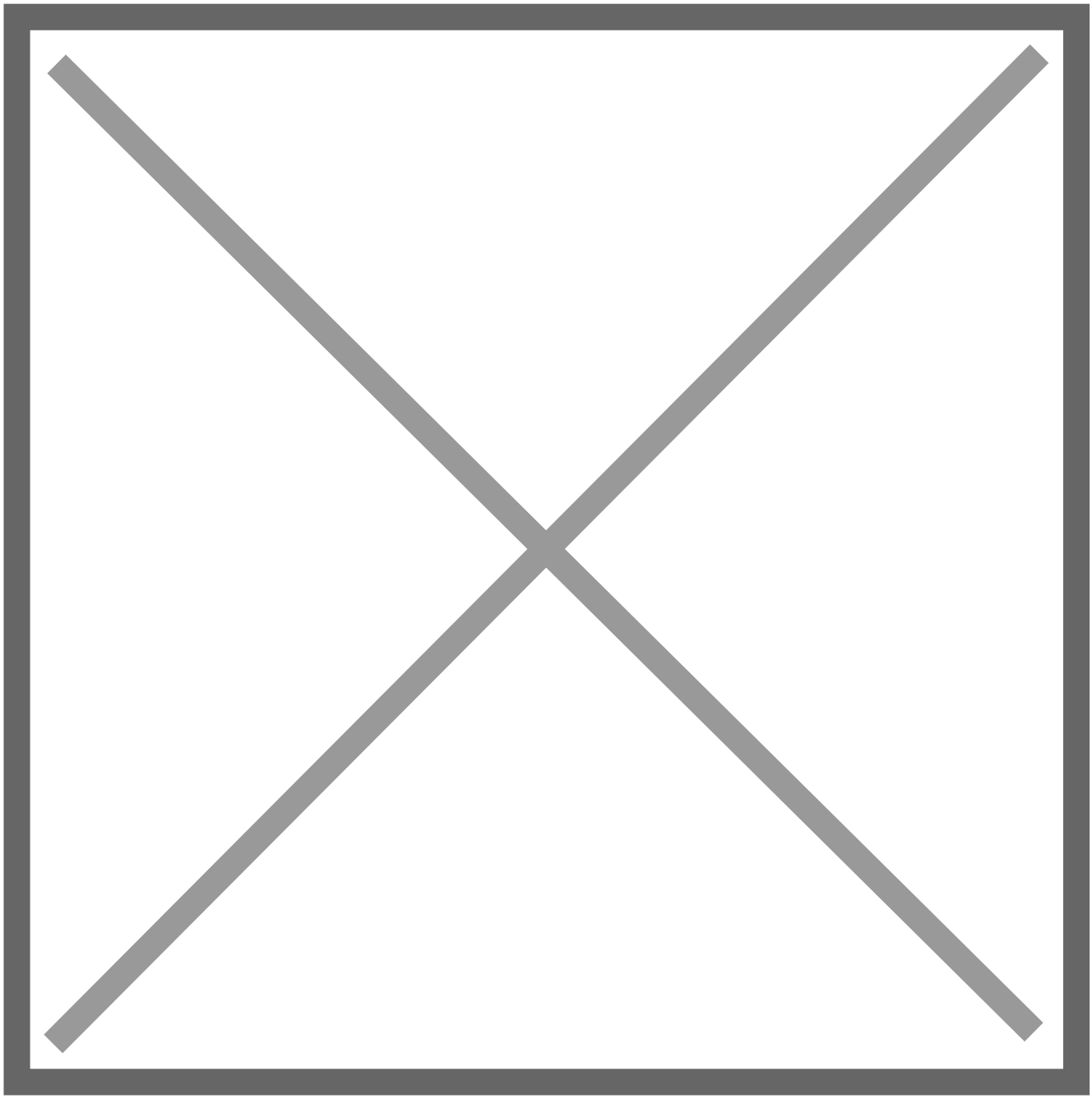


U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo speaks during a news conference at the U.S. State Department in Washington Sept. 21, 2020. (CNS photo/Patrick Semans, Reuters)



by Joshua J. McElwee

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

Send your thoughts to *Letters to the Editor*. Learn more

Rome — September 30, 2020
Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

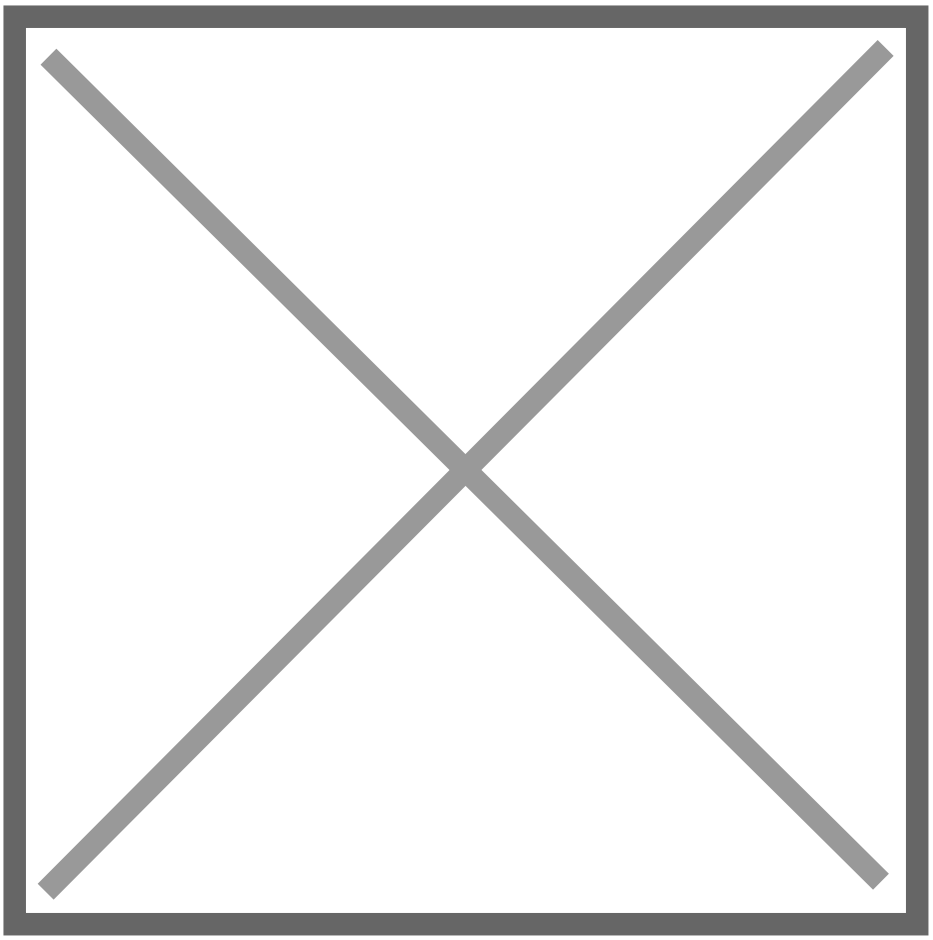
Editor's Note: *This story was updated later Sept. 30 to include remarks given by Cardinal Pietro Parolin to journalists at the event.*

Speaking at an event* that included top Vatican diplomat Cardinal Pietro Parolin Sept. 30, U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo made several thinly veiled critiques of Pope Francis' strategy of engagement with the Chinese government and appeared even to contrast the current pontiff with one of his predecessors.

Pompeo's ten-minute remarks, given at an event in Rome hosted by the U.S. Embassy to the Holy See, came as Parolin and the Vatican are known to be working to renew a landmark agreement with Beijing over the appointment of Catholic bishops in the communist country.

Although the U.S. cabinet official did not mention the Vatican-China deal by name, he lambasted the Chinese government at several points, declaring: "Nowhere is religious freedom under assault more than in China."

Pompeo also highlighted the role Pope John Paul II had played in the 1980s in helping accelerate the fall of communist regimes in Europe, and ended his speech by noting that John Paul had canonized 87 Chinese martyrs in 2000.



U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo speaks during a news conference at the U.S. State Department in Washington Sept. 21, 2020. (CNS photo/Patrick Semans, Reuters)

"Pope John Paul II bore witness to his flock's suffering, and challenged tyranny," said the U.S. official. He said he hoped the church might "be so bold in our time."

The secretary's comments, given at an event focused on issues of international religious liberty, appeared to represent a ratcheting up of public pressure from the U.S. government against papal policy.

Pompeo previously criticized the Vatican-China deal in an unusually direct Sept. 19 article in the right-wing magazine First Things, and later alleged in a tweet that the Vatican "endangers its moral authority, should it renew the deal."

Parolin also addressed the Sept. 30 event, but spoke more widely about the Catholic Church's understanding of religious freedom and did not mention China by name.

Archbishop Paul Gallagher, Parolin's deputy, also spoke. He too did not mention China.

Gallagher told journalists that he did not mention the communist country or its human rights record, because "we don't name and blame; it's one of the principles of Vatican diplomacy normally."

Asked how Vatican officials had received Pompeo's Sept. 19 article, Gallagher responded: "It was received critically." Parolin told journalists later that Vatican officials had been "surprised" by Pompeo's article.

The cardinal said that Pompeo's visit to Rome had already been scheduled at the time of the article's publishing, and suggested: "It seemed to us that [the visit] would be the most opportune time to talk about these things."

Francis' deal with China, first made on a provisional, two-year basis in 2018, ended a seven-decade dispute over the appointment of Catholic bishops in the world's most populous country.

Although the details of the agreement have not been made public, it is widely known that it involves the proposing of names for new bishops to the Vatican by the Chinese government with the help of a state-run group called the "Patriotic Catholic Association."

The pope then makes the final decision on whom to appoint as bishop, effectively giving him veto power on the matter.

Advertisement

Critics allege that the Vatican's engagement with China is inappropriate, given the authoritarian nature of the Beijing government, and its crackdown on religious and racial minorities such as the country's Uyghur population.

The Vatican's editorial director, Andrea Tornielli, responded to some of those criticisms in an Sept. 29 editorial published on the city-state's news portal, Vatican News. Tornielli said the agreement is not meant to address political issues, but is "genuinely pastoral." He said its aim is to allow Chinese faithful to have Catholic bishops in full communion with Rome.

Unlike Pompeo, some Catholic experts on John Paul II's engagement with communist regimes in Europe point more to similarities than contrasts between the strategies of the historic pontiff and Francis.

Francesco Sisci, a longtime foreign correspondent in Beijing for several of Italy's major newspapers, has compared Francis' strategy with the one used by John Paul with Gen. Wojciech Jaruzelski, a communist dictator who took control of Poland in the 1980s.

When Jaruzelski took control, Sisci told NCR in August, John Paul talked and negotiated with the general.

"Some Catholics want a crusade against China," Sisci said then. "These Catholics do not know the history of the church, and not even the ancient history, but recent history."

Among other speakers at the embassy event were three U.S. ambassadors; Callista Gingrich, ambassador to the Holy See; Nathan Sales, acting undersecretary for civilian security, democracy and human rights at the State Department; and, Samuel Brownback, ambassador at large for international religious freedom.

Pompeo visited Greece in the days before coming to Rome, where he also has scheduled meetings with Italian Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte and Italian Foreign Minister Luigi Di Maio. Pompeo is to head to the Vatican Oct. 1 for an official meeting with Parolin.

Gallagher told journalists that reports that Pompeo had been due to meet Francis were false, as longstanding Vatican protocol is that the pope not hold meetings with foreign officials whose countries are in the midst of election campaigns.

The embassy event was held indoors at a Rome hotel, and was also livestreamed.

Although people attending in person were encouraged beforehand to wear masks, an official at the beginning of the conference told participants that because the chairs had been organized with distance between them: "You probably don't have to wear your masks as you're sitting."

[Joshua J. McElwee is NCR Vatican correspondent and international news editor. His email address is jmcelwee@ncronline.org. Follow him on Twitter: @joshjmac.]

This story has been corrected to indicate that Cardinal Pietro Parolin was not yet in the audience for the Sept. 30 event when Secretary Mike Pompeo addressed the crowd.