Thank you, Chairman Smith, for holding these important hearings on Religious Freedom in China, with a specific focus on Catholic Bishop James Su Zhimin. The Bishop’s struggle to worship God according to his conscience is emblematic of the larger struggle for religious freedom, for all people of faith, in China.

Bishop Su, if still alive, has been detained without due process for some 40 years. He is one of the world’s longest political prisoners, confined even longer than Nelson Mandela, who was imprisoned for 27 years, by apartheid South Africa. Bishop Su’s crime was to refuse membership in the government-established Chinese Patriotic Catholic Association (CPA). In China, religious registration is to submit to Chinese Communist Party priorities and oversight.

While leading a religious procession in 1996, Bishop Su was taken into police custody and promptly ranked among China’s legions of disappeared religious prisoners. Since then, China’s authorities have refused to provide any information on his case.

In the Mao era, Bishop Su had been held intermittently for 26 years either in prison or forced labor camps and subjected to merciless torture. Once, security police beat him with a wooden board until it splintered, at which point they dismantled a door frame to continue the beatings until that too shattered. Another time, he was bound by the wrists and suspended from the ceiling while being beaten. He was also placed in a closet sized chamber, hip-deep in water, so that he could neither sit nor sleep for several days. Bishop Su has been subjected to a lifetime of cruel punishment for simply praying without CCP authorization.

Throughout his life, Bishop Su has remained in communion with Rome, and he was appointed the bishop of Baoding diocese in Hebei province, by Pope John Paul II. According to the Catholic outlet UCA News, though a Chinese official gave the bishop’s nephew hope that information on the bishop would be provided with improved relations with the Vatican, even after the signing of the Sino-Vatican agreement of 2018, none was.

Bishop Su’s case represents one of the many compelling reasons why Pope Francis should not renew the provisional Sino-Vatican agreement, which is set to expire in September. Beijing’s promises for a renewed pact must be evaluated in the context of his shocking ordeal. They must also be seen in the light of the reinvigorated persecution of the Catholic and Protestant underground churches more broadly and the CCP’s recent effort to meld the CPA and the Three-Self Protestant Association with its own orthodoxy under Pres. Xi’s new policy of “sinicization.” Moreover, religious oppression against the churches has intensified in China while the world has been distracted by the current pandemic.
Beijing’s persecution and repressive treatment of the Chinese churches should trouble all China observers, whether Christian or not. These churches have constituted the largest nationwide movement with a culture and belief system distinct from that of the Chinese state. Courageous doctors, lawyers, scientists, and journalists dissent, but they can do so only individually or in small groups outside any national institutional support. Since the 1980s, the church—Protestants and Catholics, open and underground—had survived with more ideological independence than any other civil-society organization in China. Christians have long been persecuted and restricted, but Beijing’s current comprehensive threatens to be devastating to the faith. It signals the advance of totalitarianism, just as China is rising as a world power.

Before discussing how President Xi and the CCP has treated the Christian Church in recent months, however, I wish to recognize that the Uighur Muslim community has been facing probable genocide since 2018. It was in that year that the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights found that over 1 million Uighur Muslims were interned in concentration camps and forced to work in government approved factories and sweatshops. New reports assert discriminatory restrictions on Uighur family size that include forced sterilizations and abortions and the forcible separation of Uighur children and parents – all among the hallmarks of genocide under international law. Also, it is important to note the ongoing religious oppression of the Tibetan Buddhists, Falun Gong and the Church of the Almighty God sect. There can be no doubt – within China, the CCP is waging a war on religion across-the-board.

Apart from Bishop Su, other Christian leaders are also being persecuted. As the coronavirus spread, Chinese authorities made examples of two internationally renowned underground Christian leaders. On December 30, as news about the coronavirus began circulating in China on social media, Pastor Wang Yi of the Early Rain Covenant Church, a Protestant house church, was sentenced to nine years imprisonment, for “inciting subversion.” On Easter Sunday, his church’s leadership were jailed for praying online.

Under the 2018 Vatican agreement, Bishop Vincent Guo Xijin of Mindong, Fujian province, had been demoted to the position of auxiliary bishop, to make way for a bishop preferred by the government. Guo was pushed out of his home on January 15, the day that China initiated its highest-level emergency response to the virus. This time, the 61-year-old prelate was stripped of his human dignity and forced to sleep on the doorstep of the church administrative building for rejecting membership in the CPA. After international criticism, he regained access to his apartment, but with its utilities shut off.

In the ensuing months, 20 underground Catholic priests, followers of the bishop, disappeared into detention after rejecting the CPA pledge of “independence” -- meaning independence from Vatican teaching and governance. One was Father Huang Jintong, tortured with four days of sleep deprivation. He signed the CPA registration but not before trying, in keeping with a Vatican suggestion in June 2019, to add his intent to “remain faithful to the Catholic doctrine.”

On June 19, 70-year old Catholic bishop Augustine Cui Tai, of the underground church in Xuanhua Diocese, Hebei province, was reported detained without due process, as he has been for most of the last 13 years. Hong Kong’s Cardinal Joseph Zen, bishop emeritus, had been right to warn that the Vatican’s silence on the rights of its unregistered churches in its 2018
agreement would allow China to “succeed in eliminating the underground church with the help of the Vatican.”

Even some official churches are being shut. In Henan province on March 10, hundreds of officials used excavators to demolish a Three-Self church. Donghu, a Three-Self church in Xining, the capital of Qinghai province, was destroyed on Easter. Under CCP supervision, the Virgin Mary’s pictures are being replaced on church walls with Pres. Xi’s and traditional Christian hymns are dropped for “My Motherland and I” during services. In Anhui, Jiangsu, and other provinces, the exteriors of hundreds of Three-Self churches were secularized, their crosses toppled. The century old cross was removed from a Henan Catholic church on Easter, prompting Shanren Shenfu, a CPA priest, to wryly remark that “now, when a cross is removed, Christians must be calm and smile,” describing the Catholic self-censorship following the China agreement, whose contents, including its concessions to the CCP, are kept secret to this day.

In an ominous sign for the Chinese Church, whose numbers had been surging, Beijing took new measures to sharply curb the knowledge and practice of Christianity within its borders and to enlist the remaining church institutions in the tasks of party indoctrination and propaganda.

January saw the announcement of a new Bible-translation project, under CCP supervision. (The Quran is also undergoing government retranslation to align it with sinicization.) Ying Fuk Tsang, director of the divinity school at Hong Kong’s Chinese University, observed that sinicization implies that the Bible is subject to “political scrutiny.” He predicts that verses, such as those on end times, that are out of sync with CCP views will be “banned or constrained.”

On February 1, Beijing imposed 41 articles of new restrictions “implementing the values of socialism.” Religious organizations must now “spread the principles and policies of the CCP,” ensure that religious personnel and believers “support the CCP leadership,” and establish “a learning system” in CCP policies. The CCP helpfully provides “Study the Great Nation” app, with Xi’s sayings -- and a back door to the user’s social media, contacts, and Internet history.

All churches are prohibited from admitting and instructing minors, and encouraging them to consider priestly or ministerial vocations, leaving in doubt whether the faith will be transmitted to the next generation. A Three-Self pastor lamented in a blog the lack of Christian knowledge among adult congregants, noting that they loudly shout slogans, such as “Live for the Lord,” without knowing the meaning. He wrote that seminary scholarship is at “training” or entry level, with state-approved Christian journals limited in availability and content.

If Hong Kong’s new national security law restricts religious freedom too, as Cardinal Zen predicts it will, this will be another blow to Chinese Christianity, which relies heavily on Hong Kong for scholarship, information, and meetings with coreligionists from abroad. The Catholic pontifical outlet AsiaNews forthrightly declared that there is at present “a slow and inexorable suffocation of the Chinese Church, both official and underground.”

The two years of the provisional Sino-Vatican agreement have laid bare Beijing’s utter lack of good faith toward the Church. Chief Vatican negotiator with China, Archbishop Claudio Celli, has recommended that the agreement be renewed. Such a renewal could now be seen only as Vatican acquiescence to the dilution, distortion and decline of the Chinese Catholic Church.