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Pope Francis attends his weekly general audience in the Pope Paul VI hall at the Vatican Jan. 31, 2024. (AP/Andrew Medichini)

by Associated Press

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Pope Francis on Jan. 31 announced the nomination of a new Chinese bishop, the third in less than a week, in an apparent sign that a controversial 2018 accord with Beijing governing the nomination of Chinese bishops is working.

Bishop Peter Wu Yishun was consecrated bishop of Minbei in Fujian in southeast China, the Vatican said in a statement. It noted that Francis had named him bishop on Dec. 6.

On Jan. 29, the Vatican announced a new bishop for Weifang and said Francis had reorganized the church territory and erected a new diocese there to conform with China's geographic delineation of the area. Bishop Anthony Sun Wenjun had been named last April but was actually consecrated Jan. 29, the Vatican said.

The Vatican said Francis made the decision to redraw Weifang's borders "with the desire to promote the pastoral care of the Lord's flock, and to attend better to its spiritual welfare." It noted that the previous territory, called an apostolic prefecture, had been erected in 1931 by Pope Pius XI.

On Jan. 25, the Vatican announced the consecration of the new bishop of Zhengzhou, Tadeus Wang Yuesheng.

The Vatican said all nominations took place "within the framework" of the 2018 Vatican-China accord.

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The 2018 deal, which has been renewed twice, aimed to unite China's estimated 12 million Catholics, who have been divided between an official church and an underground church loyal to Rome. The underground church emerged when the Communists came to power and diplomatic relations between the Holy See and China ruptured.

Francis has said he has final say in the bishop appointment process, but Beijing last year made a handful of unilateral bishop appointments without papal consent, amid a broader crackdown by President Xi Jinping on religious freedoms.

The Vatican gave in and recognized the appointments after the fact.

The terms of the 2018 deal were never released, and Francis' critics have blasted it as a sellout of those Chinese Catholics who remained loyal to the Vatican and suffered bouts of persecution. The Vatican has previously acknowledged that the 2018 accord was far from ideal but that it was the best deal it could get.

Beijing has long insisted that it must approve such appointments as a matter of its national sovereignty. The Vatican has insisted on the pope's divine authority to choose the successors of Christ's apostles.

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