

Between Pessimism and Optimism

A Realistic Look at the Church in Hong Kong and at our Concern for Catholics in China after the Handover

by Bishop John Tong

(The following is a composite of addresses given to missionaries in Hong Kong, on different occasions, in April, 1997.)

The crucial year of 1997 has arrived. If I forget and say “after 1997,” I mean “after July 1,” a date that is now not very far away.

I like to think of myself as a realist, standing midway between the pessimists and the optimists. “Virtue stands in the middle,” as Aristotle said. So first I will present the pessimistic viewpoint, then the optimistic viewpoint, then the realistic viewpoint, and close with a story.



Pessimists see corruption, nepotism, control over legal matters by the Communist Party, and the lack of an independent legal system in China. They are afraid that this will impact Hong Kong negatively, causing our city to function poorly. Besides, if China cannot achieve both economic development and political control in Hong Kong, then Beijing would rather sacrifice prosperity in order to maintain political control. At the worst, religious freedom will be suppressed, missionaries forced to leave, and our church would have to become an underground church.

On the other hand, optimists see a bright future. Hong Kong will remain more or less as it is now. Even the Chinese Communists have heard the saying: “Do not kill the goose that lays the golden egg.” Changing the present system in Hong Kong would disrupt the economic development of Mainland China. It would also frighten

Taiwan, making reunification between Taiwan and the Mainland more difficult. Massive corruption here would hurt China and frighten Taiwan. In addition, Hong Kong already has a long legal tradition and ample experience in fighting corruption.

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We will certainly not have to become an underground church. Article 32 of the Basic Law states: "Hong Kong residents shall have freedom of conscience. They shall have freedom of religious belief and freedom to preach and to conduct and participate in religious activities in public." Article 141 clarifies this. It states clearly that the Government of the Special Administrative Region (SAR) will not restrict freedom of religious belief, interfere in the internal affairs of its religious organizations, or impede religious activities that do not contravene the laws. We have to believe it is the sincere will of the Chinese Government to implement this Article.

Article 141 also says: "religious organizations and believers in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region may maintain and develop their relations with religious organizations and believers elsewhere," and this includes our contacts with the Holy See in Rome. When the Basic Law was being drafted, someone raised the question of the Roman Catholic Church and links with the Vatican. As a result, the affirmative answer was included in Article 141 specifically for the Roman Catholic Church in Hong Kong.

After the turnover, our dealings with Mainland China will increase. Some optimists hope that it will be much easier for religious personnel to cross the Shenzhen border, or to fly into the Mainland without having to write on the back of the visa application: "I am visiting China as a tourist, not to preach the Gospel." Extreme optimists even dream of doing pastoral work with and for the underground church. But remember that Article 148 of the Basic Law says relationships shall be based on "non-subordination," "non-

interference,” and “mutual respect”. Art. 148 is important because it will restrict our influence in China and in the church in China.

Some of you may know Mr. John Kamm, a businessman, who was formerly the head of the U.S. Chamber of Commerce in Hong Kong. He has devoted himself to obtaining the release of prisoners from Chinese jails and labor camps. He researches the Chinese prison system and finds that:

China today is the only country in the world where the government jails bishops and priests for the exercise of their religious beliefs....

There are no reliable estimates of the number of people held against their will on any given day in China. We're probably talking about a population of prisoners and detainees well in excess of five million. It is reasonable to assume that there are well in excess of 10,000 prisoners being held for the non-violent expression of their political and/or religious beliefs. I am the first to admit that there has been much progress in the area of human rights since 1976, the year Mao died. There has been much progress especially in the areas of economic and cultural rights, and there have been some notable developments in other areas as well. Yet [since mid-1995] the situation for Catholics has worsened, and worsened dramatically.

Mr. Kamm suggests that disseminating news about the religious situation in China to the wider world, and raising these cases with Chinese officials, by church people and businessmen outside of China can be of some help.

The situation changes, if not from year to year then every few years. In the past 2 or 3 years, since Christopher Patten, the last British Governor of Hong Kong, promoted reforms in the territory's government, Beijing set the tone of “We are in charge,” with the establishment of the Preparatory Committee. Talk of annulling existing laws in Hong Kong, and an effort to try to restore stricter laws from an earlier colonial period by publishing the consultation document on “Civil Liberties and Social Order” are both concrete signs of this tightening. Yet most recently there have been some signs of loosening up to a certain degree, as the revisions being proposed by

Mr. Tung, the SAR Chief Executive, are less drastic than earlier thought. When Deng Xiaoping died, most of the top government officials in Hong Kong were notified that they could remain in office after July 1. This is a sign that the Central government aims to achieve a smooth transition.

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Now and in the future, the political climate in Beijing will remain the most important factor in determining how loose or tight a grip Beijing maintains on Hong Kong. If the leadership feels confident in this post-Deng period, then Beijing will relax its grip on Hong Kong. However, if the political climate worsens, and the Communist Party is worried about its authority and political stability, then it will certainly tighten its grip.

Religious policy is also linked to personnel changes in the government. Deng Xiaoping did not concern himself very much with religion, but his death on February 19 marked the passing of an era. All the charismatic figures of the first and second generations of the Communist revolution have now left the stage. President Jiang Zemin is often called "the core figure of the Party," and he is indeed at the center of the third generation of leaders, those who will lead China into the 21st Century. However, Jiang still needs to build up his authority. If he senses a threat to his position, he will tend to tighten up policy regarding religion rather than take a more relaxed stance. The history of the past 50 years teaches Jiang and other Communists that it is vital to preserve social stability.

When the Communists established themselves in power, they looked upon religion as feudal superstition, something incompatible with proletariat thinking. I do not have to remind you that missionaries were linked with imperialism. To this day, there has been no fundamental change in this outlook. However, the failure of various attempts to outlaw and stamp out religion, and the recognition

of the complex and long-term nature of religion in China's preliminary stage of socialism, led Party theoreticians to rethink their policy.

Although economic freedom will bring political and religious freedom, China has too many people, and stability must be maintained. These can be excuses for Party Central to delay political reforms while not relaxing their grip on religion. Yet if the process of political reform moves at a snail's pace, it will produce serious divisions within the country and lead to a crisis. The Communists would then respond with a heavy crackdown on those who want changes, and religious personnel would also feel the impact.

In 1989, Party elder Chen Yun wrote a letter to Jiang Zemin, the new General Secretary of the Party, saying.

The infiltration of opportunists into religion has recently been growing more serious....They exploit religion and are struggling with us to control the masses, especially the youth. This is a clever trick of foreign and domestic class enemies. There is a painful lesson to be learned from several countries where Communists have lost political power. The time has now come for Party Central to thoroughly grab hold of this situation.

In recent years the Communists have restricted major Christian feasts, especially activities at Christmas. And some cadres have made it one of their main duties to prevent church growth. To keep the influence of the church from expanding, the officials have summoned bishops and priests to meetings and lectured them on instilling "respect for the law" into the faithful. This is a limited tolerance for religion, a highly controlled tolerance.

The open church, or the officially recognized church, is not the Patriotic Association. Yet the Patriotic Association and the government control the open church in various places to varying degrees. Members of the open church should be helped to be in full communion with the Universal Church and the Pope. Although the open church has many good Catholics, it has not been able to eliminate opportunists from its ranks, especially among those who hold power.

The combination of government pressure, sell-out within the ranks of the Patriotic Association, and some weak people in high

positions in the open church is a heart break for many Catholics. They are unwilling patiently to accept that people are arrested, expelled from the church and humiliated. So the underground church began to take counter measures, and their counter offensive keeps growing stronger. Some spiritual leaders have been arrested, some have even been martyred. After more than 30 years of oppression and persecution, not to mention isolation from the outside world, some people, in the underground church unfortunately developed hard hearts and began to attack the open church. We must understand them and be patient with them, while encouraging reconciliation between the two groups of Chinese Catholics.

Just as Chen Yun's analysis of the role of religion in the fall of Communism in Eastern Europe helped put religious affairs near the top of the government's agenda in China in the sensitive period after June 4, so some other foreign event or domestic challenge may bring religion to center stage again in China. Yet policies have to be implemented by officials on the local level, and corruption among cadres is still a problem. So tight policies and harsh regulations are not fully enforced. In the long run what China needs is the transition from "rule by individuals" to "the rule of law," with an autonomous judicial system and more guarantees on human rights.

Whatever happens in the Mainland, Hong Kong is our city. We belong here and have chosen to stay here.

The Catholic Church came to Hong Kong in 1841, one year before Hong Kong became a British colony. Numerically, it is also the largest Chinese Catholic diocese in the world. According to the latest statistics, Catholics now number 400,000, including 150,000 Filipinas, mostly women who work in Hong Kong as domestic helpers. There are 320 priests, evenly divided between Chinese and foreign. Sisters number 600, with Chinese Sisters in the majority. There are 80 religious Brothers and seminarians. Besides 329 schools, the diocese has 60 parish churches, administers 6 hospitals, 9 clinics, 14 social service organizations, 11 hostels, 29 homes for the aged and centres for the handicapped. The church indeed contributes greatly to the social welfare and development of Hong Kong and its people.

Although many Catholics continue to emigrate to foreign countries, their number is replaced by over 2000 adult converts and

over 2000 children baptized each year. This brings much vitality to the church. Local clergy are taking over the leadership roles in the diocese. Both clergy and religious have a variety of opportunities to go abroad for updating and renewal courses. The laity are gradually assuming more pastoral responsibilities in the parishes. About 200 lay Catholics are enrolled in the evening Bible and theology courses run by professors from the major seminary. Many Catholics deepen their faith by joining small groups that meet weekly for Scripture reflection and prayer. All of these are positive developments in the Hong Kong church.

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In accord with the Sino-British Joint Declaration, after China recovers Hong Kong on this July 1, this city will be permitted to retain its capitalist system unchanged for 50 years under the principle of "One Country, Two Systems". Yet looking at the current situation of human rights and the degree of religious freedom in China, it is hard for the people here to avoid being concerned. Therefore on his official visits to China and whenever he has an opportunity to speak with Chinese officials, Cardinal Wu has always mentioned that people are still leaving Hong Kong in great numbers because what they see happening in China frightens them. In this way Cardinal Wu hopes to get the officials to realize that they will have to soften their threatening rhetoric if they hope for a smooth transition this year.

The Justice and Peace Commission of the Diocese of Hong Kong has also monitored the entire situation in Hong Kong and China, and has spoken out when necessary.

Since the majority of the people cannot qualify to emigrate, the Church has assured them that we will remain to serve them with parishes, schools, social works, etc., to the degree permitted by the new government. The Diocese has been building at least one new church a year at tremendous capital outlay because of the price of land and construction. This sends a positive signal to our Catholics.

The Catholic Church in Hong Kong constantly reminds her clergy and laity not to be too concerned about their own safety or danger, but joyfully to use the good opportunity which God has given, and to further the work of spreading the Gospel. As China has become more and more open, and has shown greater tolerance for the church, an important part of our mission has been to be a bridge to China and the church in China.

Ninety-six percent (96%) of the 6.5 million resident in Hong Kong are Chinese. One of the subtle differences between the Chinese and other peoples, especially Westerners, is the dominant role the moon plays in their culture. Many day-to-day activities are still reckoned by the lunar calendar, and the different phases of the moon continue to exert a great influence on their lives. They see the history of their people from ancient times reflected in the moon's cyclical changes. The moon becomes for them a paradigm of their national and personal history, the dark phases of which they must accept stoically but not devoid of hope. Like the moon itself, they too must pass through many phases, but this movement is directed irrevocably towards a new fullness of light. Chinese Catholics, then, can feel quite at home in the church's eschatological message that encourages Christians to rejoice in and celebrate the now-and-future Kingdom of God in this world. Of course, the ultimate strength of the church in Hong Kong comes from her trust in the Supreme Ruler of history, and in her firm belief in the ultimate victory of good over evil, based on the Paschal Mystery.

We Catholics in Hong Kong are deeply grateful for the long-term, deep love and great contribution of missionaries. We always consider them as closest brothers and sisters in our family, and we look forward to their continued presence and support in the future. Under the trend of indigenization, it is evident that local clergy today are assuming more and more of the leadership roles here, while foreign missionaries are stepping back into auxiliary roles. What attitude should the foreign missionaries adopt in this new role? I think that missionaries should be clear about one important fact, namely, that they come from a background and culture where the faith is much older and more deep-seated than that of the local Catholics and clergy. Through their contacts with local Catholics they contribute in a special way. Their rich deposit of faith helps to remind the Hong

Kong church to measure its faith in terms of what is lasting and eternal. While the strong point of the local Catholics and clergy is that they are able to integrate the faith into local life and culture, the special contribution missionaries make is that they transmit the deposit of faith and help to deepen it in the local church communities. Some local people, following the modern trend of individualism, think that nothing is more important than success. They tend to forget the values of Christian detachment, poverty and selfless service. The foreign missionary's gracious withdrawal to less obvious and more humble roles in service to the church is a powerful witness to these Christian values. And it serves as a constant reminder to the local church of the theological meaning of the cross.

An ancient Chinese text from Zhuangzi, who lived before Christ tells the following story. A king noticed a cabinet that was excellently made, a real work of art. So the king asked the carpenter for his secret. The carpenter replied: "Your majesty, before I start on a project, I first fast to clear my mind and purify my heart. By the third day of my fast, I am not concerned about what reward or payment I shall receive. By the fifth day, I am indifferent to whether people will approve or criticize my work. By the seventh day of my fast, I have no concern for myself in my heart any more, and have forgotten about the visible world. I am detached from what I may accomplish. If I do not fast, I will not put my hand to the project. In this way whatever I do is done naturally, as if the ax and saw move by themselves."

Since we are concerned for the Church in China, we should study that carpenter, and learn from him how to purify our motives and efforts. □

