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Vatican, China Seek Closer Diplomatic Ties

By Sabina Castelfranco
Rome
22 January 2008

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Change is in the air between China and the Vatican. There are indications that Chinese authorities are focusing more on religion and the Vatican has long wanted to normalize ties with Beijing. Sabina Castelfranco has more.



Pope Benedict

fruitful.

In his Christmas greetings to Roman Catholics, Pope Benedict spoke of the need to pursue a serene and constructive dialogue with Chinese authorities. And earlier in the year, the Vatican published a letter that the pontiff wrote to Roman Catholics in China .

But Professor Agostino Giovagnoli, an expert in Vatican-China relations at Milan 's Catholic University, says problems persist. "The Vatican should cut the relations with Taipei and the Vatican has to avoid interference in internal affairs. These two points are always in Chinese official documents."

The Vatican has indicated the possibility of moving its embassy from Taiwan back to Beijing . But Taiwan's ambassador to the Holy See, Tou Chou-Seng, says he is certain the pope will not forget Catholics in Taiwan and he says normal diplomatic ties between the Vatican and China are still far off. "As long as there is no religious freedom in mainland China, as long as the pope cannot appoint

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Chinese and Vatican relations are evolving after more than a half-century without formal diplomatic ties

bishops, the Vatican will be very reluctant to normalize relations with China."

In 2006, all five bishops ordained in China had the approval of Chinese authorities and the pope. But Reverend Bernardo Cervellera, editor of Asianews, says there is still no structure for making common decisions, and he says the Chinese organization that deals with religion remains an obstacle.

"The real problem now in the dialogue between China and the Vatican is the Patriotic Association, the function of the Patriotic

Association, because this organization is still thinking in a Stalinistic way."

Reverend Cervellera says the Patriotic Association still wants to control the church, ordinations and the property of the church in China.

Ambassador Tou Chou-Seng says the Vatican is concerned about China because of the large number of Catholics living there. Up to 15 million people are believed to practice Catholicism in China, many still underground. "So many bishops are still in prison. People have no right to pray together with their neighbors, with their friends, in their own house."

He also says the ordinations this year are not sufficient evidence of a change of heart by the Chinese authorities. "There are more than 40 dioceses who are waiting for a bishop. So no one is sure whether all 40-some bishops will be appointed without a problem. Too early to say that. We have to wait and see."

With the Olympic Games taking place in China next summer, there is little doubt that Beijing wants to show a liberal image of itself. A more open dialogue with the Vatican is one way of doing this.

Professor Giovagnoli adds, "The Olympic Games in China can help this dialogue because the eyes of the world, we can say, are looking at China and the Chinese government knows that the Vatican is not a power in the political, military sense, but in the moral sense the pope is very important.

Professor Giovagnoli says he does not think the games will be enough to bring the immediate normalization of ties between China and the Vatican. But a summit of Catholic Church officials is planned in the Vatican before March to discuss relations with China.

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