

HK Church Adopts 'open door' Policy

(Bishop Joseph Zen talks to the Sunday Examiner about his view of the future and the Hong Kong church's relationship with China. The interview, slightly abbreviated, is published here with permission.)

(SE): Your appointment as bishop just before the handover could be seen as the Vatican wanting to make sure the church here was safely tucked under its wing. Is this so ?

"I think Rome cares for all its churches, We (Joseph Zen and John Tong) understand that people suspect a manoeuvre but actually it

is a normal function of the church. In many dioceses when the bishop reaches 70 years of age the Vatican usually appoints a coadjutor. But in some places there are 4 or 5 auxiliaries.

Do you think the Vatican is worried about the future of Hong Kong and the appointment of bishops here ?



Bishop Zen has faith in the Basic Law but fears misunderstanding.

“We never put such an explicit question to Rome, but maybe they have some concerns about the future.

“We don’t really worry because it’s clearly stated in the Basic Law that everything will remain just as it is now. In China the government deals with the appointment of bishops but they have no intention of enforcing that in Hong Kong.”

Do you think Beijing’s efforts to prevent the growth of religious groups and the radicalisation of the church could spill over on to the Hong Kong church and that Beijing is concerned that the church in Hong Kong could become a threat to its control over religious groups?

“I think there is evident concern on the part of the Chinese government of the consequences or side-effects of its ‘open door’ policy. It becomes more and more difficult for them to control everything. The people in Hong Kong who are concerned about the church in China, see a tightening of relations. There are also stricter regulations on allowing us to go to teach in China. All signs indicate that there is concern about interference from outside. Now the problem is that we (Hong Kong) see things differently. We do not consider what we do as interference; we consider that we are one church. We call it co-operation, dialogue and mutual help. We do

understand, however, that they are worried.

”What can the Hong Kong church do to help overcome these fears of the Chinese government ?

“I don’t see what we can do. As I told many people my relations in China are not with the Chinese government but with church people, with the priests, bishops, seminarians - and so I don’t have any chance to communicate (with the government). If I did, I would explain to them that it’s normal for us to consider ourselves as one church, with mutual help, communication and exchange.

“But I’m afraid that they fear our intervention. So I think, we have to show some understanding of their fear and to let them see that it is just a fraternal relationship between churches, that we (in Hong Kong) are in no way interfering in mainland politics or their (church) organizations. Anyway, our hope is that one day they may accept our system - which is as the church is in the whole world.”

Do you think Beijing will allow the Hong Kong church to continue to have relations with both the underground church and open church ?

“You know, in China the law is one thing and practical policy is another. So there are moments in which, well, even the government tolerates many things that are not exactly according to their law, but

still they tolerate them because they understand that there is no intention of provocation and they know it is our normal way of doing things. But then there are also moments when they want to stop what we are doing.

“I think since we went in (to China) to help teach in the seminaries we really helped the whole church understand the real situation of this so-called division (between the underground and official church). Before, when people would visit and tour (the church in China) they would just stay one day here and one day there. But we (Hong Kong church representatives) stay in places for a long time - six weeks, two months - and by living there we can really see what the situation is.

“The situation is that the so-called ‘official’ church which is separate from Rome is in no way really separate. I mean, they are kept in some ways separate from Rome because the government will not allow them to have contact, but in their hearts they are like we are. They all love the Holy Father and are all waiting for the day when they can again join together with the rest of the church.

“We don’t feel any embarrassment in helping this so-called ‘official’ church. We are clearly aware that we are not helping a church that is going away from Rome; we are helping a church that is waiting to come back. We passed this message to people out-

side (of China) so that people could see that the division is a very artificial one.”

Have you seen many changes in the relationship between the underground and official church?

“Things are changing. When I started going to the seminaries in China, that was in 1989, there were rules preventing concelebrating both for us going to China and for those from the official church coming out of China. And this rule is still valid for the self-chosen official bishops. But it no longer applies to priests. The Vatican now allows this. Priests are not that responsible for the situation. The bishops are in some way responsible in terms of their ordination as they must have been conscious of what they were doing and that they are not legitimate.

“But the priests, young men going into the seminary who want to be priests don’t (understand) the situation, they are innocent. There are very, very open rules allowing them to receive ordination, even from illegitimate bishops and when they come out (of China) Rome says, to be sure that they believe in our same faith, let them just read the profession of faith. Rome is satisfied with that and then they can be allowed to concelebrate.”

A number of mainland official church bishops would have liked to have come to your ordination

but were not able to. Can this not be seen as a rejection of the official church?

“We are in no way worried about that. We know them and they know us. We are very good friends - I mean, those we know. As some people know, many official church bishops are legitimised. But since this has to be kept secret, when they come out they still can not be allowed to concelebrate. But they did not mind, they understood why we could not invite them. But we were afraid that the Chinese government would be offended because we know that more than once the government wanted to force the outside church to recognise their bishops and to recognise their bishops’ conference. But this time they abstained from saying anything, so they were very kind to us.”

Are you concerned about the possibility of interference by Beijing in the affairs of the Hong Kong church - say through the Religious Affairs Bureau (RAB) ?

“I think generally people in Hong Kong do fear manipulation of the Hong Kong church. But, basically we can believe that the concept of ‘one country, two systems’ is a sincere effort to keep Hong Kong as it is. It is not a question of doubting other people’s good will, but I am worried that it is too difficult for people to understand the ‘other system’.

“I am afraid that there may be cases in which they (Beijing) don’t understand our system and then, without any conspiracy, intervene without knowing that they are damaging the Hong Kong system. So we have to make the effort to show that we believe in what they promise and sometimes we will have to help them to understand our system.

Will you, along with Cardinal J.B. Wu and Bishop John Tong, be meeting with any members of the RAB? Will you be having regular meetings with Xinhua in the future?

“As we are talking about the church in Hong Kong, I think there should be no Religious Affairs Bureau in Hong Kong. There is no such bureau now so there should be no such bureau in the future. So whatever concerns the Catholic Church here, we will have to deal with the government of the special administrative region (SAR) and just as now we don’t need a religious department, we will not need one in the future.

“But the problem I see is not about the church in Hong Kong, it is about our relationship with the church in China. If you insist on ‘one country, two systems’, then they will tell you, ‘Come on, we respect your system, you must respect our system.’ Then imagine, in the case of the persecuted church, I know one province in China where local officials put the

bishop and priests into prison and even beat the priests. What should we do? We can't just keep silent. Those are our brothers. But if we say something, Beijing will say 'you are interfering in our system'. That will be difficult for us.

"I can understand that Xinhua may be a channel for whatever we want to do with the church in China. So we hope to have that channel open and to talk to them and to have a consensus about what is interference and what is normal relations."

Do you think the Hong Kong church could become caught up in the complex tangle of Sino-Vatican relations?

"It is not what the Vatican does to the church in Hong Kong, but what the Vatican does for the church in China. I think the Vatican will understand if we (in Hong Kong) do not speak for it every single time. The Vatican has many means to say what it needs to say. But I am afraid there will be certain moments when we will have to say something not pleasing to the Chinese government."

Will you not be jeopardising the position of the church here if you are forced to say something critical about the Chinese government?

"No, no, I don't think there will be difficulties for our own church in Hong Kong. Suppose I have to say something that will not

please the Chinese government about the church in China. They can blame me in the newspapers; they can stop me from going to China, but they cannot harm the church in Hong Kong because we still have the law in Hong Kong."

What can you say to allay the fears of foreign religious/clergy that Beijing could withdraw their right to work in the territory?

"I don't see any immediate threat on that point. In Hong Kong there are so many businessmen, so the immigration law will still be very open. Many religious have unconditional stay. I don't see any problems, in the supposition, of course, that there won't be any radical change. We have to tell them (foreign religious) that they belong to our church, we need them. The Chinese people love them."

Do you think the Hong Kong church's international links are a strength or a weakness?

"I think it is a strength for us. And I think that before Beijing decides to damage the church in Hong Kong, they will think twice. The church really belongs to the whole world."

What would you like to see improve in relations between the church in Hong Kong and China?

"We would like to do many things but it seems that the situation after July 1 may not be better.

It may be more difficult than now, because already these last two years China has tightened up. We expected some young priests to come from China to join our seminary here in Hong Kong, (but) they never received permission. Beijing doesn't have to tell you the reason. The policy changes. Years ago we understood why, because China said Hong Kong was a base for subversion. We have two seminarians from Beijing and a priest from Fujian so we thought now it's OK. We began preparing a particular programme for the Chinese priests and then China stopped everything again. I think that is a very important area that could be improved."

Do you think Beijing would like to use Hong Kong to improve its relations with the Vatican and the outside world?

"The words 'bridge church' were used by the Holy Father when talking to Taiwan bishops. We in Hong Kong said Taiwan is too far away to be a bridge. We are better qualified to be a bridge. Now, a bridge to what? Between the Chinese church and the universal church, I think that is the meaning of being a 'bridge church'. We have the best opportunity to do that because we can go into China and we are part of the universal church.

"Secondly, we know that even within the church in China you need a bridge to link

the two sides -- the official and underground. I think we have helped a lot in this way. Many people who have gone in to help the church in China have not helped in this direction. Some took the side of the official church and some took the side of the underground church. That is wrong according to us. If Hong Kong people when they go into China are really interested in helping the two sides understand each other, they must tell them not to fight because we are all brothers."

What would you say to the accusation that the Hong Kong church is selling itself out to Beijing and betraying the struggle of persecuted Catholics?

"I think those making such accusations are in a minority. Sometimes such accusations come from people outside China. In China, generally speaking, the underground church is very well informed and so little by little they understand the situation better. But there are some outside people who are very stubborn and will never accept that we all belong to one church."

Do you think the Hong Kong church will have to prove its patriotism to China?

"I find this demand a little irritating. On the one hand, it is obvious that we love China. We are Chinese and on the other you have to respect people's mixed

feelings. You cannot force such love on anybody. Patriotism means a love for one's country. But this country is under a Communist government. Now can you force us to love the Communist government? Now, approaching the handover on July 1, I don't think we have to hurt the feelings of Hong Kong people by acting too negatively. We have to be happy that we are becoming part of China again. But then, we should not have to impose a big celebration on people. Yes, we are happy but we are also a little worried. I think we have to respect the feeling of the majority of the people. To mark the ceremony we will be having a very solemn Mass with the three bishops concelebrating, but I don't think we should have anything else. We may be invited to join what the government organises, OK, but I don't think we need to do anything else."

Is there anything you can do to reassure those in the church who suffered under the Communists in the past and fled China and those who are thinking about leaving Hong Kong because they fear a repeat of the persecution?

"There are priests who are telling people not to go away. I can accept that. But there are some who even say that it is not right to leave Hong Kong. Now I think that's wrong. Because you have to respect people. Some are afraid. but at the end of the day, it is their

decision and you have to respect that.

"Are we that sure that we can really keep this system for 50 years? I am not 100 per cent sure. I don't know if I can be even 90 percent sure. I encourage people to stay. I tell people, 'I surely will stay'. Now if there are old Chinese priests, because of their experiences before, who really don't feel secure, well, let them go. Why not? The world is so big. Especially those in religious congregations they have many places to go. There are many Catholics abroad who need Chinese priests and they can serve them there."

Why do you think Beijing fears the church?

"I don't think they really understand that the Catholic religion is really beneficial to socialist stability. I heard that in Shanghai they made some survey and found out that in the villages where the majority are Catholics that the crime rate is very low. And because of that they even allow children to be baptised there. But then the Communists want to control everything and they know that people with faith are more difficult to control. And so they are afraid."

Why should China, which refuses to allow religious groups on the mainland to become involved in socio-political issues, allow the Hong Kong church to continue to

run schools, and take a social-political stance?

“The official church in China is trying to limit itself to spiritual religious subjects and they may also do something socially beneficial, like run small hospitals or offer training courses, all this is allowed. But then to run a school...that is more difficult. That is not allowed because in a school you instil ideas and Beijing is afraid of that. In Hong Kong they say we can have schools because of the concept of ‘one country, two systems’. Deng Xiaoping was very intelligent and he knew that this was a way to keep Hong Kong useful to China. Surely, they will not accept that for the whole of China but they will tolerate it here.”

Catholic social action groups, such as Justice and Peace, could be accused of crossing from religion into politics and could be told to stop functioning as church organisations, are you concerned about this?

“No, even as political groups they should be allowed to function. Political parties are allowed. It is more difficult for Beijing to understand how we understand democracy. Several times some of

my friends in China and in Xinhua have said: ‘Why should the bishop allow them to protest before our door?’ We say: “Well, the bishop can’t do anything. They are mature people; they have their own rights. The bishop can’t tell them, ‘Don’t go.’ It is hard for them to understand that this is not a threat to them.”

“As for democracy, we have to make a distinction. Democracy as a fundamental respect for the people is one thing. Democracy as universal suffrage, one vote, one person, is another thing. You have to start from the very beginning with a democratic spirit. I mean, with respect for the people and a respect for their freedom and then maybe the system can start slowly and improve and mature.

“I think Hong Kong people are very mature for democracy because they have a very good fundamental, general education.”

Are you hopeful for the future?

Although we in Hong Kong have a big responsibility for the church in China and notwithstanding my temperament which tends to be pessimistic, I am optimistic about the future of the church in Hong Kong and in China.