

Bishop Wu's Visit to China

China Visit "A Good Beginning"

HONG KONG (UCAN) — Father Michael Yeung, who accompanied Bishop John Baptist Wu of Hong Kong on a visit to Peking (Beijing) and Shanghai on March 25-30, has described the visit as the start of "a dialogue."

In an interview with ASIA FOCUS on March 31, Father Yeung, director of the Hong Kong Catholic Social Communications Office, said the official invitation raises important questions about the Church in the People's Republic of China (PRC) and its relationship with the universal Church. Since 1957, the PRC government has prohibited Catholics from maintaining direct contact with the Holy See.

"The government could have treated Bishop Wu as the bishop of any diocese, for example," Father Yeung said, "but our diocese is in full communion with the universal Church."

"Bishop Wu could be seen as bishop of the Hong Kong diocese, also as a bishop of the universal Church."

"So how the Chinese Communist government treats the diocese would be very much a concern for people elsewhere. I don't think they (previously) seriously considered this aspect," he said.

When the Hong Kong delegation raised this point, Mr. Ji Pengfei, director of the Hong Kong and Macau Affairs Office, said, "That is a good question. We welcome more contacts and more dialogue in the future. We will definitely think it over."

A request by Bishop Wu and his delegation of five Hong Kong Catholics to visit Jesuit Bishop Ignatius Gong Pinmei of Shanghai, imprisoned nearly 30 years, was refused.

"That was not accepted. We first raised this request a month before we made our visit," Father Yeung said. "In Shanghai we raised the question again, but they said it was not the appropriate time."

Father Yeung said two reasons were given. "They said he is in prison because of counter-revolution, but what they mean by this they did not specify; they said the understanding of the people, the understanding of the Church and the understanding of people outside China is very different. Again, they did not explain."

"We tried to explain why we wanted to see Bishop Gong," Father Yeung continued. "Bishop Wu just wanted to see him — not for Bishop Gong, not to justify the sentence, and not for Bishop

Wu himself, because Bishop Wu has no relationship emotionally or as a relative. Bishop Gong does not know Bishop Wu at all."

"We explained that the visit, if it were allowed, would give people outside China a very, very strong indication China is opening more and extending a friendly message to people of a different mentality," he said.

"That would definitely increase China's prestige and also be helpful in the future. If we were willing to be utilized, in light of current gaps, we'd let ourselves be utilized to build up a closer relationship between China and people outside."

Father Yeung explained Bishop Wu's statement prior to the trip in which the bishop said Hong Kong has a bridge role between the Church inside and beyond the PRC.

"Every place is unique, but Hong Kong is unique in the sense that it is predominantly Chinese, and I think no matter what kind of mentality individuals have, they love their country and approve its unification. In that sense, we belong, we are a part of China," Father Yeung said.

"But at the same time Hong Kong is the only Chinese place or Church having very good relations with the universal Church and also contacts with people of different kinds of mentality. We are very free to do things in our own way. The Church in mainland China does not enjoy this situation."

Father Yeung said further contacts will likely be preceded by dialogue before concrete steps are taken. Asked why he thinks Bishop Wu was invited to China, Father Yeung said, "At first they extended an invitation out of politeness and friendliness," after inviting other religious leaders to China. "But I think we brought up quite a few questions for them to think over."

He said he hopes that in the future "something more concrete, deeper than just a polite gesture can be made."

Father Yeung said he thinks the primary concern of the PRC government at present is its economic development and modernization, and it realizes the Church in Hong Kong can help to create a sense of confidence in

Hong Kong to encourage investment and development.

"Financial development is very, very important, but for us, development should be something very integrated and balanced, so we also would be looking for spiritual aspects, education, human rights and so on."

Asked whether a report on the China visit will be sent to the Vatican, Father Yeung replied: "I don't think a very special or particular report on this visit has to be sent to the Vatican. The reason is, number one, Bishop Wu is a bishop and has his right to run his diocese. Hong Kong is a very Chinese diocese and Bishop Wu is a Chinese. As for keeping of the Church's teaching, I don't think Bishop Wu needs to seek advice specifically on every individual movement."

"Number two, ... Hong Kong really is an open place, because whatever you do will be read worldwide the next day. So, I think the Holy See knows everything Bishop Wu has done."

"As for follow-up," he added, "I think there will be a very good opportunity, because every five years there should be an 'ad limina' visit by each bishop to Rome, and 1985 is the year for all the Asian bishops to make their ad limina visits to the Holy See. If the situation is favourable, Bishop Wu may utilize that occasion to brief the Holy See."