

Interview with His Eminence Cardinal John Tong, Bishop of Hong Kong, July 17, 2012

Questions asked by Prof. Hans Waldenfels SJ



Fifteen years ago, on July 1, 1997, Hong Kong again became part of the People's Republic of China – under the principle of “One country, two systems.” The Church is relatively free and exercises a rather strong influence by its well-established educational system built up from Kindergarten through Primary and High Schools to the University level, and through her Caritas organization, a social service arm of the diocese, and social activities. How do you see the influence of the Hong Kong Church on the Church in Mainland China?

Over the past 15 years, the political and social environments of Hong Kong have changed. However, the mission and the commitment of the Catholic Church in Hong Kong to education, social welfare, and other services in society remain strong, for which the quality of the services has to improve, as the society has changed after 1997 when the sovereignty of Hong Kong reverted from British to Chinese rule.

Today, there are 250 primary, secondary, and higher education schools run by the diocese, religious congregations, and other Catholic organizations in Hong Kong. The Caritas-Hong Kong runs social centers for youth, family, ethnic minorities, vocational training, elderly and medical services, etc. for the general public. Such services are visible testimony of the Catholic faith among the public.

This interview was conducted in Hong Kong by Prof. Dr. Dr. Hans Waldenfels SJ, Essen/Germany, formerly professor for fundamental theology at Bonn University, who had stayed there as a lecturer in a course for seminary teachers from Mainland China on the significance of old and new philosophies for theological formation (June 27 to July 4). Cardinal John Tong has been appointed as one of the three president delegates to the upcoming Synod of Bishops scheduled to take place in the Vatican from October 7 to 28. A German translation of the interview has first been published in *Ruhrwort*, August 4, 2012.

In 2011, the diocese lost a lawsuit against a new policy in education, introduced after 1997, that the governing body of each school has to be represented by a sponsoring body, made up of teachers, parents, and other representatives. The diocese will comply with the court ruling and adapt to the new system to continue to provide quality education to all students of the Catholic schools.

On the question of influencing the Mainland Church, actually, when contacts are possible, this influence takes place and it is mutual. The Hong Kong Diocese has a history of more than 150 years. Compared with many dioceses in Mainland China, which began centuries ago, Hong Kong is relatively “young” and there is a great deal to learn from the Mainland Church.

Such influence can be observed in three aspects:

- (i) Although schools in Mainland China cannot be operated by religions, including the Catholic Church, the dedication and quality teaching in education is shared with visitors from educational institutes from China. Students and teachers of Catholic schools in Hong Kong occasionally visit schools in the Mainland and exchange knowledge and teaching methods with them.
- (ii) Regarding social and medical services, they are visited by Mainland Church individuals working in such fields. Church workers or social workers from Mainland Church-run centers or clinics come to Hong Kong on exchange or to take refresher courses. Many have visited social centers of Caritas-Hong Kong, Church hospitals, hospice care, marriage and pre-marital counseling, family and youth activities.
- (iii) This kind of exchange reaffirms the role of the Hong Kong Church as a bridge Church, where it serves as a connection between the Church in the Mainland and the Universal Church.

Obviously the Church in China is gaining more free ground. An extension of free opinion is unavoidable due to the growing development of communication media. The unofficial Church is no longer a hidden Church. How can the relations inside the Church be strengthened in the future?

The Church in China has gained “more free ground” in the expression of faith, when compared to the times in the early reopening period since 1980. However, both the open Church and the underground Church communities are living their faith with restrictions, such as the freedom to exercise religious practices and freedom of movement of Church personnel.

Apparently, as China’s info-technology has developed fast and allowed a free use of Internet, mobile phones, and other communication means within China, the Catholics living in this environment also enjoy what is provided in the society. However, the content is closely monitored by Internet police. For example, most of the web reports on Mainland Catholic websites about the ordination of Auxiliary Bishop Ma Daqin of Shanghai on July 7, 2012 were ordered by the government to be removed soon after Ma’s ordination was declared to be under investigation. Also, the construction of highways and hi-speed trains has improved communications and strengthened contacts and dialogue.

More contacts between the two Catholic communities in the recent decade have been observed. This is possible not really because of the advancement of communications, but due to the release of the Papal Letter of 2007 that calls for reconciliation and communion in the Church. Also, the more frequent recognition and legitimization of bishops by the Holy Father helps improve the relationship between the two sides. Such bishops were ordained without the approval of the Holy Father, under the so-called “self-election and self-ordination” system introduced by the Chinese government and Patriotic Association since 1958.

There are places where the two communities of the “official” and “unofficial” sides exist in peace, but others still experience disharmony due to historical and various reasons. Actually, the Chinese priests and sisters who studied in Germany and other countries have enjoyed a time and space with Catholics from the other side. They enjoyed the friendship and time together. It is hoped that the two communities may become reconciled in their hearts and also in action someday.

All in all, the “unofficial” Church still lives its faith in a quiet and low-key manner. Many still suffer restrictions and purges from the public security officials. On the other hand, the “official” Church communities are closely monitored as well. Both communities need the Universal Church’s support and prayers to strengthen their relationship and to live in full freedom.

How can a more trustful relationship between the Church and the government be developed so that the State does not see in the Church a threat anymore, but gives the religious communities the freedom they request on behalf of their self-understanding?

Trust is essential in relationships. The Chinese say: “A harmonious family makes everything rise.” Both the Chinese government and the Church in China hope to make the people live in happiness. It takes time for the two to come to a trustful relationship. Actually, in certain dioceses or places the Church and the local government have maintained cordial relationships.

Inevitably the destructions, pain, and suffering of the Church in the 1950s and during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) still cast shadows in the minds of Catholics. Today, these wounds are healing. Deeper understanding and trust is called for to improve the relationship.

However, the way the Communist authorities rule the country is to control and interfere in all aspects of life, including the Church. The interference in religious activities can be wide-ranging from monitoring mobile phone messages, organizing Christmas activities up to content in websites and publications, sitting in the seminary affairs’ meetings, screening seminarians, priestly ordinations, and certainly bishops’ appointments. Government officials are highly educated. For themselves, they need promotions and have to implement government policies from above. Even though they understand that the religious policies are outdated and unreasonably restrictive, they still have to carry out the orders from above.

The Catholics' freedom is like a bird in a cage. Unless the policy of religion is changed, the situation cannot be improved. Again, dialogue between the Church and State, as well as between the Holy See and Beijing, is essential and imminent.

What kind of reasons does the government have for thinking it has to decide about the ordination of bishops against the will of the Universal Church and her regulations?

Whether the Chinese government purposely chooses some bishops to go "against the will" of the Holy See is hard to determine or recognize. Instead, it seems more obvious for the government to select some bishops whom they "trust" and who can carry out their goals and more importantly, to control the Church and prevent the Church from linking to the Universal Church. It is hard to contact bishops in China or to invite bishops to go abroad without government interference. It is also observed that the Church leaders in China are pushed to implement "an independent and self-managed Church" without the direction of the Holy See. In the long run, there is a danger that the Church will be separated from the Universal Church.

Why does the government not recognize that a Church in freedom could be of great help in harmonizing the country and that she could assist the people on their way to realizing the good goals for the future?

Harmony is the big word today in China. But the present disharmony develops out of the Chinese authorities' obsolete and outmoded religious policy of the Communist Party, adopted since the 1950s. Even though the country is catching up with the world in terms of economy and international events, its policy toward religion remains unchanged.

For instance, on the issue of illicit ordination of bishops, the government's news release still refers to the time of 1958, where the first illicit ordinations took place in China, or to imperialist invasions into China in the 18th and 19th century, or even the "Dark Ages" of the Church in Medieval times. Their perception of the Catholic Church seems to say that the Church is stagnant. Certainly, if we compare the freedom and tolerance the Chinese government allows the Catholic Church to enjoy today with the time in 1980, when it first reopened its doors to the world, it is much improved. But it still lags behind all kinds of reforms. The Chinese authorities still maintain the thinking that the Catholic Church is led by a foreign power, undermining her contributions to morality, understanding of human dignity and human relationships that affect the building of community relationships.

In our times many call for peace, freedom, and justice. Is it not necessary that "all people of good will," as the Popes repeatedly have requested, contribute to the welfare of all whatever they are able to do? How is the Church in Mainland China approaching the ordinary people? How does she get in contact with them?

Given the development of the Church in China in the past decades, the social awareness in many Catholic leaders there seems less sensitive. The Church has been struggling for her survival, such as the reclaiming and restoration of churches and church properties in the 1980s and 1990s, and made an intense effort in building church communities and

bishop's successions in the 2000s. Evangelization has been active in the recent decade, and thus more attention is given to social justice issues like migrants in the cities. In other words, Catholics in the Mainland pay less attention to the Catholic social teaching or social awareness.

During Christmas and major Church festivals, curious young people or residents may come to the Church. They are now welcome to see and listen to what a Catholic Church is. Catholics organize themselves to visit poor and single elderly persons in villages and urban areas during the weekends or Christmas time. Church people are more conscious of environmental protection. Processions in certain parishes were organized to arouse awareness among local residents. Sometimes during holidays, Catholic youths and students have organized themselves to visit children or elderly in the remote areas.

However, big demonstrations are rarely seen. Big protests defending the Church's own property rights, human rights, and religious freedom were observed. For instance, the protest against the beating of sisters in Xi'an Diocese who defended the Church properties from invasions by property companies in 2005; seminarians in Hebei started a three-week student strike in November 2010 to protest the government's appointment of a religious official as their vice rector.

Church participation in nationwide campaigns on human rights and peace issues is rarely seen, with the exception of government-organized peace activities of the five officially-recognized religions – Buddhists, Catholics, Daoists, Muslims, and Protestants.

The great number of people in Hong Kong who are interested in the Church, but also on Mainland China proves that they see the Church as a power which insists on the fundamental rights of human persons and the welfare of humankind. Are there no ways that also the members of the Chinese governments, central and local, come to this understanding so that they finally support the true representatives of the Christian message, or at least that they do not hinder them any longer?

The Chinese government understands that Catholics are serving the needy, but at the same time they are suspicious of the Church, fearing it will introduce ideas of foreign domination into their services. In certain areas, the local government appreciates the services the Church is offering for their people. For example, the Home of the Dawn in Ningjin County, Hebei Province, accommodates orphans and handicapped children. The sisters' effort is publicly appreciated.

As mentioned, many of the Chinese officials do understand the importance of fundamental human rights and efforts made by the Church people, but they have to implement their work according to the policies stated in the Constitution and various regulations. Unless those stipulations are changed, they cannot do much to change the scenario.