

The Silence of Pope Francis
William McGurn, WSJ Opinion 12.7.20

Jimmy Lai has embraced his destiny. Last Wednesday the founder of one of Hong Kong's most popular newspapers, Apple Daily, was arrested on ginned-up fraud charges. On Thursday he was clapped into jail as a national security risk. Thus did a man who started the week a Hong Kong billionaire end it a Chinese dissident.

Mr. Lai's jailing has provoked condemnation from figures as diverse as Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, former Soviet refusenik Natan Sharansky and New York Rep. Eliot Engel. They have been joined by journalists, activists and politicians such as the Labour Party's Sarah Champion and other members of Parliament who on Monday raised Mr. Lai's plight in Britain's House of Commons.

The silence might be understandable if Pope Francis were in the tradition of pontiffs who hold themselves aloof from worldly affairs. But Pope Francis is a man who readily weighs in on outrages wherever he finds them, whether it be modern air conditioning, American capitalism or Catholic moms who breed "like rabbits."

But on China . . . silence. It's the deliberate consequence of the Vatican's 2018 agreement with Beijing, just recently renewed, that gives the Communist state extraordinary say over the selection of Catholic bishops—and whose terms Rome insists on keeping secret. The Vatican defends the deal as the means for carving out protections for the church's continued presence in China. Unfortunately, rather than herald a thaw in China's hostility toward religion, persecution has increased—and not only against Catholics.

"China is one of the world's worst abusers of religious liberty," says William Mumma, CEO of the Becket Fund for Religious Liberty. "What makes China's repression especially repugnant is the heavy involvement of the highest levels of government. Whether it is Christians, Tibetan Buddhists, Falun Gong or Uighur Muslims, the government attacks religious freedom in pursuit of absolute power. No religious believer, no religious leader, can in good conscience turn their gaze away from this repression."

But this is precisely what Pope Francis is doing. Hong Kong's Cardinal Joseph Zen notes it is not a recent development, that Hong Kong hearts have been "broken" by the lack of encouragement from the pope amid the protests and mass arrests that

have marked their continuing struggle with Beijing. “It has been 1½ years that we are waiting for a word from Pope Francis,” he says, “but there is none.”

Would it make a difference if the pope were to speak? History suggests it could, by highlighting the lack of moral legitimacy that is any Communist regime’s greatest insecurity. Not to mention the enhanced moral standing of a church that would come from insisting on speaking the truth about such regimes.

In a passing mention in a new book, Pope Francis rightly refers to the Muslim Uighurs in a list of “persecuted peoples.” It is as tepid a criticism as it gets and may well be the only critical thing he has ever said about China. Even so, the Chinese Foreign Ministry apparently felt wounded enough that this single sentence required public repudiation at a press conference.

Alas, Pope Francis not only chooses to see no evil in China, he won’t hear of any, either. In September, Cardinal Zen flew to Rome on his own initiative to talk to Pope Francis about what Beijing was doing to the Catholic faithful in Hong Kong and China. Pope Francis refused to see him. Yet later the pope did find the time to discuss justice and inequality with an NBA players union delegation, which presented him with a Black Lives Matter T-shirt.

I confess I am not unbiased here. Jimmy is my godson. And I love him.

So perhaps I am wrong and Pope Francis is right. Perhaps the Vatican is cleverly playing the long game. Then again, China has a centuries long history of making monkeys out of foreigners who told themselves they had the upper hand.

If the Vatican’s approach is to be justified by cold realpolitik, it ought to have the integrity to not shirk from acknowledging the price. To wit, it now requires Pope Francis to look the other way when China unjustly jails or persecutes those of his own flock.

In Robert Bolt’s play “A Man for All Seasons,” Thomas More remains silent rather than assent to the oath recognizing King Henry VIII’s second marriage. The Duke of Norfolk asks why the king didn’t just leave More to his silence. The chief minister to the king answers, because “this ‘silence’ of his is bellowing up and down Europe!”

Pope Francis’s silence on China and Jimmy Lai likewise bellows up and down the world. But not in an attractive way.