

## ***Cardinal John Baptist Wu Cheng-Chung: the Compassionate Pastor I Knew***

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Translated by Peter Barry, MM*

*"How can I repay the Lord for all the good done for me?  
I will raise the cup of salvation and call on the name of the Lord,  
I will pay my vows to the Lord in the presence of all his people."  
(Ps. 116: 12-14)*

Cardinal John B. Wu Cheng-Chung used this passage from the Psalms on the memorial card for the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of both his ordination to the priesthood and to the episcopacy. He also cited this passage to encourage the Catholics on such occasions as the blessing of a new church. He also used it to encourage me, because my name "Wai-tak" appears in the Chinese version of the psalm.

How fast time has gone by! In September this year we will mark the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the death of our dearly beloved Cardinal Wu. I am very happy to have this opportunity to express my admiration and respect for the Cardinal. Cardinal Wu became the Bishop of Hong Kong in July 1975. I had just emigrated to the States three months previously, but I returned to Hong Kong on family business in August of that year. I missed his installation as Bishop of Hong Kong, but I did participate in the parish feast day Mass of St. Mary's, Honghom, at which Bishop Wu presided. It was the first time I met Bishop Wu, and he impressed me as being a very compassionate pastor. I shall never forget that occasion.

On the Feast of the Epiphany, 1984, when The Congregation of the Immaculate Heart of Mary was celebrating the transfer of St. Mary's parish to the care of the Hong Kong Diocese after they founded it 25 years previously, the first local priest assigned there was Father Peter Leong. Father Leong was a priest of the Hong Kong diocese, and he was also a member of Focolare. He paid special attention to his relationship with the bishop. In his capacity

as spiritual director to the Christian societies in the parish, he would often remind us to pray for the bishop. Because the bishop was the shepherd of the diocese, it was very important that he be wise and in good health. This taught me to have a deeper understanding of the role of the bishop, and to increase my concern for him. At Father Peter Leong's suggestion, in 1986, I became a member of the Diocesan Liturgical Commission. In 1988, I became a member of the advisory committee for the diocesan campaign, "March into the Bright Future." Therefore, my opportunities to meet the bishop greatly increased. It was easy to talk to the bishop because he was very approachable. Our conversations were compatible. Topics ranged from buying a camera to the return of Hong Kong to the mainland, and decisions about whether to emigrate or to stay behind.

Because of the June 4<sup>th</sup> Incident, my parents and my unmarried brothers and sisters all migrated to Toronto, Canada. I paid attention to the call of the bishop to remain in Hong Kong, as a brave and patriotic Hong Kong citizen.

In 1990, I completed a four-year term of service to the Diocesan Liturgical Commission, but the bishop asked me to serve for another term. He also asked me to serve on the Executive Committee of the Laity Council. As a lay person, I had no reason not to serve on the Laity Council. The Executive Committee accepted me as a member in 1991. In 1994, in my capacity as vice-chairperson of the Laity Council, I was invited to join the group of seven persons who accompanied Cardinal Wu to visit Beijing, as the representative of the laity. With Cardinal Wu, we made a pastoral visit to three cities: Beijing, Wuhan and Xian. I learned a lot about the Church in China, and my understanding of the Church there increased very much.

The second time I accompanied Cardinal Wu to China, I experienced Cardinal Wu's superior wisdom and eloquence at close hand. In a meeting with the Religious Affairs Bureau, we hotly discussed over 30 topics. There were no periods of awkward silence. The Cardinal's position was firm. He put forth many opinions. The officials had to admit that they had met their match. It definitely must have been a help to the Chinese Church. Cardinal Wu was especially concerned about seminary and religious formation. Therefore on his three trips to China, he always tried to visit

seminaries and convents. He would give each seminarian and Sister a beautiful cross, to encourage them to take up their own crosses and follow Our Lord throughout their lives. The seminarians and Sisters were often moved to tears.

Cardinal Wu was an emotional person. I saw tears come to his eyes in Wuhan's South-Central Seminary while listening to vice-rector Father Pang's report. In Hong Kong, three times I saw the Cardinal moved to tears. Once was when his beloved mother died. I brought some lilies and chrysanthemums to decorate his private altar, when he was offering memorial Masses for his mother. When I asked him if he thought he would return home to show reverence to his mother, tears came to his eyes. He said that when he last saw his mother in 1986, she told him that there was no need to return home anymore. For one thing, it stirs up the people, and secondly it is not necessary. She felt that Cardinal Wu now belonged to the Hong Kong Church and to the universal Church. He must put his energy into being a good pastor in Hong Kong. Another time I saw him cry was after the June 4<sup>th</sup> Incident of 1989, when the national army killed many young students. When he thought of the sacrifice those young people made for the country, and of the mothers and fathers who lost their children, tears of sorrow came to his eyes.

The last time I saw Cardinal Wu cry was during his last illness in Queen Mary Hospital. He looked at the crucifix that was temporarily hung on the wall of his sick room, and said: "I am glad to offer up my suffering to make up what is lacking in the Body of Christ, the Church, as God has appointed me to do as his minister. (Col. 1:24-5) For the past six years I have accepted the suffering of this illness. I was willing to accept this responsibility and sacrifice for all the Catholics in the Church." I said that I was willing to accept his departure, and I expressed the hope that we would meet together one day in heaven. The bishop cried sorrowfully.

In October this year, the "Year of Faith" will begin. Although Cardinal Wu has returned to his heavenly home, his faith is our model. From 1940, when he answered God's call to enter the seminary, his faith led him on. Then he was ordained a priest in 1952. From his ordination as a priest up until the year he died, was exactly 50 years. He celebrated his golden jubilee of ordination on his sickbed in Queen Mary Hospital. I was praying next to his bed,

when the congratulatory letter from Pope John Paul II arrived. I read this for Cardinal Wu, and he was so happy that he thanked God for the many graces He had bestowed upon him: he went from Meixian to Miaoli to happily carry out pastoral work there. Then he came to serve the Church in Hong Kong, and at the same time was a bridge person between the universal Church and the Church in the motherland. Cardinal Wu deeply thanked God for calling him to these apostolates. He thanked God for the Holy Spirit's guidance and the Blessed Mother's assistance. They helped him to complete a half-a-century of service to the Church. Cardinal Wu fondly remembered his missionary days in Miaoli, when he rode his bicycle around to visit the Catholics. He remembered the name of every baptized Catholic. In fact, one time when I visited Taiwan, as a member of the Hong Kong Diocese's Justice and Peace Commission, I especially requested to visit Miaoli. I was able to bring back to Bishop Wu some materials from the Sisters and Catholics, which brought not only news, but expressed their love and concern for him.

When Bishop Wu worked in Miaoli, it was among Hakka people. He was emotionally very compatible with them. He was like a fish in water when he met them. He lived in Miaoli for 18 years, and was very happy during those years. He was not ambitious to be bishop. One time when Bishop Peter Lei Wang-Kei was in Taiwan for a meeting, he went to visit Father Wu. Bishop Lei asked him if he would like to go to Hong Kong to help him. Bishop Lei died a short time after he returned to Hong Kong. Cardinal Wu had such great respect for his classmate, Bishop Lei, that over 10 years later he named both the Formation Center for the Laity in Saiwanho and the diocesan hotel on Robinson Road after him.

Cardinal Wu used to say how lucky Bishops Joseph Zen and John Tong were. They both had a month's time to think over whether they wanted to become bishops. When he himself was called to go to Taipei from Miaoli to meet the papal representative, he only had four hours to consider whether he wanted to become a bishop. With Bishop Yu Bin's encouragement, although he knew that being the bishop of Hong Kong was a challenging and heavy responsibility, he still obeyed God's will, and accepted the call to become Bishop of Hong Kong. He only asked that the appointment be delayed for three months so that he could spend time studying Cantonese.

Cardinal Wu encouraged us Catholics to be “good Hong Kong citizens, good Christians, good Chinese.” He fervently loved his motherland. His only wish was that instead of promoting the four modernizations, they should promote a fifth modernization, namely, that of religious freedom. He felt that the citizens of China should be free to hear the Gospel, and to enjoy the peace and happiness that belief in it brings. He hoped that China would become “Christianized.” In order to better understand the situation of the Church in China, in 1980, he founded the Holy Spirit Study Centre. Through the centre, he hoped to promote dialogue between Hong Kong and the mainland. Cardinal Wu also wished to serve the needs of the mainland Church, and to build a bridge between the mainland Church and the universal Church. In 1986, when a group of Catholics founded the Catholic Institute for Religion and Society, Cardinal Wu supported it as being another channel for exchange with the Church in China. He supported both centers financially.

Cardinal Wu also urged the Catholics to make pilgrimages to China, to help the Chinese Church to alleviate their needs, and to show the support and concern of the Hong Kong Catholics for their brothers and sisters in the mainland. In the 1990s, when I visited the mainland Church, I saw Cardinal Wu’s picture hanging on the walls of many seminaries, convents and individual Catholics’ homes. From this we can see that the mainland Catholics, and their leaders, had a great respect and love for Cardinal Wu.

In 1997, when the sovereignty over Hong Kong returned to China, it caused a crisis of confidence. Not only were many individual citizens making plans to emigrate, but some religious congregations were making plans to leave Hong Kong. However, Cardinal Wu had great faith in the future of Hong Kong. He felt that where there is a crisis, there is also an opportunity. He thought that there would be many opportunities for the church to develop. Besides strengthening formation programs within the Church, e.g. organizing small faith communities, he wanted to buy land and build churches in each of the new development areas in the New Territories. St. Thomas Church in Tsing Yi, St. Jerome’s Church in Tin Shui Wai, and St. Andrew’s Church in Tseung Kwan O were all built under this premise. They just complemented the pastoral needs of the people moving into those new development areas.

At the time of the changeover, many Hong Kong citizens moved abroad, including many Catholics; many were moving to the Toronto area in Canada. As a result, the bishops of several dioceses overseas wrote letters to Cardinal Wu, asking him to send priests to take care of the Chinese Catholic in their dioceses. Vocations to the priesthood in the Hong Kong diocese itself were lacking. Because the number of priests was insufficient, parishes needed to unite with other parishes. Nevertheless, our wise bishop, not wishing to abandon the Catholics who emigrated abroad, assigned priests to go to serve them. This shows Cardinal Wu's farsightedness, and his concern for the universal Church. Each year in the three Chinese Catholic parishes in Toronto, over 3,000 new Catholics are baptized. This was our beloved Cardinal's best reward.

In August 1986 Cardinal Wu told me that he had a sickness, which would eventually take his life. He was already making arrangements for future diocesan affairs. He also sought consultation from a famous doctor. He was taking some new medicine from America. When the cardinal saw me crying, he told me to keep his illness a secret. He pointed to the cross over the door of his quarters, and said: "Jesus needs my help. The Epistle to the Colossians says: 'Now I rejoice in my sufferings for your sake, and in my flesh I am filling up what is lacking in the afflictions of Christ on behalf of his body, which is the Church.' I accept the pain of my illness, but I still need your prayers and support." Cardinal Wu's humility and fervor, his patience and steadfastness, have created a beautiful example for us. When he left the office each day, he always carried a bundle of documents to read back in his living quarters. During his 27 years as pastor of the Church in Hong Kong, he never used his deserved vacation time. Only in the 1980s, when he had to go to Rome on Church business, he would sometimes go to Lourdes on pilgrimage.

Cardinal Wu loved life, and depended on God's grace. Because he loved God, he sacrificed his whole life, his deep love and his long years of service to the Diocese of Hong Kong. I believe that Cardinal Wu is in the heavenly Jerusalem, continuing to pray for us and for the Hong Kong Diocese. Although he has left us for ten years, he still remains in our hearts, and we will never forget him.

*Rest in peace, dearly beloved Cardinal Wu!*