

## *The Seventh Chinese Cardinal: John Tong Hon*

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*Gianni Criveller, PIME*

**P**ope Benedict XVI elevated Hong Kong's Bishop John Tong Hon, 72, as a cardinal on February 18, 2012. John Tong is the seventh Chinese cardinal in the history of the Church, and the first to be born in Hong Kong. He was appointed Cardinal-Priest of Our Lady Queen of Apostles Church in Rome.

After his elevation to the College of Cardinals, the Holy See appointed Cardinal Tong to several other important posts. On April 21, 2012 he was appointed a member of the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples and the Pontifical Council for Inter Religious Dialogue. On July 2, 2012 the Holy Father Pope Benedict XVI appointed him as one of the three presidents of the Synod on New Evangelization to be held in Rome in October 2012. The Holy Father also appointed him as member of the committee supervising Vatican finances.

After the announcement of the nomination, on January 9, 2012, Bishop Tong told Hong Kong's *Sunday Examiner* that he considers himself both "unworthy and privileged" to be a cardinal. The honor is certainly a "sign of the Holy Father's great love and concern for the Catholic Church in China, and an encouragement for the efforts of the Hong Kong diocese to promote reconciliation and full communion between the China Church and the Universal Church."

On the day on which the Pope bestowed the cardinal's red hat on Bishop Tong, the newspaper of the Diocese of Hong Kong published two messages, one to the faithful and one to the city government. In them the newly created cardinal calls on Catholics to witness to the faith. "We should look for opportunities to help others with our time and money, especially the weak and marginalized in our society. (...) Giving of our time to visit the sick,

housebound friends, people of advanced age or the orphaned are also ways of showing gratitude.”

In the message addressed to the government and the political authorities, Cardinal Tong underlined the need for full democracy for the country, with universal suffrage and direct election of the Chief Executive, in addition to policies that care for the most vulnerable in society, especially regarding housing, medical care, education and pensions. “Every government — says the message — has a specific duty to harmonize the interests of different sectors according to the demands of justice.”

On March 2, Cardinal Tong told the press that he had recently expressed to Chinese officials the importance of exchange and dialogue. China is moving toward a greater economic freedom, but its religious policy is still strict, and he calls on China to improve religious freedom. “If Catholics in China were to enjoy full freedom of religious belief and activities, they would not only be able to contribute more fruitfully to the well-being of society, but would also earn for their Motherland a higher reputation in the international community.”

As for Hong Kong, Cardinal Tong said the diocese is committed “to establish a society respecting human dignity, with special care for the weak and the marginalized.” His message also expressed hope for the democratic development and social policies of the next government of Hong Kong.

On March 3, 2012 Cardinal Tong celebrated a Mass at the cathedral, attended also by pastors from the other Christian Churches in Hong Kong. Cardinal Tong said that Hong Kong will continue to play a “Bridge-Church” role, helping the Mainland Church to have better formation for priests and Sisters, to reconcile among themselves and achieve full communion with the Holy Father and the Universal Church. Tong also asked the faithful to pray for the reopening of the China-Vatican dialogue, disrupted due to the two illicit episcopal ordinations in 2011. Those ordinations forced the Holy See to declare that the two bishops subjected themselves to excommunication. He asked for prayers so that “those excommunicated may soon repent and reconcile themselves with the Church, thus healing the wounds suffered by the Church.”

### **An eventful childhood (in the midst of the Japanese invasion)**

John Tong was born on July 31, 1939 in Hong Kong in a non-Catholic family. John was the first of three children (two boys and one girl). His mother was from Macao, and her grandfather produced mantles for gaslights in Hong Kong. When she was a young girl she studied at the college run by the Canossian Sisters in Caine Road. In April 1934 Archbishop Mario Zanin, the Apostolic Delegate to China, visited the school. The Sisters mobilized all the students to welcome the famous guest in the most solemn fashion. Sister Mabel Anderson, the principal, chose the future Cardinal's mother, although not a Catholic, to present flowers to Archbishop Zanin on behalf of the school. "Maybe she was chosen because she always dressed nicely," recalled Cardinal Tong, "She told us this episode many times, always feeling very proud of that privilege. Since then she had the highest respect for the Sisters, particularly for Sr. Anderson. The good impression about the Church remained in her heart but, at that time, she did not ask for baptism."

John Tong was two years old when the Japanese invaded Hong Kong and his family had to move to Macao, where they stayed with relatives. Later he was sent to the family's hometown near Guangzhou City, where he stayed with his grandmother until the end of the war. After the war ended on August 15, 1945, he was reunited with his family in Guangzhou City. But unfortunately, his father, an accountant, fell ill with tuberculosis.

### **Under the Communists**

In those years, the Communists and the Nationalists engaged in fierce fighting in northern and central China, and many wounded, destitute soldiers sought refuge in Guangzhou, where the Tong family lived. Young John witnessed the compassion and love shown by the Maryknoll missionaries to those people, and was greatly impressed particularly by the parish priest, Father Bernard Meyer, who, recalled Cardinal Tong, "had the same love and compassion as Christ towards those in need."

Fr. Meyer introduced Mrs. Tong, the bishop's mother, to be a teacher in the nearby Baogang parish school, so that she could support the family. Fr. Meyer also introduced little Tong to the

Catholic primary school, called Ming Dak Primary School, located near the cathedral. He was granted a scholarship and studied free of charge. "I was supported by the Church my whole life. The Church provided all my education. I am a church-raised boy. As for my vocation, of course it took a long time to become clear and firm. Moved by the good example of my parish priest, I started thinking that becoming a priest was a good thing. Fr. Meyer came to visit my home and told my parents about my desire."

When the Communists came to power in China, church activities came under pressure, and Father Meyer was forced to leave China. The local Chinese priests suggested that it would be better if young John went to Macao to pursue his vocation. His parents trusted the Church and agreed that it would be good for him to leave China.

### **The formative years in Macao, Hong Kong and Rome**

In February 1951, at the age of 12, Tong left China and his family, and went to Macao to enter the seminary. Meanwhile Tong's mother, younger sister and younger brother, moved back to Hong Kong one by one, at different times. They were allowed to emigrate because they had relatives in Hong Kong. Tong's father died in China in 1952, at the young age of 42. John Tong's most beloved mother passed away in Hong Kong in 2011, aged 91, with her last few years spent at the Home for the Aged, run by the Little Sisters of the Poor in Hong Kong.

After six years in Macao, where he finished his high school studies, Tong moved to the South China Regional Seminary (later, the Holy Spirit Seminary) in Hong Kong, to study philosophy and theology. In 1964, with the help of Father Thomas Malone, another Maryknoll priest, he was sent to Rome to study theology at the Pontifical Urbaniana University, while residing at the Pontificio Collegio Urbano. The Second Vatican Council was still in session, and John Tong was immersed in, and breathed, so to speak, the special atmosphere of those years in Rome. He was ordained a priest in January 1966 by Pope Paul VI, only one month after the closing ceremony of the Council. Later he gained a doctorate in theology from the same Pontifical Urbaniana University.

## Serving the Hong Kong Diocese

On his return to Hong Kong, Father Tong went to live at Holy Spirit Seminary and has resided there ever since. From 1970 onwards, he taught theology and Chinese philosophy there, and served as Dean of Studies in the 1970s. Later he graduated with a Masters degree in Chinese philosophy from the Chinese University of Hong Kong. He has collaborated with the theological review *Concilium* and has given papers at various international conferences.

In 1979, Bishop Wu appointed Fr. Tong to head the newly created diocesan Holy Spirit Study Centre, a position he holds to the present day. It had a major impact on Tong's life. The decision to open the Holy Spirit Study Centre was both Bishop Wu's and the diocese's. China was opening up, and it became obvious that Hong Kong should do something for the Church in China. After Deng Xiaoping's open door policy (including its religious policy) took effect (1979), people started traveling across the border, bringing back news and requests for help. It was necessary to do something to meet those needs.

Cardinal Tong said: "This appointment was a turning point for me, because I had to travel and to participate in more international meetings. I started to be known by many people around the world who were interested in China. Many people would contact us before visiting China. Therefore we had to learn how to articulate our ideas, to let people know what we think. And then we had to keep checking whether our ideas were correct or not. So, step by step, we built up our knowledge and experience. This has been a great gift to us. It was God's providence."

There were many important moments in the life of the Holy Spirit Study Centre: many bishops and well-known personalities from all around the world came to visit. One of them was the Secretary of State, Cardinal Agostino Casaroli; and another was the present Holy Father, then Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger.

In 1992, Cardinal Wu made Tong one of the Vicars General of the diocese, a post he held for 17 years. Pope John Paul II appointed him Auxiliary Bishop of Hong Kong, and he was consecrated bishop, together with Coadjutor Bishop Joseph Zen, on December 9, 1996. Pope Benedict named him Coadjutor Bishop of Hong Kong

in January 2008, and Ordinary Bishop on April 15, 2009, after Cardinal Zen's resignation.

### **Hong Kong and China are Sister Churches**

According to Cardinal Tong, the Holy Father Pope Benedict XVI established the priorities for the Church in China in the letter he addressed to the Catholics of China (2007). Particularly important are: promoting reconciliation and unity among different communities in China, and their full communion with the Holy Father and the Universal Church, and the formation of priests, Sisters, seminarians and laity. Tong asks that all the faithful in China be given the possibility of reading the letter of the Holy Father and understanding it properly. "No one should give a partial interpretation of the Letter, as it must be accepted in its entirety. I am glad that a *compendium* has been published, as it serves as a guide and a commentary."

"I can play a role, as a Catholic, as the leader of the Hong Kong Catholic Church, and now as a Cardinal in relating to China. I can lead the curia, the clergy and the laity in supporting the Chinese Church. I have been playing this role for the past 30 years, and I will continue doing so. This is why I am staying at the seminary, and this is why I will continue to be the director of the Holy Spirit Study Centre. This is a bit exceptional, but when I mentioned it to people, they were not surprised, because they know how much I care for our work for the Church in China."

In relating to the Church in China, Cardinal Tong says Hong Kong is not only giving, but also receiving, because the two communities benefit each other. Many Hong Kong Catholics go to China as visitors. They can have a good influence on, and present updated ideas to the brothers and sisters in China. At the same time, an increasing number of mainland faithful and clergy come to Hong Kong, and the diocese, under the direction of Bishop Tong, has created an *ad hoc* committee to properly welcome and organize some meaningful pastoral exposures for them. They visit some active parishes, participate in pastoral activities, and visit some organizations within the diocese, such as the Liturgical Commission, the Catechetical Centre, and hospital pastoral care units. Some

Hong Kong theology professors are still allowed to teach in seminaries in China, but fewer than in the past. Some Hong Kong priests and Sisters are invited to give retreats and spiritual guidance and hold spiritual meetings in China, in higher numbers than before.

### **On relations with Chinese authorities**

In his public statement and at the press conference on April 16, 2009, after his appointment as Hong Kong's Ordinary Bishop, Tong expressed his positions in relation to Chinese politics. Firstly, show openness and a warm attitude towards everyone, but without hiding or sacrificing our principles, which are those expressed in the Holy Father's letter. "In the Commission for the Church in China, established by the Holy See, I had the opportunity of expressing my opinion openly, and I have noticed that some of my opinions have been welcomed. I have already checked my bottom lines with the Holy See, and on that basis I carry out my dialogue with the Chinese government." In 2008, when Bishop Tong was invited to attend the opening ceremony of the Olympic Games, he stated his position in an article published in the *Osservatore Romano* (August 2008).

In May 2012, after his elevation as Cardinal, Bishop Tong was allowed to accompany the Bishop of Essen Germany for a one-day visit to Guangzhou City. "When I go to China, I do it in a very discreet way, because there are still bishops who are in prison in China, and I do not forget them. They are my brothers, therefore I will always show concern and respect for them. I remember when I accompanied Bishop John B. Wu to visit China in 1985, we asked repeatedly for a meeting with the Bishop of Shanghai, Ignatius Kung Pinmei, who was still in detention (of course we did not know that he was already a cardinal *in pectore*). So the Chinese authorities have some experience with our expectations. We are not going to China as tourists, or to be entertained at meals with officials. We are concerned about all our brothers and sisters, whose human rights and religious freedoms are restricted."

"Unless the authorities allow religious freedom and full human rights to our brothers and sisters of the Church, there cannot be full relations between the two parties. It is our duty to try our best to

enlighten the Chinese government on these issues. At the same time we follow the spirit of Vatican Council II, which advocated that conflicts can only be solved through dialogue. Fighting and animosity will never help. This is what I learned when I studied theology in Rome, during the Second Vatican Council.”

### **Cardinal Tong in his own words**

“I think I am a mild person. I try to follow the Chinese saying, known also in Latin, as *In medio stat virtus* (*virtue is in the middle*). I think it is important to be a man of communication and dialogue. When I talk about communication, I do not mean more technique, but human communication. I find that giving and receiving are very important. I believe I am a simple and ordinary person. If it is possible, I would like to do something good for others, as Psalm 23:6 says, “*Ah, how goodness and kindness follow me all the days of my life.*”