholics, January 22, 2020, accessed March 2020. <https://www.churchmilitant.com/news/article/china-temporarily-frees-bishop-confined-13-years>.

Honggen Liu missing since 2015

Honggen Liu, an 85-year old priest of the diocese of Baoding (Hebei) was arrested in December 2006 for refusing to join the CCPA. He was released in August 2015 after spending eight years in prison without trial.

He was reportedly arrested again after his release and has not been seen since.¹⁴

Bishop under house arrest since 2012

Thaddeus Ma Daqin is a Bishop of Shanghai and the former vice-chair of the CCPA. He is 45 years old. He has been under house arrest at the Sheshan Regional Seminary in a Shanghai suburb since 7 July 2012 after resigning from the CCPA. The authorities prevent him from carrying out his episcopal duties.¹⁵

Conclusions

Over the centuries, Roman Catholics have had a long history of suffering and repression for multiple reasons. Currently, the CCP in China officially restricts the exercise of their religious activities using severe methods such as incommunicado detentions. According to Chinese officials, these measures are necessary to contain the potential threat that Catholics remaining loyal to Rome pose to the ideology and authority of the state.

Despite the signing of the Vatican-China Agreement of 2018, the persecution of the Catholic Church goes on unabated. The prospects for improving the situation of the Catholic Church under the current government are extremely low. Repression is predicted to continue and to further increase and intensify.

¹⁴ “Hebei priest still missing despite China-Vatican deal”, Union of Catholic Asian news, October 5, 2018, accessed June 2020. <https://www.ucanews.com/news/hebei-priest-still-missing-despite-china-vatican-deal/83553>.

¹⁵ “Bishop Thaddeus Ma Daqin - Auxiliary Bishop of Shanghai, China,” Inside the Vatican, January 1, 2014, accessed April 2020. <https://insidethevatican.com/magazine/people/bishop-thaddeus-ma-daqin-auxiliary-bishop-shanghaichina/>.