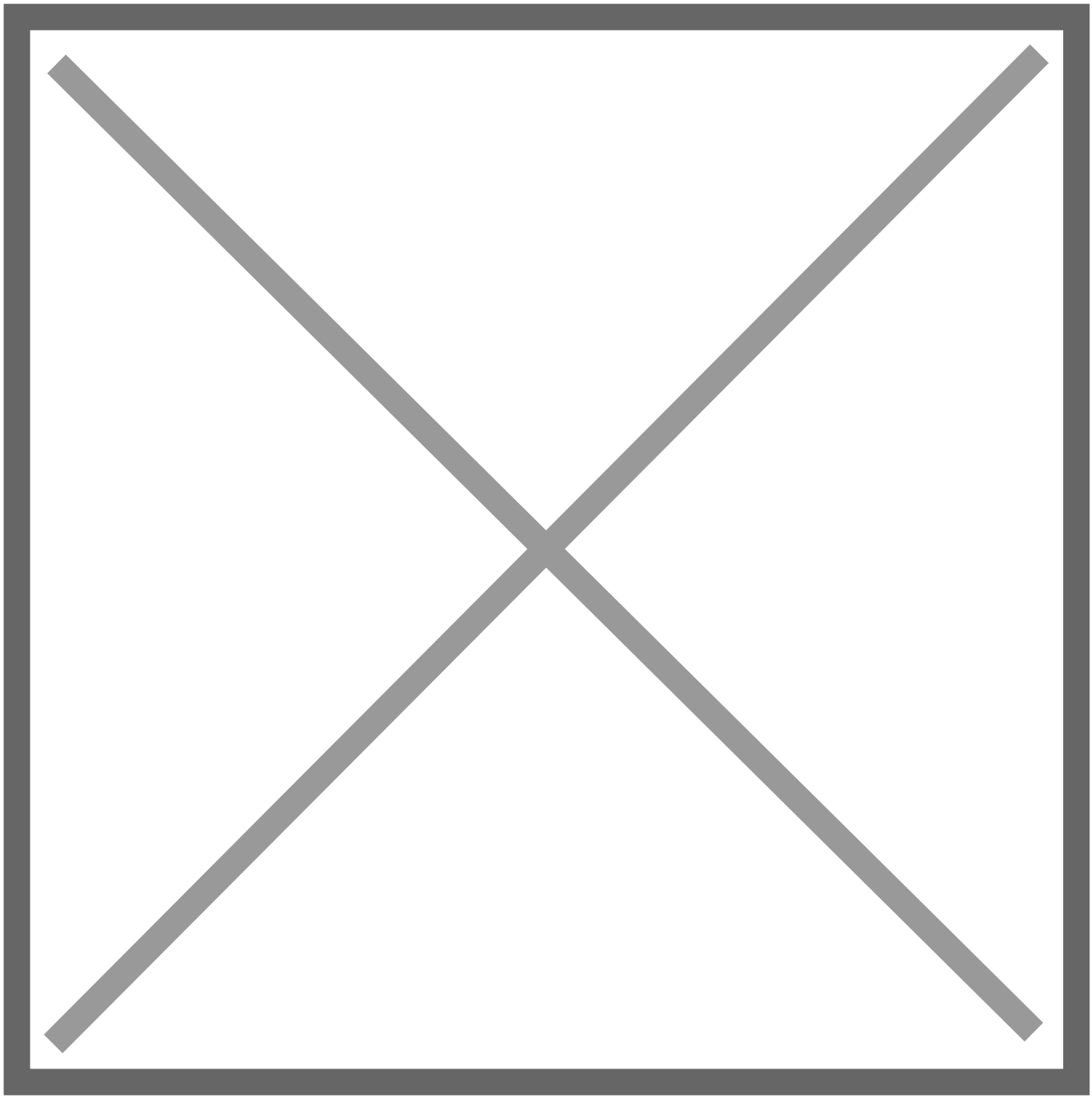
Vatican
News



A woman is pictured in a file photo praying during Mass at a church in Beijing. (CNS photo/Jason Lee, Reuters)



by Joshua J. McElwee

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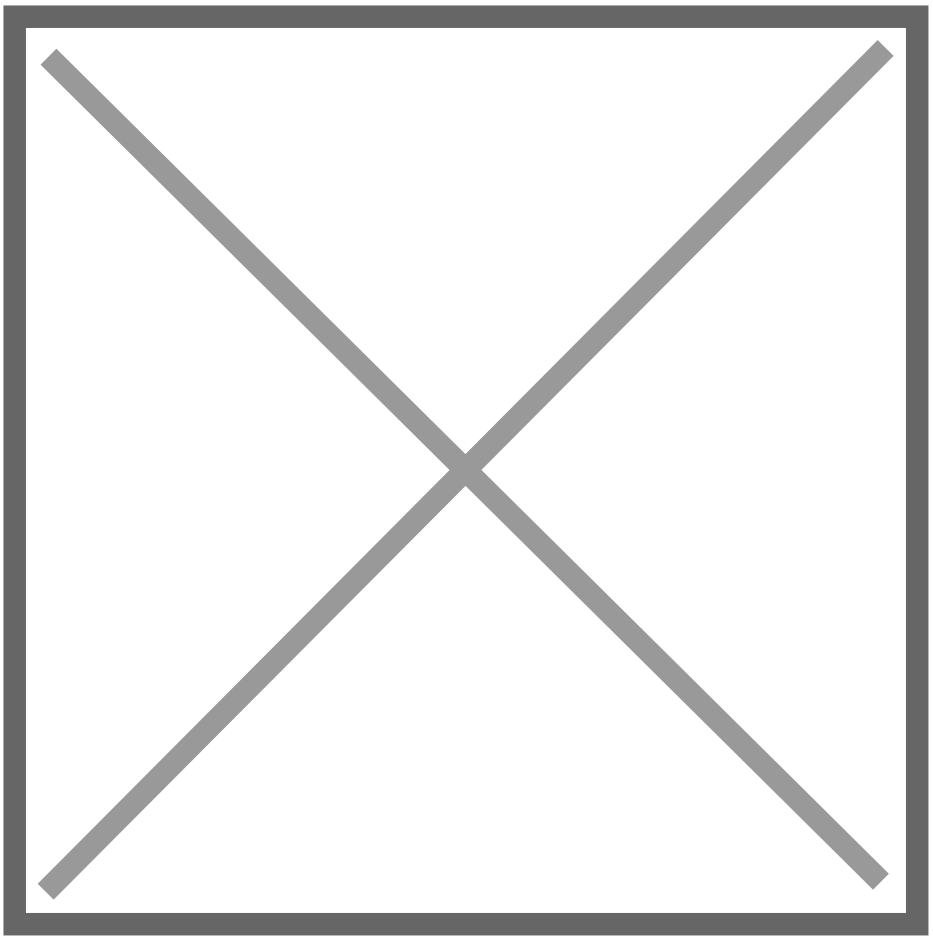
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Rome — October 22, 2020

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The Vatican and China have renewed their provisional 2018 deal over the appointment of Catholic bishops in the communist country for a further two years, the two sides announced Oct. 22.

In a brief statement, the Vatican portrayed the renewal, which had been anticipated in recent days, as a *pro forma* exercise. It said the two parties had agreed to "extend the experimental implementation phase of the Provisional Agreement for another two years."



A woman is pictured in a file photo praying during Mass at a church in Beijing. (CNS photo/Jason Lee, Reuters)

An unsigned article in Vatican newspaper L'Osservatore Romano, released at the same time as the statement, said the two sides had made the renewal by exchanging verbal notes, a simple form of usually unsigned diplomatic correspondence.

The article, which specified that the renewal would last through Oct. 22, 2022, also acknowledged that the path towards full religious freedom for Catholics in China "is still long and not without difficulties."

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

Pope Francis and Vatican officials had been under pressure from conservative critics not to renew the deal, primarily out of concern for China's human rights record and its recent crackdown on protests in Hong Kong.

Among the most vocal critics has been U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, who wrote 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."

In the Oct. 22 L'Osservatore article, the Vatican said it "should be noted that the Agreement did not address all the open questions or situations that still arouse concern for the Church, but exclusively the topic of episcopal appointments."

"On the part of some sectors of international politics, there has been an attempt to analyze the work of the Holy See mainly according to a geopolitical hermeneutic," the article continued. "However, for the Holy See it is a profoundly ecclesiological question."

The article also said that Pope Benedict XVI had reviewed an early draft of the deal before his resignation in 2013 and had approved it.

Chinese newspaper Global Times, which is run under the auspices of the Communist Party, said in an Oct. 22 article that renewing the deal "is beneficial for both China and the Vatican."

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Cardinal Pietro Parolin, the Vatican's chief diplomat, had told journalists Oct. 21 that he expected the deal would be renewed. He also said he thought it was important for the Vatican to continue working with Beijing.

"As far as the accord is concerned, we are content," said the cardinal. "There are still many other problems but we never expected the accord to resolve all the problems."

Before the signing of the 2018 deal, China's Catholic community had been split for decades between a group that accepted the government's involvement in choosing Catholic bishops and a so-called "underground" organization that recognized only

the pope's authority on that issue.

Although details of the agreement between the Vatican and Beijing 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.

The Oct. 22 L'Osservatore article acknowledged that the Vatican's deal with China has not completely resolved the situation for Catholics in the country.

"There are many situations of great suffering," said the article. "The Holy See is deeply aware of this, takes it into account and does not fail to attract the attention of the Chinese government to encourage a more fruitful exercise of religious freedom. The path is still long and not without difficulties."

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