

Cardinal Wu's China visit hints at Sino-Vatican talks

HONG KONG (UCAN/SE): Although there was no direct link between last week's visit to China of a delegation led by Cardinal John Baptist Wu Cheng-chung of Hong Kong and the possible resumption of Sino-Vatican ties, nevertheless the topic was broached.

The trip was Cardinal Wu's third visit to China as head of Hong Kong diocese but his first since he became a cardinal in 1988.

Invited by Zhang Shengzuo, director of the Religious Affairs Bureau (RAB) under China's State Council, Cardinal Wu, accompanied by three priests, a sister and two laypeople, visited Beijing, Wuhan and Xi'an.

During meetings with Mr. Zhang, it was mentioned that many Hong Kong Catholics are emigrating because of uncertainty over their position after 1997. Such immigration is not good for the smooth transition of sovereignty in Hong Kong. If Sino-Vatican relations were resumed soon, this would comfort Catholics in the long term.

After one meeting, Cardinal Wu said the Chinese still have difficulty in understanding the pope's right to appoint bishops. They still see this as interfering in

China's internal affairs.

However, as spokesman Father John B. Tsang pointed out, the visit was primarily "to promote friendship and dialogue with the Chinese and to facilitate future cooperation upon better understanding of the present situation in China."

"During his trip, Cardinal Wu met the officials of the relevant government departments and visited Catholic seminaries and convents in Beijing, Wuhan and Xi'an," Father Tsang added.

Father Tsang is currently a Hong Kong affairs adviser appointed by the Hong Kong and Macau Affairs Office under China's State Council.

However, concerns over the livelihood of Hong Kong people and the worries of local believers on possible diminution of religious freedom after 1997 were candidly discussed with each of the various government officials the church group met.

There are fewer than 1,000 days until Britain returns sovereignty of Hong Kong to China on July 1, 1997.

Visits to seminaries and convents in China reflected the cardinal's special concern for the formation of seminarians and sisters in China.

Further cooperation between seminaries in Hong Kong and China was a point explored but its implementation will depend on the requests of their counterparts in China, said Father Tsang, also chairman of the council of Caritas-Hong Kong.

The delegation included two officials of Hong Kong Holy Spirit Seminary College, Father Tsang noted.

Concerning China's government-approved open church and unauthorized underground church, Father Tsang said Cardinal Wu did not target specific sides but remained open to meet any members of the church in China.

Delegation members went as guests of the RAB director and so much of the selection of places to visit depended on arrangements by Chinese authorities, Father Tsang said.

The delegation included Father John Tong, a Hong Kong vicar general; Father Lawrence Yiu, rector of Holy Spirit Seminary; Sister Maria Goretti Lau, dean of the seminary's theology division; Lo Kong-kai, assistant to the episcopal delegate for education; and Angela Lo, vice president of the Hong Kong Central Council of Catholic Laity.