

December 8, 2006: China and the Vatican - The Washington Times

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December 8, 2006 The Chinese government's complex relationship with the Vatican has come under scrutiny again with Beijing's installation last week of another bishop the third this year without Vatican consent. The recent move emphasizes the division between most Catholics and the official Chinese Catholic church, and. It also shows that although Chinese officials ostensibly value better relations with the Vatican, their motivation is self-serving. The Chinese Communist Party recognizes and sanctions only five "patriotic" religious groups, including a Catholic organization. The majority of China's estimated 10 million Catholics, however, practice in unrecognized and unsanctioned churches an exercise strictly banned by the Chinese government. Beijing insists on total control over the appointment of bishops, and the Communist Party maintains a steadfast unwillingness to permit the development of any hierarchical, nationwide organization that is not subservient to and directed by the party's central leadership. Afraid that the Catholic church may facilitate opposition to one-party rule rather than shore it up, Chinese officials select those they consider loyal to the Communist Party. The Vatican's recognition of Taiwan is a second sticking point. Vatican concessions on both points are a prerequisite for normalized relations, and Beijing may well see closer relations with the Vatican as a way to preserve its control of the Chinese Catholic church with the addition of chipping away at diplomatic support for Taiwan. In April, it appeared that China and the Vatican were moving toward such an agreement. The Vatican was considering shifting its diplomatic relations from Taiwan to China, according to some reports. Chinese officials, however, proceeded to select two bishops who were not approved by Pope Benedict XVI, who noted his "profound displeasure" and announced his intention to excommunicate the bishops. The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom reports that "Catholic religious leaders in China told Commissioners that, though difficulties and suspicions remain, there was some reconciliation between the officially registered church and unregistered Catholics. However, most unregistered Catholics will not worship in churches of the Catholic Patriotic Association unless the bishop or priest is known to be in communion with Rome." Although some such priests and bishops have pledged their fidelity to the pope, the report notes, "the Chinese government does not allow Catholics to run schools or recognize openly the authority of the Papacy in many fundamental matters of faith and morals." When church teachings run counter to the ruling party's own doctrine as it does on questions of abortion, for instance the latter prevails, invariably alienating Catholics. While the ordination will certainly drive another wedge between China and the Vatican, the greater concern is with China's undeterred oppression of religion. Even if the Vatican were able to establish relations with China, the extent to which that would provide religious freedom to China's Catholics is far from clear. What does seem clear, however, is that China's interest in closer relations with the Vatican has little to do with rectifying the Communist Party's deplorable record on religious freedom.