

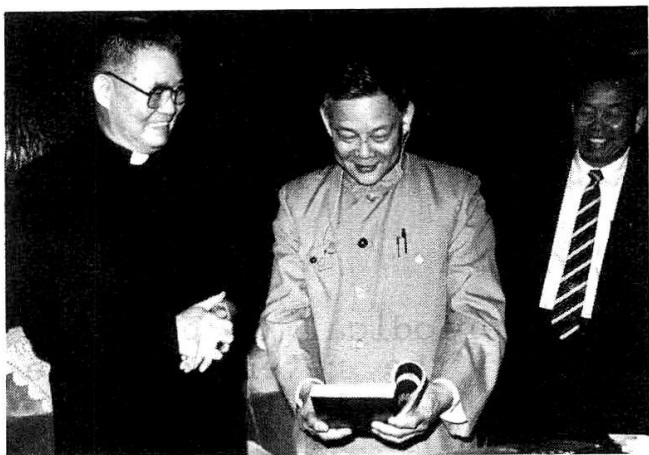
WITH BISHOP WU

IN

GUANGDONG

by John Tong

translated by Elmer Wurth



L-R: Bishop Wu, Governor Ye and Director Chen Dong



Bishop Wu with his mother

It was Bishop John B. Wu's second visit to the China mainland in less than a year, but in spirit and purpose it might be said to have been a continuation of his first trip. In fact, the groundwork for his January journey to Guangzhou and Eastern Guangdong was laid during his March visit to Beijing and Shanghai. At that time, the Bishop had expressed his eagerness to go to Guangzhou and Guangdong not only because of their close association with Hong Kong, but also because Guangdong is his home province. It was understood that while a lack of time prevented him from journeying south, the Provincial Director of the Religious Affairs Bureau held an open invitation for the Bishop to visit there in the near future. While the general purpose of both trips remained

the same: to promote mutual understanding and free exchange of views, this second visit added a note of encouragement and support to the cooperative contacts between Caritas, the social service arm of the Hong Kong Diocese, and the southern province. Since 1980, Caritas has set up over 100 training courses on a variety of subjects there, and has played host to the many delegations which have come to Hong Kong to observe and exchange views with those working in the social service field. This sharing of experiences has been positive and invaluable for both sides.

The Bishop added two new members to his delegation for this second visit, bringing its total number to seven. Because of the rapid development of the role of the laity in the Church since the Second Vatican Council, the Bishop felt that Mr. Christopher Li, Vice President of the Central Council of Catholic Laity, would be an important resource person in discussions with the Patriotic Association on the emerging lay ministries in the church outside China. Sister Bernadette Yuen, Vice-Superior of the locally founded Sisters of the Precious Blood, was the other valuable addition to the delegation. With many Sisters on the mainland regrouping and with the rise in the number of new candidates seeking to enter religious life, Sister was able to share her experiences of the renewal of religious life, especially in the areas of formation and ministry, which have been taking place in the universal Church during the past few decades.

The Bishop's itinerary was carefully chosen. There was Guangzhou city, of course, but his journey also included cities and towns of eastern Guangdong as well. Waizhou and Haifeng were selected because, in the days before Liberation, they had been part of the Hong Kong Diocese, and are of special concern to the Church in Hong Kong. Bishop Wu went to Shantou because he wanted to have a reunion with his old schoolmates from Hong Kong regional seminary, many of whom are working as priests in and around that area. Of course, his most personal visit was to be to his own hometown, and the time we spent in Wuhua and Meixian, where his mother and family live and where the Bishop was born, reared, and educated was one filled with emotion not only for him but also for us who were accompanying him on this

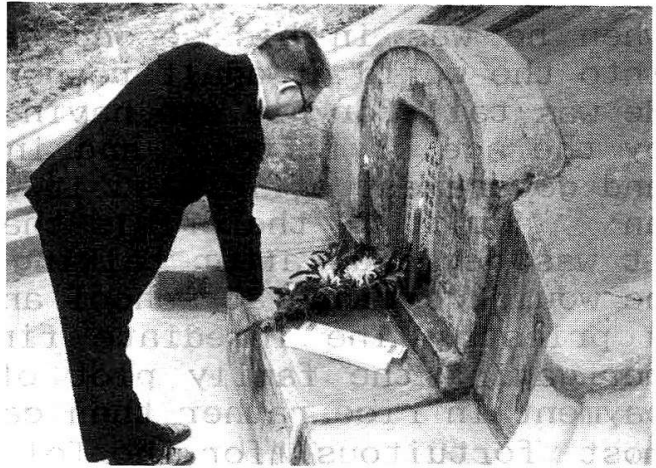
first trip home in forty years.

Throughout the trip, the Bishop's relationship with government officials was warm and courteous. On more than one occasion the Bishop expressed his gratitude for their sincere welcome and thanked them for going out of their way to make him feel so much at home. In Guangzhou, when he was asked by his hosts not to think of China in terms of the situation that existed there during the Cultural Revolution, for much had changed since then, the Bishop agreed and added that he hoped they, in turn, would move beyond their pre-Vatican II conceptions of the Church to a recognition of the many changes that had taken place during the past twenty years in it. The Bishop emphasized that he had come not only as the Bishop of Hong Kong representing the Church of Hong Kong, but also as a member of the international College of Bishops representing the universal Church. He was to make this point again when speaking to members of the Patriotic Association. It was important to him that his hosts understand that the Church in Hong Kong and he personally hoped to play a bridge role between China and the universal Church, something that he felt would be of practical benefit to the Church in China as well as to his homeland, especially in her efforts towards modernization. The Bishop stressed the necessity of a sincere dialogue as the main means for maintaining and furthering understanding. To this Mr. Ye Xuanping, the Governor of Guangdong, responded most positively, assuring the Bishop he had nothing to fear from a dialogue with atheists. "I, myself, am an atheist but am not afraid to sit down with believers. We need not try to convince each other to change our convictions. We have much to talk about with each other." Governor Ye is the son of Ye Jianying, China's most renowned Marshal, who is now quite old and in poor health. The Bishop asked specifically to be remembered to him.

Our conversation with government officials touched upon other subjects as well. Bishop Wu mentioned to Mr. Zheng Qun, the Provincial United Front Department Director, that many people abroad are apprehensive about the term "United Front". Director Zheng replied that the purpose of the United Front was to make friends for China and that there are historical reasons for retaining the name.

Bishop Wu told Governor Ye that China in her modernization program should learn a lesson from the experience of the United States and Europe. Even though these countries have reached a high level of material prosperity, they are now experiencing a decline in moral standards. In her planning, the bishop suggested, China ought to take into consideration along with the material development of the people their moral and spiritual development in order to avoid the pitfalls of the U.S. - European experience.

Our delegation asked about the present situation of Father Wu Dexin who is now in Taiyuan, Shanxi Province. We were told that Father Wu's papers are now being processed and that after the Lunar New Year he is expected to return to Guangzhou to serve in the Shishi Cathedral. We also learned that the Guangzhou Diocese will repossess the Catholic Church in Honam later this year and that the Sisters of the Immaculate Conception, a diocesan order, will begin a novitiate for new candidates this year. Bishop Wu also made known Archbishop Dominic Tang's wish to return to visit Guangzhou.



Reverence at the Tomb of his father and grandparents



Preaching at Mass in his home

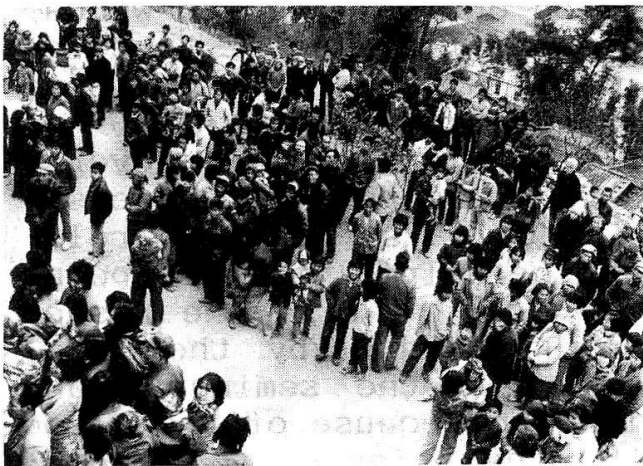
The delegation was traveling by van, which gave its members ample time to digest and discuss our experiences. But as the van turned towards Wuhua and the long awaited homecoming, the Bishop's conversation took on a more personal tone and he began to reminisce about his past. As he was the eldest of four sons, the death of his father when he was in his second year of high school thrust him into the world of adult responsibilities and decision making. He was tall for his age, having reached his full adult height by the age of fifteen, and in his dealings with townspeople and government officials, it was assumed that he was already an adult. In the crisis that followed his father's death, it was decided, after talking it over with his mother, that he would continue at school and follow his ideal of becoming a priest. The immediate financial problem was solved by mortgaging the family plot of land. The Bishop asked for payment in rice rather than cash. This turned out to be most fortuitous, for the following year the area was struck by a severe drought and rice disappeared from the local markets. The Wus had enough to see them through this difficult period. When the mortgage fell due, the Bishop sold the family sow, getting a good price for it from a neighbour who was anxious to go into pig breeding, and thus he was able to get the family out of debt. The Bishop saw these years as full of hardships, but God always seemed to provide just when the need was greatest. During the years he spent in Taiwan, he lost all contact with his family. Only after becoming Bishop of Hong Kong did he make contact with them once again, through a friend who made occasional trips to his hometown. When his mother heard that her son was still alive, and Bishop of Hong Kong, she sent him a gift through the friend. The gift was a small box of rice cakes, and it moved him to tears, for he knew it represented not only his mother's love and concern, but also the poverty of the family situation. A few years ago another gift arrived from his mother. This time it was small chick, which the Bishop has raised to its present size. The Bishop's chicken has a special place in his affection. It comes to greet him when he comes home from work and can be seen following him as he walks on the roof of his home saying his breviary. The Bishop claims he has become an expert on the way the chicken communicates and can read its various emotions by the manner in which it behaves and the variety of tones it uses when cackling. Sometimes when his chicken feels

it is being ignored, it will peck away at his trousers until it gets his full attention. The chicken and the Bishop have become fast friends; the chicken is for him a reminder of home.

When we finally reached the Bishop's hometown, he went first to the village cemetery where he prayed at the tombs of his grandparents and his father. His mother with her sons and their families were all waiting outside the door of their home to greet him. He took from his traveling bag a cloak he had brought from Hong Kong and going up to his mother, wrapped it around her. The joy of his homecoming could not be expressed in words. And all his mother could say was: "Thanks be to God", and "Thanks be to the Blessed Mother" over and over again. The Bishop said Mass for his family at their home; including friends and neighbours, there were about a hundred people. The Mass was said in Chinese and the Bishop preached a homily. Needless to say the ceremony was one of thanksgiving to God for His many graces.

After leaving his family and on our way back to Wuhua, the Bishop was told by the government officials not to celebrate Mass in Beidouzhai, the next stop on our journey. Our trip was receiving extended media coverage outside of China, and this incident became a source of some controversy in Hong Kong and foreign press. It raised again the sensitive question of just how extensive China's policy of religious freedom really was. It might be helpful at this point to describe the events as they unfolded. While the Bishop had been invited to say Mass in Beidouzhai by the local pastor, who was his former teacher in the seminary, and although he had accepted the invitation because of the close personal relationship he had with many priests of the diocese, no permission had been given by the chairman of the Catholic Church Administrative Commission of the province. This was the explanation given to us by the government officials who were accompanying us. They also added that the area is presently without a bishop and Fr. Paul Lam, who was administering the diocese was just an ordinary priest without episcopal authority, and he could not act on his own in such a matter. The Bishop explained that he, himself had not taken the initiative but was strictly in a passive position. He reiterated his desire to adhere to all laws,

and to observe the rules set down by China, even if those rules were unique to China and not found anyplace else in the world. He did suggest, however, that allowing him to offer Mass publicly would not only be to the benefit of the Chinese believers but also would add to the international reputation of China and bolster confidence among the people of Hong Kong with a view towards 1997. With these factors in mind, he asked the officials to check with the pastor Fr. Luke Lu to find out if, in fact, he had obtained the necessary permission to invite him, and if not, would our hosts be kind enough to telephone Bishop Ye, Chairman of the Catholic Church Administrative Commission for Guangdong Province, in Guangzhou to request his permission. Our arrival in Beidouzhai was delayed. The traffic situation and lack of adequate arrangements were given as the cause. When we did finally arrive, we were met by a large and enthusiastic crowd of people who welcomed the Bishop to the sound of exploding firecrackers. We were told then that permission to say Mass had not been obtained. When asked if they had phoned Bishop Ye, the officials replied that they had not, because, as government officials, they were



Some of the Catholics hoping to attend the bishop's Mass in Beidouzhai town

not allowed to interfere in church affairs. While Bishop Wu was not allowed to say Mass in Beidouzhai, he was permitted to bless the crowd from a second-floor window and say a few words of greeting. Most of the people had not seen a bishop in over forty years, and they were most eager to meet him. The Bishop was visibly moved by the warmth of their welcome, but when he asked if he might be allowed to mingle and talk with them, he was told that security reasons prevented it.

While in Shantou, we visited the ancient city of Chaozhou. There we toured Mary Help of Christians Church, which is the second largest church in Guangdong and is now being readied for reopening. In Lufeng, we met with two priests

who told us that so far 11 of the area's original 16 churches have been reopened for worship services. Throughout the trip, we were able to visit 7 newly opened churches, two bishops, two vicars-general, fourteen priests and five sisters. Unfortunately, the number of lay people we were able to see and speak with was limited. As we headed for home, we were pleasantly surprised to meet again Mr. Chen Dong, the Director of the Provincial Religious Affairs Bureau. He had made a special trip to Waizhou from Guangzhou, a car journey of over three-and-a-half hours, just to say goodbye to us.

On our return to Hong Kong, the delegation expressed a unanimous opinion that the trip had gone well. We were most grateful for the genuine hospitality offered to us everywhere we went, and the care with which arrangements were made to insure a smooth journey. We do hope, however, to be able to meet more lay Catholics on our future visits. The Bishop was heartened by the trip for it encouraged him in his conviction that the Church in Hong Kong, because of its geographical location and unique history, would be able to act as a bridge between the Church in China and the universal Church. He spoke of this role as a challenge and as a privilege for the Catholics of Hong Kong.



*(Photos in this article
courtesy of SCM Post)*

*Our Lady Help of Christians
Church in Chaozhou, 2nd Largest
Catholic Church in Guangdong.
Now under Renovation.*