Vatican



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A prominent Chinese Jesuit priest has advised the Vatican not to pursue "ideals that are too high and unrealistic" in the ongoing discussions toward a possible diplomatic rapprochement between the Catholic church and his Communist country.

Fr. Joseph Shih, a 90-year-old priest in Shanghai who grew up there but taught in Rome for 35 years before returning home, warns in an Oct. 5 interview with Italian magazine *Civiltà Cattolica* that pursuit of such ideals would force Chinese Catholics "to choose between the Church and the Chinese government."

Shih tells interviewer Jesuit Fr. Antonio Spadaro that the Catholic church should never expect to be fully accepted in China.

"The Chinese government is communist," states the Chinese Jesuit. "This is something that won't change for a long time. Yet the Church in China has to have some kind of relation with the Chinese government. What relation? Opposition? That would be suicidal. Compromise? No, for it would mean the Church loses her own identity."

"The only possible relation is that of reciprocal tolerance," he continues. "Tolerance is not the same as compromise. Compromise gives something away to the other, up to a level that the other finds satisfying. Tolerance gives nothing away, nor does it require that the other give way."

China and the Vatican have not had official relations since 1951. While details have remained scarce, it is known that diplomats from the two countries have been working to see if some sort of new accommodation for relations might be possible.

In a small sign of progress towards relations, Pope Francis became the first pontiff to be granted permission to fly in Chinese airspace in 2014 while en route to South Korea.

Shih also says in the interview that divisions between the official and unofficial Catholic communities in China have been exaggerated as part of an effort to impede the ongoing diplomatic discussions. He says that while outsiders speak of two Catholic churches in China, Chinese do not.

"In China there is only one Church: the one, holy, Catholic and apostolic Church," Shih states. "In this one Church there are two distinct communities, each with its own bishops and priests."

"Those who oppose the dialogue between the Holy See and the Chinese government are accentuating and exaggerating the difference between the 'official Church' and the 'clandestine Church,' and unscrupulously make the most of it to impede the ongoing dialogue," Shih continues. "This is unhelpful for the life and mission of the Church in China."

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