



THE GORDON CHANG REPORT

PRESENTED BY THE
PACIFIC RESEARCH INSTITUTE

VOLUME 3, NO. 1

China's Regime Is No Match for Defiant Christians

by Gordon G. Chang | July 2026

Dozens of police and state security officers—up to 70 of them according to parishioners—raided the Early Rain Covenant Church in the southwestern Chinese city of Jiangyou on June 14.

The police, some wearing body armor marked “SWAT,” eventually took 31 into custody. Officials demanded that detained parishioners sign statements that they were not allowed to read. Most refused.¹

Two senior church elders, Yan Hong and Wu Wuqing, were kept in custody. Both have been repeatedly detained, most recently in January for “picking quarrels and provoking trouble.” Previously, Wang Yi, the founding pastor of the church, was sentenced to nine years for, among other charges, “inciting subversion of state power.”²

This Presbyterian church, founded in nearby Chengdu in 2008, has been a target of officials for some time.³

The officially atheist Communist Party recognizes five religions, two of them Christian. The awkwardly named Three-Self Patriotic Movement of the Protestant Church, is the official Protestant one.

There could be more than 115 million Protestants in China.⁴ If so, about four-fifths of them worship outside the official church. In truth, nobody this side of Heaven knows the true number because many are members of the so-called “house congregations.” They literally gather to pray in homes, away from the prying eyes of officials.

Because Protestants are persecuted, they hide. Because they hide, they cannot be counted. Because they cannot be counted, they are free to pray. And because they are both persecuted and free to pray, they are fervent. On Sunday mornings, some house Protestants start at dawn. They finish late afternoon and still feel guilty for not staying longer. People in China yearn for faith, and the beneficiaries of this deep yearning are the unofficial Protestant congregations.

“Independent churches represent one of the largest remaining sectors of civil society beyond Party control,” Bob Fu of Texas-based ChinaAid told *Newsweek*.⁵

“Xi Jinping’s government appears increasingly unwilling to tolerate that independence,” Fu added. Yet Xi is largely helpless. He has to tolerate house Protestants because he cannot, despite all his totalitarian powers, control them.

His officials can raid the large Protestant congregations such as the Early Rain Covenant Church, but persecution of these sprawling organizations has not prevented their growth. Xi’s problem is that he cannot jail tens of millions of Chinese. So the religious continue to go to services under the noses of officials in the big churches or in the homes of adherents.

Moreover, when the regime tries to crack down, it only ends up highlighting its persecution. In November, authorities formally arrested Pastor Jin “Ezra” Mingri of the Zion Church for “illegally using information

networks.” He was detained the month before along with almost 30 other pastors and staff as part of the biggest assault on Christians since 2018.⁶ His case attracted attention from activists around the world. President Donald Trump raised his case during the May summit in Beijing.

While Protestant congregations are fast gaining adherents in China, the Catholic Church appears to be losing them, in large part because of the Vatican’s 2018 agreement with the Chinese regime.

The text of that agreement, extended three times, is secret, but it is known that the pact ended a decades-long dispute, going back to 1951 when the new Communist government severed diplomatic relations with the Holy See. The regime established the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association, the official Catholic church, in 1957.

Until the 2018 agreement, Catholics loyal to the Vatican prayed in the underground Church. Beijing-appointed bishops were subject to excommunication.

The 2018 agreement gave the Pope final authority over bishop selection, in the form of a veto over candidates nominated by Beijing.

That was a victory for the Vatican, at least theoretically. As a practical matter, the story is less clear.

Pope Francis never exercised that veto and neither has Pope Leo XIV,⁷ even after the

People in China yearn for faith, and the beneficiaries of this deep yearning are the unofficial Protestant congregations.

Chinese government repeatedly violated the 2018 agreement by unilaterally appointing and transferring bishops. Furthermore, Beijing has run roughshod over the appointment of bishops, forcing its choices, like Shanghai's Joseph Shen Bin, onto the Vatican, and Beijing has also redrawn diocese lines without Vatican approval.

For this theoretical win, the agreement has allowed the Communist Party to divide and decimate Catholicism in China.

The damage has so far been severe. The first thing the Communist Party, the CCP, did after the inking of the 2018 pact was arrest priests and bishops from the underground churches and told them that the Vatican had ordered them to join the Patriotic Association.⁸

The Vatican in 2019 stated this was not the case. The regime has not given up, however. The state-sanctioned Bishops' Conference of the Catholic Church, in a February 4 statement, supported Beijing's prohibition on unregistered clergy engaging in pastoral activities.⁹

Now, the Chinese regime demands that churches not have any relations with foreign churches or entities, including the Vatican, characterizing such relations as a national security issue. In December 2025, the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association and the Chinese Catholic Bishops' Conference formally adopted regulations essentially preventing the Catholic clergy from traveling abroad.¹⁰

There is, consequently, no reciprocity. While the Vatican legitimizes the Patriotic Church, the Patriotic Church delegitimizes the Vatican.

In addition, the regime is actively taking steps to end Catholicism inside China. For instance, Chinese officials are making sure that there are no new Catholics. Catholic orphanages have been closed, especially since 2018. Children cannot go to church services, and they cannot receive religious training at home. A Catholic who left the country in 2023 says that "Children growing up now have no memory of church prayers or ceremonies."¹¹

This Catholic says the congregation used to have mass at times when everyone could join, but officials forced a change to unreasonable hours, so people would not attend. The authorities also cancelled choirs and shuttered windows of the church so that prayers were not visible from outside. "I stopped going to the church to avoid government surveillance," this particular adherent admitted.¹²

In addition, cameras have been installed in churches, crosses removed, and churches demolished. Officials have replaced images of Christ and the Virgin Mary with those of Xi Jinping.¹³

Another underground Catholic, in exile from China's Inner Mongolia, said people started to arrange fake weddings "just to be able to come together and pray" and "to avoid controls and heavy surveillance at official church premises."¹⁴

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The clergy have come under intense pressure. Priests are subjected to political and ideological trainings, as frequent as twice a week in some locations. In addition to existing state control over religious materials, priests' teachings are now subject to approval from relevant authorities.

The ideological indoctrination is part of Xi Jinping's campaign to "Sinicize" religion. Religious teachings are now expected to reflect Han-centric Chinese culture. Furthermore, the campaign's goal is to ensure that Catholicism and the other four official religions "deepen their ideological alignment with the Chinese Communist Party," which is atheist.¹⁵ Therefore, Catholics are discouraged from studying Scripture, theology, or Vatican teachings.

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom has defined the Sinicization of religion as "the complete subordination of religious groups to the CCP's political agenda and Marxist vision for religion."¹⁶

In reality, the campaign, started in 2016, is intended to eradicate faith. Catholicism is becoming Marxist because the official Catholic Church is demanding it. In December 2023 the Patriotic Association issued a five-year plan to intensify the Sinicization of Catholicism. In October 2025, the National Religious Affairs Administration began a nation-wide campaign called "Study the Regulations, Observe Discipline, Cultivate Virtue, Build a Good Image,"¹⁷ which in practice means studying Xi Jinping's thoughts on religion.

Moreover, this April Catholics were ordered to implement the instructions of the 2026 national training session on the "Sinicization of Catholicism," held at the Central Institute of Socialism in Beijing. Bishop Li Shan of Beijing, chairman of the Catholic Patriotic Association, opened the session by stating that

the "general program" of "religious work in the new era" is to implement Xi's directives. Catholicism, he stated, must reflect "Chinese characteristics," in other words, Communist Party directives. As the Bitter Winter site noted, "The message was that Catholicism, if it is to exist at all, must be re-engineered to serve the state's political project."¹⁸

The persecution of Catholics is so intense and the Holy See's reaction has been so weak that some in underground Catholic congregations have felt betrayed. While underground Catholics are accustomed to persecution by the Chinese government, one expert who has interviewed dozens of Catholics in China since 2018 said "they feel like the Vatican is also coming after them."¹⁹

Because of all these actions, Catholicism in China is facing eventual extinction. The Patriotic Church promotes a "religion" that is unrecognizable to the Vatican, and the underground congregations are, to adopt a Marxist term, withering away. A priest living abroad said that many underground bishops are old and the Vatican is not appointing bishops to take their place. Those communities may survive with their priests for a while, but in the long run, underground Catholics in China will no longer have a church.²⁰

As Piero Tozzi, the senior director for China policy at the America First Policy Institute, wrote to me in June, "The Sino-Vatican accord is a failure."²¹

What could be worse? The Communist Party is using the official Catholic church to further a campaign that the U.S. State Department in 2021 officially characterized as "genocide." China's Communist Party is using the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association to promote the controversial Law on Promoting Ethnic Unity and Progress, designed to assimilate ethnic minorities.²²

On April 30, the European Parliament called for the repeal of the Chinese law, which it declared “openly promotes assimilation policies and restricts the cultural, religious, and linguistic freedoms of various groups within China and beyond.”²³

While promoting the law, the Catholic Patriotic Association has ignored Pope Leo’s *Magnifica Humanitas*, despite the encyclical’s direct relevance to cultural rights and protection of minorities. Local clergy were told to stress that the national law takes precedence over religious convictions and believers must show loyalty to the state.²⁴

“The Chinese Patriotic Catholic Church has entered a new phase of political usefulness,” reports Bitter Winter. “A Church that sees itself as part of the Catholic communion would naturally engage with a major papal document,” the site points out. “A Church that sees itself as an instrument of the state focuses instead on the legislation the Party seeks to promote. The priorities displayed on official Chinese Catholic platforms suggest that the Patriotic Church does not understand itself as a branch of the universal Church but as a domestic institution tasked with advancing the CCP’s political objectives.”²⁵

As a result, Catholicism in China is in “crisis,” as a Catholic newspaper in America put it in November.²⁶

The crisis will continue because, despite everything, the Vatican is committed to the 2018 agreement, which will remain in place until at least October 2028.

At the same time, Xi Jinping is tightening his grip over Catholicism. He’s not stopping, and nobody in the Vatican is stopping him.

Pope Leo has, at least so far, shown no real opposition to Xi. The Holy Father has, for

instance, not commented on the persecution of Catholic clergy or adherents. His May 24 message to China’s Catholics—Pope Benedict XVI designated May 24 as the World Day of Prayer for the Church in China—was silent on the most important issues they face.²⁷

Hope for Catholics in China remains, however. As Havel told us, communism goes against life. Anything that goes against life, he pointed out, can last a long time but eventually must fail.

In fact, communist regimes do not have a good track record when they take on organized religion. Pope John Paul II, for example, resisted the Soviets and was instrumental in bringing down a mighty communist empire.

Moreover, China’s communists have no answers to the spread of unorganized religion. House Protestant congregations are flourishing across China precisely because persecution is fueling faith.

Wang Yi of the Early Rain Covenant Church refused to register his church with the state, and he openly opposed Xi Jinping’s signature Sinicization campaign.²⁸

And that spirit of resistance lives on in his flock to this day. Churchgoers, which included children, sang a hymn in defiance as agents of the state surrounded them at their Sunday service on June 14.²⁹ Parishioners stayed behind and prayed until fellow congregants were released.³⁰

Gordon G. Chang is the author of *Plan Red: China’s Project to Destroy America* and *The Coming Collapse of China*. Follow him on X @GordonGChang.

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