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Pope Francis talks to a group of Chinese men wearing clergy collars and black suits. The men

Pope Francis greets chaplains of the Chinese Catholic community in Italy at the end of his weekly general audience May 24, 2023, in St. Peter's Square. On the May 24 feast of Mary, Help of Christians, venerated as Our Lady of Sheshan in China, the Catholic Church prays for Catholics in the Asian nation. (CNS photo/Vatican Media)

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Pope Francis prayed that Catholics in China would be free to share the Gospel and live their faith fully.

At a time when Vatican-Chinese relations are strained because of apparent differences over an agreement to name bishops, the pope publicly marked the annual World Day of Prayer for the Catholic Church in China May 24, the feast of Mary, Help of Christians, "venerated and invoked at the Shrine of Our Lady of Sheshan in Shanghai."

"I invite everyone to lift up a prayer to God so that the Good News of Christ crucified and risen may be proclaimed in its fullness, beauty and freedom, bearing fruit for

the good of the Catholic Church and of the whole Chinese society," the pope said at the end of his weekly general audience.

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Francis said he wanted "our brothers and sisters in China" to know that Catholics around the globe are close to them, "sharing their joys and hopes," and that "all those who suffer, pastors and faithful," find consolation and encouragement "in the communion and solidarity of the universal church."

In 2018, the Vatican and the government of China signed an agreement outlining procedures for ensuring Catholic bishops are elected by the Catholic community in China and approved by the pope before their ordinations and installations. The agreement was renewed in 2020 and again in 2022.

But in April Chinese authorities transferred Bishop Joseph Shen Bin of Haimen to the Diocese of Shanghai apparently without Vatican agreement. And in November, just a month after the latest renewal, the Vatican issued a public statement of regret, essentially accusing the Chinese government of violating the agreement when Bishop John Peng Weizhao of Yujiang was installed as auxiliary bishop of Jiangxi, "a diocese not recognized by the Holy See."