

Pope Francis denies Dalai Lama an audience because of China concerns

Tibetan leader's request declined in view of 'delicate situation'
Dalai Lama is attending meeting of Nobel laureates in Rome

Reuters in Rome

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Pope Francis has denied a private audience to the Dalai Lama because it could harm the Holy See's already fraught relations with China, the Vatican said on Friday.

The request was declined "for obvious reasons concerning the delicate situation" with China, a Vatican spokesman said. The Dalai Lama, the spiritual leader of Tibet, understood the situation, he added.

The Dalai Lama, in Rome for a meeting of Nobel peace prize winners, told Italian media he had approached the Vatican about a meeting but was told it could create inconveniences.

The Catholic church in China is divided into two communities - an official church known as the Patriotic Association, answerable to the Communist Party, and an underground church that swears allegiance only to the pope in Rome.

A Vatican official, who asked not to be identified, said the decision was "not taken out of fear but to avoid any suffering by those who have already suffered" - a reference to Catholics in China who are loyal to the pope.

The Vatican said the pope would not meet any of the laureates and that the number two in the Vatican hierarchy, secretary of state Cardinal Pietro Parolin, had sent them a message on the pope's behalf.

The last meeting between a pope and the Dalai Lama, who fled to India after a failed uprising against Chinese rule in 1959, was in 2006, when he met former pope Benedict XVI.

The Rome gathering was originally set to take place in South Africa in October, but the government denied the Dalai Lama a visa.

The Vatican, which has had no formal diplomatic ties with Beijing since shortly after the Communist Party took power in 1949, has been trying to improve relations with China.

While he was in South Korea in August, Francis urged China to pursue a formal dialogue to benefit both sides. While flying to South Korea, his plane was allowed to cross Chinese air space - a first for popes, who previously had to avoid it on Asian tours.

During his flight, Francis sent a message of goodwill to China, where the Catholic church is

keen to establish a greater presence.

The Chinese foreign ministry said at the time that Beijing was sincere about wanting to improve relations with the Vatican.

The main point of contention between Beijing and the Vatican regards which side should have the final say in the appointment of bishops. Another stumbling block is the Holy See's recognition of Taiwan, which Beijing considers a renegade province.

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