

# ***Cardinal Joseph Zen: “I Am just a Conscientious Teacher.” — Life after Turning 80***

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*Annie Lam*

## **Fifty Years of Seminary Teaching**

Cardinal Joseph Zen, bishop emeritus of Hong Kong, started a blog named “Old Yosef” shortly after he retired from being the Bishop of Hong Kong in April 2009. In his blog, he often expresses views on the Church in China and on public affairs in Hong Kong. Over three years, the blog has attracted more than 60,000 hits. The 80-year-old Salesian cardinal also frequently reads articles on the development of the Church in China and China-Vatican relations on the Internet, particularly articles posted on websites in China. He sometimes makes responses to opinions expressed there.<sup>1</sup> “Now that I have reached 80 years of age, it is time to enjoy life,” Cardinal Zen always says. But he continues to take part in social struggles and Church events. In late October 2011, just three months before he turned 80, he staged a 72-hour hunger strike outside the Salesian House of Studies in Shaukeiwan, Hong Kong to express his discontent with the infringement on freedom and rights to education in Hong Kong, which he described it as a gesture “to show my grief.”<sup>2</sup> The event was related to the diocese’s loss, on October 28, 2011, in the legal battle against the Hong Kong government’s education policy regarding school board management.

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<sup>1</sup> Cardinal Zen’s blog “Old Yosef” was opened in 2009. By August 22, 2012, there were 84 posts and 60,134 visits, and cumulative browsers numbered 32,259. Categories of his posts include Church, Weekly reports between Grandpa and youth, Chat, Political Observations and Notices. [http://blog.yahoo.com/\\_Y5NIRNHFPQDNA6XOGEWA2GYC2U/articles/page/1](http://blog.yahoo.com/_Y5NIRNHFPQDNA6XOGEWA2GYC2U/articles/page/1)

<sup>2</sup> “Card. Zen: My struggle and that of Hong Kong for Catholic schools,” AsiaNews, October 25, 2012.

Interviewed by *Tripod* in July 2012 at the same Salesian House about life after turning eighty, sparked Cardinal Zen's memory about the hunger strike, and he still commented with strong emotions: "I want this case to be recorded in history." The incident had caught the attention of the media, both locally and internationally. He has been one of the few cardinals who have ever carried out a hunger strike during their tenure as a cardinal. During the demonstration, local faithful and people from all walks of life in the public had visited him. Some mainland Catholics also showed their support by following his case on the Internet.

During that interview, Cardinal Zen also recalled his years as a seminary professor. Cardinal Zen has been involved in seminary education since he obtained his doctorate in philosophy in Italy in 1964. When he returned to Hong Kong, he began to teaching philosophy at the Salesian seminary, then located on Cheung Chau island. Since 1971, he has been teaching philosophy and some subjects in theology at the Holy Spirit Seminary College, up to the present day. He was Dean of Philosophy from 1984 to 1991. Then, from 1989 to 1996, as a visiting professor, he taught philosophy and theology in several seminaries in China. By 2012, he had contributed a total of 48 years to seminary education.

Cardinal Zen's commitment to seminary teaching brought him back to his native place, Shanghai. Thus he has made a concrete contribution to the building up of the Church in China. Between 1989 and 1996, he taught in the following mainland seminaries: Shanghai Sheshan Seminary, Wuhan Seminary, Xi'an Seminary, Beijing National Seminary, Beijing Diocesan Seminary, Hebei Seminary in Shijiazhuang and Shenyang Seminary. After China's restoration of the Church in China in the early 1980s, the then Father Zen was the first priest from outside China officially allowed to teach in Sheshan Regional Seminary in 1989.<sup>3</sup> A newsletter of the Shanghai Diocese, issued on October 8, 1989, described the presence of Father Zen and of other visiting priest-lecturers as

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<sup>3</sup> MALOVIC, Dorian: Chinese translated version of "Mgr Zen, un homme en colere" (Entretiens avec le cardinal de Hong Kong), 2005.

having played a positive role in promoting academic exchanges between the Church in China and foreign Catholic scholars.<sup>4</sup>

In this school year (2012-2013), Cardinal Zen still teaches ethics, the history of modern European philosophy and eschatology at the Holy Spirit Seminary College of Theology and Philosophy. “Yes, I will continue to teach,” he asserts. After his appointment as cardinal in 2006, he is obliged to attend meetings in Rome or other places from time to time. In order not to disrupt the school schedule, he usually returns to teach immediately after meetings. Occasionally he still has to make up classes. Shortly after flights from Rome land in Hong Kong around 6 or 7 AM, he has been known to rush from the airport to the seminary to begin his class at 9 AM. “I hoped to be able to complete the courses before exams began. It is fine with me. I don’t feel tired,” said Cardinal Zen, demonstrating his professionalism and his dedication to the mission of teaching.

*Tripod: Your Eminence, you have been studying and teaching philosophy for more than 50 years. Recently you shared about your teaching life with philosophy priest-teachers, and you revealed that studying philosophy was not your personal choice, but that you did it purely out of obedience. Are you interested in philosophy now?*

**CARDINAL ZEN:** Studying philosophy was not my choice. I did it out of obedience, but now I do like philosophy. All global affairs start from thinking. Philosophy plays an important role in enabling people to understand. Even if people do not study philosophy, they are affected by it. When I was ordained a priest in 1961, I had just finished my licentiate in theology at the Pontifical Salesian University in Rome. My superior asked me to do further studies in philosophy so that I could teach the subject at the Salesian seminary in Hong Kong. So, I obeyed and continued my studies in philosophy at the same university. Actually, I was more interested in theology then. In 1964, I obtained a doctorate in philosophy, and

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<sup>4</sup> “China: visiting scholars taught at the the Shanghai Catholic Sheshan Seminary”, Union of Catholic Asian News (Chinese News), November 4, 1989, page 6.

began teaching philosophy at our seminary in Cheung Chau. There were more than 40 seminarians from Hong Kong and abroad, including Vietnam and Thailand, and those preparing to serve in Japan and South Korea. The philosophy of the Catholic Church has attracted me most. We are blessed with a solid community in the Church, and the Church has a rich tradition with mainstreams of thinking, which is deep and strong.

I appreciate and understand our Catholic philosophy. It is true that one needs to understand through reasoning, not just be convinced by authority, or be forced to accept thoughts. Unlike other philosophical schools, where philosophers have each one their own ideas, our Catholic tradition teaches people basic principles. This of course demands in-depth study and comprehensive understanding. Philosophy is a compulsory subject in Catholic seminary education. The Church encourages believers not only to study the Church's own philosophy, but also the trends of philosophy in the world.

Philosophical studies involve some background knowledge of history. On special topics, one has to know the historical development in order to understand them. Our Church encourages us to have an understanding of all kinds of philosophy in order to have a balanced learning. Catholic philosophy can withstand the challenges from all different streams of thought. The Church encourages respect for reason. For me, I have studied and taught philosophy for decades. Now, I can say that I have much confidence in the philosophy of our Catholic Church, and I feel happy about it. The most important thing is that in Catholic philosophy one can find answers to all one's questions.

***Your Eminence, would you describe yourself as a philosopher?***

I AM AFRAID NOT. Philosophers should have a unique way of thinking on certain questions and conduct in-depth researches in order to offer contributions to the discipline. I was not given an opportunity to be a philosopher, but I am very suitable to teach philosophy in seminaries. I do not rely on faith or authority to accept a theory. I must first understand a notion thoroughly before accepting it. Then, we can teach our students with confidence. Within the



discipline of philosophy, metaphysics seems more abstract. I hope my students can understand fully the content of a subject.

To study philosophy, one needs a solid knowledge of history. In the past, some seminarians complained they could not understand philosophy very well. This might have been due to the fact that the subject was taught in Latin. Students may have lacked knowledge of history of the subject, and thus felt disinterested in it.

I am serious in my teaching, but absolutely not qualified to be called a philosopher. I have neither conducted in-depth investigations nor have I acquired unique insights into any subject in philosophy. I have not added anything to the deposit of truth in philosophy, but I have enjoyed the wealth of it. I am glad to share this wealth with others. I am not a philosopher, but I'm just a conscientious teacher. I am a serious and responsible teacher. I have conscientiously treasured the wealth of our Catholic Church, and I now earnestly share this wealth with my students. I do not have the opportunity or the time to study a subject in great depth. However, I am clear and I think I have accomplished the mission that the Church has given to me. I completed the nine-year formation program in philosophy and theology, which was provided by my Religious Congregation to fructify. For this, I am grateful, and I have not wasted any resources and time in my religious life.

***Why did you say you had no opportunity to become a philosopher?***

I WAS PREOCCUPIED WITH TEACHING, preparing for classes, the formation of seminarians and community life. Basically, there was no time left for research. Having said that, I consider myself as knowing well the needs of the students and really understanding the subjects well. My mind is not closed, and I always make references to the history of philosophy. In retrospect, I can say that teaching those days in Cheung Chau seminary engaged my time.

Furthermore, I had many tasks in the Salesian community. I became a superior, a provincial and a person with commitments to the community. Since 1971, the Salesians collaborated with the Holy Spirit Seminary College in training seminarians and students. I began to teach philosophy, dogmatic theology, moral theology and other subjects. There was little time left to delve into specialized topics that require in-depth research.

My professors were excellent and serious scholars. I had received wonderful guidance in my religious formation and academic training. As mentioned above, there was no time to do deeper research. I have not even written a book on philosophy. I have not contributed to the academic progress of the subject. I am purely a committed teacher, but not a researcher.

*Your doctoral dissertation was on the French Catholic philosopher Monsignor Maurice Nedoncelle (1905-1976). How did his thoughts affect your views?*

YES, I STUDIED THIS FRENCH PHILOSOPHER. He was a professor of the Catholic University of Strasbourg. He was a personalist. His most important book was *The Reciprocity of Consciousness (La Reciprocite de Conscience)*. My teachers were inspiring. I liked them a lot. They were very responsible in teaching. I particularly appreciated the teachers who taught me metaphysics and ethics. I visited one of them in 2011. He was 93 years old then.

*In 1989-96, you taught in several seminaries in China. You described this experience as your "happiest days." Did you teach philosophy there? Did the seminarians in China enjoy studying philosophy as well?*

MY TEACHING IN THE MAINLAND SEMINARIES began with Shanghai. During the first year, Bishop Aloysius Jin of Shanghai invited me to teach theology, because philosophy subjects had already been taken up by other teachers. In the second semester, the two philosophy teachers were sick, and I was asked to teach philosophy. In various seminaries, I taught different subjects. Although I had not taught theology before going to teach in China, my licentiate was in theology. Moreover, there was sufficient time for preparing lessons. I could concentrate in reading books and references in the library of the Sheshan Regional Seminary. This seminary housed a great deal of books that Jesuit Father Edward Malatesta had collected from seminaries outside of China. Those books were in foreign languages, which might not have been useful for the mainland students then. However, they were useful to me for preparing lessons.

My impression of philosophy students in Hong Kong and China was that both were quiet, diligent, eager to take notes and

study. Students in Hong Kong were more active in the past in asking questions than the present time. Similarly, seminarians in mainland were attentive, hardworking and busy taking notes. They probably had little time to raise questions. However, students from both places liked to maintain viewpoints put forward by scholars in their books. So far, I have not written any books on philosophy, and this seems to be a disadvantage for me.

The experience of teaching in seminaries in China gave me a deep sense of satisfaction. In those days, very few theology professors were allowed to teach in China. In Sheshan and other seminaries, I was welcome to teach. In the first year of teaching in China, I went to Shanghai three times. Since 1993, I was allowed to teach in other seminaries. Then, each year between 1993 and 1996, I spent six months in mainland seminaries, and six months in Hong Kong. While in China, I divided my time into four slots, each six weeks long. In each six week period, I could teach one course intensively at one seminary. Then, I moved to another seminary to teach another course. The task was very tough, but very enjoyable.

*On July 7, 2012, one of your students at Sheshan seminary, Father Thaddeus Ma Daqin of Shanghai, was ordained an auxiliary bishop of Shanghai. What was your impression on him? After he quit the Patriotic Association, he has been restricted in his episcopal ministry. You have protested on July 11 on his behalf under the bright sun, and prayed for him. What impact does his ordination have on the Church in China?*

YES, BISHOP MA WAS MY STUDENT. He was very smart and quiet in class. It is wonderful what he did during the episcopal ordination, when he announced that he would give up his duties in the Patriotic Association from that day onwards. This was in accordance with the Letter of Pope Benedict XVI to the Catholics in China in 2007. The Pope's letter stressed that the Patriotic Association is not compatible with Catholic doctrine. That the Holy See addresses this problem is unacceptable to the Patriotic Association.

*Today, only several mainland bishops have obtained a doctorate or a licentiate. For a bishop, is there a relationship between holding a higher degree and his episcopal ministry?*

OUR CATHOLIC CHURCH does not just emphasize academic achievement, and religious formation is equally important. Studying is essential, and at least a seminarian has to pass the designated examinations. Personality growth and spiritual formation are more crucial. Deeper knowledge in Church matters will obviously enable a cleric to understand better the functions and the role of a bishop or a Church leader, and understand things more deeply and more wisely.

The problem faced by the Church in China today is more in the area of formation than in academic knowledge. The two needs should be balanced. Our faith is more about formation than knowledge.

*After reaching the age of 80, what motivates you to continue with the ministry of visiting prisoners in Hong Kong? What do inmates tell you at your visitations?*

I AM NOT WILLING TO GIVE UP THE PRISON VISITS. I have visited the prisoners for more than a decade. The inmates at Category A (long term imprisonment) and I have become friends. They really need moral support. My visits to them began with visiting convicts of an arson case at the Hong Kong Immigration Department in 2000. The convicts were young fellows, born in mainland China whose parents were Hong Kong residents. They were waiting for the local government to grant them the right of abode in Hong Kong. The inmates of Category A are divided into eight groups, and in one day I can meet only four groups. So for each visit, I have to go on two consecutive days in order to meet them all. Sometimes, there is only one person, and sometimes ten persons. I do not mind how many inmates come each time. Today, the prisoners whom I visit are aware of current affairs, as they often read newspapers and watch the TV news. We usually discuss events related to society or to the Church, local and international. They may express their views, and I share my responses and my life experiences. Also, I show religious DVDs for them to watch, but I do not deliberately preach. They appreciate our friendship.

Prison visitation is a good tradition in the Catholic Church. As a Salesian priest, I have visited prisons since the 1960s. In those days, we visited prisons in Chi Ma Wan, Tong Fuk and Shek Pik.

*Are you hoping to revisit the mainland?*

NO, NOT REALLY. Since I was ordained Coadjutor Bishop of Hong Kong in 1996, I went with then Bishop Tong and Vicar General Father Dominic Chan to Beijing and Shanghai before the handover in 1997. In early 1998, I visited the Wuhan, Xi'an, and Shijiazhuang seminaries. But I encountered some restrictions even then. Then, I was denied permission to visit China after the Asian Synod of Bishops in the Vatican in 1998. Then, my last visit to Shanghai was in 2010.

***What plans have you got now?***

IN FACT, THE SALESIAN COMMUNITY LIFE IS VERY RICH, and full of activities. In May 2012, I went to participate in the World Eucharistic Congress in Ireland, and then to France and Italy. As the Pope's Special Envoy, I visited Papua New Guinea in July 2012 to participate in the centenary of the first local beatified saint. Recently, I conducted a three-day retreat for local Catholic youth leaders. Life is rather busy.

I hope to publish some books of my own, including a collection of my notes on philosophy. I hope to make a collection of articles and speeches that appeared in various publications since I became bishop in 1996. The diocesan weekly *Kung Kao Po* has published the Sunday homilies I wrote for three liturgical years (Years A, B and C) as well as a collection of articles I wrote over the years for the *Kung Kao Po*.

**After the Interview...**

Actually, the emeritus bishop of Hong Kong never feels tired. His calendar is filled up, and his missionary life is as enriched as ever. In less than one month after this interview, he left Hong Kong to lead a pilgrimage tour of local Catholics to Poland, to follow in the footsteps of the great Blessed Pope John Paul II, who appointed him coadjutor bishop in 1996, and to pray for the Church in China and for other intentions there.

Also, I met a Salesian bishop from Thailand in late August, who was once a student of Cardinal Zen in Cheung Chau. He recalled the happy days with the "serious teacher," Father Zen, and he shared experiences of the wonderful time spent in the seminary on that island. Including himself, at least three other brothers have become bishops in different countries.