Tuesday, September 10, 2024 / The Pope’s big bet on China

[HALF SECOND OF SILENCE]

[BILLBOARD]

<CLIP> Pope celebrating Mass

NOEL KING (host): Pope Francis arrived in East Timor earlier today and was greeted rapturously, incredibly by literally half the country. 600,000 people went to mass.

*<CLIP> Pope celebrating Mass*

NOEL: The People’s Pope is on a 12-day, four-country jaunt through Asia despite being 87 and in frail health.

FRANCIS X. ROCCA (journalist covering the Vatican): I think one reason, actually, is to show that he can do it. He wants to show that he's still kicking.

NOEL: But it’s not just that Lolo Kiko has something to prove. The Catholic Church in Asia is doing something that you could argue is a modern day miracle. It is growing. What’s more this trip will bring Papa Pancho geographically closer to a country he longs to visit, but cannot. China!

*<CLIP> Pope celebrating Mass*

Coming up on Today, Explained: The pope in Asia.

[THEME]

NOEL: I’m Noel King. There are 153 million Catholics in Asia. It’s a big number, but it’s a big continent and Catholics are a minority. The Vatican is so interested in Asia, because unlike Europe and Latin America, where Catholicism is on the decline, the religion is growing in Asia. To explain the Pope’s trip, we called Francis X. Rocca is a journalist who’s covered the Vatican since 2007.

FRANK: Francis has taken five trips to East Asia and Southeast Asia. He's visited eight countries prior to this trip. John Paul the Second, who went practically everywhere he could in the world, went to all these countries. But Benedict the XVII, as the Francis immediate predecessor, didn't make any trips to, East Asia or Southeast Asia. So, yeah, let's say that, you know, Benedict was very, very focused on Europe. Francis has, has focused on the rest of the world and certainly on Asia, among other places.

*<CLIP> Pope Francis celebrates Mass in Jakarta*

FRANK: He has visited already. He's left now, Indonesia, which is has the largest Muslim population in the world.

*<CLIP> AP: Pope Francis celebrates Mass in Jakarta*

FRANK: So that's a natural place for him to pursue. Again, his outreach to building bridges with the, with the Muslim world.

*<CLIP> POPE FRANCIS: I encourage you to sow seeds of love confidently to the path of dialog. Continue to show your goodness and kindness.*

FRANK: Papua New Guinea.

*<CLIP> AP NEWS:*

*NICOLE WINFIELD, CORRESPONDENT: Pope Francis has traveled to the remote jungles of New Guinea. He's brought a ton of medicine.*

FRANK: That’s a country, which is, been hit very hard by climate change, you know, rising sea levels threatening the atolls there.

*<CLIP> ABC NEWS (Australia):*

*MARIAN FAA, CORRESPONDENT: Well, the pope addressed political and religious leaders yesterday, and he touched on a number of issues, including climate change and the need for sustainable use of Papua New Guinea's natural resources.*

FRANK: Timor-Leste, or East Timor is a very Catholic country.

NOEL: Huh!

FRANK: It's almost 96 or 97% Catholic, I believe is considered the most Catholic country in the world, perhaps, except Vatican City.

*<CLIP> AP: Pope Francis welcomed to East Timor*

*<CLIP> CNA: LEONG WAI KIT, REPORTER: During his speech earlier, Pope Francis also urged Timorese to tap on their faith and the Gospels teachings to resolve new challenges such as education, poverty, gang violence…*

FRANK: I think also it is quite likely that he’ll talk about reconciliation because they have a 25 year occupation by Indonesia. Peaceful reconciliation after war, Civil war is a theme that not only this pope, but, you know, pope, like just like to encourage. And then finally he'll be going to, stopping in Singapore, which is kind of an interesting case. I mean, Singapore is a city state like Vatican City, of course, is very different, but it's a very wealthy country. It's one of the Asian tiger economies. The pope has talked a lot about the challenges of inequality, and social justice. He's criticized market capitalism. So maybe that's a theme that he will want to highlight there.

NOEL: What has the reception been like in Asia? Anything interesting of note?

FRANK: Well, in Indonesia it was very good. They, for the mass in the stadium there they way went over the expected numbers. I believe it was 100,000 was the figure given in attendance. You know, for a country that is only 3% Catholic, that's pretty good. And that overflow attendance. And there was a touching scene with the grand imam of the principal mosque there who, you know, kissed the pope on the head and the Pope kissed his hand.

*<CLIP> AP NEWS: Pope Francis visits Istiqlal mosque*

*<CLIP> AL JAZEERA:*

*JESSICA WASHINGTON, CORRESPONDENT: Earlier, Catholics and Muslims gathered near the Istiqlal Mosque where Pope Francis participated in an interfaith meeting.*

*NASARUDDIN UMAR, GRAND IMAM OF ISTIQLAL MOSQUE: Of course, this is an honor in itself because we're not a majority Catholic country. We are a country with the largest Muslim majority in the world. But we were chosen for the Pope to come here.*

FRANK: So this, you know, sent a sort of iconic image of what the Pope likes to call human fraternity of peaceful coexistence, More than that with, you know, with the Muslim world. He, he and the grand imam, signed a declaration calling for, again, you know, repudiating violence in the name of religion, and working against climate change.

NOEL: There's there's been a lot of talk about the one country, the one big country where Francis is not going, and that is China. Why are we hearing so much about a country that he's not visiting?

FRANK: Well, I mean, China is the big you know, John Paul would have loved to go to China and to Russia. China and Russia are the two big <laughs> the big targets that neither one has been able to go to. No pope has gone. And in Russia's case, it's because, primarily because the Russian Orthodox Church is very wary of Rome, always has been. And so that's a big hurdle. But in the case of China, the Chinese Communist Party, the Chinese government, is very wary of letting in a foreign leader of a church that operates in their own, in their own territory. That would be a big ask and would probably take some big concessions by, by the Vatican especially, above all, I think, cutting off diplomatic relations, which the Vatican has with Taiwan. The Vatican is one of the few states and still has relations with Taiwan. It would have to get rid of those, first of all. And, even then, I think the Chinese would be very, very wary. The Pope himself would go to China tomorrow if he could.

*<CLIP> POPE FRANCIS: (translation) Would I like to go to China? Absolutely! I’d go tomorrow.*

NOEL: Are there Catholics? Are there many Catholics in China?

FRANK: Yeah. The number… we don't have an official number, but, it's around 10 million, maybe a little bit more. They're divided between, still an underground church, so-called underground church that refuses to register with the government authorities and resist government control, and a kind of an official church that is very closely supervised by the government. And that's been a big bone of contention with the Vatican since very shortly after the Chinese Revolution in 1949.

NOEL: How does the official church operate and how does the underground church operate?

FRANK: For the approved religions, you know, which include Protestant Christianity and Islam and some others, they have, actual bureaucracies. They choose leaders. They approve everything of any importance that goes on. That's something that a lot of Catholics have resisted and rejected. And the Vatican has not been very happy about it. But under this pope, it has become reconciled to that and has, in fact, encouraged, increasingly, the underground Catholics to, register and in effect, join the official church so that there would be one church, not two. They're very worried about schism and also to improve relations with the Chinese. And part of that effort, in 2018, the Vatican signed an agreement with the Chinese, agreeing that neither side would appoint bishops without agreement of the other.

SCORING IN — Slow Swirl to Safety

*<CLIP> TRT:*

*NATASHA HUSSEIN, CORRESPONDENT: Many people see the landmark accord as highly significant for China's Catholics.*

*YIU, CHINESE CATHOLIC: This is a big thing for China. It means we will be able to accept teachings from the Vatican.*

FRANK: So all the bishops that have been named are both officially recognized by the Chinese government and by the Vatican. So the pro is that the church's hierarchies unify. The con for many people is that the Chinese government can, and the Communist Party can exclude anyone who doesn't meet its criteria as a bishop.

NOEL: So this 2018 deal, is everyone okay with it? Is this is this sort of how things will proceed from now on, do you think?

FRANK: Well, in fact, it's only been a…it was a temporary deal and it's up for renewal, next month, in October. The indications are that the Vatican wants to renew it. And I believe the Chinese do as well. So we can assume that it will be renewed, at least for another two years. The Vatican has not hidden its frustration, only a few bishops have been named. Nine bishops have been named since the agreement was signed. And the Chinese have used the agreement to kind of to increase the pressure on the underground Catholics to join. Many of them say, at least privately, they feel betrayed. The, the rapprochement between the Vatican and China under Pope Francis has come at a cost. And part of that is that the, Catholic Church in China has had to accept the policy of Sinicization or a so-called Chinafication, which is, in principle, making, the teachings and the practices of the Catholic Church and of other religions and of all other aspects of society for that matter, compatible with Chinese culture. But in fact, it goes beyond that and has to do with the teachings of the ideology of the Communist Party of China.

SCORING OUT

FRANK: The Chinese bishops, Catholic Bishops Conference, which, by the way, is a body not recognized by the Vatican. It's officially controlled by the government there, but in its Constitution says that the bishops conference supports the leadership of the Chinese Communist Party, the socialist system, and adheres to the principles of independence and self-governance, which means, in other words, not being run by Rome. That's in the, that's in the constitution of the bishops conference. So you can see, to what extent Sinicization, which is a policy that Xi Jinping has pushed very much over the last ten years. You can see how that subordinates the Catholic Church and other religious groups to the Chinese Communist Party. And you can see why that would bother a lot of Catholics in China and outside.

NOEL: All right. So, Pope Francis is deeply interested in China, even as much of the West is growing hostile toward China. What does that say about Francis and whatever, whatever long game he may have in mind, whatever legacy, in fact, he may have in mind.

FRANK: Well, I think again, one, there is this ongoing concern about making sure that the Chinese church in China doesn't split into two churches. A schism for the Catholic Church is very, very focused on unity. It's essential to its identity. So the idea of a, of a schism is…it keeps popes awake at night. So that's, that's one thing. But I think particularly with Francis as geopolitics, I mean, he's a multipolar pope. He's not what someone said about Pope Pius XII, in the 1950s, during the Cold War, they called him the chaplain of the West. This pope is not the chaplain of the West. He's criticized…he's suggested that, you know, the war in Ukraine was provoked by NATO expansion. The other day, he, he criticized, very much, Ukraine's ban on the Russian Orthodox Church. But he's been much more… he hasn't criticized violations of religious freedom in China, for example.

SCORING IN - Amethyst (BMC)

FRANK: So he's… I think there's a desire, he has a desire to engage with China because it's the rising superpower. And he's also skeptical, to put it mildly, of the U.S.-led Western order. And I think he…I don't know if counterweight is fair to say, that he's looking for a counterweight, but he certainly doesn't want to put all the Vatican's eggs in one basket.

NOEL: Vatican reporter Francis X. Rocca. Coming up: a brief history of Catholicism in China.

SCORING OUT

[BREAK]

[BUMPER]

NOEL: I’m Noel King with Jonathan Tan. Jonathan’s a professor of Catholic Studies at Case Western Reserve University. He says the Vatican is interested in China. And Chinese are increasingly interested in Catholicism and other religions.

JONATHAN TAN (professor of Catholic Studies, Case Western Reserve University): I think the Cultural Revolution left a spiritual vacuum for many Chinese. The emptiness of just striving for material needs leads many Chinese to turn to religion. It's not just Christianity. There's a huge growth in Buddhism, in Taoism, in Islam, for example, and also Christianity too.

NOEL: Catholicism arrived in China hundreds of years ago. The first Franciscan, John of Montecorvino, rolled up in 1294. But, of course, it was a foreign religion - and it never sat easily with China’s dynastic leaders. And it was a missionary religion - Catholics wanted to convert people. So over the centuries, waves of Catholics entered China. There were corresponding waves of anti-Catholic sentiment, sometimes culminating in the massacre of Chinese worshipers. And then came the modern era, the mid-Twentieth Century, when Mao Zedong and the Chinese Communist Party took control.

JONATHAN: Now, of grave concern to Mao and the Communist leadership was the fact that the leadership structure of Christian churches, Protestant and Catholic, were still largely foreign in nature. So you're talking about leadership, the bishops, as well as at the local level. They were still very much European. So foreigners control the purse strings, foreigners control the appointment of leaders and leadership rested in European and North American hands. So in 1951, the Communist administration established a Religious Affairs Bureau. The Religious Affairs Bureau was to oversee and to reform China's religions, to make it fit in accordance with the official communist ideology of China.

*<CLIP> KINOLIBRARY: Archival propaganda video: 1960s China parade*

*NARRATOR: We will hold high the great red banner of Mao Zedong’s thought. Rebuilt against the imperialists, the revisionists and the bourgeoisie.*

JONATHAN: The Religious Affairs Bureau works with sympathetic native Chinese Catholic priests and bishops to establish the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association, the so-called official Catholic Church. Now, the point for your listeners to note is that the official church is not a heretical church. This is 100% Catholic. So the dispute, the controversy between the Vatican and Beijing has nothing to do with doctrine. It has nothing to do with theology, it is all about politics, power, control. So the central tenet of the CCPAis Chinese, we choose our own bishops.

SCORING IN — Luke takes A Train

JONATHAN: So the CCPA appointed the first wave of illicit native Chinese bishops without the Pope's consent. So Pope Pius took a very hardline stance. He refused to recognize any CCPA appointed bishops who were selected without prior Vatican approval. So this was the issue. Now, there were many Chinese Catholic clergy and ordinary Catholics who rejected the oversight of the CCPA and the CCPA bishops. Now, together with the Chinese Protestants who rejected similar oversight of Protestant leadership, they formed the so-called underground house churches.

NOEL: I think our listeners may hear that and think people are practicing in secret. They're making sure that nobody knows where they are. You're saying it's not like that?

JONATHAN: No, it's not like that. In fact, the overwhelming majority of bishops in China today are both underground and official.

*<CLIP> CNN:*

*EMILY CHANG, CORRESPONDENT: First, we find the state run church and just a short drive down the same street, the underground church. An unassuming building but clearly marked. From the car we watch believers fill in first slowly, then by the hundreds. Clearly, quite a crowd has amassed inside.*

JONATHAN: Over the decades, what the Vatican has tried to do is to try to bring, slowly, the so-called underground church back into unity with the Holy See without causing an uproar with Beijing. So what the Vatican is trying to do is to, is to recognize the legacy of all these, you know, unholy collaboration between empire and church and to try to reset the relationship. So, the 2018 agreement recognized a major coup for Rome. Because if you look at it, what the agreement says is that the CCPA will no longer unilaterally choose bishops. Now, that is a major concession on the part of Beijing. The CCPA would recommend a slate of candidates for papal approval. The Holy See has veto power over these recommendations. And the CCPA would accept the Holy See's decision.

SCORING OUT

NOEL: We talked earlier in the show about Sinicization - about China wanting systems, maybe it’s economic systems, or in this case religious systems, Catholicism, with Chinese characteristics. Some people think religion is religion - it’s not supposed to change based on where it is. Is there pushback that says: the Catholic Church should be the Catholic Church whether it is in China or Spain or Nigeria?

JONATHAN: So here is a tension: the Catholic Church enculturates or adopts the cultural forms of the communities that it is ministering to. So that has been pushed back by ultra conservatives and traditionalists within the church who say, no, no, no, we have to maintain the Eurocentric norms. But there's a recognition that these Eurocentric norms, would wouldn't fly in a postcolonial world that is decolonizing, rise of nationalism. And many of these, supposedly universal stuff like pipe organ or Gothic architecture, Latin, you know, is essentially Eurocentric. So you see this tension, broadly speaking, throughout the Catholic Church. Now in China, it has been politicized by, by many conservative American politicians because Xi Jinping has introduced what he termed as a program of Sinicization. Sinicization of, you know, social values of business, of economics. So we run capitalism by capitalism with Chinese characteristics. We want to do business, we want education. But it's Sinicized, not Western. Through this program of Sinicization at all levels of Chinese society also applied to religious practices. So what she wants is religious practices that are Chinese in orientation and supportive and friendly towards China's socialist ideals. People who are hostile towards Xi Jinping and his politics, you know, see this as an attempt to control the church. So many conservative Catholics around the world, in the US and Europe, even in China and Hong Kong, the Cardinal Joseph Zen, for example, see this as a sell out.

*<CLIP> CARDINAL JOSEPH ZEN: They’re giving the frog in the mouth of the wolves. It is incredible betrayal!*

SCORING IN — Do your job do some research

NOEL: Ah, okay, so I understand what Xi wants. What would Pope Francis want out of a visit - if he could?

JONATHAN: He wants rapprochement. He wants to strengthen the dialog. Ultimately, he wants to bring the entire, Chinese, Catholic flock back to unity and, communion with the Holy See. To achieve that is a kind of give and take between China, the Holy See and Beijing. So, that both sides, negotiate and compromise so that, you know, it's a win-win situation for both parties.

NOEL: Jonathan Tan, Case Western Reserve University. Haleema Shah produced today’s show. Matthew Collette edited. Patrick Boyd and Andrea Kristinsdottir engineered. Laura Bullard fact-checked.

The rest of our team includes Amanda Lewellyn, Avishay Artsy, Hady Mawajdeh, Miles Bryan, Peter Balanon-Rosen, Victoria Chamberlin.

Amina al-Sadi is a supervising editor. Miranda Kennedy is an executive producer. Sean Rameswaram is working on work-life balance. Stay tuned for that.

We use music by Breakmaster Cylinder.

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I’m Noel King. It’s Today, Expakined.

SCORING OUT

[10 SECONDS OF SILENCE]