

Intervention of John Tong, Auxiliary Bishop of Hong Kong

Most Holy Father, Brothers and Sisters in Christ:

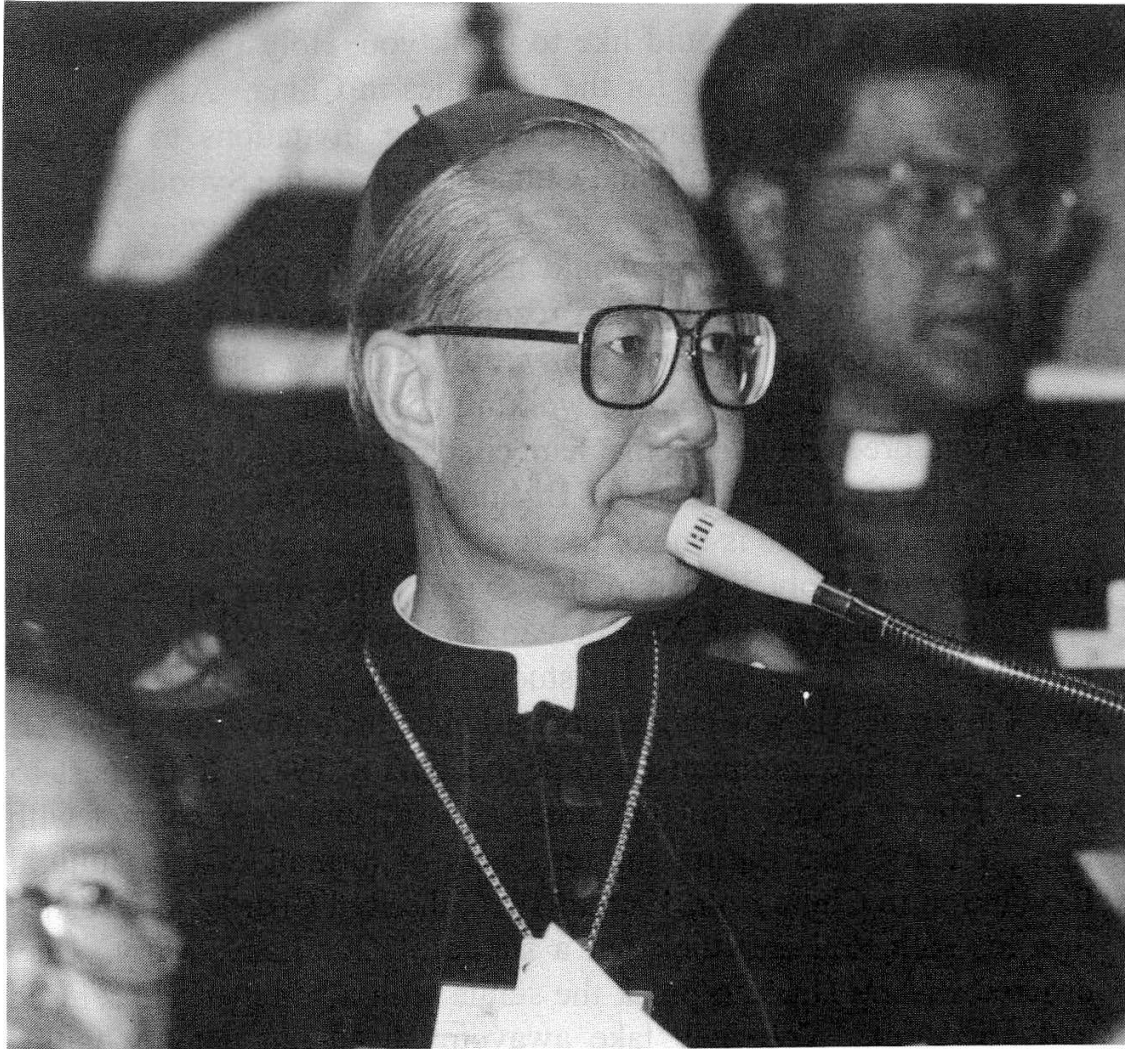
First of all, I would like to thank you, Holy Father for your fatherly concern and love for the Catholics in China. Also I would like to thank Your Holiness for extending invitations to the two Chinese bishops from Mainland China to come to the Synod.

My intervention is related to the *Instrumentum Laboris* Numbers 10, 26 and 39. I would talk about the power of witness, and the needs for formation and reconciliation among the Catholics in Mainland China. Already many brothers have shared excellent analyses and reflections on the working document. So I would like to tell you three real stories that happened in the Church in China.

The first story is about Bishop Matthias Duan Yinming of Wanxian diocese. He is one of the two bishops from Mainland China invited by the Holy Father to this Synod. The other invitee is his coadjutor Bishop Joseph Xu Zhixuan. Both are yet to arrive. Bishop Duan is now 90 years old. He studied theology and was ordained priest in Rome. He was chosen and ordained bishop by Pope Pius XII on the eve of the communist regime in China in 1949. In the past 15 years, I have visited him five times and still maintain contact with him. I learnt that during the ten years of turmoil of the Cultural Revolution in China from 1966 to 1976, the Red Guards once rushed into his cathedral and took out a statue of Our Lady, Mary. They ordered Bishop Duan to break the statue with a hammer. He refused and cried out, "You may take away my head but not my faith." Subsequently he was tortured, imprisoned and sent to a reform-through-labor farm. Since late 1979, he was allowed to resume religious life under China's open door policy. He went back to the cathedral and started the diocese again. He has been highly respected by Catholics from both the open Church and the underground Church, as well as by non-Catholics.

The Church in China has been persecuted for at least 30 years since the 1950s. However, the Catholics in China have sown the seed of hope with much love and suffering. This may explain

why the Catholic population in China jumped from three million in 1949 to at least 10 million today. Their life witnesses reflect the truth pointed out by Pope John Paul II in No. 42 of his encyclical *Redemptoris Missio*: “People today put more trust in witnesses than in teachers, in experience than in teaching, and in life and action than in theories.”



Bishop Tong addressing the members of the Asian Synod in Rome

My second story is about religious vocation. A seminarian in China once told me when and where he heard the call from God. His uncle was a priest. During the Cultural Revolution, his uncle was put on public trial and sentenced to death. The seminarian himself, who was then a small boy, was among the crowd of spectators. He heard the rifles fired and saw the bullets enter his uncle's heart, and that was followed by a fountain of blood. At once he heard a voice

inside him calling him to priesthood. He told himself, "I must become a priest to continue my uncle's work."

There are many more examples of priests' and Sisters' vocations inspired by faith in the difficult times of China. Religious vocations in China are really flourishing. By now, there are more than 2,000 young priests and 4,000 young nuns, but that is insufficient to serve the 10 million Catholics in China and to spread the Gospel to the many more non-Christians.

Originally, the Communist Party, being atheistic, had no place for religion in its ideology, but was confronted by the fact that religion exists and cannot be eradicated. The Party had to develop a way to make use of religion in order to serve the government's aims. In recent years, many militant atheists have either died or become interested in China's stability and economic growth. So nowadays, atheism is no longer a dominant ideological factor in the Chinese government's religion policy. What the government is concerned about is whether or not it can control all aspects of society. However, government control is sometimes tightened and sometimes relaxed. This often depends on the attitude of local officials toward Church people.

All through the years of the Chinese government's control, the gap between the open and underground Church communities has widened and polarized. Thus the Church in China needs help, particularly for the promotion of reconciliation between the two sides of the Church.

Fortunately, there is some light illuminating the Church in China. Here comes my third story. In a city in central China, I met two bishops. Bishop A is a government-recognized bishop who works in the open Church, while Bishop B is from the underground Church in the same diocese. Both reconciled in stages. With God's help, there were often some intermediaries helping conduct half of the dialogue. The government does not recognize the underground bishop as a bishop, but allowed him to serve as the spiritual director of the open seminary. Last year, before the annual retreat for all the priests in the diocese took place, the government officials told them the underground bishop could not preach the retreat. But where there is a will, there is a way. Bishop A preached a short homily, just a few sentences, then asked, "Are there any questions?" Bishop B stood up and asked a long string of questions. After a minute, everyone

realized if they merely changed those questions to statements, they could hear a well-prepared sermon by Bishop B. The retreatants understood and smiled. Of course, the government officials were not happy, but could do nothing about it.

I would like to appeal to all bishops and Catholics from outside China. Please go and visit the Church in China and meet the Catholics there prudently and in a balanced way. In so doing, you will show concern to your fellow brothers and sisters in China. Also, listening to their moving testimonies will stimulate and confirm one's own Catholic faith.

Secondly, I hope all of you could help and support the formation of Chinese seminarians and sisters inside and outside China. Prayers and support like sending formation materials, books and sharing experiences would help broaden their vision about the Universal Church and Church teachings.

I have mentioned the case of reconciliation in the Church in China. It is a rare example. In fact, there are many more cases of conflicts. We must work hard and echo the Holy Father's appeal to promote reconciliation and pray for it.

With your efforts and support for the Church in China, I am sure we will see more signs of hope in Asia, as noted in Number 10 of *Instrumentum Laboris*: "Everywhere in Asia there is visible a new awareness carrying the Asian people to liberate themselves from the legacy of negative traditions, social evils and situations associated with the past." Thank you very much. ■