

Hong Kong and the Chinese Catholic Hierarchy

Louis Ha

Translated by Anthony Lam

At the end of the Ming Dynasty, St. Francis Xavier (1506-1552) exerted great effort to bring the Gospel to China. Although he eventually failed to enter mainland China, 400 years after this attempt, in accordance with Canon Law, the Chinese Catholic hierarchy was set up. This year marks the 70th anniversary of its establishment. The Chinese Church achieved this result by overcoming three hurdles: patronage, prohibition and protectorate.

In the Age of Great Discovery, Portugal possessed the right of royal patronage (*Padroado Real*) over territories in the Far East. She first established dioceses in Goa (1534) and Malacca (1557). After the Dutch occupation of Malacca, Portugal was forced to change her focus further to the east. In accordance with the patronage system, she established the three dioceses of Macau (1575), Peking (1692) and Nanking (1692). In 1856, under an agreement between Portugal and the Holy See, which abolished the *Padroado*, the dioceses of Peking and Nanking were both suppressed. However, the Macau Diocese maintained her suffragan status under the Archdiocese of Goa until 1975, when Macau no longer came under any metropolitan see. This means that 70 years ago when the Chinese Catholic hierarchy was established, Macau was not included in it. Taiwan was not included either. Taiwan only returned to Chinese jurisdiction in 1945 after a fifty-year Japanese occupation. So even though the *Padroado* system was cancelled in 1856, it still affected the integrity of the establishment of the Chinese Catholic hierarchy in 1946.

Moreover, following up on St. Francis Xavier's unfulfilled desire, many religious institutes and missionary societies, including Jesuits, Dominicans, Franciscans and the Paris Foreign Missions

Society (MEP) sent their members to preach the Gospel in China. Their different approaches and experience generated a dispute on methods of evangelization. This eventually came to be called the “Rites Controversy.” It ended up in a total prohibition of Catholicism under the reign of Kangxi (康熙). Such a prohibition of Catholicism had a very negative effect on the development of the Catholic Church in China. Even the papal envoy C.M. de Tournon (1668-1710) failed to establish friendly relations with the Qing Monarchy. He left China in 1705, having only established a procuration for Propaganda Fide in Canton (now Guangzhou 廣州) for the support of missionary work in China. The procuration kept alive a ray of hope for the eventual establishment of the Catholic hierarchy in China.

The procuration often moved back and forth between Canton and Macau, but when Hong Kong became a British colony, the procuration moved to Hong Kong. The procuration stayed in Hong Kong for about 80 years, and this forced Hong Kong to get involved in the work of building up the Chinese Catholic hierarchy. The prohibition against Christianity was gradually eased after the Opium War, and was abandoned altogether following the fall of the Qing Dynasty. The obstacle created by the prohibition was formally concluded when the office of the Papal Representative was formally established in Peking (北平, now Beijing) in 1922. Then in 1939, the Holy See removed the prohibition against the Chinese rites. Everything was now ready for the peaceful establishment of the Chinese Catholic hierarchy.

The final obstacle to the establishment of the Chinese Catholic hierarchy was the so-called Religious Protectorate, which the French government obtained from the hands of the Qing Court. It is traced back to the Second Opium War (1856-1860) which the Qing Dynasty lost to the French-British Alliance. The Qing government was forced to allow missionaries to build churches, cemeteries, and carry out missionary work in the interior of China. Missionaries enjoyed extraterritorial privileges, which extended even to Chinese lay Catholics. This created certain conflicts between the local Chinese and the Catholic believers which, in turn, led to the rise of religious cases or disputes (教案). The religious cases aggravated

the misunderstandings local Chinese already had towards the Church. In this complicated situation, France claimed for herself what she considered a necessary intermediary role between the Holy See and the Qing Dynasty. She also tried her best to prevent any direct interaction between those two entities. She repeatedly undermined the possibility of establishing the Chinese Catholic hierarchy. In 1929, when the Holy See signed the Lateran Treaty with Italy, she was recognized as a sovereign country. After World War II, with its identity as a victorious country, China ascended the global stage. And the Chinese Church got rid of everything connected with the “Protectorate.” On April 11, 1946 the Chinese Catholic hierarchy was established with 20 ecclesiastical provinces. A metropolitan see, with an archbishop at its head, was set up in each provincial capital.

The establishment of the Chinese Catholic hierarchy had an important impact on both mainland China and Hong Kong. First of all, the Apostolic Delegate was replaced by a Nuncio. The first nuncio, Antonio Riberi (1897–1967), pointed out the importance of this change: “In the past all countries could send priests to China for missionary work. These were under the supervision of their sending nations. Unavoidably there was some sense of interference. After the establishment of the Chinese Catholic hierarchy, the Church in China became an independent entity directly accountable to the Pope. It enjoyed an equal status with the churches in all advanced countries of the world. The Church in China could now develop independently.”¹

Then with the establishment of the Chinese Catholic hierarchy, most apostolic vicariates became formal local churches, by being changed into what is called a “diocese.” Bishop Tian Gengxin (田耕莘), Apostolic Vicar of Qingdao (青島), was elevated to the position of cardinal, making him a member of the highest governing body of the Church. Members of Buddhist, Daoist and Protestant faiths in China considered it a great honour for China, and they

¹ *Kung Kao Po*, 26 January, 1947 [公教報，1947年1月26日]

were very eager to make donations for Cardinal Tian's trip to Rome.²

In Hong Kong, on May 12 of that year (1946), John Wong King-In (黃景賢), a graduate of the Regional Seminary for South China, was ordained a priest. He was the first priest to be ordained after Hong Kong became part of the Chinese Catholic hierarchy.³ Afterward, a large number of young people began joining the seminary with high hopes of becoming involved in the flourishing development of the Church in China.

Then the Vicar Apostolic of Hong Kong, Msgr. Valtorta, PIME, became the first Diocesan Bishop of Hong Kong. A local Chinese priest Fr. Leo Chan Pak-Leung (陳伯良) wrote, "Now we have stepped into a double new phase: one is our victory over our enemy during the second world war, setting the state on the road to recovery; the other is the victory of our Catholic Church in China: we have a Chinese cardinal, and the Chinese Catholic hierarchy has been established. It is a new situation of experiencing a double victory." He advised Catholics not to solely rely on foreign financial support, but that Chinese Catholics themselves should provide the finances for the support of the Church.⁴

Unfortunately, the civil war and the change in political power severely damaged the newly set up local church, which came into being with the establishment of the Chinese Catholic hierarchy. The ruling Communist Party enacted anti-foreign and anti-religious policies. They expelled missionaries, imprisoned Chinese clergy, and arrested a great number of lay Catholics. All at once the Catholic Church almost completely disappeared from people's eyes.

A great geographical portion of Hong Kong Diocese was on the mainland (including Xin'an 新安, Huiyang 惠陽, Haifeng 海豐, Lufeng 陸豐 and Shanmei 汕尾), but the core part of the diocese was on Hong Kong Island and in Kowloon, which was a British colony. Therefore, it could avoid the conflicts connected with the

² *Kung Kao Po*, 30 June, 1947 [公教報, 1946年6月30日]

³ *Kung Kao Po*, 5 May, 1946 [公教報, 1946年5月5日]

⁴ *Kung Kao Po*, 15 December, 1946 [公教報, 1946年12月15日]

times of religious patronage, prohibition and protectorate. And when the Chinese Catholic hierarchy came under attack on mainland China, although Hong Kong was a suffragan diocese of the Canton Archdiocese, it was not involved in those problems. Today, Hong Kong does not belong to any ecclesiastical province, nor to any Bishops' Conference. It is an entity belonging directly to the Holy See.

In laying the foundation for the establishment of the Chinese Catholic hierarchy, Hong Kong had three main roles namely: 1. Training clergy, 2. Printing books for evangelization, and 3. Serving as a midway station for Religious Orders on their way to China.

1. The 1924 China Church Synod, held in Shanghai (上海), adopted a resolution to establish regional seminaries to train candidates for the priesthood. In Hong Kong the South China Regional Seminary was opened in 1931 to accept young vocations from the provinces of Guangdong (廣東), Guangxi (廣西) and Fujian (福建). The Jesuit Fathers took charge of the administration of the regional seminary. They worked hard to provide a good academic and spiritual formation for the seminarians. It made a great contribution to laying the foundation for the establishment of the Chinese Catholic hierarchy. While it achieved great results, after 33 years of service, it reluctantly closed in 1964, due to a shortage of newcomers from mainland China. This served as an example of Hong Kong's complementary role in regards to the operation or non-operation of the Chinese Catholic hierarchy.

2. Regarding the Printing Enterprise of the missionaries, in 1894, the Paris Foreign Mission Society (巴黎外方傳教會) set up the Nazareth Press in Hong Kong. It supplied different kinds of high-quality publications—including liturgical, dogmatic, and spiritual books, as well as record books for dioceses and parishes—all over China. This important work came to an end in 1954 when Church life in China could no longer be sustained. Nazareth Press showed how deeply related Church work in Hong Kong was to the work of the Chinese Catholic hierarchy.

3. During the period from 1842 to 1921, there were only seven religious orders in Hong Kong (five men's, two women's). From 1921 to 1946, another nine religious orders arrived in the city (three men's, six women's). From 1947 to 1978, another 27 religious orders arrived (10 men's, 17 women's). From 1979 until now, another 15 orders (seven men's, eight women's) joined the Hong Kong Diocese. Of all these, only 10 religious orders have left Hong Kong for various reasons. Today altogether 48 religious orders reside in this tiny area.⁵ Religious orders from all over the world find Hong Kong a very suitable place to be a stepping stone through which they can enter Mainland China.

In the 1950s, when many Church people were leaving the Mainland, Hong Kong became a place of refuge for those escaping from difficulty. But this placed the Hong Kong Church in an embarrassing situation. On the one hand, the Holy See encouraged Church pastors to stay in China to bear witness to the faith. On the other hand, persecuted brothers and sisters had no choice but to run for their lives and seek a place for revival. Hong Kong was stuck in the role of a thankless intermediary.

Free from political interference, the Hong Kong Catholic Church developed naturally. The results she achieved are there for all to see. In 1967, a Chinese priest Fr. Francis Hsu Chen-Ping (徐誠斌), was appointed Auxiliary Bishop in Hong Kong. After two years, when Bishop Bianchi, PIME, the second Ordinary Bishop of Hong Kong retired, Bishop Hsu became the third Bishop of Hong Kong and the first-ever Chinese Ordinary Bishop of the diocese. This appointment further confirmed the Chinese Catholic hierarchy. Bishop Hsu immediately convoked a diocesan synod, through which he introduced the spirit of the Second Vatican Council to the Hong Kong Church and to the Catholic community.

Following the open policy in China in the late 1970s, Hong Kong became a bridge for the Church in China to connect with the universal Church. Her dedicated efforts to introduce the spirit of the Second Vatican Council and reforms in the Church is also a great contribution to the Chinese Catholic hierarchy.

⁵ See *Hong Kong Catholic Church Directories 1955-2016* in Hong Kong Catholic Diocesan archives.

In 1985, Bishop John Baptist Wu Cheng-Chung, as the head of the Hong Kong Diocese, visited Beijing and Shanghai at the invitation of the China State Council. It was the first such contact since the Chinese Catholic hierarchy was established and the Communist party came to power. It made people think about the possible re-establishment of the Chinese Catholic hierarchy. When the Chinese Catholic hierarchy was first established, the Holy See raised a Chinese Bishop, Tian Gengxin (田耕莘), to be a Cardinal. In the new environment of the 1980s, the Holy See, in 1988, appointed Bishop Wu, the fifth Bishop of Hong Kong, to become a Cardinal to prepare for the restoration of the Chinese Catholic hierarchy. Following this, Bishop Joseph Zen Ze-Kiun (陳日君) and the present Bishop of Hong Kong, John Tong Hon (湯漢), were made cardinals respectively. Everything is still a glimmer on the horizon. It is hoped that the recent news of renewed contacts between China and the Vatican will eventually bring about a new ambience.