

Hong Kong bishop pans Vatican deal with China

On Feb. 11, Cardinal Joseph Zen, emeritus bishop of Hong Kong met with Congressional leaders on Capitol Hill in Washington, D.C.

After that meeting, the cardinal gave an exclusive interview to CNA in which he discussed the Church in China, the Holy See's agreement with the Communist regime, and his relationship with Pope Francis and the Vatican Secretary of State Cardinal Pietro Parolin.

The following is a transcript of the cardinal's interview with CNA. It has been edited for length and clarity.

Your Eminence, can you tell us about the situation of the Church in China?

"More and more, the Church is under persecution (in China). Both the official Church, and the underground. Actually, the underground is doomed to disappear. Why? Because even the Holy See is not helping. The older bishops are dying, there are less than 30 bishops left in the underground Church, and no new priests being ordained.

"But we hope that (Chinese Catholics) can keep the faith in their families – so we have to say, 'Back to the catacombs!'

"Even in the official church, the faithful are more and more controlled. On the top of the church they tell you to destroy the crosses, inside the church, they put the image of Xi Jinping – maybe not in the center, but in some place. Now they have to have the flag in the church, they have to sing the national anthem.

"People under 18 years of age are not allowed into churches, not allowed in any religious activity. Christmas is forbidden, in the whole country. Even the Bible should be re-translated, according to the Communist orthodoxy. So now we see more and more control on the Church, and there is a really a universal lamentation in the whole Church.

"Now, I cannot contact directly anybody in China. It's too dangerous for them. But sometimes people can come to Hong Kong, to see me and they cry, they say 'what can we do?' I say 'What can I do for you? I can do nothing.' I have no voice in the Vatican, simply none."

You have spoken publicly against the Holy See's relationship with the Chinese government, has this affected your relationship with Pope Francis?

"The Holy Father Francis shows special affection to me. In interviews, they ask him 'What about Cardinal Zen?' and the Pope says 'He's a good man.' ... he says 'maybe he's a little frightened, his age ...' I say 'my age?' I'm old, I'm 88, but the age helps me not to have any fear. Because I have nothing to gain, nothing to lose."

"The situation in China is very bad. And the source is not the pope. The pope doesn't know much about China. And he may have some sympathy for the Communists, because in South America, the Communists are good guys, they suffer for social justice. But not the (Chinese) Communists. They are persecutors."

"So the situation is, humanly speaking, hopeless for the Catholic Church: Because we can always expect the Communists to persecute the Church, but now (faithful Catholics) don't get any help from the Vatican. The Vatican is helping the government, surrendering, giving everything into their hands."

"So I'm – I can sincerely say that I am not – I think the pope is okay. But I'm fighting (Cardinal Pietro) Parolin...because the bad things come from him. From him. He's still so, so, so optimistic about the so-called 'Ostpolitik', the compromise. But you cannot compromise: they want complete surrender... that's Communism."

Your Eminence, after the 2018 agreement between the Holy See and China on the appointment of bishops, members of the underground Church seem to have come under renewed government pressure, has this been your experience?

"I think the most evident case is about the one bishop in Fujian, Bishop Guo."

"Now, they legitimize seven illegitimate bishops – schismatic bishops, excommunicated bishops. But it happened that, in two of those seven dioceses, there are also two legitimate underground bishops. [Rome] asked them to step down. Now both stepped down, okay?"

But the one in Fujian was promised that he would be recognized as auxiliary bishop, downgraded, but still bishop. So he accepted. But then ... (the Chinese authorities) say 'No, we have not yet recognized you as bishop. You have to sign the document.' And the document says, 'I have accepted the independent Church.' Guo said no, I cannot sign that, so he's not yet recognized as a bishop."

"Now, recently, the news came that he is on the street, because they said 'your building is not safe. It is against the fire regulations.'"

"I said that may be an exaggeration, that he is on the street. But actually it's true, because the government doesn't allow anybody to accept him. Now in that diocese, the underground Church is of 80 per cent of the priests and faithful in the diocese. The official Church only has a small number of priests, and the bishop, who was the real bishop, is now not even recognized as an auxiliary. It's terrible."

“So [in this deal] the Vatican lost everything, and got nothing. I cannot understand why they would do such thing. I’m sure that the Pope has the good intention to gain some space, some breathing space, and maybe one day you can get something better. Okay. But Parolin, the Secretary of State, he knows very well who the Communists are: there’s no way to bargain with the Communists, you get nothing.”

“I always say, can you imagine St. Joseph going to bargain with Herod to save the infant Jesus? No way, no way. He just wants to kill him.”