

Hong Kong cardinal is cautiously optimistic about the future

Cardinal senses a change in China-Vatican relations



On the eve of the Communist Party National Congress, which will usher in a new leadership in the world's most populous country, China's top-ranking churchman is warning not to expect "too much" from the leadership changes. However, he remains "optimistic" that relations between Beijing and the Vatican will improve "in the long run."

Cardinal John Tong of Hong Kong

"The Communist government is a collective leadership. Even if [expected incoming party secretary Xi Jinping] wants to change things, he won't be able to make drastic changes, only step by step," Cardinal John Tong of Hong Kong told ucanews.com in an exclusive interview in Rome.

The new leaders will be announced at the November 8-15 meeting; an event seen only once in a decade.

Cardinal Tong said he was convinced that deeply conflictual relations between the Communist government and the Catholic Church would improve, as it is in the government's interests.

"The more freedom they give to the Church, the better reputation the Chinese government will enjoy at international level." If this were to happen, he added, Chinese Catholics "will render more service and contribution to their homeland."

“It is a win-win-win point,” Tong said. “The people win, the government wins and the Church wins. So why not? If they are good businessmen, they should do it.”

The Hong Kong bishop believes that, as Chinese become richer and enjoy more freedoms – to travel, to start businesses, to be informed through the internet – they will also have higher “expectations” regarding the central authorities, and this will include a change of attitude towards the Church.

“They come as tourists – even here in Rome – and their eyes are wide open. The government should be more flexible, more open to the outside world. Otherwise, it will be kicked out by the people.”

For Cardinal Tong, rising media attention on the situation of the Church in the world’s new economic powerhouse can contribute to “opening the eyes” of the Communist leadership.

In recent months, the case of Shanghai’s auxiliary bishop Ma Daqin has come under the media spotlight after he was forced into seclusion shortly after his ordination for announcing he would sever ties with a state-backed religious organization. The seminary in Shanghai has not reopened since he was interned there.

“I am not surprised by the solidarity [Bishop Ma] received,” said Cardinal Tong. “Shanghai is a big city, drawing the world’s attention.”

He said he was convinced that restrictions imposed on the bishop “will be loosened a little” in the near future, and the seminaries reopened “soon,” as happened in a similar case in Hebei province.

At the same time, the Hong Kong prelate warned not to reduce the whole discussion of the Church in China to Bishop Ma’s case. “Dialogue cannot be avoided, we cannot just solve one case,” he said.

While in Rome, Cardinal Tong participated in the three-week long Synod of Bishops on “new evangelization.” He was one of the assembly’s three rotating presidents.

While the synod mostly addressed the crisis of faith in secularized Western countries where Christianity has been the dominant religion for millennia, he said its themes were relevant to the church in Asia too.

Secularization, with its “indifferentism” and “hedonism,” is “everywhere,” and in Asia it is spreading quickly on the heels of the runaway economic development of recent decades.

While in Hong Kong the situation of the Church remains overall positive – with over 3,500 adult baptisms in 2012 – the drop in priestly vocations is a cause of concern for the cardinal.

But Cardinal Tong added that secularization also has a “positive meaning,” when it leads the Church to reshape its message to make it “closer to the people,” bringing biblical ideas “back to your daily life.”

From this point of view, Cardinal Tong admitted that Protestant churches and some traditional Asian religions such as Confucianism are often way ahead of Catholicism.

“Some [Protestant] pastors really know how to use our daily life to attract people, making biblical wisdom relevant to life. They spend a lot of time talking about the will of God in their homilies; we Catholics spend a lot of time on sacraments.”

Cardinal Tong said that “new evangelization” in Asia, with its ancient cultural traditions and multi-religious background, must focus on the evangelization of “culture” – following the example of figures such as Matteo Ricci – and on the service it provides to the poor through the Church’s aid network.

His own vocation, Cardinal Tong recalled, was sparked as a kid by observing a Maryknoll priest who worked with refugees from Northern China in Post-World War II Canton (now known as Guangzhou) where he had escaped to from Hong Kong with his family.

He brought relief supplies and people lined up, and “he cleaned their wounds,” he said. “I was touched, that’s the reason I got my vocation.”

Alessandro Speciale, Vatican City