Catholics

Love thine enemy

Also in this section
42 Hard sell for Xi's book

LESHAN

The pope and the party inch close to a deal on appointing bishops

IN 2011 the Vatican said, without giving details, that there were "proven and very grave reasons" why Lei Shiyin could not be made a bishop. On Easter Sunday he was nevertheless sporting a crosier and mitre, sprinkling holy water onto 300 or so worshippers at a cathedral in the south-western city of Leshan. Bishop Lei is one of several Catholic prelates who have been appointed by China's state religious authorities without the blessing of the pope. To forestall protests by Vatican loyalists, officials mount tight security at churches where he helps ordain other bishops.

Bishop Lei is a senior official in the government-backed Chinese Patriotic Catholic Association. He is also an adviser to the national parliament. The cathedral in Leshan appears to reflect the favour he enjoys with the Communist Party. It was completed in 2015, four years after he was declared by Rome to have been automatically excommunicated for accepting his post as bishop. The building has big chandeliers, Ionic columns and huge video screens on either side of the nave (see picture). Many congregants there know little of the controversy. One person who does gestures around the building and says that the bishop's links to the government have brought blessings.

Relations between China and the Vatican are closely watched, not only by the country's 10m or so Catholics. The two sides have not had formal relations since 1951, when the newly established Communist government in China kicked out the pope's representative. Months later the Vatican forged diplomatic ties with Taiwan, the seat of a rival government.

Taiwanese officials fear that any rapprochement between the pope and the Communists could result in a huge diplomatic setback for the island. The Vatican is by far the most influential member of its tiny band of diplomatic partners. The Holy See may still be a long way from switching diplomatic recognition to China. But in recent months there has been mounting speculation that it is close to a deal with the party on the appointment of bishops, the biggest bone of contention between them.

This turbulent priest

What to do about people such as Bishop Lei has been a part of this debate. The party requires Catholics to worship in closely watched, officially registered churches, supervised by bishops chosen by the government. Devout Catholics bridle at the notion that an atheist ruling party should pick their clergy. Nonetheless, the Vatican has compromised. All but seven of the present crop of government-backed bishops serve with the pope's endorsement. However, the Vatican has also appointed priests and bishops of its own (though few of them in the same places as government ones). Perhaps half of all Chinese Catholics attend masses celebrated by these "underground" clergy. Participants risk arrest and many other flavours of persecution.

Since Pope Francis became pontiff in 2013 emissaries have shuttled between Beijing and Rome, hoping to devise a mechanism to ensure that no future bishop can be appointed without the blessing of both the pope and the Chinese government. There were periods earlier this century during which the two sides managed to achieve this, only to end up squabbling again. The plan this time is to enter into a formal agreement.

Both sides are secretive about what is going on. But to enable such a pact the Vatican is rumoured to have already granted forgiveness to Bishop Lei and the six other government-approved prelates it had refused to recognise. The party had apparently insisted on this. In January the Holy See was reported to have warned underground bishops in two dioceses that they would have to make way for officially approved clergy. In effect, this would mean herding their flocks into the state-sanctioned church system.

The Vatican is probably hoping that members of a more unified church will no longer be persecuted for their loyalty to the pope, and that greater freedom would be given to the church to seek new converts. The number of Protestants in China is growing rapidly, and could be several times greater than that of Catholics. Meanwhile the number of Catholics is thought ▸▸

to be shrinking as people leave the scattered villages where the church has strong roots, and head into cities.

The Vatican may also calculate that growing intolerance among party officials towards what they see as foreign-controlled religions makes it more urgent to reach a deal now. A pact may only become more difficult to achieve if they wait. The Vatican is worried that, without an agreement, the party may decide to go ahead unilaterally with clearing a backlog of unfilled church jobs by appointing people disliked by Rome, writes Gerard O'Connell in *America*, a Jesuit magazine.

The party has good reason to want a deal. It would buff the diplomatic credentials of Xi Jinping, the president (who is trying to establish himself as a globally admired statesman, see next story). Francesco Sisci, a Beijing-based Vatican-watcher, says China was impressed by how much publicity the pope attracted during a tour of America in 2015 (Mr Xi was there at the same time). The party would also welcome any shrinking in the size of unregistered churches: it abhors social activity beyond its control. Then there is the allure of formal recognition by the Vatican, the only European state that still has an embassy in Taiwan. A formal accord on bishops would be a big step towards that.

Pope Francis may face criticism from Catholics for reaching accommodation with a repressive regime. (The Chinese government has recently stepped up efforts to block the sale of Bibles online and to stop children from attending churches.) Cardinal Joseph Zen, a former bishop of Hong Kong, has lambasted talk of an agreement as "selling out" and "surrender". It is possible that some underground Catholics would rather form a schismatic church than co-operate with party-approved clerics. For the Vatican, dealmaking with China will be fraught indeed. ■

Xi Jinping's works

The big beige book

Copies of the president's latest tome are flying out of the door. Who is reading it?

THE degree of pomp that greeted the recent release of the nine foreign-language editions of "The Governance of China II" by Xi Jinping, China's president, may have set a new record in the West for the launch of any translation of a Chinese work. In London the unveiling ceremony was held in a grand Edwardian building just a few steps away from Parliament. It had the air of a coronation.

An immaculately airbrushed image of Mr Xi, displayed on stage, smiled down on the 300-odd guests. A procession of Chinese and British bigwigs took to the stage, trying to outbid each other in their proffers of praise for Mr Xi's book. One of them was Queen Elizabeth's son, Prince Andrew, who called the work a "milestone". China's ambassador to Britain, Liu Xiaoming, likened its release to that of the much slimmer "Communist Manifesto", which had been published in London 170 years earlier. As guests made their way out, each was given a free hardback copy of the pale beige-coloured work wrapped in red cloth tied with gold brocade, together with a bookmark made of card with Mr Xi's smiling portrait on it.

Don't all rush at once

Mr Xi's books have been distributed in greater quantity abroad than those of any Chinese leader since Mao Zedong. More than 6.6m copies were published globally of his first one, "The Governance of China", a collection of his speeches and essays from 2012, when he assumed power, until mid-2014. Cambodia's ruler, Hun Sen, has urged compatriots to buy it. Prayuth Chan-ocha, Thailand's junta leader, has asked his cabinet to study it. Mark Zuckerberg, the boss of Facebook, has been quoted by Chinese media as saying that he has bought copies for colleagues to help them "understand socialism with Chinese characteristics". A copy has even been photographed on Mr Zuckerberg's desk. (Nonetheless, Facebook remains blocked in China.)

The sequel is a compilation of Mr Xi's speeches and writings from August 2014 to September 2017, many of them previously unpublished in English. It has 17 chapters, each exploring a major theme in domestic or foreign policy. "Every single comment we've received from foreign readers has been overwhelmingly positive," says an employee from China International Publishing Group, the overseas distributor.

There may not be very many readers outside China. The publisher claims the second volume has a global circulation of 13m. But, according to Scott Morton of Nielsen Bookscan, a data provider, fewer than 100 copies of the English-language version of the second volume have actually been sold in Britain since it was published in November. Sales are slightly higher in Australia, at 124. The first volume has not performed much better: 588 copies in Britain and 430 in Australia. It is likely that freebies of both volumes hugely exceed the number of copies sold to individuals. Finding foreigners who have actually read Xi's magnum opus is about as easy as finding thigh-slapping jokes in it.

In China the Communist Party's 90m members have had little choice. Many of them have been given copies. The party's ruling Central Committee has ordered members to read them. Soldiers have been urged to peruse it, too. Those who do so will draw two clear conclusions. The first is that Mr Xi has no interest in political reform. It is striking how much he gripes about Western values. Copying the political systems of other countries "could spell an end to the independent destiny of our country", he warns in volume two.

The second lesson is that Mr Xi cares about public opinion. As he writes, the future of any political party and government depends on "popular support". In parts, volume two reads almost like a manifesto. He may have been studying Mao's little red book, which tells readers that "to link oneself with the masses, one must act in accordance with the needs and wishes of the masses." Unless, that is, they demand a vote on who should lead them. ■