

## *Bishop Zen, Hong Kong's Person of the Year*

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**H**ong Kong's Catholic Bishop, Joseph Zen, is according to the readers of *The Apple Daily*, one of Hong Kong's most popular Chinese language newspapers, Hong Kong's most significant person of the Year 2002. More than 2500 readers, who voted through the Internet in the survey promoted by *The Apple Daily*, gave Bishop Zen 50% of the votes. A distant second was Bishop Zen's opponent in important policy matters, the Secretary for Security, Regina Yip (24%). In the third and fourth positions were the deceased pop singer Roman Tam (19%) and the local movie star Carina Lau (9%). Of special interest were the reasons given for the voters' choice. The newspaper reported a number of these. Finally, the editor chose one sentence that he thought best expressed the mind of the readers: "In him, I can find justice and hope."



Other readers said, "Bishop Zen is courageous in naming injustices. He does not fear the powerful, he has brought the Church into the life of society." "Bishop Zen is one of the few people in Hong Kong who is not afraid of speaking out, and to say what he really thinks. He is courageous in denouncing injustices, and does not yield to those in power." "He represents the struggle for truth, freedom and universal love." "Hong Kong needs just, wise, courageous and caring leaders. The bishop has all these qualities"

On January 1, on the page devoted to the winner, Bishop Zen, *The Apple Daily* commented that the people see in Bishop Zen what they cannot find in the government's leaders. Government

popularity is in fact declining because, while it cannot find solutions to growing economic difficulties, it is busy passing a “national security law” (Article 23), which a growing number of people perceive as a threat to the civil liberties they have enjoyed so far.

The controversy over Article 23 is perhaps irremediably and profoundly dividing the community. On December 15, Hong Kong witnessed its largest public protest since June 1989, when the people took to the streets to protest against the Tiananmen massacre. The Catholic Church, stimulated by Bishop Zen’s action as well as by various Protestants groups, made an important contribution to the success of the demonstration. Many religious and faithful were

seen marching alongside 60,000 Hong Kong citizens, a sight not often seen. The government was obviously embarrassed by such a large display of dissent; still it seems

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unwilling to modify the proposed legislation. The Pro-Beijing faction, who supports the government, has transformed the matter into an issue about patriotism, something which Bishop Zen and many leaders of the democratic front have vigorously denounced.

The December 30, 2002, Chinese television program devoted to Bishop Zen clearly demonstrated that he has become one of Hong Kong’s most popular and recognizable faces. On the program the bishop told the story of his family and his childhood in Shanghai, his vocation, his studies in Hong Kong and in Italy, and his opinion on various of Hong Kong’s important issues. In a city where the Catholics are less the 5%, the popularity and the visibility of the Bishop is certainly a new and interesting phenomenon. It will be interesting to see whether this will have any implication for evangelization. Meanwhile, we are grateful that the Catholic Church is projecting a positive and constructive image on society in general, and on the media in particular. This is already no small achievement in a period of numerous negative media reports, that have tarnished many Catholic leaders, with the exception of the Pope.

Society now acknowledges that there is some justification for the worries expressed on Article 23. Bishop Zen was among the very first to point this out. Following his courageous stand many people and organizations from the political, economic, judiciary and academic world, here and internationally, expressed grave reservations about the proposed legislation.

Early on, some people in the Church had difficulty adjusting to Bishop Zen's pastoral style, which is considerably different from that of the gentle, and much loved Cardinal John Baptist Wu. However there is now a growing support for the action of the Bishop. For his part, Bishop Zen always refers to Cardinal Wu, with whom he successfully collaborated for five years. What distinguishes the two are not pastoral policies, but a personal style.

In some quarters there is a certain uneasiness, or even hostility towards Bishop Zen. Last November, a religious delegation from China cancelled a meeting with the leaders of Hong Kong's Catholic Church. This was certainly in retaliation for positions taken by the bishop. The recent personal attack on Bishop Zen by a pro-Beijing legislator created alarm in the community. The public appreciated the light and ironic tone of Bishop's answer to the attack and various leaders and commentators condemned the offensive remark. However, concerns remain in society about Bishop Zen. A reader of *The Apply Daily* expressed his worry with the following words when he gave his vote to the bishop: "Thanks to Bishop Zen I still have hope in Hong Kong. But I am worried for him. I see a knife over his head. At the next convenient occasion, the 'old fool' will be eliminated."