

## *China Church and News Digest, 2003*

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**T**he year 2003 has been an especially difficult year for Hong Kong. As the New Year dawned, Hong Kong was suffering from an unprecedented modern economic downturn. Unemployment, which a few years ago was less than 2%, was now going up to 8%, an all time high for recent years. People were openly expressing their general dissatisfaction with the government, especially in its rush to pass Article 23 on subversion, treason and sedition. They felt their rights were being eroded. Then came the SARS epidemic in March, which took an even greater toll on the morale of the people and on the economy. Soon SARS was spreading all over China and other countries throughout the world. Life was totally disrupted. People of all ages, social status and occupations were dying of atypical pneumonia. When SARS finally subsided, there had been some 8000 cases worldwide. In trying to assess the damage done by SARS, Mainland China estimated its monetary loss at 2.2 billion dollars, and Hong Kong proportionately was the highest SARS related casualty in the world with an estimated 1.7 billion dollars in lost revenues from the tourist trade, restaurants and general industry. Worst of all, Hong Kong had lost 299 lives, some of these among young and promising medical personnel. On June 23, nearly six months after the first reported Hong Kong case, the territory was removed from the WHO list of infected areas. After that, the economy, especially with tourists returning to the territory, has been slowly regaining momentum and struggling to recuperate from the tremendous losses suffered from the SARS outbreak.



Meanwhile, frustration with the government kept mounting

and culminated in the July 1 protest that saw 500,000 people take to the streets in the scorching heat. Upon reflection, and no doubt consultation, the government backed off from its plan to implement Article 23.

If 2003 was not a banner year for Hong Kong, neither was it a good year for the Church in China. As the Year of the Horse gave way to the Year of the Sheep, there were still two bishops somewhere in detention: Bishop Joseph Su Zhemin of Baoding (70) arrested on October 8, 1997, and his auxiliary, 53-year-old Bishop An Shuxin, arrested in March 1996; their whereabouts were unknown. There were also at least 13 priests, mostly in their 30s, in detention.

Detentions continued almost unabated throughout the year. There was a general crackdown on all groups not registered with the government, and a tightening on the Catholic Church in particular. The policy was clear with the passage of three church documents (cf. March 21-23), and as stated by Ye Xiaowen, the head of the State Administration for Religious Affairs: the "aim is to fill the void in the democratic management of the Church" (cf. May 28).

### **News notes selected from events in 2003**

- Jan 10 Bishop Joseph Zen, Bishop of the Hong Kong Diocese, is voted "the most significant person of 2002" according to the readers of the *Apple Daily*, Hong Kong's most popular Chinese newspaper.
- Jan 13 Bishop Domingos Lam of Macau, 74, receives the Golden Lotus Award Medal, the second highest decoration conferred by the government of the Macau Special Administrative Region.
- Jan 21 John Baptist Tan Yanquan, 40, is ordained Coadjutor Bishop of Guangxi by Bishop Pius Jin Peixian at Sacred Heart Church in Nanning, Guangxi Province. The two other ordaining prelates are Bishop Benedict Cai Xiufeng of Guangxi and Bishop Fang Xingyao of Linyi.

- Feb 10 Msgr. James Patrick Green, charge d'affaires in Taipei, will leave Taiwan for Rome to work at the Vatican. He will help Pope John Paul with English speeches and documents. He is being replaced by Msgr. Ambrose Madtha, a 48-year-old Indian.
- Feb 12 Chinese authorities apprehend underground priest, Fr. Dong Yingmu, in Baoding Diocese, Hebei Province. This brings the number of detained clergy in the Diocese to at least 13.
- Mar 4 Christians in Hong Kong respond to Pope John Paul II's call for special prayers and fasting for peace. Joseph Zen, Bishop of Hong Kong, asks all parishes and religious institutes to hold a special day of prayer for peace.
- Mar 19 Bishop Joseph Chen Chu of Zhanjiang (Beihai) in southern China died at the age of 81 after a long illness. He was born in 1922 on this same date.
- Mar 21-23 During a meeting in Beijing, 40 bishops and 24 standing committee members of the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association and the Bishops' Conference of the Catholic Church in China pass three documents that aim to standardize the management of the open church. These three documents are: *A Management System for Catholic Dioceses in China*, *Work Regulations for the Catholic Patriotic Association*, and *The System for the Joint Conference of Chairpersons of the Chinese Catholic Patriotic Association and of the Bishops Conference of the Catholic Church in China*.
- Apr 4 Holy Week rites are simplified because of SARS: special precautions are spelled out for Palm Sunday, no washing of the feet, no Baptisms by immersion, permission to administer Sacrament of Reconciliation by General Absolution.

- Apr 9 The oldest private library in Shanghai is Xujiahui Library. Ancient manuscripts and rare books collected in this library created by the Jesuit Fathers more than a century ago will soon be open to the public after being closed for many years. Scholars of the former Catholic Fudan University in Shanghai express happiness at the re-opening.
- May 23 Chinese religious leaders speak out against the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom. The commission criticized China's religious situation in a report the leaders say is based on hearsay and conjecture.
- May 28 Secret negotiations between China and the Dalai Lama are due to resume after the arrival in Beijing of two senior envoys of the Tibetan spiritual leader.
- May 28 Ye Xiaowen, head of the State Administration of Religious Affairs, says that the Catholic Church's three official documents filled a void in the democratic management of the Church. They stress independence, autonomy and self-management of the Church in China (cf. March 21-23).
- May 28 Legislators in Hong Kong warn that if a cardinal is assigned to head both Hong Kong and the Mainland Church, the Catholic Church may fall foul of controversial national security laws.
- June 10 A papal trip to Mongolia is under active discussion but not for this summer. Some Vatican sources have hinted that the Pope's visit to Mongolia has been postponed in order to allow more time for negotiations with the Russian Orthodox Church.
- June 16 Public security officials arrest Father Lu Xiaozhou of the underground church on his way to Wenzhou City Hospital to anoint the sick. Later that afternoon, the



security officials go to the priest's house and remove all Father Lu's belongings including documents. According to reliable sources, Father Lu will not be released soon if he does not sign an agreement letter to join the government-recognized Catholic Patriotic Association.

Twelve Protestants belonging to a "house church" are also arrested.

- June 17 Bishop Joseph Zen, the head of the Catholic Church in Hong Kong, calls for the introduction of universal suffrage in 2007 for the chief executive, and 2008 for the Legislative Council.
- June 19 Police in Southwestern China arrest eight members of an underground Christian church on charges of spreading superstition.
- June 23 Pope John Paul II will not visit Mongolia in August, a senior Vatican official said during the papal visit to Bosnia. Vatican Secretary of State, Cardinal Angelo Sodano, draws attention to the fact that the Church does not yet have a bishop. He suggests that the Pope's state of health is the major concern. The papal schedule may not permit a visit to Mongolia before 2004.
- July 1 500,000 citizens from all walks of life turn out despite scorching afternoon heat to protest the Security Bill, Article 23. Some 10,000 Catholics assemble for a prayer gathering led by Bishop Joseph Zen, who has been vocal in opposing the bill.
- July 3 Pope John Paul II appoints Bishop John Tong, director of the Holy Spirit Study Centre, as a consultant to the Vatican Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples.
- July 4 Pope John Paul II accepts Bishop Domingos Lam's application for retirement. The new bishop of Macau, José Lai, pledges to develop the formation and active participation of lay people in the work of the Church.

- July 8 Fathers Kang Fuliang, Chen Guozhen, Pang Guangzhao, Joseph Yin and Deacon Wang Lijun are arrested while going to visit Father Lu Genjun, an underground priest recently released from a labor camp.
- July 15 Father Paul Kam Po Wai, the first Hong Kong diocesan missionary priest, hopes his upcoming mission in Africa will help boost religious vocations in Hong Kong. He leaves in late July for a three-year assignment in Tanzania.
- July 23 Bishop Julius Jia Zhiguo of Zhengding is arrested after being bedridden due to a protruding disc and migraine. Public security officials arrest Jia soon after he was mobile again. Five priests have also been detained.
- July 31 The government-recognized bishop of Beijing criticizes the bishop of Hong Kong for damaging the image of the Church and complicating relations between China and Vatican.
- Aug 1 Cardinal Theodore McCarrick of Washington, who went on a private visit to China, does not admit to comments China's official media attributed to him on issues related to religion and politics.
- Aug 9 Father Chi Huitian of the underground church, Baoding Diocese, and two lay people are arrested. Father Chi is apprehended while saying Mass for students.
- Aug 31 Taiwan helps promote religious books in the Mainland by granting its copyright to Church publishers.
- Sept 1 Church leaders in Mainland China generally welcome regulations passed in March for the Church, but outsiders warn the regulations could strengthen state control over the Church.

- Sept 2 Wenceslao Padilla, a priest from the Philippines, is ordained a bishop at the newly built cathedral in Ulan Bator, the Outer Mongolia capital. He has headed the Catholic Church since its inception 11 years ago and becomes its first bishop.
- Sept 4 A young Chinese bishop, Joseph Han Zhihai, from the underground Catholic Church, writes a letter expressing his desire for communion among the divided Catholic communities in Mainland China.
- Sept 5 Bishop Julius Jia Zhiguo of Zhending is released after three months of detention.
- Sept 10 Cardinal Danneels, Archbishop of Mechelen, Brussels in Belgium, expresses his great respect for Bishop Joseph Han Zhihai of Lanzhou in northwest China during a meeting of the European Catholic China Colloquium in Belgium.
- Sept 16 Bishop Joseph Zen, Hong Kong's Catholic bishop, says the recent withdrawal of a national security bill shows that the government acknowledges the proposed law remains unacceptable to Hong Kong people in its present form.
- Sept 18 Beijing Diocese makes plans to launch China's first basic theology program for lay people. Enthusiasm for the program exceeds organizers' expectations. The enrollment is twice what the planners have originally expected.
- Sept 22 Father Song Zunsheng, parish priest of Yining Church of Urumqi Diocese, says that government officials have banned people younger than 18, students, teachers, soldiers and government officials from practicing any religion and taking part in any religion.

- Sept 26 Bishop Joseph Liao Hongqing of Meizhou pledges to strengthen laity formation in view of the scarcity of priests in his mountainous diocese. Bishop Liao, 37, is ordained Bishop of Meizhou, Guangdong Province, on September 26, 2003, by Franciscan Bishop Bernadine Dong Guangqing of Hankou, Hubei Province. Bishop Fang Xingyao of Linyi, Shandong Province, and Coadjutor Bishop Tan Yanchuan of Nanning, Guangxi Province, concelebrated. Bishop Liao was born in 1966. He graduated from the Central and South China Seminary, Hubei Province in 1991, and was ordained a priest the same year. He became administrator of Meizhou Diocese after Bishop Anthony Zhong Quanzhang died on January 28, 2000.
- Oct 5 Shandong remembers Joseph Freinademetz, Divine Word Missioner, where he worked and died. He is canonized along with the SVD founder Arnold Janssen.
- Oct 9 Internet users in Mainland China are unable to access the website of Hong Kong Catholic Diocese as the Chinese government has apparently blocked it.
- Oct 14 Two elderly bishops, Bishop Peter Zhao Zhendong of Xuanhua and Auxiliary Bishop Yao Liang of Xiwanzi, of Hebei Province have been detained by police who pressed them to register with the local Catholic Patriotic Association. Neither is affiliated with the government-approved open church.
- Oct 19 The Diocese of Hong Kong kicks off the "implementation period" of the Evangelization Year, which will last from Mission Sunday 2003 to Easter 2005. This is an ambitious evangelization campaign that aims to receive 10,000 converts by 2005. The program gets underway at Hong Kong Stadium in the presence of about 20,000 people who come for the annual Mission Sunday observance.

- Oct 28 The underground church community in Hebei Province, northern China, suffers a double blow with the arrest of a dozen priests and seminarians and the demolition of a church.
- Oct 29 The central government of China sends an order to state broadcasters to promote atheism. The aim is to strengthen control over sects, but not over government-recognized religions.
- Nov 10 The Center for Human Rights and Democracy announces that Communist officials in Zhejiang have shut down 392 temples and churches operating outside government approval and registration. Twenty-four structures have been completely destroyed and 92 others have been converted into entertainment centers.
- Nov 21 Bishop James Su Zhemin of Baoding Diocese who has been in detention since 1997 surfaces today after being taken to hospital by many public security guards.
- Dec 1 Growing concern over the spread of AIDS in China prompts Catholic offers of help. A team of five Sisters from Sacred Heart Convent in Xi'an is being trained to work on AIDS prevention.
- Dec 4 Bishop James Su Zhemin disappears again after relatives are allowed to visit him briefly in hospital.
- Dec 29 Summing up the year's China Catholic news, one agency says that the Government continued to suppress the underground church throughout 2003. Especially significant are the three new documents/regulations on Church management issued through the Chinese Catholic Bishops' Conference and Patriotic Association.