

This opinion piece by PCI Vice President, Tom Plate, appeared in the South China Morning Post on Tuesday, May 21, 2019.

## How new-found trust between the Vatican and Beijing should inspire Chinese and US trade negotiators

- The Vatican's chief negotiator in China has spoken of how building trust between the two sides involves avoiding doctrinal positions in favour of solving practical problems. China and the US might take a leaf out of the cardinal's book



**Tom Plate**

Published: 1:00am, 21 May, 2019

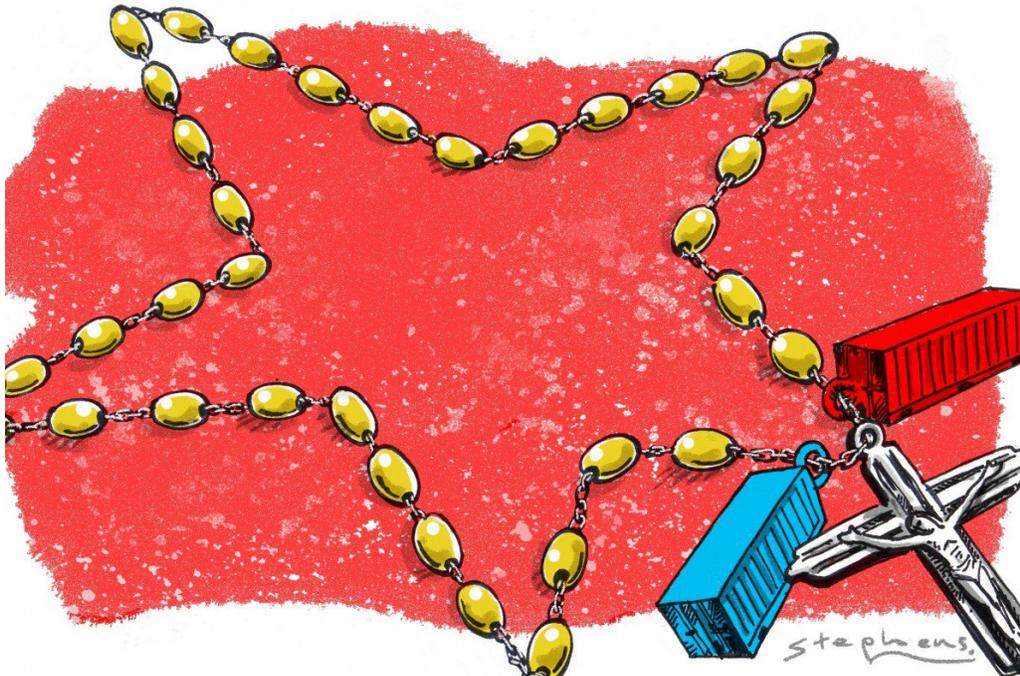


Illustration: Craig Stephens

Blessed are the peacemakers, as the Bible says. Trust takes a long time to build. Worse, in clumsy hands, it can vanish before you know it. Notice how the goodwill between Beijing and Washington seems to be bottoming out almost faster than you can say “the spirit of Mar-a-Lago and the Diaoyutai State Guest House”.

Yet, at this same dolorous moment in our fraught contemporary history, Beijing and the Vatican are mending their heretofore wary and volatile relationship by working out a “provisional” agreement on the appointment of Catholic bishops. The deal looks to have been simply a matter, one might say, of reworking Matthew 22:21: Caesar (Beijing) is to be rendered what is due to the state, without cutting out what is due to God, or in this case, the Vatican.

What's more, in this process, the representatives of Chinese President Xi Jinping and Pope Francis, leader of the Catholic Church, appear to have brewed a cup or two of utilitarian trust for one another. This was evident in an interview with Rome's lead negotiator by the Italian sinologist Francesco Sisci.

The signing of the provisional agreement “constitutes the point of arrival of a long journey, but it is above all a starting point”, said Vatican Secretary of State Cardinal Pietro Parolin. He added that “there are elements which demonstrate an increased trust between the two sides” and that “we have to journey together, because only in this way will we be able to heal the wounds and misunderstandings of the past in order to show the world that even starting from positions that are far apart, we can reach fruitful agreements.”



Pope Francis, followed by Vatican Secretary of State Cardinal Pietro Parolin, arrives in Seoul, South Korea, in August 2014. In a recent interview, Parolin spoke of “the long journey” towards a rapprochement between the church and China. Photo: AP

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In diplomacy, the playing field must be drained of opposing dogma: moral bifurcation only serves to keep both sides’ feet planted on the ground they started with, vacating the possibility of movement and nullifying the modification of differences.

Cardinal Parolin elaborated: “In dialogue, neither of the two sides gives up its own identity or what is essential for carrying out its own task. China and the Holy See are not discussing theories about their respective systems nor do they want to reopen questions which by now belong to history. Instead we are looking for practical solutions which concern the lives of real people who desire to practice their faith peacefully and offer a positive contribution to their own country.

Getting beyond dogmatic deadlocks of good versus evil requires a measure of mutual respect. The good Communist Party member doesn't have to believe in God to know that others do. China's 12 million Catholics, to the cynical heart of the materialistic Marxist, may be fooling themselves, but it is not wrong to let them believe, and quite a blunder to push them so far underground that you lose sight of what's going on.

Catholicism preaches that grace is always attainable; in effect, it practises a secular politics of forgiveness. Not China's Communist Party, which, it seems, can be coldly unforgiving, especially with its mainland capitalists and perceived political enemies. There's corruption in every society – even in sacrosanct Sweden, not to mention the US. Harsh Communist Party secular religiosity risks losing current believers via inflexibility.

Perhaps the Xi administration can take one harmless homily from Pope Francis' chief diplomat without seeming to abandon the gospel of Marx and converting to Matthew's. Parolin says the Catholic Church consciously chose not to negotiate from a standpoint of moral superiority.

That sort of street-smart Catholic secularism reflects the view that it is never a sin to negotiate, as long as you proceed from quiet self-confidence. In its soul, the church may well view the Communist Party as rather removed from godliness, but at the negotiating table, even when you believe God is on your side, it hardly helps the trust-building process to crow about having a superior presence or ideology on your team, especially one the other side cannot see.

China deserves respect. Parolin says Pope Francis “sees China not only as a great country but also as a great culture, rich in history and wisdom. Today China has come to arouse great attention and interest everywhere, especially among young people. The Holy See hopes that China will not be afraid to enter into dialogue with the wider world and that the world's nations will give credit to the profound aspirations of the Chinese people.”



Chinese bishop Joseph Li Shan (top left) baptises a member of the faithful during mass at the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception, a government-sanctioned Catholic Church in Beijing, on September 22, 2018. Photo: AP

For that to happen, the Communist Party and Chinese government must tone down the nostalgia politics. With all that the Chinese civilisation has been through, pining for a “Chinese dream” that is rooted in dogmatic delusion about a phantom past is utterly batty.

Surely, if the church can manage to partly secularise the selection of new bishops, Xi's team can manage to avoid backtracking on its hard-won economic modernisations, thoughtlessly backing up state-owned

enterprises, strengthening the Communist Party's control over private businesses, and cowering think tanks and globally respected university faculties into dreary doctrinal orthodoxy.

The dank and cheerless practice of neo-medievalism, whether of the Catholic sort or the Chinese, will lead to no good end. If, today, the Vatican and Beijing do share a common approach, though not remotely common religious beliefs, it is the redemptive qualities of continuing internal reform: making their respective institutions better, not only for themselves but for their people. Once started, stopping makes no sense.

Silly me, but if only God would make two more Parolins – one for each superpower – we might quickly see a diplomatic miracle or two in transpacific relations.

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