

Intervention of Coadjutor Bishop of Hong Kong, Joseph Zen

Everybody knows that we are here not so much as bishops from Hong Kong, but as bishops from China, invited as a result of the Holy Father's special love for the church in China.

Yes, we are here as two bishops from the People's Republic of China, of which Hong Kong is an integral part since the 1st of July, 1997. According to the principle of one country, two systems: Hong Kong is a Special Administrative Region. We were promised that we could keep our system unchanged for fifty years. What is the situation nearly 9 months after the 1st of July? People say "so far, so good". We still have freedom of movement, freedom of the press, we have religious freedom, and we can run schools and teach religion in our schools, we run hospitals and other social institutions, etc."



Bishop Zen stressing the need to work for reconciliation

But the “one country, two systems” concept contains serious contradictions. We in Hong Kong are happy to keep our system unchanged, but what about the other system? Can we say: let it also be unchanged for 50 years? A system that does not allow complete religious freedom, which still today persecutes our brothers and sisters in the faith, treating them as second class citizens? Should this system remain unchanged? No.

It must be admitted that this system has changed to some extent in the last twenty years. One example is my own case. During the late seventies Catholic seminaries were allowed to be established. In 1984 I wrote a letter to the Rector of the Regional Seminary in Shanghai, asking him to invite me to teach in that seminary. Everybody said I was dreaming. The approval of the government came at the end of 1988, after more than 4 years. From September 1989 to September 1996, I was able to spend six months a year teaching philosophy and theology in 7 different seminaries in China. I could teach exactly the same doctrines as I do in the seminary in Hong Kong, no one ever interfered.

I am so grateful to the Lord for this privileged experience and I thank our most beloved Holy Father for giving me this opportunity to share with you, my brother bishops, some thoughts, the fruit of these years of experience.

1) **Boldly proclaim the truth.** Proclaim Jesus Christ the only saviour. Proclaim that the church is the sacrament of salvation. Proclaim that the Primacy of the successor of Saint Peter is an integral part of our Catholic faith. Don't say that this last one is a secondary truth, our brothers and sisters are giving their lives for that; all our fellow Catholics in China are agonizingly waiting for the day they can be embraced by the Holy Father, from whom they are being kept separated.

To hide the truth is never a good strategy. Never pretend that everything is all right and normal when it is not so. Only the truth sets us free. Only in truthfulness do we earn respect even from our persecutors, and telling them the truth is the best act of charity we can do for them.

2) **Work towards reconciliation.** We all know about the sad division of the church in China into the so called patriotic church and the underground church. The reality is very complicated and

confused, but one thing is clear: it is not a division created by our brothers (not because of doctrinal divergence, nor because of personal contrasts). It was caused by external pressure. Facing the will of the government to isolate the Catholics from the rest of the church and from the pope, one section of the community stood firm and uncompromised, ready to be crushed mercilessly, while another chose the way of compromise. That compromise didn't spare them suffering either. They had to bear the full brunt of the cultural revolution, while at that time the first group was already peacefully kept in prison or labour camps, where the state protected them from the Red Guards.

Whatever subjective motivations and situations there were at the beginning, bishops and priests of the official church today are, with very few exceptions, zealous workers in the vineyard of the Lord, leading a poor and exemplary life, respected by the faithful they serve, bearing the continuous harassment of government officials. It is unfair to disqualify them indiscriminately. The Holy Father magnanimously has legitimized a good number of these bishops. His Holiness has a special place in his heart for all our brothers and sisters in China. In our concern for the church in China let us love and help both groups, never take sides with one against the other. They are all our brothers, victims of the regime.

3) Keep **praying and dreaming**. What can we expect for the future? Is there any basis for optimism? (Not the natural development of events, because the confusion seems to be getting worse. Not in any help from foreign powers, because they are only concerned with their economic interests, paying only lip-service to the cause of human rights.) Our hope against hope is in the power of the Risen Lord, in the working of the Holy Spirit, in the intercession of our Lady, Queen of China, in the sacrifices of Chinese martyrs, both those to be canonized and those still alive among us. ■

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