

# Catholics asked to pray for cardinal

HONG KONG (SE): In parishes across the SAR priests have been calling on Catholics to pray for Cardinal John Baptist Wu Cheung-chung who is seriously ill.

The head of the church in Hong Kong, who this month marked the 27th anniversary of his appointment as bishop of the diocese, was expected to be released from hospital this week after more than a month-long stay.

Although the cardinal's illness has never been officially announced it has been widely known for some time that he suffers from diabetes and leukaemia. He has been receiving treatment for the two ailments for many years.

An intensely private man, the cardinal had asked the diocese, including the Catholic media, to respect his wishes and not report on his illness. However, as news spread and concern grew among Catholics about the cardinal's health it was decided that prayers should be asked for.

Coadjutor Bishop Joseph Zen told the *Sunday Examiner* of the diocese's concern for Cardinal Wu.

"We have been praying for his recovery and visiting him regularly in hospital. We are all very concerned about his health but he is a very quiet man who does not like a lot of attention or fuss made."

"The cardinal knows that everything is running smoothly in the diocese and we keep him up to date on major issues," he added.

Other sources in the diocese, however, doubted that the cardinal would be returning to work soon, noting that in recent years the cardinal has had to gradually hand over more responsibilities to his deputy bishops.

July 25 was the 27th anniversary of the cardinal's appointment as bishop of Hong Kong by Pope Paul VI. Moreover, on July 6, the 77-year-old prelate marked the 50th anniversary of his ordination to the priesthood. The usual celebrations that would accompany the anniversaries were not held this year due to the cardinal's illness.

On reaching the age of 75 in 2000, Cardinal Wu, as is required of all bishops, submitted a letter of resignation to Pope John Paul II. Although the cardinal has been ill for many years and it was expected that his resignation would be upheld, the pope asked the cardinal to continue in his position.

In 1996, Bishop Zen was appointed coadjutor with right of succession, which means that as soon as Cardinal Wu's resignation is accepted, he becomes the actual bishop of Hong Kong.

Concern has been expressed in the media and in some Catholic circles about the future of the diocese under the leadership of Bishop Zen. Outspoken on many human rights issues and confident about challenging the government on matters such as the reinterpretation of the Basic Law by Beijing in 1998 and the right-of-abode issue, Bishop Zen's style of leadership differs greatly from Cardinal Wu's.

For most of his 27 years as bishop, Cardinal Wu has not commented directly on social and political issues leaving that role to Catholic groups such as the Justice and Peace Commission, which have spoken out with his full support. Among a few exceptions, the Cardinal spoke out about the treatment of Vietnamese boat people in 1989 and the right-of-abode issue in 1998.

Some Catholics have expressed fears that Bishop Zen's more confrontational manner will affect church interests, such as welfare services and schools, in Hong Kong.

When asked about whether he would change his critical style, Bishop Zen told the *Examiner* that he would continue to do what he felt should be done in the name of justice. He said he believed the majority of Catholics would support him in his efforts to promote the Gospel and social teachings of the Catholic Church.

The appointment of Wu as bishop of Hong Kong in 1975 likewise caused some controversy. A native of Guangdong province the young Wu studied for the priesthood in Hong Kong at the South China Regional Seminary. After his ordination Father Wu was sent to Rome for post-graduate studies at the Pontifical Urban University where he graduated as a Doctor of Canon Law in 1956. Unable to return to mainland China due to the political chaos there, Father Wu was sent to Taiwan where he worked for many years in a quiet mountain parish the Diocese of Hsinchu.

According to sources in the Hong Kong diocese, following the death of Bishop Peter Lei in 1974 a number of Hong Kong priests were approached by the Vatican and offered the job of bishop but all refused. Unable to find

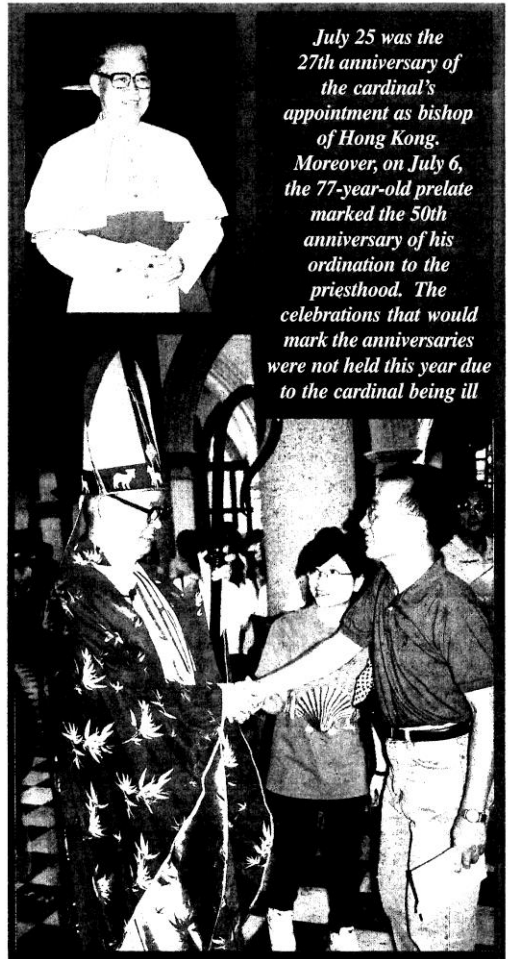
a suitable candidate willing to take the position the Vatican looked elsewhere and Father Wu, a Hakka, was invited.

Allegedly the appointment caused disquiet among the local Hong Kong clergy who did not want an "outsider".

During the cardinal's 27 years as head of the Hong Kong diocese he has made history, although very quietly. In 1988 he became the first local bishop to be made a cardinal.

Not known for his outspokenness, Cardinal Wu's concern for the fears of Catholics about the return of Hong Kong to mainland China in 1997 were made clear in 1989 his "March into the Bright Decade" pastoral exhortation.

After the signing of the Sino-British Joint Declaration in 1984, and following an appeal by the pope, the cardinal accepted an invitation from the Chinese Religious Affairs Bureau to visit Beijing and Shanghai in 1985. The visit paved the way for the church in Hong Kong to play a major role as a bridge between the church in China and the rest of the world by building understanding and organising exchange programmes. Since the late 1980's the Hong Kong church has become very active on the mainland in terms of providing aid and financial assistance for the rebuilding of churches and catechetical updating.



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