



In this Sept. 22, 2018, file photo, members of the faithful gather before a Mass at the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception, a government-sanctioned Catholic church in Beijing. A Chinese Catholic priest whose demotion was key to a now-stalled effort at reconciliation between China and the Vatican is being pressured to join the official Communist Party-controlled church organization, a fellow priest and Catholic news source said. (AP/Mark Schiefelbein, File)

by The Associated Press

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A Chinese Catholic priest whose demotion was key to a now-stalled effort at reconciliation between China and the Vatican is being pressured to join the official Communist Party-controlled church organization, a fellow priest and Catholic news source said.

Monsignor Vincenzo Guo Xijin was one of two legitimate bishops who remain loyal to the pope who were asked last year by the Vatican to step aside. That was part of a controversial agreement that also called for the Holy See to recognize seven bishops who had been appointed by Beijing without papal consent.

Local government and religious affairs department officials, along with representatives from the ruling Communist Party's United Front Work Department, are visiting Guo regularly in an effort to persuade him to join the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association, the Rev. Peng Zhekang, a priest in Guo's diocese in the eastern province of Fujian, said by phone.

"They are not coming to look for trouble," Peng said of the visitors.

However, the Vatican-affiliated news agency AsiaNews said Guo was being "hounded by public security agents" to agree to join the patriotic association in return for government recognition of his religious status. It said Guo is under the constant supervision of two guards, and officials and agents arrive throughout the day seeking to change his mind.

"For months, the Fujian authorities have been exerting pressure, blackmailing and threatening priests to push them to sign this accession in exchange for government recognition without which their ministry is forbidden," AsiaNews said.

The agreement to give China some say over bishop appointments prompted accusations that the church was caving in to the Communist Party just as China's leaders are waging a sweeping crackdown on religion. It has also been denounced as a betrayal of underground clergy and their congregants who are often persecuted for their defiance of the state.

Others called it an imperfect but much-needed step toward uniting Catholics in the world's most populous country.

Various popes have long cherished the hope of bringing together China's 12 million Catholics who are divided between those worshipping in state-sanctioned churches and the underground priests and parishioners loyal to the pope, who are frequently detained and harassed.

China demanded Chinese Catholics cut ties with the Vatican shortly after the Communist seizure of power in 1949.

Pope Francis will pass through Chinese airspace Saturday as he travels from Bangkok to Tokyo, and plans to send a telegram to President and party leader Xi Jinping. That is the first opportunity to address the relationship between the sides following last year's agreement.

Peng, of Guo's parish in the city of Mindong, said the local church was in the process of merging its official and underground sides, but only about two-thirds of clergy were on board with the move.

"Those still resisting the merger believe the government's demand for a church independent from the Vatican has an impact on their beliefs," Peng said.

Due to that, Guo "feels he has the responsibility to stay behind to take care of them," Peng said.

Calls to Guo's cellphone were answered by a message saying it was invalid, while calls to the local police and religious affairs department rang unanswered.

Since the agreement was reached, China has given no public indication that it would offer greater freedoms for Catholics or yield more influence to the Vatican.

Meanwhile, the Communist Party has been tightening controls on all religions, especially Christianity and Islam, which are viewed as foreign imports and potential challengers to Communist authority.

Authorities have removed or demolished crosses from even officially sanctioned churches, shuttered churches, and in at least one township, replaced posters of Jesus Christ with portraits of President Xi in what is being called the harshest anti-religion campaign since the 1966-76 Cultural Revolution.

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