

Catholicism in China Today



Can one really unravel the mystery of China? Perhaps not, but the country has risen to global superpower status. Accordingly, the Western world should learn more about the Chinese economy, diplomacy and culture. A better understanding of the Catholic Church in China could bear fruit as well.

As a native Texan and cradle Catholic, who enjoys the benefits of a Catholic education, I have been fortunate enough to witness first-hand the impressive growth of Catholicism in China since moving to Beijing in October 2010.

To understand the Catholic Church in China, it is necessary to ask a series of questions: What is an underground church? What is the Chinese Patriotic Catholic Association? Why is there a rivalry between them? Could diplomatic relations between Beijing and the Vatican improve? Will Pope Francis ever visit China? Do all Chinese Catholics pray for the Pope?

To answer these questions, I met many Chinese Catholics from the Underground and Patriotic churches, including priests, nuns and lay people, who offered their insights as long as they would be quoted anonymously. I also interviewed several Chinese government officials who told their side of the story.

Despite serious disagreements amongst each other, all believed the West entertained some misunderstandings about Chinese Catholics, and that they want better relations with the Vatican, but confess, “it’s complicated” when talking about potential solutions.

A Tale of Two Churches

The Catholic Church in China is divided between the Underground Roman Catholic Church that has sworn its allegiance to the Vatican, and the Patriotic Church, which supports the Pope but has not sworn an allegiance to him publicly. The Patriotic Church is registered under the Chinese government, while the Underground is not.

Hence, a simmering rivalry has ensued with some Underground Catholics rebuking Patriotic members for appearing to act as treacherous, untrustworthy and cowardly. But some Patriotic members respond that they are working with Beijing to boost Catholic evangelism nationwide, while providing safety for the Underground Church by utilizing their influence with government officials behind the scenes.

There could be some truth to that statement. Presently, there are four Patriotic churches in the Diocese of Beijing. Both Underground and Patriotic Catholics attend Mass there. Patriotic priests continue to speak with their Underground counterparts.

A year ago, I met an Underground bishop who disclosed that he attended a seminary in Minnesota. A few weeks later, I saw him at a church in Beijing to meet a Patriotic priest. They both attended the same seminary and were good friends.

Despite their cooperation, these two groups have composed rules to distinguish themselves from each other. For example, Underground Catholics do not stand up to greet Patriotic priests when they walk into a room. They can be friendly towards him though.

There does seem to be some evidence of a secret alliance between both churches. Many Patriotic members said they respect Underground Catholics and admire their courage and sacrifice, but they deny their church is un-Catholic.

A Patriotic priest explained why he joined the Patriotic church when he entered the seminary by telling the story of St. Theresa of Avila. He recalled how when she was a young girl she wanted to become a martyr, so she attempted to run away from home to board a slave ship hoping to get killed by Muslims. But her parents prevented her from achieving martyrdom at such a young age.

The priest contended that St. Theresa's parents were correct to protect their daughter from harm. Their

intervention allowed St. Theresa to become an inspiration to many Catholics. He sees his role as a Patriotic priest similar to Theresa's parents. He also said that he frequently visits Underground churches to help those parishes with financial aid and legal protections.

However, Underground Catholics struggle to deal with some misperceptions, which have led to unnecessary conflicts with Beijing. A Chinese official expressed concerns that some Underground Catholics appeared to be "uncompromising, sabotaging the Patriotic church and spoiling relations between Beijing and the Vatican," he said.

He noted that there could be some foreign influences linked with Western democracy activist groups and pointed out that it's "the outsiders, not the Chinese, who shout the loudest about religious intolerance in the country." He added, "China prefers stability, and it's important for Chinese Catholics to understand that the government respects their faith, but they should not use religion to spark another Arab Spring."

However, according to conversations with a few Underground Catholics, they sought to dispel such misunderstandings with Beijing. They said they are proud to be Chinese; and they do not call for regime change. They just ask to worship in peace and some have admitted they go to Mass regularly at a Patriotic Catholic church.

Yet, they continue to stay loyal to the Underground church, since they believe it's the one true Catholic Church. They worry that if they join the Patriotic church the Pope might not respect them as much. Some secretly hope the two Chinese Catholic churches would merge as one, but they request that the Vatican make that decision for them. They feel as if leaving the Underground would be an act of disobedience against the Pope.

Therefore, Pope Francis could play a greater role to inspire a stronger Catholic faith in China, but the Vatican should not dismiss the concerns of the Chinese government either.

Factors that Divide Beijing and Rome

To fully comprehend the complex nature of the Catholic Church in the country, one should look at the Chinese government and how it influences much of Chinese society. A wealthy Chinese property developer explained:

“The Beijing government has two hands, one that is generous to shake your hand and the other that could grab you with an iron grip if necessary,” he said. “China has two faces, one real and one fake. The real face loves to smile, but the fake one never stops growling.”

He claimed that China could only stay strong if “its government acts as peacemaker on the one hand and an enforcer on the other hand.” He hoped that all Chinese citizens “could be happy, but they should never forget they must accept their boundaries.”

He added his thoughts on religious tolerance: “whether the West believes it or not, the Chinese government is sincere when it says it hopes religion could flourish here, but the people are not permitted to use religion to ignite political rebellions.”

Many Westerners have argued that China is intolerant, undemocratic and dictatorial. Some call for the Vatican to take a tougher stance against Beijing and offer no compromises. Yet that won’t resolve anything. There’s a need to understand Chinese culture better to figure out how to resolve thorny issues.

What are some of these areas of disagreement? The Vatican has raised legitimate concerns over Beijing’s hardline stance against some Catholic beliefs. Government officials refuse to allow Chinese Catholics to recognize the authority of the Pontiff. The Vatican insists that all its faithful in the nation enjoy the rights to “pray freely and remain loyal to the Pope.”

The Vatican asserts its rights to appoint its own bishops, and not let Chinese officials assume this responsibility, because it’s a spiritual not a political act. Catholics abhor the one-child policy in which Chinese families are punished for having multiple children, while forced and voluntary abortions have become commonplace.

The Vatican calls for unity between Underground and Patriotic Catholics, which sounds reasonable since both churches appear to enjoy an unspoken alliance already. The moment is now for Beijing to soften its stance with the Vatican.

China's government remains reluctant to smooth relations with the Vatican, even though there can be much room for compromise, but Beijing just lacks trust. It continues to fear that a stronger Catholic faith could encourage political dissent or a Chinese Arab Spring.

Yet these fears are groundless, because Chinese Catholics focus on spiritual matters not politics. The Vatican has made a tremendous effort to improve ties with China's government, and Beijing should demonstrate the same good will or risk a long-term and unnecessary freeze in relations.

Besides even the Cuban communist government had invited Pope John Paul II to visit the island nation. Beijing has even less to fear since the Catholic population in China is a small fraction of the total population compared to Cuba. And since government officials seek to promote Chinese soft power, what better way than to invite Pope Francis for a state visit?

All Chinese Catholics agree on essential spiritual matters. Whether they are Underground or Patriotic Catholics (priests, nuns or lay persons) they all love Pope Francis. They pray for the Pope to visit China. They have a genuine love for God. They believe that brighter days lie ahead for Chinese Catholics, and when it comes to their safety and well-being, let's all hope so too.

(Photo credit: Zhou Ya wei).

Tom McGregor is a writer based in Beijing, China. He is a former business columnist for China Radio International (CRI) and China Daily. His articles have appeared in Fox News, Washington Post, Daily Caller, Seoul Times, Korea Herald, Korea Times, JoongAng Daily, UN Post in addition to Catholic media outlets. He has also appeared as a TV guest commentator on CCTV's Dialogue show broadcast from Beijing.

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