

**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 21<sup>st</sup> 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.

Speaking as a Catholic, and therefore an advocate for religious freedom of all China's citizens, I believe the agreement 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 fundamental teachings of the Catholic Church.

Bishop Su's background helps illuminate this point. 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 Chinese Catholic bishops who sought to be truly Catholic in private and in public life: 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.

## Chinese Catholicism and The Role of the Vatican

Until the accession of Xi Jinping in 2013, the Catholic Church in China was in a perilous position. Under Xi's policies, however, it is in mortal danger of being transformed into an arm of the Communist Party. The Chinese government seeks to control all religions that posit an authority greater than the Communist party and the state.

Catholicism poses a particular difficulty for Chinese communism 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 negotiate 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 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. While the text has never been made public, 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 and the communist regime, 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.