



POPE FRANCIS BETRAYS PRC CATHOLICS: *ARRIVEDERCI, TAIWAN?*

BY SEAN KING

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Pope Francis' recent decision to accept seven Chinese bishops chosen by Beijing's government and not by the Holy See, while asking two other Vatican-appointed bishops not approved by Beijing [to step down](#), is a major step back for religious freedom in officially atheist China (where there's not much religious freedom to begin with). It also portends a major diplomatic blow for Taiwan. It is no wonder that Taiwan President Tsai Ing-wen [invited the Pope](#) to Taipei last week. Perhaps she senses the coming disaster.

Historically, Chinese communists have targeted Catholics. The People's Republic of China (PRC) [broke off diplomatic relations with the Vatican in 1951](#), two years after Mao Zedong came to power and only one year after the outbreak of the Korean War, [arresting Catholics and nationalizing religious institutions](#) (e.g., churches, hospitals, etc.). [Foreign missionaries were banned](#) and believers were shot in public.

The upshot for Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist Republic of China (ROC) government, by then in quasi-domestic exile on Taiwan, was that the Vatican thereafter established formal diplomatic relations with Taipei that it maintains still today (at least, for now). The Chiangs themselves were devout Christians, albeit Methodists. ROC First Lady Madame Chiang Kai-shek, the daughter of a Methodist minister, had a

[big role in her husband's Christian conversion](#) years before.

Today's 12 million Catholics in the PRC can openly attend churches associated with the government-approved Chinese Patriotic Catholic Association (CPCA), which is a tool of the state. The CPCA does not recognize the authority of the Pope and it appoints its own priests and bishops. If they do not want to attend churches associated with the CPCA, then, devotees can try their luck at any number of *underground* churches that do follow His Holiness the Pope.

Since ascending to the papacy in 2013, Pope Francis has barely hidden his desire for a rapprochement with Beijing. He even [sent PRC leader Xi Jinping Lunar New Year wishes](#) in 2016. Rumors have long swirled around the possibility of Francis visiting the PRC, though the closest he has come to that is being allowed to traverse its airspace en route to South Korea in 2014.

Saint Pope John Paul II (1978-2005), also made noises about talking to the PRC, but the current Pope does not have his Polish predecessor's anti-communist bona fides. That's why Francis won't get the same benefit of the doubt that was given to St. Pope John Paul II, considering that the latter lived through the tumultuous affairs of his own then-communist homeland in the 1980s. Polish leader General Wojciech Jaruzelski was no match for St. Pope John Paul II, but today's faithful rightly suspect Xi Jinping has the upper hand in any dealings with the overly eager Francis.

Francis' PRC outreach happens at a time when now leader-for-life Xi is severely curbing dissent and the flow of information. For example, 2010 Nobel Peace Prize winner Liu Xiaobo's detention at the time of his death. Plus, the *Wall Street Journal* and *New York Times* websites still remain blocked in the PRC, as do Facebook and Twitter. Authorities are especially cracking down on religions of all kinds. For instance, in recent years they have taken crosses off some 1,200 Protestant churches in Zhejiang Province while outright [destroying churches in Shanxi province and elsewhere](#). Catholic underground church worshippers are harassed and sometimes arrested. US-based rights group ChinaAid says there has not been religious

oppression in the PRC on this scale since the Cultural Revolution.

The PRC's roughly [100 million Christians of all denominations](#) now outnumber Chinese Communist Party members, posing a perceived threat to the one-party state. Just like their late 20th century European communist counterparts, Beijing officials fear any movement they cannot control, especially a religious one whose followers call on a higher power not of this material world. Hence, unlike many corporates and even some academics, people of faith cannot be bought off with contracts or greater access, making them dangerous in the eyes of Chinese officials. Chinese Christians are not the only religious group being oppressed. In fact, [Xinjiang's Muslims and Tibet's Buddhists](#) have experienced even harsher treatment. This is because Beijing fears any cultural, or religious, resistance that challenges the party's absolute power.

So, imagine the demoralizing heartbreak for underground Catholics to see their own leader, their Holy Father, concede such a major point on these bishops. This is a sign that Francis is willing to do just about anything to establish relations with the PRC, and setting the stage for the underground church's ultimate dissolution. These Catholics fear the end is near; the end of their dream of true Catholicism within their own borders. Moreover, other faiths and activist communities at home and abroad will take note of the unfolding events between the Holy See, the PRC, and Taiwan. This is yet another paragon of apparent global moral power sadly bending to Beijing's will.

It's been said that good Taiwan policy starts with good China policy. While Pope Francis' moves are clearly bad China policy, they're perhaps even worse Taiwan policy. That's because one of the many costs the Vatican will have to pay in order to establish relations with Beijing is to break off ties with Taiwan.

The Holy See is by far the most high-profile of Taipei's now only 20 diplomatic allies, especially after Panama unceremoniously ditched it for Beijing last year. The Vatican is Taiwan's only European ally, which enabled ROC officials like former Presidents Chen Shui-bian and Ma Ying-jeou to land in Italy and make an international splash whenever they attended

any papal event. What's more, the current relationship draws a stark contrast, in Taiwan's obvious favor, to the PRC's religious persecution.

Taiwan welcomes every religion and philosophy with open arms. [Mormon missionaries first arrived in Taiwan in 1956](#). Buddhists, Catholics, Muslims, Daoists, Jews, and Protestants can all worship and practice freely in Taiwan without fear of restriction or recrimination of any kind. Falun Gong too, a spiritual practice vilified and banned in the PRC, is welcome in Taiwan.

Hong Kong Cardinal Joseph Zen has rightly accused Pope Francis of [selling out true Chinese Catholics](#). As Next Digital's Mark Simon puts it, the actions of the Pope regarding the PRC and Taiwan equate to "[e]levating the [persecutors over the persecuted](#)." Selling out Taipei for Beijing also tells the world that one's own supposedly deeply held convictions and beliefs are not enough when tempted by a huge market. This is exactly how some multinationals and even universities rationalize cutting corners on their own values and beliefs to get a piece of the PRC's market.

Pope Francis is following his own bottom line here but that should not come as much of a surprise. After all, this is the same person who never misses a chance to lecture Americans on climate change, but who failed to mention the murdered and displaced Rohingya people by name when visiting Myanmar in November.

Francis is not alone among vaunted Catholic figures and institutions looking the other way to have access to Beijing. In 2015, my own Catholic graduate school alma mater, Notre Dame, broke with longstanding school policy, choosing to allow the manufacture of school-branded products in a pilot program at six Chinese factories. It [thankfully called off its proposed Zhejiang campus](#) in [April 2016](#). Yet, as the saying goes, *you can't be more Catholic than the Pope*. That's why many of us connected to the school (Catholic and non-Catholic alike) who value freedom of speech, assembly, and worship, fear that Notre Dame will use any papal opening to Beijing as moral cover to revisit its flawed Zhejiang campus idea.

It has been a bit of a roller coaster ride for Taiwan ever since Donald Trump was elected president. First, he

refreshingly broke decades of protocol by accepting Taiwan President Tsai Ing-wen's December 2, 2016, congratulations by phone during his transition period, only later to reaffirm America's "One-China policy" in a tightly scripted call with Xi Jinping. He also later suggested that he would only consider taking another call from Tsai after first running it by Xi.

But Trump's first year 'bromance' with Xi has cooled off, as Xi hasn't helped him with North Korea as much as Trump hoped. (Trump never had any reason to think Xi would ever actually help him deal with the Korean issue, but I guess he just had to learn that for himself.) Trump has since been gradually pushing back on Beijing in some areas, including trade. He also notably became the first president since 1990 to mention Taiwan in his [December 2017 National Security Strategy](#), and last Friday, signed the Taiwan Travel Act into law.

Trump spoke unambiguously about religious freedom in his State of the Union address. If Trump is serious about religious freedom, he should take another good look at Taiwan, as Pope Francis lays the groundwork to dump it for Trump's alleged communist *bête noire* from the campaign. Taipei is being left out in the diplomatic cold by the Vatican. Because it promotes true religious freedom, this should only further endear the island to the president and much of his electoral base. Taiwan should be ready to capitalize on playing the victim card here. This is understandably not a wholly satisfying consolation prize for Taiwan. As it faces the closure of its only European embassy, it's better to make something of this predicament rather than nothing of it. Let's just call it public relations salvage value.

Taipei's European diplomatic days are numbered. Though it may take a few years before it is fully implemented, eventually the Vatican will recognize Beijing. The writing's on the wall. And when that moment comes, we'll look back at Pope Francis' accepting these bishops, while selling out his own, the same way we now look back at President Nixon's 1972 Beijing visit as the beginning of the end for Washington's official relation with Taipei.

Anyone who values individual rights, religious or not, needs to call out the Vatican for its hypocrisy when it

eventually establishes relations with Beijing. Taiwan will survive, as it has done for decades. The Church's values might not, however. I just hope Pope Francis is fully aware of the tragic events that he has set in motion for Taiwan's standing in the world and his own true believers in the PRC [and also the Catholics in Taiwan].

The main point: Signs indicate that Pope Francis is getting ready to dump longtime diplomatic ally Taipei for Beijing, even though the former personifies religious freedom while the latter tramples it. Taiwan President Tsai Ing-wen needs to accept this reality now and be ready to play the loss for whatever sympathetic value she can when that inevitable day comes.

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