

# *Death of John Baptist Cardinal Wu Bishop Joseph Zen New Bishop of Hong Kong*

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**B**ishop Joseph Zen Ze-kiun, 70, Salesian, a native of Shanghai, and Hong Kong's Coadjutor Bishop since 1996, is the new Bishop of Hong Kong. The transition from the gentle John Baptist Cardinal Wu Cheng-chung to the outspoken Joseph Zen has aroused a great deal of interest in Hong Kong and throughout the world.

## **Cardinal Wu's Heritage**

John Baptist Cardinal Wu, 77, Bishop of Hong Kong for 27 years, died on September 23, 2002, after a long and painful illness. The Catholics of Hong Kong, deeply touched by the death of the much loved Cardinal, paid him tribute with an enormous display of affection through the celebration of two most beautiful funeral liturgies, and a nocturnal vigil. In their homily, the special representative of the Pope, Cardinal Crescenzo Sepe, Coadjutor Bishop Joseph Zen and Auxiliary Bishop John Tong all



eloquently and with deep feeling described Cardinal Wu's important and historic role. Cardinal Wu shepherded the Diocese of Hong Kong with a cool assurance of a man of faith, and met the challenge presented by a city with a singular destiny, and a point of encounter between China and the West. With the Cardinal at its head, the Church in Hong Kong grew as a spirited and active community knowing how to witness to the Gospel in Hong Kong's complex, international and financial context. The Church in Hong Kong has brilliantly overcome fear and the uncertainty of a legacy resulting from the transition from British administration to that of the People's Republic of China (July 1, 1997).

Cardinal Wu, a man of great prudence and moderation, by nature, shy and free of any ambition, confronted various difficulties with courage without letting himself be intimidated by any political power, whether from London, or Beijing, or from Hong Kong's new leaders. The following examples testify to this: his firm reaction to the prohibition of meeting Cardinal Ignatius Kung in prison in Shanghai in 1985; his criticism of the colonial government on the question of Vietnamese refugees (1989); his support of the memorial celebration for the students of Tiananmen (1989); his sharp criticism of Hong Kong's government on the Right of Abode question (1999); and the solemn celebration honoring of the China martyrs contrary to Beijing's explicit request.

Cardinal Wu encouraged the Church in Hong Kong to open itself up, and to support the Church in China, that was in serious difficulty after years of persecution, but also full of life and hope. To this end, with a spirit of anticipation, and not without being misunderstood, he set up the Holy Spirit Study Centre (1980); sent professors from the diocesan seminary to teach in the seminaries of China; and supported Caritas' social endeavors in China. Cardinal Wu's three historic visits to China (1985, 1986, and 1994) were instrumental in launching a dialogue between the Universal Church and the authorities in Beijing.

The press and the local media recognized Cardinal Wu's great personal value and contribution to Hong Kong society. Upon his death, they dedicated a great deal of media time and space to him and to many expressions of appreciation.

## **Bishop Joseph Zen Succeeds Cardinal Wu**

However, the media could not help pointing out the big difference in style and personality between the deceased Cardinal and his successor, Bishop Joseph Zen. For some time Bishop Zen has been a prominent figure in Hong Kong, thanks to his frankness and his courage in denouncing injustice and hypocrisy. Bishop Zen maintains that, for years, Hong Kong has been controlled by political-business-factions from Beijing that usurp the prerogative of the local government. "Some years ago," he says,



"I gave a lecture at a conference at the Lateran University in Rome—the talk was later published in the University publication—in which I denounced clearly Hong Kong's deteriorating political climate. Only 20 percent of the Legislative Council (Parliament) is democratically elected; the pro-Beijing forces always win out even if they are a minority in society."

Bishop Zen is often asked to comment on various issues such as religious liberty in China; the canonization of the China martyrs, the Right of Abode; the refusal to let the children waiting for a resolution on the right of abode to attend school; the reinterpretation of Hong Kong's Basic Law; the independence of the judiciary system; the excessive intervention of the police in demonstrations and dissent; education; the defense of the rights of the Falun Gong movement; the legislation on national security, known as Article 23, etc.

### **Recent Polemics**

On October 1, 2002, China's national day, China's official (Beijing) government representative, Gao Siren, ventured to point out the difference between the two bishops, inviting Bishop Zen to

“learn from Cardinal Wu who was pragmatic and respectable.” On the same day, China’s official newspaper, *China Daily*, aggravated the matter by charging Zen of being a “political bishop” and spreading “seeds of discontent against the central government...”

Bishop Zen did not let himself be intimidated. After having confirmed that indeed he wanted to learn from the Cardinal, Zen invited Gao Siren himself to follow the example of his predecessor, Jiang Anzhu, who had kept a low profile, without interfering publicly in the internal affairs of Hong Kong.

Bishop Zen stressed positive steps taken by central or local authorities, on the occasion of the death of the Cardinal. The office of Beijing’s official representative in Hong Kong with its head, Gao Siren, publicly expressed their condolences for the Cardinal, while Hong Kong’s chief executive, Tung Chee-hwa personally telephoned Bishop Zen, and personally paid solemn respect to the Cardinal’s mortal remains in the Cathedral. Bishop Zen had only recently severely chided Tung Zhee-hwa, expressing his disappointment that the head of Hong Kong had never had time to meet him and other leaders of society, on questions of public interest, such as the Right of Abode and the schools. The media noted this and speculated on this rapprochement, speaking of “funeral diplomacy.” They wondered whether Bishop Zen would go from a high to a low profile, or if the government would open a dialogue with the church.

### **Bishop Tong Explains Diverse Roles**

For his part, John Tong the Auxiliary Bishop, in an article published in the *Sunday Examiner* (September 29, 2002), Hong Kong’s diocesan weekly, wrote that we should not put too much emphasis on the difference in style between Cardinal Wu, who was very reserved, and Bishop Zen, who sought to intervene in public issues. Bishop Tong explained the conscious “division” of roles among the three bishops. Bishop Zen’s strong interventions indicated areas of crisis; Bishop Tong’s role was to maintain a dialogue with the local and central authorities; the Cardinal, above the polemics, guaranteed stability for the Church.

In one of the many press conferences, and in numerous other interviews, Bishop Zen said that, imitating the example of the Cardinal, he would mitigate the harshness of his interventions on



public issues. "Our Cardinal's motto was 'doing truth in charity.' Up to now I have stressed truth; from now on I will speak it with more charity."

Zen at the same time has firmly defended his behavior, affirming that he has always acted in accordance with the social doctrine of the Church, and with the support of the Holy See. He added that his interventions reflected the thinking of the Cardinal and of John Tong the Auxiliary Bishop, and that he enjoyed the support of the majority of Catholics. Bishop Zen has assured those who feared that he had abandoned his public denunciations saying, "I will continue to say what I have to say on all issues that concern both the Church and society."

### **Law on National Security (Article 23 of the Basic Law)**

Bishop Zen did not betray his promise. The occasion presented itself with the debate generated on the government's proposal (September 24, 2002) of legislation on Article 23 of the Basic Law, regarding sedition, subversion, treason, secession and other anti-state activities. This is the most compelling issue on the future of Hong Kong since the reunification. According to the whole democratic movement, the government's proposal inflicts a mortal blow to civil liberty so far preserved in Hong Kong.

According to Bishop Zen, "the government's proposal is really scary." Almost everyone risks falling into some punishable offense. For example: having structural links with organizations considered subversive in China, could constitute a crime in Hong Kong. Then if the underground church were defined as subversive in China, what would happen to the Church in Hong Kong from the moment that we clearly affirm that we are part of the same Catholic Church?

"And many other proposals are alarming for the freedom of the press, demonstrations, and right of assembly. The police have also been given some extraordinary powers. In short, the principle of 'one country two systems' which is Hong Kong's bedrock would be compromised. I hope that the many negative reactions coming from society will be able at least to mitigate the final legislation. However, let us not be under any illusion: we know well that everything that the government presents to the Legislative Council, com-

posed for the majority of deputies named by the pro-Beijing Party, is automatically approved.”

These strong statements widely reported by the local and international media show that Bishop Zen has not entirely renounced his contentious spirit and his courage. He has become one of Hong Kong's most controversial, admired, respected and revered persons. Someone has defined him as the “conscience of Hong Kong.” Surely with him as the leader, the Church in Hong Kong is preparing to face the coming years with great interest and responsibility.



*Good News and great joy to all the  
world:*

*Today is born our Savior,  
Christ the Lord.*

*Merry Christmas  
and  
Blessings for the New Year!*