Vatican

Vatican News



Pope Francis, seen on giant screen, delivers his address at the international conference to celebrate "100 years since the Concilium Sinense: between history and the present" celebrating the First Council of the Catholic Church in China, organized by the Pontifical Urbaniana University, in Rome, Tuesday, May 21, 2024. (AP/Andrew Medichini)

Nicole Winfield

View Author Profile

Associated Press

View Author Profile

Join the Conversation

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

Rome — May 21, 2024

Share on BlueskyShare on FacebookShare on TwitterEmail to a friendPrint

The Vatican made another big overture to China on Tuesday, reaffirming the Catholic Church poses no threat to Beijing's sovereignty and admitting that Western missionaries had made "errors" in past centuries in their zeal to convert the Chinese faithful.

The Vatican hosted the head of China's bishops conference for an unprecedented, high-level commemoration of a landmark 1924 meeting in Shanghai that affirmed the need for foreign missionaries in China to give way to local church leaders.

The presence of Shanghai Bishop Joseph Shen Bin alongside the Vatican secretary of state, Cardinal Pietro Parolin, at the Pontifical Urbaniana University was in itself noteworthy. It marked the first time in memory that a mainland bishop has been allowed by Beijing to participate in a public Vatican event as the keynote speaker.

It was also significant given the controversy over Shen's 2023 appointment. Pope Francis in July was forced to recognize China's unilateral appointment of Shen as bishop of Shanghai. The appointment seemingly violated the Holy See's 2018 accord with Beijing over bishop appointments.

Francis opened the conference with a video message in which he made no mention of recent troubles but instead pointed to the 1924 meeting in Shanghai as a turning point for Vatican-China relations. The first and only Chinese church council, he said, recognized that the church in China must "increasingly have a Chinese face."

"But the Council of Shanghai did not only serve to forget the erroneous approaches that had prevailed in previous times," Francis said. "The participants of the first Chinese Council looked to the future. And their future is our present."

It was a reference to the French, Italian and other Western missionary religious orders that evangelized China over the centuries but refused to cede leadership authority to local Chinese clergy. Their attitudes helped fuel the anti-Western and anti-Christian sentiment behind the Boxer Rebellion, which aimed to rid China of

foreign influences.

Shen in his remarks referred to the "superior" attitude of those Western missionaries and their work to "protect foreign powers" through "unequal treaties" that China signed with various European nations over the centuries.

Speaking through an interpreter, Shen said the Catholic Church today must have a Chinese point of view, respect Chinese culture and develop alongside Chinese society. He also noted that the pope has underlined that being a good Christian is an integral part of being a good citizen.

Advertisement

The Vatican has been working for years to try to improve relations with China that were officially severed over seven decades ago when the Communists came to power. The aim is to unite the country's estimated 12 million Catholics, who were divided into an official, state-recognized church and an underground church that stayed loyal to Rome.

Relations had long been stymied over China's insistence on its exclusive right to name bishops as a matter of national sovereignty, while the Vatican insisted on the pope's exclusive right to name the successors of the original Apostles.

The 2018 deal sought to find a middle ground, though the Vatican has flagged repeated violations and Rome has acknowledged it was a bad deal but the only one it could get. It was signed at a time when China was tightening controls on all religions, especially Christianity and Islam, which are viewed as foreign imports and potential challengers to Communist authority.

Tuesday's conference provided a venue for the Holy See to publicly admit to certain errors of the past, reaffirm its respect for a fully Chinese Catholic Church and insist that the Vatican poses no threat to it.

The Vatican secretary of state, Parolin, who played a big role in the 2018 deal, recalled in his remarks that it is the universal role of the papacy that guarantees that the Catholic faith is not piloted by one particular nation or another.

The communion between the papacy and local churches, he said, "is the best guarantee of a faith that is subtracted from foreign political interests and is rooted firmly in the local culture and society."

"Obedience to the pope not only doesn't harm the love that one owes one's country, but purifies it and renews it," he added.